



Larry's  
NIGHTCLUB

# FIGHT CLUBS

IT'S SATURDAY NIGHT, AND YOU'RE HEADED TO A DOWNTOWN CLUB FOR AN EVENING OF MUSIC, DANCING AND DRINKING. BUT WITH NIGHTCLUB VIOLENCE MAKING HEADLINES, IS IT STILL SAFE TO GO OUT?

BY TODD MATTHEWS

PHOTOGRAPHS BY RYAN SCHIERLING

AND WHAT'S THE CITY DOING TO KEEP A VIBRANT CLUB SCENE ON TAP?

ON A SATURDAY NIGHT LAST FALL, patrons were lined up to enter Larry's Nightclub, a popular Pioneer Square nightspot known for its rap music and late-night dancing. On the sidewalk, near the sleek black awning hanging over the club entrance, an A-frame sign advertised \$2 cocktails until 11 p.m. A security camera monitored outside activity. Inside, five more security guards kept an eye on the full dance floor, where the music was loud and the atmosphere unsettling. Overall, the club felt tough, aggressive and intimidating. ¶ A couple of months later, the club's liquor license was pulled, a response to a number of violent incidents that had occurred outside its doors. Without a license, Larry's closed, and, as of press time, remained that way. In fact, violence has erupted in

a number of Seattle clubs over the last few years. In 2003, a 22-year-old man leaving Mr. Lucky nightclub on Lower Queen Anne was struck and paralyzed during a drive-by shooting. A year later, a 24-year-old Bellevue man was beaten to death with a 4-foot-long pipe in a parking lot outside the same club. Last spring, two men were shot (one in the face, another in the arm) outside the old Club Medusa in Belltown. Also last year, a man kicked out of Belltown Billiards fired several shots into the air, then into a crowd, before he was wounded by police gunfire. ¶ In October, Larry's was the scene of a high-profile incident in which Seattle Seahawk Ken Hamlin was involved in a fight while leaving the club. He suffered a broken skull, clotted blood in the brain and a broken hand.

Numerous violent incidents have occurred outside of the now-shuttered Larry's Nightclub in Pioneer Square

That incident led Seattle Mayor Greg Nickels to speak out against nightclub violence. "A healthy nightlife is an essential part of what makes downtown and other neighborhoods exciting places to live," Nickels said during a press conference at City Hall last November. "But we will insist that clubs and bars are safe places for both customers and the community. Simply put, a vibrant nightlife shouldn't mean a violent nightlife."

Even before the Hamlin incident, city leaders and the police had started work to rein in nightclub violence, holding club owners accountable for safety at their businesses. But their strategy is viewed as strong-arming by some, and by others as seriously misguided.

**TO LEARN MORE ABOUT NIGHTCLUB SAFETY,** I head to police headquarters one afternoon last fall to talk with Police Chief Gil Kerlikowske about the mayor's Joint Assessment Team (JAT). Established early in 2005, the team represents an ambitious and unprecedented strategy that calls for the police department to work with a team that includes city inspectors, a fire marshal, police officers, the Washington State Liquor Control Board (LCB), Public Health—Seattle & King County, and representatives from several city departments (Revenue and Consumer Affairs, Planning and Development, Transportation and the city attorney).

While sweeping through Seattle's bars, restaurants and nightclubs (any of the city's 2,000 businesses with liquor licenses), team members look for a broad range of public-safety concerns, including overcrowding, over-serving alcohol and improperly marked or blocked fire exits. Violations are collected in a database and, if a club has too many public-safety concerns, the city informs the LCB and asks the agency to suspend or revoke the club's alcohol license.

Kerlikowske, dressed in dark slacks and a white shirt opened at the collar, is joined by Assistant Chief Linda Pierce, a tall, thin woman with short brown hair and an authoritative demeanor. To understand the JAT, she says, it's important to understand how police officers dealt with nightclub violence in the past.

Historically, when bars closed in the West Precinct, a nightclub-dense area that includes Pioneer Square, downtown and Queen Anne, thousands of people

emptied into the streets at 2 a.m., residents complained of noise, brawls erupted and West Precinct officers would be overwhelmed.

