

Newest Gay Mecca Is Less of Key West, More of Mayberry

By GINIA BELLAFANTE

WILTON MANORS, Fla. — By the mid-1990's, this small, once comfortably middle-class city just north of downtown Fort Lauderdale had its share of woes. Crime, drugs and prostitution blighted various neighborhoods. The local Piggly Wiggly supermarket needed security guards before it shut down completely.

Then in 1997 George Kessinger converted a boarded-up bank in a derelict strip mall into a gay bar, and things began to change. Boards were removed from other storefronts in the mall, and more gay-oriented businesses opened — a bar, a coffee shop, two men's clothing stores.

Soon homes that would not sell for \$80,000 or \$90,000 even in a frenzied market moved briskly for \$300,000 to \$400,000, as gay men and women priced out of South Beach, Key West and Victoria Park in Fort Lauderdale moved to the more affordable bungalows of Wilton Manors.

Now, the city of 13,000 is 35 percent to 40 percent gay and thriving. It has a higher proportion of same-sex households than any other city in the country except Provincetown, Mass., and Guerneville, Calif., in the Sonoma wine country, according to a new study of census data.

Unlike Provincetown and Guerneville, though, Wilton Manors is not a resort town. Nor does it conform to clichés about what the United States' third-gayest city would be like. Its homes are modest, built mostly in the 1960's and of no particular architectural interest. There are no chic restaurants, no gym.

Indeed, as a gay mecca, Wilton Manors has returned to its Middle American roots. While the debate over same-sex marriage may rage in

places like Provincetown, which is to begin issuing marriage licenses on May 17, the concerns here seem more typically provincial.

"Gay marriage is not a lightning-rod issue here," said Gary Resnick, one of three openly gay men on the five-member City Commission. "For the most part when people call the City Council they're calling about local issues — noise, road work, things like that."

Wilton Manors is to urban revitalization what "Will and Grace" was to prime-time television — proof that people may be more accepting of gays than polls suggest. The gay and straight worlds have integrated without much incident here. A Kiwanis Club cookout draws a mix of straight and gay people, as does the annual canoe race. Straight families take in the city's annual Stonewall Festival, a gay pride event. Young gay couples befriend their straight retiree neighbors.

Ross Carson, a 39-year-old anesthesiologist who moved here two years ago with his partner, said he had been impressed by the balance.

Gayness, Dr. Carson said, is "a nonissue here, and that's what I like about it."

He added, "It's not Chelsea and all that goes along with that."

The city elected its first gay mayor, John Fiore, in 2000. He was succeeded two years later by Jim Stork, also gay and now the Democratic candidate running against Representative E. Clay Shaw Jr., who has served in the House 23 years.

In an indication that the city had already evolved beyond any subjugation to identity politics, Scott Newton, a native of Wilton Manors and a married father of three, won the mayoral seat in March with 85 percent of the vote and backing of the gay community against a gay opponent who had virtually no civic experience. Mr. Newton ran on a platform advocating contained development and the growth of parks.

Celeste Ellich, a 46-year-old real estate agent, former Navy intelligence specialist and married mother who has lived in Wilton Manors for 18 years, said her own political views had shifted as a result of the changing landscape.

A practicing Roman Catholic and Republican who attended the party's Southern Leadership Conference earlier this year, Ms. Ellich also served as Mr. Stork's campaign treasurer during his mayoral race and is helping in his Congressional bid. "I just think he's a great guy," Ms. Ellich said. "He gives and gives and gives. He empowers people to do things civically that they wouldn't ordinarily do."

"Living in Wilton Manors," she added, "you have to change. You can't be so conservative and stuffed-shirt."

When she and her husband give parties in her home now, she said, the crowd is a fairly balanced mix of straight families and gay men.

Eight years ago, the split between Democrats and Republicans was fairly even in Wilton Manors. Now, Republicans are in a minority.

