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By Sarah Bricker Hunt



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Photo courtesy of Ruth Ellis Center

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5 Queer Things You Can Do Right Now-ish

BY SARAH BRICKER HUNT

Before you bust out those leftovers to embark on that annual quest for the world's best Thanksgiving sandwich, take a break and make plans to ease into the next phase of the holiday season: the holly, jolly part. Get in some early gift shopping at the Detroit Urban Craft Fair, party with bears or let your charitable side shine on #GivingTuesday.

1



Score Unique Holiday Gifts at the Detroit Urban Craft Fair

Support local craftspeople and get in some holiday shopping at the same time. The Detroit Urban Craft Fair, set for Dec. 2-4 at the Masonic Temple in Detroit, is an annual, three-day shopping event featuring more than 100 crafters and indie artists. You'll find one-of-a-kind crafts, interact with the creators (including many LGBTQ+ artists) and enjoy a friendly, festive good time. Stick around Friday night after hours for a mixer.

Dec. 2-4, Masonic Temple (500 Temple St., Detroit). Visit detroiturbancraftfair.com for more information, including hours, which vary by day.

2



How Many Bears Can You Bear?

Are you a bear who could use some post-Thanksgiving revelry or just someone who enjoys hanging out with bears enjoying some post-Thanksgiving revelry? Bear Expo 14, to be held Nov. 26, is just the ticket. Billed as Michigan's biggest annual bear event, the multi-location celebration will feature a performance by adult stars Dean Michaelz, Michael Roman and Timothy Chance at 215W, cover-free music and dancing at SOHO, an after-party at Body Zone and all kinds of bear-forward fun.

Nov. 26, 215W and SOHO (215 W. 9 Mile, Ferndale), 8 p.m.-2 a.m. The Body Zone after-party begins at 3 a.m.

3



Participate in #GivingTuesday

Nov. 29 is #GivingTuesday, a day dedicated to raising funds for good causes. It's the perfect time to donate, as many organizations offer special incentives like matching donations. Here are a few Michigan organizations to consider: Affirmations, Ruth Ellis Center, SAGE Metro Detroit, Transgender Michigan, LGBT Detroit, Equality Michigan, Jim Toy Community Center and Ozone House. Even if you can't spare the extra cash this year, consider sharing a gift of your time by volunteering with one of these organizations or promote #GivingTuesday to your social networks.

4



Immerse Yourself in a New Kind of Theater Experience

Queer-forward, multi-racial theater group A Host of People will host a unique theater experience Nov. 4-Dec. 3. "Fire in the Theater!" is billed as a chance for audiences to "come to the table" and join in an immersive, multi-sensory experience where the stage is visited by three spirits (past, present and future) who help the actors and audience examine the freeness of speech in America. Audiences will also enjoy appetizers provided by Pink Apricot Cafe and original music by Super Cool Wicked and Salākastar. In a news release, director Sherrine Azab said, "I wanted to find more voices that were like my chosen community to join the conversation."

"Fire in the Theater!" runs Friday and Saturday nights Nov. 4-Dec. 3 at 8 p.m. at St. Anthony's (3553 W. Vernor, Detroit). Learn more at ahostofpeople.org.



Jeremy Pope in "The Inspection." Photo: A 24 Films

See This New Film About the 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell' Era

The "don't ask, don't tell" era kept many service people in the closet. It's that discriminatory practice that is at the center of the new A24 film "The Inspection." The film was written by Elegance Bratton, who lived through that era as a young, Black, gay U.S. Marine, and stars theater and TV actor Jeremy Pope, who played Archie Coleman in Ryan Murphy's "Hollywood" on Netflix. "I was kicked out of the house at 16 for being gay, and I spent the next 10 years homeless," Bratton told Military Times. "I really thought that I was completely worthless, but fortunately, a drill instructor told me that your life is important, and you are important, and you matter."

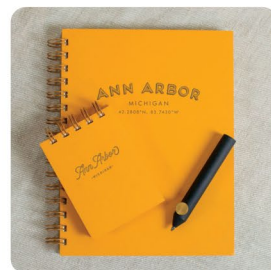
"The Inspection" opens Dec. 2 in select theaters.

Please check event pages for the most up-to-date scheduling information.

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A Democratic Majority in Michigan

What Every LGBTQ+ Person Should Know About the 2022 Midterm Election

BY JON KING

The predicted Nov. 8 “Red Wave” that became a “Blue Tsunami” in Michigan brought some hopeful results, with the legislative future in Lansing essentially flipping from hostility to optimism for the LGBTQ+ community. Here are five takeaways.

1. Ballot proposals

Despite the millions of dollars and overflow of misinformation, voters came through and provided solid wins for all three proposals to amend Michigan’s Constitution. Obviously, Proposal 3 was at the top of the agenda for LGBTQ+ advocates as it dealt directly with bodily autonomy. As BTL noted in early October, at a time

when transphobia is being used as a battering ram by the GOP, making sure the right to reproductive health care was secured was more important than ever.

However, the victories of both Proposal 1 and Proposal 2 also had significant implications for full and equal rights. Prop 1, which adjusts Michigan’s term limits, will hopefully help break up the revolving door of far-right partisans in Lansing with limited incentive for consensus building. Prop 2, which expands voting rights, will

likely benefit Democratic candidates and causes, which include support for the LGBTQ+ community.

