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CRAFT CULTURE

Northeast Tattoo & Fadeaway Laser Removal

By Ellen Burkhardt • Photos by Tj Turner

Matthew Krofta (left) and Jack Gribble

Matthew Krofta stands perfectly still, his bare back covered in a smear of purple ink. Jack Gribble, Matthew's coworker and, today, tattooer, holds a sheet of stencil paper up to Matthew's back and makes minute adjustments to get everything just so before securing the sheet—again. This is take three of the process—arguably the most painstaking part of a back tattoo, says Jack. Finally, the outline of Pharaoh's Horses—a classic Americana tattoo, Jack's specialty—is in place, totally symmetrical and ready to be transformed from concept to permanent body art.

Classic country music and sunlight fills Northeast Tattoo & Fadeaway Laser Removal. Art covers the golden-yellow walls: a hand-carved Indonesian Garuda sculpture, drawings by the shop's three tattoo artists, a print of Il Sodoma's "The Martyrdom of St. Sebastian." It's eclectic and warm, and feels

more like a funky coffee shop than a tattoo parlor and federally HIPAA-compliant, Minnesota Board of Medical Practice-certified clinic.

If the idea of one place having two LLCs and offering both tattoo applications and laser tattoo removals seems dissonant, well, it is. But it's also practical, says Joseph Downing, one of Fadeaway's certified laser technicians. "The impetus of us putting a laser in a tattoo parlor is that every day somebody comes in and says, hey, can you cover this up?" Joseph explains. "The demand for tattoo removal is crazy—like, 200 to 300 people a month crazy."

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Northeast Tattoo & Fadeaway Laser Removal was founded in 2006 by physician Thomas Barrows, MD, and tattoo artist Aleksandar Nedich. They were the first to offer laser tattoo

removal in a traditional tattoo parlor and have since expanded their removal operations to U.S. locations in Des Moines and Duluth, and Canada locations in Hamilton, Ontario, and Waterloo, Ontario.

Lasers still live primarily in the medical world but have been experimented with for tattoo removal for decades. And while someone could go to the Mayo Clinic to get rid of an unwanted tattoo, the price tag could wind up being tens of thousands of dollars due to it being an elective cosmetic procedure. At Fadeaway, clients pay as they go, and go as they please. Sessions are 20 minutes, start at \$40, and done a minimum of six weeks apart. As for how many sessions it will take to remove a tattoo, that's impossible to determine. "There are tattoos that go away in one session

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The image displays three logos. On the left is the Bent Paddle Brewing Co. logo, featuring a stylized paddle and the text "BENT PADDLE BREWING CO." in a bold, sans-serif font. In the center is the Uptown Tavern & Rooftop logo, which includes a graphic of a multi-story building with a rooftop deck, the text "EST. 2011", "UPTOWN TAVERN & ROOFTOP", "COLD BEER & GREAT SCENERY", and "AN AMERICAN BAR & GRILL". On the right is the Surly Brewing Co. logo, featuring the word "SURLY" in a large, bold, red font with a black outline, and "BREWING CO." in a smaller, black font below it.

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“Lasers do not remove tattoos. The laser is just a wrecking ball, breaking the ink molecules down into super tiny particles so that your cells can clean it up.”

and there are tattoos that go away in 21 sessions,” Joseph says. “On my card it says, ‘It takes as many as it takes.’ We will never know.”

The reason it's impossible to know has to do with what a tattoo is. In the most basic sense, to get a tattoo is to be stabbed 4,000 times a minute by a needle that is surgically implanting a foreign pathogen—ink—into your skin. The ink stays put because its molecules are too large for cells to carry away. They try—the immune and lymphatic systems are constantly waging war against that ink, which is why tattoos fade over time—but their attacks are largely ineffective. That's where lasers come in.

“Lasers do not remove tattoos,” Joseph says. “The laser is just a wrecking ball, breaking the ink molecules down into super tiny particles so that your cells can clean it up.” How long it’ll take for them to tidy up is up to the client’s immune system.

