

March 22, 2017 at 9:30 am EST | by Steve Charing

Baltimore's Grand Central celebrates 25 years

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A Grand Central party in 2014. The club has been a central hub of Baltimore gay life since 1991. (Photo by Bob Ford)

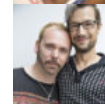
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RJ Ladd recalls the summer of 2001 at Central Station, the former name of Grand Central. It was during "Tia-Oke" when drag performer, "Tia (Chambers), drunk, hosted karaoke, attempted to walk down the steps and fell flat on her face. We helped her up, not a hair out of place, and she didn't miss a beat. She kept going as if it didn't happen."

That amusing anecdote could serve obliquely as a metaphor for Grand Central Nightclub's 25-year history. Though the club never stumbled, it has had to overcome a number of challenges —competition, property damage, declining interest in gay bars — to remain a vital part of Baltimore's LGBT culture and social life.

To mark 25 years in the community, Grand Central, situated at the intersection of Charles and Eager streets in the Mount Vernon gayborhood, will host a special event on Saturday, March 25. There will be free cover all night and giveaways every hour as well as other surprises.

Owner Don Davis, a well-known and outspoken figure in Baltimore's LGBT community, waxes nostalgic about the era when gay bars were at their zenith. Prior to owning Grand Central, he and partner Rick Morgenthaller had opened the Allegro, also in Mount Vernon, in

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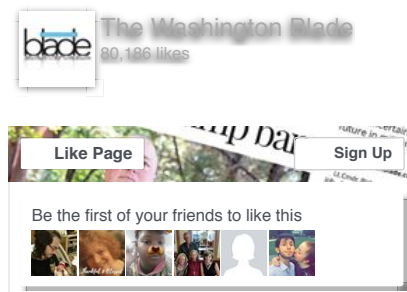


November 1986. After a slow start, they modified the piano bar format by instituting country and western parties, men's nights and ladies' nights.

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Grand Central owner **Don Davis** says he's overcome many hurdles to keep the business running since it opened 25 years ago. (Photo courtesy Davis)



Those changes paid off. "The place was hopping and became the place to be," Davis says. "There were a lot of fun memories back then."

At the time, Davis used to drive down Eager Street en route to his home in the Canton neighborhood. He noticed that a historic row house at 1001 N. Charles Street was for sale.

"I always liked the building and the location and decided to look at it throughout," Davis says. "I contacted two of my friends and asked if they would be interested in being an investor with no say in the business. They both agreed."

The property was purchased in July 1991. After renovations, the doors opened on Sept. 12, 1991.

On Feb. 5, 2003, Davis purchased the adjacent north building at 1003 North Charles St. where the former Stagecoach bar existed, and reconstruction was undertaken, adding a double bar disco with state-of-the-art dance floor, sound and lighting systems, and an additional upstairs lounge and restaurant.

In keeping with the major improvements and new facilities, the club was renamed Grand Central and the expanded complex opened May 29, 2003.

Diagonally across the corner was the iconic Club Hippo, for years the largest dance bar in the state. Within a couple of blocks were other well-established bars, the Drinkery and Leon's. Grand Central was the new kid on the block.

To effectively compete, Davis had to broaden the market and create special events. Billing Grand Central as an "alternative nightclub," Davis encouraged straight people to patronize the bar.

"I was always grateful for everyone's business, whether you were straight or gay," Davis says. "As long as everyone could accept the gay culture, they were welcomed."

Grand Central had been beset by a couple of odd events. In June 2008, just a week after workers had repaired a storm-damaged roof on the north building, a fire broke out causing damage to the upper floor.

Five years later, a car, which was being pursued by transit police, crashed into a pick-up truck in front of the bar spilling its cargo of white paint all over the exterior and leaving a mess inside the pub. The effects of that incident led to additional renovations.

Each time Grand Central bounced back.

Through the years, Grand Central hosted numerous themed events including red, black and white parties, all well attended. Karaoke nights have been a popular feature as well as jazz, fashion shows and REHAB Saturdays.

Wendy Fox, co-owner of S.H.E. Productions, which has put on events like REHAB at Grand Central for eight years, says, "We are happy to be inclusive of everyone, and the club has always been gracious and open to our ideas, themes and fundraisers."

An employee for nearly five years, Nicole West says, "Don Davis has always been encouraging and appreciative, the customers always kind and the other staff is like family."

The upstairs loft has been used for a variety of purposes including receptions, a lesbian-oriented space called Sappho's for a short time, and it had also been a venue for leather-related events after the Baltimore Eagle (now re-opened) had closed in 2012. The restaurant no longer exists.

The dance club with its two bars is a popular attraction. The Hippo's closing in 2015 left Grand Central as the leading dance venue in Mount Vernon.

Says DJ Kuhmeleon who used to work at Grand Central, "Being so far away from the crowd in that DJ-in-the-sky, I love hearing the crowd singing every song so loud that it actually rises above the music itself and I can hear them perfectly."

However, increasing acceptance of LGBT people that allows for comfortably patronizing straight establishments as well as the onset of dating apps have contributed to a decline in gay bars. This concerns Davis.

"Over the past 30 years, I have seen about 29 gay bars and clubs close," says Davis, 66, who now resides most of the year in Florida.

Notwithstanding that trend, community members see the value of Grand Central.

"I remember 15 years ago, I had the courage to step into a gay bar for the first time and Grand Central welcomed me with open arms," says photographer Robert Mercer, Jr. "It was like home and the community embraced me without judgment."

Adds Brian Dolbow, an advocate for the homeless, "Grand Central was the first bar I visited when I moved to Baltimore in 2003. I immediately loved the welcoming atmosphere. In addition, Grand Central has always been supportive of my charity work."

"Historically, Grand Central has been a welcome place for patrons of all gender, identity and sexual orientations with a variety of offerings including dance, jazz, karaoke, leather and a vibrant bar scene," says Bob Glock, general manager of the nearby Hotel Brexton. "It has been a major draw to not only the Mount Vernon community, but to Baltimore generally for those outside of the city looking for a safe and sophisticated alternative bar scene."

Brian Gaither, co-founder of Pride Foundation of Maryland, acknowledges that Grand Central is a landmark institution.

"Over the years it's provided a safe space for our community and has been a major supporter of LGBT events and organizations," Gaither says. "We are grateful for all they have done."

As for himself, Davis is appreciative of the support Baltimore has given to Grand Central.

"Without good staff and the support over the 25 years it would have not been possible," he says. "Thank you, Baltimore."



Revelers at an Electric Youth party at Grand Central in 2013. (Photo courtesy Grand Central)

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Steve Charing

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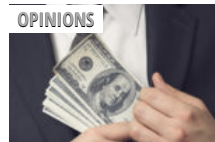
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