

A Tale of Two 'Citys'

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inviting: lighter and more comfortable. "Whoever designed that place wanted it to be danceable, but where all types of people would go and feel safe and comfortable," he says.

Jerry Fest is the program director for Willamette Bridge/Janus Youth Programs. Willamette Bridge provides case management, outreach and overnight shelter to homeless and street youth. He says during the last fiscal year more than 1,000 young people stayed at the shelter.

He admits much of the information he receives about The City Nightclub is secondhand. Nevertheless, he says, his immediate response to the club is negative.

"It seems to be a place where people look the other way when it comes to drugs and sexual exploitation.... There are all sorts of mixed emotions," says Fest.

"When you work with sexually abused youth, you learn that they treat their customers and dates as a necessary part of their lives. The dates and johns are not considered people, they are viewed as slimy, yet they are a source of livelihood," he continues. "The City Nightclub carries the same push-pull with [youth]. They can gather there, but they can also be preyed upon. There's enough good to attract them, but enough bad to be a threat."

Fest says Willamette Bridge sends outreach teams "not into the club, but outside of it for safety reasons."

"We don't want to put our teams in any jeopardy," he says.

"I feel intense mixed emotions," says Ruth Gibian, program coordinator for Roots and Branches, which provides case management for gay, lesbian and bisexual youth in Multnomah County.

Roots and Branches also works closely with drop-in support groups at Outside In, Harry's Mother and Phoenix Rising, which provides mental health services to sexual minorities. (No one would speak to us from Outside In, which runs a queer youth group called VOICES.)

"For some it's been a destructive place, and for others it's the only place of inclusion," says Gibian, "and yet you hear so many stories of drugs and alcohol and trolls."

The 36-year-old Gibian says she has never been to The City Nightclub. "Many of the youth who go there are my clients," she explains. "I don't go because it would be like your social studies teacher showing up."

She adds: "Lanny sees so many kids, and he has so much power because of that.... If the drug culture is part of The City, it gains a credibility if [Swerdlow] knows about it but doesn't do anything about it."

Gibian says she has been to Queer Night [on Monday nights] at LaLuna and describes her experience as "relatively positive, although I wouldn't go so far as to call it wholesome."

"In his eyes, Lanny is rescuing these kids," says Allanya Guenther, executive director of Phoenix Rising. She, too, has never been to The City, though she says some of her staff have. She freely admits that her information comes "second- and thirdhand."

She says Swerdlow recently made a presentation to her organization's board where he detailed his current legal situation. Though he solicited support from the board, it chose to stay neutral.

"[Swerdlow] is not held to the same standard as an agency," says Guenther, "which makes me uncomfortable taking a stand. We're a nonprofit entity, and he's for-profit. I will say, however, that it must be very difficult to run a club for teenagers. Lanny says he's done the best he can."

Guenther and the board sent a letter to Swerdlow which reads, in part: "It is clear that for many gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender/transsexual-identified youth, The City Nightclub is perceived as a haven, providing an environment in which they feel understood and supported. You undoubtedly have had contact with far more youth than many of our community's social service

agencies, and have a profound impact on some youths' lives. In addition, you have been very cooperative with Phoenix Rising and other social service agencies, allowing staff to distribute information and talk with your customers. The lack of such a resource to our youth would be very unfortunate: All youth need a place to relax, mix with their peers, receive valuable information and have a good time....

"While we acknowledge that many sexual minority youth find your establishment meets their needs, we do not have sufficient information to form an opinion about whether or not the City of Portland has violated any previous agreements



with you, or is acting without cause in this matter."

Phoenix Rising also sent a letter to Mayor Vera Katz highlighting the need to quickly find an alternative for sexual minority youth if The City shuts down.

That letter reads, in part: "The Board of Phoenix Rising Foundation is very concerned about the potential loss of a social venue for our gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender- and transsexual-identified youth.... I [Guenther] would be glad to meet with you or your staff to discuss a collaborative, community approach to maintaining a viable, safe recreational and social activities program for sexual minority youth. With summer around the corner, putting something in place as quickly as possible would be in the best interest of our youth as well as the City of Portland."

For his part, Swerdlow says he has invited social service providers to the club, but many have declined. He says they have passed up a golden opportunity to do critical outreach work.

Cascade AIDS Project is one agency that has taken advantage of the invitation. Twenty-four-year-old David Brinkman, CAP's client services staff coordinator, has been to The City Nightclub numerous times.

Brinkman has worked for CAP for two years and says the nonprofit agency has conducted HIV-prevention education efforts inside of the club on several occasions. He says it is an excellent place to pass out literature and connect with young people who may be at a higher risk for contracting HIV.

"CAP usually attracts people 30 and older. Younger queers don't fit in, so we try to get information to them where they feel comfortable," says Brinkman, a youth advocate who facilitates the Awakenings group, a weekly chat/

support group that includes queer and street youth.

