



—photo by Maddie Horton

Clockwise from the right, David Vidra, Stephannie Hutter Thomas, Judas Zukas, and John Osborne

## AN INTERVIEW WITH DAVID VIDRA —by Matte Erickson



In a continuing effort to bring a little insight to some of the interesting people within our history, we bring you our next casual interview with, David “Mama” Vidra. The contributions that David has been responsible for are too numerous to list. A piercer, registered nurse and educator, David has been an integral figure in pushing the piercing industry towards legitimacy in the eyes of Federal and medical agencies. Not only was he an early Board Member, instructor and liaison between the APP and OSHA, he also created Health Educators ([www.hlthe-du.com/](http://www.hlthe-du.com/)), one of the only industry training programs in the world.

**Matte Erickson:** How did you get the nickname “Mama”?

**David Vidra:** Mama came from Kevin Tarbell at Splash of Color in East Lansing, Michigan. It also came from all the years I worked with the handicapped. That started when I was 13. I started High Hopes for the handicapped and in the early ‘80s started an organization that cared for AIDS patients until death. North Coast AIDS Home Care, an agency taking care of the patients, closed in early 1990. I also did theater with the deaf/blind and assisted with a deaf choir.

**ME:** How long have you been around piercing? What is your history?

**DV:** Since I was 21. I got my first piercing at Body Language in Cleveland, Ohio by Linus Herell. So, 38 years total I have been around piercing and involved. As far as my history, I apprenticed and did piercing all while focusing on other parts of my life. I directed outdoor education program for a CYO Camp in Ohio, worked with mentally and physically challenged people for care as well as directing theater with the deaf/blind and what we call normal people, but the whole time I was piercing, getting pierced and doing all the above.

**ME:** Who most influenced you in your early body piercing career?

**DV:** Influences outside of local people, which was Linus and John Brittan, came mainly from the Gauntlet’s PFIQ. Fakir’s *Body Play* magazine also was a great influence in regards to the spiritual aspect of piercing, which was also very important to me.

**ME:** Who have been your role models during your involvement in the piercing industry?

**DV:** Michaela Grey, Jim Ward, the Gauntlet classes (basic and advanced). During my classes there I met both Al D. and Eric Dakota. These were the first people that really affected me personally and professionally. Also, I got the opportunity to speak with Elayne Angel

(this was before her involvement with APP) at a FDA conference in New Orleans, which had both been invited to speak at. I always had great respect for her and was fortunate to have gotten to watch her pierce at her studio. All of these people helped shape my career and so many more I haven’t mentioned as well. Shops like Infinite Piercing, Blake’s shop, Note Nomad, but they were the more extreme of our time and would share information freely.

**ME:** What are a few of your favorite Conference memories?

**DV:** Favorite memories, there are so many this is very hard to keep short. When conferences began, if there were 200 people there, OMG that was huge! We would debate different things from aftercare, things such as preps; betadine is what almost everyone used at the time, and BZK wipes to remove it (ETOH (alcohol) would deactivate it), salt solutions etc. Memories of good debates and agreeing afterward what directions we wanted to see the industry head.

Being around people who love everything you do, sharing information with each other about why we would do what we do. There were schools of thought, Jim Ward’s, Fakir’s, other owners and those who had minimal to no medical education and could not get



it. Being a new nurse at the time, about 6 years or so, I took what we did in medical, but not to the extent we did in hospital. This included documentation, adapting tools (no locking forceps etc.). It was an exciting time!

Doing the opening session with Derek and Shawn on the classes, who the Board was, was such fun. Teaching with Dr. Jack on anatomy and working with him on legislative issues in early '90s. Attending the first APHA convention. Michaela getting us that membership expense both to be there, and to get our membership paid for, not from dues, but from our own incomes. Such a success! Talking to all these people who did not really receive us too well at first, but that was the minority.

My fondest memory was teaching blood borne and studio documentation. Teaching wound care with Dr. Betsy and teaching anatomy with her and Dr. Jack. Discussions at the splash bar with those people who would say can I talk with you, and spending hours answering questions and trying to help every person no matter how long it took.

There are goofy things, but my fondest of all, was teaching and giving everyone the information they needed (no trade secrets), being accepted by others at times (though some never did). When Bruno (Pat Tidwell) gave me a towel with my initials on it, I had made it into the towel club. It felt great and came with respect from some more extreme people which, God, I wanted to be, but could not. So I could live through them keeping their asses safe, and we could come up with new ways to do what they needed to.

Research, God, back when I was on the Board for five years and a

consultant (until three years ago). Research costs money. Not just going on the web. Back then, you paid for medical and nursing journals, and for opinions from government and other big agencies. All that money was raised, or paid for, by my shop so we could prove points from minimum standard to higher standards, where appropriate. Sterilization, oh my God, what we did then to now, but no one bitched about money they spent because it was for the greater good of the community.

One last one is the first legislation in Washington; helping to write it get the proof of what we were asking for and it being passed with a ban on ear piercing guns what a rush.

**ME: What keeps you busy now that you no longer pierce?**

**DV:** All the work I have done for education, from research to getting different certificates within nursing; such as wound care certificates and certified instructor and facilitator, which both added to what I could give, and getting things certified for health inspectors for their continuing education. Setting the base courses, anything with health and safety. Teaching anatomy and wound care with Dr. Jack and the latest with Dr. Betsy and the organizations. Early on we were members of APHA, and some I just do not remember. Working on the NEHA manual (the first one) and I am glad to hear it will be updated finally. Working with OSHA, CDC, and NIOSH with different projects, all of which really brought me much joy with the illness affecting me the way it does at times, it makes it a bit hard to continue it all so I limit what I can do.

**ME: If you could pass on one piece of advice, what would it be?**

**DV:** One piece of advice: keep your relationships strong and make time for them over anything else (work, organizations, etc.) When everyone else is gone, only they will be there. The others will not. Just your closest friends and your partner. The rest move on without you and that has been proven. Most do not know my lover, he never wanted to go there with me, but he was always home when I came home and loved me no matter what. So keep them strong. My only regret is not one at all. I did a lot. I know that I was, and still am, a good piercer and educator and do both when feeling well with pride. No matter what others might say, my name still holds weight.

I miss some of what was, and miss it fondly. Remember, we all get replaced, but no one can be who you were to the clients and students you served.

**ME: Puppies or kittens?**

**DV:** Both right now. We have a boy; his name is Gus. He thinks he is a dog, but he is not. He is the sweetest when he wants to be, and tries to keep my legs calm. He always knows when things are bad and makes it better. I am looking for a small dog to go with Gus and of course, for me.

*We hope you enjoyed this little look into the life of David Vidra. To be honest, I am amazed it is as short as it is. David is a great storyteller. If you ever have the chance, please pull him aside and let him tell you some of the stories in a way only he can tell. And, to David, thank you for putting up with all the correspondence in getting this done. You are a gem. If you would like to see anyone in particular interviewed here, feel free to contact us at [archive@safepiercing.org](mailto:archive@safepiercing.org).*

—photo by Matte Erickson



—photo by Matte Erickson



—photo by Sean Hartgrove



—photo by Barry Blanchard



—photo by Matte Erickson

*Clockwise from the top: David and Eduardo Chaverria presenting a class on Bloodborne Pathogens at the APP Conference (2008); with Betsy Reynolds in 2002, the year he won the APP President's Award; "Mama" Vidra making a point; with Rivka Chavi at an APP banquet, 2015; at the 2016 Dallas Suscon right before David received a Lifetime Achievement Award*