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Youth, exuberance a heady brew on the Ped Mall

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IOWA CITY -- The beer band arrives on the dance floor at the Fieldhouse, and the place explodes.

People are jumping, pumping their arms, singing at the top of their lungs. Red spotlights rake the crowd. Trombone slides and tuba horns swing in the air.

It is the eve of the season's first home football game, and the unofficial gathering of the marching band plays the Hawkeye victory polka.

"In heaven, there is no beer -- No beer! -- that's why we drink it here!"

Out on the bricks of the Pedestrian Mall, the breeze is cool and the mood is buoyant. Several thousand young people are here.

They are in college. They will never again be this free. And they are drinking \$2 beer at sweaty nightclubs, smoking cigarettes under streetlamps, falling down, getting arrested, getting angry, getting to know each other, fighting, kissing, hugging, yelling and laughing.

Almost 35 years after the Iowa City Council decided to block off College and Dubuque streets, the Ped Mall is perhaps the most distinctive public space in Eastern Iowa.

It also can't stay out of the news. Its exuberant -- some would say toxic -- night life brings with it drunkenness on a scale so vast that underage drinking, fighting and public embarrassment are commonplace.

A string of random beatings in front of bars last spring outraged residents and attracted national attention. In 2006 and 2007, a man, or several men, known

as "the groper" sneaked up behind and grabbed women who walked alone late at night in the downtown area.

Of the thousands of people downtown drinking, many hundreds of them are underage, and police ticket only 15 to 20 of them a weekend. The City Council has upped the pressure on bar owners to get better at enforcing the drinking age. Two bars -- including the iconic Fieldhouse -- recently were denied liquor licenses because police too often catch minors drinking inside.

Despite all this, the Ped Mall also is the place where children call out on the playground as the lights snap off at the public library. Where couples take dinner in the open air with silver flatware and white cloth napkins. Where outdoor art shows and live music are commonplace. Where breakdancers spin on cardboard mats and execute handstands with one arm. Where a hippie with a red guitar plays the blues.

There's no place like the Ped Mall .

The cops

Most nights, the Ped Mall starts to fill around 10. Squadrons of boys in T-shirts and girls in shiny dresses sweep down from residence halls to the north and west or houses and apartments to the south and east.

Music thuds through the front door of the Union Bar, where humorless bouncers in dress shirts check identification. The chatter of a hundred conversations turns into a gentle roar.

Nearby downtown streets are no different.

Police officers Bob Hartman and Kevin Prestegard push their way into The Summit, a throbbing, hazy, two-story bar and restaurant overlooking the University of Iowa's Pentacrest from across Clinton Street.

Hartman has been an officer for 18 years. He's good-natured and stout, with close-cropped, reddish-blond hair. This is his first year patrolling the Ped Mall and downtown, but with him is Prestegard, a 31-year police veteran who has been working the night shift for 28 years. A downtown icon with a shock of graying hair, Prestegard talks in bursts out of the side of his mouth and listens to people without looking at them.

Hartman stops next to a table of kids who can't possibly be 21 and stands with his back to them, his arms folded, until the table empties, a half-dozen drinks abandoned.

Tickets for possession of alcohol under the legal age -- known in Iowa City as PAULAs -- carry with them not just an unpleasant stigma but a \$330 fine. Through the first seven months of this year, Iowa City police issued 477 PAULAs to minors in downtown bars and restaurants and 113 tickets for false identification or misuse of someone else's.

Getting caught is like winning some sort of perverse lottery. Of the 7,000 people who easily fill the downtown on a busy Friday or Saturday night, many hundreds are underage. With two, four or six police officers checking bars, the chance of getting caught is minuscule.

"They play the odds," Hartman says. "Sometimes they lose."

Police hand out about 70 PAULAs each month, and the numbers -- though they dipped in 2008 -- have held roughly steady over the past 2 1/2 years.

Busted

Upstairs at The Summit, Hartman picks his way through the darkness, lit occasionally by pulsing white lights that show a mass of limbs wheeling on the dance floor.

Lin, a small young man wearing glasses and a trace of mustache, is unlucky enough to attract Hartman's attention. When he sees the cop, Lin wheels out of the booth he shares with three friends, as if to flee. Hartman grabs him, points the flashlight at his face and orders him to sit down.

Lin eventually finds himself in The Summit's back staircase with Hartman, maintaining first that he's had nothing to drink and then that he doesn't know the rules because he just (two years ago) moved to this country and then that he is sorry. Hartman has him blow into a Breathalyzer.

"If you blow zeros, you can go," Hartman says.

The stairwell smells sour, and employees run up and down the steps with

buckets of ice. Lin blows something considerably more than zero and takes a different tack.

"I swear to God I won't drink anymore," he says.

He pleads with Hartman and touches the notepad in the officer's hands. Hartman looks up.

"Keep. Your hands. Away from me!" Hartman says. "No more begging and pleading. You're getting a ticket. That's it."

"OK, OK. I'm sorry," Lin says.

