

## A Reunion Of The Heart–Asbury Park Style

Memories of good times and the 30-year story of the Eastern seaboard's biggest lesbian clubs

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CARLOS ANTHONY MEDIA

Flashback mid-1980s, Key West Hotel, Asbury Park, NJ – hundreds of gay women dancing, partying and having a great time. Fast forward to May 2016, Paradise Club, Asbury Park, NJ – hundreds of gay women dancing, partying and having a great time. Déjà vu? Actually, these women got together for a long overdue reunion to relive one night of the fantastic times they experienced at what was

then New Jersey's largest and most happening lesbian club/hotel – the Key West.

Extremely popular in the '80s, the Key West Hotel was *the* place to go to join a community of gay women who were friends and, more importantly, a supportive family. This reunion was not only the chance to spend an evening with familiar faces from long ago, but an opportunity to re-experience the alluring and almost secretive world of the 1980's lesbian club scene. For many, the Key West was their first experience in a lesbian setting and to reunite with that community from over 30 years ago was special.

Not only were they celebrating a reunion, but reveling in the strides the gay and lesbian community as a whole has made in recent years—from anti-discrimination laws to gay marriage. What better way to commemorate this twofold celebration but at the Paradise Club, just a block away from the site of the original Key West, which was demolished in 2001. Ironically, Carol Torre, the hotel's only surviving owner, had a different take on those strides: "I miss the "closet"! We have long come out of that closet and it is wonderful out here with the freedom to love whom we want, get married, be protected on the job and share benefits with our spouses. But back in the 80's, gay women had to protect themselves from the prying eyes of their bosses and their family. The safe haven was the "bar", a place where one could find like people and have fun. Our customers were diverse--nurses, school teachers, doctors, soldiers, lawyers, waitresses, bartenders, truck drivers, etc. We were brought together by our common goal and became family. We were a club and, in many ways, still are. I miss that club, and yes, even that closet!"

Torre was inspired to create a Key West Facebook page when Curve Magazine published an article featuring the hotel in June 2011: *Jersey Girls: Remembering a Landmark Lesbian Venue*; but it was Mickey Carter, Torre's life partner, who gave birth to the idea of a reunion, "Carol and I talked for years about how much fun it would be to have a reunion to see how everyone was doing and just get back in touch. One late afternoon after walking down memory lane with some friends, when I went home I told Carol we have to have a reunion! I asked for committee volunteers on Facebook and eventually the Key West Reunion 2016 was born."

The reunion committee's diligent planning proved to be a success. The fact that 370 women from all over the United States attended is a testament to the positive influence the Key West had on so many. The organizers went above and beyond to recreate the atmosphere of the old club days. Numerous photos taken at hotel events, old hotel flyers and photos of women who had passed over the years were displayed on poster-boards, a streaming video of past parties in the club's disco and an abundance of 80's music transported one back to the days of Whitney Houston, high hair and breakdancing. Keepsakes such as original keys to the hotel rooms and matchbooks were given out as souvenirs. A memory board was displayed for jotting down memories, comments or to simply sign

your name. Live music by Sistas and a performance by Faye (Star) Sweat, added to the festivities. For those who worked up an appetite on the dancefloor, a generous buffet was served, along with delectable desserts. And, of course, friendly bartenders served drinks of all sorts throughout the night.

The highlight of the evening was the onstage appearance of Amy Quinn, Asbury Park's Deputy Mayor, to present an award to the three owners of the hotel, Carol Torre, Kay San Fillippo and Camille Neto, for their decades of service and contributions to Asbury Park's lesbian community. Torre accepted the award on behalf of herself and co-owners, although she had mixed feelings, "It was nice to finally be acknowledged by the city, but it was long overdue. We were one of the first ones to venture onto the ravished beachfront and restore a building but they were not hoping for lesbians on the beachfront, so happy for the live building but not the occupants. It wasn't totally a gay thing, more of a male/female or a desire for the members of their club to be there."

Unfortunately, Torre lost the building with the redevelopment of the beachfront, which left a bad taste in her mouth, "They also took the building from me for the foretold reasons and also because I attended meetings and questioned what was and wasn't being done. Taking the building might have been alright, but it took them ten years to pay me the pittance they were giving me." She had no regrets of her journey with the Key West, however, "No amount of money could ever equal what came out of that venture. Getting the award was nice, even nicer and more special was the love and friendship generated by the almost 400 friends in the room."

Following the award acceptance, a proclamation was read by Deputy Mayor Quinn, declaring May 14<sup>th</sup> as "Key West Reunion Day" in Asbury Park. Kurt Kelly, an owner of The Stonewall Inn, a name synonymous with the fight for gays rights, came out to honor Torre as well. Aside from all the merriment, was a very emotional evening with tears of joy from reconnecting with those not seen in decades, and tears of sadness learning of those who had passed on. All in all the event was a winner and conjured up the warm feelings many had for Key West.

Sue Collard, a past patron, had this to say, "The Key West was the very first bar I went to in Asbury Park back in 1982 and I knew I found my home. Years later, I worked for the girls and just had the time of my life." Donna Alexander echoes the sentiment, "The Key West was special because of the three women who ran it. They gave us a safe place to play.

Another former Key West fan, Stephanie Swank, reminisced, "I found the Key West to be a safe haven to be myself. I'll never forget all of the ladies who made my life a better one!"

Gary Morris, who was an employee of the hotel for ten years, came to the reunion with his wife to get together with the many friends he made during his years there. "Tonight I stepped back into the '80s and had a blast. I was one of the original 20 and I am so fortunate to have been one. I have never

forgotten [all of] you.”

The Key West Hotel brought together countless gay women from all backgrounds and ethnicities – women with one common bond – the need to experience other gay women in a safe and supportive environment. The hotel provided just that. The Key West site is now a parking lot, but in the early morning hours, if you position yourself at the exact spot where the hotel once stood, you just might be able to hear the subtle laughter of women, the sharp taps of cues from a game of pool, and the faint sound of a Madonna tune in the distance. You see, the Key West Hotel will never die. Mickey Carter captures the feeling in one sentence, “The building may be gone, but the Key West lives on in our hearts.”

Check out photos from the night [here](#)

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