



Robin Bailey had a memorial tattoo of her now deceased husband, Sean Pickwell (left)



TRIBUTE

In The Name Of **LOVE & LOSS**

Memorial tattoos are providing comfort to the grieving

BY Cath Johnsen



Shortly before Robin Bailey lost her husband to liver cancer in 2019, she decided to have his heartbeat rhythm, which had been captured from an ECG, tattooed on her arm.

"I'm really proud of it, it's something that

PHOTO: COURTESY ROBIN BAILEY

READER'S DIGEST

means a lot to me," the radio host from Queensland says. "I'll often find that when I'm having a bad day or I'm struggling, which is still a fair bit, I'll rub it, like in some way I'm hoping that it might just start beating back at me."

Robin's husband, Sean Pickwell, was still alive when she had her tattoo done, and he sat holding her hand during the procedure, supporting her as she in turn supported him through his battle with cancer. Sean's daughter was also there, getting the same heartbeat tattoo in what was an emotional tribute.

"I think for Sean, it made him feel that he would be remembered," the 52 year old says. "He was very ill at that point, and he knew that he

Robin had her husband's heartbeat rhythm tattooed on her arm



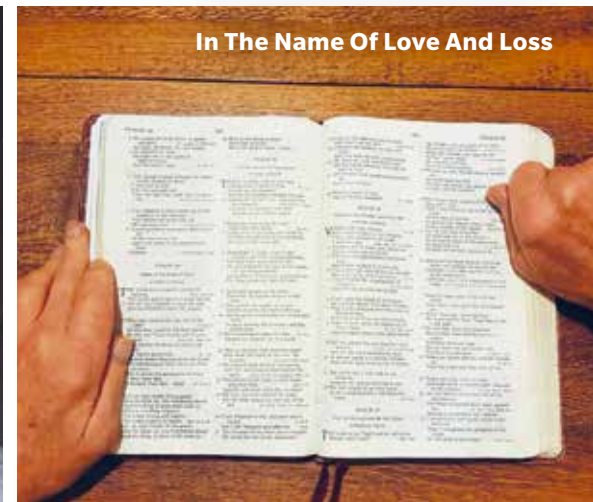
didn't have long left, but in some way, I think we were stamping him on us, and I think he really appreciated it."

The word tattoo comes from the Polynesian term, *tatau*, and in the Māori culture of Indigenous New Zealanders, the ancient practice of tattoo is called *tāmoko*. Not unlike erecting a tombstone or carefully preserving someone's ashes, many people are choosing to mark their bodies permanently to honour a friend or family member that has died, using the physically painful procedure of tattoo art to represent their emotional pain.

However, many people don't consider a memorial tattoo until after their loved one has died, sometimes years later, following deep reflection about the words or images that would best symbolise their relationship.

For 25-year-old Hannah Marshall, it was a photo of her father's gnarled and severely arthritic hands on his beloved bible, that sparked the idea for her memorial tattoo. "Dad was a pastor and he had his own congregation," Hannah explains. "Mum took this photo just a couple of weeks before he passed from kidney cancer. Dad's hands were definitely unique to him and something that I'll remember forever.

"But he absolutely hated tattoos so I don't know what he would think



This photo of her father reading the bible sparked the idea of a tattoo for Hannah Marshall

was worse: the fact that I got a tattoo or that I got a tattoo of the bible," Hannah laughs.

After finding out that her father's illness was terminal, followed by his passing in 2018, Hannah credits the cancer support service for young people, Canteen, as a lifeline through those tough years. "Canteen was really there for me," Hannah says.

"I didn't have any friends at high school going through anything similar, so having that network where I could meet others that understood, and to be able to access the Canteen services really helped."

Canteen counsellor and national clinical adviser, Claire Malengret, says there is a growing body of research that suggests that people get memorial tattoos for two main reasons: to honour and remember someone, and to help in their own

experience of grief and loss. "When our young people at Canteen get tattoos, they want to make that permanent mark that lasts forever, ensuring that their loved one is never forgotten," Claire explains.

"It's a powerful expression of the continuing relationship they have with that person who has died."