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Laser technicians are legally forbidden from asking clients why they want a tattoo removed. Usually it's obvious, Joseph says—a misspelled word, a prison tattoo—and often the client tells their story without being asked. Other things, like photo documentation and laser settings, Fadeaway is legally obligated to record. In addition to that data, the clinic also notes the age of every unwanted tattoo. The average age of those regretted decisions: 14 years.

"If someone is 20, they're in a different headspace than when they're 34," Joseph says. "A lot of stuff that's coming to be removed [is] not obviously a wedding band or an ex-partner's name. It's more that they were young, they were getting tattooed, and their standards and expectations for tattoos have developed as the years have gone on."

Of the more than 50,000 laser sessions he's performed, Joseph says only two have been tattoos done in-house. One was a misspelled word, the other a giant black cross requested by the client to cover up a smaller cross—a tattoo Jack tried to talk the guy out of but eventually did.

"I told him exactly what he was getting into. [...] I drew it out, I traced his old tattoo inside of it, did shading on it to show him how dark it was going to be," Jack explains. "We get done with the tattoo and immediately he looks at it and goes, 'I didn't know it was going to be that dark.' His mom actually called

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Joseph Downing





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me the next day and chewed me out. At that point, did it piss me off? Yeah. Was I emotionally invested after I'd walked him through the whole process? Absolutely."

Sometimes, though, the tattooers will turn down clients' ideas. "I'm shocked how many times I tell people no, either because the idea is wrong or it's going to clash or it's just not going to work," Jack says.

Other situations are even more cut-and-dried, says Kaily McKee, also a tattoo artist at Northeast Tattoo. "If a freshly 18-year-old wants their hand or face tattooed because it's trendy right now, I'll say no. Because you're 18, and you don't know what your life is going to hold," she explains.

For as popular as tattoos have become in the age of Pinterest and Instagram, there are still careers that don't allow for visible tattoos—being a flight attendant, for example, or in the Marines or Army.

Not every tattooer adheres to the same ethics as Jack and Kaily, though. Both have stories of people they've turned away who have found another tattooer to do the work. They've also fixed their fair share of bad tattoos. "[Those tattooers] care more about making money than helping people make good decisions," Jack says. "Because at the end of the day, that's what we do: we lead people through tough, permanent decisions that will affect them for the rest of their lives."

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Tamas "Zen" Pomazi knows all about the permanence of a tattoo; he's been coming to Fadeaway for 15 months and counting. On this particular day, Zen and his four-year-old son, Elijah, are there for session number eight on a tattoo Zen got in the '90s: a blue devil squeezing a voodoo doll. It's unrecognizable now—just a faded blob on his shoulder—but he wants it erased as much as possible so he can fill the space with a portrait of Elijah. "I have portraits of my other two kids and just need Elijah's now," he says. "I call him my right-hand man, and want to get the tattoo on my right arm."

While Joseph preps Zen—cleaning the area with 91-percent isopropyl alcohol, taking a photo, and numbing the skin with an ice pack—Elijah tells anyone who will listen about the fire truck tattoo he wants to get on his forearm. Then he posts up on a bench to wait and watch a show on his dad's phone, completely at home at the parlor.

Around 1pm a walk-in client arrives. He's a 19-year-old college student and bartender, and he wants an "Ango art" design (patterns bartenders make with Angostura bitters atop egg-white cocktails) on his chest. It's his first tattoo.

After he fills out the necessary paperwork, Kaily takes him back to her chair and makes small talk while prepping him. It's the same scene one would encounter at a hair salon—client and artist chatting, making sure they're on the same page—only instead of scissors, Kaily wields a needle.

The jarringly loud buzz of the tattoo machine overtakes the shop and then, about 15 minutes later, it's over. Kaily covers the tattoo with a bandage and explains aftercare practices; the student pays and leaves. Time will tell if he'll be a repeat customer—for another tattoo, or, perhaps in 14 years, for Joseph or Matthew to make his Ango art disappear. 🍷



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