

## **Tattoo Parlor in Red Ink**

By Mariel Sykes Clark

The walls of Alley Kat Tattoos are crammed with colorful tattoo of flowers, butterflies, stars – and plenty of others that would make your mother cringe. It’s a hot day outside, but inside, Alley Kat is cool, clean and quiet. Too quiet, says manager Tony Bruno.

“Business is down 20% over last year,” says Bruno of his Inwood shop. “It’s the economy. I had all the same [tattoo artists] I had last year. I didn’t raise prices or change anything.” These days, with food and housing costs rising and employment rates dwindling, “people are more likely to want to eat than to get a tattoo.”

Small, simple tattoos cost \$50 or \$60. But large, intricate tattoos, like a “sleeve” running from wrist to shoulder and completely encircling the arm, cost up to \$8,000. And no payment plans or credit cards are allowed either. Customers must pay immediately, in cash. Asked why, Bruno says, “How do you repossess a tattoo?”

Of course, the economic slowdown hasn’t affected all New York City tattoo shops. At Fun City Tattoo in the East Village, customers have been steady so far, says Melissa Garcia, shop assistant. And business actually increased this year at Dare Devil Tattoo in the Lower East Side, though owner Michelle Myles attributes that to the launch of the company’s new website. “Business is up but so is our rent so it kind of balances out,” Myles says.

Back at Alley Kat, Bruno says his store is hurting more than the downtown shops because his neighborhood lacks the tourist business. Most of his business is word of mouth. Alley Kat’s three artists work on commission, so if the tough times continue, Bruno won’t have to fire them, but they won’t make much money either.

“If they sit in here all day and nobody comes in, they leave with nothing,” he says.

Bruno says the shop needs to make \$3,000 a month to cover rent and utilities. That means it needs \$6,000 worth of business because the tattoo artists and Alley Kat split the earnings 50/50. The artists pay for ink, needles and supplies out of their earnings.

“I can spend \$300 to \$400 on supplies,” says Damien Ramos, a tattoo artist for more than 10 years. He says tattooing has its ups and downs like any other line of work and he’s more optimistic about the state of the business than Bruno. Then again he’s also the only person currently with a client.

That client is college senior Will Daley. Home from Utica College for the weekend, Daley, 21, is a return customer. Two summers ago, Ramos inked Daley’s upper arm with a large cross sticking out of a rock.

“I’m the rock,” explains Daley as he sits stoically in the tattoo chair while Ramos runs the needle over his skin. “The initials stand for my grandfather who passed away.” He points to a small “WC” below the cross. Daley is getting two more sets of initials added to his tattoo, those of his two grandmothers who recently died.

Daley says cost wasn’t an issue for his \$200 tattoo and he didn’t need to save up for it. “It’s kind of my hobby, more of a luxury,” he says. Daley had extra money from his job as a summer camp counselor.

But the same isn’t true of other customers who save up for the purchase that will stick with them. “They sock it away,” Bruno says. Others get a tattoo in increments, coming in first for the outlines, then the shading, then the color over several sessions, paying as they go.

This isn’t the first time it’s been tough for the parlor. Alley Kat opened in 2001 shortly before Sept. 11 and the first couple of years were tough. “Nobody was spending money,” says Bruno. “It was a really bad time.” But things eventually turned around and from 2005 to 2007, the shop thrived.

Bruno says just like before, business will turn around: “We ain’t going nowhere. This is the kind of business where you have to build trust.”

Now they have to trust their customers to keep coming in.