2. Michigan’s LGBTQ+ Legislative Caucus grows

With victories by newcomers Noah Arbit (20th State House District) and

Jason Morgan (23rd State House District), the caucus of LGBTQ+ legislators in Lansing has grown to its largest ever at seven members. They will now join with incumbents like State Sen. Jeremy Moss and State Sen. Laurie Pohutsky to provide representation on a variety of issues, including permanently expanding the Elliott-Larsen Act to include the LGBTQ+ community. The growth

See **Midterms**, page 31

Michigan Reacts to Colorado Springs Club Q Shooting

Local Orgs, Allies Grieving After Queer Nightclub Hate Crimes

BY SARAH BRICKER HUNT

As news trickles in about the Colorado Springs shooting at Club Q, where a gunman killed five people and injured at least 17 in what police say was a hate crime, Michigan government leaders and queer-focused organizations are taking to social media with reactions to this devastating news.



Gov. Gretchen Whitmer tweeted, "On Trans Day of Remembrance the community is in mourning. Violent attacks on our LGBTQ+ family, friends, and neighbors are on the rise. Today and every day, we stand with the community and commit ourselves to protecting them and tackling the epidemic of gun violence head on."

Michigan State Sen. Mallory McMorrow retweeted a Washington Post headline about the news, adding the comment, "Certain politicians structured their entire campaigns on anti-LGBTQ fearmongering, dedicate countless hours of their time introducing and debating bills targeting LGBTQ people, others are hellbent on banning LGBTQ books. Another shooting. Hate kills."

Attorney General Dana Nessel retweeted McMorrow's tweet.

Michigan resident and Secretary of Transportation Pete Buttigieg tweeted, "The violent news from Colorado Springs is sickening and heartbreaking — the more so because there is a pattern. We can not, will not, allow hate to win. We must end this in our time. No rest until all of us, including all of us in the LGBTQ+ community, can be, and feel, safe."

Ferndale Mayor Melanie Piana posted on the city's Facebook page, "This tragedy is a sober reminder of why Ferndale must strive to be a safe space for the Transgender and entire LGBTQ+ community in Michigan. Hate simply

cannot be allowed to win and we need to unite against the rhetoric and violence which have become increasingly common."

Affirmations, the LGBTQ+ community center, which held a supportive gathering on Monday, posted a message on Facebook:

"Affirmations, along with the entire queer community, grieves the senseless killings in Colorado Springs on this Transgender Day of Remembrance. Together with our community partners and allies, Affirmations will host a community gathering to discuss the increase of violence and threats toward the queer community... Today, our hearts are with the lives lost in Colorado and around

the world. We are angry, sad, and many are justifiably scared. What we are NOT is defeated. And we never will be."

Executive Director Dave Garcia also posted a message. "Today is a devastating day, but sadly not a unique one for our community. We will hold space to gather in grief and provide support. It is important, now more than ever, to stay united," he wrote.

Ruth Ellis Center posted to Twitter after the news broke. "Our safe spaces [are] few and far between. We deserve love, dignity and safety and we remain dedicated always to a world where the LGBTQ+ community feels safe and supported no matter where they go. Sending our love to those who mourn in CO and beyond. We are with you," the Center tweeted.

LGBT Detroit called the murders "senseless" in a Facebook post, writing, "Again, an LGBT+ institution that is open and welcoming has been targeted and lives were taken. At LGBT Detroit, we believe a #SafeBraveSpace is paramount and needed to ensure that all can participate in the pursuit of liberty and happiness."

"Our hearts are heavy as we mourn the loss faced by our Colorado community," Equality Michigan posted on Facebook. "Equality Michigan extends our condolences to the survivors of this attack and the friends and family members of this shooting."

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(bik-TAR-vee)

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- ▶ **Severe liver problems,** which in rare cases can lead to death. Tell your healthcare provider right away if you get these symptoms: skin or the white part of your eyes turns yellow, dark “tea-colored” urine, light-colored stools, loss of appetite for several days or longer, nausea, or stomach-area pain.
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Scan to see Dimitri's story.



Mark Erwin. Photo: Ruth Ellis Center

Leading the Charge at Ruth Ellis

A Decade After Taking a Tour of the Center, Mark Erwin Steps Into the Executive Director Role

BY SARAH BRICKER HUNT

Newly appointed Ruth Ellis Center (REC) Executive Director Mark Erwin says he felt a connection to the organization the first time he visited in 2011 as a guest of Laura Hughes, former REC executive director.

"I scheduled a tour of the center with Laura, and the moment I walked into the space, I knew that that's exactly where I wanted to be," he recalls. "That was the work that I wanted to do in the community I wanted to be a part of." When the director of programs position opened up a few months later, he applied right away, a moment he now describes as a turning point in his career.

"Never before had I worked for an organization that I was so passionate about the mission and the work and inspired by the capabilities of the organization," he says. "From that point forward, I just never left."

Before Erwin first arrived at the Highland Park social services agency, which serves at-risk LGBTQ+ youth, he served in various volunteer roles for Affirmations, the LGBTQ+ community center in Ferndale, after time in L.A., Boston, New York and Minneapolis, where he ran a School of Rock franchise.