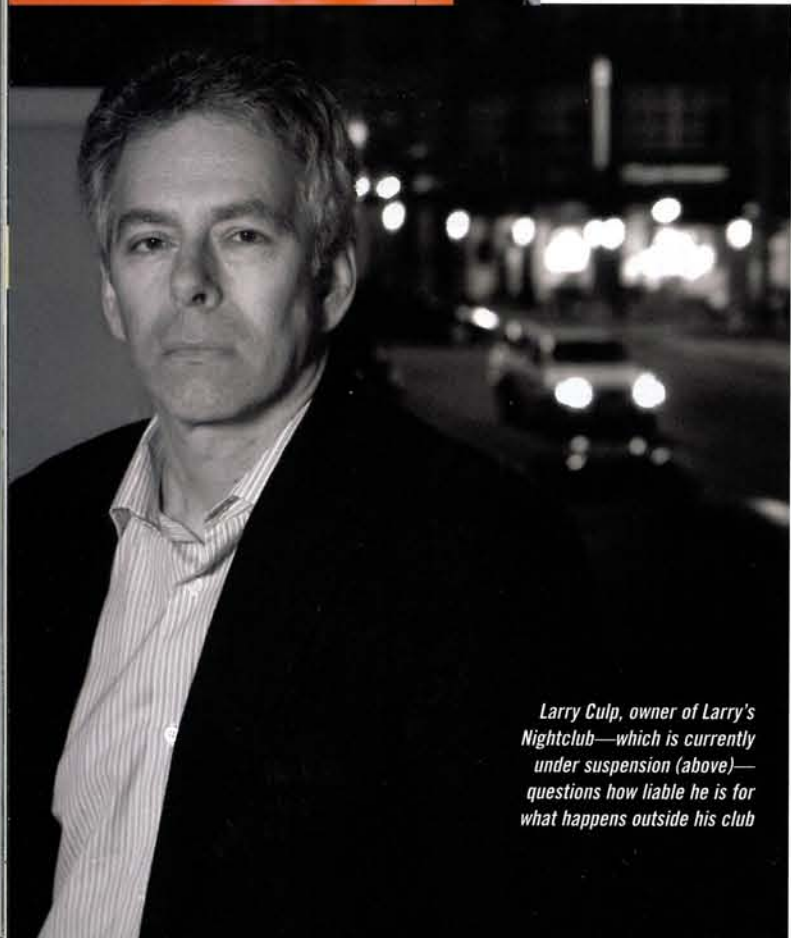
The officers were frustrated, says Pierce, who previously served as the West Precinct's captain. They could respond to the calls, but they couldn't address underlying causes: A club that was overcrowded or over-serving alcohol might be fueling brawls and other violence, for example. Police didn't have the authority or the manpower to take action.

The city's nightclubs, she explains, answer to several regulatory authorities. Overcrowding falls to the fire marshal, over-serving to the LCB and actual acts of violence to the police. For Pierce, it was a fractured arrangement: "You couldn't really address the baseline issues of overcrowding, not enough room or overservice when you were fighting with larger problems, such as actual incidences of assault or injury."

When the mayor and police chief sought a solution last year to nightclub violence, it was Pierce who suggested looking at the issue from the ground up by proactively making sure nightclubs were safe to begin with. The way Pierce and Kerlikowske see it, if fire exits are clearly marked, if clubs aren't overcrowded and if customers aren't being over-served, there's a better chance for a safe environment. Thus, the idea of the JAT was born.

Though on the surface this strategy seems reasonable, it's not always easy to connect the dots. How does inspection of admission taxes help prevent brawls between club-goers? Can a clearly marked exit help prevent a drive-by shooting?

**"HOW MUCH LIABILITY DOES A CLUB OWNER BEAR? SOME, PROBABLY. BUT NOT ALL OF IT. RATHER THAN CONDEMN ME AND MY CLUB, LET'S LOOK AT WHAT HAPPENED. YES, FIGHTS OCCURRED. DID THEY START INSIDE THE CLUB? NO. WHAT SAFETY MEASURES DID WE TAKE? EVERYTHING UNDER GOD'S CREATION."**



Larry Culp, owner of Larry's Nightclub—which is currently under suspension (above)—questions how liable he is for what happens outside his club



At The War Room on Capitol Hill (above), the vibe is happy and positive, partly due to the club's well-trained security staff, aka peacekeepers (left)

One club owner asking these questions is David Meinert. Co-owner of The Mirabeau Room, a Lower Queen Anne nightclub, Meinert is arguably the most politically active nightclub owner in Seattle (six years ago, he helped craft and fought for the All Ages Dance Ordinance, a law that opened the door to live music for minors in the city).

"What the mayor's plan [the JAT] does is looks into the thousands of businesses out there and further regulates them, as opposed to looking at places that have the most issues," Meinert asserts. The city does need to regulate things like admission taxes and open-flame permits, he says, but "even if all those things were perfect, none of it speaks to violence. It's not going to keep shootings from happening." He's also concerned that clubs with no history of violence are unfairly targeted under the plan.

