

herself, even though it's just the two of us talking. I say y'all rather than you because I understand that my friend doesn't exist in a vacuum – indeed, none of us do.

At its simplest, y'all is a contraction of you and all. You – you are you, I am me, and for the sake of this sentence I must distinguish between you and me; and all – even as I separate myself from you, I do not isolate you. I understand that when I speak to you, I must consider more than just the person standing in front of me. I acknowledge that you are part of something bigger, something stronger and more important than the word you alone can hope to convey. You are a sibling, a parent, a friend, a teacher, a student. As one human being to another, and with all the love in my Texas-bred heart, I speak to all of you.

## Slingin' Ink

SAMANTHA BROOKS



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*WRITER'S COMMENT: When I met Tony Mercado, he was not the stereotypical tattoo artist I was expecting. I scheduled an interview with Mercado over the phone and envisioned the kind of person I was going to meet – someone probably bald with a scraggly beard, dirty jeans and an oversized T-shirt is what came to mind. And tattoos, obviously. Tony has a lot of tattoos, so I got that part right, but that was pretty much it. He was clean-cut, friendly, and rather charming, if I'm being honest. I showed up to the interview with all my questions written out and expected my finished paper to have an edgy ring to it – which in the end, it sort of did, but not in the way I had anticipated. Within minutes of meeting him I knew that I was going to have to put a totally different spin on this profile than I initially planned. When I left the parlor, I sat down in my car and thought to myself, "How on earth am I going to start this piece?" I then realized that I had to approach this not head-on, but at the proper angle – putting Mercado's background at the forefront. Like tattoos, experiences are permanent, and with a little bit of detail, you can learn a lot about someone from looking at them.*

*Instructor's Comment: For their second major assignment, students in my UWP 104C: Journalism class write a 1,500-word profile piece. This article requires them to find an angle that will interest a general audience and to capture details, both large and small. Samantha immediately understood that Mercado's journey from soldier to tattoo artist could interest a broad audience. That provides the foundation for a great article. Throughout it, she captures her subject's voice in an exemplary way. Readers experience Mercado's sarcastic sense of humor, with voices of his co-workers sprinkled in for additional verisimilitude. Through it all, Samantha demonstrates many of the finest journalistic skills: finding the right subject, noting the important details of that subject's world, and conveying that information in clear prose.*

*– Nathaniel Williams, University Writing Program*

**T**ony Mercado is a big fan of needles. In fact, he uses them almost every day.

It hasn't always been this way for 30-year-old Mercado.

Standing beside the counter of a tattoo and piercing shop in Davis, California, I introduced myself to the tattoo artist and shook a uniquely decorated hand.

The artist flaunts numerous tattoos, including the words "VIDA AMOR" ("Love Life") written across his two hands – a letter on each knuckle. Shoulders slumped and chest thrust, Mercado emanates a charming confidence that gives a friendly air to our conversation. Neatly styled hair, dark eyes and similar facial features complement his crisp plaid shirt, corduroy pants and overall sharpness. If his forearms were trees, the ink on his wrists and hands would be the roots and grass of a picturesque scene. His long sleeves conceal broad arms with presumably many more tattoos. Those exposed on his open skin are colorful and captivating.

After getting acquainted and grabbing a Sprite from the bakery next door, Mercado and I walked back to one of the tattoo rooms, where he kindly let me sit in the artist's chair. As he took his seat on the multifunctional tattoo client/massage table, I couldn't help but notice that behind him hung a patriotic flag with the iconic Colonial snake symbol and the words "UNITED STATES ARMY" in bold white letters on red ribbon.

Mercado is one of two tattoo artists at Urban Body, where he has been doing professional work over just this last year. While body art hasn't always been at the center of his career endeavors, it is indubitably a lifestyle to which Mercado has been effortlessly drawn.

"My first experience with tattooing was when I was in ninth grade," he told me, "My brother made a home-made tattoo machine out of a Walkman motor, a spoon, a mechanical pencil, and the needle was a guitar string. Total prison style. I was messing around with it in my room with my friends, gave myself a tattoo of my initials on my arm, then did some pretty horrible tattoos on my buddies....I didn't tattoo again after that until about 10 years later, when I was in the army."

Mercado enlisted in the army at 19 and served for 11 years – during that time, he ordered a tattoo kit while visiting home in Sacramento and offered free tattoos to his friends as a way to practice. The pastime got more serious in 2009 when Mercado went to Afghanistan for a year and made some money on the side by tattooing out of his tent.