"The City Nightclub is a huge part of their culture. They have their own language and style of dress," Brinkman says. "I think one of the most wonderful things I have seen there is their talent show. You see kids who earlier in the day may have been panhandling, who, at midnight, take to the stage and get their 15 minutes of pride. It's incredible to watch, and hopefully that 15 minutes can be a catalyst for higher self-esteem."

Last Halloween, the Rev. Roy Cole, pastor of Portland Metropolitan Community Church on Northeast Broadway, along with support from

Phoenix Rising, launched a weekly coffeehouse designed to give queer youth a place to hang out on Friday nights.

In January, the coffeehouse became a once-a-month deal due to generally poor attendance.

"Let's just say that we had some qualified successes," says Cole, "like a hide-and-go-seek party at the church, which sounds silly, but the kids really had fun. There were maybe 15 to 20 youth who attended."

That figure reflects about the highest attendance—a weak match for the hundreds of kids who pour into The City Nightclub each weekend.

"To be honest, we haven't found the right mix or niche for these young people. Initially we had a concern that the coffeehouse was being held in a church, but that didn't seem to be the problem," he says.

Some social service agencies sponsor support groups and speakers' bureaus for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender/transsexual youth, among them Harry's Mother, Phoenix Rising and Outside In. But these are not comparable venues to

The City Nightclub.

When we spoke with youth at The City and asked them what their ideal social outlet would look like, we heard answers like "Just like The City Nightclub." They basically wanted the same scene, except with "bigger dance floors" and "smaller cover charges."

They also generally felt that gay and lesbian adults have abandoned them.

"They don't care because they have their own places to go," says Korey James, 14, an out lesbian who finds peace at The City Nightclub.

"I think it would be great to have gay adults get involved with us," says Andrew, 16, who is openly gay but still reluctant to let us use his last name. "I think we could learn a lot. We need role models."

"People used to say that if you were a gay adult and expressed an interest in the well-being of a young person, you'd be perceived as a pedophile," says Brinkman. "Maybe that excuse worked in the '50s. But it's the 1990s, and that's a sad excuse."

Cole, who says he is "pushing 40," says it's important that adults try to see the situation from the younger person's perspective.

"Sometimes I forget that when I was 15 or 16, I didn't think in terms of program models. I just wanted to go out and hang out with my friends. Not that I'm knocking those programs. They are very credible, but it's simply not the same as going out to a club."

Gibian agrees: "Phoenix Rising and MCC have created this wholesome atmosphere, and you know what? Kids don't go. There is something about a place like The City Nightclub. It's a scene. The question is, how can you keep the 'scene' but not the bad elements of it?"

"It all comes to our commitment to find the right mix and experience for these kids," says Cole.

One 23-year-old gay man who has been going to The City Nightclub for five years says a community center may be one possibility—but a community center that is open 24 hours.

"Some of the kids who go to The City are street youth. If they go to a shelter, they have to be in bed by 9 pm. I don't know any teenager who wants to be in bed at 9 pm. So they go to The City Nightclub, which opens at 10 [pm] and closes around 4:30 [am]. It becomes their home. It's warm. It's safe. It's a fun place to hang out and dance," he says. "I knew some kids who lived in an abandoned building. I went to live with them for five days to see what their experience was like. Well, it was horrible, and every night we went to The City Nightclub because it was their refuge.... When coming up with a solution, we have to look at these kids' realities."

This young man, who asked not to be identified, also said youth were very concerned about what would happen if The City Nightclub did close. "I've heard that maybe they'd hang out on Stark Street, or start Camp back up."

Going to the Quest, we were informed time and time again, is not an option. Young queers told *Just Out* that that club has a clientele that is "too prejudiced" and "too violent."

Brinkman agrees: "There's one boy who lives in a dress who goes to The City Nightclub and it's no problem. If he went to the Quest, he would be beaten up."

Willamette Bridges' Fest cops to the reality that "as a system, we have not done a good job with finding an alternative."

"Everything leads to downtown. It's the only place that youth can easily get to, but there's nothing there for them to do," he says. "Downtown is really designed for adults."

It's Friday night, May 31, the first night that really feels like summer. It's warm and dry outside. The kind of night known for inspiring excitement and abandon, particularly in teenagers.

Outside The City Nightclub, small groups of young people sit, speaking in quiet tones. Inside, they dance and talk. This night, just days before the court hearing, there is a sense of melancholy.

"We're very scared," says Crystal Lucero, 15. "We don't know what is going to happen to us if The City closes. This is where we find support."

What will happen to you, all of you, I ask. The answers are bleak: the rebirth of Camp; kids hanging around on Stark Street, site of many adult gay bars—and many gay-bashings; more depression; an escalation in drug and alcohol use born from hopelessness.

"I've heard some kids even talking about suicide," says Lucero. "We didn't feel that way because we have our place. We have our friends. Take that away, and who knows what will happen to us. Who knows?"