

Interview transcript

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(I = Isaac, the interviewee, P = Paula, the interviewer)

P: So, first of all, will you please state your name and job title?

I: My name is Isaac Robert Mitchell, and I'm a tattoo artist at Danny's Ancient Art at Blacksburg

P: Ok, umm, how long have you worked there?

I: I've worked with Ancient Art, umm, since February 2008, and I moved from the Roanoke shop to the Blacksburg shop in April, 2008

P: So, where are you originally from?

I: I grew up, umm, a couple towns over from here, in, umm, Riner, and went to Auburn high school

P: Ok, how do you spell that?

I: Auburn?

P: No, the..

I: Riner? R-I-N-E-R

P: Ok. Ah, umm, what did your..what did your parents do for a living?

I: Ah, my mother is a school teacher at Riner elementary school, and my father works, umm, bridge construction, resurfacing bridges and stuff.

P: So, ar-, are they also from around here or..?

I: Yeah, they actually are, umm, from the next town over, Floyd. They both grew up and went to high school there.

P: So, how did you come to have this job?

I: Umm.. I guess it started while I was in the military, Hawaii. Umm, I got an apprenticeship from someone there and, umm, he started teaching me how to tattoo. And.. started tattooing there and then in Iraq, and when I got back from Iraq I tattooed in Hawaii, and then when we moved back here, 'cause I got out of the military, umm, I went, took my portfolio to Danny and talked to him and he hired me.

P: How many hours approximately do you work a week?

I: Umm, let's see..

P: And, umm, are they like, year-round?

I: Yeah we, like, year-round, like, pretty much every holiday is off, except like Christmas and Thanksgiving, there are a couple of holidays when the store actually closes but other than that we're umm.. I work five days a week, umm, I'd say, ten hours a day.

P: That's pretty.. that's kind of a lot.

I: Yeah, 'cause with your average jam it's like.. regular weekdays and everything it's like, I get to.. I get to the shop at about 11.30, and get off at nine. But, umm, weekends it's a little bit longer, and too if I end up staying later for a tattoo. Oh, so, I'd say on average about ten hours a day.

P: Well, you're.. you're probably considered full-time then?

I: (nods) Definitely

P: Umm.. Would you describe in detail a typical day in your job? You said you start at, like, 11.30?

I: Umm.. Yeah, I come in depending on what's going on for the day, I'll come in 11.30 at the latest and then some days I come in early to do drawings for appointments, for that day or the next day, umm, or I'll come in early to clean our tools and the tubes that we use, umm, that usually takes a couple of hours so.. I'll come in early and do that. Umm, then the doors open at twelve o'clock, usually have an appointment or two throughout the day, at least, and then we also have the walk-in stuff, people just come in off the street wanting something done, we'll help them out with that.. But, umm, yeah, you know if I'm not tattooing I just hang around and sketch and draw and stuff, or, you know, get ready for other appointments. And if totally nothing to do I will watch TV, you know, joke around, play on the Internet, you know, it's a pretty relaxed job

P: Umm, do you have a lot of walk-ins?

I: Yeah, well, I'd say probably 85-90 % of all the tattoos we do are walk-ins.

P: Oh, like tattoos too?

I: Mm-hm

P: Oh, you couldn't do that in Finland, you always, for tattoos..

I: Appointments?

P: Yeah. And you have to book them, at like, two weeks in advance.

I: Yeah, well, I mean, we, we've been trying to get more, like, appointment-oriented kind of style going on, so, uh, I mean if we're booked up completely for the day, people will walk in but they won't get their tattoo that day, so, we'll set up an appointment so they're not technically walk-in then, but, you know what I mean?

P: Yeah, yeah. Umm.. what personality traits are required in your job, in order to be successful? I mean, what do you think is important?

I: I'd say the most important thing is you have to be good with people, you got to be able to deal with the general public. You also, uh, you have to be a salesman. I mean, some people come in with ideas, and you have to be able to explain to them why that is or is not a good idea., as far as, the size of the drawing, and, you know, how complicated it is, or whether it's even possible. I mean we can pretty much replicate just about anything as far as doing a tattoo, but, you know, different things require different sizes, you know, umm, color options, stuff like that. So you gotta.. gotta be a really good salesman, cause, you know, they're paying, you know, a quite a bit of money for something that's gonna be on their body for the rest of their lives, so, you know, it's.. it's important to make sure they get what *they* want, but at the same time make sure it's going to be a good lasting piece of artwork.

P: Yeah. Umm.. how does Virginia Tech affect your business? You said you have a lot of Virginia Tech tattoos?

