

# La Cage Celebrates Its Silver Anniversary

## CONSTANT CHANGE KEY TO MILWAUKEE'S LANDMARK GAY NIGHT CLUB TURNING 25

By Michail Takach

Spring 1984. The AIDS virus is identified just as the mortality rate approaches 50%. Ten million people are starving in Ethiopia despite international relief efforts. And the Cold War could become a nuclear winter at any minute. And yet, Frankie says, "relax," as MTV is arriving in many Milwaukee neighborhoods for the first time. The age of the music video had arrived, and it was true - you would never look at music the same way again. Night life was changing, and the race to open Milwaukee's first gay video bar was on.

The February 9 issue of *Wisconsin IN Step* reported: "...the old Nikos in Milwaukee is reopening soon, under new ownership and management. The place was gutted and restyled, and will offer dancing, video and live entertainment. Keep an eye out."

Nobody really remembers Nikos now. Some people remember it as a south side, blue-collar "rough-neck" bar, others remember a polka/concertina bar, and then there's the people who think it was a Mexican restaurant. If anyone knew what Nikos was in spring 1984, they would quickly forget, because the new video bar at 801 S. 2nd Street was about to reinvent the neighborhood.

On March 20, 1984, the bar opened as "La Cage Aux Folles" in a relatively tiny storefront. But even then, La Cage was thinking big, offering "Milwaukee's finest cocktail hour" every weekday (complete with complimentary hors d'oeuvres) and a seven-day schedule of video-themed event nights. This was the arcade age, after all, and 2-for-1 video games was another big draw. The bar's theme was "'Where You Can Always Be What You Are,' and it meant it: La Cage was the only place offering free drinks for anyone who came in drag on Friday and Saturday.

Word got out about the new "it" spot. La Cage quickly overtook Club 219 and The Factory to become the city's premier gay dance bar. This was not only the place to see and be seen, but also the place to hear the hottest new music and see the latest videos. There had never been anything quite like it.

Celebrating its silver anniversary last month on April 24, La Cage still has a strong seven-day operation, a loyal following that helped it survive even the tazziest competition, and ambitious plans to reinvent itself for the next generation. Later this year, the club will debut a new third level space that has been shrouded

in mystery to date. As co-owner Kris Heindel explained, "While we don't want to give out all of our secrets, what we will tell you is that the third floor will open this year, and it will be as comfortable, intimate, and attractive as your living room as well as upscale, modern and energetic. And we already have a name picked out. Have we piqued your curiosity?"

Love it or hate it, take it or leave it, whether you go every week or haven't been there in 20 years, no one can deny the impact that La Cage has had on the LGBT community since 1984.

As long-time employee Jackie Roberts shared, "Lots of people see this as just a club. They don't realize what being gay in Milwaukee would be like today if there hadn't been a La Cage."

### EARLY DAYS

George Prentice had been in the bar business since the late 1960s and later operated the River Queen on what is now the site of the Milwaukee Public Market and the Circus Bar - later Club 219. When Nikos was on its last legs and ready to go out of business, George saw a great opportunity. There was just one question: would people come?

"When La Cage opened, this wasn't the strip it is now," George said. "The concentration was downtown or in the Third Ward - before people called it the Third Ward. It was just a bunch of empty warehouses for years. And Walker's Point was such a different place back then."

"The word on the street was that I was nuts," Prentice continued. "We hung a sign and put our name right out there on the front of the building. That was huge! At the time, either you knew where the gay bars were, or you weren't going to find them, because they didn't want straight people coming. There wasn't the intermingling you see today. It was too risky for so many reasons. You would still see roaming gangs of drunken guys looking for someone to beat up, and the police were not going to help you. We have always had a fairly large and well-trained security staff. The only difference is, back then, we needed this to protect ourselves."

"We uncovered all the windows. That just wasn't done in those days. People seriously thought they were going to get shot through the windows. The only window in gay bars back then was the 12-

square-inch pane of glass in the front door, which was required by law. You can still see this in some of the older bars. People felt safer knowing that nobody could see in. We were validated a few years later when Bob Schmidt opened the M&M Club's windows. Finally, everyone understood this window thing wasn't going to be a problem."

