

The StarPhoenix Fri, 10 Jun 2011
By Janet French of The StarPhoenix

Saskatoon's gay bar scene has come out of the closet

A GATHERING PLACE

This story is part of a series that is running this week in conjunction with the Saskatoon Pride Festival.



—Photo by Kel Faber Photography

Diva's nightclub, Saskatoon's longest-operating gay bar, attracts a diverse crowd

It's a magnet for party people, queer or straight, looking for hot DJs, drag shows or a weekend place to party until dawn.

But Saskatoon's longest-operating gay bar, now called Diva's, has oscillated through a spectrum of names and locations in its more than 30 years of existence.

In 1980, Saskatoon's first commercial gay club opened for business. At first called After Midnight, it was "like a rumpus room" in a shoebox of a building, said Kelly Faber, now manager and co-owner of Diva's.

Tucked off 22nd Street at 102 Ave. B South, After Midnight had no sign on the outside of the building, no listing in the phone book and definitely no advertising. Pictures are scarce — photographs were not allowed inside, for discretion.

"You had to be in the know to find your way there," said Neil Richards, a retired University of Saskatchewan archivist who has spent decades documenting the city's queer history.

By 1982, the members-only club, mostly frequented by gay men, changed ownership, and its name became Casey's and then, Numbers. Women could only enter if signed in by a male member.

A month before her 16th birthday, Faber got a job there as a bouncer.

"Times were different," Faber said. "People would park on Avenue B and literally dash in and try to time their running in by the lights. You were constantly being called 'fag' and having things thrown at you. It was horrible." Patrons, rightfully, feared for their safety. "Quite often, people would be dancing and somebody would throw in a smoke bomb, or something," Faber said. "People were so used to it, they would pick it up and toss it back outside without missing a beat. It was crazy. It's such a resilient group."

On June 25, 1984 — a man spilled gasoline at Numbers' front and back entrances and lit it on fire. Everyone evacuated safely and no one was injured. Several patrons chased down a suspect — including Richards, and held him until police arrived. The man was later charged with arson, but a jury acquitted him.

"People came back in afterwards and continued drinking . . . it didn't scare anybody off," Faber said. Richards was one of those undeterred. "If you wanted that type of gay social life, then you'd have to go there," the 63-year-old said. "It's just a risk you took." In spite of the risks, Numbers was also a haven and a relief for its patrons.

"(I) looked forward to going once a week," Richards said. "It's the only time you could sort of be open with other gay people, whereas, I don't think that's the case now. Lots of people are very open."

On the move

In September 1984, Numbers moved to 25th Street and Second Avenue North, across the street from the Great Western Brewery.

The city was growing, the club's popularity was growing and Numbers needed a bigger space, Faber said.

It was here, at the 493A Second Ave. North location, that Numbers became a training ground for future DJ stars, including Toronto DJ Michael "DeKo-ze" Babb and Mercan Dede.

In early 1990s, David Wall felt courageous enough to walk into Numbers. He worried the entrance was too exposed on Second Avenue. Cars full of people would drive by, yelling slurs at patrons or throwing bottles, he said.

"I was terrified to go when I was first coming out," Wall said. "Within my first visit or two, I couldn't believe the number of people who approached me just to say, 'Welcome to the club,' and, 'Where are you from?' And, 'If you need any help, we're here for you.' "

In the 1970s, it was the Gay Community Centre of Saskatoon that was most active organizing queer social events, Richards said. The non-profit support centre held licensed dances on the weekends to raise money for their operations, he said. Run by volunteers, the club was fatigued and in financial trouble when the commercial gay bar appeared and began dominating the scene.

Numbers was Wall's first exposure to the queer community.

"It was a real eye opener. I'd never seen groups of gay people together, acting open and free and comfortable with themselves," the Saskatoon man said.

"Just as someone who was young and coming out, that was a huge help for my self-esteem and a sense of what was OK in myself." Morphing into a Diva In 1994, Numbers' lease was up and the building was sold. Faber, now a manager, was shopping for a new home when a real estate agent told her about a space in the Avenue Building, a 1913 historical landmark in downtown Saskatoon. Picturing the offices on the upper floors, Faber was skeptical.

The agent opened the alley entrance to 220 Third Ave. South, revealing a seven-metre ceiling and an overlooking balcony with the original ornate wrought-iron railings.

“My jaw fell to the floor,” Faber recalled. “This is it. We have to make this work.”

An estimated \$20,000 worth of renovations turned into more than \$100,000. Later that year, the bar was re-branded as Diva’s.

The club’s dancing, DJs and drag show staples continue, with an ever-growing roster of special events, karaoke, fashion shows, costume parties, theme nights and more.

The coat check area serves as a charity fundraising mechanism for community groups such as the Avenue Community Centre, AIDS Saskatoon, the Saskatoon Diversity Network and others. Last year, non-profit groups raised more than \$16,000 operating the coat check, Faber said.

A club that started with mostly male members is now more inclusive, attracting more lesbians, straight people, bisexuals, transgendered and others who consider themselves queer. Members can bring their friends now, too.

Customers may not realize it, says Wall — a regular Diva’s patron — but the club is laden with security features.

“It’s the one place I know, if I hold my partner’s hand, I’m not going to get scoffed at,” Wall said. Other gay bars have tried to open in Saskatoon, but were short-lived. In 1984, a private club called Zorro’s opened at 249 Second Ave. South. It closed in less than a year.

In 1994, a gay men’s dance bar called Viper took a stab at the market at a location on 24th Street, just east of Idylwyld Drive. It lasted as a gay bar for less than a year before trying to broadening its appeal, and ultimately, closing down.

“It just shows how really difficult it is to run an establishment like that in a small city,” Richards said.

Last year, the 302 Lounge and Discotheque opened on Pacific Avenue, in the downtown warehouse district. The lounge is host to numerous Saskatoon Pride Festival events this week.

This summer, Diva’s is in for another transition.

Faber has hired local designers to come up with a new vision for the club. The details of the redo are so secretive, staff are being asked to hand in their keys so they can’t peek at the

changes on their days off.

Diva's will be closed for a few days each week, but the party rages on during the weekends. "It's hush-hush . . . but it's gonna be big," Faber said.