

# Houston Press



## The Mayor of Montrose

Charles Armstrong, owner of four gay clubs and benefactor to feral cats, is the most powerful man in his neighborhood BY MANDY OAKLANDER



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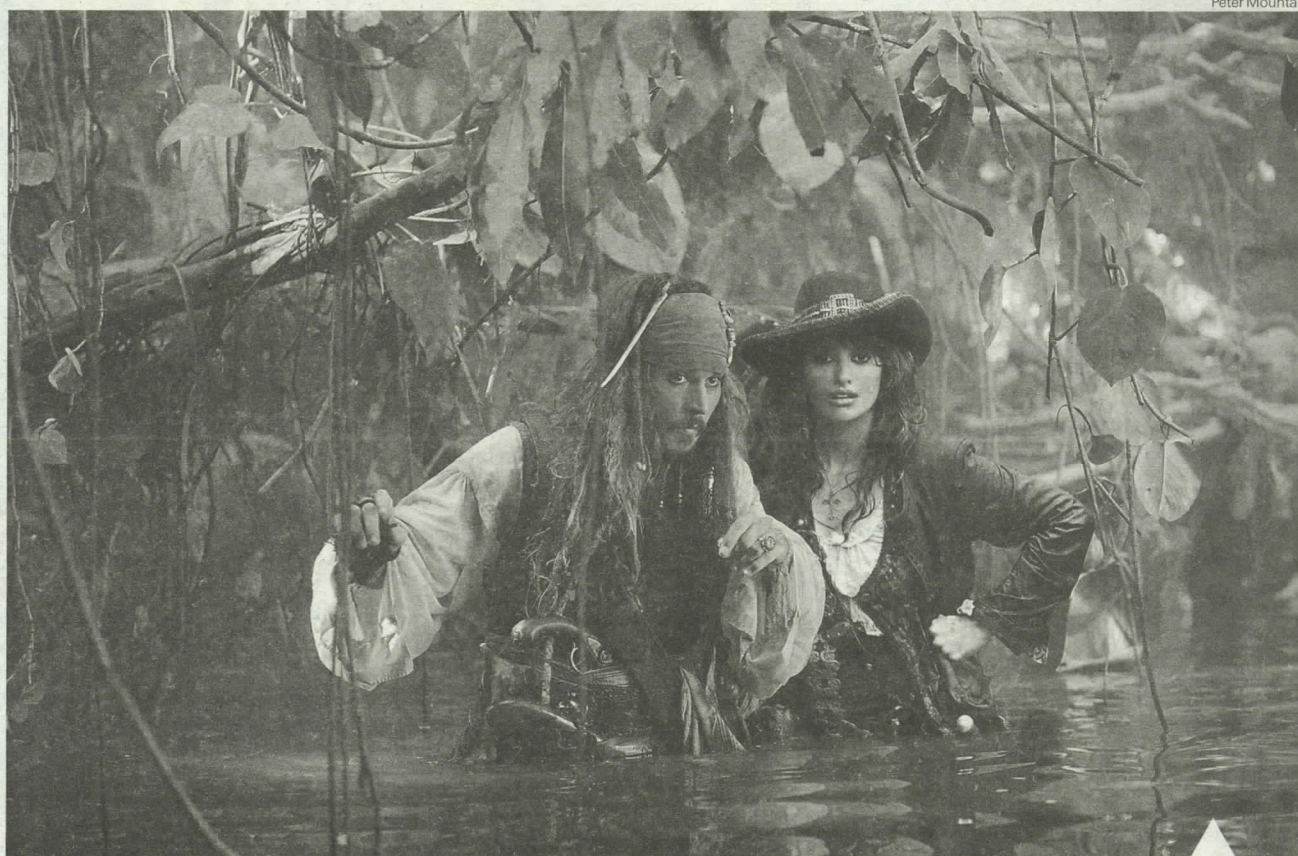
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2011

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# The Mayor of Montrose

Charles Armstrong, owner of four gay clubs and benefactor to feral cats, is the most powerful man in his neighborhood.



In Montrose, there's no holiday that can't be celebrated in a pair of tight white briefs. Tonight it's Easter, and the go-go boys in bunny ears, white sneakers, and cottontails pinned to their underwear are exiting the stage at JR's Bar & Grill. It's last call at Houston's most popular gay bar, owned by Houston's most famous employer in the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) community: Charles Armstrong.

As the bar closes, the side door swings open. Out files the entire staff of JR's, brooms and dustbins in hand. Their day isn't over yet. It's the beginning of the mandatory nightly neighborhood cleanup, where they sweep the wide swath of Montrose that Armstrong owns until it's spotless. Much of Pacific Street belongs to Armstrong, including three clubs next door to one another. (His fourth club, Meteor, is only a bus ride away on Armstrong's direct shuttle.) Onlookers giggle: "You're doing a good job; you can come to my house!" someone mocks from the street. Another man says he thinks it's cute that they're recycling. The men keep sweeping.