"In the beginning, we rented only the first half of the corner bar, and the other half was a Puerto Rican social club," George said. "Business was strong from Day One, but our infrastructure was always two steps behind the boom. Heating, air conditioning, water, gas, electricity - we just couldn't keep up with the people. It would be years before we got ahead of the business."

Six months later, Prentice and his partner Corey Grubb rented out the whole building, and after another year, they bought the building. But it wasn't easy getting on their feet.

"During our early years, Alderwoman Mary Ann McNulty took an unpopular stance on the Common Council and went to bat for us in a big way. She helped us with the police department, building inspectors, and other city departments. There was such great pressure from the city in those early days that we almost didn't survive," Prentice said. "We had a lot of popular straight bars in the area, and the police department seemed to resent that we were 'in their face.' It was really a gradual process of winning people over."

"Very quickly, we became the gay entertainment anchor for the area, and our success encouraged the development of smaller bars nearby," George added. "Suddenly, there was a whole new strip."

### ENTER JACKIE ROBERTS

Jackie Roberts came to La Cage in May 1989 and has worked at the bar continuously ever since, except for a three-month hiatus in 2007. She's known as the Official First Lady of La Cage, and she has the sash and crown to prove it. Jackie has now been here longer than anyone, including DJ Tony Aiello, who was with La Cage for almost 20 years. She even remembers when it was known as La Cage aux Folles. "That original sign was still floating around here recently," Roberts said.

Formerly Miss Cream City 2001 and Miss Lakeshore

2007, Jackie recently took the title of Miss Cosmopolitan Milwaukee USofA, and is now performing at preliminary competitions for Miss Wisconsin USofA in October. Jackie also performs monthly at M's and Triangle, and will be performing a special show at Wherehouse in early June.

After spending 12 years as door girl, she's usually recognized as the front face of La Cage. She's also seen a lot of people come and go over the past twenty years, and a whole lot of changes in Milwaukee's club culture.

"One Sunday night in 1989, I came here from Club Marilyn's underage night with some Milwaukee Ballet employees. I barely left the front bar, which was very dark at the time, and just stood against the wall taking it all in," Jackie laughed. "Two weeks later, I was back with some friends from Milwaukee High School of the Arts. After the shows, we talked with fans in the (Jazz) back bar. We quickly learned it was all about working the door schedule and knowing when it was safe."

She became immediately fascinated by the star performers of that era: Holly Brown, Miami Marks, Goldie Adams. Shows were every Sunday night at 10:30 PM and they were consistently packed.

"At that time, you didn't have RuPaul on TV introducing America to drag," Roberts said. "The scene was more underground," Jackie and her pal Rudy were there every week, until finally Jackie pal pulled from the audience to work the spotlight for the show. "From there, I worked my way through every job in the bar - from the spotlight to cleaning to bar back to cast member to door girl to show girl."

"Coming out at La Cage used to be an event - people planned their outfits all week, and really dressed up for the occasion of being here," Jackie said. This was the original SGM - Stand and Model bar. Now everything is so casual and people just come out in whatever they're wearing."

The bar also used to be so crowded, every night, and there would be so many after (bar) parties," Jackie said. "But there were so many risks 20 years ago that don't exist now. Going to a gay bar was a lot more dangerous, personally and professionally, because going there was making a statement about yourself. There was a lot of stigma attached. Straight people didn't even come to gay bars for the music, because they were so scared of somebody seeing them. People were actually afraid of cameras in bars because they were afraid that photos would be used against them. People usually stayed at the bar they were loyal to, because it wasn't always safe to bar-hop."

Closing time was often a particularly bad time to be on 2nd and National. "We used to have so many fights outside, because our crowd and the Steny's crowd all got out at the same time," Roberts said. "There was a lot of name-calling, and even a few attacks. You just didn't walk down the street alone, ever. I used to get harassed on the bus. There were always a lot of wisecracks and hostile remarks. Thinking about it right now, I'm shocked with what we put up with. Society has changed so much."

