

Wes Wood

Tattoo Society of New York

If one were to look around and inquire where all these tattoo shops came from, it would not be unreasonable, to copy a McCarthy-era phrase, to find Clayton Patterson's Tattoo Society of New York under every bush and behind every tree. Clayton is an archivist of the Lower East Side, an activist, an organizer, a photographer, a promoter, a germinator of ideas and causes, and this forever-optimist's monthly meetings of the TSNY were certainly the seedbed for events that were unfolding in the world of tattoo.

I discovered Clayton when I passed his Essex Street storefront and saw a hat, custom-embroidered, announcing that I too could have a hat, a baseball cap, embroidered with anything I wanted. What an idea. I lingered before his storefront before, sort of like Frost, wondering whose woods these were. Clayton's storefront on Essex Street was a good spot to linger: odd things inside and a display in the window of recent pictures of locals, a lot of young people enthusiastic for life, oblivious in youth to things that would shape their destinies. Everybody stopped to see if his or her picture was up. A landmark.

Seeing that embroidered cap, I ventured in and ordered a cap with my name of course, a parachute and a plane, because I was skydiving during the mid '80s. In 1987 I went back, and this time Clayton invited me to sit down and chat. Maybe he saw my tattoos, because he started talking about his TSNY, which he started with Ari Roussimoff in 1986, taking over with his wife Elsa Rensaa when Ari moved on. He invited me to attend. The TSNY had actual meetings, more like gatherings, at places like the Pyramid Club and Chase and CBGB's 313 Gallery, different venues. This was in '88. In a city that outlawed tattooing as a violation of the health code, TSNY was radical.

No stranger to activism, having been hooked in 1959 by the Freedom Train going through Fredonia, New York, I had been active on a range of issues in the '70s with marches in NY and Washington, D.C. When I was a member of the Chelsea Coalition we chained ourselves inside the fences of Shoreham Nuclear Power Plant on Long Island. Maybe it was the activism

to make things better in society that drew me to Clayton. He too is optimistic that we can make things better.

I started attending the meetings. TSNY was improbable. It was a window into an entire culture revolving around tattoo. It comprised all fellow travelers, a universal awakening under one roof, which rubbed everyone who had any kind of interest in tattoo or body modification. There was no secret organization, there were no dues, there was no membership, though I treasure my 1988 "membership" card.

TSNY created hooks that pulled everyone together. Here I was, with a couple of tattoos, connecting with existing and emerging tattooists. Little did I think I too would become part of a who's-who for my contributions to the tattoo industry, along with Sean Vasquez, Emma Griffiths, Marcus Pacheco, Timothy Hoyer, Ritchie Sean, Med, Tommy Houlihan, Andrea Easton, Skull and the established tattooists like Spider Webb, Mike Perfetto, Jonathan Shaw, Tony Polito, Mike Bakaty and son Mehai, Angelo Scotto, Coney Island Vinny, Bear, Richie Montgomery, Tony the Pirate, Big Joe, Shotsie Gorman—all legends within tattoo.

But I learned and interacted as well with tattoo enthusiasts—anyone could come: it was open to all, a daring idea. Clayton believed in that. Who could forget Kaufman; George Bauer with flag tattoos; performer and Coney Island attraction Mike Wilson; photographer and tattooist Steve Bonge; body-modification photographer Efrain Gonzales; magazine photographer Pulsating Paula; tattoo historian Mike McCabe; organizer and promoter Matty Jankowski?

Matty Jankowski, whom I met at a TSNY meeting, became manager of my tattoo shop, Sacred Tattoo. I gave him freedom and he created the link between art and tattoo in New York, utilizing the basement space at 365 Canal Street to curate art shows supporting creative artists—daring forays into new media linking art with tattoo, staging body-art performances by employees and Disgraceland. Matty created links to the museum world, the fashion elites and the establishment. If not for NYTS, this would never have happened.

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By 1996 I had been on a roll creating idea after idea advancing the technology of tattoo and making it available in a city that outlawed tattoo as dangerous to public health. New York was emerging as a tattoo center. It wasn't LA or Portland but we were getting there, half underground, and TSNY was growing.

In November 1996 we were alerted that the New York City Council had introduced a bill to legalize tattooing and that the public's chance to comment would take place on December 2nd. You can imagine the panic. I immediately called Clayton after receiving Eve Colombo's fax, and the two of us went into high gear to find out more.

Clayton discovered that Kathryn Freed was a cosponsor. He had worked with her on some local issues in the past, so he got a quick connection and access to set up some meetings with her, the council and eventually even the DEP and DHMS. The meetings under the umbrella of the TSNY established a consensus among all interested parties and successfully brokered those demands into changing the bill, which was adopted in 1998.

In my opinion, the Tattoo Society of New York was fated to play this dominant role in shaping the existence of tattoo in New York.