

BUSINESS

Slammers, one of 15 lesbian bars left in U.S., weathers pandemic, cultural shifts in Columbus



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In Columbus, like many cities, lesbian-centered nightlife is a thing of the past.

Traces of the old scene in Columbus exist in the memories of people who were there. Ask around, and you'll hear about Wall Street Downtown, Summit Station (now The Summit) in North Campus and Blazer's Pub (now Two Truths) in the Short North.

Dani Escamilla especially liked Liquid Café and Lounge (now Standard Hall), also in the Short North.

"I'm not exactly sure what happened with Liquid," said Escamilla, 36, of Downtown. "I just know it closed and I was so sad. So, it left us with only Slammers."

News: Central Ohio cities embrace designated outdoor drinking areas

Operating Downtown on East Long Street since 1993, Slammers is the only surviving lesbian bar in Ohio, and one of just 15 left in the U.S., according to a report by Greggor Mattson, associate professor of sociology at Oberlin College and Conservatory.

Slammers in Columbus a 'safe haven' for patrons

The pandemic's devastating effect on bars and restaurants has shed new light on the state of gay and lesbian bars, which have been shrinking in number for decades. A greater acceptance of the LGBTQ population, as well as cultural shifts within the community, are cited as contributing factors.

“It’s a lot more accepting, even in the last 10 years,” said Jackie Sansavera, 39, who bartends at Slammers. “A lot of the girls in their early to mid-20s can go just about anywhere and feel a little more comfortable. I’d say for people 35 and up, this is our home base.”

But younger crowds and men are patronizing Slammers, which welcomes everyone with its bar motto: “All walks, one groove.”

News: Columbus chef Avishar Barua's team takes round two of 'Top Chef'

“It’s just a safe haven,” said longtime employee Deb Gordon, 67. “People are comfortable here.”

COVID-19 pandemic threatened Slammers' business

That sanctuary was threatened by the pandemic. Slammers was set back by Gov. Mike DeWine’s shutdown of bars and restaurants in March 2020, and the bar was vandalized during the racial justice protests last summer.

“It was pretty bad,” said owner Marcia Riley, 68. “We struggled a lot.”

Prior to the pandemic, Riley was in talks to sell Slammers, but the deal fell through. Had it worked out, it would have saved her a few headaches.

“I was tired,” she said. “I’ve been in it for almost 30 years, but I’m glad I kept it.”

Slammers was able to reopen in June, and Riley was supported by two Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) loans, as well as \$8,500 raised by a GoFundMe campaign organized by former manager Nikki West.

News: Arena District bars and restaurants benefit from the return of sports fans

A surprising gift came in the form of the Lesbian Bar Project, an initiative started last year by “Orange Is the New Black” star Lea DeLaria and queer filmmakers Erica Rose and Elina Street. The fundraising campaign raised \$117,504, which was divided among 15 participating lesbian bars, including Slammers.

“That was a very generous thing that they did,” Riley said.

Today, staff members say Slammers is doing well, and in no danger of closing. The bar’s pizza continues to be one of the biggest selling points. And the newly opened LGBTQ show bar and nightclub, District West, located behind Slammers, is bringing in new, mostly male, clientele.

“(It) has helped us tremendously,” Gordon said. “Men spend a lot of money. People will come here to eat first, have a drink or two, then go to the show. A lot of them will come back to eat more and sober up. We’ve got this partnership going on.”

'Separate but equal': A history of LGBTQ bars

In the early 1990s, the LGBTQ community was less integrated, creating a bigger audience for lesbian bars.

Pride: The oral history of Wall street

“We were separate but equal,” Gordon said. “Gay men wanted to be with gay men, and gay women wanted to be with gay women. And I remember there were some issues where some women didn’t want men in here.”

Back then, Slammers was a stopping point for women on their way to the Wall Street nightclub.

“(It was), you come here, you drink, you eat and then you go down to Wall Street at 11 p.m. or midnight to dance,” Sansavera said. “That was everybody's Friday and Saturday for years.”

There are fewer than 900 LGBTQ bars nationwide, having declined by 36.6% between 2007 and 2019, according to **Mattson**’s research. However, LGBTQ bars that predominantly serve women and people of color have seen sharper drops of 51.6% and 59.3%, respectively.

“The peak of lesbian bars happened back in the late ‘80s,” said **Mattson**, who is working on a book on changes in gay and lesbian bars over the last 25 years. “There was a precipitous decline through the ‘90s. And that was accompanied by a rise in the number of gay bars that were identified by patrons as places where men and women socialize together.

News: That's the spirit Utica's Mill Street goes from gristmill to distillery

"Were these lesbian bars invaded by gay men? Were these new establishments where people were choosing to socialize in mixed gender groups? Or were these formerly gay male bars that had become welcoming to women?"

Mattson sources some of his data from the San Francisco-based Damron Guide, the most-comprehensive listing of LGBTQ spaces nationwide. It was published in various formats from 1964 to 2019, but it will live online moving forward, according to owner Gina Gatta, who said the guide is losing money.

“Before the internet, people relied on these books,” said Gatta, who added that others are creating similar listings online. “I have heard stories where people said, ‘You saved my life. I didn’t realize that there were other, like-minded people. I thought I was all by myself.’”

Bars owned by gay males have always outnumbered lesbian bars, and economic inequalities may be a contributing factor, **Mattson** said.

“As a space that prioritizes women, you're serving a patronage who has less disposable income, and you're serving a patronage who overwhelmingly get saddled with care responsibilities,” **Mattson** said. “So, people who have children, people who are caring for elders, they don't have as much free time. When it comes to the economics, we know that women business owners aren't as well-capitalized as men are.”

Sansavera said she noticed that trend in her own circle.

'We need this bridge': Ohio restaurants eager for more than \$28B in aid on the way

“A lot of women, when they settle down, they settle down, and the boys continue to go out and play together into their 40s and 50s,” she said. “We show up a little more sporadically. A lot of my friends have 2-year-olds to 5-year-olds.”

Lesbian bars such as Slammers survived because of their inclusivity, **Mattson** added.



“All of them have stressed how these were women-first spaces, but open to everyone,” he said. “I know that many places and spaces had debates about inclusion of trans women and trans lesbians. And my impression is that younger folks increasingly won't patronize a place that's not open for all.”

Other marginalized communities want representation in Columbus

Other events and spaces have been created to fill the void for some LGBTQ community members in recent years, particularly Black people, who have felt marginalized or excluded in the city. Community Pride was established by the Black Queer & Intersectional Collective in direct opposition to the Stonewall Pride festivities.

Additionally, the Black, Out, & Proud (BOP) organization was established to center the Black LGBTQ community, and provide advocacy, education and social events.

“The Black LGBTQ community needed a voice,” said co-founder and treasurer Letha Pugh,

missing in the community.”

News: Outdoor dining season is here in Columbus. Here are restaurants with patios.

Pugh said a Black LGBTQ bar in the city would be a "total dream."

Despite cultural changes within the community, some Slammers customers like Dani Escamilla still see a need for lesbian-designated bars.

“The gay population here seems to be growing, but essentially it's very male-dominated,” Escamilla said. “Even within the gay community, people don’t understand that there’s differences, and that’s OK. (At lesbian bars), you can make friends or meet your next person.”

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