"There aren't that many of us left," said Ed Kalis, the city's funeral director, a married father and also a fireman.

In recent years, Mr. Kalis has not been partisan in his voting for city officials. Nor has he let sexual orientation inform his decisions. "The city was dead. Whether or people were gay or straight didn't matter to me," he said. "I wanted to vote for people who were going to do something."

The changes in Wilton Manors have, of course, not passed completely without question. Many locals remark on the diminishing presence of young families. The number of students at Wilton Manors elementary school has declined to 650, from 904 10 years ago. "On Halloween I don't even bother buying candy anymore," said Jane Buonomo, a 22-year resident of Wilton Manors.

"As you see the property values go up you see young families priced out," Mr. Fiore said. "I've heard this all along and what I've said in response is 'well, we're going to have bring in wealthier parents.'"

At the other end of the spectrum, he said, he once had someone say to him during his mayoral tenure that Wilton Manors would really be a terrific place if it were entirely gay. "I said, 'you know what? I'd be the first to move.'"

With newfound popularity has come the inevitable construction boom. At least one complex is being built with gay buyers in mind. Of the 13 new housing developments under way, the biggest and most lavish is the \$120 million Wilton Station being constructed on the 10-acre site of a former Miller brewing facility and scheduled for completion at the end of next year. Another, Belle Isle, is going up on the site of a former trailer park. Most of Wilton Station's 272 units have already been sold, said George Galuzzo, a partner in the project.

The development's Web site features images of men sharing Vespas and frolicking in a pool. The focus is on gays by real estate agents and developers is sure to keep the town's

From 1990 to 2000, the number of same-sex couples counted by the census in Wilton Manors grew at more than six times the national average, said Gary J. Gates, a demographer who, with Jason Ost, a researcher, compiled "The Gay and Lesbian Atlas," (Urban Institute Press, 2004). Among the analyses in the atlas was one that ranked the cities with the highest concentrations of gay residents.

One recent afternoon, Rick Cameron, a flight attendant with Song Airlines, paced outside the Java Boys coffee house telling a friend on his cellphone that he had finally, after weeks of looking, found a two-bedroom apartment to buy in Wilton Manors. Mr. Cameron, who is gay, had exhausted himself of life in a tiny studio apartment on the Upper West Side in Manhattan for which he paid \$1,300 a month.

"There's a real community here," Mr. Cameron said when he got off the phone. "They already know what I drink at Georgie's Alibi. At the gay coffee shop they know I like mochas. In New York, I went to the same coffee shop everyday and no one knew who I was."

Also, Mr. Cameron noted, "I used to pay \$40 to get into a club, here I can buy two drinks for \$5."

Dr. Carson and his partner, Jeffrey Schaumburg, a representative for a South American seafood wholesaler, gave up their lives in Cleveland for a waterfront home in Wilton Manors. Six friends from Cleveland now live there, too.

"I wanted to be in a place where gayness was a more comfortable aspect of life," Dr. Carson said in his newly refurbished stucco home. "It is not that I experienced gay bashing or prejudice in Cleveland. But I wanted to live in a place where gay life revolved around more than bars on a Saturday night."

Wilton Manors has also proven a draw to gay retirees who have found other warm-weather areas, like Palm Springs, Calif., too expensive. Four years ago, Ted Verdone, a retired former property manager from Bolton, Mass., traveled to South Florida on vacation with his partner. The couple bought a house in Wilton Manors in a week. He'd had his sight sets on relocating to San Diego but couldn't afford it.

"We didn't know that Wilton Manors was a gay mecca, we found out when we got here," Mr. Verdone said. "As gay people in central Massachusetts, we were very much outsiders."

Since he moved to the area, he founded a local chapter of Toastmasters International, an organization that promotes public speaking. Thirty-one of the 33 members who joined are gay, Mr. Verdone said.



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Wilton Manors' gay population is estimated as much as 40 percent.