

SHE'S DE-LOVELY

She is shrewd enough to make the transition from longtime waitress to successful restaurant owner.

She is brassy enough to stare down a drug dealer and order him away from her establishment.

She is classy enough to transform herself into Portland's Rose Empress XLIII.

She is Suzanne Hale, but the area's gay and lesbian community knows her better as the Lovely Suzanne.

It is difficult to pick the role she plays best. She is a multifaceted person who has taken the things she enjoys most and transformed them into her livelihood.

Take, for example, the Roxy, which has become "the" place to be seen for those gallivanting into the wee hours of the night in the Burnside Triangle. If you are out past 3 on a Saturday morning when the bars are closing and you are looking for something to eat, you can rest assured of two things: Hale's restaurant will be open, and there will be a line—often a very long one—waiting to get in.

The Roxy, located at 1121 S.W. Stark St., serves perhaps one of the most eclectic crowds in the community. On any given day you might find fraternity boys sitting near drag queens who are dining next to grandmothers.

Hale has a long list of synonyms to describe her clientele at the Roxy. "There are suits, disco biscuits, drag queens, leather guys, bears, lesbians, bartenders and bums," she says with a quick laugh. "There is just about everybody."

Indeed, there is. And you can use nearly the same synonyms to describe the Roxy staff. Hale is quite proud of the fact that if someone is a hard worker, there is often a place open for him or her at the restaurant.

"We have a very diverse staff," she says. "They are gay, straight, drag queens, transgendered, old, young, male and female. As long as they have a good work ethic, we get along fine."

Hale did not necessarily start out with plans to own a restaurant, but the business certainly has become a huge part of her life. For more than three decades she was a waitress, working for a long time at Quality Pie, an early hangout for the drag community.

But her years in restaurants aren't what actually propelled her into the role of business owner. Believe it or not, it was her time as a Tupperware saleswoman.

"They teach you so much and give you so much motivation," Hale says. "They gave me the confidence...to go from being a waitress to a restaurant owner."

Hale, who ran another establishment before she opened the Roxy, says a variety of factors led her to take the big plunge and fulfill one of her dreams. When she made the decision to launch the restaurant, she insisted on two specific things: It had to be a safe place in a location that was convenient to the gay and lesbian community, and it had to be open all night.



PHOTO BY MARTY DAVIS

Both of those are key elements to the Roxy's success. The amazing thing is that

Hale started it with little cash and was forced to "nickel and dime it" in the beginning.

The menu, she says, is based on something you might find in a truck stop with a few vegetarian items thrown in "to make the lesbians happy." The lunch crowd is still not what she wants it to be, but the place is packed

beyond belief several nights a week, which often results in a time limit for customers.

Meet Suzanne Hale, queen of the night

by Tom Stevenson

Perhaps the biggest reason the Roxy is successful is that Hale enforces one hard-and-fast rule: No drug dealing, selling or using on the premises. That was not easy in the early days, when drug dealers would congregate right outside the door. (The space had been vacant for seven to eight years before the Roxy opened.)

"I don't care if they come in high or drunk," Hale says. "But the key is keeping drugs out of it. This has got to be a safe place."

Hale and her staff will not discriminate against anyone, and customers who dare show any signs of bias promptly will be shown the door. In fact, she says the group that causes the majority of problems, ranging from "dining and dashing" to being abusive to others, are "the white frat boys."

"They are the ones who give us the most trouble, and they are the ones we watch the closest," she adds. "They get drunk, have no conscience and think they are cool. It's the testosterone at work."

During the past year Hale has turned over much of the Roxy management to her daughter, as she has been busy representing the Portland drag community as Rose Empress XLIII. How this straight woman became a prominent titleholder is another interesting story.

"My mother was always very open," she says. "I always thought gay bars were cool, and I always had gay people in my life. I never felt any prejudice."

Hale got to know a number of drag queens during her time at Quality Pie, and she slowly made the decision to become involved in the community. She transformed herself into the Lovely Suzanne, and the rest is history.

She is extremely proud that the Portland court donates thousands of dollars back to the community every year and is one of the most diverse in the nation, with several female-to-female performers. "That is a unique phenomenon," she says.

Hale absolutely loves "the exquisite art of illusion" that comes with life on the stage. She also acknowledges that transforming herself from a woman into a drag performer is much different from what men experience.

The makeup, the glorious and glamorous costumes, and the friendships are all a part of life as a Rose Empress, and Hale is enjoying it all. She has been on the road constantly and will do so until her reign ends.

Actually, she has been traveling as part of the show for three to four years and undoubtedly will continue to do so in the future. After all, she is a woman who has worked hard to make her dreams come true, and just because a couple of things have turned out wildly successful, she is in no way ready to quit.

Hale also is looking at other possible business opportunities. She is, as they say, always ready for the next show to begin. ■

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