In Iowa City, the war on underage drinking has become more serious in the past 12 months. The Iowa City Council voted in July to deny liquor licenses to two bars downtown based on the number of PAULAs police issue at them each month. In addition to the Fieldhouse, Etc., a midsized bar on the Ped Mall, made an unforeseen exit from the bar scene.

Next on the chopping block are likely the Sports Column and The Summit. Hartman and Prestegard's visit doesn't help the latter's chances.

A few minutes after dealing with Lin, Hartman is standing in the same spot with John, a 20-year-old Kirkwood Community College student who takes wedding pictures to support himself and who was nursing a whiskey against the wall. Again the breathalyzer comes out.

"What if I guess it?" John says. "0.24?"

Things are quiet for a moment.

"I'm going to have a hungry month. You understand that," John says. "My rent is \$300. I make about \$630."

Hartman seems sympathetic, in a vague sort of way. The two talk about cameras. John likes Nikon; Hartman likes Canon.

"I don't know how you can be a Nikon guy," Hartman says, as he writes the ticket.

John shrugs.

"I don't know how you can be writing me a PAULA right now," John says. "We're best friends!"

Hartman laughs.

The history

Through the 1940s and '50s, downtown Iowa City was, in City Hall's view, declining. It had for decades been a center of commerce where farmers banked and bought clothes, but its old buildings and cluttered parking had become an embarrassment for the city and the university.

In 1961, Robert Wheeler, a fresh-faced 39-year-old assistant engineering professor at the university, wrote a report, probably on his own, laying out a plan to remake downtown. He promptly left town, but his report, later known as the "Wheeler report," became central to the discussion.

"There really wasn't much argument in the early 1960s about the need to upgrade the downtown business district," the Loren Hickerson, mayor from 1968 to 1971, said in 1983. He later died. "The question was no longer whether it should be done, but how."

The city settled -- after much controversy -- on a plan to demolish and redevelop swathes of old buildings on Clinton, Washington, College and Dubuque streets. Part of the plan was a pedestrian mall, where specialty shops and restaurants could flourish.

"It was taking somewhat of a gamble," says John Balmer, an Iowa City Area Chamber of Commerce board member, City Council member in the late 1970s and later the mayor. "Those types of ventures in other communities nationwide were not necessarily successful."

Though Iowa City's Ped Mall clearly has succeeded, Balmer is ambivalent about what it becomes after-hours. One of his relatives was attacked there one night. He says the past few decades have seen an explosion in student housing around the downtown and a corresponding increase in the number of bars.

"When I was in school in the late 1960s, you had maybe two or three bars at

the most," he says. "Now you've got a proliferation."

Between 1999 and 2008, the number of liquor licenses downtown increased 50 percent, to 46.

"I make it a point to be out of there by 9:30 or 10:00," the 60-year-old says.

The short view

As the night wears on, underage drinking becomes less of a priority for police.

Around 11 p.m., a guy in a green polo shirt stumbles onto a bench, trying his darnedest to eat a breadstick. He has no friends around and has trouble identifying his hometown, or himself. He is hauled off to jail.

"That's a classic public intox," Prestegard says, yawning.

"We try to get people a cab or have their friends take them home," Hartman says, "but when they don't have friends with them and don't know where they live, well ..."

A tourist from Ireland walks up and asks the officers if he can have a picture taken with them. He is drunk. He spreads his arms wide and leans into Hartman.

"This is very similar to Galway City," he says of the Ped Mall . "Here, the drinks are weaker, but the chicks are better looking."

The long view

Diane and Michael Dillon moved to Iowa City from Hinsdale, Ill., five years ago after Michael retired from his job managing hotels.

They sent three sons to the University of Iowa, loved the town and saw a niche. Thousands of UI students come from Chicago and grew up on Italian beefs -- beef, cheese and peppers on a long Italian roll. The Dillons sold their house in Hinsdale, moved to a home on Coralville Lake and opened a Ped Mall food cart called Pop's Italian Beefs.

The Dillons -- who sometimes go by Mr. and Mrs. Pops -- have a 360-degree

view of the mall , with a stream of college students flowing by all night. The police check in with them regularly.

When a fat, young man starts a fight and cuts his head open on a park bench next to their cart, the Dillons give him ice and tell police what happened. All in all, they say, youths on the Ped Mall behave well, and police handle problems as well as can be hoped.

"The Ped Mall gets a bad rap, but it doesn't deserve it," Michael Dillon says. "There's, like, one a--hole for every 5,000 good kids."

Diane Dillon says she can recognize which kids are freshmen. They are awkward and travel in unlikely groups, because they haven't settled on who their friends will be. It's endearing, she says.

The bars start emptying at 1:20 a.m., and the crowd on the Ped Mall grows thick. By 2 a.m., the night's buoyancy is gone. With narrowed, glazed eyes, people walk solemnly home.

The Ped Mall is down to a few dozen people, and the ground is littered with napkins, wrappers, an abandoned straw hat. Mr. and Mrs. Pops sell a few more beefs and sausages, and the grilled-cheese cart does some business.

A lone figure sits on a park bench under a tree. His arms are outstretched, and his legs crossed. It's Kevin Prestegard, the police officer, watching the night end for the thousandth time.

"I'll wait," he says, "until things empty out a little more here."