I: Yeah, it definitely helps being near a, you know, a big, college town and everything, you know, umm, ever since the April 16th thing went down, like, we've done a lot of memorial tattoos for that, and, uh, yeah we get, a lots of people walk in, to come get piercings and you know, they'll bring their friends, and, it'll kind of, kind of get the ball rolling in other people's minds, so like, people will come in and watch their friend get a tattoo and they may not even think about getting one at all but then they're like, "Hey, I'm here, like, might as well get a tattoo too!" so, it definitely helps. Younger students, I've noticed, umm, the biggest difference working in Roanoke, where I used to work, and then working here now, being beside Tech, umm, it's, kids are much more open to doing bigger, more extravagant, like, you know, tattoos, more expensive, they don't care about the money and so, uh, like, some of the people we had in Roanoke, which is mostly older people, they don't wanna pay for anything, they didn't, they were less open to your ideas, but around here everybody is like "Yeah, you're the artist, you know, tell me what's the best way to do this." So, working with the younger generation is a lot better.

P: So, what are the most unusual tattoos or places for tattoos that you've done?

I: (smiles) Umm, well, I mean, they're not.. any of them aren't really too unusual to me because they're all done, I mean, pretty much all over the whole body. Umm, I don't know, I, I've tattooed genitals before so that's.. most people would consider that odd but to us it's like, it's like being a doctor, you know, once you've seen it, you've seen it, so, it's no big deal. So, umm, a lot of people freak out about it and stuff but, you know, it's just skin. That's the way we look at it, no matter what it is, so.. But, uh, I'd say that's one of the most unusual places.

P: Yeah. Do you have like, any specific tattoos that have, like.. you remember 'cause it was just so unexpected that someone would, like..

I: ..Want it there? Well, I've had like one girl come in and she wanted to get her name, on her wrist, facing so she could read it, and then got her name again, in that same font, same size, on her buttcheek. So I kind of thought that was odd, it was kind of, you know, like, pretentious of her, or, whatever, you know what I'm saying? Like, "Hey, I'll get my name on me, twice, and, the places she got 'em was kind of weird, but.. You know, a lot of people come in and want, like, same tattoos as celebrities, movie stars, other people they've seen, the want the exact same thing on the exact same spot.. I did a nautical star, like, on a chick's butt, but it was like going into her crack, because she saw it on a movie, a chick had that and that's exactly what she wanted, so I was like, "Okay."

Yeah.. Do you like tattoos that, like, cover up stretchmarks and stuff? I did a pair of like, well, they basically in the shape of, like, panties, and it was all Japanese style or whatever, cause, like the lady had kids and had, like, really bad stretchmarks, so she wanted to try to cover them up. So, I mean, it wasn't weird necessarily, it was kind of cool but, uh, it turned out really nice, so..

P: Does it cover them up?

I: Yeah, like, stretchmarks, and, umm, like, older scars, you can usually.. you can tattoo over them, they don't always accept the ink necessarily, but, if you do plenty of stuff around them too, the whole idea of it, and in that sense and with like, say, a cover-up, like if you're covering up an old tattoo, cause it's, like, done poorly or they just don't want it anymore, the whole idea is just to trick your eye away from looking at that specific thing and looking at all the stuff around it, so, you don't, kind of, see it anymore, you know what I mean? So, uh, some of the spots, the stretchmarks, you can see if you get, like, real close, but if you're standing, you know, three, four feet away, in normal viewing distance, you wouldn't notice them.

P: Ok, all right, so, umm, what are the most memorable tattoos you have done? You mentioned the girl's name, do you have any other..?

I: Yeah, umm, I'd have to say the most memorable one would probably be a, I had a guy come in and see me, he wanted to do a, a memorial to his son. His son was six years old when he died, like six and a half, and, uh, just a freak accident, got hit in the chest with a baseball while playing baseball in the front yard, so it was just, totally random, like, accident, and umm, he came in and sat for like.. seven hours? Eight hours, and, uh, tattooed like some cowboy boots and a cowboy hat with the little lasso and it had the kid's name underneath it, uh, you know, the whole banner saying like, when he died and everything. And the reason that that was even more memorable was because it was on Fathers' Day, that we did it. And, I have a son, it was actually my first Fathers' Day since I'd gotten back from Iraq, so, I missed my Fathers' Day with my kid, because I had to work that day. But, at the same time, I was able to do that for that guy, like, you know what I'm saying? It really, both of us were really quiet that whole time, I mean I tried to talk to him and stuff like that but you could tell it was really emotional deal for him and it kind of got to me too. So, umm, any time I do memorial pieces for people, I mean that's.. Another one was a lady, her son was like twelve when he died, and he was a big fan of the Pokémon thing, so she got the little..little Pikachu or whatever, umm, you know, she got that for him, and uh, that was another big deal, because, you know, it was her first tattoo and only tattoo, she was just getting it purely for him, so.. I mean anytime you gotta do stuff like that it's usually kind of rough. But, umm, I've done a few other pieces, I mean, they're memorable just because I like the artwork that we did, you know, or, whatever, but as far as painting, and everything, the before things, go, those are probably the two of my most memorable ones.

