The Association of Professional Piercers is a California-based, international non-profit organization dedicated to the dissemination of vital health and safety information about body piercing to piercers, health care professionals, legislators, and the general public.

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The Quarterly Journal of the Association of Professional Piercers

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ASSOCIATION OF PROFESSIONAL PIERCERS

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KENDRA JANE B
MARINA PECORINO
The Point Editors

“Optimism is a strategy for making a better future. Because unless you believe that the future can be better, you are unlikely to step up and take responsibility for making it so.”

—Noam Chomsky

I am a glass half full, the sun will come out tomorrow kind of person; a believer that everyone deserves a second chance and that humans are innately good beings. I’m an eternal optimist if you will.

When I started piercing almost a decade ago it was amazing; piercing became an overnight passion I didn’t know I had. I wanted to learn everything I could about every aspect of our industry. I dove in head first. I have had the privilege of being chosen as an Al D. Scholar, and have now become a longtime conference volunteer. I have been a contributing writer and an Editor for The Point for several years. The culmination of all this hard work and diligence has been the opportunity to serve as this organization’s Vice President. Looking back, it honestly seems so surreal. I have met soulmates, best friends, and my chosen family. Being a part of this industry has allowed me to be the change I wanted to see. I wanted to make a difference and this industry gave me the chance to do that.

Although I may be a glass half full kinda of girl, I would be lying if I led you to believe that my time in the piercing industry has been all sunshine and lollipops. It is very easy to let piercing throw off a work life balance, as it seems piercers like to eat, breathe, and sleep piercing. In my case it allowed me to indulge...
in my first choice for self harmful behaviour, being a workaholic. I used my career as an excuse to miss family gatherings, maintain toxic relationships, and to define myself as a person through my career alone. This sadly means that I, like so many piercers I know, have spent the past few years teetering ever so cautiously on the precipice of complete burnout.

After almost a decade in this industry it was a strange reality for me to have worked so hard for so long to get exactly where I wanted to be, only to realize that place was not at all like I had envisioned it. I am so very proud to say that I feel I have made real changes within the piercing industry, but I am now realizing the changes I’ve made in myself during my involvement in the industry are the real prize. I have said it before and I will say it again, this industry has taught me self worth, the ability to set boundaries, and to stand up for what I believe in. The piercing industry has also shown me that it is ok to step aside when you are no longer the best person for the task at hand, and the time has come for me to step aside and let the next shepherds of our industry take the lead.

I believe that this industry and this publication deserve a new voice, the voice of the next generation of piercers. The time has come for me to say goodbye to The Point and my role as Managing Editor. I would like to thank James Weber, Elayne Angel, Kim Zapata, Jim Ward, Caitlin McDiarmid, and Marina Pecorino; whether they know it or not, each of them played an integral part in my editorial journey with this publication.
In April, the Association of Professional Piercers will be 25 years old. As a community, we’ve come a long way, from bedrooms, basements, and dungeons to a reputable international industry with professional organizations, standards, best practices, and training opportunities. With that change, we’ve also experienced a drastic shift in the public’s perception of our trade.

With public attention comes public scrutiny. As both an industry and individual practitioners, we have a decision to step up our game and work toward professional growth and advancement, or rebel in an attempt to hang on to our subculture status. It is my feeling that we should not settle for mediocrity and succumb to doing things the way they’ve always been done, just because change is challenging and intimidating. Learn new skills. Educate yourself and your staff. Make professional and personal development a priority. Aim for continual improvement.

Along those lines, the APP has made some updates to what was previously called our Health and Safety Agreement. This document has now been expanded to address the diversity and inclusivity of our industry, and has been retitled as the APP Member’s Code of Conduct.

Read about these changes and inspiring words on this topic from APP President, Jef Saunders, later in this issue.

Staying grounded is a key component of professional and personal development. Logical and level-headed decisions are difficult to make when egos are unrealistically inflated or emotions are heated. Jacob Spjut explains the difference between an industry’s knowledgeable elites and the attitude of elitism. Knowing who in our community has a wealth of expertise on a particular topic is an important step to forever learning. On the same token, Chris Beierschmitt’s article provides information on finding reliable, credible, and trustworthy information from sources outside of our industry, including peer-reviewed research. We are human and not expected to know everything. As any good teacher will tell you, it is not about rote memorization, but about knowing where to look to find what you need.

As the APP’s Membership Administrator, I am experiencing first hand the rapid and immense growth the organization and industry are undergoing. Personally, I am looking forward to seeing what new directions our leadership and industry elites will lead us in next. But it is important to remember that each individual plays an integral role as well. As Kendra Jane expresses, it is time to step up and be the change you want to see.
THE PRESIDENT’S CORNER

JEF SAUNDERS

In this issue celebrating the organization’s 25th anniversary, we ponder the future of the body piercing industry, our community, and the Association of Professional Piercers. As President, considering the future of our organization and industry is one of my highest priorities. The opportunity to help establish policies and safeguards which help our organization flourish, and our industry to become safer and better-educated, has been one of the greatest honors of my career. As such, I’m excited to discuss how we hope to aid in the growth and success of our industry.

It is the goal of the APP, and hopefully the goal of everyone in our community, to foster inclusivity and diversity. With that goal in mind, the APP has added several new classes, roundtables, and TalkAPP sessions to our 2019 Conference. These courses are intended to highlight diverse perspectives and ideas, provide education about the challenges faced by people of color in our industry, and discuss actionable steps we can take to minimize those challenges.

In addition, the APP has added the following language to our Member’s Code of Conduct:

“I agree to provide a work environment that is free from harassment, bigotry, and discrimination. I will not discriminate or harass employees or clientele based upon an individual’s sex, gender identity, gender expression, sexual orientation, size, race, ethnicity, national origin, immigration status, age (except where legally required), religion, ability, or any other legally protected characteristic(s).

“Declining to perform a piercing on an individual (who has provided legally required valid identification) based on minimum age requirements, anatomy viability assessment, or potential health complications is not considered a violation of the APP Code of Conduct, unless it is done to explicitly discriminate against a legally protected characteristic. Refraining from piercing when there is a reasonable risk that the piercing will fail or result in complications is considered appropriate, safe, and ethical piercing practice.”

The APP will continue to expand our educational offerings and improve pre-existing classes at our annual Conference. In addition, we will continue to broaden the scope of our online courses; it is imperative that we offer a wide variety of options for education, so that all individuals looking to learn are able to do so regardless of distance or financial concerns. Furthermore, as sister organizations spring up around the globe, we will do everything we can to assist these colleagues in nurturing their organizations and developing educational materials.

I am truly excited to see what our industry’s jewelry manufacturers and other suppliers deliver in the coming years. I am in awe of the high-quality, innovative creations our sponsors have produced in the past 25 years, and I think we are all looking forward to seeing what they have in store in the next quarter century.

Finally, as the APP’s educational mission continues to succeed, I expect to see further growth in our membership. In the last three years alone, we have seen membership increase by more than double. Our next big benchmark will be one thousand APP Members from all over the world!