These are the Charles Armstrong boys, fiercely loyal to the boss they serve. Over decades, 57-year-old Armstrong has built an empire of four of the most successful clubs in Houston's gay scene. Though he's

rarely spotted inside his bars, many people have seen him feeding the feral cats that roam his property. There's no mistaking Armstrong. With immaculate wavy brown hair and a perfectly trimmed matching mustache, he's utterly distinguishable.

Armstrong doesn't want to be the subject of a story. "Now if you want to write an article," he says over the phone in his assured, booming voice that practically drips italics, "here's a good one for you." A dramatic pause. "What in the hell is killing the palm trees in Houston?" Armstrong says he's losing some of the \$20,000 palms that surround his clubs to airborne bacteria, an issue he believes has mass appeal. "A lot of people would love to read more about something like that," he says.

After finally tabling the tree fungus, Armstrong goes back and forth on whether or not he will answer questions. Skeptically, he agrees to an in-person interview. This changes in the following days. After consulting his attorneys, he decides he will only respond to questions via e-mail. ("You're the millionaire!" Armstrong says his lawyers warned him. "They all want to bring you down!") Still, he answers questions over the phone again and again — sometimes warily, usually charmingly, and often in the third person. He >>p14

BY MANDY OAKLANDER



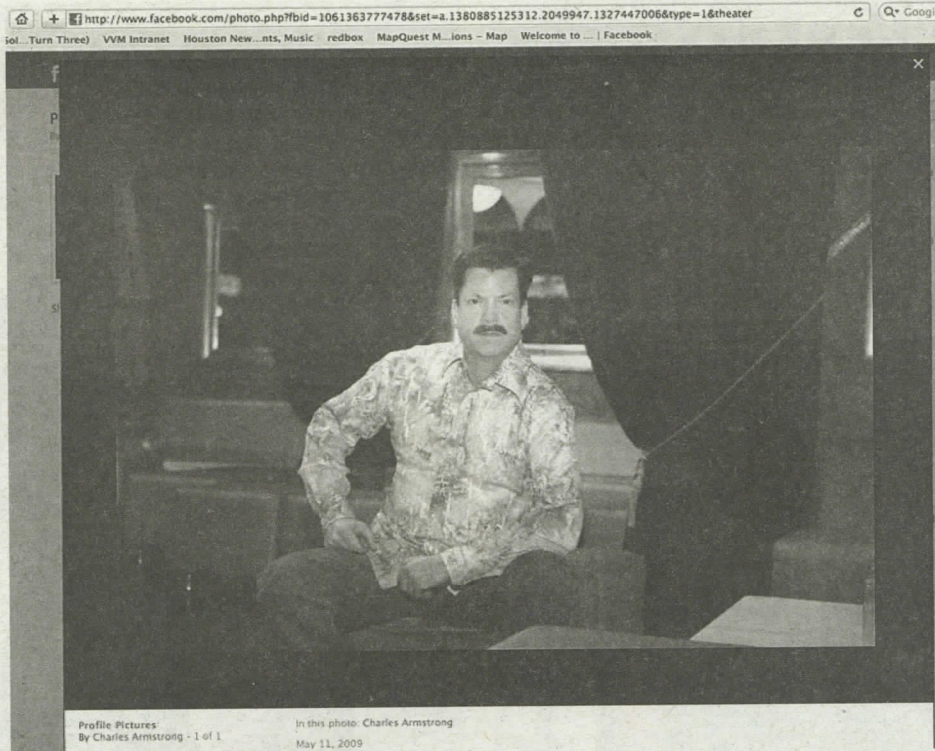
insists, however, that he not be photographed. Charles Armstrong is a private person.

Armstrong isn't here tonight, but his employees don't need to be reminded of the schedule. Most have closed the same way for years. As cigarette butts disappear into dustbins, stray cats start to wander into the parking lot, right on time. Three cats walk to the back door of the bar and sit in a straight line, waiting. Others perch on JR's parking barriers or lie on their sides.

They're here for dinner, which is diligently delivered each night by the staff at Armstrong's orders. Piles of wet and dry food will soon be spread out around the lot. Armstrong tries to be cagey when speaking about feeding the cats, saying he shouldn't talk about them since "some people just *hate* cats." But he can't seem to help himself. "I like to think they're going to Luby's," Armstrong says. His smile is almost audible from the other end of the phone line. "They get a choice." Armstrong always sets out a buffet of poultry, beef and seafood. "How heartbroken would you be if you got to Luby's and all they had was fish, and you *hated* fish?"

