

Last call at lesbian bar

FRONT PAGE!

The closing of the Palms in WeHo heightens efforts to bring more services for women into the city

BY HAILEY
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On Sunday night at West Hollywood's last lesbian bar, Cyndi Lauper's "Girls Just Want to Have Fun" blared over the speakers.

Dozens of women stood outside the Palms on Santa Monica Boulevard, hugging old friends and escaping from the heat inside the crowded bar. They congratulated one couple on their recent engagement, then cheered as an older woman pulled up on a loud motorcycle.

It was a wake for the Palms and for a way of life in West Hollywood.

Gay men have always well outnumbered lesbians in West Hollywood, but until recently the city managed to maintain a small but vibrant



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THE ANNUAL WeHo Dyke March takes place on Santa Monica Boulevard in West Hollywood in June 2012.

lesbian social scene. When Ellen DeGeneres' character came out of the closet on her 1990s sitcom, the character's friends took her to the famed Little Frida's coffeehouse on Santa Monica Boulevard. It shut down not long after that. More recently, Showtime's lesbian drama, "The L Word," was set in and around the city.

When the Palms closes its doors later this week, the city will lose its last dedicated lesbian gathering space. Its demise has heightened efforts by West Hollywood's lesbians to bring more services and businesses into the city — and get back some of the spark from the past.

"These were the heady days of Ellen and Melissa [Etheridge] coming out, lipstick lesbians on the cover of

[See WeHo, A12]

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BETHANY MOLLENKOF Los Angeles Times

IVY BOTTINI, 86, a lesbian activist and longtime West Hollywood resident, has seen friends leave the city for more suburban areas. She has been a force in getting the City Council to approve a lesbian social space.

Last lesbian bar is closing

[WeHo, from A1]
fashion magazines and a little show called 'Will & Grace,' resident Heidi Shink said of the 1990s, when she met her wife at Little Frida's. "There was a great sense of community then; lesbians were unified, organized and visible for the first time in history."

West Hollywood has long been a gay mecca, but lesbians have always been a small minority in the city. About 40% of its 35,000 residents identify themselves as gay men, but only 3% as lesbians, according to a city survey released in May.

The demographic divide goes beyond West Hollywood. Experts say gay men tend to cluster in upscale urban neighborhoods, while lesbians tend to settle in less flashy, more family-friendly communities.

Celia Alger, who used to work the door at the Palms, decided to leave West Hollywood and now lives with her wife and young son in the

'The whole point of being a gay person and going to a gay bar is to feel comfortable in your own environment.'

—VICKI WAGNER,
a West Hollywood resident

Mid-City area.

"West Hollywood is small, expensive and very, very gay," she said. "While it is pretty safe, it is very expensive to live there and, honestly, not the best fit for my family. They are not the most family friendly — it's still Boystown after all."

Lesbian activists in the city don't want to change that. But they want the city to help keep the community going.

In response, city officials

plan to open what they call a "lesbian social space" in a Robertson Boulevard building to help foster the community. The city's Lesbian and Gay Advisory Board has also been talking about ways to attract more lesbians to the city as well as bring in more lesbian-owned businesses.

A gay destination

West Hollywood became a major gay destination in the early 1960s when the Los Angeles Police Department began leading aggressive raids against gay gathering places. In 1970, members of the Los Angeles Police Commission attempted to prevent the first L.A. Pride Parade, citing the potential for violent reaction from bystanders.

Gays found a refuge in West Hollywood, then an unincorporated area patrolled with a more tolerant eye by the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department.

By the time the city incor-

porated in 1984, the lesbian community was small but strong. The city's first mayor, Valerie Terrigno, was a lesbian. And, over the years, there was a small cadre of businesses that catered to lesbians.

Comedian Vicki Wagner has watched the decline in the lesbian social scene first-hand.

When she first came to California from Chicago, she moved to San Clemente, where she had a hard time finding a lesbian bar. She was doing some work in the Los Angeles area and heard about the Palms.

The first time she stopped in for a drink, she met two women who were friends, and they struck up a conversation. When Wagner drove up to the bar, they would meet and hang out. They're friends to this day.

Wagner moved to West Hollywood 13 years ago and loves the city. But when she walks through the city, she

[See WeHo, A13]

City plans lesbian social space

[WeHo, from A12] laments the lack of a vibrant lesbian community. And the closure of the Palms will only make things worse, she says.

"The whole point of being a gay person and going to a gay bar is to feel comfortable in your own environment," Wagner said. "Unfortunately, there's not really any space where lesbians can go that's their own."

The city's lesbians now have what she calls "rotating nights" — specific nights at gay male bars dedicated to lesbians.

The problem with some of these nights, though, is that "all the straight people want to come in and gawk at all the lesbians." It can be uncomfortable, she said. "The problem I have is all the gawking at the gay people like we're in a zoo."

Wagner was on hand Sunday night at the Palms. At one point a tour bus passed and one man held up his iPad to take a photo of the crowd.

Wagner yelled to him: "This is the lesbian part of West Hollywood!" She turned back to her friends and said with a smile that the man was probably surprised to see women in the city.

The city has been trying to fill the void. It organizes the annual WeHo Dyke March during Pride Week. It published a Lesbian Health Bill of Rights, which states that lesbians have a right to appropriate reproductive health services and medical care without stigma. And for the last year, it has sponsored SHE, a series of discussions with topics like "Lesbian Culture Now" and "Dykes on Hikes" (about healthy living).

"We talk about Proposition 8 and marriage equality and all of the big issues that are important," said Shink, a member of the city's human services commission. "But that's not the stuff of day-to-day living, like how to survive a long-term relationship."

A place to meet

The wide gap in the gay and lesbian populations in West Hollywood is familiar to Gary Gates, a researcher at UCLA's Williams Institute, which studies LGBT demographics.

"In general, most of what we think of as gay neighborhoods — places like Dupont Circle in Washington, D.C., the Castro in San Francisco and West Hollywood — are substantially dominated by men," Gates said.

Gay men "cluster more intensely than lesbians," Gates said. Lesbians are more likely to live in areas that don't have large gay populations.

Although there are places where lesbians have clustered — like Silver Lake

and Long Beach — concentrations tend to not be as high as in areas where large numbers of gay men have settled.

Economics and the presence of children, Gates said, are major factors in geographic patterns. Gay male couples tend to earn more money than lesbian couples and can afford upscale urban areas like West Hollywood. Lesbians are more likely to have children and tend to prefer areas that

have more services for them, he said.

Ivy Bottini, an 86-year-old lesbian activist and long-time West Hollywood resident, has seen friends leave the city for more suburban areas. She has been a force in getting the City Council to approve the lesbian social space on Robertson Boulevard.

The space, according to city documents, will be "designed to entertain, educate and empower lesbians

through a wide range of social, political and cultural services." It will also serve as a haven for young and old lesbians to learn from each other, Bottini said.

"It's inherent that women like to hang out with women," she said. "I've been pushing and pushing and pushing for this. We're finally going to have a place to meet."

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PARTICIPANTS in the annual WeHo Dyke March in West Hollywood in June 2012 include Em Kent, left, and Ashleigh Matherly, both of Hermosa Beach.