



STARK BAIT-AND-SWITCH

Everyone in the triangle has an opinion

by Julie Sabatier

The official word is all well and good, but this reporter puts no lesser merit on the proverbial word on the street. I coaxed a friend, Dallas Oliver, a 24-year-old Portland artist with a dazzling smile who describes himself as "sexually free," into hitting the bars with me on a recent Wednesday night for a little bait-and-switch. He was the bait. I was the switch.

As we headed over to Stark Street, which Dallas lovingly refers to as "Vaseline Alley," I asked my traveling companion what he thought about the changes going on there. "Sometimes you just want to go where there's lots of horny gay men, and that's what Stark Street is, but I think some changes could be really positive," he answered in his Georgia drawl. (Dallas moved to Portland from Atlanta just over a year ago.)

Our first stop was Scandals' new location at 1125 S.W. Stark Street, where we met Porter, 30, who told us he loves the new digs and comes in nearly every night when he gets off work. "[Scandals] is the only good gay bar on the strip," he said, but he had some harsh words for nearby Silverado. "I can't wait 'til they leave Stark Street because it's the scummiest bar here."

When we asked our new friend what he thought was happening to the whole area, he said: "It's going to be Pearl-ized, and that's OK. That's just fine. [Scandals] won't go anywhere."

Just as I was finishing my conversation with Porter, Dallas pulled Benjamin Oaks in with his tractor beam. Oaks, donning his coat and hat, announced he and his friend were leaving Scandals for the Eagle, which will remain open at 1300 W. Burnside St. until mid-February.

"I kind of feel like, especially with the Eagle going out really soon, it's both a disappointment and not that the gay scene is kind of splintering off right now," said Oaks, 26, who was born and raised in Portland. "[Being gay] is very accepted in this city, and so of course it's going to splinter off, and yet it's really easy for me to go to all the places that are here in one place."

When asked why he was leaving Scandals for the Eagle, Oaks said his female companion, Leslie, who is straight—"Actually, I'm bisexual," she countered—well, anyway, she's not a gay man, and she prefers the Eagle, Oaks explained.

"I like dingy bars," Leslie said. "And they have pinball. And they're cheaper. And I just feel more

comfortable there," she said quickly before grabbing her friend's hand and pulling him out the door, reminding him that she hadn't had a drink all night.

As I sipped my second gin and tonic, Dallas lit up a cigarette and we relaxed a little with a few interviews under our collective belt. That's when a tall, tan guy with stringy blond hair approached, asking Dallas if he could bum a cigarette. We said he could have one in exchange for an interview, and I think we got the short end of that deal.

"This is not where we need to be. We need to be more located," said the blond dude, who identified only as Leroy. He explained that he moved from Malibu, Calif., a year ago and recently purchased a condo in the Pearl. Leroy quickly got a little too friendly with Dallas, and we decided it was time to down our drinks and move on.

We made our way east on Stark Street, stopping into the Red Cap Garage. While Dallas flirted with the bartender, I introduced myself to James Larson, who was perched on a nearby bar stool.

When I asked him if he thought Stark Street was becoming less queer, the gay 25-year-old said: "I actually was asking myself that question. I'm starting to see, in the gay bars, a lot of straight people coming out more, and I kind of feel like I need to now ask everyone, 'Are you gay or are you straight?' It gets annoying after a while."

Larson's candid comments were practically drowned out by a raucous table of three guys and a woman, whooping it up on a Wednesday night. I approached and asked them what they thought about the changes happening on Stark Street.

"I think Stark Street is totally gay and it will always be gay," offered John Linneman, 28, who identifies as "straight-ish." (It was hard to tell what he meant by this, as he said things like "I like pussy" and in the same breath told Dallas how adorable he is.) "The Pearl's moving in here, and Stark Street is becoming gentrified as far as sexual orientation."

Asked what a "straight" guy was doing in a gay bar, Linneman said he enjoys the drink specials and "guys will buy me drinks more than girls."



Dallas Oliver, a "sexually free" Stark Street dweller, sees changes coming for the gay district.

"Less trolling, more hipsters!" shouted someone at the table. There seemed to be a consensus all around that this was a good thing.

"I definitely agree with the whole less-trashy thing," said Jody Buckelew, 26, who described herself as "bisexual or what you might call confused." She went on to say: "I want to go to a bar. I love the gay environment, but I don't want to be seeing porn on the TVs. That's why I like [the Red Cap Garage]."

Though it's not exactly on Stark Street, Dallas and I felt no visit to the Burnside Triangle would be complete without stopping in to Spartacus, the adult toy store that's open late, even on Wednesdays.

"I wouldn't say it's getting less gay. I'd say it's getting a different kind of gay," said Anya Keyes, 23, an assistant manager at Spartacus who says she's "technically bisexual."

"I'm feeling like the crowd is more upscale, like the Pearl District crowd," Keyes continued. "I'd say it's good because it's giving a little bit more diversity to the store."

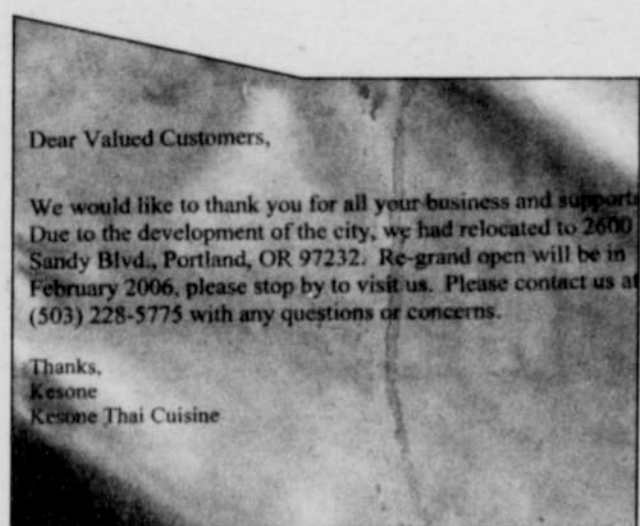
Dallas and I did a little shopping before ultimately deciding it was time to wrap up our reporting for the night. On the way home, I asked him if his feelings about Stark Street had changed at all.

"Well, I really feel like I need to come down here more often because I feel like it's going to be gone a lot sooner than I thought it would be," he said. "It feels more imminent now than it did prior to coming out with you tonight." **JO**

the move. "We really didn't move that far, but the physical space is really nice compared to what it used to be, and it just sort of upped the ante a little bit," he explained.

If the decision to keep Scandals on Stark is a barometer for the surrounding area, it appears that the future holds a slicker look, aimed at milking customers for more dough to make up for rising rents. This might eventually mean that the gayness of the triangle will diminish as more and more bars leave the area, but for now, Scandals' owners are making a powerful social and economic statement by choosing to stay on Stark. If you ask them, they're here, they're queer, and they're in it for the long haul. **JO**

JULIE SABATIER is a Portland writer and radio producer. Her half-hour show *DIY*, Portland airs on KBOO-FM and is available as an iTunes podcast. You can e-mail her at julie.sabatier@gmail.com.



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