Some people in the neighborhood think the world of Charles Armstrong. Some wish he'd get "clawed to sh#t by one of his many feral cats," if Facebook wall posts are to be believed. Regardless, Armstrong's clout has kept employees sweeping the streets and feeding the neighborhood cats for decades. Though opinions on the man vary, one thing's undisputed. From happy hour on, Armstrong is the most powerful man in the neighborhood.

But that might be changing. With the huge success of a brand-new gay bar in town, F Bar, some of Armstrong's staff has quit to work for his adversary. Armstrong has a soft spot for kittens — not, however, for dis-



**Charles Armstrong has been the mogul of gay nightlife in Montrose for decades. He's also the area's largest distributor of cat food. Armstrong is loved by some people, reviled by others and — we can only assume — adored by feral cats everywhere.**

this Montrose neighborhood's a nice place," Hill says. At the time, Montrose belonged to widows and empty nesters. The gays moved into their vacant garage apartments and redecorated the neighborhood, helping the elderly widows with the upkeep of their historic homes. "We became the gentrifying generation," Hill says. Gay bars began to spring up.

Come 1985, gay Montrose was booming. Gays made up only about 19 percent of Montrose's population, Hill estimated, but the flavor and politics of the neighborhood were distinctly rainbow. That's when 32-year-old Charles Armstrong blew into town, nightclubs in tow. Rumors abound about how Armstrong managed to get control of three bars at so young an age, with so little income. Armstrong's version is that he had worked under a successful gay nightclub operator in

Dallas as general manager of Texas operations, and he purchased the three bars located in Houston from his boss by selling his countertop vending machine business. The bars were an instant hit. JR's Bar & Grill, Montrose Mining Company and Heaven (now South Beach) soon turned Armstrong into Houston's largest employer of the gay population. In 2004, he added another club, Meteor, to his portfolio.

When Armstrong discusses his businesses, he never compares them to neighboring bars, whose existence he rarely acknowledges. Instead, he always likens them to Neiman Marcus, and sometimes Bank of America.

"There's three things in my employee handbook that I request of every employee, as well as for myself, and that's honesty, loyalty and professionalism," he says. "Those are three virtues that

I just demand." From the start of Armstrong's reign, signing up with him was a marriage-like agreement, whereby employees swore to forsake all others. Whenever a new gay bar popped up, his employees were forbidden to go.

Most bars never lasted for long competing against Armstrong. He ran the only businesses in town that guaranteed a fat wad of cash at the end of the night. It was a good reason for employees to keep staying out of other bars. "I think people would rather work for a strong leader than a weakling," Armstrong says. "You might resent that strength...but you respect it."

In the late '80s, AIDS began to decimate the population of Montrose. People stopped coming to the neighborhood to eat out of fear they would catch something from gay waiters. Funeral homes didn't want to take the bodies of dead men. In response to the health crisis, Armstrong set up a fund-raiser to help his employees defray the cost of medical care. Staff performed in drag shows at the bars, and all proceeds went into a pot of money called the Employee Emergency Fund. Armstrong would give

out money from the fund to help a sick employee buy groceries, pay rent, or afford hospital bills. Beneficiaries were expected to pay the money back. "It was a bridge to transition someone into getting their health restored," Armstrong says. "That way it'll be there for someone else." More often than not, Armstrong says, employees didn't live long enough to pay it back.

George Konar, 56, is tall with snowy hair and green eyes. He worked for Armstrong for 23 years, and he's a self-described blabbermouth. If there's anyone who could dish on Armstrong, it's him. But he says he owes Armstrong his life.

Konar remembers the dark days when men living in the 77006 couldn't get health insur-

ance without taking a blood test. A positive test for AIDS meant no coverage. Armstrong signed up for expensive high-risk health insurance, which covered his full-time employees regardless of their AIDS status. He paid half, and the employees paid the other half. "If you had insurance, you lived. If you didn't, you died," Konar says. "We were lucky — we worked for Charles, and we lived."

As AIDS tore through the neighborhood, the gay community flocked to the nightclubs for a reprieve from sickness and death. But even there, they weren't safe. In 1991, a young gay man named Paul Broussard and two friends were stopped by a car full of high school kids from The Woodlands. The boys asked for directions to Heaven, Armstrong's nightclub. When Broussard told them how to get there, the boys jumped out of the car and chased the men with knives and nail-studded planks. His friends got away, but Broussard was attacked. Hours later at the hospital, he died.

The gay community rallied around Broussard's murder, and Armstrong was a key player in getting the city to pay attention, says Konar. "It's one thing for a bunch of gays to march, but if you don't know who to call and why we're marching, it's just a parade," he says. "Charles was the one who was able to get all the right people to stand up." This summer will be the 20th anniversary of Broussard's death, and Armstrong is organizing a memorial for victims of bullying and hate crimes on one of his vacant lots.

