

The number of gay bars has dwindled. A new generation plans to bring them back.

‘Whatever your queer looks like, it belongs here.’

By [Casey Parks](#)

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The moment Rach Pike stepped into Bounce, something felt different. The bar was dark, but Pike, who uses she and they pronouns, could sense her people in the shadows. Some people danced or made out. Some cheered for the drag king performing onstage in an olive three-piece suit. Others stared at Pike.

Pike was used to being studied. She had short hair and wore cargo shorts or boy’s jeans, and usually, people stared at her in confusion. That night in Cleveland, though, Pike realized people were gazing with something new in their eyes. *Approval.*

“It was a relief,” Pike said. “It was probably the first time I ever thought I was attractive.”

Nearly two decades have passed since that night. Bounce closed in 2017, and hundreds of other gay bars have shut down, too. Just 21 lesbian bars remain open nationwide, according to the Lesbian Bar Project. Still, Pike hasn’t forgotten what it felt like to be safe and attractive for the first time. The number of queer bars may be dwindling, but for many LGBTQ people, Pike knows, those spaces are still needed.

Early next year, Pike and partner Jo McDaniel plan to open As You Are Bar on Barracks Row in Southeast Washington. It’s one of a handful of queer spaces set to open in coming months. A group is planning a lesbian and queer “clubhouse” in Los Angeles, and an “old-school gay girl” in Norfolk plans to reopen the lesbian bar she founded four decades ago. A nonbinary performer is also raising money to open a lesbian bar in Queens. Pike and McDaniel know opening a bar during a pandemic may be risky, but they say they’ve learned one thing from years of visiting and working in other queer establishments: If they want to survive, they first have to build a better and more inclusive bar.

More than a bar

The gay bar was long the main, and sometimes only, space where queer people could gather. A few opened quietly in the early 1930s, then after World War II, hundreds more began serving gay men and women. By the 1980s, more than a thousand existed across the United States, according to [Greggor Mattson](#), an Oberlin College professor who spent two years creating a [database](#) using listings from the [Damron travel guide](#) of LGBTQ-friendly spots. About 200 of those catered to lesbians.

Some, like Hershee Bar in Norfolk, opened when their states had [laws that prohibited](#) bar owners from employing gay people or creating gathering spots for them. Annette Stone, who opened Hershee as a lesbian bar in 1983, said the law emboldened police and other law enforcement agents to raid her business. One year, officers came 60 times in 90 days, Stone said. Still, Stone found a way to hold on. A judge deemed the law [unconstitutional](#) in 1991, and for years afterward, Stone hosted weddings and the occasional funeral. She mentored foster children whose parents had kicked them out, and every Thanksgiving, she threw a dinner for people whose families didn't accept them.

By 1987, Norfolk had four or five gay bars, and the number nationwide peaked at more than 1,700. Many stayed open through the 1990s, but in the early 2000s, hundreds of gay bars started to close. Those serving lesbians and people of color were hit hardest.

While all gay bar listings declined by 37 percent between 2007 and 2019, the number of queer bars serving people of color declined by 59 percent, and bars for lesbians declined by 52 percent, Mattson found.

San Francisco lost [the Lexington Club](#), and [Rubyfruit Jungle](#) shut its doors in New Orleans. Lesbian bars in [Portland, Ore.](#), and [Philadelphia](#) closed, as did those that had long served women in [Chicago](#) and [Los Angeles](#).

A host of reasons led to their demise, Mattson said. Gentrification pushed some out of big cities, while depopulation and deindustrialization left bar owners in the Midwest unable to stay open. Still, Mattson has found two prevailing factors — the rise of dating apps and a growing acceptance of gay people.

“Gay bars were never just hookup places, but they were places to meet other LGBTQ+ people, and now that you can meet them from your bedroom or while you're waiting for the bus, that has taken away some of gay bars' monopoly on being the place where you find other LGBTQ+ folks,” he said.

Gay bars are also no longer the only place some queer people, especially White and cisgender men, feel safe. “I think this is highly uneven,” Mattson said, “but for gay, White, middle-class people like myself, any bar feels like a gay bar if you show up with six friends.”

Mattson has interviewed 120 bar owners in 35 states for a forthcoming book called “Who Needs Gay Bars?” and found that many endured by becoming more inclusive of the most marginalized groups. Lesbian bars, for instance, began to welcome nonbinary and trans patrons — people who may not feel as safe as cis White men do in straight bars. For some bar owners, Mattson found, that's just economics, but for a new generation, “lesbian” and “gay” don't capture their full and fluid identities.

“I think it's very limiting to just say lesbian bar,” said Lauren Richer, a nonbinary queer person who plans to open Hot Donnas Clubhouse, a trans-friendly, “inclusive, queer-woman-focused” spot in Los Angeles. “I just want it to be more of a chill, relaxed approach to gender and sexuality. I think that's the way of the future, honestly. Now that we have language to identify all these gray areas that we've always mulled over in our brain, I really don't see the term ‘lesbian bar’ existing in lights for the rest of time. I see ‘queer space’ being in lights for the rest of time.”

A family-oriented space

Pike and McDaniel have spent the past 20 years working in gay and lesbian spaces. Pike did security for Nellie's Sports Bar, and McDaniel bartended at APEX, Cobalt and other gay bars before working alongside Pike at A League of Her Own (ALOH) in Adams Morgan.

ALOH was one of just 21 lesbian bars left in the country when Pike and McDaniel worked there, but during the early days of the coronavirus pandemic, the couple decided they wanted to create a new spot, one they owned.

