

ART

Gay tattoo artist makes his mark

Interstellar Ink opens in Southeast Portland

BY REBECCA RAGAIN

When Jonny Bicha was going to tattoo school, his whole family—mom, dad and sister—traveled from Montana to get ink done.

"My family has been really supportive," says the gay 24-year-old, who now runs his own tattoo studio.

Even as a little kid, Bicha was drawn to art. In fact, he originally moved to Portland planning to attend Pacific Northwest College of Art. That path didn't work out, however, and he bounced from job to job, eventually settling down to work at a coffee bar in Portland State University's food court.

On his 22nd birthday, Bicha went in for a new tattoo: a Pisces symbol, represented by an

"It's nice not having two jobs. I've been really worn down," he says.

Every week, Friday through Tuesday, Bicha can be found at Interstellar Ink, doing tattoos that range from tiny to elaborate. He creates custom designs, spending between 30 minutes and several hours on the artwork before he even picks up the gun. He also works from ready-made art, called flash.

Bicha is happy to accommodate the stylistic requests of his clients, but eventually he may follow his personal inclination toward Asian-themed designs.

"I have an affiliation with Japanese style," he says. "I like it aesthetically."

Bicha is building up his client base, keeping



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Asian-style koi on each forearm. It wasn't his first tat, but it was the most significant. That day, under the needle, he decided to become a tattoo artist.

"Throughout my life I'd had a lot of different people—just by looking at my artwork—tell me that I should be a tattoo artist. Just off-hand comments," says Bicha.

He enrolled in tattoo school on a part-time basis while still holding down his barista job. One year later, he finished school with more than 600 hours under his belt, far exceeding the 360 hours required by the program.

In tattoo school, Bicha studied concepts like the placement of tattoos on the skin, the ins and outs of pigments and sterilization requirements. He had to log 150 practice hours, which meant bringing in customers willing to have a student permanently etch their flesh.

"Pretty much you have your friends come in. Basically anybody you can find. You don't get walk-ins," says Bicha.

After he finished school, Bicha took and passed the two-part state exam to be licensed as a "permanent color technician."

Once he had the official green light to practice, Bicha started his own tattoo studio in a shared space on Woodstock Boulevard. He dubbed his business Interstellar Ink.

When it opened in March, Bicha was still slinging java at PSU in addition to manning the needles at the studio. In early June, school let out at the university, and Bicha was free to focus on his art.

his business cards at the ready. He'd like for more members of the queer community to come by the studio, so he plans to join the Portland Area Business Association.

For now, Bicha relies largely on walk-in customers for business. This strategy is working well so far. The Woodstock shop is well placed and far enough away from other tattoo locations that Bicha gets walk-ins daily.

"It's cool because it's its own little entity—Woodstock, that area right there. It's this totally busy area with all these different shops," he says.

He hopes that word of mouth will spread by way of his previous customers, who display his art around the city on the living canvases of their bodies. His partner, Benny Velthouse, has gotten inked multiple times since Bicha received his license.

Bicha knows that it takes time to establish a business and that it can take years to build a significant client base. Still, he's not looking forward to another round of working two jobs when school starts again later this month.

"My biggest aspiration," Bicha says, "is to have so many clients to not have to go back [to PSU] in the fall." ■

INTERSTELLAR INK is located at 4625 S.E. Woodstock Blvd. Jonny Bicha is available at 503-807-9718.

REBECCA RAGAIN is a Portland free-lance writer and a tattoo virgin.

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