Konar is now a bar owner himself. In 2006, he opened George's Country Sports Bar. It's a rose-lit club tucked away on Fairview, a few blocks off the main Armstrong drag of Pacific Street. Come happy hour on any given day of the week, every leather barstool is filled with men watching either the Barefoot Contessa or an Astros game. Sketches of shirtless cowboys adorn the walls, along with flyers promoting free HIV and syphilis testing on Monday nights. The bartender, a beefy man with two diamond hoops in each ear, slings drinks at full force. He returns a "How are ya, Leon?" with a loud "Better than a hand job, baby!"

Starting a new gay bar would normally be an unforgivable breach of loyalty in Armstrong's handbook, but since George's caters to a crowd Armstrong didn't target, Armstrong approved. "Charles thought gays don't like sports," Konar explains. "He didn't think that's where the money is." The two parted with a handshake and a kiss, and Konar credits Armstrong with teaching him everything he knows about the bar business. This month for the first time, George's liquor sales exceeded those of both South Beach and Meteor, per Texas Alcoholic Beverage Commission records. "Bless his heart," Armstrong says. "I wish all my employees went on to become millionaires."

Many others left on a sourer note. David Williamson, who's 48 ("But with gay people, it's like a million," he says), spent ten years working at the Montrose Mining Company. Williamson, along with many other ex-employees, says that at the end of the night, bartenders had to turn in a certain number of "spilled drink" tickets, whether the drinks had been wasted or not. A bartender was required to report that they

Whenever  
a new gay bar  
popped up, his  
employees were  
forbidden to go.



Mandy Oaklander

**Every night after last call at JR's Bar & Grill, feral cats line up in the parking lot and wait to be fed by the staff.**

loyal employees. Their two weeks' notices have been greeted with lifetime bans from all of his bars, or worse. Then again, mutiny against the Mayor of Montrose was never expected to come without a few casualties.

Montrose wasn't always Houston's gay Mecca. LGBT activist and longtime Montrose resident Ray Hill, 70, says that before 1970, the gay population and its bars were spread out across downtown and Midtown. After the bars closed, however, there weren't many places to hang out where gays wouldn't be harassed. Hill and others found a welcoming 24-hour restaurant in Montrose, Art Wren's. "Since we were going to go there after the bars closed, people looked around and said, 'You know,

had spilled and three li Williamson end of the n manager w tickets. If th didn't add u add more, h have meeti we'd have t month's wo tickets," Wi

Armstro didn't know policy, and come from But he calle saying that rarely recor botched dri heat of the l of tracking wastes and that," he sa bly a fractio pens throu

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had spilled three beers and three liquor drinks, Williamson says. At the end of the month, the manager would count the tickets. If the numbers didn't add up, they would add more, he says. “We'd have meetings where we'd have to make up a month's worth of waste tickets,” Williamson says.

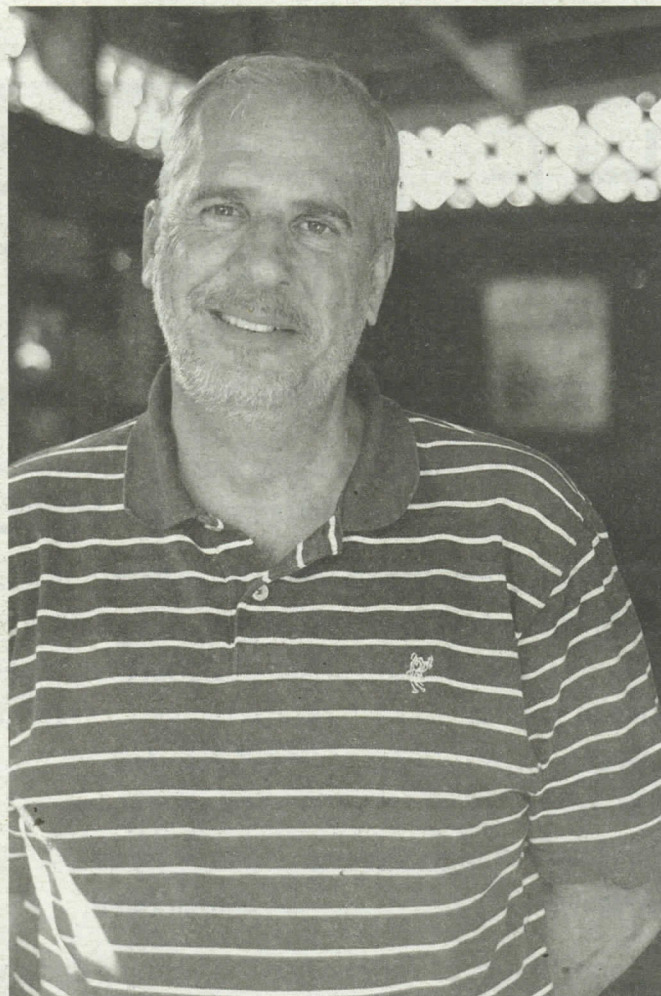
Armstrong claims he didn't know about this policy, and says it must come from his managers. But he called it logical, saying that bartenders rarely record spilled or botched drinks. “In the heat of the battle, it's a way of tracking their spills and wastes and accounting for that,” he says. “It's probably a fraction of what happens through the night.”

