

STADIUM TO SPOTLIGHT: THE BLACK HART OF ST. PAUL

Bethel alum and bar owner Wes Burdine creates space for the intersection of the Twin Cities' soccer and queer communities.

By Rachel Blood and Makenzi Johnson

Two hours before Minnesota United takes on Orlando City at Allianz Field at 7 p.m., the Black Hart of St. Paul buzzes with a low bass and the upbeat energy of the oldest queer bar in the city. Lyrics melt into the chatter interrupted by the clinking of glasses as Bethel alum and bar owner Wes Burdine weaves through the crowd to his place back behind the bar.

“Wes!” a man greets as Burdine passes, and he replies with a smile. A game of pool starts on the raised back platform and screens across the bar broadcast other sporting events before the night’s pre-game coverage begins.

The Black Hart is Burdine’s vision come to fruition, a place serving as the intersection of St. Paul’s soccer and queer communities. After graduating from Bethel University with a degree in English literature and obtaining master’s and doctorate degrees

from Marquette and University of Minnesota-Twin Cities, Burdine decided it was time to buy a bar.

After Burdine visited a soccer bar in Milwaukee, he found himself drawn to the distinct atmosphere and began wondering whether he could recreate it himself. About seven years later, he heard of a new soccer stadium being built in St. Paul and knew then that it could be possible. So, he went to every person he knew with an “adult paycheck” to see if they’d pitch in to create a soccer bar.

“Most people were like, ‘That’s really cute, but no,’ ” Burdine said. “It was a year of just asking for money.”

Over a few drinks, Burdine feeling “despondent” and reacquainting with someone he knew from graduate school and her husband, Burdine found his new business partner: Chris Newman. The people Burdine



Read Deutscher and Kyle Bernier play darts the evening of April 15. They’ve frequented the Black Hart for several years now, saying the welcoming atmosphere keeps them coming back for games of darts and karaoke duets in the back room. | Photo by Toby Ryberg

originally thought would be his business partners ended up backing out, but Newman said, “That sounds cool. I might be interested.”

Burdine searched the area for bars to buy, none of them really working out due to financial reasons, until it seemed the Townhouse was the best option. The Townhouse has been a historically gay bar since the 1960s, and Burdine was hesitant to even talk to the owner in fear of taking away the already established community and replacing it with soccer.

“I didn’t want to turn a gay bar into a sports bar — all of my friends would drive me out of town,” Burdine said. “I didn’t want to drive the queer people out, but make people feel like they could come together for different reasons.”

The previous owner had been waiting for someone to buy it from her, and Burdine realized it could be the perfect fit, even if not everyone understood the concept of a combined queer and soccer bar. The Black Hart opened in August 2018, 18 months before the opening of Allianz Field –

the new home of Minnesota’s Major League Soccer team, the Minnesota Loons.

“It wasn’t until we put [the bar] into place that I could really show people what that meant, but also realize and adjust to what it means to me as well,” Burdine said.

Five years later, between the bar and a spray-painted autograph by U.S. Women’s Soccer player Megan Rapinoe, darts fly at two Bullshooter dartboards. Kyle Bernier and Read Deutscher aim red and yellow between drinks. They have been here a number of times, and they say the open atmosphere of the place keeps them coming back.

“I’ve only had good experiences at Black Hart – our first experience was a few years ago. We liked the hole-in-the-wall vibe but also how welcoming it was,” Bernier said. “We’ve always felt safe there. Overall, it feels like a gem in St. Paul.”

Word got around and soon, this gem of St. Paul reached beyond the

Twin Cities. In October 2021, Burdine heard the U.S. Women’s National Team was coming to play at Allianz Field, so he hurried to contact a local artist to paint a mural of Rapinoe – famous for her pixie cut, being one of the few openly gay U.S. soccer players, fighting for equal pay and more – on the exterior wall of the bar. Burdine, with the intention of inviting the team himself, didn’t have to do much. Soon, Rapinoe was posed for photos in front of the mural, smiling with her arms stretched wide in one shot and in another locked in a handshake with Burdine in front of a sign that read, “WELCOME MADAME PRESIDENT RAPINOE.”

The team reached out to Burdine and asked to come see the bar, but could not actually come into the bar due to COVID-19 policies. Rapinoe apologized and told Burdine that she would have had a shot of tequila with him if she could have come in.

“I should have brought the tequila out, but she still owes me a tequila shot,” Burdine said. “I’m gonna hold her to that.”



