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Crime & Courts

Job applicant says facial-hair policy unfair to Sikhs

Thursday, November 13, 2008

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BY HEATHER APPEL

STAFF WRITER



A Paramus man has filed a federal discrimination complaint against a car dealer in Little Falls, charging that he was not hired because of his facial hair, which he keeps because of his Sikh faith.



TYSON TRISH/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Gurpreet Singh Kherha of Paramus has filed a federal discrimination complaint against Tri-County Lexus in Little Falls.

Gurpreet Singh Kherha, 24, was recruited for a sales position at the Tri-County Lexus dealership on Route 46 through the Florida-based recruiting firm TK Worldwide, he said.

After an interview with the recruiter in February, Kherha was invited to complete a two-day training session at Tri-County Lexus, followed by a group interview.

"I'm a young guy, I know about cars. It seems a good fit," Kherha said in a telephone interview Tuesday.

After the group interview, a recruiter with TK Worldwide asked Kherha why he kept a beard and whether the facial hair was a religious requirement, according to a complaint filed with the federal Equal Employment Opportunity Commission.

Kherha explained that as a practicing member of the Sikh faith, he is required to keep his hair uncut and would not be willing to shave his beard in order to be hired by the Lexus dealership.

The complaint states that after Kherha was not selected for the sales job, the recruiter told him that the general manager at the dealership had said he was "exactly what we're looking for," but that the parent corporation has a policy prohibiting facial hair for salespeople.

"I heard it, and I didn't know exactly what to say," Kherha said. "I realized I didn't get a job because I have a beard. The anger grew more and more as I left."

Kherha, who is now employed as a research assistant for a lawyer and is planning to apply to law school, reached out to the New York-based Sikh Coalition, a national organization that works to protect the civil rights of Sikhs.

The coalition put him in touch with attorney Ravinder Singh Bhalla in Hoboken, who helped him file a discrimination charge last week.

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New Jersey is home to an estimated 3,000 Sikhs. The religion, which originated in the Punjab region of India, forbids members to cut their hair and requires men to wear turbans.

"There's nothing about his religious beliefs or practices that would interfere with his ability to sell cars," said Bhalla. "We were shocked by what happened to him, and we're really concerned about the fact that Lexus has done nothing to assure us that this policy is not uniform nationwide."

Xavier Dominicus, a Lexus spokesman, said the corporation does not set any human resources policies for individual dealerships.

"I'm not aware of there being any policy that would preclude a salesperson from having facial hair," Dominicus said.

Staff at the local dealership, Tri-County Lexus, did not return repeated calls about the discrimination charge.

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1. cleanuphackensack says: when in Rome do as the Roman's do. shave the GD beard. Or another alternative is to go to India and sell cars. Next thing will be he want's to burn incense in the showroom.
2. b0zmeg says: This guy is just suing to get some experience in law. His ridiculous lawsuit is just a way to gain more experience in his desired profession. Salespeople have to meet certain standards if they want to sell anything. The dealership is a private company and they have the right to hire or reject anyone for employment that they wish.
3. Joe says: I don't agree, getalife. He's got a right to his beliefs and should not have to shave. I would also believe that the dealership is probably making a mistake in not hiring him. With the Sikh population in NJ, this dealership might have attracted a greater share of Indian customers. On the other hand, I'm not sure suing to get a job helps. Why put yourself in what will likely be a hostile environment. I'd look at other dealerships.

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