

Firebrand

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It was the ill-fitting shoes that saved Charlene on the night she lost Kenny. Brand-new white clogs, which matched her striped bell-bottoms, but cut up her feet so badly on the walk down St. Peter Street that she'd never make it up the thirteen steps to the Up Stairs Lounge gay bar. No, Charlene Schneider knew she had to beg off and limp back to her home bar, a lesbian haunt on the corner of St. Peter and Rampart Street called Alice Brady's. So her friend Kenny Harrington and the rest of their clique went ahead to the Up Stairs Lounge "beer bust," a Sunday night drink special on the fringe of New Orleans' French Quarter popular with working-class queer folk. Charlene and Kenny waved as they parted, per usual. Nothing special. It was June 24, 1973.

Charlene, 32, was a tan, petite lesbian with a feathered mullet, dimpled cheeks, and the unmistakable y'at accent of a New Orleanian—think Brooklyn-meets-Southern, such that "you at" becomes one word. Neither butch nor femme, Charlene transcended gay archetypes and body types and rejected bigotry wholesale. "She was open," remarked her friend and political ally Mark Gonzalez. "And it wasn't just her look; it was her attitude." A born talker, Charlene made friends easily and displayed the trademark gruff voice and under-eye bags of a lifelong smoker who'd seen much from her stoop.

Charlene made it to Alice Brady's and helped herself to a stool at the bar. Brady, a no-bullshit proprietor for gay women, poured Charlene a beer. "Stocky with glasses, blue skirt, a white short-sleeve shirt with two bulging pockets" was how Charlene described the proprietress. Fellow patrons likened Alice Brady to a gay Julia Child. Brady didn't allow "funnah business" in her establishment for self-respecting "dykes," the then-preferential slang term for lesbian women. Brady kept a bat handy to clear out riffraff who broke her rules: "No dancing, no touching, no kissing, no nothing." Given these precautions, Brady's was a rare lesbian establishment that hadn't been raided by cops. However, women could still be harassed on the sidewalk for wearing less than three items of feminine attire or pants that zipped up the front.

That night of June 24, Charlene noticed a young man sprinting past Brady's. Almost out of breath, he poked his head through the doorway and shouted something about the Up Stairs Lounge. Just then, Charlene's lover, Diane Dimiceli, called the phone behind the bar. Breathlessly, Dimiceli said there'd been a deadly inferno at Up Stairs as the beer bust was winding down. After Charlene hung up, Brady ribbed Charlene that she had just saved her own life in the most lesbian way possible: By complaining about her feet. Charlene spent the rest of the night at home with Dimiceli glued to the unfolding TV coverage of the Up Stairs calamity. "Channel 4 had shots of some lucky person being rescued from a ledge," Charlene wrote in an unfinished memoir manuscript only recently recovered from Katrina detritus. "Flames flickered through the burned and barred windows; the white smoke from the doused flames hung heavy in the air." In less than sixteen minutes, twenty-nine lives were snuffed out in an intentionally set blaze, with three more souls fated to excruciating deaths in the Charity Hospital burn ward. It was the deadliest fire in New Orleans history and the worst mass killing of homosexuals in twentieth-century America.

One who died was Charlene's friend "Kenny," or Kenneth Paul Harrington, a 48-year-old bureaucrat with the US Department of Agriculture Milk Division who palled around on weekends as Charlene's gay wingman. They both lived on a particularly queer-friendly block of St. Peter Street. Kenny died of carbon monoxide inhalation in the Up Stairs Lounge before flames consumed his body, the Orleans Parish Coroner ruled. Charlene knew Kenny's family, and it was Kenny's sister who went to

the morgue to identify his asphyxiated, “cherry pink” corpse. Hopelessly, Kenny had tried holding his breath as while tiles, wallpaper, and decorations rained fire and bodies dropped around him. Eventually, involuntarily, his lungs had forced him to inhale superheated poison.

Even public mourning had to be coded for homosexuals of the South. So Kenny’s family, leery of associating him with the gay bar in which he perished, took out classified ad space in the *New Orleans Times-Picayune*. “I would like to extend my appreciation to all of Kenny’s friends for the thoughtfulness & kindness in the time of sorrow,” their message read.

A week blurred by for Charlene. “I was saddened and angry at the media,” she recalled. “They did not mention the wonderful lives of the victims lost.” Police wouldn’t even question the chief suspect for the arson, a gay-for-pay sex worker named Rodger Dale Nunez, who was violently ejected from the Up Stairs Lounge during the beer bust shouting, “I’m gonna burn you all out!” Many of the city’s estimated 60,000 gays and lesbians found themselves paralyzed with fear at the prospect of being outed through association with the fire victims. Up Stairs Lounge fire survivor Stewart Butler, for example, went to work the following day and attempted to conceal his agony with busywork. “It was a hard, hard thing to do and not show any reaction,” he recalled.

Gay New Orleanians, up to 1973, had never experienced a catastrophe of such scale. Almost to a person, they’d discretely kept their jobs in an atmosphere where being outed meant being fired and blacklisted from white-collar industries. There wasn’t even public-facing homosexual leadership in town. A contingent of the Gay Liberation Front in New Orleans fell apart due to lack of interest in 1971. The one gay leader to be found in the 1973 phone book, Reverend Bill Larson of the Metropolitan Community Church (MCC) of New Orleans, had burned to death, pinned to the window bars of the Up Stairs Lounge. A photograph of Larson’s charred, ashen remains circulated in national newspapers—as if a warning on the perils of outness.

It took the intervention of the national Gay Liberation movement and a radical gay minister from Los Angeles named Troy Perry, founding pastor of the MCC denomination, for a French Quarter church to agree to host a public memorial for the Up Stairs Lounge dead. Although gay business owners called him a “fairy carpetbagger” for doing so, Reverend Troy Perry

defied Crescent City taboos by calling a press conference in which he showed his face and used his real name as a gay citizen.

