

# Over-40 Rebels With a Cause: Tattoos

By ELIZABETH HAYT

**A**T first glance, Claudia Glenn Barasch, an event planner on the Upper West Side, looks nothing like a tattooed cover girl of Road Rash, a motorcycle magazine. Ms. Barasch, 44, is married to a bankruptcy lawyer, has two college-age sons and wears Armani suits to work.

But Ms. Barasch is also a road-loving, leather-clad motorcyclist who over the last six months has made two long trips from New York, one to the West Coast and the other to British Columbia. Each culminated in that long-honored biker ritual, a souvenir tattoo.

"I never had the guts because they were taboo," she said. "Now that it's become mainstream and safe and clean, it gave me the opportunity to do something I always wanted to do." Her first was a galaxy on her back hip and the second a starburst on her front hip. "The big turning point in my life was that I became an empty nester," Ms. Barasch said. "My children's 'Wonder Years' are over, and now I get to be more sexy and have fun."

Her husband, Sheldon Hirshon, usually no fan of tattoos, sounded nearly lyrical, saying, "It's exotic, the forbidden fruit."

Tattoos — so common that 10 percent of Americans have one, according to a study in American Demographics magazine — have lost almost all their outlaw status, once conferred by convicts, Hell's Angels and circus freaks. But they remain just enough of a taboo to still seem an act of rebellion to some.

Ms. Barasch is among a growing number of middle-aged, middle-class women who in recent years have been drawn to tattoos for the first time. Their reasons fall all over the lot: to commemorate big birthdays, to celebrate a divorce, to poke fun at the stereotype of older women. Whatever the reason, they say that getting a tattoo is always a symbolic act.

"One thing they all have in common is that it marks an important time in their life or a turning point," said Vyvyn Lazonga, a Seattle tattoo artist. "To a certain degree, it's different than a younger person because younger people don't have a wealth of experience to draw upon. An 18-year-old isn't as apt to think about it as an older person."

When Jane Caplan, 57, a history professor at Bryn Mawr College near Philadelphia, got the first of her three tattoos, she was 50 and had endured a difficult year. She chose a Chinese character meaning "courage" for her upper arm. She said 50 was a good age to start. "When you're older, you understand what it means to incorporate an experience into your body," said Dr. Caplan, who is the editor of "Written on the Body: The Tattoo in European and American History," academic essays about the history of the tattoo.

Last fall, Nina Segre, a Philadelphia lawyer, turned 60 and decided to do some things she had always wanted to do. She had "Grandma" tattooed on her hip and soon after added a tattoo of her husband's initials above her heart. "I think of a tattoo as a game," she said. "It's playing with aging, not resisting it."

Today, tattooing is so prevalent that there are tattoo parlor chains, tattoo courses at art colleges and temporary rub-on tattoos favored by preschoolers sold at 7-Elevens. Hygiene standards have improved, according to the Alliance of Profession-



**ON THE ROAD** Claudia Glenn Barasch, 44, has two tattoos as souvenirs of two motorcycle trips across the continent this year.

al Tattooists, a 1,100-member organization based in Tucson. But medical professionals worry about the spread of infectious diseases and skin reactions to the dyes used. (Not all tattoos are removable.) Latex gloves and autoclave sterilizers are now commonplace. As in most other fields, more women are becoming tattoo artists, a comfort to women who are getting private parts of their bodies adorned.

Once primarily the domain of men, increasing numbers of women are plunking down \$75 to \$150 per hour for a tattoo.

Celebrities fueled the trend, with Cher, Charlize Theron, Britney Spears and Christina Aguilera flaunting their tattooed skin. In 1999, when Barbie turned 40, Mattel introduced Butterfly Art Barbie with a tattoo on her stomach. Margot Mifflin, author of "Bodies of Subversion: A Secret History of Women and Tattoo" (Juno Books, 2002), said that was a sure sign that tattoos had entered the mainstream.

In a study of 1,009 adults reported in American Demographics magazine last year, of those between 40 and 64 years of age, 9 percent were tattooed. Overall, including all age groups in the survey, more women than men have or have had tattoos: 18 percent of women to 13 percent for men.

Tanja Nixx, owner of the Lyle Tuttle Tattoo Studio in San Francisco, confirmed that the number of women over 40 getting tattoos outnumbered men of the same age group. "Middle-aged women are an unlikely category," said Don Ed Hardy, owner of Tattoo City in San Francisco, "but they are doing it to kick up their heels or celebrate the freedom

they've achieved."

Nancy Greene, 71, a bridal consultant in West Northridge, Calif., got her first tattoo four years ago and is ready for a second. "I think women become bolder and more independent as they get older," she said.

Two years ago, Martina Fauch of Mill Valley, Calif., turned 40 and altered her life style, quitting her high-level position at a telecommunications company and entering a graduate program to become a sex thera-

apist. She got a winged fairy tattoo across her entire back. "I needed my wings," she said of the motif. "I needed strength."

Tattoo parlors have even become a popular destination on "girls' night out" for the over-40 set. "A few years ago, you wouldn't have any older women, with a few exceptions, but these days I'll get groups of them on their wacky night out who want to get tattoos to surprise their husbands," said Michelle Myles, owner of Daredevil Tattoo, on the Lower East Side in Manhattan. For that little flower on the ankle or the butterfly on the lower back, two of women's favorite tattoo spots, women

**For women, a symbol of, well, something.**

gladly stand the pain of an ink-filled needle bobbing up and down like a sewing machine needle on their skin.

Tattoos can bridge the generation gap. Six years ago, Christine Scheurer, 52, a compensation specialist at an auto parts manufacturer in Denver, and her 20-year-old daughter got matching tattoos. "I thought it would be kind of cool," Ms. Scheurer said. "It's not something you'd expect of someone who is 46. Most people are surprised. It sends a message: 'She's a little wild.'"

The children of newly tattooed mothers don't always think so. Erin Fauble, 29, an office manager at the Alliance of Professional Tattooists, has two tattoos, and her sister wears three, but the women were shocked when, in October, their mother, a 54-year-old technology manager for Motorola in Mesa, Ariz., announced that she wanted one, too.

In general, tattoos are becoming so acceptable among women north of 40 that they are in danger of losing their allure of naughtiness — that is, of seeming as conformist as a tattoo on a 25-year-old rock guitarist.

Susan Friedman, 55, who retired as director of client services at Christie's a year and a half ago, was all set to get a tattoo. "I wanted to get back to my 60's roots," she said. "But then I chickened out. It was too obvious an act of rebellion."

Blocked due to copyright.  
See full page image or  
microfilm.

**BEEN THERE** Sandra Oliver, who is in her early 50's and works for a health maintenance organization in Manhattan, has several tattoos.