The future has some big things in store for our community, and I can’t wait to see what we accomplish! Excelsior!
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In addition to being an educator at the annual Conference and annual Members' Only Retreat, I put in a lot of my free time volunteering for the Association. I’ve been the head of the Social Media Committee for over three years, and am part of the Outreach Committee and the Al D. Scholarship Committee. Two years ago, I took over the Mentor Program and have worked diligently to expand and strengthen the program to better reach first time Conference attendees and piercers of all levels. I also do various other tasks for the Association, have written articles for The Point and have been featured in many educational podcasts. I excel at multitasking, am highly organized, and I especially enjoy working with new Conference attendees. It’s time for me to move forward, and am excited that my next step is to join the Board of Directors!

BECKY DILL

After nearly ten years as an APP Member, I am thrilled to be at a point in my career where I know I am ready to serve on the APP’s Board of Directors. Two things are key in my decision to run for the Board: the willingness to work and the qualifications that I possess.

Willingness to work is only half the equation. Below are some of my relevant qualifications.

My APP experience:
• Member since 2009
• Attended Conference since 2006 (I’ve missed only one)
• Speaker at Conference since 2013, and have earned the title of Senior Instructor
• Volunteered at Conference
• Attended all four years of Camp APP, and have led workshops since 2016
• I am a founding committee member of the Body Piercing Archive. While preserving, learning, and presenting our history, my duties and skill sets include program planning and goal setting, management of volunteers, proficiency in Excel, Photoshop, Illustrator, Powerpoint, and also in Google Suite (Google Suite is the APP’s preferred management software.)

My Bay Area Piercers’ Group experience:
• I’ve been a body piercer for fifteen years, and I come from humble beginnings. My thirst for knowledge and community has always been strong. In 2009, I founded the Bay Area Piercers’ Group. This group has brought the local piercers in our area together so that we may learn and inspire each other without ego or competition getting in the way. The formation of this group also inspired other communities to get together; now you can find piercer groups across the U.S. and other parts of the world.

My Fakir Intensives experience:
• I have also been serving the industry as an Instructor for the Fakir’s Body Piercing and Branding Intensives in San Francisco.

When I found out about my nomination, I spoke with some of our current Board of Directors as well as sent an email to the Oversight Committee. My initial concern was that there may be a conflict of interest because of my nine year working relationship with APP Treasurer, Paul King. Thankfully I have been given a green light to work hard for our organization. I have the ability to commit to a dozen hours a week of additional work, to jump on a plane, or rush to the phone because there are people I work with and live with that also believe in the APP’s mission.
proceed. I will also recuse myself from participation in decisions that involve the Treasurer.

Working on the Board will be no easy task. I think it’s important to have stability and a strong work ethic. These jobs are done best by leaders in our community. I want to be a Board Member, not because of the impact it will have on my career, but because I want to work hard for an organization that changed my life and created the person I am today.

As the Membership Coordinator, I help to run the Membership Committee, alongside the Board Member assigned to the Membership Liaison position, which has been Jef Saunders followed by Cody Vaughn.

My current position was created a couple of years ago in response to the exponential growth in membership (around 300 Members in 2014, to around 700 Members in 2017) and increasing number of piercers aspiring to become Members. Heading our hard working committee has become such a large task that it requires the attention and dedication of more than just one person, and that is amazing!

My current workload involves processing applications, answering all emails and communications directed to the Membership Committee, as well as managing membership documents received during the application process. I’ve also headed and assisted with many projects with the committee.

I believe that I have been an integral part of the growth of our organization. I stepped into the Membership Committee during a time where there was tremendous growth, but a need for direction, organization, and improved communication. These are my strong suites and led to me rapidly taking on more responsibility. I believe that through this position I have gained insight and experience into the inner workings of the organization and the workload required of a Board Member. I am ready for this commitment.

I have helped bring on new Membership Committee volunteers that have a strong drive to help, as well as positively shape the organization. I have helped many Members through their applications. We recently launched MemberLeap and an application system that offers a more streamlined process of applying for and maintaining membership records.

The future and vitality of the organization is dependent on new energy and a fresh perspective, which I strongly believe that I will provide. There is also a need for more diverse representation of our industry through the Board Members of our organization. Amongst many things, my main goals as a Board Member are to open a dialogue, while respecting and representing the interests of our growing diverse membership and industry, to continue furthering the reach of the organization while maintaining the quality and integrity of membership, as well as carry on the hard work of those who have led our organization and committees previously.

MONICA SABIN

I currently serve as the Membership Coordinator for the Association, and am honored to have been elected to a seat on the Board of Directors. I hope to further my long-running involvement and contributions to the APP. I have to say, this has been a dream of mine since the beginning of my career.

Some of you may have seen me working a booth or door at Conference over the years, seen my name answering posts on the APP Non-Members and APP Members Only forum on social media, as well as my email responding to questions pertaining to membership. Almost 8 years of my piercing career has been spent volunteering my time to the APP.

I have been a:

- Professional piercer since 2010
- Proud recipient of an Al D. Scholarship, allowing me to attend Conference and start volunteering for the APP in 2012
- Business Member of the APP since 2014
- Member of the Membership Committee since 2015
- Membership Coordinator since 2017
- Volunteer to represent the APP at ACHA & NEHA Conferences in 2015
- Conference volunteer from 2012 to 2017
- Mentor to first time attendees at Conference multiple times
- Speaker at Conference 2017, 2018, and will be again in 2019
In honor and celebration of the life of Fakir Musafar, the Body Piercing Archive will present the most comprehensive exhibit that’s ever been seen on Fakir’s art and legacy.

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Tuesday 10 am–6 pm  
Wednesday 10 am–6 pm  
Thursday 10 am–6 pm

**DOCENT TOURS:**

**MONDAY**

Paul King 11:30 am–12:30 pm  
Ian Bishop 1 pm–2 pm  
Allen Falkner 2:30 pm–3:30 pm  
Dustin Allor 4 pm–5 pm

**TUESDAY**

Cody Vaughn 10 am–11 am  
Paul King 11:30 am–12:30 pm  
Ian Bishop 1 pm–2 pm  
Betty Ann Peed 2:30 pm–3:30 pm  
Jef Saunders 4 pm–5 pm

**WEDNESDAY**

Cynthia Wright 10 am–11 am  
Ken Coyote 11:30 am–12:30 pm  
Yossi Silverman 1 pm–2 pm  
Grin 2:30 pm–3:30 pm  
Annie Sprinkle 4 pm–5 pm

**THURSDAY**

Grin 10 am–11 am  
Paul King 11:30 am–12:30 pm  
Allen Falkner 1 pm–2 pm  
Cynthia Wright 2:30 pm–3:30 pm  
Ken Coyote 4 pm–5 pm
The paradox of education is precisely this—that as one begins to become conscious one begins to examine the society in which he is being educated.”

—James Baldwin

I’m a piercer located in the Hudson Valley of New York. I have been piercing professionally for about five and a half years. Though I am not an APP Member, I value the work of the APP and its Members, both in health and safety, and education. It gives me great pleasure to be able to contribute to this organization.

