

A Tale of Two 'Citys'

The City of Portland wants to shut down The City Nightclub, but many queer youth say the club is their only refuge

story by Inga Sorensen ▼ photos by Linda Kliewer



Did you know that Madonna came here and DJ'ed for a while when she was in Portland filming *Body of Evidence*?"

This, I tell my twentysomething host, a young gay man who was touring me through The City Nightclub, is a cinematic tidbit of which I was unaware.

"I guess she wasn't easily recognizable because of the way she was dressed, but she came to the door and Lanny recognized her and swept her up into the DJ booth and let her spin some tunes."

His story certainly wouldn't surprise me. After all, The City, an alcohol-free establishment catering largely to queer youth in their teens and early 20s, seemed like the kind of place the Material Girl would be attracted to.

At Northwest 13th Avenue just off Burnside, The City Nightclub is situated in a slightly off-the-beaten-track, somewhat intimidating (to the uninitiated) locale, surrounded by copious cement and looming warehouses. The street, pocked with railway tracks, is less than inviting to one's suburban sedan. As with so much of queer culture, the club's energetic music is often cutting edge, as is its clientele.

"Lanny!" shouts my guide when Lanny Swerdlow, the club's owner, walks by. He stops. "I was just telling Inga about the time Madonna came here."

Swerdlow, a balding middle-aged man who has been operating clubs geared toward sexual

minority youth for 15 years, offers a blank stare before setting the record straight: "She was never here. That's not true at all. That didn't happen."

My sweet and buoyant guide deflates a tad, but quickly shrugs off the bad news with a smile. "Rumors," he says. "Sometimes they get going. You know?"

Welcome to the world of The City Nightclub, occasional rumor mill and a place that is heralded by supporters as a lifeline for queer youth, particularly those who hail from difficult circumstances: young people who have been kicked out onto the streets by unforgiving adults, kids who have struggled against many forms of abuse and neglect.

Detractors, however, view The City as a nest for unrestrained drug activity and predatory maneuvering by trolls (older men seeking sex with underage youth) eager to make the most of the club's supposed vulnerable populace.

The City of Portland seems to be towing the latter line, and has taken aggressive action to close the club down. This past December, Senior Deputy City Attorney Nancy E. Ayres, filed a civil suit against the building's owner, ADS Investment Limited Partnership, which could force the eviction of tenant Swerdlow's City Nightclub.

The suit maintains that the club violates the city's Specified Crime Property Ordinance, more loosely known as the "drug house" ordinance, that bars the use of a building for the distribution

of a controlled substance.

Bolstering the city's contention are affidavits from Portland police officers who say they investigated the club from April to October of last year. According to published reports, Portland police officer Robert Hollins, via his affidavit, stated he observed "what appeared to be drug transactions and possible prostitution activity," while working undercover. He further stated that he purchased drugs at the club and encountered more than a dozen drug dealers there.

On June 6, the day *Just Out* went to press, the judicial wheels starting turning: It was the same day the Multnomah County District Court was to hear arguments for a summary judgment in the case.

To hear Swerdlow tell it, he's basically just a guy who gave a shit about kids who nearly everyone else turned their backs to.

Swerdlow, a longtime neighborhood and community activist, has been operating for-profit social venues geared toward queer youth since the 1970s.

"Hundreds of gay and lesbian young people used to hang every weekend night near Third and Southwest Yamhill simply because there was no place for them to go," says Swerdlow, adding that the spot was known as Camp, and its presence was unsettling to surrounding businesses and city officials.

In 1977, Swerdlow opened a no-alcohol club

called Mildred's Palace, located in what was then called the Pythian Building at 918 Southwest Yamhill.

"It got rid of the problem of all the kids hanging around at Third and Yamhill," he says. "The kids finally had a place where they could go. Everyone was grateful."

Mildred's Palace eventually closed, and Swerdlow opened Metropolis at Southwest Third and Burnside. It too closed, but in the summer of 1983, Swerdlow opened The City Nightclub at Northwest 13th.

Swerdlow says hundreds, if not thousands, of sexual minority youth who have passed through The City's doors over the past 13 years have encountered a sense of solace and community not found elsewhere.

He also claims that Portland police have harassed him and his establishments over the years, due largely to homophobia. Swerdlow says he was beaten by Portland police in 1980, and in 1989 he says The City Nightclub was "illegally raided" by a band of public officials from the city's Police Bureau, Fire Marshall's Office, Bureau of Buildings, and Oregon Liquor Control Commission.

He says things got a little better during the tenure of former Police Chief Tom Potter, a friend of the gay and lesbian community. And in 1992, Swerdlow and Potter even signed a partnership agreement that called upon police and Swerdlow to work cooperatively to keep the club clean and safe, and to identify problems involving potential criminal activities at the club and to arrest the offenders.

According to Swerdlow, "In a written agreement, the police had promised they would assign all surveillance of The City Nightclub to Central Precinct, promptly let me know of any surveillance activities, and make immediate arrests for any drug violation. Instead, over six months, they assigned surveillance operations to Drug and Vice, concealed the operations from me, and—by holding back from arresting drug sellers—they made The City Nightclub appear to be a safe haven. The police utilized the results to persuade city officials to seek closure of The City Nightclub under the Specified Crime Property ordinance."

Swerdlow says if he had been told about the problem, he would have taken action. But he was never informed, he says, and out of the blue he received written notice that the City of Portland was taking legal action.

"Other clubs have problems, too, but nothing is being done about them," says Swerdlow, pointing to the Quest, an under-21 club in Southwest Portland that attracts a straighter crowd.

Swerdlow and others say that club has been the site of gang-related violence, including, says the alternative weekly *PDXS* in its May 24 issue, "stabblings, at least one shooting, and a full-blown riot which required a massive police response to stop. Instead of closing the Quest, however, the police helped line up extra security for the club, which is still in business."

We did not target The City Nightclub because the folks who go there are predominantly gay," counters Bruce Prunk, a Portland Police Bureau assistant chief and the designated liaison to the city's sexual minorities.

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