"Now, LGBT people have so many more options, and sometimes they don't even realize it. Jackie continued, "In my lifetime, I've seen people become comfortable going to straight bars and fitting in without changing a thing about themselves. That is huge."

Roberts believes mainstream media coverage of the

gay community has brought many changes. "The media has done wonders for us," she said. "The gay community has become so much larger, and at the same time, the country has become so much more accepting. Even the Midwest has become more liberal than people think. When Pridefest started, it was a small picnic in Juneau Park or Veteran's Park. I never thought I'd see the day when we would take over the Summerfest grounds, and look at us now."

Jackie feels that she could write a book about what she's seen, heard and done over the years. "I've fallen down a flight of stairs on the fourth of July, and woken up naked on the second floor wrapped in a fur coat and last night's makeup. I've learned not to question it," Jackie laughed. "I remember a lot of fist fights, a lot of wigs being pulled off, and a whole lot of mayhem."

"I remember one famous battle where one queen mumbled off to another while changing in the bathroom. Well, one chased the other into a bathroom stall, and then tried to climb over the stall to get at her. After literally being thrown out by security, she came back in through the front door and stabbed the doorman in the eye with a pencil!"

Roberts recalled a Mike Tyson-like episode. "One time, a queen and a male patron got into a fight at the coat check over who was next in line," she said. "The guy was wagging his finger at her, which must have seriously pissed her off. Next thing you know, she's running out the front door with blood all over her mouth - and the guy is running after her, carrying part of his finger that she bit off!"

Jackie then recounted how the bar's front windows were always getting abused. "At that time, people still entered through the front door and our registers were up front," she said. "Scary! An angry stripper once threw a brick through one after a dispute with the owners. Another night, an accident out front sent a parked car crashing through one of our front windows. And then someone threw a rock through the same window one night after hours. The tinted window cracked after impact, then very slowly spider-webbed, and then suddenly imploded. I yelled 'Hit the floor!' just as the window shattered. Everyone in the room was scared as hell."

Roberts also encountered many unique and unusual characters such as Miss Susan, a black queen from New York City who dreamed of performing as a female illusionist and who would command runway vogue competitions on the dance floor. "Lily White would paint her lips and throw her on stage at 2:19 in lace gloves, crimped hair and leather outfits," Jackie said. "She would always try to get a show here, but never could. One night, we finally let her do a number. The audience was used to a more upscale performance, and they just didn't get it. Susan never performed here again. I wonder whatever happened to her."

Jackie also remembers the strange combination of Taco Night with something called "Dragstrip." Dragstrip involved drag queens stripping from girl to boy, pulling off 14 layers of pantyhose, on top of the bar in heels, wigs scraping the ceiling. In some cases, the performers were stripping from dresses to lingerie. "This excited one patron so much that he flipped over the taco table," she said. "With everything in complete disarray, Rudy walked away, saying 'OK - I'm done.'"

## TRANSFORMATIONS

Since its early days, La Cage has reinvented itself so many times that people often question their own memories of how the place used to look. "Our thing is that we always changed. That had a lot to do with our longevity. We did not sit still and expect the business to come to us," Prentice said.

Even Joe Angeli, who has been responsible for many of the club's most successful renovations, admits that it's hard to remember the way things were, unless he's actually on the premises. "I came to change a light bulb in the late 1980s and never left," he joked.

Angeli has worked for thirty years in custom interior, lighting and sound system design. He worked on venues such as Park Avenue, Nitro, and Club Marilyn. "In the beginning, things (at LaCage) didn't look so snazzy," he said. "They were working with someone who was more of a butcher than a carpenter. I hit it off with George after doing maintenance on the sound system, and eventually I started doing more and more projects for him. He's turned out to be one of the best friends I've made in my life."

Joe appreciated the architecture and history of the Walker's Point area. He can tell you all about the locomotive that used to run down National Avenue, about his father singing "God Bless America" on a player piano at the Alberman bar across the street, and about a time when the neighborhood was much more green and much less concrete. But more than anyone, he can tell you about the building at 801 South 2nd Street.

