Gay Bars

by Andrew Belonsky
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The modern gay rights movement began in a gay bar, and, for better and for worse, bars continue to hold a central place in the life of many gay New Yorkers.

It was actually illegal to serve liquor to homosexuals until 1967 when some early gay activists from the Mattachine Society challenged that regulation by the State Liquor Authority and prevailed in court. But harassment of the patrons in gay bars continued, and two years later, when the police raided the Stonewall Inn on Christopher Street, the patrons fought back for the next three nights. That is the event commemorated on the last Sunday of every June with the world's oldest and surely still largest gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender pride parade.

Lesbian bars have always been scarcer in New York and several were subjected to harassment by the State Liquor Authority into the 1980s by agents who claimed that these bars were refusing to serve men.

Today, almost four decades later, New York City is home to no less than 120 gay bars and clubs, more than anywhere in the world. As gay people have become more integrated into mainstream life, and booze has become a little less socially acceptable or desirable as the pretext for getting together in the gay world, all manner of other gay institutions have sprung up, from churches and coffeehouses to self-help groups and gay cruise ships. But establishments that serve liquor are still an integral component in the maintenance of positive gay identities, providing gays of a wide variety of backgrounds a safe space in which they are free to explore themselves, and each other.

There are complicated levels of irony then, to several current conflicts.

The most widely reported is between residents and youth on that very same iconic street where it all began.

Christopher Street, and the Christopher Street pier, have become a magnet for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender youth, who celebrate late into the night. Nearby residents, who themselves mostly identify as LGBT, have been complaining bitterly about the collective boisterousness.

The controversy, playing out in the local community board, is the subject of some discussion in the bars that still line the street, with patrons taking different sides: A patron of Ty's finds the kids "a little scaryâ€¦and loud" while a patron at The Hangar says "they're a part of our culture."

A bouncer at Chi-Chiz, a gay bar one block from the pier in question, had a particular gripe: "As soon as the kids start fighting," he said "the community wants to blame the bars, and that's not fair. We're tired of getting blame for [what] they do."

Conflicts are occurring in other gay or "gay-friendly" neighborhoods as well. In the East Village, there have been a number of tussles between (LGBT) bar-goers and (LGBT) residents. In an effort to quell the noise, some bouncers have been known to yell even louder than the offending parties, compounding the problem. In Chelsea, irate neighbors have been known to throw used kitty litter on raucous loiterers, and it is not uncommon for the residents above the bustling Barracuda bar on 22nd Street to yell vulgarities at rowdy smokers on the street below.

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