Kerlikowske has heard that criticism but says he wants to address nightclub safety fairly and comprehensively. He'd rather create a baseline of safety for all clubs than simply target so-called "problem clubs." Safety concerns, he says, aren't limited to brawls or drive-by shootings. He points to the February 2003 tragedy at a nightclub near Providence,



Rhode Island, in which 100 people were killed and 200 injured when pyrotechnics during a live music performance set the club ablaze. "When you think about the real potential for loss of life and the real danger for club owners, it really is from fire," he says.

**IN JANUARY, AT THE URGING** of the police department and the specific request of Mayor Nickels, the LCB suspended Larry's Nightclub's liquor license. Evidence from the JAT, which collected information on the club, says Chief Kerlikowske, supported the action, as did a stacked pile of police reports documenting violence there.

The October incident involving 24-year-old Seattle Seahawk free safety Ken Hamlin has received the most attention. During the brawl, one man hammered the football player with his forearm, sending Hamlin, 6-foot-2 and 210 pounds, to the ground. One of the men then pulled a street sign off a nearby pole and hit Hamlin repeatedly, striking his head, chest and neck. The injuries Hamlin suffered ended his NFL season.

Last November, a male club-goer inside Larry's flashed a gun at a female club-goer, who reported the incident to Seattle police. When cops arrived, the man was gone.



**Marcus Lalario, co-owner of the War Room on Capitol Hill, has been proactive in his approach to security and safety**

In December, according to police, security guards pepper-sprayed an allegedly intoxicated man after he tried to force his way inside. Police officers also claim that on Christmas Eve two men were beaten by two other men waiting in line to enter the nightclub.

Finally, an incident on New Year's Eve spurred the city to take action. According to police, on that night two customers brawled inside the club, and one person was stabbed in the chest with a broken beer bottle. Security staff moved the fight outside the club, and the victim—a 40-year-old man whose face and hands were covered in blood—staggered to a police car parked nearby. He told an officer he was stabbed at Larry's. When cops arrived at the nightclub, according to police, a security person refused to cooperate, swore at one of the officers and disappeared inside.

"There is a pattern of violence at Larry's, and the club has clearly become a threat to public safety," wrote Nickels in his letter to the LCB.

When I speak with owner Larry Culp about the violence linked to his club, he jumps to its defense and deflects responsibility: His nightclub was targeted by police and attracted scrutiny because of its African-American clientele and rap music, reporters were on a witch hunt and other club owners in the area disliked him because of the negative attention.

"I don't condone or accept violent activity at my club," he says. Culp's version of the violence? Much of it occurred outside his club—on the sidewalk, down the street, around the corner. The Hamlin brawl? That occurred outside, after the football player left the club.

"I'm not going to go any further until we distinguish what goes

**LALARIO'S APPROACH TO SECURITY IS UNIQUE. HIS CLUB FEATURES "PEACEKEEPERS" RATHER THAN SECURITY GUARDS. IT'S MORE THAN A CLEVER WORD CHOICE—IT'S AN IMPORTANT PART OF HOW HE MAINTAINS SAFETY AT THE CLUB.**

on inside or outside the club," he explains. "How much liability does a club owner bear? Some, probably. But not all of it. Rather than condemn me and my club, let's look at what happened. Yes, fights occurred. Did they start inside the club? No. What safety measures did we take? Everything under God's creation."

Culp says he worked with Assistant Chief Pierce to tackle some of the safety concerns. On busy nights, the club operated a "rolling closure"—stopping alcohol service at 1:30 a.m. but staying open as late as 3 a.m. Instead of putting 200 people on the street at once, customers left over a couple of hours. Also, bouncers moved through the club to monitor patrons and didn't allow loitering in front of the club.

But police officers claim recurring violence plagued the club. And when the Liquor Control Board suspended Culp's license in January for six months, he hired an attorney who tried unsuccessfully to persuade a judge to toss out the suspension on the grounds that Culp's due-process rights were violated. Today, the club is shuttered and a bright orange notice announcing the suspension is taped to the front door. And the violence—at this location—has ended.

Larry's isn't the only nightclub with its share of trouble. When I visited Mr. Lucky last November, I asked owner Kyriakos Kyrkos what he thought about the violence linked to his club. How accountable was he? Was the city fairly addressing nightclub safety?

Kyrkos was polite but reticent—he refused to comment.

**ACCORDING TO KERLIKOWSKE**, club-owner responsibility does extend beyond the door, and he says that many club owners understand that: "It doesn't do their businesses any good if [club owners] say, 'Gee, it happened five feet outside my door.'"

