

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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trict is just simply wrong...Hopefully common sense will prevail. I don't believe that the majority of the members of this Common Council would be that reckless and do something like that."

Several committeemen stood up and, in turn, voiced similar sentiments. The word "right" was tossed around liberally.

Each of three candidates was allowed to introduce himself and field questions. The first, Michael LoCurto, is an aide to Assemblyman Sam Hoyt and has lived in the Delaware District his entire life. He attended PS 66, City Honors High School and the University at Buffalo, where he earned a bachelor's degree in Media Studies and a master's degree in Urban and Regional Planning. "This community and this city have given me a lot," LoCurto said, "and I want to give back." He stressed his work with Sam Hoyt and his urban planning background. LoCurto said he helped establish the city's Anti-Flipping Task Force and has plans for intelligent development on Main Street and Hertel, Delaware and Elmwood Avenues. "We don't need any more big-box development in Buffalo. We need intelligent, developmental decision-making. I will bring that to the Common Council."

Pedro Velez Lopez introduced himself as a 16-year veteran of local Democratic politics. Then, understanding that LoCurto was the heavy favorite, he pointed out that the Common Council does have a right and a responsibility to fill the vacant Council seat, a point that wasn't well received. "I would like this to be an open and fair process for all of us who are running who want to represent the Delaware District." Velez Lopez was born in Puerto Rico, moved to Buffalo when he was five and has lived in the Delaware District for more than 10 years. He's a licensed real estate agent and is currently earning a degree in Economics and Urban Studies. He wants to focus on housing issues, primarily targeting ways to increase property values.

Sam Marie, the final candidate to speak, is a political newcomer. A 22-year veteran of the Buffalo Police Department, as well as a Vietnam veteran and former Army Reserve drill sergeant, Marie said he's "leaning towards a law enforcement agenda." He'd particularly like to focus on quality-of-life issues, landlord licensing and high taxes. Marie has lived in the Delaware District for 28 years, graduated from PS 77 and Burgard Vocational, and has an AS in Business Management from Byrant & Stratton.

Rosemarie LoTempio, who works part-time in Councilmember Joe Golombek's office, wasn't present for the committee hearing, but is apparently still interested in the seat. She's been meeting separately with members of the Common Council for the past couple of weeks.

Council President Dave Franczyk and Councilmember Kearns also showed up at the meeting, and both addressed the audience in regard to the Council's plan for replacing Coppola. Franczyk said that the Council will take into account the decision of the Democratic committeemen. "We're not bound by law to take into consideration what the committeemen want, but they are the foot soldiers of the party process, they are obviously closer to the process and they have a lot of weight in recommending someone to the body." The audience didn't seem to buy it, though, and there was a lot of grumbling, head-shaking and sighing around the room.

Kearns tried to explain that he wasn't trying to undermine the Democratic committeemen. "All I wanted to do," said Kearns, "is bring to light a couple of inefficiencies and open up the process to outsiders. That's all it is, opening it up. And I think we accomplished that here tonight." He also pledged to vote with the committeemen.

This Monday, in a meeting held at the North Buffalo Community Center on Sanders Road, the Erie County Democratic Committee cast a nearly unanimous vote in support of LoCurto, who seems likely to succeed Coppola. Since then, four of the five Council members necessary to reach a decision have pledged their support to LoCurto, including Kearns, Franczyk, Dominic Bonifacio and Antoine Thompson. Pending a five-person majority—at publication time there were no developments—the Common Council will call a special meeting to announce the new Delaware District Councilmember. According to Bonifacio, that should happen later this week. "We have to fill the seat," Bonifacio says. "It's been vacant almost a month, and we can't leave a district seat open that long."

Though the end result will probably be the same—Mike LoCurto will be appointed to the Delaware District Council seat—the recent rift over whose right it is to name a successor did succeed in opening up the process to the politically unconnected. And that can only be a good thing.

—peter koch

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Our quagmire in Iraq turns three



PHOTO: ROSE MATTREY

Several hundred protesters gathered Saturday in Lafayette Square to mark the third anniversary of the American invasion of Iraq. For nearly two hours, students, veterans, activists and everyday people endured windchills of 10 degrees Fahrenheit, while calling for an end to the war and the return of US troops. There were signs of all shapes and messages. People banged tambourines and drums, and yelled into bullhorns. American, Palestinian and Peace flags cracked in the gusts. It was beautiful bedlam in the name of peace. Thirty wooden crosses were set across the base of the monument in the square, each one representing a WNYer killed in Iraq or Afghanistan. Their names were read off, as well as a short bio and his or her cause of death. The message of the day, which was sung loud and clear by all present was, "All we are saying is give peace a chance." Hopefully someone was listening.

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