As naïve a thought as it may have been, my initial expectation in being part of the visibly modified community was to be relatively free from common prejudice within its walls. We are, after all, the moderately modified and the minority (in factions of power, whether it pertain to race, sex, sexual orientation, etc.): two groups that share the experience of commonly being “othered” by greater society. The obvious difference being those who are able to conceal their differences enough to “pass”, and those who cannot. Since it is in no one’s best interest to harbor an environment wherein one feels the need to hide a piece of their identity in order to advance, the matter must be flushed to the surface.

With full recognition that I cannot speak to everyone’s experience, what I aim to do is echo what I’ve learned from the parallel in hardships between myself and my peers of similar background; the more severe hardships ranging from borderline harassment to outright discrimination. There is simply no excuse for denying another the right to a fundamental level of respect, and it is not enough to pay lip service to the problem.

One of the most notable aspects of human bias is that in its most insidious form, it thrives subconsciously, making its existence easy to deny. Regardless, the colonization and oppression of select ethnicities by our most powerful governments still remains evident within centuries of history; this is necessary to acknowledge when weighing factors of racial divide within the United States, and abroad. Let us suppose now that this gap in living standard, education, monetary wealth, and access to necessary resources exists passively—that it is purely by cause and effect of our predecessors that one individual is benefited by the gap, and one is disadvantaged. Our past would dictate that it is imperative those in the minority of power positions have a voice in maintaining a level of acceptance within society or risk becoming an afterthought entirely. This applies as much to the piercing industry as it does any other faction.

Professional piercing has revealed to me some of the most benevolent, hardworking individuals I’ve ever encountered, and I am proud to be part of a community that holds the...
Top to bottom, Krista Breault, Kirsten Janusewski, & Dominee Sunshine; Yasuhiro Chiba, 2018 APP Conference, photos by Shanna Hutchins; Teresa Ellis, photo by Robbie Sweeny
We can advocate for, sponsor, apprentice, and give platforms to those who aren’t being heard. We can speak out. We can listen. Not every contribution needs to be radical; most of them won’t be, but collectively they’ll amount to a world of difference.

We've already begun to diversify our community and its image. During the 2017 APP Conference “Women in Leadership” panel discussion, Kendra Jane's plea to the women of this industry to step up and make their voices heard served as a beautiful call to action, and reminder that the need for social change is ever-present. Alicia Cardena’s 2016 speech regarding who is really served by our jewelry companies displayed exactly the vigilance needed to redirect our efforts. In her speech, she outlined the problem of preferential treatment toward wealthy individuals, both inside and outside our studios; and how it contributes to a culture of socioeconomic inequality.

Faced with issues that threaten the well-being of our group success we, as a community of professionals, become the sum of our parts. Every single member of the community becomes responsible for their contribution to the solution, or lack thereof. Our jewelry companies, marketing agencies, photographers, aftercare companies, office clerks, volunteers, and studio members have more power than they realize. Let us continue to support those who may not have been born into equal opportunity, remembering that a single decision has the potential to inspire a wave of difference. We can advocate for, sponsor, apprentice, and give platforms to those who aren’t being heard. We can speak out. We can listen. Not every contribution needs to be radical; most of them won’t be, but collectively they’ll amount to a world of difference.
Although the internet and social media have been boons for the distribution of information and ideas, most will agree that they have served as a double-edged sword. For every fact-based and informative article shared, it seems that there are two more that dabble in pseudoscience or outright lies. As professional piercers, we have a unique opportunity (and maybe an obligation) to utilize our platform to educate our clients and fellow industry people about a wide range of subjects. The problem is: scientific literature is written with language that allows researchers to appreciate the mechanical and technical nuances of a given topic, but it’s nearly indecipherable to the general public (i.e.: the taxpayers funding the research). Tackling this divide between scientific writing and comprehension by the average reader is a rough task, and while this burden should largely fall on the shoulders of the scientific community, there are methods piercing professionals can use to sift out pearls of relevant information from these daunting piles of data.

Consider the Source

In order to stay profitable, news organizations rely on click traffic to their websites so advertisers will buy ad space from them. It’s no mistake that headlines often share similar architecture, a la: “Scientists prove...” “...you won’t believe what happens next;” or “Doctors are baffled by...” The unifying theme behind a majority of these articles is that, somewhere deep down, they are rooted in some intentional or accidental distortion of a real scientific finding. Like a childhood game of telephone, where an initial message is gradually corrupted as it passes from person to person, so do the relevant findings of a scientific publication as it is interpreted and communicated by people who don’t fully understand it. Before sharing one of these articles, it is our responsibility to find out how the authors came to their conclusion and if it makes sense. This means reading the article with a skeptical eye and finding the root of the author’s claims. Hopefully, the base of their writing can be found in a
peer-reviewed scientific journal. The struggle isn’t over here, though, as many journals are behind paywalls and/or so jam-packed with difficult language that they are nearly unreadable. Knowing this, why should we strive to find a peer-reviewed source instead of just taking someone’s word for it?

**Why Does Peer-reviewed Matter?**

A scientific paper is (in most cases) the result of months to years of hard work and revision. In order to be published, it must be submitted with some novel finding, have published references for any claims about previous research, and must have data for any new claims. After submitting a paper to a scientific journal, it is preliminarily reviewed for novelty and general content. If this is found acceptable, it is given to several scientists unrelated to the journal for review. After weeks to months of review, the journal decides whether the author should be allowed (or is able to) address any concerns that the reviewers had. If the journal decides that the author will be able to revise their paper to address reviewer concerns, they will be given time to perform the necessary experiments and/or gather the appropriate data to do so. This revision process will take anywhere from a few days to a few months, depending on how demanding the revisions are. Finally, the paper is re-submitted with revisions, the journal performs any necessary editing for grammar and format, and in a few weeks to months, the paper is published. Authors must declare where their funding is coming from (e.g.: government, private industry, etc.), as well as any potential conflicts of interest. If an author is found to be lying about these details, they risk ruining their reputation as well as the journal redacting their paper.

**Where Do I Find Peer-reviewed Papers?**

This is where things get a bit tricky. While open-access journals are steadily becoming more and more common, many papers are stuck behind paywalls. University systems, research institutions, and some libraries pay subscription fees so their members can access
If we want to be regarded as professionals who are progressive and interested in the health of our clients (as well as ourselves), we should be using resources outside of the piercing community to prevent our well-intentioned sentiments from becoming an echo chamber.

What If I Can’t Find the Full Text?

Since every listing in PubMed should have contact information for the author(s) of a paper, you have a direct way of contacting the researcher and/or physician who knows the most about the article you are interested in. While there is no guarantee, I can say with high confidence that if you send an email to a paper’s author requesting a copy of their work, they are going to be happy to send it to you directly. This might seem a bit weird, but it’s more common a request than you think. To increase your chances for success, try to send an email to the first author listed on the paper. The order in which names are listed for a research paper are (for the most part) organized in such a way that the person who contributed most to a project will be listed first, and the person who runs the lab where they are employed is listed last. As such, by sending a correspondence to the first author, you are directly asking for information from the person who probably knows more about the paper’s contents than anyone else on Earth. After you do your due diligence and carefully read the paper, you could even send an email back to the author to ask them any questions you may have. If you decide to ask questions, be sure to give the researcher an “out,” and ask them if there is someone else you should be contacting with questions (e.g.: a postdoctoral worker or graduate student in their lab). Don’t be surprised if responses take a while; researchers are often inundated with mountains of email and it takes a while to sort through all of them.

