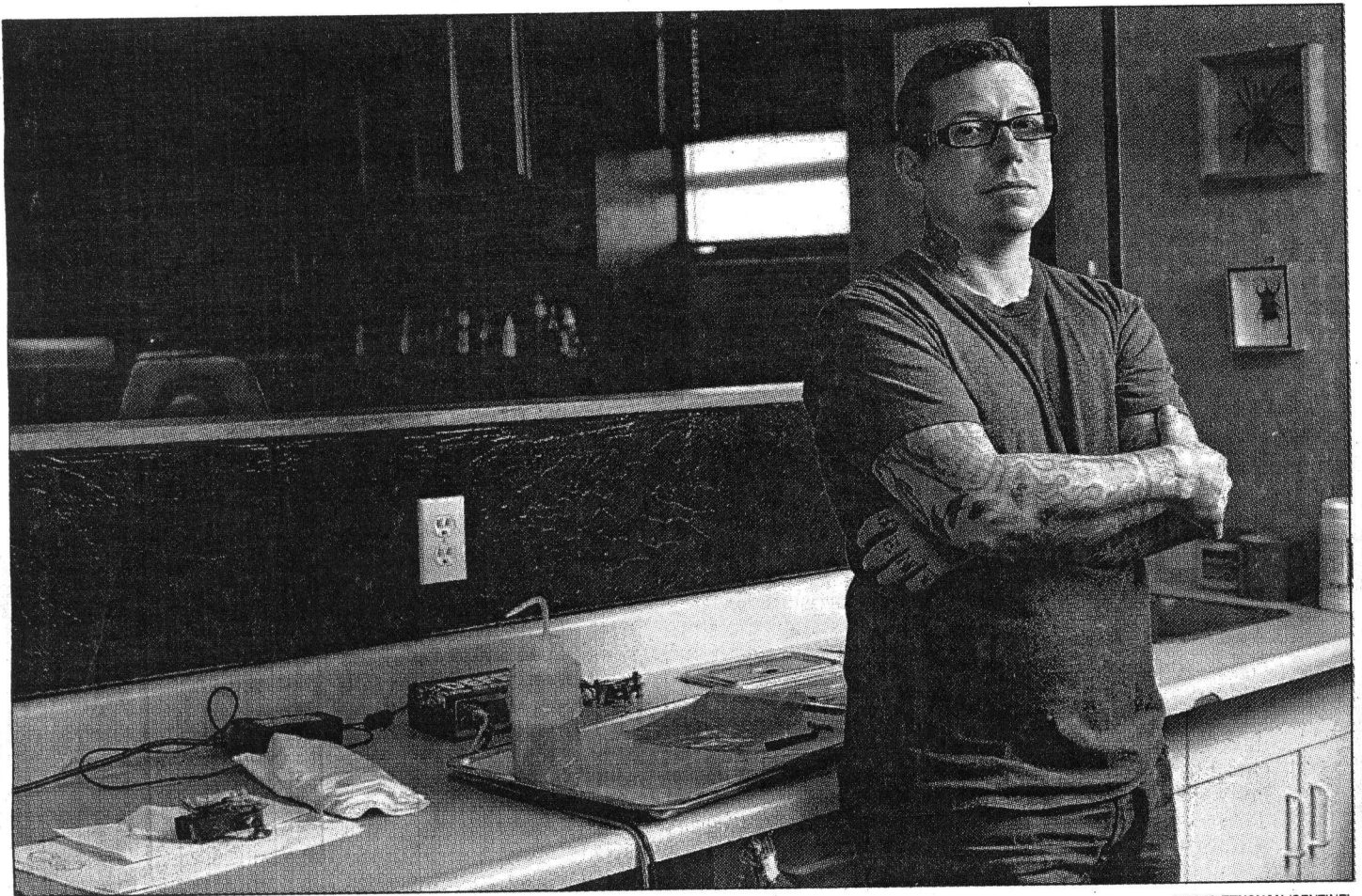


SKIN ART

BRIGHT LINES

New tattoo regulations address growing industry



JAMES TENSUAN/SENTINEL

Ron Nelson stands by his work station inside of Staircase Tattoo. A new state law requires standards for equipment handling and calls for regular site inspections for tattoo parlors.

Shop owners, artists banding together to work through details

By JASON HOPPIN

jhoppin@santacruzsentinel.com

Body Piercing & Tattooing

New regulations are coming to one of Santa Cruz' favorite forms of self-expression.

In a city where half the people seem painted with tattoos or hooked by piercings, using one's body as a vessel for self-expression can seem like the rule rather than the exception. Yet people seeking a body art shop that pays attention to safety and quality have had to rely on experience, word of mouth and leaps of faith.

ON THE NET

For information on county body art regulations, go to sccounty01.co.santa-cruz.ca.us/eh/Medical_Waste/medical_waste_home.htm

A new state law that went into effect July 1 should change that, bringing broad new regulations to an industry that for years — at least in California — has operated largely without them.

"It's been a long time coming," said John McDermott, since 1990 the owner of Staircase Tattoo in Santa Cruz, and who has worked for years on bringing regulations to his industry. "Just to make sure everybody was following the same criteria. One person spoils it and all my years of work go away real quick."

