

Politics left, bottoms up

Detroiters meet for Drinking Liberally

BY JULIE HINDS

FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

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Drinking and politics have gone together since the start of America. It's one reason why Sam Adams wound up on a beer bottle.

But in a wired age, political discourse has shifted somewhat to the blogosphere. And that's about tapping keyboards, not clinking glasses.

Where did the foamy mugs go? There were a few Tuesday at the first meeting of the Detroit chapter of Drinking Liberally, an informal club designed to bring together left-leaning folks for socializing and sharing ideas.

Jeanette Pierce, 25, of Detroit showed up wearing a humorous button that declared she's doing her best to tick off the religious right.

"I love talking politics," said Pierce. "I love knowing about politics and staying up on what's going on and fighting for something you believe in, as cheesy as it sounds."

Born three years ago in New York City, Drinking Liberally has more than 160 chapters nationwide in its network of free social clubs. Its founders say Detroit is probably one of the biggest cities that didn't have a chapter until now.

The network "isn't really about drinking," says Justin Krebs, cofounder of the national group. "It's about gathering in a social atmosphere to discuss progressive politics."

Soft drinks and water are just as welcome as ale and lager. Drinking Liberally is quick to point out that it's for drinking responsibly.

An Oakland County chapter of Drinking Liberally met for the first time on Aug. 24 at Bo's Brewery & Bistro in Pontiac. Three people showed up and several more indicated by e-mail that they're interested in coming to future meetings.



Detroit organizer Peter Coseo, center, with Jeanette Pierce and Kevin Ayers at the first chapter meeting. (KIMBERLY P. MITCHELL/Detroit Free Press)

Drinking Liberally meetings

Detroit chapter

7 p.m. Tuesday

Detroit Beer Co.

1529 Broadway, Detroit

Detroit@DrinkingLiberally.org

Oakland County chapter

"This is the first time I've really been active in politics," says Ron Wasczenski, 51, a tax manager from Groveland Township who's the organizer of the Oakland County chapter. He said he plans to hold meetings every Thursday through the November election.

7 p.m. Sept. 7

Bo's Brewery

There also are Drinking Liberally chapters in Ann Arbor and Benton Harbor. A full list of locations is available at DrinkingLiberally.org.

& Bistro

Sarah Anderson, communications director for the Michigan Republican Party, said there are lots of organizations and clubs where conservatives can meet face-to-face. She hasn't heard of one with a drinking peg, but she said it sounds like an interesting idea.

51 N. Saginaw, Pontiac

OaklandCounty@DrinkingLiberally.org

At Tuesday night's Drinking Liberally debut in Detroit, held upstairs at the Detroit Beer Co. on Broadway, the conversation was relaxed as nearly a dozen people showed up over the course of a few hours.

One of the first to arrive, Michael Whitty, 64, a professor at the University of Detroit-Mercy college of business administration, set the mood by issuing an invitation to liberals of all stripes.

"We should make it clear and vote unanimously that liberal Republicans are welcome here," said Whitty, who stuck to coffee and genially offered to buy every liberal Republican in town a drink.

Whitty described attending some Drinking Liberally meetings last year in Seattle, where he was a visiting professor.

"They were all techies," he said. "They all brought their laptops and iPods. They actually did podcasting from inside the bar."

Later, Whitty brought out a "Gore in 2008" bumper sticker.

Those at the gathering chatted about subjects like downtown development and the 2006 election. The vibe was low-key and friendly, the opposite of political talk radio.

Pete Coseo, the leader of the Detroit chapter, said the last time he was active in a campaign was for George McGovern's 1972 presidential run.

Coseo, 48, a carpenter who lives in the city, said he found out about Drinking Liberally from blogs. So far, he's had more than 20 members sign up online.

Alan Jacobson, 42, of Detroit learned about the meeting through e-mails. A regular blog reader, he was glad that liberals are being nudged toward more social interaction.

"I think liberals and progressives are often busy doing the good things they do and don't take time to socialize," he mused.

Kevin Ayers, 35, of Detroit said he came for the opportunity to meet new people and enjoy some conversation.

He talked about the importance of education and had the bar's signature beer, the Detroit Dwarf Ale.

"This is good beer," said Ayers. "This is nourishment."

Contact **JULIE HINDS** at 313-222-6427 or hinds@freepress.com.

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