Charlene and her lover, Diane Dimiceli, clashed over whether Charlene should attend the memorial that Sunday, July 1, but Charlene went to St. Mark's Methodist Church on Rampart Street anyway—particularly, to grieve her friend. Dimiceli said, “Cameras would be there, and everyone would see me,” Charlene recounted. Dimiceli and Charlene had a Roman candle of a romance, dangerously passionate. Charlene brought the spunk, and Dimiceli brought the muscle. Their sex was incandescent, as were the quarrels. “Diane usually won all of our arguments, but this time I was absolutely determined to go, to hell with the press,” explained Charlene. “We had no role models. We knew we liked women, but we weren’t men. So there was a lot of role-playing.” Paradigms like butch/femme, when mixed with alcohol and childhood trauma, could mimic the marital strife of 1950s straight life. “Power, not gender, underlies gay male [and lesbian female] abuse,” noted Lenore Walker in her foreword to the book *Men Who Beat the Men Who Love Them*. “We must not forget that most gay men and women were raised in heterosexual homes where power differences between men and women fueled the sex role socialization patterns that they modeled on their own relationships.”

So Charlene slipped on a brown minidress and hid her face beneath an orange floppy hat. She walked alone down Rampart Street, entered St. Mark's, and sat high in a balcony as Reverend Troy Perry preached to a crowd of approximately 250 gays and lesbians. Friends of survivors, friends of victims, bereft neighbors, no city leaders. “As long as one brother or sister in our country is oppressed, it’s our problem,” Perry sermonized. “I had never heard anyone like him, before or since,” Charlene recalled. True to Dimiceli’s warnings, three local television stations turned up to cover the memorial and posted cameras on the road median outside the church. The film log for WDSU, recording its cameraman’s location that day, states, “Memorial—held for 30 homosexuals who died in F.Q. fire.” At the conclusion of the service, Reverend Perry rushed back to the podium and announced to the crowd that reporters had the church effectively surrounded. He offered mourners a secret backdoor exit to avoid being photographed and outed at a gay event. Terror momentarily overtook the

chamber. Then an unidentified butch lesbian stood and shouted, “I came in through the front door, and I’m damn well going out that way!”

In a spontaneous act of defiance, queer folk of New Orleans begin rising and marching through the front doors of St. Mark’s. They were effectively outing themselves to the world. Charlene wavered for a moment, fearing Dimiceli’s reaction, but willed herself to stand and join the others. Out of deference, New Orleans news outlets kept their camera lenses affixed to Troy Perry on the front chapel steps, only briefly scanning the crowd. “I had heard people say gay and proud but never truly understood what it meant,” wrote Charlene. “For the first time in my life, I felt liberated.”

Unable to fully embrace her sexuality, Charlene Schneider had spent her young life dwelling in the shadow world offered to so-called “quares” of Dixieland. She’d been slapped down repeatedly and brutally by authorities whenever the way she loved became publicly apparent. “Live and let live” was the social contract New Orleans officials preached to the city’s semi-closeted underworld of bachelors, dandies, tomboys and spinsters, but police regularly failed to honor the “let live” portion of the sentiment. Every stage-managed bar raid meant printing names alongside queer offenses in the crime blotter of the *Times-Picayune*: “crime against nature,” “lewd dancing,” “obscenity.” As gay local Albert Carey recalls, “Some chose suicide rather than face of the shame of seeing their names in the paper that way.” Marching into the cameras that July I marked Charlene’s rejection of a societal lie: the fairytale of safety in discretion, a ruse that had ruled her life. “Reverend Troy Perry awoke several sleeping giants,” she wrote, “me being one of them.”

Charlene Ann Schneider was born on August 13, 1940, in Bay St. Louis, Mississippi. Moving with her family in early childhood to a house on Magazine Street in New Orleans, she attended L. E. Rabouin Vocational High School downtown. Charlene was outed by a teacher in 1959, her senior year, after watching her first “girl crush” marry a man. “When my mother confronted me, I ran away and watched from under a car in the next block as the police came to my house,” Charlene remembered. After a vagabond week, Charlene resolved to go home, damn the consequences. Charlene’s mother, Virginia, hugged her daughter for a long time, then personally escorted her back to L. E. Rabouin to get her reinstated. “I returned to school but was

stripped of all committees and elected positions I held, such as president of student council,” Charlene said. With little else to lose, Charlene went to her first lesbian bar: the Tiger Lounge on Tchoupitoulas Street. When she walked into the place in 1959, she counted seven gay women at the jukebox. “I fell in love with every one of them,” she recalled in a 1989 interview for gay New Orleans newspaper *IMPACT*. “Butches. Femmes. It did not matter. Somebody was gay besides me.”

After graduating from L.E. Rabouin, Charlene’s typing skills qualified her for a high-status job. She worked as a crypto-teletype operator for the contractor Mason-Rust at the NASA Michoud Assembly Facility in New Orleans East. Due to the sensitive nature of the code work she processed for a government aerospace agency, Charlene received a federal security clearance. For two years, she balanced the discrete halves of her life—by day, a cryptographer at a facility building stages of the Saturn V rocket; by night, a connoisseur of Quarter lesbian bars like The Village Inn. On August 1, 1964, those worlds came crashing. “Members of the headquarters special vice squad Saturday reported the arrest of sixteen women, a juvenile, and two men from The Village Inn Bar, 345 Dauphine, on various charges of obscenity,” reported the *Times-Picayune*. Charlene had taken her baby sister, Diane Schneider, also lesbian, to The Village Inn to celebrate Diane’s eighteenth birthday. They’d grabbed a pitcher of beer, and Diane, the so-called “baby dyke” of the group, was reveling in newfound attention. Then someone called Charlene over to the bar pay phone. A lesbian friend, whose dad was a cop, screamed through the receiver that The Village Inn was about to be raided.

