



Saving our culture by saving our bars

A little over a year ago, I wrote in this space about the importance of our bars as places for the community to connect. At the time, I said, “Our bars remain key spaces in our community and it’s important that we protect them, patronize them, and celebrate their existence! I have built many “mini-families” among the various patrons and staff of the venues I frequent, and I am so lucky to have these people in my life.”

I still stand by what I wrote today, but one thing I continue to worry about is that we are not protecting and patronizing them as much we should. Since I wrote that column in May 2017, the San Diego LGBT community saw the loss of popular gay spots including Numbers nightclub, and Babycakes. We also saw that The Caliph — a gay piano bar — significantly cut its hours of operation, closing completely two days a week, and cutting out their daytime open hours.

While some may say this is just business and say, “Oh well,” it’s so much more than that. Sure, business is business and I place no blame on the owners of these establishments. It’s not their job to provide a space for our community when it comes at a personal financial loss. Our community must step up if we want to save these spaces that are so precious to us. Every time an LGBT bar closes, I see hundreds of people posting on social media and hear people talking out in the community about how sad it is, or how angry they are that we are losing our spaces. But the question I always ask is, “When was the last time you patronized that particular spot?”

Our LGBT spaces rely on our financial support to keep them going. Our bars are our original community centers, but they can’t accept donations or government contracts to keep their

doors open. They need people to come in and regularly patronize the business to remain afloat. Why aren't we doing this as much as we used to?

One of the biggest losses for me when I lose one of my favorite places is the sense of family that is developed by becoming a "regular" at a spot. Not only are there other customers that are regulars, but the staff become friends, confidants and a second family. At Babycakes, for example, my regular #BennyHour every Friday afternoon became a tradition. I very much enjoyed catching up with the staff in the early part of the afternoon and having a space where so many friends and community members could stop by to visit and catch up throughout the evening. It was a special place and there really is no place else like it.

Some have asked "Where is #BennyHour moving to?" And to that, I don't know. My Friday afternoon tradition happened so organically. It was the right space, the right people, at the right time. It's one of those things that just can't be picked up and moved somewhere else. As Babycakes was entering its final days, I visited a few other places on Friday afternoon, but they just didn't feel the same. Should there be a spot that eventually feels right, those of you who follow my social media will be the first to know! But for now, #BennyHour is a thing of the past, and I'm just supporting our various bars as I can when I can.

We're lucky in San Diego to still have some fantastic LGBT spaces like Rich's, Flicks, Uptown Tavern, #1 Fifth Avenue, The Rail and the Mo's Universe locations including their brand new insideOUT. I hope we will continue to patronize these spaces as much as possible to make sure that our community has these safe spaces to go to that give back so much.

At The Caliph, though not completely closed yet, I became a regular on Monday evenings to hear the legendary Carol Curtis sing and play the piano. While there was rarely a large crowd, there were many regulars who all got to know each other, inside jokes and all. When new folks visited, they were always made to feel welcome too, and sometimes even became part of the family. I miss these folks who I enjoyed music and drinks with every Monday.



Benny Cartwright

Speaking of bars, I hope everyone will be able to get out to see the “San Diego’s Gay Bar History” documentary that premieres this Sunday at FilmOut San Diego’s 20th annual Film Festival. This is a very local look at the importance of gay bars to the San Diego region. I encourage folks to give it a watch to understand why these bars were and continue to be so important. It was an honor to be a part of the documentary myself and I can’t wait to see it! If you can’t make it to the festival, it will also air on KPBS TV on Thursday, June 14. The Rail will host a viewing party that night!

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