

Keeping the memory alive

Portland's Blackstones to hold two benefits for a scholarship in the name of a beloved bartender

by Tony Giampetruzzi

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If there's one thing to be said about gay bars, it's that they know the meaning of charity.

That won't be typified any better than at the end of this month when Portland's Blackstones will hold a Comedy Night and Auction to benefit a scholarship in the name of a beloved bartender that died from an aggressive cancer three years ago.

Charles Greer was a teacher at Old Orchard Beach High School in Old Orchard Beach, Maine - but at night, he moonlighted as a bartender at Blackstones, a popular neighborhood bar in nearby Portland's West End.

"People adored him," says Ralph Cusack, a Blackstones' owner. "He was closeted at school, so stayed fairly low profile. He would bar tend, but tried to stay away from things like being on our float at Pride or bartending Pride events because they were much more public. But, he was always working behind the scenes. If there were ten thousand envelopes that needed to be licked, he'd be the one to do it."

That said, Greer was an institution in Portland - before bartending at Blackstones, he could be found behind the bar at The Underground and at Cycles before that.

According to Cusack, Greer was preparing for a rafting trip three years ago and, during a required physical, doctors discovered that he had lung cancer. He continued to work, but passed away six months after the diagnosis.

That was when Blackstones' Spring for Education was instituted to supplement a scholarship program that had been set up by Greer before he died. In the first two years of the event, which featured an auction at Blackstones, more than \$20,000 was raised.

And, now that that money is endowed, Cusack and his partner Butch Fenton decided to do something a little different ... to spread the wealth by raising money for both the Charles Greer Memorial Scholarship and the Rainbow Business and Professional Association (a group for gay business owners in Maine) Scholarship Fund.

"Now that Charles' fund is quite healthy, we want to be able to donate money to a fund that is available to students all over the state," says Cusack. "And we've expanded our programing to reach our goals."

One event has now become two with the first, a Comedy Night Fundraiser, scheduled for April 26 at Blackstones.

Note: this isn't your typical comedy show, but rather a gala event with limited tickets available. Only 75 people will be admitted, and the perks and line-up will be wellworth the admission price.

For \$30, guests are invited to join other do-gooders at 6 p.m., an hour before the show for wine and hors d'oeuvres (prepared by David's Restaurant). For those interested in just the show, \$25 will get you in the door.

Hosting that evening will be Kitti Chanel (the alter ego of Anthony Moulton), while comedians will include Stephanie Doyle, Nicholas Gill, Ian Harvie, Dan Frederickson, Christine O'Leary and the Improv Group.

Doyle, a native of Flint, Michigan, is a regular at the Comedy Connection and works at the University of Southern Maine's WMPG, while Dan Fredercikson is an up-and-comer from Manchester, Maine who is winning awards around the state.

You're certainly familiar with Bostonian Ian Harvie who refers to himself as "A transgendered (TG), butch, female to Something More Masculine [FTX(M)], gender queer, comedian ... for those who know what that means, great. For all others, you might refer to me (tenderly) as the 'trannie comic'."

"I grew up on Beaver Pond -- for real - in the rural mountain town, Bridgton, Maine until the age of twelve. My first comedy performance was in a family variety show on New Year's Day 1975. I was standing in front of a fitted sheet hanging on a clothesline in the spare bedroom at my aunt and uncle's house in New Hampshire. It was a period in my life that I was slightly obsessed with the Carol Burnett Show and her cast," says co-performer Ian Harvie. "Channeling the energies of Tim Conway and Rich Little, I performed an impression of Rich Little, doing Richard Nixon, a complicated and technical feat. As I recall, my impression 'killed.' So what if the audience of all 7 or 8 people were family members. For years after that, I received regular requests for that impression and I obliged every time. Still to this day, if a family member were to ask, I would do it in a heartbeat."

Today, Harvie is a regular at comedy clubs and colleges throughout New England and beyond. For more on Harvie, connect to www.myspace.com/ianharvie.

And then there's belle Christine O'Leary.

Last May, O'Leary was crowned the winner of Portland's Funniest Professional Contest only a year after her debut in stand up comedy at the Comedy Connection in Portland. As a graduate of Comedy Connection producer Tim Ferrell's comedy class, O'Leary was chosen by judges out of 100 contestants, 20 semifinalists and six finalists-five of whom were men.

"Mama took it home," O'Leary joked about the \$1,000 cash prize.

This funny lady is also a relative newbie to the world of comedy. She's worked with at-risk youth as a social service provider for a good chunk of her life, and has also logged hours in Southern Maine GLBT non-profits, and all of that experience has been percolated into some fantastic punch lines during her show.

But, we couldn't be more glad that she stumbled into Tim Ferrell's comedy workshop two years ago, because both social work and making us laugh are good for humanity. Check her out at www.christineolearly.com.

All the proceeds from the Comedy Show will benefit the Charles Greer Memorial Scholarship Fund.

However, on April 30, everyone is invited back to Blackstones (and there won't be a cap on those admitted) for an auction to benefit both funds.

"Anything and everything," says Cusack of the items that will be up for auction, "The first year we had a guitar autographed by Aerosmith, so you never know what might be available. There's no rhyme nor reason to what we'll have."

Well, In Newsweekly has a bit of an in, so we can safely say that items from stained glass to services by local masseurs to dinners for two."

The Spring for Education Auction gets underway at 5 p.m., on April 30, but doors will be open at 3 p.m.

"This really has raised awareness on two levels. We always go to Old Orchard Beach High School now and present the check, and we receive beautiful notes from students," says Cusack. "Sometimes they are addressed to Mr. and Mrs. Blackstone, but that's okay." •

For more information on the charity events at Blackstones located at 6 Pine Street in Portland, Maine, connect to www.blackstones.com.