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Mall rule not fair to teens

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The recent unveiling of the inequitable Shoppers First Policy at Northgate Mall has barred unaccompanied teenagers from the mall on Friday and Saturday evenings.

While society is most familiar with oppressions such as racism, sexism and classism, one oppression remains largely ignored and unheard of -- ageism. It's astonishing that the Durham community is not grieved by this injustice, considering that the segment of our community that is being victimized by this discriminatory policy is a minority that we've all been a part of -- teenagers.

You see, the Northgate Mall "Guest Courtesy Code" booklet has a new policy concerning youth under the age of 16. The policy that went into effect June 20 states: "Guests under the age of 16 must be accompanied by a parent, legal guardian or responsible adult 21 years of age or older on Friday and Saturday evenings after 6 p.m. until closing."

Discriminatory policies by private businesses in Durham should not be tolerated. Policies targeting youth of this era are every bit as immoral and unjustified as those that targeted minorities in the past.

The city of Durham is on a traceable downfall; with already limited activities for teens, now one of the few places teens go has laid down the unwelcome mat.

Northgate management must understand that age means number of years since birth. It does not mean level of maturity or ability to handle responsibility, which makes this new policy disgraceful.

Denying Durham's youth the opportunity to freely socialize and assemble at Northgate goes against the fundamental principles on which this great nation was built. Remember, Thomas Jefferson wrote in the Declaration of Independence: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."

While the marketing director cites the Shoppers First Policy as a way to encourage more adults to shop with children, what parent really is interested in hanging with his or her teenaged child and friends after a long week's work?

The marketing director at Northgate and other businesses in Durham must understand that modern shoppers are becoming younger everyday and the primary source of revenue for the commercial industry has been and will continue to be youth. Hence, the reason for more marketing targeted at youth rather than adults.

It is time for the passiveness of the youth community to be replaced with guided and assertive leadership in the youth rights movement. It's time for youth to stand with a united voice and say, 'As an American citizen, I will not tolerate discrimination on the basis of my age because I am not defined by my age alone.'

In a post-Sept. 11 era, all Americans should stand firm in ensuring that American values such as the freedom to assemble are not deprived. Allowing the Northgate policy to stay in effect is not sending a message of true American value.

Youth remaining silent and immobile will not reverse this prejudiced policy. Just as past disenfranchised minorities had to fight and struggle for justice, the youth of Durham must organize together to ensure that the policy at Northgate is reversed and other local businesses do not take the example.

Youth have the right to remain silent, or the right to be heard. Which will be exercised?

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