One day last year, Williamson was asked to leave when he received a write-up that said he had overpoured a month previous. “It's really hard to defend yourself against something that happened that wasn't mentioned a month ago,” he says. Williamson says he was told that they would accept his resignation, effective immediately. He was banned from all of Armstrong's clubs for a month — standard procedure whenever an employee quits or is fired, according to Armstrong.

Six months before he quit, Williamson had written Armstrong a letter asking for a loan from the Employee Emergency Fund. Williamson, who describes himself as “immune-compromised,” had just been in a car wreck. He says he needed funds to repair his car so that he could make frequent doctor's appointments. Williamson's request was denied because of lack of funds, he says he was told. “It kind of confused me, because it's money we supposedly raised for us,” he says. Since all loans given from the fund were expected to be paid back — except in the case of death — Williamson still doesn't know why he was denied. “I worked hard for Charles for ten years, and he was not there for me when I needed him the most.”

Armstrong says that he receives too many requests to accommodate everyone, and that his employees often loosely construe the word “emergency.” “It's for a medical emergency,” he says, didactically, “not a personal emergency.” Last year, Armstrong gave a portion of the fund to an employee who lost part of his leg. “These are the types of expenses in which funds have been made available,” he wrote in an e-mail. Armstrong says that there is currently a balance of \$13,000 in the emergency account.

When Williamson left, he wasn't able to find a job in a non-Armstrong bar. He may have had better luck trying today. Many of Armstrong's ex-employees have found employment at F Bar, the new gay bar steps from Meteor. Twenty-eight-year-old Benjamin Lewis worked for Armstrong for five years as a barback, floor man and manager. He lived in an apartment



Mandy Oaklander

**After working for Armstrong for more than two decades, George Konar left to open his own joint, George's Country Sports Bar. He credits Armstrong with everything he knows about the bar business. Recently, George's liquor sales surpassed those of both South Beach and Meteor.**

owned by Armstrong that was close to the bars and a popular living choice among employees. When the general manager at Meteor quit to manage F Bar, Lewis decided to follow. “It was time for our community to have something nice that wasn't owned as a monopoly,” Lewis says. After quitting, Lewis found out he was banned for life from all Armstrong bars. Then an eviction notice was slipped under his door. He had 30 days to get out.

Says Armstrong: “It's perfectly anyone's right in America or Texas as a property owner to evict someone. Ex-employee? Adios.”

Lifelong bans and evictions aren't Armstrong's typical parting gifts to employees who leave. The defection to F Bar is personal, says Armstrong. F Bar's owner is Irwin Palchick, a longtime Houston resident and storied entrepreneur. Neither man likes the other, and both hint at dark secrets in each other's past: Palchick is permanently banned from all of Armstrong's clubs.

Though the flight of some of his best employees came as a shock to Armstrong, the opening of F Bar didn't. “Irv pops up every decade like a horror film,” he says. “Like Freddy and Jason, he keeps coming back.” Laughing at his turn of phrase, Armstrong adds, “You can put that one on the record.”

**T**he sweat from damp, grinding club-goers hasn't yet seeped into F Bar. Instead, the bar still smells as fresh as the grand opening of an art museum. Crystal chandeliers and marble columns accent the interior, and every surface is lacquered with glossy black paint. It's the kind of place >>p18

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## The Mayor of Montrose from p15

that immediately makes you feel underdressed.

Irwin Palchick is sitting in his office at the back of his club. A 63-year-old, heavyset man with fluffy silver hair, Palchick is wearing a gold watch and thick tortoiseshell glasses. He's also wearing khaki shorts, a detail that concerns him when I take his photograph. Palchick demands to see the photos, and he shoots down the first four with a curt "no." He instructs me to publish the fifth one, a headshot. "Don't make a mistake," he says flatly.

F Bar was dreamed up while Palchick and his 33-year-old partner were traveling in Asia. Palchick came across a lounge called Fashion Bar, which was full of dark leather, chandeliers and elegance. "I said, 'Wouldn't this be nice to have in Houston instead of just the sterile-type clubs?'" says Palchick. Three years later, F Bar arrived.

"I'm not competing with Charles," he says. "We're doing our own thing here. I have a great staff...we have about 60 years' experience between us."

Earlier, a doorman at F Bar estimated that ten out of their 16 employees came from Armstrong bars.

