

MANY IRONS IN THE FIRE

Mike Piña promotes positive space for queer youth

by Michael Burdick

Electronic music throbs in the background while young people come and go. Some read or peck at computers; others just hang out.

In Heaven, an Internet cafe at 421 S.W. 10th Ave., the stark white walls, bare concrete tables and raw steel light fixtures about the room evoke an industrial feeling. This is no accident, as owner Mike Piña is dedicated to urban space and shaping it to cater to the needs of residents.

He has spent his 2 1/2 years as a Portlander busily effecting positive changes here. As a member of the Burnside Triangle Advisory Group, he is working to maintain the character of the Stark Street neighborhood through the inevitable changes progress will bring.

According to Piña, many profit-minded landowners in the area already are abandoning mom-and-pop queer businesses in favor of corporate shops à la the Pearl District. He is distressed by this trend, which has hindered some of his plans and so far frustrated his attempts to create a community center for queer youth.

"I don't think people realize how important BTAG is to the future of this neighborhood," he says. He warns that major changes are already in the works and that the group is one of the few tools queer Portlanders can use to influence the process.

Piña's first visit to the Rose City five years ago was accidental—he had missed a connecting flight and needed to kill some time. He quickly became fond of Portland for its East Coast feel and unique character and moved here a couple of years later. He always had loved music and dancing into the wee hours, and though he appreciated the music scene here, he found it lacking in a few key ways.

"I believed the creativity in presenting music in the scene was lacking. I have traveled all over the world and have had the fortunate experience of seeing scenes where the gay music base was full of raw talent and it was prevalent in straight and gay clubs."

So Piña started communicating with disc jockeys and venues. He coordinated and promoted several successful events, including a special dance night at the House of Grooves (now the "13th Floor") in the fall of 2000. There he operated a popular cart selling orange juice and coffee to thirsty revelers, and the seeds of Heaven were sown.

Piña stopped providing orange juice when he learned it was especially popular for those trying to maximize the effects of psychedelic drugs. "I have never done a drug in my life, so I truly don't understand the attraction," he says.

His feelings about drugs stem from his childhood in Phoenix. "A staunch conservative belief was instilled growing up in the projects and wanting to steer away from any examples that remind me of scenes of my past."

Piña wants to set an example of how life can be enriched without drugs, though he does have many acquaintances who partake. "I do not judge my friends' use, as I feel the first and foremost right of a human is free choice."

After coordinating and promoting more successful events he opened Heaven in March 2001 at Southeast Eighth Avenue and Morrison



Mike Piña has moved Heaven and earth to establish a strong presence in the Burnside Triangle

Street. He later moved to a space on Northeast Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard before settling in for good in the Stark Street neighborhood.

After a bit of wrangling, Piña managed to snatch the space two doors down from Heaven, which became its lounge. That hangout area soon will be replaced by the Urban Attic and Art Gallery, which will feature cool furniture both for sale and for lounging on, art and dancing on Thursday and Friday nights.

Heaven itself already doubles as a gallery where the work of Portland artists is always on display and has been a regular host to First Thursday exhibits. And if Piña gets his way, the audio equipment store between Heaven and the Urban Attic one day will be annexed so the whole space can be interconnected.

Piña's diverse background includes stints as a project manager and computer consultant in addition to his success as a small-businessman and event promoter. Before that he was a gymnast and a men's gymnastics coach at Arizona State University in Tempe, his alma mater. He even coached U.S. Olympic gymnasts.

Though he has been out to friends and attending gay bars since his early 20s, Piña fully came out late in life because of pressure he felt as an athlete and coach. "Being a coach for 20 years and feeling the need to hide my gayness caused me, once exiting the sport, to have a passion to help youth learn to make good decisions as opposed to bad and to help them understand the power of choice, especially in regards to being gay." □

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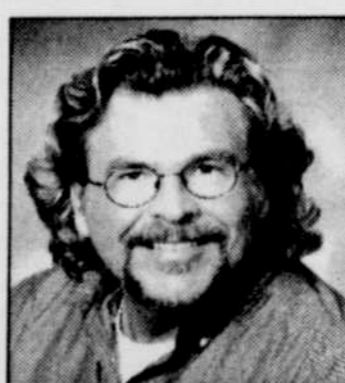
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