Erwin's time with School at Rock, in particular, planted a seed that would carry through to his role as executive director at REC. "When I came back to Detroit in 2011, it was really important to me that

I work to support the LGBTQ+ community. It was something I was passionate about," he says. "And more than that, I was really wanting to think about, 'How do we create spaces where young people can show up exactly as they are?'"

Answering this question has been at the heart of how Erwin has helped shape the direction of REC, which is experiencing a period of remarkable growth. Earlier this year, the center opened its Ruth Ellis Clairmount Center, a permanent supportive housing program for local LGBTQ+ youth experiencing chronic homelessness, in Detroit's Piety Hill neighborhood.

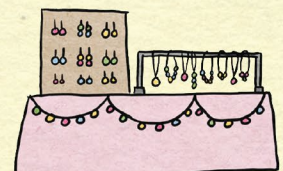
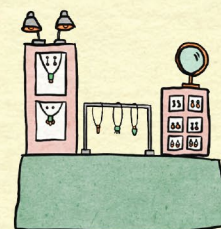
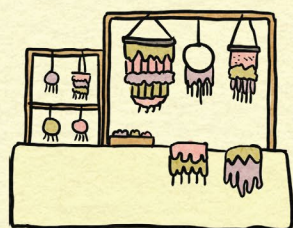
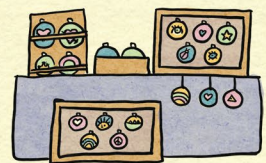
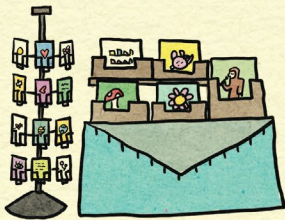
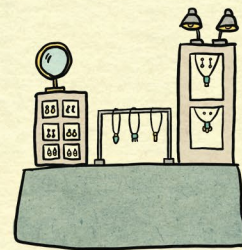
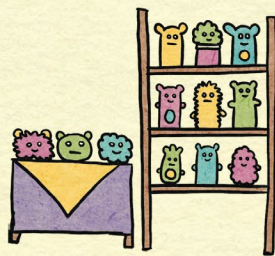
Clairmount Center, Erwin says, is one way REC is creating innovative programming that "truly addresses the needs of the LGBTQ+ young people we're serving."

"We're not taking programs that already exist and adapting them to young people," he adds. "We are literally creating new and innovative programs that truly meet young people where they are. And that's really been the motivating force behind my work and my dedication to the center. I would say that's probably a similar experience for a lot of my colleagues, as well."

Clairmount Center is a significant achievement for REC as well as the city of Detroit. The facility is the first LGBTQ-affirming facility in the city's subsidized housing continuum and offers a host of supportive health and community

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CREEP OF THE WEEK

A Man Walks Into a Bar — Another Horrific Day in the United Guns of America



By D'Anne Witkowski

We've all been to a place like Club Q. An unassuming place tucked into a strip mall that doesn't look like much from the outside, but offers a safe haven for LGBTQ+ people and allies inside. A place where people can be themselves, hang with friends, dance, have a drink and just take a break from the exhaustion of living in a world that, despite progress, doesn't exactly welcome LGBTQ+ people.

I remember going to one such bar with my wife back before we were married. I wasn't even 21 yet, so I had to wear a glow necklace that communicated to the bartenders that I was not to be served alcohol. My wife and I danced and then ended up playing pool with an older lesbian couple who were in the process of breaking up and their daughter, who was about my age. The older lesbians were sad, but clearly on good terms, and they taught my wife and I how to play pool. This was in Michigan back in the day when you could still smoke in bars, and I remember that the cigarette smoke was thick and the reason we called it a night pretty early. I still wonder about that family and hope they are all OK.

That this most recent shooting happened in Colorado Springs tracks. Colorado Springs is the home of Focus on the Family, a corporate powerhouse that trafficks anti-LGBTQ+ hate under the guise of Christianity. Its partner organization, the Family Research Council, is located in Washington D.C., where it works full time to elect anti-LGBTQ+ leaders and craft anti-LGBTQ+ policy.

In 2016, we felt the horror and the grief of the Pulse shooting in Orlando when 49 people were murdered and 53 injured. And in the years since, absolutely nothing has changed when it comes to guns, and anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric has only increased. And so it's no surprise that it has happened again.

One of the reasons five people and not 49 people were killed and injured is because patron and U.S. Army veteran Richard Fierro tackled the shooter, grabbing one of his guns and hitting him over the head with it again and again.

"I looked across the room and the guy was standing at the door. I ran across the bar, grabbed the guy from the back and pulled him down and pinned him against the stairs," Fierro told the Washington Post. "I took control of the scene as best I could. I'm just hitting the guy with the pistol, beating the back of his head."

He chose the back of the gunman's head because it was one of the only places not covered by body armor. The gunman had come prepared for war.

Fierro is a hero in this situation, no doubt. But it's a fully unjust and unrealistic expectation that Americans need to be

combat ready to go to a nightclub, or the grocery store, or a movie theater, or school. All so we can accommodate a sick and deadly obsession with guns.