"The building went up in 1886 and was a mercantile and grocery for most of its first hundred years," Angeli said. "At one point, we uncovered some of the original glass, with butcher shop ads painted onto them. We tore out the ceiling, which had been boxed down six feet lower with 2x4s."

Angeli recalled that the original building was "battered" and covered up over the years. "Someone covered up the brick with metal panel siding in the 1950s," he said. "Then the building was painted fire engine red, like a barn. By the time La Cage opened, it had wound up being a scary-looking building."

"City maintenance also impacted the site, according to Angeli. "The original street level has risen five feet over the past hundred years," he said. "You used to be able to see more of the building foundation. Our corner entryway has only two of its original six steps, and we also lost a walk-down doorway on the National Avenue side of the building. When they were tunneling new waterlines to the bar, they ran into the submerged steel rails from the old National Avenue locomotive, and it took them forever to cut through them."

In 1987, La Cage embarked on its first major expansion project. The southern portion of the building opened as a separate, but connected venue known as Dance, Dance, Dance. Around the same time, a separate bar named Jazz was opened, offering "a not so loud adult retreat," featuring fine wine and champagne by the glass, ice cream and blended drinks, crab legs and shrimp cocktails, and other more elegant touches. This was only the beginning of a 20-year series of renovations.

"I was already there when Dance Dance Dance was going up," Joe recalled. "There weren't a lot of employees who were both creative and mechanically talented. But it was a melting pot of ideas with so many

great people involved. That's one of the things that made it so successful. George always had his finger on the pulse, he always knew what was going on in the city, and what would work and what wouldn't work."

"Whoever said that you could only depend on two things in life, death and taxes, forgot to include La Cage's remodeling projects," Bill Meunier wrote in an issue of *Wisconsin Light*. Every year or two, the bar would undergo drastic remodeling, and no component of the bar was safe. Bars would be ripped out only to reappear in a new spot, seating areas and dance floors were frequently reinvented, restrooms and coatrooms would pop up and disappear regularly, video screens, spotlights and accent neon would be added in unusual places, even the DJ booth was redesigned several times. "We gave everything a 120 day try," George said. "Even if we spent \$100,000 to build something that didn't work, we would spend another \$100,000 to make it right."

Grubb's Pub opened in 1989 in the bar's basement space. At one point the full-service grill was popular enough to remain open from noon until well past bar time, seven nights a week. Hoping to recapture Grubb's magic, the basement bar reopened in 2003 as Etc.

In 1994, a tropical-themed bamboo patio opened in a narrow alley along the building's south side, only to close after its first winter, when the unstable foundation eroded and sank. The Jazz bar was blown up to expand the original dance floor into a L-shape. Later the space was closed off again with a black translucent wall to become "Backstreets" in 1995, but then reopened as a dance floor only a few years later.

Angeli remembers how the Backstreets wall came down. "That bulletproof glass had been salvaged out of a bank. It was over an inch thick and was literally built into the dance floor wall," he said. "I had nothing to do with the installation, but I was there watching the contractors struggling to get it out. Since they had such a hard time removing it, they decided they were going to smash it. But they were hammering it with sledgehammers that just bounced off. I watched them for almost an hour, and then, I walked up to them and said, 'I bet I can break this piece of glass.' They didn't believe me, but I hit it on an edge and it shattered into a million pieces. The guys were amazed!"

In 1998, La Cage completed a \$750,000 exterior remodeling project to restore the building to its original 1887 appearance. Every scrap of exterior lead-based paint had to be collected and disposed of as a hazardous waste. The project also included cleaning bricks, installing traverse windows, putting in two new entrances, resizing and installing new windows, and redoing the building's trim.

"One of the things we are most proud of is the restoration of the building's facade," Prentice said. "We worked within federal guidelines and wound up on the National Register of Historic Places. We are also the building that appears on all the Milwaukee Redevelopment Authority posters for Walker's Point. The building is one of the few remaining examples of tin over brick and stone in the city. People don't realize that the fancy scrollwork over the top of the building is all tin over mortar, not wood or stone."

