

Can Misfits Assuage the Rage?

With a new owner and a new name, Portland's embattled underage queer nightclub endeavors to walk the fine line between patrons' expectations and community-imposed standards

BY INGA SORENSEN • PHOTOS BY LINDA KLIEWER

Mind if I smoke?" asks Pete Ryan, a dead ringer for Matthew Broderick (circa his May 1997 marriage to Sarah Jessica Parker).

At 33, Ryan is still quite boyish, very polite and practically preppy. On this day, he sports a Big Dog polo shirt, shorts, socks and sneakers. His hair is short and dark, his eyes a creamy brown.

We're sitting inside Misfits Café & Discotheque, an all-ages dance club aimed at queer youth, situated at 333 S.W. Park Ave. in downtown Portland.

Not long ago, this building housed the Rage, another all-ages club catering to queer kids. Its owner, Lanny Swerdlow, established the Rage not long after the shutdown of his City Nightclub, a lively dance spot popular with many queer youth—but far less so with Portland city officials, social service providers and law enforcement.

Critics slammed both the City and Rage as seedy, drug- and predator-infested holes that could only bring harm to youth.

The City Nightclub, which was ensconced in the cement jungle of the Pearl District near

Powell's City of Books, closed in January 1997 after some serious pressure from the powers that be. With saucy resilience, Swerdlow skipped across Burnside Street, down a few blocks, and opened what was then called the Evolution, later renamed the Rage.

Nearly four months ago, on April 30, federal, state and local law enforcement officials raided the Rage, as well as Swerdlow's houseboat. While no arrests were made, they confiscated videos, videocassette recorders, various computer equipment, a small television and boxes of folders.

As we told you in our May 15 issue, "[According to the *Oregonian*] child pornography was at the heart of the raid, and...the Interagency Sexual Exploitation Pro-active Enforcement Team is investigating." The probe is ongoing.

Which circles us back to Mr. Ryan.

"How do I feel about taking over the most controversial club in Portland?" he quips. "I don't mind the controversy, or getting rid of the bad reputation."

On July 1, Ryan and his brother, Jerry, took over ownership of the Rage. They changed the

name to Misfits, transformed Hollyrock—the Gothic room—into an office, and banished alcohol from the premises. Pete has personally hit the floor to scrub, swept out a rat carcass or two, and splashed new paint here and there.

"I'm trying to make the space more open, to give some positive energy to it," he says. "Before, it was so gloomy."

Additionally, Ryan wants to meet with the mayor as well as Portland police in order to start things on the right foot. In Ryan's world, the police are not the enemy, nor is the so-called mainstream.

"It's really important for these kids to have a place where they can go and really be themselves," says Ryan, who grew up in Oregon City. "God knows, we didn't have that when I was younger, and I really beat myself up about being gay.... But you've got to live the way the Man says how to live.... We are nothing less than straight people, but we do live in their world. We need to educate them."

It is a philosophy that clearly veers from that of his predecessor.

Swerdlow has long argued the establishment was out to get him. To bolster the claim,

he points to the years-long friction between him and law enforcement, which in part took the form of the Rage raid and a series of City Nightclub sweeps.

"After the last raid, I knew it was time to move on," says Swerdlow.

Moving on manifested itself via Swerdlow's decision to sell his club to Ryan.

Their agreement includes a noncompete clause that, says Ryan, prohibits Swerdlow from opening a competing business any time soon, anywhere close.

Swerdlow, who has spawned clubs for queer youth for two decades, says that after 20 years, change—however forced—makes sense.

"New blood may be a good thing," he says. "And I knew after the last raid that, until I'm out of the picture, [law enforcement] wouldn't leave the club alone."

Swerdlow won't comment about the Rage raid, the subsequent investigation, or some nasty rumors floating around concerning the contents of a supposed videotape.

"I would love to be able to talk about it but

Continued on page 21