I am so tired of the violence. In a country obsessed with guns and awash in white supremacy and Christian fascism, violence is unleashed time and time again on marginalized communities, whether it be

“

I am so tired of the violence. In a country obsessed with guns and awash in white supremacy and Christian fascism, violence is unleashed time and time again on marginalized communities, whether it be LGBTQ+ people and allies at a nightclub, Black shoppers at a supermarket, or Jews at synagogue.

LGBTQ+ people and allies at a nightclub, Black shoppers at a supermarket, or Jews at synagogue.

And then we have pro-fascist idiots like Colorado's own Lauren Boebert, who won her reelection by less than 600 votes,



tweeting things like, "The news out of Colorado Springs is absolutely awful. This morning the victims & their families are in my prayers. This lawless violence needs to end and end quickly."

If you're not familiar with Boebert, you might ask why anyone would take issue with this statement. But if you are familiar with Boebert, you know that she not only loves guns (the "L" in her campaign logo is a handgun and the "O" is a bullet and her campaign slogan is "Pro-Freedom, Pro-Guns, Pro-Constitution" — a document I have no doubt she has never read, if she can read at all), but that she is also rabidly anti-LGBTQ+. She has gleefully pushed the idea that LGBTQ+ people are "groomers" (aka child molesters) and that drag queens pose a danger to society.

On Twitter, Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY) responded to Boebert, "You have played a major role in elevating anti-LGBT+ hate rhetoric and anti-trans lies while spending your time in Congress blocking even the most common sense gun safety laws. You don't get to 'thoughts and prayers' your way out of this. Look inward and change."

Chances of Boebert changing are slimmer than her margin of victory. It's yet another reminder that voting really does matter. Voting is anti-violence.

We Are Sad, Angry and Weary. And Asking More From Our Leaders.

It's been a brutal year for mass killings in a broken America. In 2022, victims include young schoolchildren, college students, grocery shoppers and, once again, queer people gathered in what should have been a safe space, behind the "closed doors" many Americans would prefer they always stay behind.

We could point to a dozen reasons why. Inaction on meaningful gun reform. Untreated mental illness. Internet echo chambers. Inadequate law enforcement response in some cases. The list goes on.

At the heart of the Colorado Springs Club Q murders, which have now been characterized as hate crimes, we'd be remiss not to consider political rhetoric.

It was only a few months ago that hundreds of men in Dearborn protested the local high school library system for stocking queer-themed books. "Faggot!" these grown men shouted at a sole counterprotestor, a young trans college student. Meanwhile, local politicians stood at the podium repeating deadly anti-queer Republican rhetoric that dominated the 2022 election cycle.

For months, the party has characterized LGBTQ+ people, especially transgender people, as "groomers," never citing evidence that queer folks are more likely than cis-het folks to prey on children because there isn't any.

Republicans vowed to criminalize parents who sought treatment, including mental health care, for their transgender and questioning children in places like Texas and Florida. Several states, at the behest of the party, are considering laws to outlaw transgender treatments for minors, including non-medical interventions.

Republicans have been happy to carry the water for political leaders like those leading the Texas Republican Party, whose official party platform this year included the statement, "Homosexuality is an abnormal lifestyle choice." Here in Michigan, voters were treated to months worth of baseless, dangerous claims by failed governor candidate Tudor Dixon, who called Gov. Gretchen Whitmer a "birthing parent" and frequently repeated GOP talking points targeting trans women.

Post election, queer-phobic national Republican strategies seem to be evaporating. How could that be, when they were so urgently insisting a few weeks ago that our children

are in grave danger (not from the threat of the next school shooter, but from teachers who acknowledge the existence of LGBTQ+ people)? Faced with the reality of the midterm vote — that only deep red states are likely to respond positively to that brand of rhetoric — Republicans across the country are quietly changing course.

Out here in the real world, that rhetoric still reverberates in the spaces where fearful, narrow-minded Americans whip one another into frenzied states of panic, until yet another renegade emerges, hellbent on taking out the "enemy." When they take aim, any LGBTQ+ community member will do, even if they're minding their own business.

And so, even through our tears, we look for the answer and, once again, come up short.

There is no easy answer.

Many will retreat from public places that have felt safe. Some will push away the reality, finding it too difficult to confront. Others will lean into love and community and at least feel less broken in the arms of their community. None of it is wrong. Please, practice self-care as you process your reaction to this latest national headline. It's not on you, alone, to fix this.

To truly combat the impact of dangerous political rhetoric, it will take real action on the part of the Democratic leaders who have the burden and power to amplify LGBTQ+ voices. Rhetoric travels fast, and all too often, it fosters violence.

We've said it before, and we'll say it again: Silence leads to violence. We need more Mallory McMorrow and fewer "both sides" politicians loaded to bear with thoughts and prayers.

Michigan State Sen. McMorrow, you may remember, went viral for her response to anti-LGBTQ+ Republican rhetoric. In a floor

speech, she pointed out that she is a straight, white, Christian, married suburban mom who simply wants "every kid to feel seen, heard and supported — not marginalized and targeted because they are not straight, white and Christian."