Working together with scientists

Reaching out to the scientific community is a step forward in the direction of further legitimizing the piercing industry. If we want to be regarded as professionals who are progressive and interested in the health of our clients (as well as ourselves), we should be using resources outside of the piercing community to prevent our well-intentioned sentiments from becoming an echo chamber. The next time you see a health- or science-related news article shared on social media, take a moment to evaluate the source and investigate it yourself. Start a dialog with fellow piercers about what the findings of a publication might mean for client health. Encourage others to engage with this material and ask questions of their own. Together, with a keen set of skeptical eyes and help from scientific literature, we can be sure our industry will continue to improve for years to come.
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LEARNING TO LOVE THE TASTE OF FIRE: Elitism in Body Piercing
JACOB SPJUT

“They’re so cold, these scholars! May lightning strike their food so that their mouths learn how to eat fire!”

—Friedrich Nietzsche

There can not be a discussion concerning the contemporary history of the piercing industry without elitism entering into it. Elitism is so ingrained—even when there is growing democratization of information and sharing of knowledge the world over—that the fear it will reveal its serpentine head has weakened the discussions required for the industry to continue to grow. Likely influenced by a culture crippled by the sentiment that it is reasonable to denounce expertise as superfluous, piercers are embracing the view that “my [anecdotal experience] is just as good as your knowledge.”

Holding these particular beliefs and thinking they are somehow applicable to the entirety of the industry makes this wholesale denunciation unsurprising. Elitism, which elicits feelings of otherness and exclusion, should no longer be a term thrown carelessly at an individual or group who strives to establish themselves as experts or as elite piercers. Applying disparaging meaning to any word similar to elitism, elite, or expert, for example, has driven many piercers to reject taking principled stands or engaging in valuable dialogue concerning essential issues to avoid becoming branded as a charlatan or worse. The term elite, unfairly marred by its close association with elitism, can and should be used in the field to denote the positive positioning of individuals based on unique and qualifying attributes that can propel the industry forward. Overcoming the natural desire to reject an expert or elite piercer, as though they are an elitist piercer is paramount to the future of body piercing. Overcoming this desire, though, creates a unique challenge for piercers. Ego and a lack of consensus between piercers creates fissures that make the very idea of a group of experts seem intrinsically counterproductive to a growing and marketable industry. With focus, this problem is shown not to be insurmountable.

The existence of a top rung on this field’s ladder is a somewhat nebulous idea. There is little way to judge how “good” a piercer is or whether their ideas merit consideration. The inability to empirically discern what constitutes a qualified expert is true in almost any human intellectual endeavor, as subjectivity is a strong force against which to contend. This is especially true in fields that can reach the same result, like a well-healed piercing, through different means. This dilemma, however, does not make the act of examining and choosing this upper echelon of piercers superfluous.

Discerning who is qualified for the title is further made difficult by the historical justifications for the rejection of expertise. The Puritan “originators” of the United States upheld the idea that no group can preside over any individual; this was foundational to the oppressive nature of these “New World Settlers.” This rejection has carried forward for centuries, the result being expertise is no longer considered adequate; everyone feels entitled, even required, to have an opinion falsely regarded as equally valid as any other. “To reject the advice of experts is to assert autonomy, a way for Americans to insulate their increasingly fragile egos from ever being told they’re wrong about anything […] All things are knowable, and every opinion on any subject is as good as any other.”

In the piercing field, this dismissal of expertise appears to have origins in hyperbolic discussions between some piercers attempting to absolve themselves of resentment. They likely felt that these other piercers were upholding “elitist” standards that contradicted policies they, the resentful, had practiced for years “without issue.” Many piercers remember this as a rebuff of the APP; the APP was used as a generalized term by many individuals to denote a piercer that maintained a set of standards deemed “unnecessary.” The myth of a group of elitist piercers likely has legitimate beginnings, but there is little reason to believe that for nearly two decades their existence has
The term elite, unfairly marred by its close association with elitism, can and should be used in the field to denote the positive positioning of individuals based on unique and qualifying attributes that can propel the industry forward.

“Elitism” is often suggestive of pedantic sterile field fanatics or of contemptible piercers using bully tactics to shame up-and-coming piercers into “hanging up their needles.” One is reminded of piercers using imaginary titles to denote their level of “mastery” in the craft, or those who have allowed their deeply held convictions on any given subject to give them a feeling of self-importance that makes any other “less than” merely because of a differing opinion. These typical instances of an “elitist” should not poison the well of what an expert or elite piercer is.

In comparison, an elite piercer has a deeper and more full understanding of a given subject or area of focus, and assert that they should not only disseminate that learning, but must expand upon their knowledge indefinitely. Elite piercers should be helpful, while being open to discussion and the pursuit of innovative ideas. They should always work hard to develop themselves as educators and maintain the philosophy that complacency is the death song of a good leader. They use their skill and understanding to advance the field in its totality, and they do not use it to amass “internet cool points.” When discussing ideas, they hold fast to their opinions, yet are accepting of provocation without being inexorable when presented with a valid argument. They are not from any single group, and one can not befriend themselves into their ranks. These are essential semantic distinctions and must be understood.

Piercers who are working towards developing these traits, and the elevation of those individuals who possess them, can be used to benefit everyone; creating opportunities for anyone who wishes to better the industry by instigating positive changes that vivify and encourage the culture that should be fostered. Creating an outlet for positive change will benefit the practitioners who are a part of this group, those who strive to be a part of it, and the clients assisted with the craft. Together, these changes will bring about a better experience for anyone who enters into the orbit of a piercer. This position of earned power requires a great deal of courage and demands a certain level of humility. This humility should not come at the expense of the critical need for depth of conviction, however. This is increasingly more important as a growing crisis of trusted piercers softening their positions rises in learning settings where they avoid conflict with others that may not agree with their ideas. By denying...
that some piercers are better or more knowledgeable, the bar of competence is deeply lowered, to a point where demonstrably inadequate piercers are given the same weighted influence as their more educated peers. Weakening informed opinions, coupled with the growing focus towards educating new or struggling piercers, will be catastrophic.

This tendency is seen, more and more, in the classroom at the annual Association of Professional Piercers educational conference. Teachers, selected because of their expertise concerning a subject, often concede points that may be contentious between practitioners. Sterile gloves, touted as an essential step forward by many, are rejected as just past the line of necessary by others. Surface finish, a subject that does not, at face value, seem like a position open to controversy, brings about inimical arguments where the ethical foundation in opposition is built on nothing more than “having not killed anyone.” Even standards adopted from other industries are cherry-picked to not further complicate established practices in one studio or another. What is an attendee to learn from exchanges that offer nothing more than “this is just how we do it?” It is ascertained that there is no reason to believe that any single idea is authoritative and that any position is equal as long as it falls within one’s “experience.” This should not be tolerable. The teacher, or any attendee with a reasoned argument to make, should not concede to an idea they disagree with unless they have been convinced they are, indeed, wrong. It is easy to say this concession is made only to avoid ostracizing a piercer who practices different standards. After all, there is room for differing approaches to piercing. There is merit to this, but it misses the point of reasoned dialog. One is to come to an opinion based on defensible points of reference. Which one of these positions is correct is debatable, thus refusing to debate is detrimental. Sterile gloves or surface finish may seem like silly and arbitrary examples, but it is analogous of many, more serious disagreements that plague the industry.

