

About Health TV with Jeanne Blake
Tattoo Removal: The Prentiss Project
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JEANNE BLAKE: Welcome to *About Health TV*. I'm Jeanne Blake. Even the least observant person will notice this. Tattoos are more popular than ever. From adolescents to the elderly, a lot of people are getting them. But what if you want to get rid of a tattoo and doing so could be a matter of life and death? On this edition of *About Health TV*, we'll talk about an organization that is helping gang members become former gang members and in the process get their tattoos removed. We're joined by Michelle Wynn, who is the executive director of an organization called Project Prentiss, and by Neil Tem, a former gang member who is undergoing tattoo removal and has almost completed the process. Thanks so much for coming in, both of you. Michelle, let's start with you. What is Project Prentiss? It's not just an organization that helps young people get tattoos removed.

MICHELLE: Basically, there's a bigger picture to it. It's to help these former gang members reintegrate back into society and, in fact, initially I just saw the problem. Here was this tattoo on a former student of mine who needed it removed, and from there I kind of created a program so that not only would they get this tattoo removed, but they would also have a method or a means to reintegrate back into the society that they once rejected.

JEANNE BLAKE: And so you went from one former student to an organization?

MICHELLE: Yes.

JEANNE BLAKE: How many young people have you helped through this process so far?

MICHELLE: We've only helped a handful, and probably because I wanted to establish my 501(c)3 status and all the legalities that go with actually starting a business, so to speak. So I didn't advertise, and in fact I haven't really formally advertised until recently, and all that I've gotten is, every month or so I get a phone call from someone asking, Are you the tattoo lady? and it goes from there. So the people we've helped so far are really just kind of on the outskirts, because the word has gotten out.

JEANNE BLAKE: Okay, so it's word of mouth. Neil, how did you find out about Project Prentiss?

NEIL: It was in the newspaper. One of my teachers, because I was in this school, one of my history teachers found it in a newspaper and he brought it to my attention, and I always wanted to get my tattoo taken off but I didn't know what to do or anything. I know there's programs out there that have this gang-force type thing that they have, and he just suggested that it would be a good idea to just, like ... did he call you?

MICHELLE: He called me.

NEIL: Well, he called Michelle and he set up a meeting. Then me and Michelle, we met, and he interviewed me and stuff like that, and he just asked me why did I want to get my tattoos taken off and stuff like that, kind of interviewing me.

JEANNE BLAKE: To make sure you were serious?

NEIL: Yeah.

JEANNE BLAKE: Let's back up just for a minute before we talk about the tattoo removal and all that that's meant to you. How old were you when you joined a gang?

NEIL: I think I was like ... I don't know, like 14.

JEANNE BLAKE: And what was the appeal?

NEIL: Like, I don't know, like, I'm from Connecticut and I was raised there since I was like 12 and then I moved to Lynn. When I was growing up in Lynn, that's what everybody does, getting in a gang and stuff like that, and I just caught up to it, I guess. I really didn't know anybody. I just started making friends with gangs and stuff like that. I wasn't in a gang for a couple of years, but when you start making friends with gangs and stuff like that, you're going to want to join them.

JEANNE BLAKE: Because it becomes family?

NEIL: Yeah, because, I mean, you're hanging around with them every day anyway, going to school or skipping school and stuff, too.

JEANNE BLAKE: Did it get to be more than you bargained for, being in the gang?

NEIL: Not really.

JEANNE BLAKE: No?

NEIL: It was kind of like, I don't know, it was something to do, because I didn't really have much to do back then.

JEANNE BLAKE: But we think of, you know, those of us who hear about gangs think of them as being violent and involved in negative behavior.

NEIL: Right. There was violence and stuff like that. There's a lot of selling drugs. I don't know. We're not like rich kids growing up. Back then I was on welfare and I wanted stuff that kids have in school, like Oh, that's cool, I want that. Your parents can't give it to you, so you're going to have to make money of your own, so that's why they're selling drugs and stuff like that.

