

# Badges of Honor

## Tattoos help friends, family memorialize victims of terror

By Bill Jensen

**O**VER THE PAST six weeks, Tony LaFemina has been on top of the mountain at Ground Zero, climbing through voids, searching for hope. He's worked security detail at the city morgue at Bellevue, watching his civil servant brothers come in on slabs. He's been at Fresh Kills, sifting through the rubble, his first day uncovering a woman's hand amidst the tons of debris from what once was the World Trade Center.

Today's his day off, and the Brooklyn North narcotics detective is leaning back in a comfortable chair in Copague, making the emotions he's built up since Sept. 11 permanent by way of a needle jamming multicolored ink into his right forearm at a high rate of speed.

It's tradition for police and firefighters to honor fallen comrades with tattoos. But as with everything the attacks have wrought, the amount of ink now being embedded into New York's finest and bravest, and their families and friends, as well as into ordinary civilians, is staggering. Designs of the American flag and bald eagle, or police and firefighter badges, have been set within the backdrop of the Twin Towers at tattoo parlors across the region.

LaFemina, 32, may have been among the first to make the decision to physically remember the unforgettable. He's not just a cop. He's also a tattoo artist — one who was set to preside over the grand opening of his own parlor on the South Shore on Sept. 11, when all hell broke loose.

"I went home [to West Islip] from my shift, was getting ready to come here and open up, and I heard the news," LaFemina says, a thick Brooklyn accent masking the pain of the needle. "I packed up my car and was gone for four days."

As LaFemina worked Ground Zero alongside his two brothers, both city firemen; the shop opened without its owner, his civilian tattoo artists manning the ink guns in his absence. Immediately, people started coming in and getting American flags. One designer created a tearing red, white and blue rose design that has been popular with many women.

Once LaFemina got back on the ink job, calls came in from friends looking to commemorate the event. "Any survivors or family members, I'm doing for free," says LaFemina, who etched a fireman's cross for a woman to honor her father, who died in the service of Rescue No. 3. "Anything that's patriotic is half-price for everyone else."

The nearly 5,000 civilians lost in the tragedy are also spawning remembrance tattoos. Mike Medwig, a Web manager from Amityville, lost his nephew, Peter O'Neill Jr., a 21-year-old working his first job at Sandler O'Neill on the 104th floor of Tower 2. Two weeks after the attacks, he went to Davinci's Tattoos in Wantagh.

"I never really thought of getting a tattoo until this," says Medwig, 35, showing a shamrock on his right shoulder encircled by the name "Pete," along with his nephew's birthdate and Sept. 11. "It's a way to carry him around with me."

Now LaFemina is getting his. He came in to his shop — called INKlinations — this morning and told Rich Verdina, 30, a fellow cop and tattoo artist, to draw up a patriotic design. Four hours later, he's having an eagle rising above the Twin Towers in front of an American flag, poked into



Newsday Photos / Alejandra Villa

Police officer Steve Steo and his fiancée, Dorothy DeFranco, have matching Twin Towers tattoos.

his arm.

The design is going on his right forearm, on the other side of a baby blue and yellow rubber duckie with his daughter's name, Francesca. On his other arm is a full sleeve (in tattoo speak) that LaFemina calls "Back to Brooklyn," featuring a colorful montage of Kings County landmarks, including the Brooklyn Bridge, a Belt Parkway highway sign and a pizza pie.

LaFemina got his first tattoo, a tribal design on his leg, when he was 23. He got an angel on his shoulder after being shot at from 25 feet away while buying drugs undercover (the guy missed, hence the angel). He became hooked on tattoos and took on an apprenticeship to become an artist.

"I retire in nine years, and I don't want to be a security guard," he says of his decision to open his own shop.

As LaFemina winces, the white-gloved Verdina clutching his arm and digging the needle into flames behind the eagle, an attractive man and woman walk into the parlor, fresh American flags and Twin Towers on their arms.

The patriotic design was the first for Steve Steo, a cop from the 75th Precinct robbery detection unit. The 36-year-old West Islip native's fiancée, Dorothy DeFranco, 28, a hairdresser also from West Islip, told him beforehand that it wouldn't hurt. The identical, albeit smaller design on her slender bicep is her fifth. All her other tattoos are in less-viewed areas on her body for a reason.

"You get married, and you think you might want to wear a strapless dress," says DeFranco, who plans to marry Steo next spring. "But I'm not gonna want to hide this."

In the back of the Copague shop, civilian Pete O'Donnell, 29, is getting a flag on his right shoulder.

"It's kind of a shame that it takes something like this to be patriotic," says the carpenter from West Islip. "It's the least I could do."

After an hour, Verdina is finishing up the outline of the eagle on LaFemina's arm. "Ahh!" yelps LaFemina at the front of the shop, as Verdina adds some detail to a tip of the bird's wing close to the cop's elbow.

"Maybe we'll drop the date down later on," suggests LaFemina, as red and blue are filled into the word "Patriot" floating in a banner. At two hours, the eagle looks menacing and determined; the flag, majestic and bright; the towers understated, but unavoidable.

Like most cops and firefighters who responded and survived Sept. 11, LaFemina is back to his regular duties, but will never be the same.

"I remember being there and trying to describe it to my wife," he remembers, "and I can't describe it 'cause I don't know what I'm looking at."

No one will ever have that problem when they spy the muscles twitch on LaFemina's right forearm. ■

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Police officer Anthony LaFemina gets a patriotic tattoo on his forearm from tattoo artist Rich Verdina.