The new law is being rolled out slowly in Santa Cruz, where the county and local shop owners and



JAMES TENSUAN/SENTINEL

Debra Niemira of Santa Cruz gets a tattoo from Ron Nelson of Staircase Tattoo.

'If you're a reputable shop and you're doing things the way shops are supposed to operate ... it should be nothing new. That's kind of the good thing about it, it's pretty much the way we've been operating.'

JOSH FORSYTHE, tattoo artist

SEE TATTOO ON A2



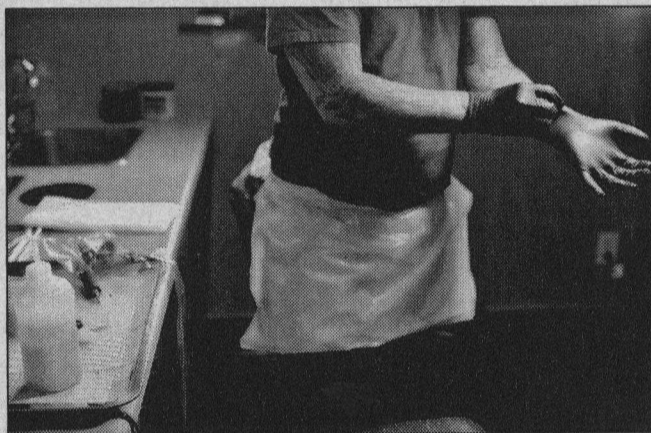
JAMES TENSUAN/SENTINEL

Gall Wallace of Lodi gets a tattoo from Ron Nelson to mark her 60th birthday.



JAMES TENSUAN/SENTINEL

New regulations require that tattoo machines be covered and must be cleaned between clients.



JAMES TENSUAN/SENTINEL

Ron Nelson of Staircase Tattoo prepares his gloves and apron before tattooing a customer.

TATTOO

Continued from A1

tattoo artists and working through the details together. One big adjustment is the law's demand for an abundance of paperwork from parlors where the only paper previously found was in a sketchbook.

The new law is also an affirmation that tattoos have grown up from their days as form of rebellion. More than two dozen shops currently operate across the county, most featuring high-quality artists who apply works of art of customers who plunk down thousands of dollars.

"The industry itself has changed so much in the last five to 10 years," said Josh Forsythe, a tattoo artist operating out of Black Pearl on Portola Drive. "It's not really an underground thing anymore. Most of our customers are soccer moms and business professionals, it's not so much sailors and hookers anymore."

Industry professionals say well-run shops shouldn't have much trouble adjusting to the new law, which mandates everything from sinks and clean rooms to customer health forms to licenses for

shops and artists alike.

The law standardizes procedures for equipment handling, and calls for regular shop inspections. Artists must also undergo training in blood-borne pathogens and are required to show proof they've been vaccinated for Hepatitis B, a viral liver infection transmitted by bodily fluids.

It also bans tattoos or piercings of anyone younger than 18 years of age, regardless of parental consent.

Parlors and artists alike pay an annual fee to counties, which are charged with regulating the industry. For Santa Cruz County, it completes a step first taken in 2007, when the county drew up its own local tattoo ordinance but never implemented it.

"If you're a reputable shop and you're doing things the way shops are supposed to operate... it should be nothing new," Forsythe said. "That's kind of the good thing about it, it's pretty much the way we've been operating."

County environmental health inspector Celia Brown said tattoo parlors have been cooperative, with all but a handful of the 25 to 30 operating throughout the county submitting plans for approval. The county also maintains a roster of 55 to 60 locally licensed tattoo artists.

But that doesn't mean there won't be adjustments. The county held an informational meeting in April to help with the transition.

"They've been very nervous about this from the beginning," Brown said.

Some questions have emerged around the health forms that many shops already had customers fill out, but have been standardized under the new law. The law calls for the forms to be destroyed after a few years, but some shops want to keep them around for longtime, repeat customers.

And while some questions are there to protect artists and customers alike, some operators wonder what they're supposed to do with some of the information. What if a customer has diabetes, for example?

"That's implying if you say yes to this question, we known what to say," McDermott said.

It also appears some are hurrying to catch up with the new law. The regulations allow artists to take the blood-borne pathogen course online, and Dr. Alpesh Patel, cofounder of Illinois-based online course provider Biologix Solutions, said he's seeing a flood of new customers for California's test.

"We started offering it in March, and knew that July would be the month that people started scrambling," Patel said.

Tattoo customers welcomed the new regulations.

Luz Donahue has a floral-themed tattoo from her rib cage to her hip, and says she did her research before applying permanent art to her body. She said as tattoos become more widespread, it's natural to enact regulations.

"I've been lucky in that every artist I've seen was informative and professional," Donahue said. "I can see the value in standardizing the system."

Darren Odden has a tree from Teutonic mythology tattooed on his arm, with a phoenix and a fiery butterfly to signify rebirth, following a medical scare. He favors the regulations, and was thorough before getting a tattoo.

"I walked in and interviewed the artists and the shop to see what the facilities look like, cleanliness of workspaces and the like," Odden said. "I am sure I am a bit more cautious than some as it took me a couple of years to look for a good shop and artist I wanted to do my tattoo."

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