JEANNE BLAKE: So what inspired your decision to stop being in a gang? What happened?

NEIL: Well, it first started when I got arrested, you know, like doing drugs in public, drinking in public, gang fights, I get arrested ... during that time I didn't even realize, I was just trying to have fun or whatever. I didn't really care about it. But when I started going to juvenile hall, you know, lockup and programs and stuff like that, then I started to realize. And none of your friends are there, you know, and the only people that was there are basically your family, your real family, and you would think that your friends would come and see you and stuff like that, but ...

JEANNE BLAKE: So you started to realize that maybe it wasn't the way you wanted to spend the rest of your life?

NEIL: Right. And I don't want to keep looking over my back for something that I don't even want anymore.

JEANNE BLAKE: Okay. So the tattoos that you had that were gang-related were where on your body?

NEIL: Well, I've got a lot of tattoos all over the place. Mostly they were on my arms.

JEANNE BLAKE: Can we see where they used to be?

NEIL: They used to be right here. This says "Blood" right here, and over here it says "Original Blood," and over here it just says "OB," which stands for original blood.

JEANNE BLAKE: And that was the name of your gang?

NEIL: Yeah, Original Blood. And Def One used to be the nickname they gave me because I'm lazy, I don't like to do anything, so they just called me that.

JEANNE BLAKE: And I imagine that when you make a decision to leave a gang and you've got that branding, for lack of a better term, all over your arms, it makes it even more difficult.

NEIL: Yeah, because when you're joining a gang, they want to make sure that you'll represent the set or whatever, they call it the set, and just seeing if you're down or not.

JEANNE BLAKE: What does that mean, seeing if you're down?

NEIL: Like, what's another word for down?

JEANNE BLAKE: Michelle, what do you think that means?

MICHELLE: Make sure you're really in. It's a commitment.

NEIL: Yeah, it's kind of like a commitment-type thing, to let them know that whatever they do, you're going to do with them or whatever.

JEANNE BLAKE: So you have helped Neil get his tattoos removed with the help of Dr. Rox Anderson from Mass General Hospital. Can you tell us a little bit about how you met up with Dr. Anderson?

MICHELLE: It was pure luck, really. When I first started looking for surgeons, it was back when I had the students in western Massachusetts. I wrote several surgeons that I knew did tattoo removal that I had found on the Internet. I got a very nice response back. I think I sent about 30 letters, and maybe

about 10 or 12 wrote back and said Yeah, we'll remove this for free. It was amazing. And I chose one doctor to do the original surgery on Prentiss, and then I kept the names of the other people and sent them letters saying maybe someday I would need to ask you something like this again, so keep me in mind and I'm going to keep your name in mind. It wasn't until about a year later that I decided to put together an organization that would do this. And I went back and talked to the doctors and got a really nice response, but I had doctors all over the greater Boston area. I was wondering, how do I set up this program? Do I get referrals and then send the kids out? Do I have a central location? Here I am, someone who has never done anything like this before. How do I figure all this out? And I had a conversation with my own dermatologist one day, just casually telling her what I was doing and she said, "Oh, you should get in touch with Dr. Anderson. He's phenomenal and the type of guy who would do this." And from there, boom, everything fell into place. Mass General became our home and Rox set me up and made sure that I could meet with kids there if I needed to, and he did the surgery. And we started the program from there and decided that would be our central location.

JEANNE BLAKE: And I think it's worth noting, by the way, that Project Prentiss – I just heard you mention the name of your first student, and his name was Prentiss. I forgot to mention that in the beginning that that's where you got your name.

MICHELLE: I had called him a couple of years after his treatment and said that I wanted to start a program, and if I do start a program it would have to be named after you and I want your permission. He said he'd be honored and that's what it is.

JEANNE BLAKE: I like that. I like that story. So tell us about the tattoo removal. I've heard it's very painful. Is it?