We need more statements like the one Gov. Whitmer put out after news of the Club Q shooting broke, which said in part, "Violent attacks on our LGBTQ+ family, friends, and neighbors are on the rise." Acknowledging that LGBTQ+ people have faced more violence in recent months is a worthwhile use of Whitmer's enormous platform.

We need more Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez energy, who tweeted to Colorado Republican Rep. Lauren Boebert, "You have played a major role in elevating anti-LGBT+ hate rhetoric and anti-trans lies while spending your time in Congress blocking even the most common

sense gun safety laws. You don't get to 'thoughts and prayers' your way out of this. Look inward and change."

Most of all, we need swift, vocal, unequivocal pushback from Democrats when Republicans push dangerously false rhetoric into the community we all share as Americans, far from the political bubble.

As a voting block, the LGBTQ+ and ally community consistently supports the Democratic party, who we entrust with our safety in so many ways. Please support us with the same enthusiasm.

Signed,

The Pride Source Editorial Board



(Clockwise, left to right)
Remembering
Kelly Loving,
Ashley Paugh,
Raymond Green Vance,
Daniel Aston and Derrick
Rump, all victims of a hate
crime. Courtesy photos



Queer Michigan School Board Trustees Speak Out

Representation, COVID-19 and Putting to Rest That Rumor About Litter Boxes

BY ELLEN SHANNA KNOPPOW

Susan Estep, a Saline Area Schools Board of Education trustee, says she's passionate about her role as an elected official. But openly queer Estep possesses an unusual determination to carry out her official duties in the face of open threats like the one that occurred at a meeting that focused in part on the district's transgender student policy.

At the meeting, Estep's friends in the audience heard someone behind them say, "I'd like to have two hours with her. I would like to get her out in a parking lot and spend two hours with her." And so my friends, they walked me out," she said. She noted the man is a preacher, one of whose church members is a woman running for school board this fall.

Previously, there was a campaign to force Estep's removal from the sex ed committee. The language used was that she had a "conflict of interest."

That would suggest having an LGBTQ+ identity is in itself a conflict in matters that involve teaching sexual education to all students.

"They need my voice," Estep insisted. "Out of all the committees, this is where I need to be, because that voice is not there. And we're talking about the LGBTQ curriculum and being inclusive. I said, 'I'm doing my job. I'm committed to this, and



Susan Estep, Trustee, Saline Area Board of Education. Courtesy photo

I will not leave." In fact, her policy chair position was taken away, but she was later put back on the sex ed committee after reasoning that either she or the other LGBTQ+ board member must be given that assignment.

Estep confirmed that she lives in a relatively progressive region, as do some of the other openly queer school board trustees (five including Estep) that BTL interviewed. They shared what the latest hype surrounding school boards is all about and why representation by the queer community matters so much.

All agreed there was a noticeable shift brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. The debates over masking seemed endless. Whether or not to meet in-person. How much, what kind and when for sex ed. Soon critical race theory and diversity, equity and inclusion policies were implicated. Attempted book bans were not unexpected. Lately, the buzz

is over so-called "parental rights," or parents exercising control over public school curriculum.

"I think it was the way that the state handled the lockdown," said Tim Ciechorski, treasurer of the Royal Oak Schools Board of Education, on the genesis of school board squabbles large and small. "Those people that were against that then looked at the way the schools were handling it — not as a student or staff safety issue; they saw it as a political issue." He called it "one of those things where people think they have a better idea of how to run schools, just like they have a better idea of how to run the state and businesses."

Megan Maddock, a Kalamazoo Public Schools Board of Education trustee, made the observation that some feel if they didn't agree

with the masking policy or the social distancing policy, "then I have to disagree with you on curriculum and everything else," she said.

Those fights over curriculum "and everything else" at times have been extreme. Just ask Eric-

John Szczepaniak, secretary of the Kenowa Hills Schools Board of Education. In what he called "a crazy, right-wing conspiracy," Kenowa Hills and schools in other districts were rumored to have litter boxes in their restrooms for use by furries, who are members,



Megan Maddock, Trustee, Kalamazoo Public Schools Board of Education. Courtesy photo



Eric-John Szczepaniak, Secretary, Kenowa Hills Board of Education. Courtesy photo

sometimes queer, of a subculture interested in anthropomorphic animals.

"If you look that up — there are a few different news reports about it — where superintendents who never thought this would be part of their job, would go and tell the news, 'No, this does not happen,'" Szczepaniak said. He added that on the plus side, he's pleased with the progress of his school district's sex ed advisory board, which has been directed to include grade-level-appropriate details about sexual assault and its prevention.

Ciechorski had his own experience with outsiders imagining all manner of mayhem occurring behind closed doors. On one occasion, two women who spoke during public comment having identified themselves as "concerned grandmothers" said they were "appalled" about the "CRT" the school was teaching the kids. Again, critical race theory has never been taught in public K-12 schools.

"They accused us of trying to start a race riot within the city," Ciechorski recalled.

School boards are being framed as parental adversaries, an issue that may stem from two sources: a lack of credible news sources and/or confusion over what school boards do and don't do. To the latter, the main responsibilities of a local school board are to employ the superintendent; develop and adopt policies, curriculum, and the budget; and oversee facilities issues. "I'm definitely not sitting at home on Monday night deciding that chicken nuggets are for lunch on Tuesday," Ciechorski said. Nor does he sit on a committee that monitors student restrooms.

