

Ink, sweat and tears: How one local tattoo apprentice defied gender expectations

Abbey Miguel's career was never supposed to get this far. When hired as tattoo shop manager, she knew an apprenticeship would be forbidden. She could doodle on her iPad and paint all she wanted, but transferring her art to human canvases? Kiss that idea goodbye.

That didn't stop Miguel from going against the grain and securing an apprenticeship a year later though. With only [25% of tattoo artists in the United States being women](#), Miguel knew she wanted to be one of them.

Miguel broke boundaries by becoming Division Street Tattoo's first female tattoo apprentice after five years of business. She received her tattoo apprentice license from the Tennessee Health Department on her one-year anniversary with the company, Feb.16.

Ina Braunschmidt, her apprenticeship mentor, is the only other woman in the Mount Juliet based shop. Together they are representing the growing role of women in the tattoo industry with Women's History Month right around the corner.

"Tattooing is still a male dominated industry," Miguel said. "I really appreciate being an apprentice under another woman, especially because it's not very common."

Miguel began drawing as a three-year-old learning how to hold a pencil in her hand. Growing up she could usually be found hovering over a piece of paper sketching away. Since then, drawing has become a source of self expression and stress relief for her. However, between ages 15 and 18, Miguel took a three-year hiatus from creating art due to a lack of drive. Her passion returned to her at 19 when she became Division Street Tattoo's shop manager.

When she went to Michael Lanning's shop for the first time, she only wanted to get a moth tattoo. However, she ended up with a life-changing opportunity as well. Lanning knew from their appointment that she just dropped out of college and was getting into tattoos.

Miguel, previously in school to become a veterinary technician, felt unfulfilled by the practice. Some aspects of it brought her joy, but her heart wasn't in it. There was a missing piece calling her elsewhere.

Tattooing was a lifelong dream of hers that felt impossible in the past. Miguel accepted the position offer despite the catch: Division Street Tattoo would never apprentice her. Lanning told her they needed a manager, not another artist.

His opinion changed once he witnessed her dedication to the trade. Braunschmidt, her mentor, noticed the same along with Miguel's talent and desire to learn. She pressured Lanning to open the doors to Miguel's apprenticeship for months before he agreed.

In the meantime, Miguel sharpened her craft daily by straightening her lines and experimenting with color. Division Street Tattoo is a melting-pot of different mediums such as traditional, realism and black-and-gray work. This gave Miguel opportunity to experiment.

If she didn't draw during breaks at work, she skipped sleep to paint for hours. Her favorite subjects to create are animals, Greek sculptures and **Pokémon characters**.

Miguel feels her art has improved significantly over the past year by working hard and expanding her horizons.

"She outperforms artists who have many years on her," Division Street Tattoo owner Michael Lanning said. "She has a great attitude towards learning new styles and her passion is shown through her art."

In the future, she plans to do Japanese-traditional and neo-traditional tattooing because of her colorful, animated art style. When she masters both mediums and is ready, Miguel wants to celebrate women in the tattoo world by opening a "hyper-feminine" tattoo shop. The shop will be decorated with plants, all things pink and Hello Kitty. Her heart would swell to see a woman-owned shop with mostly female tattoo artists.

Miguel encourages other female artists to persist regardless of how exhausting it gets. She assures that the long nights and hours spent erasing repeatedly will pay off. Many doubted and ridiculed her for trading in her vet tech scrubs for tattoo stencils. Some said that tattooing was exclusively a man's job. Nevertheless, Miguel used their skepticisms to fuel her fire.

At 20 years old Miguel tattoos five days a week on top of her part-time stocking position, saving every cent she can. Tired yet determined, Miguel yearns for success and will stop at nothing to reach it.

It means the world to her to be Division Street Tattoo's first female apprentice. While she's proud, she knows that this is only step one.

"She is a natural-born artist that doesn't even know her true potential yet," Division Street Tattoo artist Steve Graves said. "Abbey will be the reason we get more powerful, motivated and talented women in this industry."