

His signs are everywhere

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To make a living as an artist in Santa Cruz County, Peter Bartczak takes any job that comes his way

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Over a cup of whip cream-topped hot chocolate at Sunrise Cafe in Soquel, sign painter and illustrator Peter Bartczak talks about his colorful journey from a warehouse commune in 1970s San Francisco to leading mural projects for at-risk youth in Santa Cruz.

The wobbly table shakes so much from Bartczak's enthusiastic gesturing, an earthquake would go unnoticed. Hot chocolate is everywhere.

And the tale is often punctuated with: "I wouldn't have chosen this, I'll tell you that."

These days, Bartczak, 62, is a venerable airbrush artist in Santa Cruz. It's probable you've seen his work: the sign behind his head here at the Sunrise, murals at the Silver Spur, in the basement of the County Building and at Upper Crust Pizza.

He's been painting for 40 years.

Bartczak doesn't put a shine on the life of an artist. It's hard work, he said. Though he loves the beginning and end of a project, the middle is a slog. Clients' visions often vary wildly from his own. And it can be tough to make ends meet, despite his years of commercial art experience.

"It's called the 'Santa Cruz shuffle,'" he said. "You do whatever you can."

But the payoff for the constant struggle is immense because he is able to eke out a living in Santa Cruz.

Bartczak first came to Santa Cruz — actually, the Brookdale Lodge — on New Years Eve 1975. He had taken a hiatus from airbrushing tourist portraits on Fisherman's Wharf to be the roadie for a rock band. The band's performance wasn't memorable but the drive down Highway 9 and into downtown Santa Cruz the following morning proved life changing for Bartczak.

"It hit me like a thunderbolt: I want to live here," Bartczak said. He was standing in front of the Cooper House on Pacific Avenue mulling the question so many Santa Cruz transplants before and after him have pondered: "How the hell do you live here?"

That's when he realized he didn't care what it took, and so began Bartczak's Santa Cruz shuffle.

"I have all this freedom, but it's a cliffhanger," he said.

He lived in Felton and Ben Lomond for a time because it was cheaper, and at least once striped parking lots to make some quick cash. Eventually, he moved downtown and landed good hand-painted sign gigs, complete with a studio at the end of Mission Street, "which was the ultimate art scene at the time," Bartczak added.

When a combination of the government crackdown on lead-based paints and the advent of the vinyl sign killed his cottage industry, Bartczak turned to murals and illustrating books to make a living. He airbrushed 28 individual paintings to illustrate "A Voice for the Redwoods," a children's book written by Loretta Halter and mentored Costanoa High students through a mural project on their campus.

"I want to create art that's going to be meaningful," he said.

Bartczak also gets the occasional odd — as in weird — job, like painting backdrops at Six Flags in Vallejo or peep show boxes in San Francisco. Once, he worked on a \$17 million carousel at Disneyland.

His skills have grown with time and, about 15 years ago, he reached a point where he could paint anything he visualized.

But Bartczak claims he's given up on being an artist many times, only to come back time and again.

"I love it, but I know the nature of the beast," he said, again adding, "I never would have chosen this."

He left Santa Cruz to live in the town of Paradise, in the Sierra Foothills, for several years. Bartczak now is back in Santa Cruz and recently opened an online shop to sell prints of his many works. The illustrations run the gamut: an airbrushed portrait of Mick Jagger as Frankenstein, aptly named "Jaggerstein," images from sci-fi books Bartczak has contributed to, a winged frog originally painted as a greeting card for the Calaveras County frog-jumping contest.

Bartczak is continually debating the merits of his artist lifestyle, though he always comes back to its virtues.

"What I love about being an artist," he said, reminiscing about the wide range of clients he's had over the years, "it's a passport to any point on the spectrum ... it's a hot knife through the butter of society."



Bartczak painted the people above the entrance to the East Side café The Silver Spur.

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story



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COVER: Peter Bartczak created the mural that welcomes people traveling south on Highway 1 into Santa Cruz at Upper Crust Pizza in 2002. ABOVE: Peter Bartczak led a mural-painting project with students at Costanoa High School.