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NORTHWEST news

CROSSING THE RIVER

Northbank Tavern is a Vancouver hot spot

by Shanna Germain

Finding the Northbank Tavern is a little like finding the perfect partner: If you don't already know what you're looking for, you might have a hard time finding it.

The bar is tucked away on the middle of Sixth Street in downtown Vancouver, Wash., without so much as a sign to lead the way. But step inside, and it's easy to see why this old-time tavern has become a hot spot for the city's gay community.

The small bar in the front room invites guests to sit and gab. Behind the bar, the wall is lined with calendars, pictures and information about upcoming events, while posters and a large bubbling fish tank provide eye candy. A jukebox sings softly in the corner, while dart games beckon for a little competition.

Originally a card room, Northbank still bears some of that history in its dark interior and cozy atmosphere. Pool tables and a dance floor fill the large, high-ceilinged back room. A corner stage also has been set up for karaoke and drag events.

And in the middle of everything is gay bartender Grant Sheppard. He has been the shining star of Northbank since he agreed to pour drinks when the regular bartender went on a two-week vacation.

"That was two years ago, and I'm still here," he says with a laugh. Now, Sheppard is practically running the place, along with owner and founder George Eggleston.

Eggleston, who is straight, has owned Northbank since its inception in 1979. He changed the tavern's theme from a card room to a gay bar in 1986, at the suggestion of a regular customer.

"This guy came in and said, 'Why don't you turn it into a gay bar?'" Eggleston says. "And I said, 'OK, do it,'"

If it hadn't been for that suggestion, Eggleston says he would have gotten out of the business a long time ago. "I was crazy for not retiring when I had the chance," he says jokingly. Still, he continues to be a large part of the bar's day-to-day business, taking care of the tills and the office work.

As the only gay bar in Vancouver, Northbank serves up more than just pints. It also provides a sense of community and belonging for those who are unwilling or unable to hit the Portland scene.

Friday nights can find the place packed with more than 100 people. But slow afternoons also find the regulars hanging out, throwing darts or just chitchatting with the bartenders.

"We're more of a friendly, neighborhood bar," Sheppard says. "We don't have a specialty. We don't have that many gimmicks."

The gay community supports the tavern,

Sheppard says, and in turn, the tavern makes it a point to support the gay community. It offers space, time and resources to a number of organizations, including Saturday in the Park, Vancouver's annual Gay Pride celebration at Esther Short Park. Other community-oriented activities include karaoke nights, pool leagues, bear events and dances to raise money for sexual minority youth.

Once a month, Northbank holds its most



A large bubbling fish tank provides eye candy behind the bar

popular event: a drag show on the stage in its back room. The other big draw is the monthly community dinner, a full-scale meal that teases the taste buds.

One regular customer started going to Northbank with his partner after moving to Vancouver from Portland a few years ago. Now, he says, the couple stop in a few times each week for what he jokingly calls "beer-30."

"When we lived in Portland we hardly ever went to Northbank, because it was too far of a drive," he says. "We started going to the Northbank about 10 months ago, because we got tired of driving to PDX every time we wanted a beer."

He is quick to add it's not just the nearness of the tavern that makes it their favorite beer haunt. "We appreciate the hometown feeling we get from the Northbank," he says. "Plus, the bartenders are big sweethearts."

Northbank, which is open six days a week, serves wine, beer, sandwiches and munchies. Although the establishment has a liquor license, it can't serve booze until it adds a kitchen that will allow it to cook full meals. That's next on the list of major overhauls, Sheppard says.

In the meantime, he'll continue serving up good ales and good times for Vancouver's gay community. ☐

NORTHBANK TAVERN, located at 106 W. Sixth St., is open 4 p.m. to midnight Tuesdays and Wednesdays, noon to midnight Thursdays, noon to 2 a.m. Fridays and Saturdays, and noon to 10 p.m. Sundays. For more information call 360-695-3862.

SHANNA GERMAIN is a free-lance writer and editor who likes to run the pool table while downing a pint of something dark. You can reach her at shanna_germain@hotmail.com.

PHOTO BY KIRSTIN KRAMTZ