Potential problems that can arise when the industry embraces a perceived shadowy network of super piercers dictating what type of piercings will trend or how best to pierce a navel must be considered, as well. Piercers are not above being ego-driven and closed to critical evaluation. The fact that being open to critique is hailed as something special in the aforementioned online communities is telling. Experts on any given subject in the industry can also be wrong, biased, or they may be unable to see the nuance to a given idea.

Some, though not many, may even fall into the classification of “elitist,” making the need to be able to distinguish them even more critical. Regardless, allowing uninformed piercers to postulate ignorant ideas that go unchallenged can influence leadership within the APP or the online communities to implement policy or suggest ideas that hinder growth. This is the antithesis of what is essential to piercing’s future.

Thankfully, the piercing industry benefits from its interconnectedness, and delving into oligarchical ruin is not likely. Not only is it unlikely, but the structures already in place—structures that have led to a trusted network of expert piercers, such as the vetting process in the online forums—will make the problem an improbability. Piercers who, through hard work, rise to high positions will be accountable to every other piercer, at least to those working towards increasing the field’s prestige themselves. There is little room for ego-driven self-importance, especially when piercers looking to leadership for change are relentless in exposing muddied thinking and promoting good ideas. Critical examination of any proposition, regardless of whom it is coming from, is the mechanism by which the industry will flourish, and it must be encouraged.

It can not be denied that elitism has damaged the piercing industry. It has created fear. In this culture of fear, piercers have begun to turn inward, allowing subjectivity to be the essential consideration when ideas are posited. Many are rejecting, consciously or not, that there are those who are presenting more informed positions. They are labeling these other piercers inaccurately, using stigmatized terms to create ad hominem attacks and stifling required debate. This is a failure in need of reform. There are opinions that hold more water than others, and these opinions, though entirely open to challenge, are going to be presented by piercers that have spent the time to hone and expand on them. It is crucial to accept that an elite group of piercers exists, that this group’s roster is in constant flux, and that there are those who are presenting more informed positions. They are labeling these other piercers inaccurately, using stigmatized terms to create ad hominem attacks and stifling required debate. This is a failure in need of reform. There are opinions that hold more water than others, and these opinions, though entirely open to challenge, are going to be presented by piercers that have spent the time to hone and expand on them. It is crucial to accept that an elite group of piercers exists, that this group’s roster is in constant flux, and that this is good for the industry. The acceptance of this fact will cause a shift that will make more widely applicable ideas resulting in the highest good for the industry. It must also be accepted that conviction to an opinion and being receptive to those who challenge it are two sides of the same coin of advancement. The industry must not fall for the false narrative that expertise is a prelude to elitism. Instead, the industry and its practitioners should embrace the title of “elite” as a call to responsible action, and work to earn that title every day.

Footnotes:


People often ask me what the secret of my success is. In an industry as multifaceted as professional piercing, that’s a very difficult question to answer, but I’m going to do my best to boil it down to some key points. Like everything else in life, hindsight is 20/20. Looking back is when many valuable lessons are learned. Over my 22 years in this industry I’ve learned things that have helped me find success and things that hindered my growth, both professionally and personally. I hope to share some of those lessons.

When I started my apprenticeship in 1997, piercing was barely considered its own industry. We were more of an addition to another industry, and because of this, there were a lot of tattoo artists who offered piercing; my old bosses being two of them. Fortunately for everyone, they got “too busy tattooing to deal with doing piercings” and hired an actual piercer. I became that piercers’ apprentice and that is where my story begins. Planning a career path in piercing wasn’t really on my mind at the time because I didn’t know if piercing would be there as a career down the road. The industry was so young, and we were all so hopeful, but also quite unsure of our futures and basically flying by the seat of our pants. Thankfully, I followed my heart, stuck with it, and built up a great clientele. I became known for my high standards, ethics, and a true passion for the job. I treated every client with respect and professionalism and like every piercing was the most important one I’d ever done. I did outreach at local colleges to promote safe standards and educate my peers. If the shop was open, I was working, and I did everything that I could to further the reputation of the shop that I worked in.

Even though I had always been a team player, and went above and beyond my job description daily, my bosses still had very little respect for me or for piercing. “They come here for us and stay for you, not the other way around, and don’t you forget it” was said to me so many times that I lost count. I knew in my heart that wasn’t true and that I was creating my own success. I could also see that the industry was changing and going amazing places. I knew that I wanted to be a part of that, so after almost 11 years at the same shop, I left. The running mental list of “if this was my place” I had made over the years made me realize immediately that it needed to be a piercing-only studio. I knew it was risky, but it just felt right. So, I cashed out the sad little
retirement account that my dad made me start at 20, got a line of credit at the bank, got a small loan from my accountant who is a venture capitalist, and opened a new credit card with the highest limit they’d give me. It was the scariest thing I’ve ever done in my life. I had no idea how much harder it would get before it got better, but it was the right decision, and I knew with all of my heart that this was where I belonged. I found a great location, scraped together enough money for a security deposit, a few month’s rent, the renovations needed to build my shop to APP standards and a small stock of implant grade basics and simple gems to get me through a couple of months of piercing.

It took a total of four months to build my shop. On top of my 50 hours a week piercing at the tattoo shop, I worked every morning, every night, and every Sunday doing anything I could do to get my shop ready for the opening. I had planned to open Labor Day weekend, but was found out by my old bosses (who were less than supportive) in early August, so my deadline became as soon as possible. Those last two weeks were an all-day, all-night marathon of painting and finishing touches. I opened my doors on August 19, 2008. I had made it, and thought I had it all figured out. Now I just needed to wait for the money to roll in, right? HA! I hope you laughed at that too.

There’s a saying that if you’d like to make the universe laugh, just tell it your plans. The universe apparently had some hard lessons for me to learn, because on September 29, 2008, just six weeks after I opened my doors, the stock market crashed. I had originally expected to get back to a decent salary within a couple of years, but between everyone being scared to spend money and worried about the future, and my naivete in the realities of owning a business, I really had no money to pay myself, especially if I wanted to still grow the business, so I basically lived on my tips. Fortunately, I was married, and my husband was supportive enough to agree to cover the bills while I built back up to real paychecks. I worked at the shop completely by myself for two years, and every cent that came in went right back into Black Diamond. It was the hardest two years of my adult life. I remember choosing groceries by what coupons I had and ate meals at friends and families houses whenever I could. I was 31 years old and living like I was 18 again, except now I was married and previously knew what it was like to not be broke all the time. That was a hard pill to swallow after making fairly-good money for so long, but I would do anything to make the shop succeed and I knew this was the only way to make that happen.

