

PRIDE

I learned Spectrum Queer Bar was closing at a drag king bake sale in June.

Heavy Cream, the artist hosting the event, who *Eugene Weekly* readers voted Eugene's best drag king in 2023, returned to the mic at the end of the show to thank the bar. Heavy Cream, he said, would not exist without Spectrum.

After Cream's speech, drag king and burlesque performer Luke N. Good told me the cast had just learned that Spectrum would be closing August 12, right after Eugene Pride.

"I opened Spectrum to make Eugene a better place," says Helen Shepard, Spectrum's owner. Shepard says they wanted to provide a space where Eugene's queer community could come together, build community and create change.

"One of the things I've always said is it's a place to talk about the revolution, a place to plan the revolution, a place to be together at the end of the world," they say.

"The intention has always been for it to be a community space and for people to see it as more than just a bar," Shepard says. That's always been "a little bit of a battle," they say; people came in because of a drag show or a dance party — which Shepard thinks is great — but didn't necessarily show up in the same numbers for the other community-building events.

"I think what has made Spectrum special is part of what has made it somewhat untenable," Shepard says. "It's a lot of energy investment."

They add, "Other bars are doing whatever they can to bring the most people in the door and sell the most alcohol, because alcohol is the thing that makes the most money. Here, we're more concerned about the people that are inside feeling safe."

Eugene is not without its queer-owned businesses and resources — TransPonder's gender-affirming resource room, Sylvia's Closet; the HIV Alliance's work to make PrEP and injection supplies for hormone replacement therapy accessible; and wig shop Kissed by Ra's drag closet come to mind — but Spectrum has stood as Eugene's lone queer bar and queer community space since it opened at the end of 2018.

"There's this idea that everyone is queer here, everywhere is welcoming," says Brooks McLain, development director at HIV Alliance and president of Eugene Pride, "and so we don't need those spaces, necessarily. That's fundamentally not true."

McLain says feedback from community youth, Pride attendees and their own personal experience has cemented the importance of dedicated queer spaces. Even in Eugene, McLain says, "flamboyant queerness and gender flexibility are not accepted everywhere." Explicitly queer spaces give people somewhere they can go and just exist without judgment, he says.

As part of their work with the Alliance, McLain helped to secure a grant from Trillium Community Health Plan to open a queer resource center, in collaboration with other Eugene nonprofits. The goal is to provide an accessible, centralized space for the queer-specific resources that organizations including HIV Alliance, TransPonder and Queer Eugene offer, McLain says, as well as to "create a space where we can all be and be safe and support each other and bounce ideas off each other and create together."

The group anticipates they'll have a space operating by the end of this year, with plans for a grand opening in early 2025.

But for many of those involved in Spectrum — myself included, as a frequent patron — it will still be hard to see the bar go.

'EVERYBODY IS WELCOME'

Ina Cook was the first person brought on for Spectrum's staff as the bar's head of security, six years ago. They often sat just inside the door, checking IDs and greeting patrons. "They see my ugly mug every time they walk in," Cook says.

Cook has been in Eugene since the 1990s and has spent a majority of those decades as a bouncer at various queer

gathering spots, working to keep their community safe. Most recently, they worked at the Wayward Lamb, the queer bar that closed in early 2018, in the same venue where Shepard opened Spectrum.

"This is my house," Cook says. "This is my house, and it's my responsibility to keep it safe, and this is my way of doing it, of being a bouncer." They say ensuring Spectrum was safe and inclusive for its queer patrons was their way of helping their community.

From a well-lit front bar, to a back bar that serves as a space for parties and shows, to a lounge with plush chairs and books and puzzles, the bar tried to create spaces for a range of patrons, Cook says.

There were condom dispensers in the gender-neutral restrooms, a selection of local newspapers near the entrance and a photo booth tucked away in a corner with community members' art hanging nearby. The bar's events ranged from drag performances to dance parties to social mixers to game nights to poetry readings and the occasional punk show or comedy night. While many of the bar's drag shows were limited to those 21 and older, a fair number of events were open to those 18-years-old and up and others were accessible to all ages.