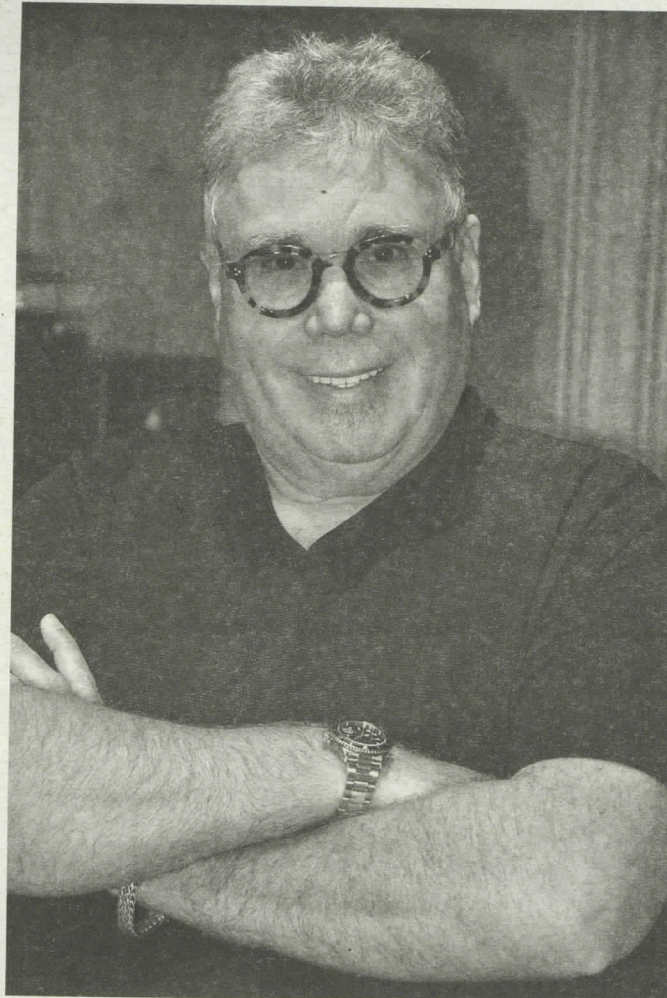
Palchick won't say how he funded F Bar, but notes that he owns a successful beauty-supply business. The last club he owned was called Sazarac Celebrity Grille, in 1992, and he says that he's always wanted another.

A man named David Nastasi says he remembers Sazarac Celebrity Grille well. He lent Palchick about \$20,000 to start it, he says. He also says he recalls seeing the door padlocked half a year later. "He paid none of his employees," Nastasi says. "They were working on promises." Nastasi alerted his attorney that he was going to sue Palchick for the money he was owed, and the attorney collected bounced paychecks from employees as part of his investigation. Copies of the checks are all stamped with "funds unavailable." According to an investigation by the Texas Employment Commission, Palchick was ordered to pay one of his employees, Zera Harmon, \$340 in unpaid wages.

A few years later in December 1997, Palchick pleaded guilty to the misdemeanor charge of insurance fraud, paid a \$1,000 fine and received deferred adjudication. Palchick served 18 months on probation, and the charge was subsequently dropped.

Palchick declines comment on his past.

The next business day, Palchick calls the *Houston Press* repeatedly, claiming that his "competitor" Charles



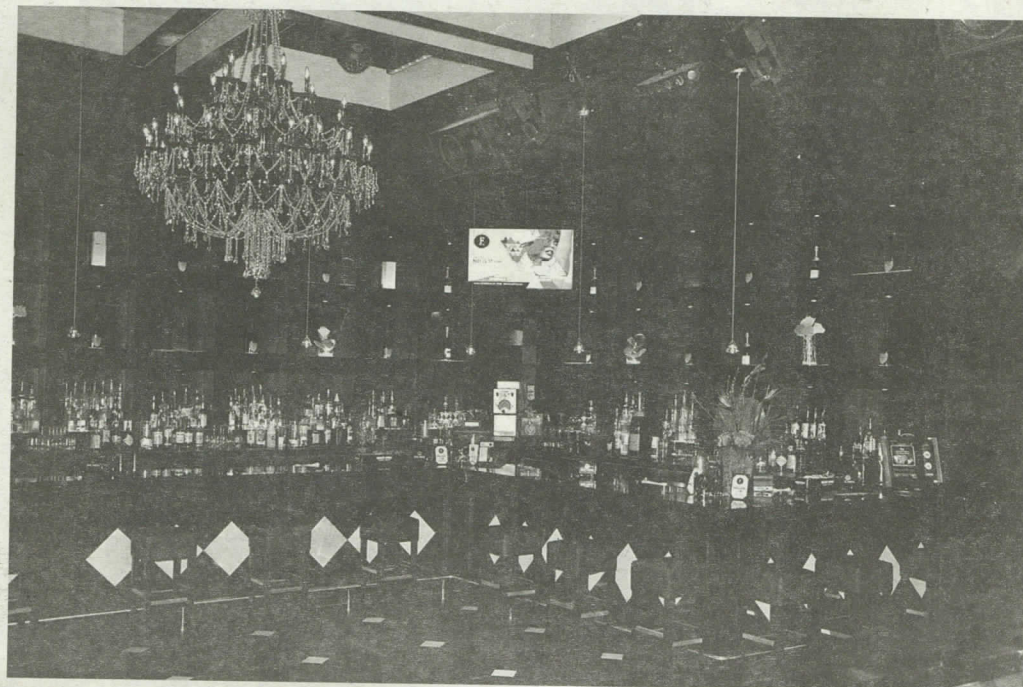
Mandy Oaklander

Since Irwin Palchick opened his new club, F Bar, it's quickly lured employees and patrons away from the Armstrong empire.