School board trustees are also not indoctrinating children. That's one that openly LGBTQ+ elected officials and even allies hear too often. Google "groomer" and politically-related results will appear more than ads for pet salons. Unfortunately, Maddock was on the receiving end of this hysteria during a forum led by pastors during her candidacy.

"It became pretty apparent early on that it was not necessarily a forum to just ask

questions about what we wanted to do as school board members," Maddock said, "but it turned into a bit of a targeted campaign against my sexual orientation and identity and what my intentions were for the children of our district." She described it as difficult to sit through.

For Charlie Fulbright, trustee of Battle Creek Schools Board of Education, a district with little apparent conflict, advocating in his own district hasn't been difficult. So the Battle Creek Pride board member has been attending a neighboring district's meetings outside of his board member role. He explained that Pennfield Township is making decisions about curriculum and there's talk of banning books with LGBTQ+ content.

"[I'm] just trying to state facts," Fulbright said, "what our state level school board says and what their policies are. And what neighboring districts have. And why it's so important to include those books."

Whatever the degree of partisanship experienced as a school board trustee, there's one thing all five interviewed agreed on: Openly queer representation on boards of education matters.

"There's a lot of allies on our board, but if there's a board with all straight people, who's going to fight for adding sexual orientation into the discrimination policy?" asked

Fulbright, who has done just that. When another board member with whom Fulbright serves was adamant about voting against adding sexual orientation and gender identity to their nondiscrimination policy, "I educated him and told him what it meant and what it was for, [and] he changed his vote to a yes," Fulbright said. "Knowledge is

power."

Szczepaniak had a similar situation in which another board member actually felt he could approach him with questions.

"I don't know how to ask this," Szczepaniak recalled the board member saying to him, "but I don't know what the T means in LGBT." And I could tell where his heart was. And I said, 'Well, I'm glad you asked, and here's what it means. Here's what transgender means. And I'm not speaking from experience here, so this is what the experience is like for a lot of people.' And so he ended up voting alongside the rest of his colleagues for Elliott-Larsen expansion." Szczepaniak called his colleague voting for a resolution in support of amending ELCRA a heartfelt moment. "Sometimes we underestimate the influence that we can have just by being out," he said. Later, that resolution was offered to and supported by the Michigan



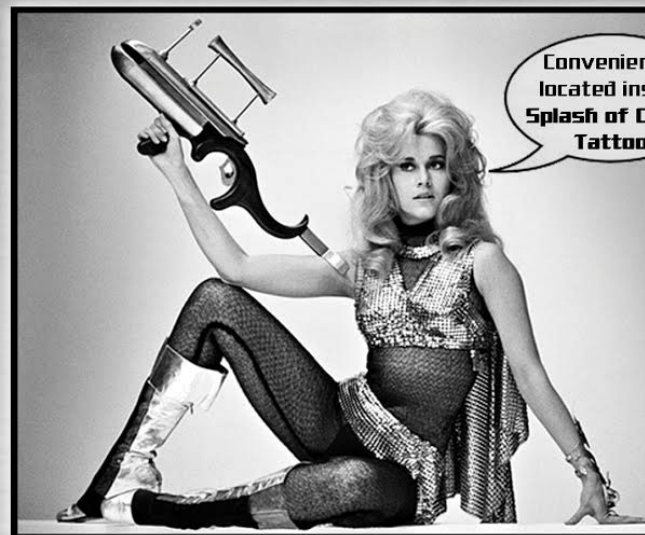
Tim Ciechorski, Treasurer, Royal Oak Schools Board of Education. Courtesy photo

See **School Board Trustees**, page 24

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Sam Smalley confronts protestors at an anti-LGBTQ+ rally in Dearborn. Photo: Jason A. Michael

A Dearborn Hero Shares His Story

Sam Smalley on How He Faced Down a Mob of Grown Men at an Anti-LGBTQ+ Rally

BY JASON A. MICHAEL

It was not your typical anti-queer rally. There were hundreds — four, five, maybe six — packed in so closely together it was hard to count the number of angry, mostly Arab American men in the pavilion out front of the Centennial Library in Dearborn. They carried signs calling gay men “sexually perverted animals” and shouted anti-gay slurs.

In the middle of this enraged mob was Sam Smalley, a trans teen and recent Dearborn High School graduate, sitting on both a traditional Pride flag and a trans Pride flag. His only weapon was a blowhorn, which he activated to drown out only the most egregiously anti-gay claims.

Just after the rally began with a Muslim prayer, delivered first in Arabic then English, Smalley was surrounded by men shouting “faggot” at him and telling him to go home. Some suggested forcibly removing him to the back of the pavilion where the rally took place. In the end, Dearborn Police had to erect fencing around Smalley and a second counterprotestor, Karen Cristian of Dearborn, to protect them from the crowd. Additional police officers had to be called and remained positioned near Smalley at all times.

