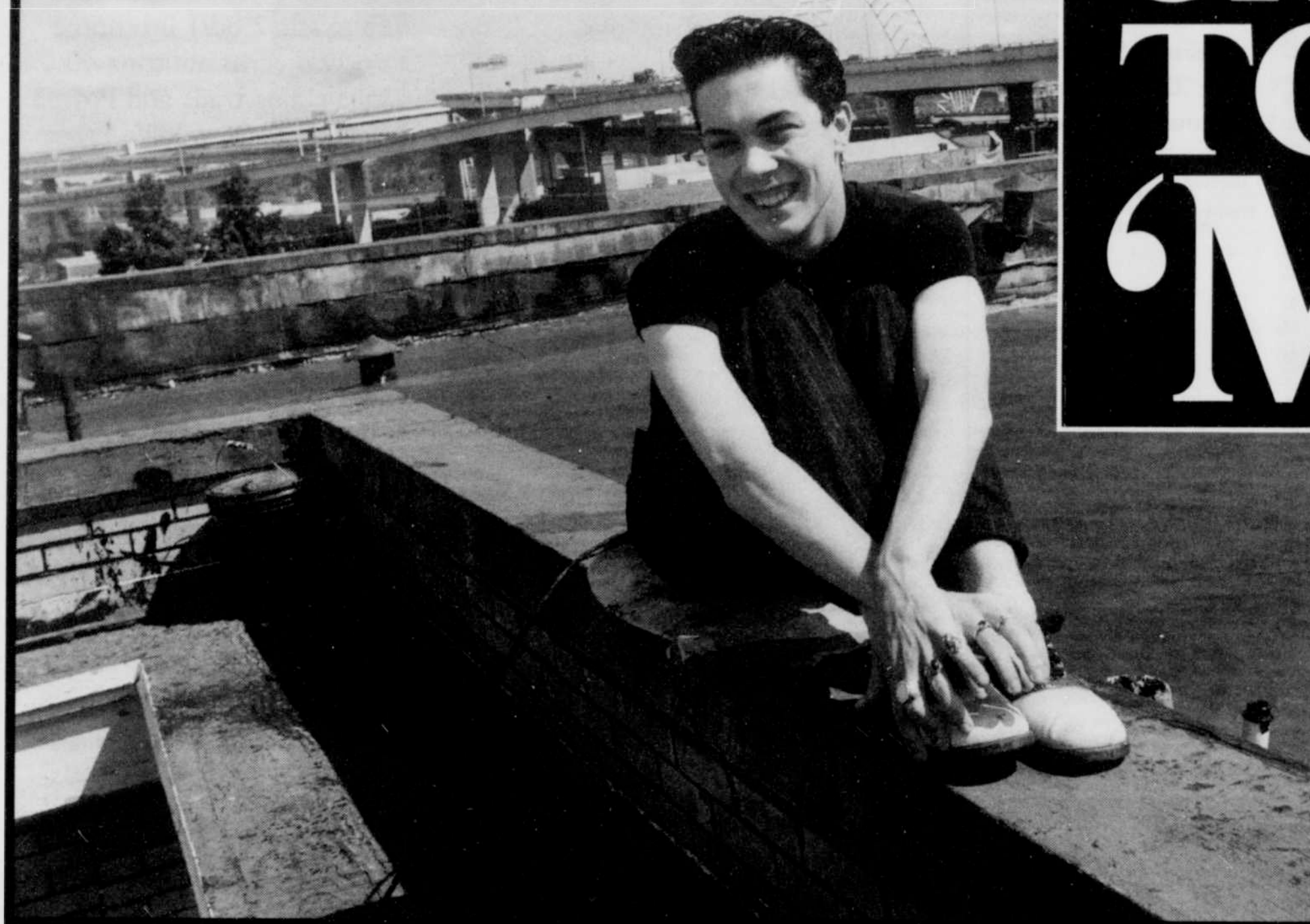


Some queers chafe at being asked to tone down their dress and behavior on the job

by Inga Sorensen • photos by Linda Kliever



Joshua Rutan

Jennie Bricker, 34, loves what Zach Heusinkveld, 21, is all about. "Everything about him is a celebration of queerness," says Bricker, an out lesbian who concedes that her own gay ways are "probably more palatable to others."

After all, Bricker neither flits nor flames. By his own admission, Heusinkveld does. "I'm a *fairy*, for goodness sake," says the 21-year-old, who at work has been known to flash elaborately painted fingernails, flounce to the copy machine and gyrate enthusiastically about his office.

Both Bricker and Heusinkveld will tell you this is just the way Heusinkveld is—a person whose queerness shines through not simply during a weekend of clubbing, but also during those tamer moments, you know, Monday through Friday—daily-grind time.

"It's who he is. Plain and simple," says Bricker. "To attempt to alter or repress that would only do Zach serious damage—and he shouldn't have to change himself."

