

# COLUMBIA SPECTATOR ARCHIVE

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## Opening of Gay Bar Delayed Because of Community Protest

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Plans to open the area's first gay and lesbian bar were abruptly halted Tuesday morning when the bar's application for a state liquor license was placed on hold by the New York State Liquor Board because of a petition signed by 100 people in the neighborhood protesting the bar's opening.

The neighborhood around the bar, which is located at the corner of West 109th Street and Amsterdam Avenue, has always been a problem spot for police who have been unable to rid the area of drugs for years, making it difficult to attract new businesses to the area.

However, the neighborhood, which has seen little commercial development over the past 30 years, has become a hot spot for new bars, including 1020, located at



Amsterdam and West 111th Street, and SOHA, a new bar at West 108th Street, also along Amsterdam.

The bars' success made SOHA's and 1020's owners thrilled when Bernie Knowllinger, 37 and a SOHA manager, told them of his idea to open a bar in the same neighborhood called Saints that would cater to an untapped consumer group, the gay community.

But Knowllinger and leaders of the University's gay and lesbian community were shocked at the amount of opposition to the bar expressed at last Wednesday's Community Board 7 meeting.

Graduate students said the opposition is thinly masked homophobia.

One woman, Barbara Adler, a graphic designer who said she disliked the outer facade of the bar told The New York Times that the bar's construction made her wonder about what sort of illicit activity would be going on inside. She said the dark exterior and high, small windows were suspicious.

"No one can peer in," Adler told the Times. "Why?"

According to Knowllinger, he and his bosses have invested over \$80,000 in renovating the bar and designing an exterior that could protect their customers from anticipated attacks and other forms of anti-gay violence.

Local residents said the bar is an unnecessary addition to an area that already has two bars within a small block radius. Although there are no legal or zoning restrictions opposing Saints, community members are still concerned.

Currently, the gay and lesbian bar closest to Morningside Heights is The Works, located on West 81st Street, several subway stops from Columbia.

"[The Works] is not a neighborhood bar for Columbia students. That's for sure," Coordinator of the Queer Co-op Frank Susa said.

Although many residents in the area did not directly object to the bar's clientele, they expressed fear that the bar might increase crime and prostitution at that corner.



Steve van Leeuwen, coveener for GABLES, a gay and lesbian group for graduate students and faculty at Columbia, and Susa tried to relieve residents of those concerns at the Community Board meeting by pointing out the interest in community service and revenue a bar would generate in the area.

"I was surprised by how vehement the protesting was," van Leeuwen said. "They were quite enraged," he said. "My bottom line was to convince the community that a gay bar is different from any other bar. It's not just a place to get drunk," he said.

"Gay bars do a lot of community outreach. My real argument was that they really need to give this bar a chance. They cannot condemn it," van Leeuwen said.

"The bar is a large part of what the gay and lesbian community has. It should be supported because it is a gay bar," van Leeuwen added.

Knowllinger, who has had the AIDS virus for over 11 years, said he is giving back to the gay community that has been very supportive throughout his illness by opening the bar.

Members of the area's gay community said Saints, which will open during off-hours for Columbia's activist groups' meetings, will provide a greatly needed area for socializing as well as a space for community activism.

"As much as we have an open and gay-friendly environment, there isn't really shared space or adequate social opportunity," Susa said, adding that gay bars offer open space where gays and lesbians can relax together for extended periods of time.

"[Having] a gay bar right on our doorstep could serve our community in ways that we just couldn't here at school," Sousa said. "People could hang out for a long time," he said, adding that a bar is a more comfortable social atmosphere than an Earl Hall office or a student center.

Van Leeuwen said events at the West End, where GABLES reserves a few tables, do not provide sufficient social opportunities for many groups on campus.

"There are a lot of 'out' graduate students, and they have no place to go," he said.





CONTRIBUTING PHOTOGRAPHER—CARLESTE HUGHES

**Currently under construction, Saints, a gay bar on West 109th Street, is awaiting approval of its liquor license after complaints by locals.**