

Gay

Tolerance

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Some Gays, Lesbians Still Far From Free

LOCAL GAYS won a great symbolic victory four years ago when John Laird, the city's first openly gay city council member, became mayor. The story went national, and ever since Santa Cruz has been identified as an important gay stronghold.

Besides the obvious political ramifications of Laird's mayoralty and ongoing popularity (he was the top vote-getter in the last council election), the good news for gays in general was that Santa Cruz' relative open-mindedness was creating conditions more and more favorable for coming out of the closet.

Being open about being gay in Santa Cruz, however, is still not a simple game to play, according to several men and women who fall into that category. Despite certain attributes which make Santa Cruz a more comfortable place than most to be openly gay, local gays say much progress remains to be made.

"Yes, there is considerable support for gays in Santa Cruz, both from the straight population and within the gay community itself," said Scott Brookie, co-editor of the Lavender Reader, the city's gay newspaper.

"But it would be a mistake to identify Santa Cruz as a utopia for gays. There is plenty of discrimination against and harassment of gays, and I think just about everyone who is openly gay in this community has experienced that in one form or another."

According to victims of "gay-bashing," Santa Cruz gays are subjected to such things as being denied housing or laid off from jobs; being stared at, honked at and flipped off; being threatened, verbally abused, beaten up and generally trampled on in a number of subtle or overt manners.

Homophobia-induced incidents such as these are a constant reminder to gays that Santa Cruz can only offer relative freedom. They are also a large part of the reason that many local gays still have not stepped out of the closet.

After giving her talk at last month's annual gay pride celebration, feminist talk show host Allison Claire asked those out of the closet to raise their hands, and virtually everyone did. She then asked how many knew people who were not out, and got the



These marchers at this year's Gay Pride Parade down Pacific Ave. apparently have no problem accepting lesbians.

same response.

"Certainly most of the gays I know are out, but there are a few who aren't," said Jo Kenny, chairman of the city's recently formed human relations task force. "It could be because their job would be jeopardized or they would be afraid of losing their children or they are surrounded by a traditional culture. There's also an unknown number of gays nobody knows about, because they haven't told anybody."

By most accounts Santa Cruz's gay

community is no larger than that of most places: about 10 percent of the general population, or close to 5,000 in the city and 22,000 in the county. It is, however, more cohesive, organized and political than many counterpart gay communities — there are at least two dozen gay social, political or recreational organizations in Santa Cruz — and as a result gays may feel more secure here.

"The gay community is active, alive and unique," said Claire. "The gay pride parade is a good example of the spirit. About 1,000 people participated, and there was really something delightful about it this year, like a festive party. That type of celebration really means a lot, and it makes me feel more secure as a gay person. There weren't even any Bible-quoters protesting this year."

Longtime Santa Cruz gays agree that the local community coalesced and broke into the open in a big way back in 1978, the year of the Briggs Initiative, an extremist anti-gay state ballot measure that was handily defeated by the voters, but only after a vigorous campaign against it.

In Santa Cruz, the Committee United to Defeat the Briggs Initiative served as a focal point for hundreds of local gays, and was the forerunner to the Lavender Coalition of the early '80s and the current Lesbian and Gay Action Alliance, the influential gay political organization generally sympathetic to "liberal-progressive" issues and candidates.

"I think it's getting easier to be open each year," said Laird, first elected to the council in 1981 and scheduled for a second mayoral term beginning in November.

"But it's pretty apparent quite a few gays are still uncomfortable about coming out," Laird said. "I know of a few closet gays in high places. Another indication is that a lot of people are willing to come to a park away from the public view but won't participate in the parade on the mall."

Noted Kenny: "One way to tell how hard it still is in Santa Cruz is to walk down the mall hand in hand with your companion and see what the reaction is." •

—Kevin Hanson