It all happened faster than Charlene could react, faster than her brain could process: lights, screaming, pushing, dogs, handcuffs. Charlene escaped with a group out the side door, but it dawned on her quickly that teenage Diane wasn’t by her side. So Charlene rushed back into The Village Inn to be apprehended and put in the same paddy wagon as her baby sister. “She tried to protect Diane,” recalled Linda Tucker, the woman who’d become Charlene’s life partner and who shared with me Charlene’s private archive of papers and memorabilia to complete this piece. “But Diane had a mind of her own.” According to Tucker, Diane Schneider was the sort of scheming younger sibling who’d watch Charlene iron her school uniforms before bedtime and then get up early to steal the ensemble, leaving Charlene to

wear wrinkled clothes. To limit blowback from the arrest that could affect her job, Charlene gave the false name Charmania Cochran at the police station. But “Diane Schneider, 18,” defiantly gave her real identity, which tipped off Charlene’s security officer at Michoud—a federal functionary tasked to investigate security risks for NASA. So when Charlene showed up at the First District Court to face misdemeanor charges as “Charmania,” the Michoud security officer stood in the back. Within minutes, Charlene was handcuffed anew and charged with a felony. “Charlene Schneider, you’re under arrest for falsifying police documents,” the policeman said.

When Charlene arrived at work the next day, her boss told her that debriefing agents were flying in from Patterson Air Force Base. “He explained that his hands were tied, and if I were a whore in the gutter, he could save my job, but in this case, he could do nothing,” Charlene recalled. “He was a married man, whose married secretary was pregnant by him, preaching morals to me.” Three federal agents interrogated Charlene in a soundproof room for two hours. They threatened her and explained exactly what would happen if she revealed a single detail relating to her code work. “My insides became dead,” she recalled. At the end of this grilling, the agents yanked her security clearance for reason of homosexuality, which they said made her susceptible to blackmail from foreign governments. Charlene tried to clarify that her lesbianism wasn’t a risk because it wasn’t a secret to anyone in her social circle. The explanation disgusted them. As Charlene remembered, “They dismissed me as if I was a dog.”

Charlene’s mind shattered. She ironed the same clothes over and again for weeks. She refused to leave the house until her money ran out. Though the felony charge was dropped, it didn’t resurrect her career, and her car was repossessed. “It’s very hard for gay people to lose their jobs,” Charlene explained to New Orleans historian Roberts Batson in 1997. “We tend to be very independent. That fear kept many gay people from going to the bars and made activism so difficult. It was a choice between being outed and a bum with no job or being self-homophobic and successful.” Eventually, Charlene reemerged. With a black mark on her resume, she was so humiliated that she only applied to work at lesbian bars—the very locations that police targeted. In January 1968, Charlene was arrested again while working at Red’s Bar on 940 St. Ferdinand Street. Seven women, including her, were charged with

“alleged lesbian activities.” Afterward, Charlene’s real name appeared in the *Times-Picayune*. This happened on at least four more occasions. “Broke my parents’ hearts every time,” wrote Charlene of the ritual mortification.

Charlene found more lucrative work at the Western Union office on Carondelet Street, but she was pink slipped on August 08, 1972, due to a “REDUCTION IN FORCE.” Given this instability, it’s no surprise she sought security in the arms of a street-savvy woman named Diane Dimiceli. Dimiceli was a lover who could physically protect her from “rollings,” or violent muggings that could put gay folk in the hospital. Dimiceli adored Charlene for a time. They gave each other the pet name “Ninny.” They nested quickly, but their passions metastasized. “Once when we lived together, she had beaten me so bad that Diane, my sister, had to come pick me up off the floor and take me to the hospital,” wrote Charlene in her unpublished memoir. Recently asked to comment, Dimiceli responded via phone: “Her talking about domestic violence, it’s just not true.” Dimiceli stressed Charlene’s habit of getting “big on a soapbox” to highlight struggles that could apply to any lesbian. “I can’t speak to her thought process,” said Dimiceli. “But Charlene also did a lot of good.” No archival police reports or hospital records exist to substantiate Charlene’s accusations of domestic abuse, but a mutual friend of the time period, local gay historian Roberts Batson, does recall Charlene describing the relationship as “abusive.” Such murkiness may be unsurprising. As queer counselors David Island and Patrick Letellier observed in *Men Who Beat the Men Who Love Them*, “Based on the false assumption that domestic violence is a ‘heterosexual problem,’ gays may know even less about domestic violence than the average American.”

Given her devastating grief over Kenny as well as her rap sheet, it’s remarkable that Charlene mustered the courage in 1973 to walk down the front staircase of St. Mark’s into the cameras. Fully radicalized, Charlene made some changes in her life. She and Dimiceli broke up faster than they’d nested. Dimiceli tried to win her back, but Charlene rebuffed. An unsigned love letter in Charlene’s personal papers written on Ramada Inn stationery dated October 2, 1974, reads somewhat hauntingly, “I will never let anyone physically hurt you in my presence. And I shall always hope and pray for your happiness.” It’s unclear whether Charlene or Dimiceli or a third party with intimate knowledge wrote this note.

In a city without Gay Liberation, Charlene was already involved in a goofy annual tradition at City Park called “The Gay Olympics,” which included events like a high heel race. But Charlene made a point of branching out from the party scene. She joined a literary salon for gay intellectuals called the Gertrude Stein Society. She also networked with activists in the formation the Human Equal Rights for Everyone (HERE) coalition in June of 1977 to protest anti-homosexual spokesperson and singer Anita Bryant’s scheduled concert at the Municipal Auditorium near the French Quarter. Through HERE, Charlene cultivated friendships with a Black state senator who supported local gays named Johnny Jackson as well as gay activist and Up Stairs Lounge survivor Stewart Butler. Her gay-to-straight and lesbian-to-gay outreach was deliberate. HERE’s 2,500-person-strong demonstration against Anita Bryant in Jackson Square turned out to be the largest gay rights protest in New Orleans history. As a parade marshal, Charlene corralled the seething gay mob down St. Ann Street through the French Quarter to take the demonstration directly to Anita Bryant’s concert. “Charlene did more than her share,” reflected protest organizer Skip Kibodeaux. The HERE campaign “brought many people out of their closets and into the streets,” reported *IMPACT*, the newly formed gay newspaper in town, where Charlene perfected her voice as a columnist and assistant editor. Aptly, Charlene’s column title was “Speaking Out.”

