

NO HUGS ALLOWED

Allegations of discrimination cast doubt on the gay-friendliness of the Princeton Athletic Club by Inga Sorensen



Austyn Rowley (left) and Cole Struhar

They were just enjoying a little downtime after their laborious work week.

"We were having a wonderful time, sitting at the bar, talking with people and the bartender. It was lovely," recounts 25-year-old Cole Struhar, who, along with her partner, Austyn Rowley, 26, was savoring a night out this past spring at a place they thought was gay-friendly: the Princeton Athletic Club.

The two had never been there before, but had certainly heard enough anecdotal evidence about the club's appeal to queer folk, particularly gay men, many of whom work out at the Princeton.

Situated in downtown Portland on Southwest Alder Street between 11th and 12th avenues, the establishment includes a gym, pool, bar and billiard tables.

"We were just laughing and hanging out and waiting for a pool table to open up," says Struhar, adding she and Rowley were "clearly a couple." Not in an overtly sexual way, mind you, rather in a more benign, affectionate way. A touch, a loving glance, a smile, one's finishing of the other's sentence.

"That's all," Rowley chimes in.

At one point, they say, Rowley hugged Struhar.

"It was nothing more than that," says Rowley. "We were simply being sweet."

"The next thing we know is one of the owners comes up to us and says, 'We don't allow that kind of thing here,'" reports Struhar. "I was so shocked and said something like, 'This has never happened to me before.'"

She says she then went over to the bartender (with whom she had been bantering and chatting a little earlier) and told him what happened.

"He said to me, 'I told him not to say anything to you,'" she asserts.

The couple say they told a few of the bar patrons about the incident, then left.

"I was so stunned and upset. It was totally humiliating," Struhar says, explaining that in her five years of being out, she has never been confronted in such a manner.

"I was one of the fortunate few who had never faced that kind of situation. I can't say that anymore," she says, adding that she is a

changed woman because of the occurrence. "I now think about it when I'm being affectionate with my girlfriend in public. I don't want to censor myself, yet I find myself having to work really hard not to.... This isn't something that happens to you one night and it's over. You carry it with you the rest of your life."

Rowley points out that she spotted a woman sitting on her boyfriend's lap at the club.

"We didn't do anything like that," she says.

A Princeton employee who asked to remain anonymous says some co-workers were very upset by the incident.

"I was extremely offended by it," says the source. "It divided the bar."

Just Out spoke with Princeton Athletic Club co-owner Jeff Marlow on Aug. 18. He told us he was in the dark about the lesbian couple's claims until we shared them with him.

Marlow, who estimates 40 percent of the club's 2,800 members are gay, staunchly defends the business, saying it does not discriminate on the basis of sexual orientation.

He also points out the Princeton Athletic Club offers same-sex couples the same membership rate it does to married heterosexual couples.

"We're pretty open and liberal here," he says, conceding that occasionally someone's membership will get revoked because of "lewd" behavior on the premises. (He mentions sex in the sauna and masturbation.)

Princeton Athletic club co-owner Lee Morris was out of town and unavailable for comment.

Rowley and Struhar, meanwhile, still can't get over the irony. Struhar, who works for a non-profit organization that counsels children on death and dying issues, is also the mother of a six-year-old named Joey, who attends Buckman Elementary School in Southeast Portland.

"At the end of the last school year, Austyn and I went to see Joey in the school play. [He was the lizard.] Austyn and I held hands and were affectionate in the way any loving couple would be," Struhar says. "There were no problems at all—zip. We were not made to feel like we didn't belong, and that was in an elementary school."

Rowley adds, "It's really unbelievable what happened to us, given that so many gay people go to the Princeton. And we were right downtown, not at a truck stop in Gresham."

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