Memorial tattoos provide a prompt for the bereaved to talk about their deceased friend or family member. For this reason, many people choose to have their memorial tattoos on their arms and feet, where it's visible for other people to see, and prompt a dialogue about the deceased.

"You'll find that when people are telling stories about their loved one, they often touch their tattoos, so I think it's deliberately visible so that they can keep telling that story," adds Claire.

PHOTOS: COURTESY (LEFT) ROBIN BAILEY; (RIGHT) HANNAH MARSHALL

For some, the idea of a memorial tattoo can appeal many years later as a tribute. For Ryan Jones, of Derby in the UK, his memorial tattoo – the date his grandfather passed away in Roman numerals on his right forearm – helps him to remember his granddad’s legacy.

“I chose this particular idea as my granddad died when I was 13 years old,” says Ryan. Despite the pair being very close, in the years following his grandfather’s death Ryan, now 21, was overwhelmed by guilt that he didn’t think enough about him.

“I only have good memories of him and wanted something to really remind me of his presence and impact on my life – a tattoo is a great permanent reminder about what a legend he was to me.”

Ryan has plans to get another tattoo in his grandfather’s honour, this time a half-sleeve on his forearm. As his grandfather loved painting boats in watercolour, Ryan would like to get a tattoo of one of the boats he painted, and also add some nautical-themed objects, such as a compass and a sailor’s knot. “When it comes to tattoos, I am not a fan of getting any without meaning,” he says. “When I came up with the idea to honour my grandfather with a permanent piece of art on my skin, I could not pass up the opportunity. I now plan to honour all my family members in this way.”



Deborah Davidson’s butterfly tattoo remembers her two infant children

Using the human body as a canvas is not a new concept. Deborah Davidson, 68, a sociologist from York University in Toronto, Canada, says tattooing is one of the most ancient and persistent forms of body modification. She says that the earliest archaeological evidence goes back over 5000 years, and artefacts that were probably used in tattooing go back over 10,000 years. In 1000 BCE, tattooing was found virtually everywhere.

In more recent times, the tattoo has often been associated with subgroups, such as non-conforming punks or anarchy-loving bikies, but Deborah says that tattooing has never been limited by its relationship to deviance or subcultures.

“It’s become far more widely accepted as a social phenomenon,

as a mark on your body for various reasons,” she says. “A lot of people who have memorial tattoos said they would never have thought of getting a tattoo before and many only have memorial tattoos.”

Deborah is a perfect example of this. Admitting that she had never thought of getting a tattoo herself, she had a change of heart in her mid-50s when she decided to have two butterflies etched into her skin in remembrance of two infants she had lost decades earlier.

“I had two babies many years ago,” she says. “They were born and died shortly after birth and their loss, their lives and my loss of them was never acknowledged at the time.

“After I saw memorial tattoos on some lovely people, I got some of my own and then of course, tattoos are like potato chips, you can’t just have one, so I got more.”

Now, Deborah has numerous tattoos to acknowledge her family members, both living and non-living, and has written a book called *The Tattoo Project*, a print version of her website, which is a collective community

effort to create a digital archive of crowd-sourced memorial tattoos and their accompanying stories.

One thing that stands out from Deborah’s collection of stories is that for many people, memorial tattoos not only mark their sorrows, but remind them of joyful times.

“Virtually all the time when I speak to people about their memorial tattoos they smile,” Deborah says. “You can ask about the death and they’ll tell you, but they also want to speak about the life that existed.”

At Zealand Tattoo in Queenstown, New Zealand, manager Sam Tan says they have around six to eight people each month booking in for a memorial tattoo. Common designs include names, portraits and Māori symbols to represent the person that has passed on. “In rare cases, we have people asking for the ash to be mixed into the ink,” Sam says. “They need to be aware of the risk of contamination in the ink, but we have found it to be quite safe. The feeling they get from it is amazing, it’s quite touching.”

It’s been said that grief is a souvenir of love. It seems the tattoo has also become a souvenir of both love and loss. **R**

PHOTO: COURTESY DEBORAH DAVIDSON

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It’s Finally A Girl

A Michigan couple, whose large family attracted attention by growing to include 14 sons, has welcomed their first daughter – nearly three decades after the birth of their first child. AP