

Midwestern oasis, but no gay paradise

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Kansas City's lesbians and gay men long have been mostly invisible to the surrounding straight majority. Now they are...speaking out

SCOTT CANON

For the gay man who grew up in Warrensburg or the lesbian who hails from Salina, Kansas City stands out like a refuge on a vast homophobic plain. To a transplanted New Yorker, by contrast, the city can feel downright Victorian.

Kansas City is big enough for people to revel in their homosexuality at night and then stash that part of themselves back in a closet at dawn.

For generations the metropolitan area has offered nightclubs that celebrate homosexuality rather than ridicule it. Today, dozens of other businesses thrive from the patronage of gay clientele, and some churches serve congregations that are predominantly homosexual.

Still, Kansas City at times feels too small to lesbians and gays, nearly suffocating in its Midwestern conservatism.

The tendency is for gay people to keep their sexuality quiet on the job, to not hold hands while strolling through Bannister Mall. They expect epithets hollered from passing cars outside of Sidekicks Saloon. "Faggots die" is spray-painted on an overpass.

"It is like being set back in time," said Rocky Chung, a 33-year-old hair stylist who moved here from San Francisco. "People are just not that open here. People just don't understand us or accept us. " "Kansas City is no San Francisco; there's no getting around that," agreed Deborah Rubaloff, who lives in Mission. "But it's not a Little Rock, either. " More tolerant attitudes are "like a lot of things in the Midwest," said Rubaloff, a 45-year-old veterinarian who grew up in Louisburg, Kan. "They filter down a little more slowly. " About four years ago, Terry Maturo, 37, moved from New Jersey to work for a management consulting firm. To her eyes, Kansas City's gay community seemed to thrive.

"It seemed pretty well accepted in the general community. I was surprised," she said. "Things seem less closeted here than what I found in New Jersey. People in the Midwest are just more personable, more open with each other. "

Although Jon D. Barnett doesn't hold hands in public, to avoid the harassment it brings, the associate editor of the *Lesbian and Gay News-Telegraph* is still "a big booster of Kansas City.

It's just a very friendly city, and that carries over for gay people, too. " People who don't feel they can reveal their sexuality in a small Kansas town or an Ozarks village come first to Kansas City's bars on weekends and frequently move to the area for good.

"They want to go to a place where there's a sense of community," Barnett said. "Kansas City, especially Midtown, is a place where gay people can live comfortably. "

No census of gays How many gay people call Kansas City home?

The answer is elusive. About 5,000 showed up for a gay pride parade and picnic last June. One gay newspaper circulates about 4,000 copies here. More than 7,000 people voted for a gay City Council candidate in 1991.

The lowest estimates of homosexuals in the general population would suggest at least 15,000 live in the metropolitan area. Other estimates would put the number at 10 times that.

In a random telephone survey of more than 500 people this month, 53 percent told *The Kansas City Star* they had a gay friend or relative.

Whatever the numbers, lesbians and gays are hardly new to Kansas City. Gay people in their 70s talk about routine police raids in the 1940s. Getting locked up for the weekend was common.

Elderly gay people say their youth was spent in a much more closeted homosexual community. Perhaps because their presence wasn't as obvious, they also say the resentment and the anger weren't as great.

"I'm glad we've made progress," said one 66-year-old man from Kansas City, Kan. "But when people assert themselves, you also see some backlash. It used to be people didn't even think we were around. " Now the gay and lesbian presence reaches into every part of the metropolitan sprawl, from Ward Parkway to Blue Ridge Boulevard and from Leawood to Liberty.

Three newspapers speaking to a gay audience circulate in Kansas City, along with a radio program and a cable television show. In Westport, restaurants and shops cater as much to gays and lesbians in the daytime as the bars do to single straights at night. The Alternative Business Alliance offers everything from pet care to home repair.