Armstrong had set us up to write a negative story about Palchick. "Charles is after me," he says. "He's mad; we've taken some of his business, but not intentionally. We've just opened our club wanting to do something nice for the gay, lesbian, black, transgender community."

(No word on the apparently neglected bisexual community.)

Though Palchick may be shaky on what the acronym stands for, Palchick says that of all the LGBT bars in Houston, F Bar is currently



Mandy Oaklander

F Bar opened in March and quickly attracted much of the gay population of Montrose, many of whom say they're craving something different than Armstrong's typical club fare.

number one. At press time, F Bar's tax records were not available on TABC's database.

George Konar thinks F Bar's success is only momentary. "I wouldn't trust that owner with used toilet paper," he says. "In my opinion, he's nothing more than a con artist." Konar isn't surprised that the club is so popular. "The gay community is the type of community that if they want something brand-new, they want it today. They want it right now, they want it all pretty, and it must be the most spectacular thing in the world," he says. That's F Bar today, Konar says. "But in two years? They'll say, 'Big deal. What has F Bar put back into the community?'"

It's 4 p.m., and Mike Kumaus is standing alone behind the bar at Meteor. It's his last night, and the club is dead; he hasn't poured a drink in more than an hour. Kumaus, a dark-eyed, handsome man in an Oscar the Grouch baseball cap, is growing out what he calls his "playoff beard." Until he quits work, he won't shave.

It's probably his last scraggly day, Kumaus thinks. He used to have a lot of regulars. Now, he says, they've all migrated down the street to F Bar, along with much of the Meteor staff.

Since the opening of F Bar, every Armstrong bar has dropped in sales, according to TABC liquor tax records. But none has been hit harder than Meteor, F Bar's neighbor and direct competition. TABC numbers released at the end of January show that Meteor paid \$12,578 in liquor taxes, placing it among the top five most profitable gay bars in Houston. The most recent records, released at the end of April after the opening of F Bar, show that business has dropped almost by half, to \$6,742.

F Bar isn't entirely to blame — or credit, depending on who you ask — for Armstrong's wounded sales. As more gay people move to the Heights and the suburbs, the gay scene is decentralizing, says Hill. He estimated that the gay population of Montrose is now less than 8 percent. Fewer and fewer gay people are coming into Montrose to party. "Gay bars used to be places where we had to go to get refuge because we were not welcome anywhere else," he says. "Well, guess what? There's nowhere we're not welcome anymore."

A man strolls into Meteor and >>p21





Mandy Oaklander

**Mike Kumaus, a former bartender at Meteor, hadn't seen many of his regulars since F Bar opened — so he followed them there. Now, he's banned for life from every one of Armstrong's bars.**

### The Mayor of Montrose from p18

takes a seat at the bar. It's Kumaus's attorney and friend, Phillip Slaughter. "Been meaning to talk to you," Kumaus says with a smile. "Not gonna work here anymore."

"Where you going?" Slaughter asks.

"Probably down the street," Kumaus says. Tonight's the night. "I'm going to walk over there and say, 'Let's fill out a new-hire packet.'"

"Nice, because I'll probably be over there," Slaughter says, laughing. "I just stopped in to say hey."

They both know that if Kumaus quits, it will be his last night inside an Armstrong establishment. At the moment, neither seems to care much. "You can only ban people for life for so long until no one is allowed to come to your damn bar," Slaughter says.