Former Seattle City Attorney Mark Sidran agrees. I spoke with Sidran last fall, before the LCB took action against Larry's. He recalled eight nightclub-related homicides during his tenure at City Hall, between 1990 and 2001. At the time, he called for the LCB to hold clubs accountable for public safety. "Washington state law makes it clear that licensees must operate in the public interest," Sidran, still a strong advocate for nightclub controls, says. "I think it's fair to say that when you have recurring patterns of violence and unruly behavior inside or outside a nightclub, that is not in the public interest. What needs to happen—and in my view is critical—is for [the LCB] to step up to its responsible and legal authority to hold nightclubs responsible for what happens outside their clubs."

Before Larry's closed, I interviewed a bouncer who worked at a nearby club (he asked that his name and club not be identified). He was candid about Larry's. "The violence has escalated [in Pioneer Square] because of that club," he told me. "The security guards at Larry's drag the fights from inside of the club out onto the sidewalks."

He leafed through the clipboard he was holding. "Here's what we think of the club," he said, handing me an 8-by-10 glossy photo-

graph of an oversize sign usually posted on a window at Larry's. Instead of the name "Larry's Nightclub," the photograph was altered to read "Larry's Fightclub."

**LARRY'S NIGHTCLUB WASN'T ALWAYS KNOWN FOR VIOLENCE.**

Culp ran his business for nearly 20 years as a blues club. It was homier, attracted older patrons and only needed a small security team to keep things under control. Three years ago, he changed the music format to rap—and found himself investing heavily in increased security.

Though Culp claims he played the same music found at many other clubs, Charles Mudede, associate editor at *The Stranger* and a music critic who writes about Seattle's hip-hop scene, sees a link between music and violence. According to Mudede, DJ-driven hip-hop music typically focuses on a rich tradition of dancing and non-violence, but rap focuses on the sensational aspects of the rapper, usually with an emphasis on the artist's hyper-violent street credibility.

A club like The War Room offers dance-driven hip-hop music, says Mudede, and that's why violence isn't an issue. At Larry's, however, the music was largely rap, and therefore attracted violence. It created what he calls "tuff turf."

"When 50 Cent's movie was released, somebody was shot dead in front of a theater," Mudede points out.

"That's rap. That's the energy it thrives on. Club owners, when they play rap, there's a lot of people who come, and it's very popular, and they make a lot of money. But they have to face it. The energy and the message is violent, and violence could happen. You can't separate what happens from the event at the club, and the music that was at the event."

Music may be part of the equation, but Kerlikowske and Pierce say club owners make a big difference. "I think those nightclubs in which the level of training and quality of security personnel is high, there's usually a higher level of safety," Kerlikowske says. "Paying attention, dealing with problems and teaching mediation skills to security personnel in order to prevent things—all of that factors in."

**MIXED IN WITH THE ISSUE** of nightclub

safety is the city's goal for increasing residential density downtown. While Belltown started the trend, numerous high-end condo developments are breaking ground or are in development for the city's downtown core. But downtown residents don't always mix well with a vibrant nightlife.

"It's not a problem if you don't have anyone living downtown or if you don't have any clubs or entertainment downtown," says Seattle City Council member Nick Licata. How can we keep people interested in moving downtown and keep the nightclub industry alive and well?"

Local developer Triad is banking on a

vibrant nightlife in order to sell its condominiums. Triad has some 700 residential units either under construction or planned in the Seattle metro area. "A lot of the people who move downtown do so for activity, vibrancy and vitality—and a lot of that causes noise," says Triad representative Brett Allen. "But we're selling a lot of condo units in very active and noisy areas."

As we went to press, Belltown neighbors and the city had just worked out a good-neighbor agreement with Twist, a new lounge in the neighborhood, which puts restrictions on the way Twist operates. The Mayor's office was touting the agreement as a possible model for a 14-member task force that is trying to find ways for late-night businesses and residents to co-exist. The task force was due to make recommendations to the mayor in March.

**RISING NIGHTCLUB ENTREPRENEUR** Marcus Lalario, 29, of The

War Room on Capitol Hill, a neighborhood known for its concentration of condos and apartments (three apartment buildings are across the street), believes it is possible to have it all: the nightlife, the safety, the nearby residents. When I visited the club shortly after midnight on a recent Saturday night, there was a line stretching from The War Room's entrance—where a team of security personnel checked

IDs, patted down customers for weapons and drugs, and collected a \$10 cover—down to the corner. Hip-hop beats and a roaring din of conversation poured out of the club's front doors. Inside, a few hundred people were packed into the sprawling, two-story club.

