

this just in

# Brush With Death

Business at a North Philly memorial T-shirt business is, sadly, booming.

By Kate Kilpatrick [kkilpatrick@philadelphiaweekly.com](mailto:kkilpatrick@philadelphiaweekly.com)

With back-to-school season underway and the Puerto Rican Day Parade just around the corner, orders for airbrushed T-shirts, boots, sneakers and backpacks are coming in strong.

"This is the best time of year for me," says 25-year-old Pedro Rosa (known around the way as "Page"), who with his partner Terence Amaker, 34, owns the Sketch Pad airbrush shop at Front and Cambria in Fairhill. On this Saturday afternoon he's finishing up a backpack design featuring a doe-eyed Tinkerbell in a green leotard with the name "Daly" painted across the top.

It's an unusually festive period for Rosa, considering he spends most of the year painting memorial shirts for victims of Philadelphia's homicide epidemic.

"That's the moneymaker right there," says Rosa, who estimates memorial shirts make up 89 percent of his business.

The day after a murder, friends and family members carrying photos of their loved ones start coming into Rosa's shop to place their orders. While there are other airbrushers in the city—including Philadelphia Airbrush on Girard Avenue and an airbrushing stall in the Gallery—Rosa says his location in the Badlands puts him closer to the violence—and the business.

"Most of the deaths are in North Philly. I know that for a fact. I don't need a report to tell me that," he says. "And the majority of them I do. Girard gets their orders, but I'm closer—it's just business."

With 298 homicides in Philly so far this year, Rosa and Amaker just opened a second location on Kensington Avenue at Clearfield Street.

"I keep it cheap," says Rosa of his affordable designs. Backpacks cost about \$30, boots \$25 to \$40, his "in memory" T-shirts \$25 to \$35. "I'm not trying to break anybody. I know where I'm at. I grew up in the same 'hood."

From a young age Rosa was interested in graffiti-style lettering and designs, and he studied art briefly at Franklin Learning Center. In his early teens, when his younger brother Jose was born, Rosa brought

a visor to an airbrusher along with a sketch of how he wanted his baby brother's name painted. Impressed with the design, the man asked Rosa if he wanted to learn to airbrush.

From there Rosa "took it the crib," practicing every day in his basement with an airbrush gun his mother bought him for Christmas. He buried himself in his art.

with paint before I deal with blood."

Some customers who walk into Sketch Pad know exactly what they want. Like the teenage boy who asks how much it'll cost to get SpongeBob SquarePants smoking a blunt and blowing out smoke in the shape of his name painted on a Timberland boot. (It's \$25.)



Painted love: Pedro Rosa opened his airbrush shop at Front and Cambria two years ago.

"My mom will tell you. She used to argue with me to come upstairs," he remembers. After more than five years of practicing on his own, Rosa began working at the Pennsauken Mart, where he stayed for six years until it closed in 2005. He also spent a summer airbrushing on the Ocean City boardwalk, where he learned to work quickly and efficiently.

"Everyone says I should get into tattoos," says Rosa. "But this is my passion. I don't want to be there wiping blood off your skin. I'll deal

Others flip through the pictures in Rosa's photo book for inspiration. In it are images of some of his more personal artwork, like the pair of boots decorated with sunny images of Philly—including the LOVE Park statue and fountain—on one side, and a cop car with a policeman gunning down a young man on the other. "I spray what I see, and I see a lot of shit," says Rosa.

But he'll also satisfy any customer requests. If a customer wants a "stop the violence" shirt, he'll make it. If

they want a Latin Kings shirt, he'll do that too. He recently painted a shirt for a member of the Crips gang.

"That's never got to me. If their money's green, their money's green. This is my livelihood," Rosa says. For the violence, he blames "too many kids who think they're grown men. Get a house. Get a family—and support them. That's what makes you a man. I don't care how much money you make."

Although he hasn't had to paint an "in memory" shirt for any close friends or family, Rosa says that if the day comes, he'll do it. "I'll lock myself in the store and just do it. I'll do it. I just don't want anyone to be here because I know I'm gonna break down."

Generally, though, he doesn't let the sadness surrounding his business take a personal toll. "I just try to make it nice for the family. I try to make the customer happy. They come in for an 'in memory' but might come back for an anniversary." ■

straight  
cupcakes

IRAQ WAR TALLY

3,783

U.S. SOLDIERS KILLED

Source: [icasualties.org](http://icasualties.org)

9

U.S. SOLDIERS KILLED  
THIS WEEK

Source: [icasualties.org](http://icasualties.org)

477

IRAQI SECURITY FORCES  
AND CIVILIANS KILLED  
THIS MONTH

Source: [icasualties.org](http://icasualties.org)