P: What's the longest that you've spent making a tattoo?

I: I'd say, umm, probably.. probably my butterfly wings, that I did, umm, it's a full-back piece, it's two butterfly wings. We outlined it for four hours and then she came back a month or so later and we filled it in and we tattooed for a little over nine hours. An then same thing with a sunflower, it's another big back piece, it's a bout the same actually, like, we broke it down to, like, two six hour sessions. So, umm, you know, about 15 hours or so, give or take.

P: Wow, that's long.

I: Yeah, I mean it's pretty common, it's like, some people wanna come in and do like, a quarter sleeve and like they only got like this day and then they're going back somewhere, so, i mean, i'd say, on average to cover the most from like the elbow to the shoulder you're looking at anything between eight to twelve hours depending on the design and how much color and you know, how much space you got in there but, you know if it's totally solid you're looking at at least twelve hours.

P: Yeah. So, do you usually do the big ones in like two parts or..?

I: I try to, it always looks better when, if you're doing a big piece to go in and do.. say it's a full-color piece, to go, do the outline and then do all the black and gray shading, so then basically it's kind of, look at the tattoo, sort of like painting in a way, as far as you making layers, so then you let

that heal and they come back then you can go back in, and make darker areas even darker and then you can go and put color in over top of it 'cause it's already healed, so you get really good gradience that way. If you try to do it all at once, it may look like everything is straight that first day, but after it heals out you're gonna have lighter areas that you wanted darker, you know what I'm saying? Because if you try to mix them, like, you know, lighter colors with darker colors like, to get that good gradience, it's just so much easier to do that layer of like black and gray and put the color on top cause then you dont have to sit there and blend your colors as you go you just basically, say you're doing from black to yellow you just do your black, medium gray, lighter gray and then to skin, let it heal, come back and then you just run yellow over the whole thing and then maybe a little more black towards the black side and then, it's a way better gradient that way

P: What do you like best about your job?

I:Uh, I love everything about my job like honestly, umm, always been kind of a talkative type person, llike meeting, you know, interesting people, it's nice getting to work with the general public I guess. Some days it can be you know annoying, like in any other job, you get asked for the same stuff over and over, the same questions, but for the most part it's something always different, everyday is different, you know, I love that, I love the fact that I can wear whatever I want, you know, having tattoos and piercings is encouraged, you know, it's not like, I'm not gonna lose my job because I got a piercing, you know?

P: Yeah, yeah. You don't have to worry about having to cover your tattoos for a job interviews or anything..

I: Exactly, exactly, Yeah, and uh I mean.. we don't have a uniform so we wear whatever we want, everyday, as look as we look nice, you know. And then, uh, we get to listen to whatever music we want to listen to, it's just, all around it's for me the perfect job. You know, I get to sit on my butt all day and draw on people, you know?

P: Yeah,. So, uh, what do you like least about your job? Or are there any things..?

I: Not really, I mean I guess if I had to pick any thing, just the, uh, just cleaning up, i mean that's if you had to pick any thing i'd say like doing tubes, like, the way it works, you know, we got the machine, we got the little grip and the tube, like, all the needles are disoposable, they're one time use only, but the tubes have to be cleaned and it usually takes an hour and a half to two hours.

P: What are the wages like at your job?

I: I can't really talk about the wages at my job, I mean, it's like, I can tell you that much that it's usually one of two ways it can go. For some you pay a rental fee for your booth every week, you know, you pay a certain amount every week, and keep what you make by tattooing. The other way it can go is, like, when you don't have to pay a rental fee but you only get a certain percentage of the money.

P: What advice would you give someone considering your line of work?

I: It's really demanding, I mean, you have to want it really bad, you can't be lazy, you have to care about every tattoo, like, show each customer the extra little bit of caring, because, you know, if they get good treatment they're gonna go and tell their friends and you can get more customers. Umm, you have to have a lot of thrive, because, you know, it's hard to get an apprenticeship, many tattoo artists don't want to teach competitors, so getting in is the hardest part. If you just get in then just kiss your the guy's ass for your apprenticeship and you'll be fine.

P: Do you have anything else you would like to share?

I: If you consider getting a tattoo, do your research, you know, go on the Internet, buy four or five tattoo magazines.. Always make sure the store is clean, that they have their licence.. because, you know, the more research you do, the happier you will be with your tattoo. And don't think about the price, price is the last thing you should be thinking when you get a tattoo, because it's, like, something that you're gonna have for the rest of your life. Uh, make sure to check the artist's portfolios, demand to see some of the works they've done, don't just take their word, like, "Oh, I've done this and this..", you want to see the work that they've done before. And always tip your tattoo artist! (laughing) Because, you know, you tip your waiter and they only bring you your food, a tattoo artist does something you're going to have the rest of your life.