

# Tattoo art helps women triumph after cancer

■ Beau Donnelly

Anne Hulett wears a bold emblem on her new left breast: a bright red love heart with a teardrop beneath.

The Melbourne primary school principal had never considered getting a tattoo before doctors found three aggressive cancers growing above her breastbone in 2012.

Then came chemotherapy, a mastectomy, and finally, the reconstruction.

By the time the 64-year-old met the cosmetic tattooist who was to paint over her reconstructed nipple, Hulett knew she wanted to make a statement: she was still here and she was still a woman.

The heart was chosen because Hulett loves her life. Red, because it is her favourite colour. The teardrop was the tattooist's idea.

"I decided that if I was ever going to have a tattoo I should have something out there," Hulett says.

"I wanted to cover some of the scarring and to say, 'I survived this and look how good I look!'"

A growing number of breast cancer survivors are now sharing their stories about covering mastectomy scars or reconstructed breasts with decorative tattoos.

Earlier this month, a Northern Territory tattoo parlour posted an image on social media of a client's double mastectomy and reconstruction tattoo. The photo of Darwin woman Alyson Anderson's tattoo received more than 230,000 likes.

Survivors say the tattoos are an important part of their recovery, reinforcing their femininity and building confidence. And they are a symbol of being back in control, having survived the ravages of a disease that is the second leading cause of cancer-related death in Australian women.

Hamish Farrow, head of breast reconstruction at the Austin Hospital and spokesman for the Australian Society of Plastic Surgeons, says about 40 of his patients have had decorative breast tattooing after prophylactic surgery or mastectomies for cancer treatment.

Dr Farrow says while this number represents only a fraction of the women he has treated in the past 15 years, he expects the practice to increase as tattoos become more popular.

"Scars are a continual reminder of what they went through, of how ugly that time was," Dr Farrow says. "Obliterating that is mostly about

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letting them move on, letting them forget."

Nadia Cimino doubted her husband when he said she was beautiful. All she could see when she stood in front of the mirror was what the fast-growing cancer and 18 months of

gruelling treatment had taken.

In the months following her surgery, the normally confident 48-year-old wilted. "Once I had the mastectomy it all changed," the Brunswick mother-of-four says. "It was really awful, I couldn't accept that it was

done. I didn't feel comfortable in my own skin."

Cimino had a breast reconstruction last year, with muscle from her lower back used to cover the implant. Soon after she had the scars on her back and side covered with a tattoo

Clockwise from main: Nadia Cimino, Michelle Louis and Anne Hulett show off their tattoos. Photos: Justin McManus

of a rose vine. This year, she turned her attention to her breast.

"It was for me, so that when I look at myself in the mirror I don't see so much of a difference between the breasts," she says. "They don't look the same, it will never be the same, but at least it's not as obvious. It hides that."

Davo Voodoo, a tattoo artist at the Fitzroy North studio Third Eye, specialises in body art over surgery scars, skin grafts and burns. Over three two-hour sessions he tattooed the "feminine tribal pattern" on Cimino's breast.

"For me, work like this justifies being a tattoo artist for 23 years," he says. "There's more pressure in the sense that you've got to make sure it's perfect, but at the same time it's more rewarding as an artist."

In the United States, not-for-profit group PInk connects tattoo artists with women wanting to ink over jagged mastectomy scars. The organisation has raised money to cover tattoo artist fees so dozens of survivors could "reclaim their bodies".

Mastectomy tattoos, whether cosmetic nipple tattoos or bold artistic designs, show the power of women embracing their post-surgery bodies, says Christine Nolan, chief executive of the Breast Cancer Network Australia.

But Ms Nolan recommends anyone considering a decorative tattoo speak to their specialist and research the artist before going ahead.

Surgeons caution breast cancer survivors make sure any body art is done in a sterile and safe environment. Women who have lymphedema of the skin or have had radiotherapy in the breast area could be at risk of complications.

Michelle Louis, 58, decided to get a tattoo on her breast to mark the end of a decade defined by cancer. She lost both her breasts and then her ovaries, battled a staph infection and had more than a dozen surgeries.

"It was to say: 'Hey, I'm still here. This is finished, this is me now and this was the journey I have been on,'" says Louis, who was diagnosed with cancer in her mid-40s.

Her tattoo pays tribute to the Cancer Council's Pink Ribbon campaign, with the organisation's motif modelled in the shape of a butterfly, symbolising new beginnings.