To save money, Charlene got a late-night typesetting job with the *Times-Picayune*—ironically, the publisher that publicized her prior arrests. She also managed women-only “swim-ins” at a gay bar in the Bywater called The Country Club. In October 1977, when the *Times-Picayune* laid her off with a sizable severance of \$7,000 for the time, she used that capital to open her own bar for lesbians at 940 Elysian Fields Avenue in the outlying Marigny neighborhood—then a remote atoll on the gay social circuit. Few at the time thought a lesbian bar could succeed outside the “Fruit Loop,” the gay nickname for the Quarter. “Charlene always said she wanted somewhere where women could be safe,” recalled Linda Tucker. “And that’s why she opened her own bar and used her own name.” In December 1977, Charlene received a state liquor license to operate the business, dubbed “Charlene’s.” For her bar location, she chose an old storefront for Castiex Pharmacy, once a family-owned drugstore chain. Charlene opted to keep the “C” tile mosaics in the floor because, by a

stroke of luck, they matched her first initial. More omens guided her steps. “I was living at Bourbon and Esplanade,” Charlene extolled, “and the key to my apartment fit the door to the bar.” She was off and running.

Though the décor was spare besides a few booths and a pool table, though regulars sometimes tripped over cracks in the floor, Charlene’s swiftly drew a regular crowd. The bar’s art-deco logo of two women, one masked, dancing cheek to cheek with hands clasped said it all. “It was a comfortable, small bar, and when people started dancing, the place was rocking,” recalled former patron Maxx Sizeler. “I remember how welcome I felt, and I remember how, for the first time in my life, I fit in somewhere.” Fellow patron Valda Lewis likened Charlene’s to the ultimate dive. “There were some mirrors on the walls here and there, and you could basically spit on the floor, and nobody would care,” Lewis said, laughing. Diane Schneider, habitually seeking work, asked Charlene for a bartending gig, and Charlene obliged.

Regulars at Charlene’s got an automatic social life every night for the price of a beer. “We’re a whole support system,” Charlene boasted. In the years when many lesbians were rejected by biological families, Charlene became a matriarch for “families of choice,” who frequently stopped by. “She was a mother hen, the protector, the to-go person,” recalled Mark Gonzalez, a gay attorney who represented gays and lesbians targeted by police. “Charlene was one of the people that you knew would be supportive if you got arrested or even if you were having problems with your girlfriend.” Above the thirty-foot bar was a framed quotation that, searching for words, Charlene often recited to lesbian youth weeping mascara into her golf shirts. “To live, to love, to laugh at life . . .,” the mantra began. (Charlene kept the origins of this phrase to herself. Regulars treated the words as if they’d fallen from the clouds.)

Resolutely, Charlene guarded patron privacy and banned behaviors that attracted police attention. She kept the same “No Fighting, No Fucking” rules as Alice Brady. To keep “predatory straights” who ogled at lesbians or straight couples cruising for threesomes away from clientele, Charlene’s patrons got buzzed in at the front door on the corner of N. Rampart and Elysian Fields, which she scrutinized like a lioness. “She knew exactly who came in and who went out,” recalled Linda Tucker. Charlene was also known to carry a .25 Browning automatic Colt pistol in case of emergencies, though she never found cause to fire it indoors. “I make you a deal: You

don't smoke dope in my bar, and I don't shoot out your kneecaps!" Charlene told *Playboy* magazine in 1979.

Charlene's could thus feel like a saloon, a cramped dance hall, and a debate space all mixed up in a daiquiri blender. It was the sort of watering hole where a woman could mingle after work while catching a comedy act such as Ellen DeGeneres or drop off a signed civil rights petition. "Ellen was a customer and a young struggling comedienne determined to become famous," recollected Charlene. "She was a gentle soul, just one of many customers that enjoyed the bar." Ellen DeGeneres hailed from the conservative New Orleans suburb of Metairie. Patron Maxx Sizeler recalls DeGeneres's early forays: "I remember her posters and her performing at Charlene's." Part of DeGeneres's schtick involved throwing out pieces of paper that audience members read aloud like fortune cookies. Reportedly, someone got the line, "When I'm famous, I'll buy you a house!" For the first few years, Charlene lived in a small apartment in the back of her bar to minimize expenses. "Charlene never had any money," Maxx Sizeler and Linda Tucker both affirmed. Generous nonetheless, Charlene held charity fundraisers such as "Toys for Desire," an annual Christmas toy drive for children in need that featured, according to Valda Lewis, "a lesbian Santa with a big beard."

Charlene had an uncanny way of making newcomers at the bar feel like lifelong friends. When twentysomething Kathleen Conlon crept into Charlene's to explore a vague but persistent curiosity with lesbian society, Charlene sniffed out Conlon's story within seconds. She pointed to Conlon and hollered at eager faces down the bar, "Don't bother this one!" She then turned to Conlon and muttered under her breath, "Unless you want 'dem to." Simultaneously, Charlene developed a reputation for imploring customers to become politically active. "Are you a registered voter?" she'd ask, while sliding over three fingers of whiskey. If a woman answered no, she'd quip, "Then your opinion don't count for shit." On February 27, 1978, Charlene's hosted a political forum for candidates in the Louisiana State Senate District Four special election, the first in a series of candidate/constituent confabs that continued for the bar's duration. "When we started to be visibly queer in the political movement, by and large the bar owners didn't want to have anything to do with us," recalled Roberts Batson. "Charlene was a notable exception—because she had already been arrested. No one was as visible."

