

What's inked in Vegas...

Local artists to participate in the Biggest Tattoo Show on Earth

BY JIM TATUM

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Many people may not have heard of it, but it's the premiere event of its kind in the country, if not the world.

Eric "Doc Feelgood" Roellig, who works out of Ivory Tiger, a Summerville-based tattoo studio, heads to Las Vegas this weekend to participate in "The Biggest Tattoo Show on Earth." "This is absolutely the biggest event in our industry," Roellig said. "It's an amazing event. To my knowledge, I think we're the only studio in this area planning to attend."

"We're going out there to represent South Carolina in a very positive way," "This is an important, world-wide event and we intend to represent our state in the best light possible."

The event, to be held this weekend at the Mandalay Bay Hotel and Casino in Las Vegas, is hosted by Mario Barth, one of the world's premiere tattoo artists. The show, which grows every year, is expected to draw some 25,000 people this year,

according to its website.

Thousands of participants, artists from across the country, competitions, seminars, and other activities will be some of the highlights of the show, Roellig said. He plans to enter some of the competitions, he added.

"There are no cash prizes, just trophies," Roellig said, "But to bring home a trophy, well, that would be quite an achievement."

These competitions are more about showcasing the artists' work, Roellig said. Artists enter these competitions because they are passionate about what they do, not because they are seeking fame and fortune.

The show is also about education, for enthusiasts, for artists, and for the public.

Negative stereotypes have persisted for years—outlaw bikers, drunken sailors, people of ill repute all getting their ink work done in unsanitary parlors located in seedy areas of town.

The truth is that tattooing is one of the oldest and respected art

forms in the world. In recent years, tattooing has enjoyed a surging popularity, with people from all walks of life getting tattoos. Mario Barth, who hosts the Biggest Tattoo Show on Earth, sports a veritable celebrity who's who list of clients, including Sylvester Stallone, Tommy Lee, Nikki Sixx, Lenny Kravitz, and many others.

Ray Dwyer, owner of the Ivory Tiger, pointed out that tattooing, at least in South Carolina, is safe. In fact, thanks to tight regulation from the S.C. Department of Health and Environmental Control, South Carolina is one of the safest places in the country to get a tattoo, he said.

Dwyer also pointed out that a tattoo artist is no different from any other artist; the only difference is the medium in which the artist works, which is, of course, human skin.

"Everyone comes from art backgrounds," Dwyer said, referring to the Ivory Tiger artists. Dwyer, who has been tattooing

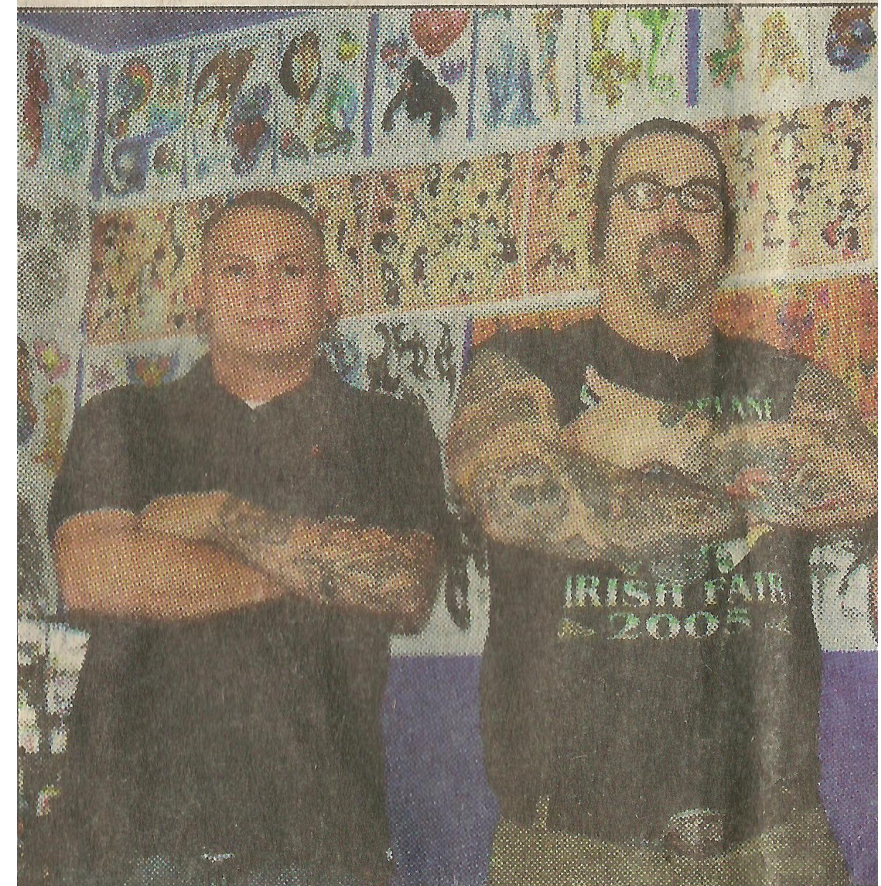
for some 20 years, grew up in Long Island, New York. He became interested in tattooing because a friend's father owned and operated the largest tattoo studio in Long Island.

Roellig, on the other hand, was a street artist first. "I started out spray-painting trains," he said. "I got my start in Seattle, worked there for awhile, came down here."

Roellig's style, he says, is more dark and evil—skulls, talismans, dark imagery—and he tends to work in black and gray. He is also a free-hand artist, which means what he is inking on his client is not copied from a picture or stencil, it is coming straight from his mind and imagination, Roellig said.

Still, tattooing, like any other art form, is also about letting the imagination soar freely—and anything is possible.

Dwyer points to a picture of a tattoo he did several years ago. At first glance, it is interesting—a skeleton rock and roller playing a



The artists of Ivory Tiger—Eric "Doc Feelgood" Roellig, owner Ray Dwyer.

guitar. But a closer look at it reveals some truly intricate details; for example, the figure's denim jeans show several subtle folds in the fabric.

The artists also occasionally get some bizarre requests. Roellig remembers one woman, her large in stature, who wanted a tattoo of the state of Texas.

He agreed to do it, thinking it would not be terribly difficult to do and assuming she wanted it on a fairly wide expanse of skin, such as the middle of her back. That's not where she wanted it, he said with a rueful grin. "I'd say that was one for the books," he chuckled.