One portion of the building posed a significant challenge during the restoration project, according to Angeli. "With a building this age, everything's a challenge. The biggest challenge so far was the two dormer windows that stick out onto National Avenue," he said. "There was so much missing from the architecture due to deterioration, I had to go around and figure out what it was supposed to look like through interpretation and replacement. So much of it was originally hand-carved, which makes it very difficult to reproduce. For example, all the molding on the big door on the front of the building was hand-carved. It's a slow process."

For most of the Nineties, a wall with automatic sliding doors

and windows separated La Cage and the former Dance Dance Dance space, creating two different environments offering two very different dance styles. But in 2004, La Cage underwent one of its biggest transformations ever: the entire center of the building was opened up into one massive, centralized dance floor surrounded by bars, tables, walkways, and a dance cage. After 20 years, La Cage had evolved from three separate bars to one gigantic room.

Through all the transformations, some nostalgic elements still linger in memory: the long front bar with thousands of pennies inset in its surface, the second floor dressing rooms, the old-fashioned telephone booth, the pulsating neon lights that surrounded the ceiling heating ducts, the parking meters and street signs of Backstreets, the many different stages, boxes and video screens that filled the dance floors over the years...there's a lot to remember. What's coming next? Joe Angeli won't say much about it, but he will say, "I pride myself on never missing a deadline, and I'm not planning on missing this one."

## GOSSIP GIRLS

La Cage has always lived up to the Oscar Wilde motto, "There is only one thing in life worse than being talked about, and that is not being talked about." Even in the early days, cover charges were a cause for complaint, as was the "La Cage Card" preferred customer program of the 1990s, in which patrons received special VIP discounts through a membership card that was made available for a limited time.

In July 2004, the club was renamed from "La Cage" to simply "Cage" to reposition and redefine the bar for the next generation. Rumors swirled that the name change was part of a se-

cret plan to transform the 20-year-old institution into a straight bar. In response, one ad announced that "We're not going Straight, We're going Forward."

The name change lasted approximately a year and reverted back under the new ownership. "I honestly think we lost patrons because of it," one former employee said. "It was a sudden and surprising change, unlike our more gradual changes in the past."

Prentice felt differently. "It's ironic, older customers used to come to me and say we had become too 'straight.' And I would think back through all the bad years, back to the 1960s, when we were looking for general acceptance in society," he said. "And now that we had been accepted, there were people who resented it."

Around the same time as the name change, the bar started a controversial Teen Night event during the early evening hours. At first, the upstairs bar was closed to adults from 7-11 PM on Wednesdays, creating a totally alcohol-free environment for LGBT youth and their friends. Later, the bar blended underage patrons and legal adults in the same setting, with bracelets indicating who could and couldn't drink. The experiment proved to be a logistical nightmare and ended after only a few months.

## CHANGING HANDS

On a Saturday in July 2005, rumors were again circulating that La Cage was up for sale. But this time, the rumors were true: the bar really was for sale. "35 years as a business owner was enough," Prentice said. "It is so rare for anyone to keep a club on top of the game for 25 years - even on the East or West Coasts. One year before I sold, I was sitting around with friends and realized: 'I don't know if I want to do this when I'm 60. I don't know what a 22 year old wants anymore.'"

Prentice was about ready to list it with a broker when Kris Heindel and Michael Jost stepped forward to buy the bar. With backgrounds in management, sales and service, the pair felt they were ideal business owners.

"Several things inspired us," Heindel said. "We had a sentimental attachment to La Cage, where we had grown up in our 20s and 30s. The potential sale made us wonder: 'What might happen next? What if the buyer changed La Cage to a straight bar? What if they developed condominiums or a Walgreens? That is when the gravity of what was happening hit us. It was a hard thing to think about losing.'"

On November 1, Prentice and Grubb sold the bar and later retired to Sarasota, Florida. Jost and Heindel made it official at a special celebration in January 2006.

