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Old-School Ink: New Haven's Tattoos Exhibit to Open at New Haven Museum

New Haven, Conn. (September 11, 2017) –Ray Willis was in the middle of the sweltering Amazon rainforest earlier this year when a complete stranger took one look at the tattoo emblazoned on Willis' right shoulder above the words, "Original Gangsta," and said, "That's John DeStefano." Willis, a city employee who crowdsourced funding for the tattoo to commemorate the New Haven mayor's record-breaking 20-year career, was shocked. A large photo of Willis's tattoo is just one of the many quirky items that will be featured in "Old-School Ink: New Haven's Tattoos," an exhibition opening on September 23 at the New Haven Museum. From 2 to 6 p.m., the afternoon's events will feature hands-on activities; temporary tattoos; professional photography of visitors and their tattoos, a storytelling booth with the New Haven Story Project, and a reception with the artists from 4 to 6 pm. The exhibit will remain on view through March 10, 2018. The free opening is being held by the Museum to mark Museum Day Live!, a national celebration sponsored each year by Smithsonian Magazine: <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/museumday/museum-day-live-2017/>.

"Old School Ink" guest curator Elinor Slomba enlisted New Haven photojournalist Corey Hudson in her examination of why and where locals get tattoos, and how the industry, public

policy, and aesthetics surrounding the art of tattooing have evolved over time. After conferring with contemporary tattoo artists, community members and tattoo historians, and researching and borrowing from archival collections, the materials and stories Slomba has assembled will reveal the roots of a thriving “Old School” tradition, and offer insight into how the Elm City has contributed to the tattoo field worldwide.

“Old School Ink” will explore four aspects of tattooing, beginning with the tools of the trade, and a look at New Haven area innovators, including Samuel O’Reilly, who patented the first electric tattoo machine in 1891. Henry Silver, the earliest known tattoo artist to advertise in the New Haven Register, used red ink that would have likely been made from cinnabar, also known as vermilion or mercury sulfide, according to tattoo historian Carmen Nyssen. The blue ink he used may have come from India gunpowder or even soot from lamps.

Contemporary tattoo artists in the area have created new, limited-edition art for the exhibit inspired by historical aspects the Elm City, and contributed “flash sheets” of the work to the show. The images depict everything from “I ‘heart’ New Haven” to a stylized Yale bulldog to the inscription above the gate of the Grove Street Cemetery, “The Dead Shall Be Raised.” Tattoos of the drawings can be purchased at the artists’ respective studios during the duration of the exhibit.

The show will also examine what tattooing means to those who practice the trade. Notable current artists include Joe Capobianco, owner of Hope Gallery, who has designed his own tattoo machine, and a line of inks particularly suited to the style he is known for nationally—the pin-up-style character known as “The Capo Girl.” According to Capobianco, “Once you start doing this, it does tend to just take over. You literally *become* a tattooer, you’re not just some artist who’s putzing around on somebody’s skin. You’re constantly thinking about how you’re going to do what you’re going to do next, and how to get better.”

According to Connecticut statutes adopted in 2014, the legal definition of tattooing is “marking or coloring, in an indelible manner, the skin of any person by pricking in coloring matter or by producing scars” (Chapter 387a, Section. 20-266n). In the 1700s, court papers show that

criminals housed in New Haven's colonial prison were tattooed with letters corresponding to crimes, for instance, "B" for burglary. In a section on public policies and community support, "Old School Ink" examines how changing tattoo policies and regulations have impacted the conditions under which tattoos have been applied, selected, and shown in New Haven.

The exhibit also highlights the aesthetics and influence of New Haven body art, depicting the history of tattooing from the perspective of local tattoo artists. As tattooing becomes more mainstream, those who carry it forward share a concern with authenticity and staying true to their roots. According to Tracey Rose, co-owner of Lucky Soul Tattoo in Woodbridge, who has contributed and loaned a number of works to the show, "Entering into a tattoo apprenticeship or becoming a tattooer is entering into this world that's like a big family...you're entering into something where you have grandfathers and great grandfathers. You have a lineage. Whether or not your direct lineage connects, you should know who those people are."

Taking a look at the aesthetics and influence in the trade, the exhibit will include items such as a poster from 1900 featuring Lulu Aggie Baum, the tattooed lady who came to New Haven with the circus, to images with tattoos relating to Capoeira, a combination of martial arts and dance from Brazil, of which 90% of the practitioners have some form of tattoo.

Guest curator Elinor Slomba is known in the Elm City as the founder of Arts Interstices/Verge Arts Group, created to help organizations meet their community engagement goals through arts and culture. She is currently managing two high-profile city projects, Project Storefronts and the Made in New Haven Campaign. She notes that while she is interested in tattoos as art form, she particularly admires the artists' ability to make a living while inking in a regulated environment. "My work is at the intersection of arts and culture and economic development," she says. "I really respect artists who are able to contribute viable business models to the creative economy."

About the New Haven Museum

The New Haven Museum has been collecting, preserving and interpreting the history and heritage of Greater New Haven since its inception as the New Haven Colony Historical Society

in 1862. Located in downtown New Haven at 114 Whitney Avenue, the Museum brings more than 375 years of New Haven history to life through its collections, exhibitions, programs and outreach. For more information visit www.newhavenmuseum.org or Facebook.com/NewHavenMuseum or call 203-562-4183.

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