By 2010, I took on an apprentice. Thankfully, the time went by quickly and Brooke Bittens was a natural, so by 2011, I didn’t have to do every single piercing that came in and even got a day off a week! Since I was trying to grow our jewelry selection, I still needed to be very careful, but at that point I was finally able to get a steady, albeit tiny, paycheck! Thanks to living on as little money as possible, I paid off the last of my loans by Christmas 2013, just 5 years and a few months after I opened my doors. Unfortunately, I also ended my marriage during that year due to a few factors, but largely because of how much time I dedicated to my shop. It was always a cause for fights, and ultimately the love I have for my career and my determination to succeed very much overshadowed my relationship, so one of them had to give.

From 2010-2015, I had hired quite a few front-end people with the hopes of turning them into jewelry experts. I always favored having front end jewelry experts and not just “counter people”. It was clear to me that they were both very specific skills and if I wanted the shop to be able to handle more clients, it was a necessity. Thankfully, I found a couple of people that worked out well! Andie Saunders became my second apprentice and Melissa Willette became my shop manager. Around then, the physical reality of full-time, medium to high volume piercing was also starting to really emerge. By the end of 2015, when Andie was finishing up her apprenticeship, I had a full blown non-traumatic labral tear from 18 years of constant piercing. Overuse syndromes are sneaky because you deal with the symptoms for so long that they become normal. Suddenly, my hand started to go numb, I would wake up crying from the shooting pains in my shoulder and chest, and no matter how many massages
I got it, it never let up. I saw a few Doctors, and the consensus was, either get surgery (which may or may not actually fix the problem; cartilage is a funny thing) or work less, since it mostly was only unbearable when I pierced a lot. That Christmas, I also took my first real vacation of my entire adult life. While I was away, I did a lot of thinking and decided this was it, time to change roles. I had put in my time piercing, and my body was telling me to take a step back from it. I still loved to pierce, I just couldn’t handle the volume anymore, so I started working by appointment and spent the rest of my time either filling in up front showing jewelry when my manager was off or sitting in my office ordering jewelry/supplies and brainstorming my next move.

It was becoming obvious that two full-time piercers and one part-time, by appointment, piercer just wasn’t going to be enough. Everyone was getting so burned out, we were getting busier by the day, and I couldn’t physically handle any more piercings than I was doing. Thankfully, I was still accustomed to my inexpensive life, so my paychecks stayed low throughout the years, and largely because of that the business finally had a pretty decent savings. That is when I asked my landlord if I could expand into a part of the other side of the building for an additional piercing room. The expansion only took a few months, and before I knew it, we were hosting guest piercers almost monthly. For a year and a half, we hosted guest piercers during our busiest months, sometimes for weeks at a time. From the guest spots, I was able to hire a great piercer to round out the crew, Rob Gold, who officially joined the team in March 2017. I also recently hired another jewelry expert, Lilly Young, as well as a part-time jewelry-expert-in-training to help with front-end overflow. This has allowed us to grow into the potential that was already there and finally catch up to the needs of our clientele. In October 2018, just over 10 years after I opened, I was able to buy the building that my business is in, so now not only can I take over the rest of the first floor to allow for a larger waiting room and a new office for me, I also inherited 3 tenants for more income, thereby starting a whole new business, Black Sapphire Properties.

So, that brings us to 2019: my 22nd year as a piercer, my 11th year as a business owner, and my first year as a landlord. Now that I finally have a full staff that I trust, my main role at the shop is all the background stuff like finances, jewelry orders, and website updates, and I can still take appointments here and there. I now have plans to buy an apartment building down the street, hopefully within the next year, and plan to buy more investment
properties over time. When I look back on everything, it now seems so obvious how I got here, but as I said in the beginning, hindsight is a great teacher. My journey has taught me some of the vital components to success:

- **Standards**—As a Member of the Professional Piercers whose primary goal is promoting safe piercing, this one should be obvious, but it’s also worth mentioning. It is important to stay on top of what’s happening in the industry as far as jewelry standards, sterility practices, and aftercare. It’s easy to sell yourself to clients when you know you’re doing everything you can to give them the best experience and the safest piercing possible. Do not sell any jewelry you wouldn’t wear yourself and educate yourself on every aspect of the jewelry companies that you carry and their products.

- **Integrity**—Be impeccable with your word: with clients, other piercers, other industry people— with absolutely everyone. Honestly, I believe this is true in every part of your life, but it’s essential in business and is the key to building a business that will stand the test of time. On the same note, be wary of people who belittle you and your vision. Walk away from toxic people and those that lack integrity, they will only bring you down.

- **Passion**—Your clients can sense if you’re genuine or not and this industry is only truly rewarding if you love it more than anything. If you are in this industry for any other reason than your love of piercing and jewelry, do yourself a favor and don’t open a shop.

- **Image**—To put it simply, be professional. Speak with confidence and be able to back it up with knowledge. Be careful who you represent yourself as, in person and especially online. No one wants to give their money to a jerk, no matter how well you pierce or how nice your jewelry is. Period. There’s a saying in retail that applies well to piercers, “A happy client tells a few friends. An unhappy client tells EVERYONE.” Whether you are opening a shop in a year or ten years, the internet never forgets and neither do salty clients. Also, be sure your shop physically reflects what you’re trying to project to the world. It’s hard to sell a $500 piece of jewelry if you look like you just rolled out of bed or your shop doesn’t look like a fine jewelry store.

- **Consistency**—Be sure your staff is all on the same page and your front end is well trained. Have frequent meetings to quickly address problems or inconsistencies that arise. Having an employee handbook is also essential. You want all the things that are important to you in writing so that there’s never a question what should be done in any situation, whether you’re there or not. You
want any client to walk in on any given day and have just as good of an experience as any other, no matter who is working. Part of this is also treating your employees well and paying them well to create an environment that encourages long term employment. When you have a staff that you trust, you have a lot of freedom too.

- **Sacrifice**—When you own a business, you may be the most important person as far as image and decisions, but you’re the least important person when it comes to paychecks. It will pay off in the end, but building a shop from the ground up is not for the faint-of-heart or the weak-willed. The shop HAS TO come first, and your staff isn’t going to work for free. This will impact your life in every facet, and it may mean you make the least amount out of your whole staff at times, but if you stick to it and go all-in you will be rewarded in every way down the road. As far as start-up capital, however much you think you need to open a shop and make it successful, at least double it. You have no idea what can/will happen during your building years and you should be prepared for anything. Insurance may cover lost wages if your shop collapses or burns down, but it certainly won’t cover things like being slow because the economy tanked. If your plan is to open a shop someday, start putting away money now and don’t be frivolous. Make yourself a budget and stick to it; get used to being frugal. Think in years and decades, not weeks or months.

- **Limits**—Remember, you are only human and just one person. You cannot do it all and still be healthy, either mentally or physically. Know when it’s time to take on other/more employees! And know when it’s time to take a step back too. On the same note, do not tolerate employees that do not share your vision. It’s very easy to be held hostage by talent and/or circumstance, but remember that it is your shop in the end and stick to your guns.