NEIL: Well, what the doctor says, it's just like taking an elastic band and just stretch it and let it go. That's every snap of that laser. It's okay. They put this cream-type thing.

JEANNE BLAKE: An anesthesia sort of cream?

NEIL: Yeah. Or you could take a shot. The shot works better.

JEANNE BLAKE: Like a Novocain type of numbing effect?

NEIL: Yeah, like a numbing, you can't feel anything if you get the shot.

JEANNE BLAKE: Take us through the process a little bit. I don't care which one of you do it, but because we're not there, we're not in the room and we want to be able to picture what this is like.

NEIL: Right. What I do is, I go in there and talk to Rox or his assistant, and she asks me if I want the cream or the shot, and I just tell her the cream is probably easier because the shot makes you bleed more. When you take the shot, it starts bleeding and stuff like that. When she put the cream, she wrapped my arm, so it just goes into the skin so it helps more. And it stays in there about 30 to 45 minutes to numb it up. Then after that we would have to go ... I think there's two surgery rooms ...

MICHELLE: There's a couple of surgery rooms.

JEANNE BLAKE: How long per session is your arm zapped to get rid of all of that?

MICHELLE: Ten minutes.

JEANNE BLAKE: Ten minutes?

NEIL: Yeah, that takes pretty fast, but the waiting of the cream and stuff like that takes a while.

JEANNE BLAKE: Okay. So it doesn't sound as bad as I've imagined it when I've heard about it.

NEIL: It's not that bad.

JEANNE BLAKE: But for one of those tattoos, let's take a look at the tattoo. I mean, that tattoo – I don't know if the camera is going to be able to pick it up – but it's this big, two circles that big. How many sessions to get the O of the "OB"? How many sessions to get the O off?

NEIL: Well, like every session that I go in, he does everything.

JEANNE BLAKE: Oh, I see. He doesn't do a tattoo at a time.

NEIL: No, he does everything at once.

JEANNE BLAKE: So how many sessions to get it faded like that?

NEIL: I think it's about six or seven sessions already.

JEANNE BLAKE: Now, that is part of the deal, right, Michelle? For Neil to show up and have the tattoos removed by the laser is just a part of the deal?

MICHELLE: That's right.

JEANNE BLAKE: He makes a major commitment, I guess, that is designed to prove that he's really wanting to not be a member of the gang and that he's not just using you.

MICHELLE: That's right. And that component would be the community service aspect.

JEANNE BLAKE: Tell us about that.

MICHELLE: Well, part of the reason why I wanted to put it in there was ...

JEANNE BLAKE: You mean put it in the program.

MICHELLE: Exactly, the psychology of it. Being able to give back to the community and also start reentering your community where you were once rejected on some level. So that was a big piece of it, but also to take ownership, to say, "I got this tattoo and it was a decision I made," and not to say, "Here's a remover, sure we'll take care of it." But I think it allows them to take some ownership in the decisions that they made. So it's 20 hours of community service per treatment. The treatments average around six or seven, and they can only be done every couple of months. So really you're committing to community service for a year to two years.

JEANNE BLAKE: What community service did you do, Neil?

NEIL: I take old people around to their appointments and stuff like that.

JEANNE BLAKE: Do you drive?

NEIL: Yeah.

JEANNE BLAKE: Okay, so you drive them around?

NEIL: Yeah, and sometimes I help them out, because they have wheelchairs and stuff like that, so sometimes I am a driver's helper and take them to their doctor's or appointments. Some of them can't really walk so you've got to carry them.

JEANNE BLAKE: And how do you feel about doing that work? What do you think you've learned from that?

NEIL: Back then, like, I wanted to work with old people or kids, but I figured I don't want to pick up trash. Michelle wants me to do something that I like or she doesn't want me to pick up trash or something I didn't like.

