

Cover Story

Dreams of a resort-style getaway

Owners of a combination hotel, restaurant and cabaret aim to reinspire New Hope's community.

By Erica S. Brath
FOR THE INQUIRER

A new venue aims to bring world-class entertainment to New Hope. Harlans — The Nevermore, a Solebury site that includes a hotel, restaurant and Harlans Cabaret, will hold its grand opening next weekend.

"My first time in New Hope was in 1981," Harlans co-owner Rand Skolnick recalled. "I actually came with Andy Warhol when he first built his studio and his home out here. It was amazing to see what it was in the '80s.

When co-owner Terrence Meck "and I came back all these years later, the whole national scope, even the global scope, of talent was dissipating. And now, the [cabaret] lineup, I think, is something that immediately will give inspiration to the community here."

Gathered for a rare weekday meeting, Skolnick, Meck, creative director Elissa Patterson and publicity head Erika Jaeger-Smith settled into low chairs that dotted the Nevermore's bar area.

Sounds from continuing construction punctuated the conversation. Delivery of a Steinway grand piano, a must for any self-respecting cabaret, was expected at any moment, and the hotel lobby remained open for business amid the chaos.

Meck and Skolnick are no strangers to the area. The partners purchased the Raven, a popular gay bar, in March 2004.

"We've owned the Raven for



Akira Suwa / Inquirer Staff Photographer

At Harlans Cabaret, co-owners Rand Skolnick and Terrence Meck (right) with creative director Elissa Patterson. "If you're familiar with the Catskills, there's ... everything from entertainment to food to shows," Skolnick says.

3½ years, and there's so much we've always wanted to do," Meck said, "but there's only so much space."

While the Raven caters to all orientations, its predominantly gay clientele might put some off from visiting what Meck and Skolnick have expanded into the Raven Resort, comprising a bar, restaurant, pool and inn.

The pair's answer: a resort-style getaway for people of any inclination and orientation interested in sitting back and having a good time.

"If you're familiar with the Catskills, there's a phenomenon where you come in on Friday, park your car, and never leave until Sunday. There's everything from entertainment to food to shows," said Skolnick, whose middle name is Harlan.

Meck, Skolnick and Patterson hail from Manhattan, yet have

If You Go

Harlans — The Nevermore is at 6426 Lower York Rd., New Hope. For tickets or more information, call 215-862-5225 or visit www.harlanscabaret.com.

always found themselves drawn to New Hope. Skolnick spends most of his time in New York, where he is president and chief executive officer of family business Solgar Vitamin & Herb. Meck runs the businesses day to day, ensuring that all the pair's endeavors run smoothly.

Patterson, who still lives in New York, plans to make New Hope home in June, along with her husband and 6-year-old.

"I've lived in New York City my whole life, and I'm not really a suburb kind of girl,"

Patterson said. "I still needed to be in a place that has a huge artistic community."

In addition to her duties at Harlans, Jaeger-Smith, the resident Bucks County expert, serves as associate curator for the Michener Museum, which has locations in Doylestown and New Hope. She explained that community was the defining factor.

"One of the things that I have learned is that any business needs to draw on its immediate community base, or it fails," she said.

Formerly the New Hope Best Western, the hotel's site on Route 202 was rechristened the New Hope Inn. It was consistently panned by visitors, and its owners sought out Meck and Skolnick, who bought the property in June, renovated the hotel rooms, and began a five-year plan to turn the

location into a first-class resort.

"We were very honored. The former owners were moving on to some other project, and they found us to bring to light what this whole venue could create," Skolnick said.

"They were people who didn't know us, yet really did understand our commitment to this community, a lot of which has fallen apart here in New Hope."

New Hope's economy has struggled in recent years. Two major floods in 2005, followed by a fire that shuttered the popular Cartwheel nightclub, began a decline that the pair agree has helped slow the area's arts-and-entertainment industry.

"When we bought the Raven, the town was doing really well," Meck said. "A lot has changed. So many stores closed."

They envision a boom for both the hotel and the town's entertainment scene, led by Harlans — the Nevermore and the yet-to-be-opened Q nightclub, a facility in the basement that still needs approval from Solebury Township.

And while the group might have a variety of obstacles to overcome, the members are hoping their reputation and dedication to New Hope, along with an award-winning array of cabaret performers, will turn the well-lighted, candle-adorned tables in their favor.

Future performers include Grammy winner Lari White, Tony winner Chuck Cooper, *Mamma Mia* star Karen Mason, and Scottish-born Euan Morton, best-known for his role as Boy George in the musical *Taboo*.

The hotel has continued to rent rooms during construction, and both Plate, the restaurant, and the cabaret have been open for business for several weeks, with shortened hours.

The venue will open officially Friday and Saturday, with two performances by Andrea Marcovicci, considered the Queen of Cabaret.

Friday's events are sold out; as of last week, some tickets remained for Saturday evening.

ON THE COVER

Elissa Patterson, creative director of Harlans Cabaret in New Hope. Inquirer photo by Akira Suwa.