Black Hart owner Wes Burdine serves drinks from the bar in the back room the night of the Minnesota United home game against Orlando City SC April 15. | Photo by Toby Ryberg

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Bartender Mark Privratsky pours draft beers and laughs with each customer who sits or hovers at the bar, most of whom are regulars. Privratsky, who met Burdine over some good-natured trash talk on soccer Twitter, moved to St. Paul from Duluth during COVID. Previously working in politics, he was looking for something new and reached out to Burdine inquiring about open positions. He was intrigued by the “combination of cultures with inclusive communities.” Not only that, but Burdine had owned the bar for a few years and Privratsky was struck by the fact that nearly all of its original Townhouse staff members had stayed through the transition in name and ownership.

“That said a lot to me, that the staff respected him and felt comfortable staying in that, and I can say from the regulars too, people appreciate the way he supports the community,” Privratsky said. “They know that he’s not queer, but he is fully an active ally. That’s a cool thing.”

Back at the dart boards, Deutscher nails the red circle just outside the bullseye, earning a glowing yellow 275 on the player screen. Bernier at 285 hits a 2, 9 and 20, maintaining the lead, and Burdine serves drinks from the bar in the back room, maintaining his business and the relationships he has built because of it.

Bernier and Deutscher grin at each other. Here, they love a space that loves them back.

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Burdine’s time at Bethel from 2000-2003 allowed him to create his own beliefs and ethics while realizing how important it is to foster community with the mentorship of professors and the student body. He would host low-key parties in his campus apartment, where he made homemade chai, a recipe courtesy of his study abroad in Nepal. Some friends would play guitar, but most would simply talk.

“There was a distinct animosity towards people who were anti-[Iraq] war or who opposed the treatment

of Muslims after 9/11. The group of close friends that I came to know were people who held different beliefs,” Burdine said. “What I do think happened is that there were professors [at Bethel] who really helped foster this idea of thinking critically and about social justice.”

A scarf pinned to the wall above the bar’s street-facing window reads “Soccer Supporters Against Fascism, Racism, Sexism and Homophobia.” Other scarves, a staple of soccer merchandise, are slung around necks or hanging off tables, knit with black and blue Loons slogans or rainbow stripes. Burdine has maintained his sense of social justice and the strong desire to have community and brought it into his bar.

As the clock hits 6:00 p.m. and Allianz Field’s gates open, fans with tickets to the home game are exchanged for fans without. A departing Florida fan cheers for Orlando City SC on his way out and is met with good-natured boos from smiling Minnesota fans. Three hours after the game begins, the Black Hart



Mark Privratsky has worked at the Black Hart for about three years, first as security and now as a bartender, after first being acquainted with bar owner Wes Burdine on Twitter over some friendly soccer trash talk. | Photo by Toby Ryberg

will host its weekly drag show.

“I believed that deep down [combining a gay bar with a soccer bar] could work ... and I knew it wouldn’t be a problem,” Burdine said. “I want it to be a space where people can come into somewhere they know is maybe a bit different and they’re adapting to that space.” Burdine even considered placing a neon sign outside reading “GAY” to allow incoming customers to adjust. Instead, the letterboard near the front door reads, “ASK US ABOUT OUR GAY AGENDA.”

In part, Privratsky says the Black Hart caters to different audiences at different times: drag shows late at night do not intersect with early evening soccer games or Monday night bingo, and plenty of customers frequent the bar specifically for sports or for drag, but some come for both. The two communities seem to blend naturally, each coexisting with the other and being supportive.

“I literally see the communities merge,” Privratsky said.

Customers often proudly tell him they have been frequenting the Black

Hart, previously the Townhouse, for decades, and these customers are enthusiastic about the newer influx of soccer fans. When fans return to the bar from a home game, buzzing from alcohol and sometimes victory, they have karaoke in the back room as a drag show rages out front.

“You can tell when soccer people haven’t been to a burlesque show or a drag show before, and they’re walking into this world, and it’s honestly a really cool space that people get to enjoy,” Privratsky said.

Privratsky worked security for more than a year, and during that time he noticed a distinctly supportive atmosphere. Oftentimes, the people he’s bartending for are the same people who put their hands under the arms of someone who made inappropriate or offensive comments and help Privratsky remove them from the bar.

“As a queer bar, anyone is welcome. You don’t have to be queer, but for people who are, it is a genuinely queer space,” Privratsky said. “That’s a really valuable thing

to our community because it’s a truly inclusive space, and I guess also in terms of St. Paul ... our bar is not vast majority white all the time. And that reflects the community, which for someone who lives in Midway, I like that because it means people probably aren’t feeling excluded.”

Soon, afternoon rays of sun streaming through the front windows will give way to the light of a spinning disco ball inside. The same tables where fans had pre-game beers five hours earlier will be replaced by drag artists and musicians for the Dick Von Dyke drag show. Every weekend, regardless of a victory or loss on the field, the bar will come alive. Some, like Bernier and Deutscher, will be throwing darts or singing karaoke duets. Others will order their favorite drink from Privratsky. But regardless of who walks in the door, Burdine will be there, too.