

DECADES LATER, UNDERGROUND FINDS IDENTITY

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When a spree of violence marked the end of the party last year in Buckhead's trendy nightclub district, club owners looked to [Underground Atlanta](#) to fill the hole.

In response to the Buckhead violence, the Atlanta City Council passed legislation prohibiting alcohol sales after 2:30 a.m. Just as it seemed that Atlanta's clubbing crowd might have to leave the city limits for late-night fun, a loophole was discovered allowing bars in Underground to pour until 4 a.m. Established club owners flocked to rent space at the festival mall only to balk weeks later, leaving the fate of what was to be yet another revitalization of the downtown venue in question.

Underground has made numerous attempts to find an identity. A popular nightspot in the 1970s, it reopened for the first time in June 1989 after being shuttered for almost a decade.

Eight clubs eventually decided to sign on with Underground and they opened to much fanfare on New Year's Eve. Now, almost four months after the nightclubs debuted in Kenny's Alley, some business owners are wondering whether Underground has finally found an identity in the form of nightclubs and outdoor open-container laws.

Dan O'Leary, Underground's managing partner, said business has been much heavier than he expected at this point.

"Before the clubs opened, I thought that if we could have somewhere between 500 and 700 people on the weekends, that would be great and we could work on growing toward the summer," he said.

But O'Leary reports upward of 4,000 people have been checking out the entertainment district on the weekends.

"It's overwhelming," he said.

Businesses in Kenny's Alley have been pleasantly surprised by the traffic they have experienced. Before the clubs opened on New Year's Eve, the Irish Bred Pub was one of the only bars in Kenny's Alley. As one of the few downtown bars that was open late, the pub's traffic was light and there were rarely sizable crowds. But the restaurant's average weekend revenue has more than doubled since the clubs opened.

"Before the clubs came, on a Friday or Saturday, we'd make about \$3,000. Now we're making more than \$8,000. We're seeing 800 or 900 people in here on the weekends," said Ayana Dunlap, the pub's manager.

Underground's revenue might also be helped by the new nighttime activity. In 2004, Underground generated \$7 million in revenue, a figure that is expected to increase to \$8 million this year,

More important to Dunlap is that these customers are returning on subsequent weekends.

"We now have regulars for the first time," she said.

In the wake of the Buckhead violence, security became a major concern for late-night entertainment venues, especially Underground. O'Leary estimates Underground has spent \$1 million on security expenses, which does not include manpower provided by the Atlanta Police Department. Police were prepared for large and unruly crowds but they have not encountered major problems yet, said Major Lane Hagin, commander of the police department's Zone 5, which includes Underground.

"It's been busy but we've not had any problems during the hours that Kenny's Alley has been operational," he said.

But police have increased their visibility in the area on the weekends and have extended the hours of the Underground precinct. Hagin said he has a minimum of 10 officers covering Underground each weekend.

Still, Underground's security record has not been blemish-free in the time since the clubs opened. While thousands gathered on the Underground plaza to watch the Peach Drop on New Year's Eve, a woman's neck was grazed by a bullet. The incident had the potential of reinforcing Underground's dangerous image. But O'Leary said that hasn't happened, pointing out that there has been no conclusive evidence that the bullet was shot out of a gun at Underground.

"There has been a deep-rooted perception of a lack of safety in downtown and Underground. But with the security plan we have and the amount of money we spend, it's actually overkill. But we realize that when people have heard enough and decide to check us out, we've got to make triple sure that when they give us a second chance, they walk away and say they felt safe here," he said.

Many leaders hope a revitalized Underground will bring new energy to downtown, which is often deserted after the evening rush hour.

"To make downtown a vibrant place, that will take time. But this is a catalyst," O'Leary said.

Much of the action is centered on Kenny's Alley, which is cut off from the surrounding streets, preventing the type of street crowds often experienced in the Buckhead Village. While the nightclub's seclusion might not help create a vibrant street atmosphere, Starnes said it helps balance the desire for late-night entertainment against the needs of 25,000 downtown residents.

"I think so far, we're balanced. The complaints I get aren't about loud music or parties. It's about how buildings get serviced, things like emptying dumpsters and cleaning streets," she said.