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## Legal? This booth's for you

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One of the most contentious issues of the 2008 presidential campaign is immigration, particularly from Mexico.

Each candidate has a position. The Democrats and Republicans can't agree, not even among themselves. Lou Dobbs of CNN is practically having a stroke every night screaming about illegal immigration.

Frankly, it's a complicated issue, and many Americans don't understand all the complexities.

I will explain it in the simplest terms.

Because Congress has failed to renew legislation concerning the H2B guest worker program ... you may have to wait a little longer when you buy a funnel cake on the Carnival Midway at this year's Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo.

Or eat a deep-fried Twinkie, or walk through the Fun House or win a prize by sinking a free throw through a "not regulation size" basketball hoop.

Many of the carny workers will be amateurs this year.

"The H2B worker program has worked fine for many years," said Mike Ousey, owner of the Pennsylvania Dutch Funnel Cakes booths at the Rodeo. "Each year, I hire people from Mexico to work the fair circuit. Some of them have been with me for years. These people have an H2B work visa. They work hard, pay U.S. taxes and obey all of our laws. They do a tremendous, honest job and then return home to Mexico at the end of the season.

"But these people have been caught up in the immigration controversy. The government hasn't renewed or passed into law any legislation concerning the H2B worker program. Even if a bill were passed today, it would take until April to get my regular crew cleared and into the U.S. Unfortunately that leaves me with zero help at the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo, which is our biggest event of the year."

For many years, Ousey hired about 12 Mexicans to work his funnel-cake booths. Ousey paid them above minimum-wage salaries and even gave them trailers to sleep in. They had to get a Social Security card and pay taxes.

"They had to stay on the right side of the law, too. If they got a parking ticket and didn't pay it, their work visa wouldn't be approved the following year. This year, they're not allowed into the U.S. And you can't use undocumented workers or illegal immigrants at major state fairs and events like the Houston Rodeo," Ousey said.

### Low pay, long hours

Now Ousey has a big "Help Wanted" sign outside his funnel-cake booths. He's scrambling for workers. So far, he's recruited a few family members, some friends and some friends of friends. But it's still not nearly enough.

Here's your chance to be a real-life carnival worker.

Sure, the pay is relatively low and hours are long and you sort of smell like a funnel cake and you don't get any days off during the three weeks of the rodeo ... but think of the romance and glamour of being a carny.

"We have more rules about employment than you'd think. Guys can have mustaches but no beards. Neither men nor women can have any visible tattoos. Guys can't have their hair touch their collars. Women can't wear too much makeup or jewelry. You have to be clean and presentable," he said.

And you absolutely have to pass a drug test.

The pay ain't bad. Ousey said workers make about \$8.50 an hour, with a bonus if they work every day between Feb. 26 and March 23. If you need a place to stay, there's a bed in one of his mobile homes that he parks near Reliant Stadium.

You get a free carnival ball cap, shirt and apron. You have to supply your own khaki pants, though.

Don't worry if you've never made a funnel cake. That part is easy. Just pour a circle around the little frying pan, then a couple of crisscrosses, then squiggle in the rest.

Come on, if I can do it ...

A few years ago, my assignment was to write one column a day from the rodeo. Since I was going to be there anyway, I went to work in the funnel-cake booth.

Yes, I passed the drug test. And no, I don't have any visible tattoos.

I was assigned to work the back of the booth. I was one of the guys who actually made the funnel cakes. They didn't let me anywhere near the cash register or the big jars of pickles on the counter.

I never asked why a funnel-cake booth would sell pickles.

The weirdest thing was how the customers would place their order at the front window and then, in an orderly way, step to the side, like it was the Soup Nazi's store. They would press their faces up against the side glass and watch me cook their funnel cakes.

I decided to mess with them a little. I'd lift the pitcher of batter and draw the customer's portrait in the frying pan. Some artists work with oil paint, some with water colors, some with acrylics.

I worked with oil — vegetable oil. And funnel-cake batter.

I would stare right at their faces and draw the customers. A few caught on to what I was doing. I got pretty good at it. Of course, the batter would billow up and spread out while cooking, but my funnel cakes still looked like rodeo fans.

I was a funnel-cake impressionist.

Back when I did it, the pay wasn't nearly \$8.50 an hour. I think I got \$5. And all the funnel cakes I could eat.

After a while, one a day was plenty for me. Funnel cakes are delicious, but they're the most burp-lingering food ever invented. A whole week later, you still can't shake them.

You want to try your hand at making funnel cakes at the rodeo? If you work the whole three weeks, you can walk away with a pretty decent paycheck.

Call Ousey at 512-738-6582. You have to be 18 or older.

And presentable.

And legal.

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