

Carded at the Café

OLCC shuts out minors, again.

Stacy Borke, 20, and her friends frequented Café Paradiso, where they'd drink tea and eat pastries while they listened to world and folk music and other acts that interested them.

"I liked the size of the venue — it was small enough to have an intimate experience with the performance but large enough to accommodate various group sizes," she says. As for the cover charges for shows, says Borke, "You get more than you pay for."

With those positive thoughts in mind, Borke and her friends wandered into the all-ages restaurant at the corner of Broadway and Olive a few Friday nights ago to catch WYMPROV!, an all-female comedy act that recently signed on to perform regular Friday night gigs there.

But Borke and her friends were shocked to find themselves turned away because they weren't 21, a brand new rule imposed by Paradiso owner Greg Fleener that began that night.

The 21 and over rule kicks in at 9 pm Friday and Saturday eves and will go into effect at a certain time weeknights beginning mid-December or the beginning of January, says Fleener.

"There aren't too many venues like Café Paradiso," says Borke, "That's why I am so outraged by their decision."

While Fleener says he will book earlier all-ages shows and bump up the open mic time to accommodate minors, he didn't have much of a choice.

"The OLCC approached me a week before the Eugene Celebration and said 'We need to talk,'" says Fleener.

He waited a month and a half, then the OLCC finally got back to him, giving him two weeks to make a change.

The OLCC wanted him to either bump the age to 21 when evening entertainment started, or move all drinkers to the rear of the venue, where there isn't much space and they wouldn't be able to see the stage, he says.

After consideration, Fleener decided to go with 21+ during evening entertainment, and expand the wine and beer offerings to full bar service.

"The more a place is not food-service oriented, the more it then becomes something we have to look at in terms of restricting access," says OLCC Regulatory Specialist Dan Green. "In that place on certain nights, the focus is more like an entertainment venue, so that's basically what led to the conversation with Café Paradiso."

At other venues, like Sam Bond's, minors are allowed for the purpose of consuming food but once the entertainment begins, it's 21 and over only.

Customers are notified of the regulation through what the law calls "minor postings;" literally, signs that say "No Minors" after a certain hour.

"The overriding thing for minor postings in Oregon is that minors are primarily allowed in areas where alcohol is being served for eating purposes," says Green.

Where the service is minimal, where the environment is more for entertainment, they're not.

A few years ago, the OLCC made headlines

when it cracked down on several local all-ages venues, beginning with the McKenzie Ballroom in downtown Springfield. In response to complaints — some say by racist neighbors who did not like the Latin dance nights that attracted a large Latino population to downtown Springfield — the OLCC rewrote state regulations to have different standards for restaurants, dance halls and concert halls.

For dance halls, which the McKenzie Ballroom fell into, the rules required a physical barrier to separate where alcohol is being consumed and where it is not. To answer that, the McKenzie erected an unsightly wall right through its center, but that didn't stop the venue from being closed down.

The OLCC then swooped down on the WOW Hall, the Community Center for the Performing Arts, which has always been all ages, and tried to talk its managers into erecting a barrier on its dancefloor, not to separate alcohol service from minors, but to separate adults who had been drinking from minors.

The WOW Hall fought the walling off of its dancefloor, but met the new dance hall regulations by restricting the sale of alcoholic beverages to its downstairs area, an obvious physical barrier that allows easy identification checking of its patrons.

But the time was difficult.

Bob Fennessey, WOW Hall publicist, says "It was fortunate we had someone who was looking out for our interests and that was state Rep. Floyd Prozanski, a WOW Hall member, who was our angel. When the OLCC was rewriting the regulations, the WOW Hall was held harmless."

The law is different for concert halls, a category that the Hult Center and the Shedd fall into. The OLCC considers concert halls places where "drinking is minimal, allowed in the lobby before or after a show or during intermission, or confined to areas not accessible to minors," says Green.

Concerns over alcohol-consuming adults having access to minors in the lobby is not a discussion the OLCC has had with those venues, as it did WOW Hall several years ago.

A new venue, Cozmic Pizza at the Strand, offers wine and beer while the interior of The Strand remains all ages. But that's for two reasons. First, when the evening entertainment begins, there is an obvious cordoned off section with a sign that says "Over 21 only." The second reason is that the Strand also houses a coffee stand with sitting area, which the OLCC "has no jurisdiction over," says Green.

Green says for the most part, bars in Eugene are "pretty good," and under-age drinking is not a big problem. "The penalties are big enough so that there's incentive to be careful," he says.

The biggest problem the OLCC faces is fake IDs, but OLCC employees go around to various bars and train employees on what they look like.

At Café Paradiso, because of the short notice of the change, owner Fleener has not had a chance to rebook future shows. "I'll probably do more dance bands," he says.

As to her and her friends getting shut out of their favorite hangout, Borke says, "It exemplifies the age stratification that continues to exist in our community."

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