- **Preparation**—The banks do not just hand out loans. Do your research and know the market in the area you want to open. Write a few practice business plans until you get it right and feel confident enough in your facts for a meeting with a loan officer. There’s plenty of information on the internet to lead you in the right direction. You can also look for a venture capitalist! The loan interest can be a little higher, but if a bank can’t help you, or can’t give you enough money, they are a great option. They are typically more adventurous than banks with what types of businesses they are willing to work with.

- **Confidence**—Know your worth! Don’t compromise on pricing your services and/or jewelry thinking lower prices will bring people in, even in the beginning. It will come back to bite you and really limit your buying power when ordering new jewelry and growing your shop. If you do great work and sell great quality jewelry, the right people will happily pay you what you’re worth. Do not lower your prices, have piercing sales, or let people bully you into charging less. I promise, you don’t want those clients anyway; let the lesser shops have them. It will only make you look better in the end and win you more clients overall when those who were at first unwilling to pay your price come back to have you fix things. They’ll learn the difference first hand and you’ll now have a client for life who tells everyone they shouldn’t go anywhere else. Never apologize for having high standards.

- **Autonomy**—Taking inspirations from other great shops is wonderful, but don’t concern yourself too much with what the other shops around you are doing. Just do your thing and believe in your vision! If you believe in what you’re doing, and you put the time and effort in, you’ll be amazed at what you can accomplish.
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FACES OF THE FUTURE
Photos by Shanna Hutchins

Left to right, Nova Amorette, KristaJae Amante, Fernando Chavez, Megan Naito, Zach Fitzgerald, Shahbaz Bokhari & Michelle Livingston
It is a privilege to contribute to the first issue of The Point for 2019, and to lend my experience to the theme of “Our Future” as an industry.

This is an industry of small businesses and entrepreneurs, and with small business and the entrepreneurial spirit comes the possibility of ownership and the hope of deciding one’s own fate. For many, that means building or renovating your own work space, sometimes needing to meet specific building codes, or perhaps to meet APP environmental criteria for membership.

Whatever small business experience you’re coming from or going to as a piercer—opening your own free-standing studio or developing space in a tattoo shop—hopefully this article serves as a useful guide. You will learn what can be expected, as well as some things to remember in building out a commercial space. Opening and closing tattoo and piercing studios is nothing new, and I’m sure there are those currently with multiple locations who could speak on this. In this article, I will be focused more on speaking to those who are branching out on their own, whether it is renovating their own piercing room or attempting their first studio space.

I have renovated and built out tattoo and piercing businesses of all shapes and sizes in both Connecticut and New York. My background was in building trades. I worked as a builder full time for more than 12 years before taking up piercing. I am trained and have worked in all forms of residential and commercial roofing, asbestos and lead abatement, custom high end deck and patio construction, residential and commercial building/additions/renovations, restorations, and residential/commercial property management and maintenance. These experiences served to help me as I prepared to build my own studio space. I am confident that they will also help you.

PLAN AHEAD:

Even if you end up throwing out your plan the night before you start building, plan ahead anyway. Plan for every single thing as much as you can. No detail is too small to include in your plan.

- **Plan your budget**

  Building costs, inventory budgets, licenses, fees, insurance, cash for your register, living expenses during start-up time are just a few of the things to think about. While these are some of the financial concerns you’ll want to plan for, sticking to them is the hard part. Building costs will likely require an experienced contractor to estimate. Your build-out...
Left & below, Cold River Piercing & Fine Jewelry, Albany, NY, main showroom under construction and ready for business; bottom, essential documentation.
Surprises will always arise with any building project. The goal is to eliminate as many surprises as possible beforehand.

“Surprises will always arise with any building project. The goal is to eliminate as many surprises as possible beforehand.”

budget will vary based on the amount of work you want/need to do.

- **Plan your time of year**
  The time of year you renovate or build your business can affect a lot of other factors. Are you building during your slow time? Is it going to cut short your cash resources? Are you scheduled to open during your slow time? Will it hamper initial success? Are you attempting major exterior work with winter approaching?

- **Plan your work**
  Projects can run-away from you fast. Get accurate estimates on an accurate amount of work. Stick to the work you’ve planned. Don’t just plan what work you will do, but also your timeline and order of work. Don’t have people sheetrock and cover walls before you have your electrical done. Keeping to a planned timeline, when possible, will help prevent doing the same jobs over again.

- **Plan for success**
  Whether it’s planning your budget, your inventory, or your build out, leave room for success. Jewelry inventories can be modest when first starting; make sure you have room to accommodate the natural increase in inventory selection that will occur as you are open longer. Having all the jewelry will matter little if you have no place to put it. You can use your initial budget to help you increase your inventory selection over time, simply by being judicious with your initial inventory orders.

**LOCATION:**

Choose your location carefully; you’ll likely be there for awhile. There are a number of factors you should consider when picking a good potential location, whether for your own shop, or inside an existing business. Population and demographics for the area, amount of foot traffic, and access to parking are important for both situations. Leasing costs will be necessary whether you lease your own space or sublet. Bear in mind most commercial real estate is not a simple monthly rental fee. There are often NET costs and CAM charges. These fees may exist in addition to your monthly lease.

**BUILDING/ZONING CODES & PERMITS:**

Zoning codes will dictate whether or not your business can even exist in the location you’ve chosen, so it is best to look into this during the beginning of your process. Building codes will dictate what changes you can and can’t make, and the manner you are allowed to do them in. Codes will vary depending on area and building type. For example, a studio opening in a residential building might be able to use wood framing lumber, while something in a strip mall will likely require steel framing. The cost difference between these materials is substantial and can drastically change your build out capital requirements. These building codes not only stipulate material types and uses, but also govern handicap accessibility, historical restrictions, and acceptable and unacceptable mechanical conditions.

A large portion of all of this work will require permits. Generally speaking only licensed contractors can pull a permit, if the work you need requires one. Permits and the subsequent inspections to verify the work are lengthy processes. In my experience, required permits and inspections can be the things that most commonly cause delays in a project.

**AVOID SURPRISES:**

Surprises will always arise with any building project. The goal is to eliminate as many surprises as possible beforehand. The story of building your own business changes rapidly when you unexpectedly find termite damage, asbestos wrapped pipes, or some other hidden detriment that will cost thousands of dollars and weeks of time to mitigate. A thorough property assessment by a qualified contractor including a hazardous materials survey and an EUL Report (Expected Useful Life) on mechanicals can save time and money! Even after you’ve checked for surprises, and eliminated as many variables as possible, plan a little extra time for your project as a precaution!

If you are lucky, your new studio space will require very little work. Hopefully all you need to do is some minor upgrades and a few coats of paint. Regardless of the size of your studio project, do thorough research and thoughtful planning on everything, not just your jewelry inventory and piercing supplies. I hope this article helps you on your journey, and that you are able to successfully build your own studio space. Plan carefully and thoroughly. Look for a location as objectively and as informed as you can. Follow through with the appropriate civic departments. Expect the unexpected. These are just some of the basic fundamentals of commercial building projects. Keep them in mind and it will make every step of the process easier.
Footnotes:

1 Population & Demographics: Population numbers, median age, median income, population density, education data, average debt, common professions. All of this is easily accessible information that can be found online. All of which can help inform your decisions about the area you are considering opening in. The US Census Bureau is a great place to start.