"Spectrum is unique because it caters to everybody," Cook says. "Even underage kids could come in, and they can come in with their little friends. I've had a lot of them call me 'Auntie' or whatever when they come in." They add, "You get to know the regulars."

Of all the bars Cook has worked in over the years — whether it's an explicitly queer space or somewhere people have congregated in times when Eugene didn't have a queer bar — Spectrum was their favorite.

"It's just like the word says: spectrum," they say. "You have a wide variety. Everybody is welcome."

'MORE THAN JUST A BAR'

"Spectrum has really felt like a kismet experience," Shepard says. "I'm always seeking those moments in life where you feel like everything in my life has led me to this point. Here I am, happy and living my best life. I'd love to think that Spectrum could be that for other people."

Prior to opening Spectrum, Shepard was working as a clinical sexologist and was part of a burlesque troupe that did monthly performances at Eugene's last "official" queer bar, the Wayward Lamb. Wayward closed abruptly in early 2018, with ownership announcing that the venue would be closing less than a week out from its final day of business. Shepard says their troupe had

a show scheduled for the following weekend; the group had already made posters before they learned the show would not be happening.

Between the bar's closure and Shepard's general senses of underemployment and frustration with their life, they decided it was time for a change. "I saw it as an opportunity to take a risk and reinvent myself," Shepard says. "I felt very passionately about the opportunity for queer performance art," and that, they say, "needed to be in Eugene."

By the end of 2018, Spectrum was up and running.

"I have had people tell me that they chose to move to Eugene because they came to Spectrum and it was so welcoming," Shepard says. "I love the idea that Spectrum is part of a beacon that's calling people who are coming from more troubled places to a place that's more safe, to a place where community is more open."

That meant closing before the state of Oregon required it in 2020, Shepard says, and hosting popup COVID-19 vaccine clinics during the pandemic. It meant the lounge, where people could take a second to sit down in a low-stimulus environment and hear one another talk. It meant all-ages shows. It meant a space that was accessible for someone to come in and get a drink of water and connect with their community, even if they didn't have money to purchase anything.

'THIS IS WHERE I'M SUPPOSED TO BE'

Burlesque performer Sadie Jayne — or Lady Sadie onstage — first came to Spectrum for one of the bar's daytime COVID-19 vaccine events. "I didn't even realize it was a bar until I got here," Jayne says, "and I was like, 'Oh my gosh, what is this space?'"

The clinic was DJ'ed by Tinta Turner, who is now Jayne's wife.

Jayne didn't actually get involved with the bar until about a year and a half later, when burlesque performer Bebe Boudoir invited Jayne to perform in a lesbian dance party she was hosting at Spectrum in June 2023. The next month, drag performer R.E.D. 4 Filth cast Jayne in her cartoon-themed show, Boi-oi-oi-oing. "That was a big eye-opener," Jayne says.

As a burlesque dancer, the level of audience interaction at a drag show — walking through the crowd and collecting tips from attendees — was a culture shock. And although it was a little bit outside of her comfort zone, Jayne decided she liked it.

Jayne ended up talking with Boudoir, an assistant manager at Spectrum, and general manager Kiki Boniki

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— SADIE JAYNE

about helping out as a bartender. Boniki also offered Jayne the job of hosting Spectrum's monthly lesbian dance party.

"It felt like this is where I'm supposed to be," Jayne says. "This is the path I'm supposed to be on."

Jayne says they've now grown as a performer and as a manager — Spectrum's the first place where they've been involved in management, rather than just bartending. And they have embraced the community surrounding the space.

"I hate that cliché of saying that it's like a family," Jayne says. "It's not. It's more intentional than that."

"People here really do look out for each other. There is a level of safety here because it is such a community space."

For Jayne, that was especially evident in Spectrum's all-ages drag shows, which combated the idea of drag



HELEN SHEPARD AT SPECTRUM
Photo courtesy Helen Shepard