



KAT VON D IS ONE OF THE WORLD'S BIGGEST FEMALE TATTOO ARTIST CELEBRITIES. AFTER LEAVING SCHOOL TO TATTOO AT THE AGE OF 16, SHE'S NOW A REALITY TV STAR THANKS TO SERIES SUCH AS MIAMI INK AND LA INK. PR.COM'S ALLISON KUGEL RECENTLY SPOKE WITH THE WOMAN WHOSE BUSINESS KNOW-HOW AND SHEER TALENT HAVE PROVED TO BE ONE POTENT COMBINATION...

WORDS BY ALLISON KUGEL IMAGES COURTESY OF TLC

AK: When you're running a business and it's also a reality TV show, how much of it that the public sees is produced, and how much of it is a true documentary of what actually goes on?

KVD: I think it's pretty close to the truth from 9.00am to 9.00pm, because that's when we film. It would be crazy to have the entire camera crew there for 24 hours straight. Also I want the shop to be open to the public at some point. When we do film, which usually takes in three to four months, we're also open from 9.00pm to midnight. A lot of the crazy stuff happens then too, but we miss some of those moments. It takes about a week to film a one-hour episode. So what the viewers get to see is an edited, concentrated version, but it's pretty close to the real thing.

AK: You grew up in California. How did you wind up working in Miami several years ago and how did the reality TV show *Miami Ink* first come together with cable TV network TLC?

KVD: It was interesting because at the time, before *Miami Ink*, there really hadn't been any tattoo shows. I was working at a shop in Hollywood for two of these guys and one of them was Chris Garver. I remember it was like, "Oh yeah, Chris is off to Miami to film some kind of pilot," and I'm like, "What's a pilot?" When he told me I said, "For a tattoo show? That's so boring!" I didn't understand what it was going to be about, because each day is usually just us sitting down and the buzz of a tattoo needle. You know what I mean? It's

just that buzzing noise. I didn't understand the premise until the show actually came out. It was more based on the story behind each tattoo and the dynamics between the client and the artist. But it was all about guys and the network finally said, "We want a female. There's too much testosterone." Chris Garver called me and said, "Hey, we all want

you to come down." There's not that many female tattoo artists who are cool and don't get offended, and who are actually good and who have been tattooing for a long time. The network approved me and I flew down there.

AK: How did you like living in Miami?

KVD: I was there on the weekdays and then I would fly home on the weekends, so I never actually lived there. It was definitely a different vibe than LA. I'm so used to living in Hollywood where it's totally not a big deal to be tattooed. To be separated from that and put in South Beach, well — I got a lot of weird looks when I was in a bathing suit! There was friction between myself and some of the other cast members. It didn't end up pretty, so then it was time for me to go home.

AK: Why do you think it appealed to TLC to want to do a show about tattoo artists in the first place?

KVD: I think the age demographic was important, because TLC is doing more shows that are aimed at younger viewers. I honestly believe nobody really knew how big it would get and how interested people would be. Once the show aired it was crazy. People loved it. People that would never get tattoos were tuning in because they could kind of live through either us or a client. Believe it or not grandmas and soccer moms come up to me and say, "I love your show!"

AK: Before you were famous, had you encountered prejudice from people who would see your tattoos and judge you, or maybe treat you in a certain way?

KVD: Oh, most definitely. Four or five years ago going into a Dior store, you know — you felt like Julia Roberts in *Pretty Woman*. People would stare and it wasn't because they were curious. Going to the mall was pretty hard. I think for a female especially, because it's so much more gnarly than tattoos on a guy. On a guy it's like, "Oh, he's a wild one." If it's a girl it's all the bad stigmas — you're a hooker, you're a drug addict, you were in jail. It was actually kind of fun, because I consider myself to be a pretty smart person and you talk to people and they're like, "Wow! You actually have a brain!", or, "You're actually kind of nice and pretty conservative!"

AK: What is it about tattoos that you love so much?

KVD: It's a form of self expression. I'd been listening to music on my own without my parents' input since I was 12 and getting into the punk rock scene. It just really gave me the attitude where I don't get tattooed for anybody else but me. I didn't do this as an attention seeking act of rebellion. It was more that I actually just like this and I want to get tattooed and I want it so much that I don't care if other people treat me differently. If they do then they're probably the people that I don't want

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to hang out with, so it kind of filters those people out. But now it's backfired, because people really like the show and even people who haven't watched it are indirectly affected and they become more open minded. So now they come up to me and ask me about my tattoos. Now I have to constantly talk about my tattoos, like... at the grocery store. I'm not complaining, but before it wasn't like that.

AK: Who does your tattoos? You can't do them yourself, can you?

KVD: No. I used to do it myself when I was a kid, practising, but not anymore. It's too hard for me to concentrate. I've collected them from over 30 or 40 different artists from around the world.

AK: Did you ever foresee yourself being a television personality or a celebrity when you began tattooing?

KVD: F@#k no! When I first started tattooing

SKINDEEP