## STAYING ON TOP

Over the years, many competitors have tried to challenge La Cage's dance scene dominance, from Club 219 and Nitro in the 1990s, to more recently Pump-house and Wherehouse. But Jackie Roberts believes that competitors underestimate the one thing that sustains La Cage in even the most challenging moments: the club's legion of long-time, loyal customers who just won't give it up.

"They may try the trendy new place, but they always come back here," she said. "Despite the constant changes in the crowd, the staff, the bar itself, people are still loyal to the idea of La Cage. We provide continuity and a connection. It's hard to compete with 25 years of history. Whenever rumors have popped up that we're closing, people just come out of the woodwork to see if it's true."

Prentice also shared his insights on LaCage's longevity. "What was our secret to our success? Quality. My goal was to be better than my competitors, and do everything top-notch from the minute someone walks in, until the minute they walked out," he said. "I always tried to be better than the competitor - in fact, better than anyone else. Every club I've ever owned was the #1 dance club in the gay community. It was all about creating a good experience for people. It's all in the experience you provide. If you make it a not-to-be-missed experience, people will come no matter who they are or what they're looking for. They just want to be part of it."

As an LGBT business owner for over three decades, what does Prentice think about the speculation that gay bars are no longer needed and may soon disappear? "Some people say that gay bars will become a thing of the past," he said. "I say that day is almost here. Only the heavy niche bars will continue to operate that exclusively. In most cities, even in the Midwest, dance clubs have already lost the 'gay bar' distinction. People just don't worry anymore about being seen in a gay bar anymore. By the early 1990s, our weekend crowd was already 30-40% straight, depending on the night. I can't even guess what it is now."

"At the same time, gay youth is no longer limited to gay bars," Prentice continued. "They don't have to be loyal to any one place. Unless a bar can provide the music, atmosphere and reputation that they are looking for, they will go elsewhere."

Technology has also challenged the bar scene, according to Prentice. "And they always have other options for meeting people. This all started with the Internet, which created a real challenge for our weekend business," he said. "My friends who ran straight

bars were jealous that La Cage was busy every night, when their business was only there 2-3 days a week. But then the Internet hit. In the old days, if you wanted to meet up with someone, you got dressed up and went to a bar. With the Internet, you no longer 'need' to go out in public to hook up."

## CLOSING TIME

Prentice offered kudos during the interview for the Qwest feature. "I would like to thank Corey Grubb, my partner in business, and all patrons and the community that made it all possible, all the way back to 1984," George says. "I'd also like to thank Alderman Jim Witkowski who was always a good friend to our bar."

New owners Kris and Michael also shared their gratitude. "While there have been many rewarding and memorable moments over the past three years, the most rewarding is the strong sense of family and community within," Heindel said. "The friendships and relationships we have built with customers and staff have been very fulfilling and continue to grow everyday. Our staff, friends, and family have all been encouraging, helpful, and supportive. Without these elements in place, the transition of La Cage's new ownership would have been much more difficult. For this, we thank you all."

"We also need to say a special thank you to George and Corey for many different reasons," Heindel added.

They grew La Cage from a corner bar to the multi-level lounge and nightclub that it is today. They were instrumental in bringing the LGBT community out of the closet and into the forefront of Wisconsin's community's showing others that we're all just people trying to get along with one another. We no longer need to be in hiding to feel safe and accepted. It's amazing how much has changed in 25 years, but there's still work to be done! George and Corey gave us an opportunity to continue the legacy they have left behind. This is something we are taking seriously and enjoy being a part of."

No one knows what the future holds for any establishment, especially in challenging economic times that have leveled local businesses. But one thing you can count on is that LaCage will continue to evolve as Generation Facebook approaches legal drinking age. "Bars come and go, but La Cage is a timeless chameleon," Roberts said. "It transforms, adjusts and adapts to whatever is going on in that moment. Just when you think you've figured us out - we'll change again."

In other words, the transformations at LaCage aren't over yet - they're just beginning!