Stepping outside for smoke breaks, Charlene frequently assumed the role of street corner lecturer for queer milestones like the Up Stairs Lounge.

Community complications ensued when Alice Brady retired in April 1978 and sold her bar to Charlene's ex-lover Diane Dimiceli. "That's when the animosity with Charlene started," recalled Dimiceli. "She and another lady thought Alice Brady was going to give the bar to them, sell it to them. And she did not. She came to me purposely and said, 'I want you to have my bar.'" Still, Charlene devoted space in her *IMPACT* column to hail the changeover: "Diane is now the official owner of Brady's, and I know she is planning a lot of renovation, etc., so why not drop by and have a drink? A big party is planned to celebrate Brady's retirement." Dimiceli took a different tack in *IMPACT* advertisements. "Brady's is Dead . . . But Diane's is Alive!" read a full-page spread. A rivalry brewed, stirred by private grievances.

Determined to link party-centric New Orleans with the national Stonewall legacy of political "Pride," Charlene spearheaded a campaign in 1979 with law student Mark Gonzalez and activist Dick O'Connor to start a Pride celebration in New Orleans. Brainstorming at the bar, they decided to call their new happening Gay Fest. Pat O'Brien, Charlene's straight male lawyer and consigliere, drew up the founding documents, and Dick O'Connor went to City Hall to secure a permit. "He gets permission to do it in Jackson Square opposite the goddamned Catholic cathedral," remembered Mark Gonzalez with a grin. "When the 'powers that be' became aware, they said, 'You can't do that.' And we said, Well you gave it to us in writing, and they said, OK, pick any other place in the city." The planning committee chose Washington Square Park on Elysian Fields, which happened to fall just down the street from Charlene's establishment. To sell fellow bar owners on the "Pride" idea and get them to buy vending booths at the event, Gay Fest planners touted Charlene's involvement. "You could use Charlene's name, which impressed people," Gonzalez recalled. They sold eighty-two booths for the festival, which took place that last weekend of June. Musician Tim Williams performed as the headliner on a plywood stage, around which the local Pink Triangle Alliance donated a black flower arrangement to recognize those who perished at the Up Stairs Lounge and could not partake in the day's celebrations. "Huge crowd," summed up Charlene.

The next year, in a peacemaking gesture given that Charlene's bar had benefitted financially from the strategic location of the first Gay Fest, community leader Diane Dimiceli was tapped to lead. "Animosity made it uncomfortable for Diane and I to work together," wrote Charlene of Gay Fest 1980. "But I helped when asked." (Their collegial relationship had devolved further following a violent encounter.) In November 1979, Alice Brady came out of retirement to purchase a co-ownership stake in Charlene's bar. Charlene's full-page advertisement in *IMPACT* read, "Brady's Back." For someone in Dimiceli's position, this turn of events may have felt like a dirty trick. Why did Alice Brady sell her bar only to get in bed with the competition? Meanwhile, Charlene was determined to make her bar "included in the national lesbian circuit" for touring musicians. In a small coup, singer-songwriter June Millington agreed to take the stage at Charlene's on Sunday, March 2, 1980, before playing the mainstream venue Tipitina's on Tuesday, March 4.

That Monday, March 3, Charlene showed Millington around town. After dropping the star singer off at her hotel, Charlene stopped by for a nightcap at Diane's. Charlene may have been crowing over recent success, as if saying without saying to the Diane's crowd that she was now the undisputed alpha. Reading the angry vibe in the room, Charlene left Diane's and went across the street to a gay bar called the Finale II. There, Charlene recalled, an enforcer lesbian and Diane's regular nicknamed Erin the Welder followed. She snatched Charlene from a barstool by the neck and carried her flailing out onto St. Peter Street. Erin the Welder proceeded to strangle Charlene while bashing her skull into the pavement. According to Charlene, Diane Dimiceli witnessed the attack but did not intervene. "I know there was an altercation, and it was outside of the bar," recalled Dimiceli. "Charlene's using strong words here with 'attack.' From what I understand, there was an altercation that stemmed from a difference of something that had been said." Charlene fought back as she faded in and out of consciousness. She barely freed her throat from Erin the Welder's grip before she sprinted to her car. "I had urinated myself," Charlene wrote in her unpublished memoir, "and was bleeding from my nose, eyes, ears and mouth, and my tongue was swollen to three times its size."

Charlene stayed in bed for two days. She knew not to call the police, lest she be booked again for some petty crime. “Most gay people my age, in that era, would never ever have considered calling the police about an incident of this nature,” wrote queer activist and author Sarah Schulman concerning a violent lesbian encounter in her book-length work of cultural criticism, *Conflict Is Not Abuse*. “You called the police to prevent a crime, like if someone was breaking into your apartment. But no gay person would have called the police to solve a problem with another gay person by inflicting punishment after the fact. It was almost inconceivable. There was no expectation that the police would care or be helpful.” Loath to tolerate any form of internecine violence without deep context, Schulman later clarified this stance in an interview with *The New York Times* podcaster Ezra Klein: “What I’m really talking about are negative systems of loyalty.”

When she returned behind her bar, Charlene told none of her patrons how she got hurt, determined to “fake it.” When her lawyer Pat O’Brien, a former Green Beret, noticed the bruises, he vowed to “get even,” but Charlene talked him out of revenge. “It would absolutely split the community,” she wrote as explanation, right when gays and lesbians of New Orleans had finally unified for Gay Fest. “People would have to take sides, and above all else, I did not want this to happen.” Any bickering that spilled into the open, Charlene contended, would give fuel to critics who said that “queers” were criminal lowlifes. “Now is the time for the family to come together,” Charlene wrote in *IMPACT*. “It always gets back to that one thing: family.”

