

Robin Huebner reports: Should the overserved be under watch?

By [Robin Huebner](#) on Nov 15, 2014 at 10:49 p.m.



Tasha Rae Gorentz, 24, seen standing on Broadway in downtown Fargo, says bars need to do a better job of looking out for drunk patrons. Gorentz says a woman was ejected from this doorway where Gorentz found her lying on the sidewalk. The bar denies the woman was ejected without help. Michael Vosburg / Forum Photo Editor

FARGO - A 24-year-old woman here is on a mission to make bars more accountable when dealing with drunken patrons after she saw how a customer was treated at a downtown bar in September.

Tasha Rae Gorentz thinks her plan could reduce overserving of alcohol and ensure that anyone who is overly drunk has a safe way to leave the bar.

“I was really upset and still am,” Gorentz said about the incident. “The way they handled it is not OK.”

Her proposal would require bars to keep a log of customers removed for overintoxication and note how they left – by cab, with a friend or to detox.

Police would monitor the log so the city and bar management would know how often it happens.

Gorentz is scheduled to present a proposal to the city’s liquor control board at 1:30 p.m. Wednesday.

Fargo Lt. Joel Vettel said police are always open to ideas about keeping people safer, especially those who are more vulnerable.

“Citizens are where some of our best ideas come from,” he said.

The person who coordinates alcohol server training in the area agrees.

“We need more people like her,” said Robyn Litke Sall, Fargo Cass Public Health prevention coordinator, “Good bystanders who intervene.”

Compelled to help

Gorentz said the incident happened at the Old Broadway just before 10 p.m. on Sept. 20 after a North Dakota State University football game.

She was sitting with friends at a table when a woman in her mid- to late 20s, decked out in Bison gear, walked by and bumped into her.

Then the woman fell to the floor about 10 feet from a bouncer. Gorentz said the woman didn't try to get up because she couldn't.

“Nobody else in the bar even looked twice,” she said. “They were all laughing at her.”

Gorentz said bouncers picked up the woman and told her she had to leave – while Gorentz was trying to ask the woman where her friends were in the bar.

When it was obvious the woman would be removed, Gorentz followed her out.

“It all happened pretty quick,” she said.

Outside, Gorentz found the woman lying on the sidewalk – incoherent, not knowing where she was or who she was with. She offered to give the woman a ride and asked for her address, but the woman kept insisting that she “didn't live in Bemidji.”

“I said, ‘Honey you're in Fargo,’ ” Gorentz said.

Gorentz found the woman's cellphone so she could call a friend, but the woman kept giving her the wrong phone password.

“She kept saying, ‘I'm so drunk, I'm so drunk,’ ” Gorentz said. “She was a mess.”

When Gorentz tried to re-enter the bar with the woman so they could track down her friends, bouncers stopped them.

“They (bars) want their money from the alcohol, but when someone is going to have to baby-sit, they'd rather get rid of the situation,” Gorentz said.

She was finally able to unlock the woman's phone. The first person she called said to put the woman in a cab and send her to a particular address.

Gorentz was uneasy about that, so she kept calling and found someone willing to pick up the woman.

She wonders what would have happened if she hadn't been there – a mugging, hit by a car or taken.

"If you're kicking someone out of a bar and they aren't well enough, they should have somebody to go with," Gorentz said.

Story questioned

The owners of Old Broadway say they have no proof the event occurred.

"My guys are too good to let this happen," said Randy Thorson, part owner of Old Broadway and several other bar-restaurants.

Another part owner, Warren Ackley, said they have video surveillance in the bar, but the video is usually kept for only 30 days.

Thorson said it's standard procedure in all of his bars that if you're intoxicated, you're asked to leave.

But, he added, "Not only do we get you a taxi, we pay for your taxi."

Ackley said that policy, which has been in effect for years, is clearly stated on bar doors.

One sign at Borrowed Bucks Roadhouse, also owned by Thorson and Ackley, spells it out, and begins, in bold letters, with "If you need help, ask us!"

Thorson and Ackley also own Borrowed Bucks bars in Grand Forks, Bismarck and Sioux Falls, S.D.

Travis Haar, based at the Fargo bar, is the regional manager for all four.

"We won't turn 'em out," Haar said of customers who may be overly intoxicated.

He said the patron is seated at the bar and offered water or soda while a manager finds a friend who's able to take them home safely.

If friends are also too drunk, they'll get them a cab.

"We were serving them, they're still our responsibility," Haar said.

On a mission

Regardless, Gorentz did some homework after her experience.

“I always feel like I need to stick up for people who can’t stick up for themselves,” she said.

Gorentz, who works in customer service at U.S. Bank, talked with several bar managers, attended an alcohol server training class and met with Litke Sall, who organizes those classes.

Litke Sall said adult binge drinking in Fargo is a big problem. She noted a recent story in The Forum about weekly efforts to clean up vomit from the sidewalks outside downtown bars.

The story did a good job of bringing the problem to light, she said. “But now, how can we prevent this, and not just worry about cleaning it up?”

She said the problem is twofold: overserving alcohol in bars and people who aren’t responsible enough with their drinking.

“If either were addressed, we’d have less barf on our streets,” Litke Sall said.

She said binge drinking here is an everyday and acceptable occurrence, and studies show it’s even more prevalent in Fargo and the Red River Valley than in central and western North Dakota.

“We need to change our culture, to not make it acceptable,” Litke Sall said.

She said more alcohol policies would help, such as statewide requirements for server training and liability insurance for bars, which could reduce overserving. She also wants to see restrictions on drink discounts.

While Litke Sall focuses on strategies to lessen the problem, she said more people like Gorentz need to take on this “difficult work.”

She’s also pleased that Gorentz broadened her proposal beyond any one particular bar.

“It’s happening everywhere else,” Litke Sall said.

Gorentz acknowledges that bars and people who drink share responsibility, but she doesn’t think the woman should have been “pushed out the door” that night.

“It makes you question your faith in humanity,” she said. “If people put in a little bit of effort, it could be life-changing.”

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