MICHELLE: That's a huge part of it, matching their community service with their interests. So what he's saying is, really pick something out that you really like, tell me something that you're interested in, and if I have to lead them along the way and tell them ideas, that's what I do. But Neil immediately said he liked working with kids and liked working with the elderly, and then he actually ... because Neil is a superstar ... went out and found his placement and it saved me the trouble of doing it. It worked out great.

JEANNE BLAKE: So it can help sort of demystify the notion of a gang member. I mean, how many of us would have thought that a gang member liked working with children and the elderly?

NEIL: And they don't want to do it, but I told her the situation and everything and she was like, okay.

JEANNE BLAKE: Who is she? You told who that you didn't want to do it?

NEIL: The director.

JEANNE BLAKE: Oh. They weren't necessarily so interested in having you do the work, is that what you're saying?

NEIL: Yeah, because they don't want a gang kid around elderly people.

JEANNE BLAKE: I see. So there's been a little bit of learning on both ends of the spectrum.

NEIL: Right. And, plus, one of my teachers, we went in and just explained the situation.

JEANNE BLAKE: Do you think they like having you around now?

NEIL: I left there because I had to move to somewhere else.

JEANNE BLAKE: But before you left, do you think they got on board and thought you were okay?

NEIL: Yeah. I would clean the yards and stuff. If I'm not doing something like bringing the elderly people to their appointment, I would clean their yards or help the cook or something.

JEANNE BLAKE: When you were doing that work, Neil, did you have a chance to think about why you were doing it, and did you reflect on that a little bit?

NEIL: Yeah. I knew that I had to get 20 hours each time I go in. I think it's worth it, you know, 20 hours. It could cost me tens of thousands of dollars just to get it removed. I mean, 20 hours is basically nothing.

JEANNE BLAKE: What would you say to a young person today who was thinking about getting a tattoo?

NEIL: Just think really hard, don't get no gang's tattoo, just get something that you want for the rest of your life, you know. I mean, if you get something like a girl's name or something like that, it's not worth it.

JEANNE BLAKE: Or a boy's name if you're a girl, right?

NEIL: Yeah, or a boy's name. It's not worth it.

JEANNE BLAKE: It's kind of hard to know when you're 14 what you might want forever, isn't it?

NEIL: Whatever is cool for them, they're like, Oh, this is cool and I'm going to go out and get a tattoo. Later on, when they get older, they're like, Oh, I don't want this anymore, I want it removed, or

get it covered or something.

JEANNE BLAKE: Michelle, what is your hope for your organization down the road? You must have a vision. I can tell you're a woman with a vision.

MICHELLE: Well, the short-term vision is really to get the program up and running so much that we're really helping lots of kids.

JEANNE BLAKE: Do you sense that there's a greater need than what you're able to meet right now, not necessarily meet it by demand, but do you think there are more Neils out there that just don't know about you yet?

MICHELLE: Oh, absolutely. No question. And again, probably because we didn't do any advertising yet. From my informal research, going through residential facilities and talking with other social service agencies, there's a ton, there's definitely a ton of kids. And on the west coast, I've found, that there are a couple of programs that do something similar, not quite the same way that I've designed it, and they have two-year waiting lists.

JEANNE BLAKE: Is that right?

MICHELLE: Yeah.

JEANNE BLAKE: Wow, that says a lot, doesn't it?

MICHELLE: Yes.

JEANNE BLAKE: So how are you funded?

MICHELLE: Through grants, which, when I have time, I write too. I work full time, so this is really a part-time endeavor for me. I'm not paid to do this, we don't have a lot of funding. The only funding I have right now is a very small grant to cover the paperwork.

JEANNE BLAKE: And who gave that to you?

MICHELLE: The Hershey Family Foundation.

JEANNE BLAKE: Well, I think it's just fine that we give them a little credit, and you say their name right out loud.

MICHELLE: Absolutely, absolutely. I actually had their son in class for two years. I teach biology and chemistry, so he had me for biology and he had me for chemistry. His parents are just really wonderful, and they heard about the program and said, "We'd like to help out," so that's where it came from.