A man standing just next to the stage, the one carrying the “sexually perverted animals” sign, shouted at Smalley that he

See **Sam Smalley**, page 18

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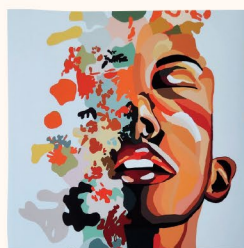


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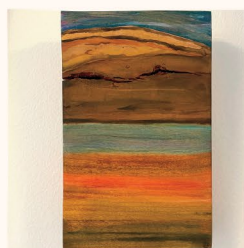
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THE KIDS AREN'T ALL RIGHT



Sam Smalley

Continued from page 16

didn't respect him. But Smalley just sat there. Casually. Bravely. Confidently. Nonchalantly. No matter what was said to him, no matter how irate the crowd became, Smalley held his ground.

"It's really upsetting," Smalley, 19, a second-year student studying engineering at Michigan State University, said of the attempt to ban queer books in his hometown. "I think that it's all a political ploy in order to divide the community and ostracize the LGBT community in Dearborn."

Though the entire backward banning attempt was the twisted brainchild of Stephanie Butler, the Moms for Liberty member found an enthusiastic throng of followers in the Arab American community. Sadly, it was not a surprise to Smalley, who said that growing up in Dearborn he "faced a lot of harassment from everyone because I was transgender." From the age of 13 to adulthood, Smalley said he was harassed. "And I think it's ironic that the same people that claim to want to protect their children are the same type of people that teach hate toward people like me."

Smalley said there are queer people in Dearborn who are "faced with harassment because of the rhetoric they're spreading around. It just felt like another reason to stand up for myself and the LGBTQ+ community in Dearborn."

If the crowd was enraged and clearly agitated by Smalley's presence, he said he wasn't surprised.

"I think the mob was pretty much what I was expecting," he said, pointing out that men are usually more outwardly vocal about their homophobia and transphobia. Therefore, he said, he went into the debacle prepared.

"This may sound grim, but I went into the situation knowing that I could experience violence of some sort," he admitted. "But at that time, I didn't care. ... I had decided to go there and stand my ground no matter what happened."

Smalley said none of what he experienced at the rally was new to him. Instead, it made him recall his high school days. "The same thing was happening from kids that were my age. I dealt with that for four years. So, just for a few hours, it was pretty much the same thing again."

Upon arriving, Smalley presented himself to the first police officer he saw and volunteered to have his bag inspected to show he had no weapons. "Thankfully," he said, "I had the police there to protect me. So, it wasn't as daunting."

Butler later claimed in an email to BTL that police had to erect a barrier to protect the crowd from Smalley — a ludicrous claim, says Smalley. "I don't know what they'd need protecting from," said Smalley. "If she's claiming that one teenager was a threat to a crowd of hundreds of men, I think that's

"This may sound grim, but I went into the situation knowing that I could experience violence of some sort. But at that time, I didn't care. I had decided to go there and stand my ground no matter what happened."

pretty pathetic."

Once the rally was over, Smalley had to be escorted to his car by multiple police officers. Small children followed along, continuing to taunt him. Still, Smalley said he was not shocked. "If anything, I was surprised that the police did their job so well. I went into the situation fully expecting to get into a fight of some sort."

Smalley said his message to those attending the rally, which he delivered extremely effectively, was that he was here, in Dearborn, and not planning to go anywhere. "I think what's driving me," he said, "is that they want to make queer people less visible. And they want to make queer people feel less welcome."

The whole point of the campaign, said Smalley, "is that kids not learn about queer topics and not be exposed to queer people. I think that reinforces the homophobia that already exists in the city. And I think that's what these people want."

Despite the strong stand Smalley took for queer people at the rally, he confessed he doesn't actually consider himself an activist. "I do go to rallies and stuff when it comes to social issues," he said. "But that's just what I think is right. I don't really stand for anything special politically. I just want everyone to live their life and be treated equally."



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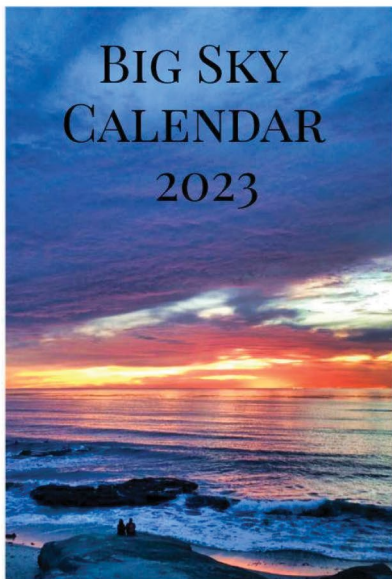


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THE KIDS AREN'T ALL RIGHT



Valarie St. John Wants Queer Kids to Know They Can Grow Up to Be Successful Adults

New Grosse Pointe School Board Trustee on LGBTQ+ School Board Representation

BY ELLEN SHANNA KNOPPOW

Although Grosse Pointe is shedding its reputation as a conservative bastion, it's still notable that voters in the Grosse Pointe Public School System (GPPSS) just elected their first LGBTQ+ school board

trustee. Even the winner herself doubted her ability to pull it off.

"I still wasn't sure that the community was ready for an openly gay person on the school board," said Valarie St. John, who made it a point to feature her family in her campaign literature. "But I figured

just running would be a good example because when I was a kid, I didn't have any role models or anything. In the '90s, the only gay people I saw in the media immediately lost their jobs."

