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LGBTQ landmark Brewers Bar up for sale in Lawrenceville



MEGAN SWIFT | Friday, July 5, 2024 5:11 p.m.



SHANE DUNLAP | TRIBLIVE

Carol Held, owner of Brewers Bar, Pittsburgh's oldest gay bar, is ready to retire. She's asking \$1.2 million for the business, its liquor license and real estate. Her father opened the bar on Liberty Avenue in Lawrenceville in 1981.

Brewers Bar in Lawrenceville — Pittsburgh's oldest gay bar — is up for sale for \$1.2 million.

Owner Carol Held said she's ready to retire and spend more time with her grandkids.

"After covid, it just kind of hit a point — the business just changed," said Held, 57, of Moon. "We weren't getting the people in the door like we were."

Brewers Bar has been in business in Pittsburgh for 43 years, and she's been at the helm since 2010, when she took over for her dad, Andy Usner, who passed away.

Usner was a detective for the city, and he bought the bar in 1981, Held said.

Held said her father was instrumental during the AIDS epidemic because he housed people who had the illness in the rooms above the bar when they had nowhere else to go after their families had kicked them out.

"We're known for what my dad did back in the '80s, the things that he did for people," she said.

He fed them, paid for their medicine and gave them a free place to stay, she said. Usner also ended up financing many of their funeral and burial expenses, according to Held.

Now, Brewers Bar attracts patrons for drag shows, trivia, paint and sip nights along with those who want to enjoy its recently opened nightclub, The Underground.

The building on Liberty Avenue is five stories, and the bottom two stories were converted into a nightclub in November, Held said.

"It's a great place," she said. "We have a great clientele."

Though she said it was a hard decision to sell Brewers Bar, she ultimately feels good about it. It's been a lot to manage for someone who is getting older, Held said.

Ideally, she wants a "young mind" or someone in the local LGBTQ community to take over the business. She hopes a new owner will keep the original Brewers Bar intact.

"Everybody knows Brewers," Held said. "I'm all about keeping the original because it means something to me."

For the seven-figure asking price, the buyer will receive the business (with the liquor license) and real estate because Held wants to sell both together, according to Sidney Sokoloff, president and CEO of Specialty Group, which is handling the sale.

The family real estate business based in Ross is LGBTQ-owned, and Sokoloff said he hopes the buyer maintains the LGBTQ integrity of Brewers and continues to make it a welcoming space.

"The goal really is to keep it in the community," Sokoloff said.

Sokoloff, who is gay, said Brewers Bar going on the market is "a big moment" for the community.

He recalled how Liberty Avenue used to have more gay bars, but now, he said, they're sparse in the Pittsburgh area.

"As a community member, we need those gay bars, or LGBTQ-friendly bars, as safe places to go," Sokoloff said. "It's been unfortunate — a surprise to me."

For the new owner of Brewers Bar, he said there's potential for growth.

"(Held) and her family have been so paramount in helping the gay community," Sokoloff said "This is a chance to have that open door to a historic landmark."

Held said Brewers Bar will remain in operation until a buyer is found.

"Just trying to stay above water for right now," she said.

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