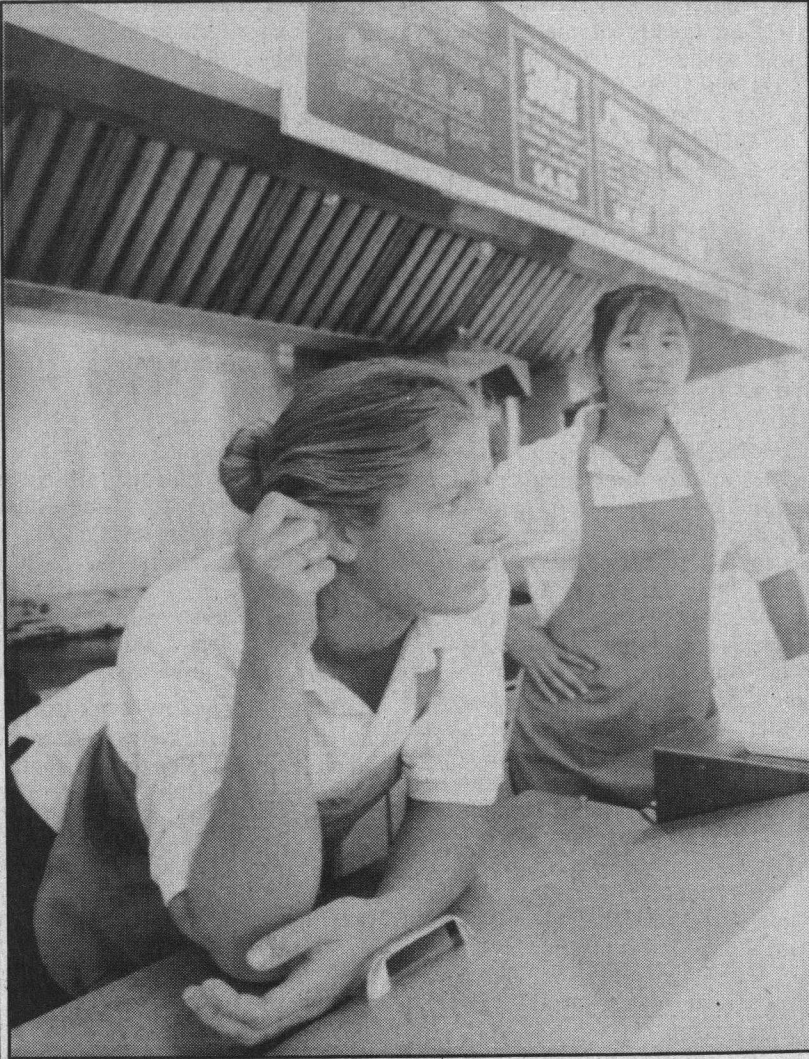


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Anti-bias law protects offbeat, but not the bizarre



After removing her nose ring, Colleen Stover waits for customers during a recent work day at a Boardwalk food stand.

Associated Press

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When Colleen Stover arrives at her job at a Santa Cruz Boardwalk concession stand, she puts on a blue apron — and then pulls out her nose ring.

In a town where almost anything goes, the offbeat is protected by perhaps the nation's broadest anti-discrimination law.

It doesn't defend the most decorative denizens, but people can't be discriminated against in jobs or housing based on personal characteristics, including birth defects, height, weight and sexual preference.

"It just was never meant to protect all those people with pierced tongues or noses," said City Councilman Neal Coonerty, who during months of debate tired of people emphasizing the most far-out interpretations of the law.

The law's first draft could have prevented employers and landlords from turning away people with pierced body parts and colorful hairdos. But the ordinance was amended to take out the words "personal appearance," as one of the things protected. "Personal characteristics" was used instead.

Still, 19-year-old Stover maintains the law "stinks."

"I'm quitting this job because of this," a nose-ring-less Stover said on a recent sunny day at the fast-food stand. "I don't understand why they don't allow

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City Councilman Neal Coonerty

this. Santa Cruz is nose rings. Santa Cruz is blue hair. Santa Cruz is pierced tongues. Half the people out there look like that."

Not quite. And, despite people like Stover, the Seaside Co. that runs Santa Cruz's famed Boardwalk amusement park is one of the most tolerant and fair — not to mention largest — employers in the city.

"I've only heard one complaint about working here, and that was from a woman who had fire-engine red hair but had to go back to brown," said Ken Gregg, a 24-year-old Boardwalk ride operator. "I've lived here all my life. It's kind of a strange town. But I think it's the best place to live in the whole world."

Under the law, a violation could result in a \$100 fine if a citizen complains to the city and proves discrimination. A city-approved independent mediator would try to settle the dispute first.

Now, federal and state law protects people from discrimination based on sex, race and religion. Michigan outlaws discrimination based on height and weight. And Washington, D.C.,

protects people based on appearance. But Santa Cruz is the only city to combine all that and add sexual preference, too.

The law was passed April 28, after three months of heated debate over whether also to protect Santa Cruz's more bizarre beings. It doesn't go into effect until Aug. 1, but most people are observing it already.

"We wanted to notify businesses by mail and let them get used to the idea," said Mayor Don Lane. "People were sensitive about this at first. From a national perspective, people were saying, 'What a crazy idea.' But we worked out something everybody could live with. And it does break ground."

The Boardwalk, which opened in 1915, employs 1,200 people in peak summer months and has always had an eclectic group of applicants, who often must clean up their appearance to get a job. Long hair must be pulled back and tucked under hats; no dangling earrings are allowed; tattoos can't show because of gang connotations. Employees run the gamut from stylish teens to a 79-year-old to a mentally handicapped man who

sweeps up.

"I just walked in and asked for a job," said 21-year-old Chris Dow, who has been sweeping the Boardwalk for two years. "I looked for a different job, but people weren't hiring me. It's fun here."

Ann Parker, a spokeswoman for the Seaside Co., said that like most Santa Cruz employers, the Boardwalk has health, safety and dress codes. And, like most amusement parks, the company also requires a neat appearance.

"This is nothing like Disneyland, which is really strict," Parker said. "But we're seen as part of the entertainment business. And people on the front line are like entertainers. They must meet certain criteria."

The ordinance began as an idea from homosexuals after Gov. Pete Wilson vetoed a gay rights bill last year. Other groups, such as one for overweight women, joined the effort.

Wendy Chapkis, a lesbian and a leader of the drive, said she hated to give up the portion on personal appearance. But she and her peers won legal protection she never enjoyed before.

"The last time I was renting a place, I couldn't tell my landlord I was a lesbian," Chapkis said. "This time, my lover and I signed a new lease a day after the Santa Cruz law passed and I thought, 'Oh, I don't have to worry about this anymore.' It was a wonderful feeling."