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**Queer Lounge poised for return
Undeterred by "Brokeback" controversy, gay hotspot is 'huge,' founder says**

Jay Hamburger

Not concerned with Utah's conservative bent, the Queer Lounge will, for the third year, provide a gay themed spot for parties, panel discussions and hanging out during the Sundance Film Festival.

The Queer Lounge's return seems to solidify its standing as a film-festival week hotspot and shows that, although the lounge faced limited opposition when it started in 2004, the organizers have been able to generate a buzz unique during the week.

The lounge will occupy about 5,000 square feet in the Gateway Center at the intersection of Heber Avenue and Swede Alley Jan. 20-28. The public is allowed inside during the daytime and invitation-only events are scheduled in the evening.

"Last year was the year it broke into something huge," said bisexual Ellen Huang, the former movie executive from Los Angeles who founded the Queer Lounge.

She said, in 2005, about 7,000 people either visited the lounge or attended Queer Lounge events at Suede. She said the Queer Lounge, a nonprofit, is doing well financially.

This year, the Queer Lounge plans at least eight parties or special events and six panel discussions, including a planned panel with Rosie O'Donnell, whose All Aboard! Rosie's Family Cruise screens at Sundance. Huang said about 10 percent of the Sundance films scheduled in 2006 have at least some gay content.

She acknowledges that conservatives in America have been influential in opposing gay rights, noting laws against gay marriage that have been approved in the U.S. in recent years, including one in Utah.

Huang said, in 2005, the Queer Lounge attracted Bible-carrying demonstrators but that Park City has been welcoming. She said Park City during film-festival week attracts a crowd that accepts the Queer Lounge.

"Park City becomes so cosmopolitan. To me, that's the attitude that's brought there," Huang said.

She said the Queer Lounge has played a role in making Utah known as a gay-friendly state.

But Utah recently gained notoriety when movie-theater owner Larry Miller refused to show "Brokeback Mountain," a critically acclaimed movie about gay cowboys. Huang said such publicity is bad for Utah and makes the state look like it has anti-gay leanings.

Guy Robison, the co-director of the Queer Lounge's Utah volunteers, said Utah movie-goers should have the chance to choose whether to see the movie, calling Miller's decision a "knee-jerk reaction." He said he is surprised that owner of a theater complex would not show what Robison describes as an artistic endeavor.

"It's a love story, a relationship story," he said.

Robison, who lives in Tooele, does not expect people at the Queer Lounge to dwell on the "Brokeback Mountain" controversy.

He said, regardless of the "Brokeback Mountain" controversy, gays feel welcome when they visit Park City during film-festival week. Robison, though, moved to Utah from Dallas four years ago and said, in Utah, people are not as friendly to gays.

"I was used to at least a non-judgmental attitude. I have not run into that in other places," Robison said, adding that people in Park City have not shown prejudices toward gays.

"I think Park City is a more cosmopolitan area . . .," he said. "People bring their own belief systems."

Huang said between 30 and 40 percent of the people who visit the Queer Lounge are straight. She said the organizers plan to start a Queer Lounge at the Toronto International Film Festival in September.

"Our mission is to build bridges between these two communities," she said about heterosexuals and gays.

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