



**LAST CALL** Club Dakota heads into its final chapter in Santa Cruz.

## Leaving Dakota

The last LGBT club in Santa Cruz is going out of business | BY CHRIS J. MAGYAR

### DOES THE GAY COMMUNITY NEED A BAR IN A TOLERANT TOWN?

Since opening in 1996, Club Dakota has been the center of the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered community in Santa Cruz. As the Blue Lagoon has slowly shifted toward a more mixed crowd, and after Club Caution closed its doors last year, Dakota stood as a last bastion of rainbow flag-waving in a town where being out is much more likely to be celebrated than shunned.

Faced with financial issues, Dakota's owner Geoffrey Stout was forced to auction off the club in bankruptcy court on July 11. The space and its licenses have been purchased by Pati Murray and Mike Pitt, the current owners of Fusion at Pearl Alley and Castaways, respectively. There was a quiet purchase attempt made by stone mason Marcus Zelmon before the bankruptcy auction, in which the club's name and essential identity would have remained the same, but he was unable to complete the transaction before the bankruptcy auction, and was outbid.

"It was going to be the exact same thing, just upgraded a bit," says Zelmon. "I have friends who work there and they were the ones who let me know it was for sale." He says a front-page article in the Sentinel attracted attention to the auction, making it difficult for him. "It got to be very public. And I didn't think it was very ethical, the way they ran all the numbers of Geoffrey's debts. That was a little off."

While he's not a club regular himself, owning a club has always been, and continues to be, a dream. "I've always wanted to own a club, and eventually we might establish another club with the same name, but right now, it's difficult to do that for various reasons, with needing a new location."

Business hadn't been slowing in recent years, but Stout was still too deeply in debt to maintain the club. (For Stout's thoughts, see his letter on page 6.) With the closure of The Lighthouse in Monterey last year, Aug. 1 will mark the first day in memory when the Central Coast has been without a gay bar.



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realize they're there to have a good time, but when it's no more, it's no more."

He remembers a particular night when word spread through the club that Cher was coming from a concert in San Jose, and all the patrons went out on the sidewalk to look for her limo. "She never showed up," he recalls. "Or if she did, we thought it was just a really pretty drag queen."

For AD, it's one particular dancer who came up to her one night. "She was sick with cancer, and she told me when she comes to dance to my music it makes her feel better," she says. "Things like that were what Dakota was about." AD promises to keep her followers updated about her next move on the Club Dakota MySpace page. "You haven't seen the last of me, that's for sure."

### A LABOR DAY TRANSITION

Neither of the new owners are strangers to transitions. When Pati Murray took over the decades-old Pearl Alley Bistro at the beginning of this year, renaming it Fusion at Pearl Alley, she was very careful to keep the old customers happy even as she made big changes—a lounge area with a DJ was added and the walls were opened up for local artists. "We want to make sure there's a smooth transition," she says of the Dakota space, which is slated for a Labor Day Weekend reopening. "We both respect the history of the Dakota, and want to reopen it without offending or disrespecting the owners or the current clients. Dakota has meant a lot to Santa Cruz."

Murray is a true local, born and raised here, as is Mike Pitt, who recently went through his own transition story when he took over Castaways in Capitola. Pitt's renovation of Castaways was more radical, but only due to necessity—the previous ownership had let the building and its reputation fall into disrepair, and it took some extensive remodeling and a new attitude toward safety in order to turn the corner. "Luckily the Dakota's in great shape," he says. "We don't have any idea of completely changing the whole thing."

But there will be some changes, including the name, though they're still toying with ideas on that. Pearl Alley and Dakota have always shared the restrooms in the back of the building, and the new owners see a lot of possibilities with the two businesses combined into one. While nothing's set in stone yet, the idea is to open for lunch and get full food service into the Dakota. "It will be a shopping waystation, a sit-down meal that's not so involved, where people can refuel with some tapas and a cocktail," says Pitt.

While the deal is still, as of press time, in escrow, and licenses are still in the process of being transferred, neither new owner is too worried. "Obviously there are some execution hurdles," says Pitt, "and I don't ever count my chickens until they hatch, but both Pati and myself are already license holders, and we aren't looking to change the fundamental impact of the business on the community."

"I think this is the best location on Pacific," Murray adds.

The pair acknowledges a transition is in the works, but one that should not, by any design, alienate current clientele. "We're just service-oriented people," Pitt says. "We want to provide a safe and fun experience for everybody, with no exclusion. And I realize that hot spots change. When I was growing up, the Blue Lagoon was the gay bar, so things shift around. I don't know if Dakota is a gay bar or if all cultures are accepted, but there's been a feeling out there that they haven't been accepting about people outside the gay community. I know in Geoffrey's heart he's been open to everyone, but I don't know if the staff has always been that way."