That June, Diane Dimiceli’s Gay Fest 1980 at Washington Square Park was an unmitigated success—bigger than the previous year. It left a sizable profit of \$2,000, and Charlene fundraised for future Prides, even when Gay Fest temporarily transplanted to Armstrong Park to take advantage of Rampart Street bars, like Diane’s, on the edge of the Fruit Loop.

In 1981, the gay bar Café Lafitte in Exile teamed with Charlene’s on a Mrs. and Mr. Gay Pride fundraiser, with the Mrs. being a gay man and the Mr. being a lesbian. Charlene hired Ellen DeGeneres to MC her “Mr.” event. “A gentle, kind, sensitive and giving young woman,” remarked Charlene. “Believe me, what you see is what you get.” Soon afterward, DeGeneres moved to pursue Hollywood aspirations. Although DeGeneres was out in New Orleans, she circumnavigated her sexuality on the standup

circuit to survive in a showbiz culture that outright denied work to gays and lesbians, believing that American audiences would not accept them. By the time DeGeneres performed her famous “phone call to God” bit on *The Tonight with Johnny Carson* in 1986, she had effectively re-closeted. Tabloids smelled a story and frequently called Charlene’s offering increasing sums of money for anyone willing to talk on the record. “Years before Ellen came out, newspapers and magazines would call me wanting me to out Ellen,” Charlene said. “Coming from the old school, this was never going to happen.” Indisputably, DeGeneres’s declaration of her lesbianism in the 1990s would be a seminal gay event of the twentieth century—heard and seen by hundreds of millions. Though Charlene’s lifelong financial woes stood to vanish had she merely scooped DeGeneres, had she robbed a former protégé of her agency, Charlene wouldn’t take the payoff. Indeed, many of the first generation of “out” lesbian entertainers who became household names were protected by unfamous lesbians in ways unseen.

Now a bona fide bar owner and community leader, Charlene at last faced private demons. She sought out a gay-friendly therapist named Betty Spencer to resolve the nagging question of why she kept picking the wrong woman—lesbian enforcer types, who according to Charlene’s lover Linda Tucker “beat her up all the time.” In counseling sessions, Spencer helped Charlene to overcome the self-loathing that drew her toward lovers who’d inflict punishment as the price for joy. Sarah Schulman, in *Conflict Is Not Abuse*, characterized this emotional cul-de-sac as “a desire of the Traumatized to seek alliance with bullies.” Time with Betty Spencer transformed Charlene—helping her to not just accept but celebrate her gayness. She identified and worked to combat the newly understood phenomenon of internalized homophobia. For example, Charlene began to reject the word “dyke.” “Dyke to me is a poor attempt at male impersonation, a flashback to a time when fists and pool sticks decided all disputes,” she wrote. “A policeman rubbing his crotch after we were all arrested and put in a cell, saying, ‘What you need is a real man, baby. That’s all any of you dykes need.’” For a local lesbian biker group, Charlene vetoed the name “Dykes on Bikes” in favor of “Women on Wheels.”

Throughout the early 1980s, Charlene sought positive channels with police and city officials. She joined the Louisiana Lesbian and Gay Political Action Caucus (better known as LAGPAC) and encouraged LAGPAC leader

Alan Robinson's efforts to fundraise for the purchase of bulletproof vests for police officers. Charlene also cheered the creation of a charity softball game between the New Orleans gay community and the New Orleans Police Department between 1980 and 1981, sponsored by Anheuser-Bush and umpired by New Orleans City Councilmembers like Lambert Boissiere (whose campaign LAGPAC endorsed). When Ernest "Dutch" Morial, the first Black mayor in New Orleans history, was reelected in 1982, Charlene—an out lesbian politico—was invited to the inaugural.

These initial steps toward a working peace between gays and the authorities floundered after a series of mass arrests at gay bars. On June 12, 1983, four female patrons of Charlene's stepped outside for some air. It was Lesbian and Gay Pride Month, and Gay Fest 1983 had fallen apart because of gay infighting. As consolation, Charlene sponsored a well-attended Pride soiree with live music. As this was an era of indoor smoking and Charlene had yet to install an exhaust fan, clouds hung so thickly that customers ducked out the front door to catch their breath whenever the band took a break. Beneath the halos of streetlamps, four women leaned on their car hoods and flirted. Emerging from a place of hiding, two male officers of the Fifth District of the New Orleans Police Department (NOPD) pounced. They'd been harassing Charlene's patrons this way for months.

The officers threw the women against the cars, frisked them, slapped cuffs on their wrists, and placed them under arrest. Their crime? Obstruction of free passage, legalese for blocking a sidewalk. As patrons inside Charlene's sounded the alarm, the officers noticed three more women—just in from Baton Rouge—walking toward the bar. The officers arrested them for the same sidewalk crime. Now seven handcuffed women stood in a dehumanizing line outside of Charlene's. Most of these women weren't out at work. "Two of 'em were policewomen from Baton Rouge," Charlene recalled. "One was a bail-bondswoman from Baton Rouge. One of 'em was a teacher." Absent employment protections for sexual orientation in Louisiana, these women would all assuredly be fired if the location of their arrests became publicized.

Alert to the emergency, Charlene leapt over her bar and ran outside to intervene. Trying to understand the charges, Charlene paced off her sidewalk and asked for the legal definition of a blockage. The NOPD Fifth District

Commander rebuffed her: "It's at the discretion of the officers." Sensing that she wasn't being taken seriously, Charlene picked up the phone behind her bar and dialed the home number of Boissiere. Minutes later, when Councilmember Boissiere pulled up in his pajamas, the police backtracked on their sidewalk ruse and said they'd amend the charges. Boissiere exploded. "You just told me that those women were arrested for blocking a sidewalk and open containers, and if there's going to be anything else on their police report, you're going to be in trouble with me," he said.

