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Volume 1 No. 840
December 31, 2009

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NEWS & VIEWS



How The City Cleaned Up Its Act — At Least A Little

Whyte Avenue riots prompted city to act. Now, other cities are watching to see what we did right

Published December 24, 2009 by Andrew Paul in News & Views

How many times have you watched this painfully familiar scenario play out? You stumble out of Blues on Whyte on a Saturday night after several pitchers of draft on a mission to reach the Black Dog before last call. You make your way through the crowded sidewalks dodging flailing arms holding lit cigarettes. As you duck to miss yet another errant ember you're almost bowled over by two drunk douche bags in destroyed jeans and graphic tees as they burst through the crowd hanging off each other, and yelling at the top of their lungs.

Their conversation is riveting.

"Dude I'm so fucking wasted!" slurs the first one, to which the second cleverly replies, "No way man, I'm fucking wasted."

They go on back and forth like this for a few minutes until suddenly a half dressed woman in busted heels with dried vomit on her dress looks up from the curb, and recognizes the two buffoons.

"Holy shit guys," she screeches. "Are you as fucking wasted as I am?"

We get it okay! You're drunk, he's drunk, she's drunk; we're all wasted, and having a good time, and can you blame us? If nothing else we can credit our frozen winters for fostering our shining talent for being able to consume ungodly amounts of alcohol in close quarters without murdering each other.

In fact, our talent for getting drunk and not stabbing each other (too often) is so awesome that the Responsible Hospitality Institute (RHI), a networking organization that promotes safe and vibrant urban entertainment districts, has awarded Edmonton the title of most sociable city in North America.

Seriously. Edmonton.

Aside from bragging rights, and a feather in our cap, the new designation means good things for students enrolled in NAIT's hospitality management and culinary arts programs.

Between the two programs roughly 500 students graduate annually where 95 per cent of them will find work in the local hospitality industry.

During the two-year hospitality program students are trained in the fine art of providing safe and vibrant experiences for their drunken clientele — that would be us folks. Which is exactly what the RHI looks for when choosing a winner for the title of most sociable city.

Leroy Russell, chair of the hospitality management program at NAIT, attended an RHI seminar this summer to see how his curriculum compared to industry trends, and was pleased to find his students on the leading edge of responsible hospitality practices thanks to ProServe and ProTect, two government initiatives designed to educate bar staff about current drink pricing and liquor regulations, and how to screen patrons for weapons and contraband before they enter the bar.

According to Nicole Chapdelaine, an Edmonton police officer with the Public Safety Compliance Team (PSCT), and Responsible Hospitality Edmonton (RHE), it's programs like ProTect and ProServe that are the first steps in ensuring safe party environments.



Meryl Smith Lawton

Party Hearty | Patrons enjoying themselves in The Funky Buddha.

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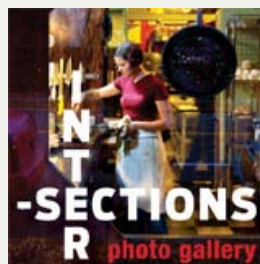
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The quest for a safe party scene in Edmonton kicked into high gear eight years ago when Whyte Avenue's reputation was at its most unsavoury.

Responsible Hospitality Edmonton is the end result of initiatives started in the wake of Canada Day riots in July 2001 when hordes of drunken partiers laid waste to Whyte Avenue. The aftermath prompted concerned business owners, residents and police to call for the creation of a task force to look into ways of properly managing Old Strathcona during peak occasions.

City council approved the creation of the task force in 2002 and by 2006 the body submitted its report on how the city could better manage its nightlife district.

The task force recommendations included several projects designed to decrease the amount of feces, urine and garbage left in the street, as well as social marketing campaigns aimed at quelling problematic behaviours on the strip. After reading the report city council asked that a framework be developed and implemented, and RHE was born.

The first social marketing campaign to hit billboards and the coveted wall space above urinals in most Whyte Avenue bars was RHE's Be a Lover/Not a Fighter initiative that proved what we knew all along: blow jobs are way cooler than punches in the face.

In a similar vein Save the Party! RHE's latest marketing effort is helping partiers get more net hours of boozing and socializing in annually by reminding us that we all lose when we have to interrupt keg stands to do things like CPR or filling out police reports, because some goon couldn't keep their hands to themselves.

You also may have noticed all of those shiny ashtrays lashed to most signposts downtown and along Whyte Avenue. Those are courtesy of RHE as well, and let's not forget about the portable urinal project that is now entering its third year of operation.

Let's face it: there are few things worse than stepping in someone's feces when all you're trying to do is sneak around the corner to piss on a dumpster. RHE's urinal/porta-potty program has been most effective in dealing with that ugly situation entirely.

Though Chapdelaine doesn't have any hard numbers to gauge the effectiveness of RHE's initiatives she says other cities, including Victoria and Kelowna B.C., have been asking Edmonton for help in developing similar projects.

Chapdelaine says she isn't surprised other cities want to emulate Edmonton, explaining that all cities face the same problems when it comes to managing their entertainment districts.

Essentially the main issue is competition between intoxicated patrons who end up fighting over things like cabs and donairs.

"And, of course, we have competition for what we call sex," says Chapdelaine. "That's potentially what happens when we see over-service inside bars is competition for space that has people bumping into each other, and people don't make the greatest judgment calls when they have alcohol introduced to their system."

If proprietors aren't following safe serving practices the RHE isn't without legal recourse for repeat offenders thanks to the PSCT.

The PSCT is comprised of representatives from of four agencies including by-law enforcement, the Alberta Gaming and Liquor Commission, Fire Rescue Services and Chapdelaine from the EPS.

The group has the power to ask the city's chief licensing officer to place limitations on offender's business licence or, if worse comes to worse, revoke an establishment's licence entirely — as they did to the Windmill Pub in May 2008.

However, that happens very rarely thanks in part to safety conscious proprietors, and future party masters in NAIT's hospitality program who will be entering the work force with the responsibility of keeping Edmonton on the map as a hot spot for safe vibrant nightlife.

"We're certainly happy to see that Edmonton is becoming recognized as a destination for guests of the hospitality industry, and it certainly provides us with better opportunities in terms of providing our students with success building careers within the industry," says Russell.

So where does this leave us? Why thirsty, of course. So even if this award seems a little bit like a nightlife policing circle jerk raise your glass and toast to the fact that you probably



won't get stabbed in the pub tonight thanks to our sociable city.

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