

"I would like to be known for being able to help people"

Karen Betts shares her experience as a leading permanent cosmetic artist, medical tattooist and trainer



Karen Betts began her training aged 16. Ten years later she had opened her own salon, specialising in colour analysis and wig making. Designing and styling wigs for cancer patients was always something Karen thrived on. Providing her customers with what Karen calls the "gift of confidence," is hugely rewarding, she says.

Soon after Karen opened her salon, a close friend developed cancer and confided that one of her biggest fears was losing her eyebrows. With a tattoo parlour based in the same building, Karen had an idea.

"After watching the tattooist at work, my belief was that tattooing eyebrows couldn't be much different to drawing eyebrows on with a pencil," she explains. Knowing that conventional tattooing wouldn't be appropriate for creating facial features, Karen began researching alternative methods. Soon she discovered micro-pigmentation and, keen to learn more, she embarked on an educational journey to the US.

"I went to San Francisco on my own, absolutely scared to death," she says. "I went to most of the states, gaining as much knowledge as possible because at the time there was no education here in the UK." She decided there was a gap in the market and after six months of hard work, developing techniques and writing manuals — Karen opened her first training school, Nouveau Contour, in 2001.

She began training people in permanent cosmetic techniques for eyebrows, lips and eyes and later expanded into medical tattooing.

Karen now works alongside numerous charities, specialising in treating cancer patients, patients with alopecia, cleft lips, burns and scarring.

"I see a couple of patients a week through the Katie Piper Foundation, which I really enjoy," she says. "As much as I'm giving back people something they've lost, it really makes me appreciate what I've got in my own life."

Making her work look as natural as possible is Karen's aim. "If it is good permanent cosmetics, people don't even realise you've had it," she explains.

"Having an artistic eye is extremely important," she says. "At Nouveau Couture we have a strong educational programme where we teach trainees to be more artistic. We look at face shapes; we look at bone structure; how to create and draw eyebrows for each face. As long as they've been trained really well you can teach people to be more artistic." Initial consultations with patients are vital for Karen — each patient has to complete medical consent forms. "When they come into the clinic we go through all the forms again, all the treatments available, and really get to know the person and what their expectations are," she explains. "If we don't feel that we can reach their expectations then we definitely don't advise the procedure."

If she knows another specialist can achieve better results then Karen would have no qualms referring them. She explains that a patient may need laser treatment before she treats them. "I don't ever think about doing the laser treatment myself," she says. "I send patients to practitioners who specialise in laser. I would never take anybody's money just because they've walked through my door."

Strategy, planning and structure — these are the key ingredients for running a successful business says Karen. "I go home every evening making sure I've planned the structure for the next day, organising what the priorities of the business are and what I need to be working on."

At the moment, there is no official body governing the regulation of medical tattooing and permanent cosmetics. Instead, Karen offers her trainees Nouveau Contour qualifications, recognised in more than twenty countries. Trainees can take a range of different courses, which all involve case studies and four levels of exams.

In the future Karen hopes that she can raise awareness of how permanent make-up and medical tattooing can appear very natural. "Now I'm trying to make sure people know it's a safe procedure, carried out by safe technicians who have been trained well." After recently winning the Beauty Guild award for best eyelashes, designed with alopecia patients in mind, Karen says, "I see myself as a business entrepreneur and would like to be known for being able to help people, and most importantly give them back the gift of confidence."

Q&A

What is your proudest moment yet?

When I tattooed eyebrows on a woman I met through the Katie Piper foundation, she burst into tears as soon as I showed her the results. She was crying with joy.

What treatment do you enjoy carrying out the most?

Breasts for medical tattooing. Giving my clients back areolas and nipples after they've gone through breast cancer is just like the final end to their journey.

What's the most difficult procedure you do?

Treating vitiligo. The results are not as successful as you'd like them to be because the skin type can change. In bigger areas on Caucasian skin it's not always as effective as I'd want it to be.

What advice would you give to practitioners in this field?

Practice, practice, practice; that's the only way they're going to stay ahead of the game and gain more confidence. They need to continue training and professional development — don't ever just think that you're good enough or the best, things change constantly. I change my techniques yearly, there is always scope to learn.