Charlene helped to bail out the arrestees, found them hotel rooms, and went with them to their morning hearing. And as if by magic, all charges against Charlene's patrons were dropped. Associated records were expunged, and the arrestees' names didn't even make the *Times-Picayune*. In the span of one lesbian generation, Charlene went from being regularly arrested and convicted to possessing the requisite power to prevent such arrests from sticking. Her participation in New Orleans politics had paid dividends, though she took a "sucker punch" in the aftermath of the raid. *IMPACT*, the gay newspaper to which she'd devoted years as an editor, declined to cover the arrests at Charlene's—deprioritizing a lesbian emergency in favor of coverage for a local gay convention called Celebration! Forcefully objecting to this act of erasure, Charlene resigned her "Speaking Out" column, but she chose to keep her outrage "in family." Friends did worry about her. It had been a time since Charlene had felt the guiding embrace of a committed partner. One night, patrons spotted Charlene crying alone behind the bar as she counted out her register, which was short.

Despite setbacks, Charlene maintained a knack for reading the trade winds of lesbian culture and placing her bar at the epicenter. The summer of 1986, a young singer-songwriter named Melissa Etheridge went on a grassroots tour of lesbian bars across America called "Melissa Travels the East Coast." Wanting to kick things off in New Orleans, she consulted a bar guide and saw the name "Charlene's." Etheridge dialed the number, heard a gruff voice, and knew she'd found the right place. She booked the Wednesday of July 9 and turned up in a mohawk. Charlene's patron Brenda Laura was there that night. "Was she hot? No, I didn't think so until she opened her mouth," recalled Laura. "Then she opened her mouth, and she could have had any woman she wanted." Within a year, Etheridge recorded her eponymous debut album, an underground hit that eventually

went platinum. Predictably, success had the effect of re-closeting Etheridge in show business, and, unsurprisingly, tabloids again came calling to Charlene's. (Charlene kept Etheridge's cover well into 1993, when Etheridge proclaimed her sexuality with the release of her album *Yes I Am*.)

The years 1985 and 1986, during which Charlene fundraised for the N.O./AIDS Task Force as the AIDS crisis surged to new heights, became turning point years for gay New Orleans. "They had no name for it and just said it seemed to only affect gay people," Charlene said. "At first, it seemed like a scare tactic." True to form, Charlene's hosted the first meeting in the city on HTLV-III/LAV (as HIV was then called). In late 1986, Charlene lent her support to a gay consortium pressing for an anti-discrimination ordinance that would make sexual orientation a protected class in New Orleans. After twelve hours of vitriolic debate at City Hall, with 120 people speaking for and against, Charlene took the microphone. "Now come on, you guys," Charlene lectured the City Council. "What this whole thing is about is whether or not you councilmen are going to pass an ordinance that will give us our equal rights." The ordinance was soundly defeated by vote of five to two. "Why is this not a civil matter?" Councilmember Johnny Jackson, one of the two votes in favor, shouted as he slammed his fist on the rostrum.

The defeated activists met at Charlene's to regroup. There, LAGPAC member and Up Stairs Lounge survivor Stewart Butler encouraged his protégés to launch a third campaign. In a nearby booth, bartender Loretta Mims and bar regular Valda Lewis fumed at what they'd witnessed in the Council chambers and resolved to start a television show that would, in Lewis's words, "give gay people a better image." They launched the public access program *Just for the Record* in May 1987, and it continued into 1993. Charlene was a perennial sponsor and, said Lewis, one of the few lesbians able to get on camera without jeopardizing her job. In the very first episode, Charlene delivered a monologue to lesbian youth: "Politics is very, very important to you. I know it's boring. It sounds boring. I ask the young community to think about what they're doing."

Meanwhile, Charlene's dating life was due for another "spin of the revolving door," as she joked. She'd always counseled lovesick patrons that when the heart is ready, the lover arrives, sometimes not really believing her own words. Then in 1987, chance played matchmaker. Linda Tucker,

head coach of Rice University's NCAA women's basketball team, strolled into Charlene's bar. With an elegant neckline, long lashes, and a ballerina's waist, Tucker was a catch—instantly, the hottest woman in the joint. It was the NBA Finals, Tucker remembers. The Lakers were playing the Celtics, and Tucker made them tune the bar's small TV into the game. As Tucker sipped on a scotch and gazed at the screen, Charlene teased her about being a grown-ass woman who believed that sports meant "jack." Tucker turned her head to give this loudmouth a stare. Charlene wore wide-framed glasses with tinted lenses, a gym teacher vibe. That look happened to be exactly Tucker's type. Charlene nicknamed Tucker "Coach," as in, "Hey, Coach, what's the score?" When Tucker eventually got up to use the restroom, she accidentally bumped into Charlene. They hugged almost involuntarily, as if they'd been hugging their entire lives. "Get her away from me. She fits!" Charlene shouted, when they finally released. That was it. She and Linda Tucker were together for the next nineteen years. They had but one argument, and it was over landscaping their home. "About a fucking bush!" Tucker recalls, shaking her head.

Everything in Charlene's life that preceded their romance became known as "B.L.T.," or Before Linda Tucker. External pressures tested their love but only served to draw them closer. "I kissed a lot of frogs to get to Linda," Charlene said half-seriously. Charlene was a gay public figure, and Linda Tucker, by necessity, had been closeted since she started coaching NCAA women's basketball at Rice in 1978. Unquestionably, if her sexuality was exposed, Tucker couldn't continue to lead a college program. "Charlene was very, very protective of me," insists Tucker. "She didn't want anything to jeopardize my profession." When Tucker came to New Orleans for her first Mardi Gras, Charlene arranged for Tucker to watch the parades in costume from a special section designated for police families. "Charlene was absolutely terrified something was going to happen to me," Tucker recalls, "that I'd be noticed." Charlene insisted that friends and patrons offer Coach Tucker the same discretion they'd expect for themselves, the same lesbian omerta that safeguarded the privacy of all who passed through the bar. In 1989, Linda Tucker retired after eleven years of coaching and embraced an out lifestyle. She became a DJ, bookkeeper, and manager at

Charlene's. Tired of seeing longtime employees take advantage of Charlene's good nature, Tucker spearheaded the installation of security cameras in the bar, which caught several bartenders using sleight of hand to pocket bills intended for the register.

