

RYAN BLAIR

If this CEO looks like he has gang tattoos, it's because he does.

Being in a gang and earning millions of dollars as an entrepreneur aren't as different as you'd think, according to Ryan Blair, CEO of weight loss and fitness company ViSalus. Raised by an abusive, drug-addicted father and an alcoholic mother, Blair found himself a ward of the court of California at 13. "I was in and out of trouble and I moved into a gang-infested neighborhood," he says. "The first thing that they do if you're a young man without a role model is show up and try to be that role model."

Although he was forced into the gang at first, he fell deeper into the culture when his sister's best friend—his first crush and his first kiss—was killed in a drive-by shooting by a rival gang. "That's when my connection to the gang became emotional," Blair recalls. It was a connection he wore on his body. "The start of my lifelong obsession with ink was the gang. We would take ink and needles and tat each other up."

Suddenly, at 17, he had a change in circumstances. His mother began dating a wealthy entrepreneur who became Blair's stepfather, and they moved him from his old neighborhood to a mansion. Even more than living in a safe neighborhood, it was entrepreneurship that changed his life. "In gangs we're entrepreneurs as well, just illegal entrepreneurs," Blair says. "It requires leadership and all the same economic principles to be successful at one or another, but as a professional entrepreneur I didn't have to worry about getting shot or arrested."

Following this epiphany, Blair started his first of 10 businesses, a computer repair service that leveraged skills he had learned reprogramming stolen computers while still in a gang. Many businesses and many highs and lows later, he is at the helm of weight loss company ViSalus and has written a best-selling book, *Nothing to Lose, Everything to Gain*, about his rags to riches story.

Blair's tattoos, like his computer skills, are something he has taken with him from gang life and turned into a source of positivity. "All of my tattoos have deep meaning, so every time I look in the mirror I'm inspired and focused," Blair says.

He has dragons on his arms that represent transformation, and a favorite philosophy, "Carpe Diem," is on the inside of his biceps. But his most meaningful tattoo is the date 8-4-11 tattooed in Roman numerals on his left forearm, for when three major life events occurred simultaneously: His book was published in hard-cover, he found out his son has autism, and he took custodianship of his mother, who had been in a coma for five months (she later, miraculously, came out of the coma shortly before he was planning to terminate her life support).

It's this bittersweet phase of Blair's life that has informed the new additions to the paperback version of his book, which was released this spring. "I've experienced this perfect duality of extreme success and extreme challenges, and I've gained new perspective having gone through those extreme times." This is a man who lives up to his ink. Blair not only finds a silver lining in the darkest of times but also inspires others to do the same. —Suzanne Weinstock Klein

