

SUBDISCIPLINE: Urban Anthropology, Legal Anthropology, Public Anthropology
(Re)Think Ink: Advocacy is not Skin Deep

“Did you put your cream on?” Rosemarie Ashamalla asks her client as two children run laps around their chairs. A nurse practitioner calls a name and a young man follows her down the hall. An electric crackling snaps in the background—the whole office is abuzz with activity. It is Saturday morning at Sunrise Outreach Center where the order of the day is laser tattoo removal as former gang members and others reshape their futures one procedure at a time.

Sunrise Outreach Center assists people to “mainstream” their lives. “We are working with people who are putting their lives back together and tattoo removal is a part of that process,” says Director Rosemarie Ashamalla. It is often tattoos that are offered as evidence of gang membership and law enforcement responds accordingly. Recent attention has focused on Central American gangs like Mara Salvatrucha, who the media has showcased as the most dangerous transnational gang. Officials often describe the gang’s violent activities alongside descriptions of their elaborate tattoos. In the US and Canada, police are deporting suspected gang members back to Central America. Ashamalla reports that in El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala, tattooed individuals are routinely rounded up by police and vigilantes—some are arrested, others shot. Her work with these and other individuals is an extension of her advocacy that began in graduate school.

“My target age group has always been 17-24 year olds—the age you learn to become an adult.” Ashamalla first encountered her target group while volunteering at Central Juvenile Hall in Los Angeles. This volunteer work soon became her graduate project as she tracked the lives of young men facing serious charges (some charged as adults). After finishing her dissertation at UCLA in 1999, she continued in the non-profit sector.

In 2000, Ashamalla answered a call for proposals by QueensCare Clinics, proposing a tattoo removal project at their East Los Angeles clinic. “This was a time when they were beginning to define violence as a health care issue.” The project was approved and focused on gang tattoos along with other tattoos that hinder employment opportunities. Within two years Ashamalla started the Sunrise Outreach Center. These days she splits her time between the two centers, court hearings, and other advocacy work as she assists individuals in building new life skills.

Though tattoo removal is painful and time consuming, it is an empowering process. From the first procedure that visibly blurs the ink, clients report positive reinforcement from family and peers. This reinforcement helps clients greatly as treatment can take years. Returning every six weeks, clients apply lidocaine cream to ease the discomfort of a laser that seeks out their old inscriptions. Throughout this physical and emotional process, Sunrise Outreach Center insures that finances won’t be a roadblock. At Sunrise Outreach Center, all gang tattoos are removed at no cost to clients through a partnership with Homies Unidos and the Weingart Foundation—other tattoos are removed at a fraction of the normal cost.