The couple worked weekdays together and spent their weekends at a pied-à-terre on three acres that Charlene inherited from her mother in Bay St. Louis, Mississippi. Thus did Charlene's lifestyle evolve from Elysian Fields parties to Gulf Coast domesticity. She and Tucker built out a small estate, complete with a party room and a beer hut with its own liquor license. "Fun changes," Charlene took to saying, meaning that one's definition of fun had to evolve as one grew as a human being. As New Orleans' lesbian bar scene collapsed on the cusp of the 1990s, squeezed by neighborhood gentrification and undermined by the advent of email and online dating, Charlene's held on as an institution, although her landlord raised the rent in 1990 and again in 1991, 1994 and 1996.

Bar events like Saints games, Pride observances, and Charlene's birthday, August 13, continued to draw regular crowds. In 1991, Charlene hailed the City Council's passage of an anti-discrimination ordinance protecting homosexuals of the Big Easy. She celebrated at her bar alongside fellow members of LAGPAC, several of whom had fought for eleven years for the victory. And when the *Times-Picayune* finally ran an extended story to recognize the twentieth anniversary of the Up Stairs Lounge tragedy, Charlene attributed the recent political victories to the legacy of those thirty-two lives, lost so unjustly: "I believe the fire was the catalyst for the anger to bring us all to the table."

When the lease on Charlene's was up in 1999, she and Linda knew they couldn't manage the next rent hike. So they made "Last Call at Charlene's" their formal adieu, a celebration of more than twenty years serving the community. Newspapers and TV stations reported the send-off, and that February 20, Charlene's was wall-to-wall packed with regulars and well-wishers and state officials from Baton Rouge. Friends flew in from around the country. Little sister Diane did not turn up behind the bar for a last hurrah. Sadly, Charlene felt inexplicably ill that day and was hardly able to make an appearance. It was Linda Tucker who, come 3 a.m., announced, "It's last call at Charlene's," barely able to speak the words. "It's very difficult to let something good go away,

but that's what happened at New Orleans' oldest Lesbian bar," wrote Brad Benedict in the gay New Orleans newspaper *Ambush*. "For Charlene Schneider, it means going home." (New Orleans' last lesbian bar, Rubyfruit Jungle, would close in 2012, officially marking the end of an era.)

In retirement, Charlene and Linda Tucker held informal gatherings called "Charlene's On the Coast" at their Bay St. Louis property and sponsored an annual fundraiser for breast cancer charities called "Pride with a Purpose." When they lost everything to the twenty-six-foot storm surge of Hurricane Katrina, they evacuated to Alabama, where Charlene was diagnosed with leukemia. After spending interminable months as storm refugees, the couple returned to the vestiges of Bay St. Louis and restarted from zero monetarily. Tucker worked feverishly to repair their home as Charlene deteriorated, hooked to an oxygen tank in their FEMA trailer. "I'm not dying in this FEMA trailer," Charlene promised her partner. Tucker had to take out the gas stove from the government vehicle, lest the exhaust poison her. When Tucker finished the renovations and moved Charlene indoors, she asked, "Is there anywhere you want to go, anything you want to see before you check out?" Charlene smiled, took her lover's hand, and said, "This is the prettiest little house I've ever had."

Charlene Ann Schneider died on December 3, 2006, in the home Tucker rebuilt for her. She was only sixty-six. Unlike with her friend Kenny, denied a full public mourning in New Orleans' newspaper of record following his 1973 death, the *Times-Picayune* devoted a half-page spread to Charlene's obituary, which openly acknowledged her activist legacy. "Charlene Schneider, gay-rights champion," rang out the headline. The following year, Tucker paid to install a plaque on the historic site of Charlene's bar. "Let the work I have done, speak for me," it reads (misplaced comma included, endearingly).

Connected to the land and its lineage, Linda Tucker still resides at their home address. To tell their story, I met with her multiple times in their self-made oasis, their little "place apart" stocked with everything needed for a lipstick pool party or the butchest game of darts. Why leave at all, except for the thousand reminders that she's not there? Charlene's presence remains palpable with her numerous human rights awards gleaming on walls and mantles.

Tucker continues to lead their Pride with a Purpose fundraiser, which to date has drummed up close to \$300,000—enough for more than 1,200 free

diagnostic mammograms for women who are uninsured or underinsured. This annual drive represents one of several ways that Tucker stays active while honoring her partner's philosophy of giving back lots, even when you have little. Living alone as a lesbian on the Gulf Coast has meant the occasional culture shock, she admits, with queerness in small-town Mississippi existing in a kind of "social compact" of euphemism and denial sometimes eerily reminiscent of the 1980s New Orleans she knew. For example, when *South Mississippi Living* magazine covered Tucker's charity work in 2014, it described her and Charlene as "longtime friends" and ignored that the "Pride" in their charity's name was queer-derived, as in Gay Pride Parade.

Sitting on her La-Z-Boy throne in the living room, stationed on the very spot where Charlene passed away in a wheeled-in hospital bed, Tucker good-naturedly laughs off any attempt to closet their enduring love. "People know who Charlene was," she says, "and what she meant to me." Although Tucker insists she's got years left in the tank, if and when she ever "checks out," she wants it to be riding on her sit-down lawnmower or drinking in her beer hut. That tiny shanty by the pool shelters some of the last remaining artifacts of Charlene's bar. Hanging on a beam is a water-damaged poster with a quotation that the Firebrand herself used to recite to lesbian youth.

Tucker closes her eyes to speak the words from memory: "To live, to love, to laugh at life . . . To sing love's sweet melody. And when your heart is broken, a melody soon to be forgotten. But when your heart is mended, ah! To live, to laugh, to love again."