"I wish for one day we would all turn purple so that you could realize the guy next to you on the bus is gay," said Fenton Ferguson, 31, of Midtown. "Or the person you work with who has never asked you over for dinner for fear you might ask what his family is like. He just hasn't known how to react to you, because he didn't know how you would react to him being gay." Nowhere is the presence of lesbians and gay men more concentrated or more open than in Midtown. When Barnett ran an openly gay campaign for the Kansas City Council in 1991, his greatest support came from an area bordered by 31st and 55th streets, State Line Road and Troost Avenue.

An informal community known as Womantown, populated increasingly by lesbians looking for safety and social bonds, is centered in Midtown.

One reason the women came together is the intimidation some felt. Stories are commonplace of lesbians or gay men in Kansas City being chased while leaving a bar or heckled for holding hands in public.

Even at the cosmopolitan Country Club Plaza, gays can run into hostility.

One 43-year-old woman recalled a Saturday afternoon in 1975 when, as she was walking hand in hand with her lover, "three people started throwing rocks at us." More recently, Maturo, the New Jersey transplant, drew taunts there.

"One time we were on the Plaza one evening and a group of younger women were uptight about the 'lezzies' walking down the street," she said. "They're probably trying to figure out how to get comfortable with themselves." Five years ago, Mark Manning stepped out of the Cabaret bar on Main Street near 50th Street and was knocked to the ground and kicked in the head. Before he passed out, his attackers told him that if he preferred women to men, "this wouldn't happen to you." One night last April a 27-year-old man strolled into Blue Valley Park. He was murdered. Police believe three robbers cut the man's throat because they assumed he was gay.

Like the Liberty Memorial, Blue Valley Park remains popular among gay men looking for anonymous - and risky - sex.

Bars a major focus

For men especially, Kansas City's gay taverns have long been the hub of the gay subculture.

Gays and straights mix in the pounding beat of disco at The Edge. Men cruise in leather at the Dixie Bell Saloon. Old friends swap lies and shoot pool at Turtle's Bar & Grill. Several nights a week, women dance the two-step together to Hank Williams tunes at Illusions.

Jamie Straley, now a 27-year-old college student, remembers the first time she sneaked into the old Billie Jean's lesbian bar near 51st and Main streets.

"When the door opened and I stepped in, all of a sudden I felt like I wasn't alone anymore," she said. "It was like if you were in a foreign country and everybody spoke another language and you walked into a room where there were a bunch of other Americans.

It was just something that said: 'This part of you is normal.' " These watering holes also represent some of the difficulties of being homosexual in a heterosexual world.

"You're growing up gay and you know that it's something you're not supposed to be, and especially as a teen-ager, it's such a homophobic time," said Rhonda Weimer, a 36-year-old lesbian. "So there's a lot of pressure and when you have these feelings there's a big need not to feel that..."

"The other thing that happens is that once you start as an individual saying, 'Well, maybe this is what I am. Let's see what the culture is like.' " And that may explain part of the drug and alcohol problem in the gay and lesbian communities.

"Where do you go if you're gay to meet people? You go to a bar. So what do you do at a bar? When you're at a bar, you drink," said Weimer, who works as a drug and alcohol counselor.

The bars also satisfy a gay subculture that seeks a more exotic approach to life. Kansas City's drag queens can be found several nights a week at The Edge, the Cabaret, the Dixie Bell or a handful of other gay bars.

Among them could be a 19-year-old man who, with a thick layer of makeup and a cloud of hair spray, transforms himself into the persona of "Sapphire." "My best friend likes to dress up, too," he said. "We call ourselves the Precious Stone Sisters." When the bar lets out at 3 a.m., the men in dresses might drift to Chubby's on Broadway or other all-night cafes.

"We can get the whole place laughing," Sapphire said. "We just like to act up and get really outrageous."

Options are growing

The importance of the bar scene has diminished as more wholesome venues grow to accommodate an increasingly public and proud gay community.