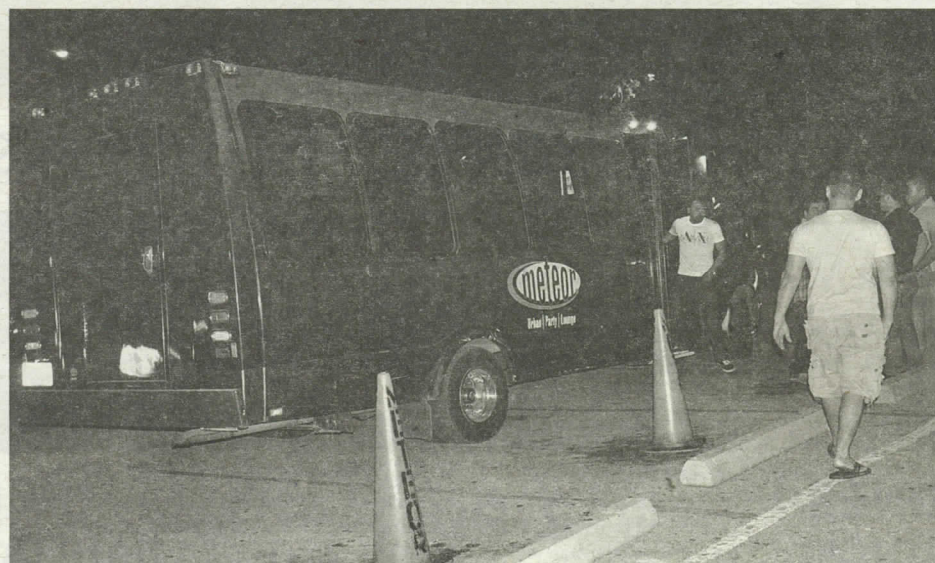
Not long ago, Kumaus was on the other side of the bar as a manager. His demotion, he was told, was due to lack of ability to follow instructions. Back in December, Kumaus told his bartenders not to hand in any more spill sheets. "I questioned the legality of that," he says. A few months later, around the time the spill sheets were tallied, Kumaus says he was demoted to bartender.

Kumaus says Armstrong is struggling to

regain customers. Armstrong runs a shuttle from South Beach to Meteor on the weekends, carrying partygoers from one Armstrong club to another. It used to be free. But once F Bar opened, people began hopping the shuttle and

Meteor shuttle. Close to midnight on a Saturday, a group of about ten men waits in line for the shuttle, which arrives about every 15 minutes. There's no line to get in the club.

Inside, South Beach is dressed to party.



Mandy Oaklander

**Armstrong operates a shuttle between Meteor and his other clubs. Lately, some clubhoppers have been taking it to nearby F Bar.**

walking to F Bar. Armstrong began charging \$3 to ride the shuttle, in exchange for a coupon you could redeem for \$3 off a drink at Meteor. Now, Kumaus says F Bar is honoring the coupons.

Kumaus pulls out his phone to log into his Meteor e-mail account. His eyebrows shoot up. "It failed," Kumaus says, surprised. News of defection spreads fast here.

Later that night after Kumaus closes the club, he appears at F Bar. Hands in pockets, his eyes glaze over. Kumaus knows he'll never set foot inside Meteor again. "I tried, I really did," he says. "I worked with the most integrity I could, and all it got me was here."

**T**hree limp, sagging palm trees herald the entrance of South Beach, the clubbiest of Armstrong's bars. The palms also mark the pickup spot for the

A mirror ball, so enormous that Armstrong had to carve out a double-door to get it into the building years ago, glitters over the club. Rows of neon laser lights flash across the faces of patrons. Ice jets suspended from the ceiling shoot a thick mist onto the dance floor, providing the perfect opportunity to get away from an unsavory dance partner. But tonight, there's hardly anybody to get away from.

On a platform, a go-go dancer in sunglasses, briefs and sneakers is staring off into the distance, absentmindedly scratching his six-pack. Nobody seems to be watching him. Throngs of the young, gay and glamorous seem to be elsewhere. "It's a different generation," says a 40-year-old clubgoer. "The kids want something new." But he knows they'll be back. "Gay people are fickle," he says.

A young man has just returned from the bathroom, excited by the announcement he found taped up by the stalls. South Beach is hiring barbacks and bartenders.

**C**harles Armstrong likes to visit his empire long after the crowds have gone home. Early each morning, he can be found in latex gloves lugging a huge bag of cat food and a tarp that acts as a makeshift buffet table. A uniformed employee is always by his side.

Armstrong knows the life stories of some of the dozen cats playing nearby, cats he calls the "little angels." He points a gloved finger at a calico. "She's sick, I think, bless her heart," he says. "I've had some of her kids put down."

Sometimes people drive by and offer Armstrong money for his work feeding the cats. It always makes him laugh. "I say, 'No, trust me, I don't need money, that's very sweet.'" Later, he'll feed the birds, give peanuts to the squirrels and take a few injured cats to his private vet.

Not that he's bragging. "I'm not Mother Teresa. I've never pretended to be Mother Teresa," Armstrong says as he leans against his silver Mercedes-Benz. But Charles Armstrong knows Charles Armstrong is one of a kind. "How many wealthy people do you know going around feeding cats?"

Nearby, an employee blocks off one of Armstrong's driveways with orange cones. "Put those two on back further down," Armstrong shouts to him. Quietly and obediently, the employee moves the cones. It's 9 a.m. — his day with Armstrong has barely begun. And as long as he stays loyal, like the cats that return to Armstrong day after day, he'll be back tomorrow.

mandy.oaklander@houstonpress.com

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