At one end of the club, a bartender scrambled to pour drinks and make change. At the other end, in another room, a DJ with headphones, illuminated by a red spotlight, played a steady rotation of hip-hop for an appreciative crowd. For 24-year-old Eastside resident Courtney Ottosen, The War Room offers the active nightlife she's looking for. "Everyone here is friends with everyone else," says Ottosen, a petite, dark-haired woman fashionably dressed in a tight black T-shirt and jeans.

Safety is a concern for Ottosen—one reason she chose The War Room. "The security here is nice," she explains. "Problems get dissolved here real quick."

When he opened The War Room about a year ago, Lalario says, he heard that neighbors were complaining about noise. He responded by meeting with the owners of the apartment buildings. "They had my cell-phone number; they had the head of security's number; they had the club's number," says Lalario. "I said, 'If there's an issue, call and we'll turn the music down.'" Lalario is conscious of his neighbors: The club doesn't have music on its upstairs deck, and he typically ends the music by 1:45 a.m. "The crowd is

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**Violence has broken out at other Seattle nightspots such as Belltown Billiards (above) and Mr. Lucky (below) on Lower Queen Anne**

## Fight Clubs

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dispersed, we clean the sidewalks and we try to get everything done by 2," he says.

Lalario's approach to security is also unique. His club features "peacekeepers" rather than security guards. It's more than a clever word choice—it's an important part of how he maintains safety at the club. His security guards wear black T-shirts with the word "PEACEKEEPER" on the chest. Though visitors are patted down at the door and their ID is checked, the peacekeepers, who also circulate through the crowd, make an effort to be approachable and friendly toward customers.

"You can't be responsible for everyone who comes into the club," Lalario says. "If you put a thousand people in a club, it's like putting animals in a cage. I guess it's being able to break up a situation—or knowing how to break it up—before it happens. Break it up respectfully, and be cool to these people."

"We have a very nonviolent club," explains Laurie (she asked that just her first name be used), a young woman with a shaved head, wiry frame and calming presence who supervises the team of peacekeepers. "At a lot of nightclubs, the security intimidates customers. We don't want to do that. We want people to feel comfortable."

Lalario was unfazed about the city's plan for addressing nightclub safety. Last year, when he heard inspectors were visiting nightclubs, he collected all the paperwork they would be looking for and organized it in a notebook. When inspectors finally did visit early this year, everything checked out.

**Theories abound** about the best way to solve nightclub violence, and it's unclear, so far, whether the JAT will be the long-term solution. So many elements go into the success of a club: the music, the security, that difficult-to-define vibe, the crowd that comes and, yes, the stamp the owner puts on his or her business. Leaving one thing out, adding another, can tip the balance. Nightclub violence isn't a new issue. As the city grows, becomes denser and even more urban, it may be that some violence will always be part of the scene—controlled, but not eliminated.

When I spoke with Lalario about the attention nightclubs are receiving from City Hall and the police department, he made a point that shouldn't get lost in the discussion.

"If they're trying to create something to make the public feel safe, that's great," he says. "As long as it doesn't harm what's going on in these clubs, and it's supposed to help, that's fine." **S**



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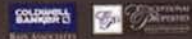


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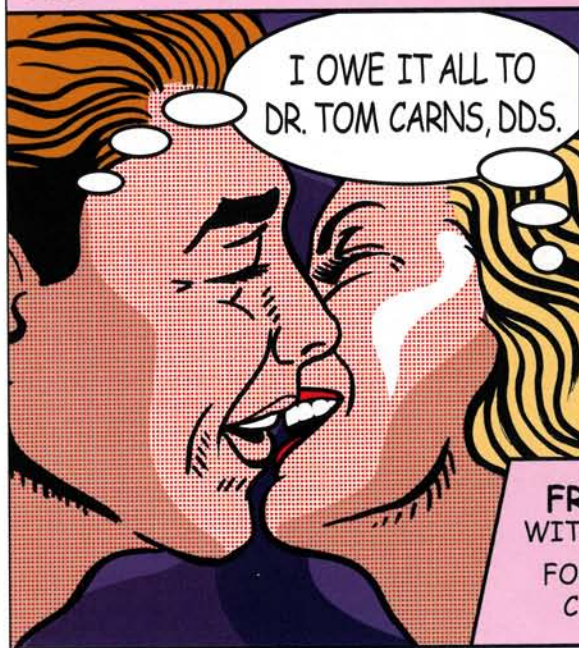
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