### WHAT DOES SANTA CRUZ NEED?

For what it's worth, the vast majority of Dakota's Yelp reviews mention specifically how comfortable straight reviewers have been in the club—"The gay/straight ratio was good enough for us to stay and just have some fun dancing;" "I'm not gay, but when my best friend and I went, I was jealous I wasn't;" "I am a straight woman also, I felt right at home here;" "Didn't know it was a gay bar but figured it out as the night progressed;" "Regardless of whether you are gay or straight, you can still have the best time here"—with the most negative comments being either about rude bouncers or the fact that it's not gay enough for some San Franciscans.

But does Santa Cruz still have a need for a branded and bannered gay club? Murray and Pitt are sincere in their desire to maintain a safe and open atmosphere, and the closure of two gay clubs in such short order begs the question if the local community still has enough desire to keep such a place open.

"I still think there's a strong need," DJ AD says. "In our case it was just financial problems. Maybe they could have been dealt with a little better, but I don't mean to put anybody down for that, it just happens. We still need a safe place. You have other clubs where stabbings happen. Our security may not have been popular with intoxicated people, but they ran a tight ship, handling it as well as they do and still continuing to work everyday. That level of safety is important."

Ongman agrees, though he wonders how much of a need the gay community has for a club. "Gay people tend to use the internet more to hook up these days," he says, "and on the west coast where there's more acceptability of all lifestyles, everything's merging and there's less judgement. I had a gay friend who works at Blue Lagoon say, 'Steven, we won! We don't need it!' And yes, there were some nights at Dakota where it was very straight. But there were still nights when it was all gay men or gay women. I think there's a need, but the definition of 'need' has changed."

"I definitely think there's a need for it," Aulbach says. "I think it's important to keep the diversity. I'm really hoping that somebody will ... that this might shock some people into doing

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### MEMORIES AND CAREERS

Like most of Dakota's employees, manager Karen Aulbach is facing an uncertain future. "I'm moving up to Sand Point, Idaho," she says. "My father and I have some land up there. I'm going to spend my first winter away from the ocean and be in the snow to help him build a barn for his vehicles. But I always joke that people who leave Santa Cruz are inevitably back in six months. I have a feeling that will happen to me."

Having been with Dakota for 10 years, she feels an inevitable sadness. "We don't just open the doors every day," she says. "We try to stay in touch with the community. It's sad we're not going to have this vehicle."

Steven Ongman, who has also worked at the bar for a decade, agrees. "It's an emotional time for all our staff. It's that whole bartender identity, getting so connected to the whole gay community, men and women, and to have that connection every weekend suddenly disappear is hard."

Ongman had a particularly good career with the Dakota, launching his extremely popular Shanda Leer drag show there. "They were horrible at the start," he says of the early shows. "We thought asking \$2 at the door was just beyond the pale. And

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—KAREN AULBACH

now we charge \$12 to \$15 with a full show and talent from around the Bay Area. To go from 20 people showing up to being at full capacity with 75 people waiting around the block, that's my special memory."

He says the drag show will live on somehow, somewhere, but it will be some time before he gets his bearings. "It's like Carol Burnett, going out with good ratings," he says. "Now is the time to metamorphose into something new."

Another popular Dakota fixture that has been with the bar since the beginning is DJ AD, long-time winner of the most popular DJ in Santa Cruz in the *GT* "Best Of Santa Cruz" readers' poll. Getting her start as a fill-in, AD quickly became one of the club's main draws. While she has side gigs with weddings and private parties lined up, she, too, is wondering where the next home will be. "I'm very thankful to the Dakota crowds for the whole experience," she says. "It was like family for the employees as well as the customers. The customers felt it as a safe place to go. I'm sure the Santa Cruz Police Department appreciated how well we ran our club. We had it down to the bartenders knowing your name and what drink to pour from the minute you walked in, and they took the time to listen to you, whether you had the best of news or news that was not so good."

Ongman says he learned everything he needed to know about good bartending at the club. "My first guy I ever served, he was completely drunk—pulled up a chair and fell on the floor," he says. "I got confrontational, and I learned that confrontation just gets you into a fight. So from then on I turned it around and just made fun of it, or handed them a glass of water and walked away. You have to treat people with kindness and love and

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something about the lack of a gay club in town. We've had a lot of people come up with really positive feedback, saying we need to do something. And a lot of people come up with money to do things, but I'm not in the mental space to turn around yet and do this all over."

She adds, "I really want people to wake up and hope that we can get something new and better going. I don't think this is the end. People have had so many amazing experiences at Club Dakota. When we close our doors at 2 a.m., the stories will continue and keep everybody's spirit up there to really get out and do something. And I'm sure as soon as winter is over I'll be running back to Santa Cruz to be a part of whatever's going to happen next."

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*Club Dakota's last day is Thursday, July 31. Call 454-9030 for more information. Send comments on this article to [letters@gtweekly.com](mailto:letters@gtweekly.com) or visit [gtweekly.com](http://gtweekly.com).*