"At first I didn't really think I could do it, because I didn't go to art school," Mercado admitted. Though his artistic talents had emerged and blossomed, his personal style and spin hadn't quite. His hobby having turned into a genuine passion, after resigning from a full-time position in the National Guard, Mercado started an apprenticeship in Sacramento to develop his creative skills and style in full.

"My apprenticeship was in Oak Park on Broadway, and it was a total street shop – crack heads and hookers everywhere down the block. I like that environment. It's entertaining."

Mercado began his professional career in the heart of Sacramento where such characters are not uncommon. A few months into the job, Mercado had a pleasant encounter with his now co-artist Chris Yoakum at a tattoo convention in Reno, and shortly after was offered a position at Urban Body when the previous artist left.

As it happens, Davis and Sacramento are night and day in regards to the population they cater to. "Every college chick gets the same tattoo. Every f\*cking day I do a cursive quote on some girl's ribs. It's the new tramp stamp."

Aside from the collegiate make-up of the rural town, clients differ also in how much tact they demand.

In Davis, Mercado says, people "are such hippies and liberals. Being from an army background where we all talk sh\*t to each other, we didn't have any hate behind it, because we just thought it was funny. Here I have to watch that sh\*t because a lot of people are easily offended."

Between the customers, their demeanor, and the general nature of it all, Mercado has, no doubt, an amusing job. However, being a relatively new professional tattoo artist comes with challenges. In contrast to his co-artist Yoakum, who has been at Urban Body for eight or so years, Mercado doesn't quite have the loyal clientele that long-time tattoo artists enjoy.

"It kind of sucks being new, because I don't have clients built up. I usually just get people walking up off the street, so that's part of what I rely on for money. Right now I'm in the 'developing-my-skills' phase, so in a few years down the line when I have a client base, I won't have to worry about money so much." While not having the customers that long-time artists have is the greatest obstacle, Mercado is certainly learning how to address it; one way of doing so is by promoting himself on Instagram.

Obviously the first thing I did after our interview was look at Mercado's Instagram page.

Bombarding the viewer with photo after photo of both unique and traditional tattoo work, Mercado's Instagram gallery shows over 300 of his most interesting pieces. In one pirate-inspired tattoo, a skull, a parrot, and an empty rum bottle are superimposed over an ocean, the words "SMELLY PIRATE HOOKER" running in large letters across the bottom.

Needless to say, being even a new tattoo artist has its perks. "When people come up to me and say, 'Hey I checked out your Instagram, I think you're good and I want you to tattoo me,' that's kind of an honor, because they're willing to let me draw something on their body that literally lasts forever. It feels like maybe I made the right choice, you know, because people like my sh\*t."

What about the overall atmosphere at a tattoo and piercing shop?

"It's terrible!" joked Cynthia, the general manager of Urban Body. "Having Tony here is great," Cynthia added. "He is extremely talented. He just...needs to stay on top of his appointments," she said comically, but with a hint of seriousness. "APPOINTMENTS!" she repeated, and the three of us shared a laugh.

"It's overall pretty chill here though," commented Mercado. "I think it's the best work environment anyone can have." Being employed at a tattoo shop gives "going to work" a whole new meaning.

"I get to do what I love to do – art. I do paintings when I'm not doing tattoos. This environment is hella cool, especially coming from the military. I can wear whatever I want, to an extent say what I want. It's tight – aside from...well, nothing. There's nothing bad about it that I can think of. It's definitely not one of those jobs where I wake up in the morning and dread having to get out of bed to go to work. I could kick it here every day."

Most people wouldn't expect that Mercado had formerly served in the military. "The two lifestyles totally contradict each other," Mercado said with half a laugh. "People expect tattooers to be, like, dirt bags. They totally never expect that I was in the Army for 11 years."

Mercado gracefully defies the misconceptions people have about tattoo artists. "People expect tattoo artists to be like f\*cking drug addicts that just got out of jail, but that's definitely not all of us. Right now I'm focused on keeping up with appointments and building up my client

base."

As far as careers go, Mercado is confident that he made the right choice. "I knew when I left the Army that I was going to take a major pay cut, but I didn't even care. I'd way rather be making just enough to get by and being really happy than being f\*cking miserable all day."

"Would you do this forever?" I asked.

"F\*ck yeah. Half because I'm lazy and don't want a real job, and half because I love it."

And that's as good a reason as any.

Check out Tony Mercado and his work on Instagram @tonymercado27.