Drawing on their years of bar experience — and Pike's master's in business administration — the couple broke ground in November on a 4,000-square-foot Capitol Hill space a few blocks from where the iconic lesbian bar Phase 1 operated for more than 40 years. (McDaniel also worked at Phase 1 before it closed in 2016.) Their bar, which they call As You Are, will be more than a nighttime party spot. They'll have a dance floor, but they're soundproofing it, and they're retaining the downstairs for a cafe where people can co-work during the day or meet a date in the evening. They're also building a room upstairs where people can play video games or watch football on Sundays.

"Our goal with that is to be family oriented," McDaniel said. "I think people age out of the dance floor. We'll have brunches where you can bring your kids. We might have book club meetups. Whatever your queer looks like, it belongs here."

To that end, McDaniel and Pike say they have spent the past several months talking to community members, including Black LGBTQ people who were outraged last summer after footage went viral of bar security at Nellie's dragging a Black woman down the stairs by her hair. As You Are won't have security guards; instead, Pike is training a fleet of "safety managers" — a change Pike hopes will attract applicants who are less concerned with acting tough and more interested in creating a safe atmosphere for everyone.

Pike and McDaniel know that some people think the gay bar era is over, that spaces like theirs are no longer needed, but people who say that tend to have more privilege, McDaniel said. Many trans people, for instance, have IDs with pictures and names that don't accurately reflect them. A bouncer at a straight bar might turn them away, but the security managers at As You Are won't.

"The people who say that are saying *they* don't need them," McDaniel said. "*They* feel safe going anywhere. And that's not everybody's experience."

In fact, a few days after Pike and McDaniel broke ground, they went to celebrate at a nearby, non-queer bar. A customer there had read about As You Are, and when he recognized Pike and McDaniel, he bad-mouthed them to other customers, then implored the bartender to charge them double. The bartender didn't ask the man to stop, Pike said.

"He was clearly homophobic," Pike said. "And this is in Washington, D.C., in Capitol Hill, down the street from where we were trying to open this bar. That's why we need this. If I were the bartender and he said anything like that, I would have said, 'We don't talk like that here, and your money is not more important than their safety, so you can head on out.'"

Expanding the meaning of 'lesbian bar'

Though As You Are is not specifically a *lesbian* bar, a group of filmmakers featured Pike and McDaniel this summer as part of the Lesbian Bar Project, a documentary film and fundraising campaign aimed at keeping lesbian bars open. The filmmakers helped to raise more than \$250,000 for the lesbian bars that remained open during the pandemic, and they're continuing to promote new spots, including Hot Donnas, which aims to "expand the meaning of 'lesbian bar.'" But some supporters, particularly older women who identify as lesbian, bristle at that expansion.

“It sounds like you’re trying to rebrand and redefine a very special word — lesbian,” one user wrote on Instagram after the Lesbian Bar Project [posted about Hot Donnas](#). “Please don’t. Words matter to those who need them.”

“Less queer bars and more lesbian bars,” another user added.

Erica Rose, one of two filmmakers behind the project, said she understands the term “lesbian” has a rich and important cultural history. “But I don’t think we have to be so militant on our definition of lesbianism,” Rose said. “I think it could be used as more of a catchall in the way that queer is an umbrella term. For me personally, lesbianism is a term and an identifier that many different types of people can use. At the end of the day, nonbinary people, transgender women, bisexual people, pansexual people, they’ve always been part of the lesbian community. We just might not have had the language or the awareness to realize that.”

Richer and business partner Angelica Castellanos are still searching for a physical space, but they’ve been hosting brunches, pool parties and disco nights this year to raise money for Hot Donnas. More than 90 percent of the people who have attended those events have been queer women, Richer said, but Richer and Castellanos don’t want to exclude trans and gender-nonconforming people. Richer is nonbinary, and Castellanos is a first-generation Latina and lesbian.

“My experience of trying to find safe space here in the States, and comparing it with trips back to visit family in Mexico, has probably informed my fervor for creating a space where you are able to just exist regardless of how or where you were born, who you want to love and how you identify,” Castellanos said.

Stone, the owner of Hershee Bar in Norfolk, considers herself an “old-school gay girl,” but she’s rooting for the next generation of queer bar owners. She kept Hershee open for more than 35 years, and when Phase 1 closed in D.C., Hershee was, for a time, the oldest lesbian bar in the country. Some years were tough, Stone said. Norfolk is a Navy town, and when the Gulf War began and sailors shipped out, Stone’s bar emptied overnight. She lost customers to dating apps and breweries, but she noticed long before many others that trans patrons needed a place, too. Hershee remained a lesbian spot, but Stone put the word out, and soon the bar stools were filled with trans and nonbinary people, along with many straight cross-dressers.

“They felt safe there with us,” Stone said. “We wanted them to feel safe. We wanted to wrap our arms around them. We held on all those years, but you can’t be in it for the money. You have to be in it for the love of community.”

Stone never owned the building Hershee occupied. She tried to buy it, she said, but a lender backed out when the inspection revealed the land was a brownfield. The city [bought the property](#) in 2018 and it tore it down the following year.

“The feeling was close to losing a family member,” Stone said. “I would wake up in night terrors every night, if I could sleep at all. I would have dreams of my bar and my community.”

In nearly four decades of serving people, Stone met thousands of people who felt the way Pike did when she first stepped into Bounce all those years ago. Many still write to Stone saying they have nowhere to go, so this summer, Stone decided to reopen. She’ll have to find a new location — the city broke ground two months ago on a civic plaza at the old location — but Stone has hired an architect, and she hopes to open the new Hershee next year.

“I don’t care if I have to go there in my walker, I want us to have a safe space that we can call our own,” Stone said. “My family still needs a place to be together. And we’ll still be called a lesbian bar. I’m claiming it forever.”