JEANNE BLAKE: That's great. And you continue to have the opportunity to go to doctors beyond Dr. Anderson should it be necessary?

MICHELLE: If I need to, yes. But Dr. Anderson also has a small team that he works with, so he's brought them in, interns, people who are doing rotations, and he can bring them in that way. So he feels fairly equipped at this point, but we'll see what happens.

JEANNE BLAKE: Let's talk about ... before we say goodbye here ... the challenge of a young person wanting to leave a gang -- I don't know that we were really clear about this -- and having visible tattoos. If they leave the gang and they have visible tattoos, what are the dangers to them?

MICHELLE: The danger that I've heard from some of the kids that I've interviewed, really ... if you have that identifying figure someplace blatant like your hand or your arm, and in Prentiss's case on his face, one story I heard from one of the kids who contacted me was that he was shot at. He had left the gang but was being shot at. He felt very uncomfortable leaving his place, and I'm sure in some situations that's very true. Neil, I know, it's a tough transition. He found it a little bit easier, but I think it's different for the different gangs and depending on what their rules are.

JEANNE BLAKE: About whether you can leave and how aggressively they pursue you?

MICHELLE: Right. Exactly.

JEANNE BLAKE: You spoke about the emotional and psychological factors of forging new friendships, and especially if you're within the same community, I can imagine how difficult that would be. Can you give us examples of what the young people have told you about how challenging that is?

MICHELLE: I can say that they've said it's incredibly scary. I mean, this is their family. I know that Neil and I have talked about why you would go into a gang and the reasons, and a lot of it that it's a family and it offers support, comfort, safety, and all of us know that feeling. I know that if I had to leave something that was comfortable for me, it would be very, very difficult. So I'm sure it would be the same for them. And being younger, it's even more difficult.

JEANNE BLAKE: Actually, I was just going to mention that. So Neil, what final words do you have about what you wish you knew when you were younger and about gang life that you're only finding out now as you grow up and mature?

NEIL: I don't know. I don't think I'd want to know anything, because I wouldn't change that for anything, because if I change that or if I change where I lived or where I've been, I wouldn't have met the people that I met and I wouldn't have met the teacher that I met or I wouldn't have met Michelle. So I wouldn't change anything or I wouldn't want to know anything.

JEANNE BLAKE: But you would like others to be spared the experience of being in a gang?

NEIL: Right. That's my lifestyle and that's, like ... back then that's how it was going to be, like we had to be on welfare. But now we're just moving on, so I'm trying to be like somebody else. Well, not be like somebody else, but live your own life type of thing.

JEANNE BLAKE: That's right. Well, that's a good attitude to have. And Michelle and Neil, we thank you for coming in and talking about this story, and hopefully others will hear about it as you expand your organization and do your good work.

MICHELLE: Thank you.

JEANNE BLAKE: As Michelle mentioned, Project Prentiss wouldn't exist if it weren't for the generosity of Dr. Rox Anderson from Massachusetts General Hospital here in Boston. Dr. Anderson donates his time to the program to remove tattoos of any who come to him, and we thought that you'd like to hear why he decided to give his time to this program.

DR. ANDERSON: Every physician considers taking care of people a valuable use of their time, so I put this in that bigger context. In particular, though, these are people that got a tattoo at some time in their lives when they were different, and now they're coming out of that time and they're realizing that

the tattoo is somehow holding them back, and this is the case for all the patients who I see for tattoo removal. But in this particular program, a lot of these people don't have the resources to pay for the tattoo removal. It's typically not covered by an insurance company, they don't have good medical coverage or resources, and so they need help. I'm here to help them.

JEANNE BLAKE: Dr. Rox Anderson from Mass General Hospital. I'm Jeanne Blake. Thanks for joining us on *About Health TV*, and I'll see you next time.

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