

BIG SHOTZ OR BIG LOSER?

The Big Fat Loser Bar on Chippewa Street



The 11th Annual Artvoice Mardi Gras was another successful fundraiser and great party for the city of Buffalo. It was remarkable to see a full contingent from the Buffalo Police Department lead over 200 runners huffing 4.5 miles through freezing weather down Elmwood, through Allentown and across Chippewa Street. They were followed by more than 40 Mardi Gras floats, which are getting more lavish each year. The Crocodile Bar and Nietzsche's both won Best Float awards.

And the Mardi Gras parties after the parade were a blast. From Soho to Cozumel to Crocodile, Nietzsche's, JP Bullfeathers or any of the 42 participating venues, Artvoice Mardi Gras in Buffalo was a February celebration of our cold weather hardiness. Whether you were a drag queen in heels, a musician on a stage or just wandering from club to club with hundreds of beads around your neck looking for a warm Mardi mate, you knew this was not your usual Tuesday night.

But the most laudable part of the event was the thousands of dollars raised for the Center for Hospice & Palliative Care. Buffalo now has the third largest Mardi Gras in the country and the only Mardi Gras celebration that is a charity fundraiser.

Soho, Nietzsche's and Cozumel rocked in fundraising, as did Quote. Crocodile dou-

bled their contribution from last year and McMonkeez made a very healthy contribution as well. Every venue that participated that night deserves applause—except one. Big Shotz on Chippewa Street.

The fundraising structure of the event is simple. We sell \$5 bracelets at the door at all venues and once you purchase a bracelet anywhere you are admitted into any of the 42 participating clubs. All the bracelet money from all the clubs is collected and donated to charity (minus some expenses for beads, masks and city permits, etc.). The gross raised this year for this single-night event was around \$25,000.

In January, Artvoice staff met with Big Shotz manager Jeremy Schiffmaker about participating in the Mardi Gras event. Jeremy, who is a nice enough guy, said he had the authority to make a decision, but just to be safe he phoned the owner of Big Shotz, Randy Phafen, to verify they would participate. He told Artvoice everything was cool and signed an agreement form saying, "YES! We are participating in the Artvoice Mardi Gras Festival. YES, we will contribute with Mardi Gras bracelet sales at our door (or make an optional donation) and we will honor bracelets sold at Mardi Gras Central and other venues."

So for the next two months Big Shotz had the benefit of being included in dozens of radio promotions on three Citadel stations, flyers, posters and 13 full-color pages of advertisement in Artvoice, as well as an additional three-page Mardi Gras pullout in Artvoice the week of the event. And on the night of the event, 103.3 the Edge and 97 Rock were down on Chippewa Street doing live broadcasts.

But the day before the event Randy Phafen, Big Shotz owner, phoned to say that they didn't want any Hospice volunteers at their door. Nonetheless, he said, they would honor the Mardi Gras bracelets which allowed admission to all venues and that they would make a donation. "No way can we have volunteers here," said Randy, "we'll make a donation, but no volunteers." Unfortunately, that's not what happened.

Our fist indication that we had a problem came the day after Mardi Gras when Artvoice received its first complaint via e-mail. "I think Big Shotz should no longer be included on your flyers or any form of advertisement since they refused to honor any bracelets...I purchased the bracelet in good faith, along with at least ten of my friends and they turned out to be a waste of money since our sole intention was meeting up at

Big Shotz." The e-mailer complained that "the flyer clearly stated" Big Shotz was a participating venue but when they got to the door, not only did Big Shotz not honor the bracelet, they insisted these people pay another \$5 to get in. "We paid the cover charge of \$5 and went inside because our friends were meeting us there. My problem is why sell bracelets when they're not accepted as an admission? Please get back to me on this issue."

Needless to say, Big Shotz also refused to make any charity donation from the bonanza cash register they had on what in years past had been a dead Tuesday night in February. They won't take any phone calls about the matter and others who have tried to talk to the owner said he refuses even to discuss it. So 41 out of 42 clubs stepped up and did what they promised and this loser decided instead to be greedy. Big Shotz took advantage of the efforts of a lot of good people—volunteers from Hospice, race runners, Artvoice staff, sorority and fraternity volunteers, Citadel radio employees and volunteers from 103.3 the Edge, Oldies 104 and 97 Rock, United Way and Univera volunteers, float builders, Forever Elmwood, Buffalo Blue Bicycles, the Buffalo Police Department, the Buffalo Reserves, the Mayor's Impact Team and many others who spent hours outside on a cold February night to raise money for the Hospice & Palliative care charity. Big Shotz basically took money intended to comfort dying people and instead put it in their scummy pockets. This is like being at the scene of a car crash and shouting to the crowd, "Let me through, I want to help," and then sneaking away with the victim's wallet, watch and jewelry.

Quite frankly, and I hate saying this because I'm an avid promoter of Buffalo business, but by the time next year's Artvoice Mardi Gras event rolls around I hope Big Shotz is out of business. I'm sure another, more worthy tavern entrepreneur would be happy to take the location.

—jamie moses

POWER STRUGGLES Common Council reclaims right to fill vacancy

Change is hard to come by in this city, even when it's clearly written that the old way is the wrong way. A reminder of this fact came recently when Common Councilmember Marc Coppola won the special election for Byron Brown's old State Senate post in the 60th District, vacating the Delaware District seat.

For years, when circumstances left an unexpected vacancy in the Council, the other members simply appointed the candidate chosen by party leaders—namely, the party's committeemen and their chairman. But

when talk recently turned to replacing Coppola with another Democrat, South Councilmember Michael Kearns asked that the process be opened up, so that those without close ties to the Democratic Party leadership would have a fair chance at the seat. Not so fast, said the Delaware District committeemen, many of whom felt that this was simply an attempt to strip them of their power. At a recent meeting, one committeeman, Jim Bagarozza, said, "It's the right of the committeemen of the Delaware District to make this decision and all the councilmen should basically stay out of our business. It shows no respect to the people of the Delaware District, as well as the committeemen. We represent the people, it is our right..."

But Kearns' own experience in South Buffalo tells a slightly different story.

Kearns feels that he was shut out of the same process last April, when Jimmy Griffin vacated the South District seat. According to Kearns, he was never even given an opportunity to address the committeemen in South Buffalo before Jeffrey Conrad was given the nearly unanimous Democratic endorsement and appointed to the Council. Just six months later, Kearns beat Conrad in the Democratic primary, before going on to a landslide victory in November. It seems, in that case, that the Democratic Party was out of touch with its constituents and endorsed a candidate the people didn't want.

Kearns rightly points out that the city charter gives the Common Council the right to choose Coppola's replacement, as long as that person is a Democrat living in the Delaware District. The actual text reads, "...The remaining members of the Council shall appoint a qualified resident of the same political party and district of the councilmember whose place is vacant and so should be filled."

The Council agreed to open up the process and asked any interested candidates to submit letters of interest and individually meet with each councilmember. The four candidates who expressed interest were Michael LoCurto, Rosemarie LoTempio, Pedro Velez Lopez and Sam Marie.

At the same time, the Democrats continued with their own selection process, calling an open meeting on Monday, March 13, at the Parkside Lutheran Church in North Buffalo to meet with and review the candidates. The local Democratic brass were clearly upset over the Council's butting into what they consider to be their own business. Erie County Democratic Chairman Len Lenihan, who hosted the meeting, spoke to those feelings. "There's no justification for anybody other than the elected committeepeople from the district and the party that lost that member to make the recommendation," he said. "For somebody or some group to arbitrarily decide—from another district—who'll be councilman in this dis-



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