

<http://www.philly.com/philly/entertainment/39418737.html>

Posted on Wed, Feb. 11, 2009

Trashy, sassy and successful

Two Philadelphia women stage popular parties for the gay and lesbian community.

By A.D. Amorosi

For The Inquirer



RON TARVER / Staff Photographer

Getting together at Bump Lounge are (from left) Corinne Thornton, Tracy Buchholz and Erica Foltz. Buchholz and Thornton have organized social events for the last few years.

On a bitter cold Saturday at Vesuvio, more than 400 people - gay guys and girls, transgender kids, hipster straights willing to experiment - heat up the South Philly nightspot.

There's dancing on the tables, kissing by the billiard tables, huddled gatherings in every dark nook and corner - pretty spicy stuff for a Bella Vista Italian restaurant and disco.

This is Tracy Buchholz's doing.

"It's freaking incredible," Buchholz said of the Scene - a once-a-month party she created where girls dance on tables at the same time kids play pool. "The place is packed with every age group, color and race. It's the single greatest party I've thrown."

Buchholz and Corinne Thornton - Philadelphians both - have spent the last few years holding events for the city's lesbian, bisexual and transgender population to raise awareness, social consciousness and money. Some say their soirees, like the Scene, are part of the reason Philly placed 15th among the Top 20 U.S. destinations chosen by Community Marketing Inc., a noted resource for gay and lesbian research.

But as you might have guessed, these aren't your run-of-the-mill do-good functions. Buchholz and Thornton have made being conscious trashy, sassy fun.

Even Thornton, who's a bit reserved, has been known to get a little wild at her monthly FUSE parties, held at South Street's XO Lounge. "I've been known to take a turn on the go-go box," Thornton said of a bash where Legos and hula hoops are plentiful and games of spin-the-bottle are the norm.

Making events sexy is a recent twist for the older, established lesbian community in Philadelphia.

"I'm going to resist the term *elders* but will say that the activist experience of many people I came out with was that we gave of our time," says Gloria Casarez, director of LGBT affairs for Philadelphia. She joined Mayor Nutter's administration in July after leading HIV/AIDS organizations and antipoverty initiatives since her teens.

She and her peers grew grassroots organizations, learning how to be donors with their money and dedication. "But these recent fund-raising efforts have been laced with fun and have the ability to raise very real dollars for very real use here in Philadelphia," Casarez said.

"People are having fun; that's key," says Buchholz, 29. "I hope I'm helping raise awareness while contributing literally and figuratively to making our community come together and helping round out our nightlife, especially for the younger crowds."

Since 2004, Buchholz has created and produced parties such as Elevate, famous for including all the LGBTQ community - the latest acronym for the homosexual community that stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer. (Many parties instead are ladies-only.) And in 2006, as women's event chair of the Sapphire Fund, which supports the physical and mental health of the local gay community, Buchholz pushed to have the Blue Ball - Philly's annual bash - include an event for and by lesbians, called Emerge. Until then, no headliner events existed for the city's lesbian crowd.

She also raised money for beneficiaries including the William Way Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Community Center and the Mazzoni Center's LGBT health-and-wellness services. Though she left Philly in 2007 for Los Angeles, Buchholz returned last year and started the Scene, which takes place every fourth Saturday.

Thornton, a Sapphire Fund board director with master's degrees in social work, law and social policy, enjoys the challenges of putting the *fun* into fund-raising - even when she's at her most serious. "Oppression intersects - that's an ideal that guides what I do," says Thornton, 30. "Being queer can mean a lot of things. We should celebrate those differences, especially within our own community."

Buchholz and Thornton remember events that excited them (and didn't) when they first came out. Each mentions the traveling "G Room" party, hosted by promoters Marion Leary and Amanda Leahy - an underground bash that was an alternative to the adult crowds at Sisters, a staple in Center City.

When G Room ended in May 2004, Buchholz and Thornton found something lacking in the party scene.

"One of my first nights in a Philly lesbian club, I heard a girl say about a group of trans-women, 'They need to go to a men's bar,' " says Thornton. "I was shocked and sad by that comment. Not that that is everyone's mentality, but it was an eye-opener."

That inspired Thornton to create FUSE, which she hopes feels welcoming. Buchholz, too, wanted to fill the void left by G Room's departure. She used the tagline "boy/boy, girl/girl, girl/boy, you decide" for her parties. To both promoters, if someone is a friend to the gay community, they're in.

That's what makes Philly's new lesbian scene fun. Recently created parties such as "3 Dollar Bill" at World Cafe Live and new clubs such as Stir and Rainbow Eye follow in the footsteps of Buchholz's and Thornton's vision. "Corinne and Tracy reinvigorate life in Philly," says R Perry Monastero, executive director of the Delaware Valley Legacy Fund, which aims to raise money for LGBTQ and straight-allied communities.

"I've seen firsthand how their parties and events raise important awareness, especially among younger women - and men, too - about the needs of our local community."

Having worked with Thornton and Buchholz on fund-raising efforts, Casarez knows each woman brings something significant to the table. They raise cash and consciousness. "At Tracy and Corinne's events," said Casarez, "you're going to have a good time, shake your booty, meet some new people, and maybe learn something new, too."