Up until a few weeks ago, Bricker and Heusinkveld worked together in the legal department of Dark Horse Comics Inc., a local comic book publishing company situated on the outskirts of Portland in Milwaukie.

Now neither does; Heusinkveld, who had been employed by Dark Horse since February, was fired, and in response Bricker, who had been there five-plus years, quit.

In her resignation letter—made available companywide via in-house e-mail—Bricker said she was leaving because she believed Heusinkveld's termination was spawned by homophobia. She also expressed concerns about the perpetuation of

a "good ol' boys network," i.e., work environments which require clone-like qualities among staff.

Bricker stresses she was never personally treated unfairly by Dark Horse because of her orientation. She also says the company's eclectic employee stew includes other homo folks, as well as straight employees with piercings, tattoos and "green dreadlocks." But none, Bricker adds, who are so overtly queer (or gay) as Heusinkveld.

"I think if Zach were straight he'd still be working at Dark Horse, but because he's gay—and very blatantly so—he's a threat," she says. "Whether you're gay or not, you should have the right to be yourself in the workplace."

This is not solely a story about Heusinkveld and Dark Horse Comics.

It has to do with the broader issue of a queer sensibility in the employment environment.

Sure, more companies are granting domestic-partnership benefits—and more people than ever before are out at work—but how far out, and just how identifiable are they? What happens to those who ooze queerness yet want to earn a paycheck, too? Where are the lines drawn, and what are the costs of repression?

With younger generations sporting piercings and tattoos galore—not just as fashion statements but as genuine expressions of self—those questions are increasingly sure to pop up.

Many of the answers will have to come from within.

For Bricker there was no choice but to leave Dark Horse. It was no easy decision, given her pro-

fessed loyalty to the company, as well as the fact that she has a 5-month-old son to feed and clothe.

"But I felt what happened just wasn't right," she says.

Heusinkveld, meanwhile, says, "I can't change who I am, and I wouldn't. I come from the streets. I've prostituted.... It was a hard, hard existence, but I was always proud of myself for who I am. I was never ashamed of being queer."

Despite the odds Heusinkveld attended Portland Community College, where he studied to become a legal secretary, later landing such a post at Dark Horse Comics.

Sure, more companies are granting domestic-partnership benefits—and more people than ever before are out at work—but how far out, and just how identifiable are they? What happens to those who ooze queerness yet want to earn a paycheck, too? Where are the lines drawn, and what are the costs of repression?

Heusinkveld says he was "very ambitious," volunteering "for everything, from computer work to receptionist stuff, you name it."

In late June, a few days before Pride weekend, he sent out companywide e-mail announcing the upcoming festivities. Two weeks later, he says, he was axed.

"They said I was too enthusiastic," he tells *Just Out*.

Kim Haines, human resources director for Dark Horse, says Heusinkveld was let go due to a "lack of experience."

"He required more supervision than our

resources allowed," she says. (Heusinkveld's supervisor, legal counsel Mark Anderson, did not respond to our inquiry.)

Haines says Heusinkveld was a vibrant employee, though his work product "wasn't the best." (She says Bricker had been an "excellent employee.")

Haines further says Heusinkveld did not exhibit "certain behaviors expected in a corporate setting." She says he was repeatedly asked to turn down the volume of the radio in his office during a two-day period and failed to respond. As for Heusinkveld's e-mail message, Haines says other employees have utilized company e-mail for nonwork-related messages.

She says there are no "hard and fast rules" about it, and that the e-mail had nothing to do with Heusinkveld's termination.

She adds that Dark Horse has a nondiscrimination employment policy which includes sexual orientation.

Heusinkveld, meanwhile, says his legal-career aspirations have been derailed, at least for now, due to this experience.

"I lost a whole lot of confidence because of what happened," he says.

Rebek Kelly, 25, says to remove his earrings would be to render himself invisible as a gay man.

How he expresses himself, he says, is key to his survival and connection with gay culture.

"It's really easy for a straight person to make it in this world. They don't have to do anything because everybody assumes they're straight," says Kelly, who has worked for Wells Fargo for nearly four years, donning earrings basically hitch-free despite that corporate bank setting.

Pondering a job change, however, Kelly recently interviewed for a receptionist position at a different company, and maintains he was denied employment there because he is a man who wears earrings. (Though he named the company in both his letter to us and the subsequent interview, Kelly later asked that we not use the company's name, saying he feared possible repercussions.)

Kelly says during the interview, in which he sported 10 earrings, he made a "favorable enough impression to be asked back for a second interview with the owner/operator."

He says, however, he received a call from a company representative later that day and was told the firm was still interested in a second interview "but [she] wanted to know if my earrings were something that I would want to wear to work."

"I replied that if my employment with the firm were conditional upon the removal of my earrings, I could not do that.... [She] went on to say that,

Continued on page 21