

# New Year's in Nanaimo

Revisiting the old stomping grounds

## COMMUNITY

Nathaniel Christopher

**I**T'S BEEN SEVEN years since I moved away from my hometown. On the day I completed high school I traded the quaint security of island life for the allure of a gay life in the big city. After a stint in Vancouver followed by my university years in Ontario I'm back in Nanaimo for a New Year's Eve visit.

I walk up the seawall, battling the wind until I find shelter in the basement of a tidy downtown hotel. At one time it was one of my few refuges from homophobia, but today it shelters me from the rain. There are no big neon signs, paintings or bright lights, just a doorway and a small sign that reads "70 Below."

Although it appears modest and unimpressive from the outside it's the only gay bar on Vancouver Island outside of Victoria.

I walk down the stairs to a cosy basement pub. It's 8 pm and the place is dead. I'm welcomed by the bar's co-owner Patrick Edwards, who chats with me while preparing the place for a busy night. It's a small, intimate venue reminiscent of an English pub with low ceilings, crossbeams and comfortable chairs. It has the sweet, slightly smoky musk of an old Robin's Donuts store.

"I don't know how it can smell like that," says Edwards. "There's no smoking in here."

Edwards tells me that the space has always been used as a bar. It's changed hands over the years and has gone back and forth between being a straight bar and a gay bar, although these days there's a lot of overlap.

"When this was a straight establishment, gay men would sit up against that wall over there," says Edwards as he gestures to a long, mirrored wall. "Right now the bar is more popular with straight people."

As I nurse my beer, I scan the room and old memories pop up. I notice a pool table packed away

on the dance floor. I remember losing a few games on it on the 19th birthday I celebrated for myself when I was 17.

"We're getting rid of it because dance night is too popular," says Edwards.

It's hard to imagine that such a small pub could accommodate a big dance night, but on New Year's Eve the place is hopping with a diverse crowd who came from far and wide for the event.

"It's like a family reunion tonight," says Edwards. "A lot of people here come and go, but a bunch of people always show at certain events such as Pride and New Year's, birthdays and the end of the school year. We have a lot of higher education students who come here."

By midnight, the place is packed, and there's scarcely a place to sit. The coat check has swelled into a mountain of leather and denim, and the distinct smell of cannabis sativa wafts through the doorways. The crowd is very diverse; no single demographic dominates. People of all ages, sizes and backgrounds drink, dance and socialize in the small place.

Li Kretzschmar, a tawny tattooed girl in a tank top, has come with her girlfriend Niomi. Originally from Ottawa, Kretzschmar has done the bar scene in Ottawa, Toronto and other small towns but describes 70 Below as the most inclusive, non-judgmental bar she's ever been to.

"In other bars, there are many petty rivalries, cliques and infighting," she says. "You'll have the gays against the lesbians, the bis against the gays or the lesbians against the lesbians. Whenever I come here, there is always someone who is happy to see me."

"Lots of people feel very comfortable and accepted here," she continues. "Trans people in particular. I have a trans friend from Vancouver who comes over sometimes. When he came to this place he was fucking ecstatic. He was so bloody happy to come here because trans people aren't looked down upon here. They are accepted and appre-



**PURR:** Niomi McKay (left), gets some love from her girlfriend Li Kretzschmar. '70 Below is the most inclusive, non-judgmental bar I've been to,' says Kretzschmar.

ciated here. People don't look at them sideways."

Alyssa Duffy used to work at the bar. She's here tonight to be in an inclusive, friendly environment. Although she's not queer, she still feels more at home in this place than many other local establishments.