Instead, gays and lesbians meet for play in their own softball and soccer leagues. They gather for commerce in shops such as Phoenix Books or Jerry's Westport Tropicals. They join their own rodeo group, parents' group, Presbyterian group, teen-agers' group, chorus, their own Alcoholics Anonymous group. Lawyers, therapists and accountants cater to the special needs of gay clients.

And every Sunday morning and Wednesday evening, in the sanctuary of Metropolitan Community Church in Midtown, dozens of voices join in song and heads bow in prayer. The congregation has fewer children, perhaps, than most churches.

Though the sermons underscore an acceptance of homosexuality, the gospel is decidedly more fire and brimstone than New Age relativism.

"We are really just like everybody else," said the Rev. John Barbone, the pastor. "People like to dwell on how we're different instead of how we're the same." The need for gay churches such as Metropolitan Community churches in Midtown and Shawnee, however, points up attitudes about homosexuality held by much of the rest of Kansas City.

In The Star poll, almost two-thirds of the respondents said homosexuality conflicted with their religious beliefs.

No wonder, then, so many gays and lesbians want to carve out their own spiritual niche.

That wish to be around other people like themselves extends beyond the sanctuary. Karl Cropsey, a 55-year-old retired Army colonel, said he's as likely to socialize with straight people as with homosexual friends but that he finds a special bond with other gays and lesbians.

"I wouldn't say my life is exclusively gay...If I have a choice, I'd rather go to a restaurant that is very open about its ownership or about its staff," he said. "Maybe it's a little snobbery, but it's just nice to be with your own kind of people. I guess that's why people have conventions." For some, such as Carl Hippensteel, the aim is to escape the straight world as much as anything else.

"I don't go to Westport," said the 32-year-old Midtown resident. "The college frat people that go there are very smug about their heterosexuality. I've been accused of being heterophobic, and maybe I am." Gay people also can be critical of their own kind.

"You'd think gay people, with all they have to put up with, would be a little more tolerant than other people. It doesn't work that way," said Randy Hite, a 34-year-old postal worker from Midtown. "They also have their prejudices. Some women don't like men and some men, well, they hate being around women. And there's racism, just like with everybody else." Men who are both black and gay in Kansas City may be the least visible of all. Nelson Moore, 26, who moved to the city three years ago, said he sees both white and black gay men chided for interracial dating.

"They ask you: 'Do you think you're too good for your own race?'" Moore said.

Yet finding a black partner can be hard.

"Blacks here tend to be in the closet and not go to the bars, especially blacks who are professionals," he said.

"A lot of white guys won't approach a black guy," said a 27-year-old black computer programmer from Midtown. "We're also checked for IDs at the door a lot more than the white guys. You'd think that, being gay, people would know what it's like to be oppressed. But you still see it." But it is the straight world that presents the widest variety of attitudes, from noisy hostility to polite acceptance. Gays often talk of occasionally not acting so butch or so effeminate - monitoring their own behavior around straight friends or strangers.

One 35-year-old man sees many of those elements in his Sunday softball league. They are the terms of an unspoken pact that gays can expect courtesy here as long as they don't flaunt their sexuality.

"The city of Kansas City, Kansas, has been absolutely great.

We tell them up front that this is a gay league," he said. "We try to use a little bit of discretion. Early in the day, you might see men kissing men and women kissing women, but later in the afternoon when we see other teams showing up, we generally don't show any affection. We don't want other people to feel uncomfortable.

"The only thing that happened once was that we were going to play this one team with younger guys, about 19 years old. We heard from some other teams that they were saying some things about us.

But we ended up beating them by 13 runs."

CAPTION: Mark Manning was beaten five years ago near a gay bar.

He says his attackers told him that if he wasn't gay, "this wouldn't happen to you."

CAPTION: Lea Hopkins (left), an artist and a former Playboy Club bunny, and Pat Billings, owner of two small businesses, live in Leawood. The women are open about their sexual orientation and say they lead lives not unlike their neighbors. Billings said: "We're just like a thousand other couples who live in Johnson County. We both just happen to be women."

CAPTION: Photos by TAMMY LJUNGBALD/The Star