2 NET Lease: In a NET Lease, the landlord charges a lower base rent for commercial space, plus some or all of their “usual costs”, which are expenses associated with operations. In a single net lease, renters are required to pay the base rent plus a portion of the property taxes for the building. Double net leases require the renter to pay the base rent plus taxes and property insurance costs; this is beyond your own business insurance. Triple net leases require the renter to pay base rent plus taxes, insurance, and CAM (Common Area Maintenance) charges.

3 CAM Charges: Common Area Maintenance are expenses incurred in shared, common area, such as utilities, sidewalk maintenance, snow removal, etc.

4 Mechanicals: Plumbing, Electrical, and HVAC (Heating/Venting/Air Conditioning) would be your mechanical systems. Each system has specialty contractors who works solely within their discipline and area of expertise.
BIOMATERIALS & TRUSTWORTHY SOURCES

Why materials from countries without strict quality control requirements are unacceptable for jewelry

BRIAN W SKELLIE
APP Medical Director

Does it matter where a biomaterial we use comes from?

Biomaterials made in the USA and in a short list of countries who maintain reciprocal quality control agreements can currently be verified as ASTM or ISO compliant. Those materials made outside of these qualifying countries cannot due to a lack of quality control protocols and lack of consequences for substandard and falsified products. The provenance of the material should be listed on the certificate of tests.

Is knowing the chemistry enough?

Learning what the ingredients are, as well as the proportions of a material, is a minimum step in the right direction to indicate that it does contain what we need, and does not contain harmful impurities over a certain threshold. Chemical tests are not confirmation of quality by themselves. The only way to be sure about the quality of the material is to have reliable chemical and microstructure tests performed under strictly regulated controls during the final purification melt and on the ingot (block of metal) produced, prior to forming it into bar, wire, sheet, etc. We must be assured that the correct ingredients have been mixed and cooked together in the correct way, and that the material has been treated and handled correctly during the process according to the ASTM and ISO specifications. There is more to the ASTM and ISO standards than chemistry. So if a certificate says “chemistry only” the material has not been fully tested to fulfill the material properties required by the standard, and may break or include foreign matter among other disadvantages. Basically, we want the raw materials to fully meet the standards for surgical implant, and we want documented proof that it was tested and completely fulfills all the requirements during the melting of the alloy. No misleading shortcuts. No half-steps. Add a proper surface finish, cleaning, passivation, and sterilization and then we can wear it with a clear conscience.

Currently, our requirements for gold, niobium, and platinum are measured based on chemistry alone. We have a strong theoretical rationale to use them based on the fact that they are three of the most biocompatible elements and have a long-standing history of acceptable level of response in the body. Unfortunately, they are not as strong when compared to other biomaterials, and do not have the same sort of detailed specifications for use in the body. For gold and platinum, because of proprietary alloys and strict legal regulation for the karat content, the chemical analysis is all we have access to if we don’t use gold or platinum group metal alloys that have already been through ISO 10993 testing for biocompatibility. Gold and platinum group metals are frequently mentioned in biomaterials and dental implant science texts as inert substances with low potential for allergy.
“CORROSION AND CORROSION CONTROL IN THE BIOLOGICAL ENVIRONMENT

“The need to ensure minimal corrosion has been the major determining factor in the selection of metals and alloys for use in the body. Two broad approaches have been adopted. The first has involved the use of noble metals, that is, those metals and their alloys for which the electrochemical series indicates excellent corrosion resistance. Examples are gold, silver, and the platinum group of metals. Because of cost and relatively poor mechanical properties, these are not used for major structural applications, although it should be noted that gold and its alloys are extensively used in dentistry; silver is sometimes used for its antibacterial activity; and platinum-group metals (Pt, Pd, Ir, Rh) are used in electrodes.”

For this reason, and historical antecedents we feel comfortable with some gold alloys for initial piercing jewelry. Most of our evidence related to gold for use in jewelry is based upon historical, that is to say experiential and anecdotal sources. Gold has been used in jewelry fabrication since prehistoric times, and has had a similar length of history in surgical and dental applications.

Who should understand our jewelry standards?

Our standards are necessary for jewelers and regulators as well as piercers, healthcare professionals, and the public. APP publications have previously addressed the general public as the primary audience for our jewelry standards. Our simplified explanation of the rationale for our jewelry standards is helpful for clients, but not specific enough for regulators, and missing information for jewelers. We have chosen to rely firmly upon specifications that have been pulled from medical and dental implant sciences, and voted to allow to permit the use of certain traditional jewelry materials that are composed of biocompatible elements which seem to demonstrate an acceptable response in the body. This represents two categories of materials: specified and agreed upon.

The specified biomaterials are exact standards for materials that can be purchased ready to use for making body jewelry based on evidence that meets CDC recommendation Category IA: Strongly recommended for implementation and strongly supported by well-designed experimental, clinical, or epidemiologic studies. This would include all biomaterials which have been developed using ASTM and ISO standard specifications for implantation.

The agreed upon materials of gold and platinum alloys, niobium, and fused quartz, soda lime, and borosilicate glass are within the ideal of CDC recommendation Category II: Suggested for implementation and supported by suggestive clinical or epidemiologic studies or by a theoretical rationale. For example, there is strong evidence that the pure elemental form of each of these materials are well accepted by the body, and they should retain that quality when alloyed until a threshold level of sensitizing or toxic elements are added to the mix. ASTM F2999 and F2923 limit the harmful levels of toxins based on California Prop 65.

Why are material standards important to understand?

Our standards are based on utility rather than our own invention. We use existing medical and dental expertise for materials that are currently being used in human implants and prosthesis. We rely upon a body of evidence and experimentation that we as an industry have not yet become capable of doing ourselves. For this reason, it is important for us to find and understand reliable information from other fields that can be applied to our own.

Why is the language we use important to describe standards to the public, jewelers, and regulatory authorities?

Simple descriptions should be clear for the biomaterials we choose for body jewelry. Existing materials which are made to ASTM and ISO implant specifications are tested according to consensus based scientific standards to ensure long term safety in the body. We choose these material specifications to avoid reinventing the wheel, and the ISO 10993 series of tests for those new wheels can be prohibitively expensive. We use the specifications F67, F136, F138, F1295 etc as a summation of what we need for safe materials, before they are formed into jewelry. We should not have to elaborate the minutiae of these specifications to know that they are applicable and achievable for our purposes. Can get away with less precision? Not without introducing high levels of risk.

Understanding biomaterials is one of my goals as both an experienced professional piercer and long time member of ASTM Committee F04 on Medical and Surgical Materials and Devices. I hope that some of the information we have to share is helpful to you.

Footnotes:

1Biomaterials Science: an Introduction to Materials in Medicine, Buddy D. Ratner http://books.google.com/books?id=Uzmrq7LO7loC page 434

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