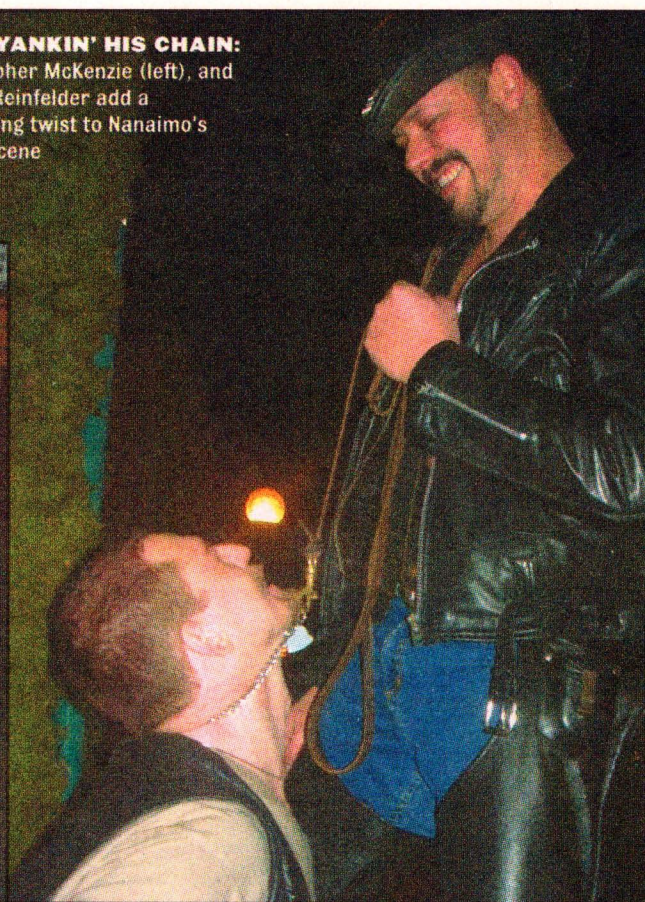
"Whether you are gay, straight, fat, skinny, black or white, there is no judging," she says. "You can wear what you want. Also, a lot of overweight people come here because they are looked down upon at other bars. It's all ages: old and young."

As soon as she says "old," a nearby table of men glance knowingly in our direction. Duffy returns a smile and a wave.

"He's my old boss. He was so sweet and wonderful," she explains, referring to the co-owner Dave. "There aren't many problems here."

After four beers, I'm having trouble keeping my notes legible. As I stumble towards the door, I find no shortage of people offering to share a joint. It's hard to stay on track, with so many people to talk to. I recognize some faces but most of the people are new. There seem to be a lot of new Nanaimo queers who've moved here from all over. The bar owner is from Col-

**JUST YANKIN' HIS CHAIN:** Christopher McKenzie (left), and James Reinfelder add a refreshing twist to Nanaimo's queer scene



orado and many patrons have moved from Vancouver,

attracted by the slower pace of life. Nanaimo has no gay village as such, but it does have a small gay leather community.

A man with a slight German accent and clean haircut explains how he moved with his partner to Nanaimo for the second time.

"We lived here a long time ago," he says. "We made a lot of money here as a gay couple the first time around. We've been together as a couple for 33 years and a triad for seven. We decided to retire here. We met our third here on our 25th anniversary. Same night, same bar."

He's flanked by his partner, their third, James Reinfelder, and their friend Christopher McKenzie. Together they comprise Nanaimo's gay leather community.

"There is no real leather community in Nanaimo, other than us," says Reinfelder. "We invite people from all over the world to our house in the Old City."

McKenzie is one of those houseguests who has become a resident of Nanaimo. He's wearing a chain of dog tags, with a leather vest. "I moved here seven or eight months ago," he says. "I came here one night and met these guys and

hit it off from the start." He finds Nanaimo to be a comfortable, accepting place for himself. "I don't apply labels. I just be myself. If I can't be myself, then I don't want to be here. It's live and let live."

Reinfelder has seen a lot of changes in Nanaimo, to the point where he feels comfortable in many settings, not just queer space.

"It was different 13 years ago when I moved here," he remembers. "It was very redneck, but it's opened up because of courageous people taking chances. Now, for the gay community on the whole, we don't need to go to a gay bar. Our bar is an alternative club; there are more straights than gays. It's where most people feel comfortable."

"We can go pretty much anywhere and feel comfortable," he continues. "It's different than the Vancouver gay ghetto, where people conform to their own small community rather than the community as a whole. We still like the comfort of being in a gay club and interacting with each other physically or however. When you come visit to Nanaimo, make sure you call us up!" says Reinfelder.

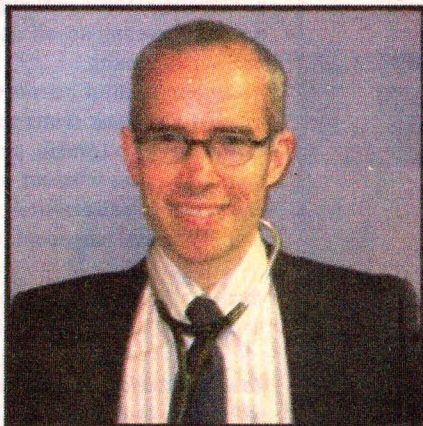
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