But St. John said she didn't run for the position just to make a point. She did it in



Valarie St. John and family. Courtesy photo

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Moon Landing Kiss
Puzzle on page 33

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part to be a visible adult who's supportive of the identities of students who might not get that support at home. It's commonly known that LGBTQ+ youth who say they have at least one accepting adult were 40% less likely to report a suicide attempt in the past year.

The feedback from her campaign was largely — though not entirely — positive.

"Someone even said that their 9-year-old told them to vote for me," St. John said. "And I was like, how does your 9-year-old know who I am already? But I guess they had seen campaign literature or something and were so excited to see an openly queer person running for school board."

At the same time, far-right wing ideology certainly affected the race, with two of the top three candidates having run on campaigns hostile to the expression of diverse gender identities and supporting other conservative causes like book bans. But there were three seats to fill, and St. John was the second highest vote-getter in a field of 10.

St. John remembers the time she and her wife weren't able to live openly: They were married the day "don't ask, don't tell" was repealed. "Before that, she was not allowed to exist basically in the military because she's in the Air Force," St. John said of her wife. "We were very stressed out all the time that someone would find out about us."

Now the negativity rarely bothers St. John, although she says it's troubling that people would accuse her of hurting kids. When she entered the race, St. John said she was prepared to deal with the opposition's talking points and scare tactics.

And she can expect to face more of that, as a contingent from Moms for Liberty has been coming to school board meetings to read from books with main characters who are LGBTQ+, insinuating that teachers are using books to "groom" students, "whatever that means," St. John said.

"I have made public comments to the

"I experienced a lot of suicidal ideation in my teenage years because I couldn't see a future for myself. I thought that being a queer adult was a life of just sadness and being unemployed and everybody hating me."

effect that representation is important," St. John said, "and these books aren't convincing any kids who weren't already thinking about being different, and now they can see themselves in these books."

"But I look forward to being on the board and being able to say from that seat of authority that this is not the issue that we need to be focusing on," she continued. "Because honestly, it's just a distraction tactic. We need to make sure that our kids feel safe and welcome at school. I trust our librarians to screen books appropriately and select age-appropriate materials that are really interesting for our kids."

Looking back at her own childhood, St. John says her win is deeply personal. "I experienced a lot of suicidal ideation in my teenage years because I couldn't see a future for myself," she said. "I thought that being a queer adult was a life of just sadness and being unemployed and everybody hating me."

Now, community members are taking notice of what St. John's win represents.

Michael Rowady is a former chair of

Equality Michigan who was born and raised in Grosse Pointe. He practices law (at Rowady Law PLLC) in Grosse Pointe City.

"I am thrilled to see my incredible home town have a strong woman of high intellect [and] skill elected to the always-interesting GP school board," Rowady said. He said he's impressed with her goals to serve the community by making schools safe and welcoming for all families and stabilizing enrollment while providing teachers with the tools, appreciation and incentives needed to stay in Grosse Pointe.

"It is a great story," Rowady added. "She will have a tremendous impact on improving the overall stability and social inclusivity of the GP Public Schools."

When all the votes were tallied, St. John pointed out that of all five-and-a-half cities that the Grosse Pointe Public Schools System represents, she was number one in the city in which she lives. She called

See Valarie St. John, page 24

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So Your Kid Is Queer

They're Here and Queer. And Counting on You.

BY CHRIS AZZOPARDI

Parenting a queer child comes with unique considerations. After all, LGBTQ+ people, despite advances in protections and rights (though, more recently, some terrifying pushbacks), may be better off than they were 20 or even 10 years ago, but this fact, sadly, remains: Often, queer people are still treated as second-class citizens.

So imagine how your kid feels. Every day for them is not exactly a Pride parade. Even at school, where they should feel safe every day, they might be dealing with cruel playground bullies who lob dangerous anti-queer slurs

at them or teachers and staff who are feeling trapped by political pressure and anti-diversity school boards. Outside their school building lurks the great, big, heteronormative world, which, through religious, political and censorship attacks, is constantly telling them that who they are is wrong. These external pressures are all the more reason for a parent to love and accept their LGBTQ+ kids for exactly who they say they are.

But there's so much more to caring for a queer kid, and if you're reading this now, you can at least know that, yes, you're headed in the right direction. Here are eight ways you can be the best ally to your LGBTQ+ child right now.

1. Be unconditionally accepting.

Easy, right? But maybe not as easy as you think. Because it's not just the words you use — it's your actions, too. Does your little girl feel a sense of belonging when she wears a queer-affirming shirt? Does your little boy love *My Little Ponies* like I did when I was 6? Don't judge their interests, and don't get in the way of them — to your kid, this may imply homophobia. This is what they love, and this is who they are. And it's your job to meet them in the very moment that they're expressing their identity to you, no matter their age. After all,

we all had school crushes, right? Why should a same-sex crush be treated any differently?

"If a 9-year-old is thinking about their sexual identity, they are obviously not too young to have thoughts about the subject," says Roz Keith, executive director of Stand with Trans. "This doesn't mean they are ready to engage in sexual activities — it just means that when they watch a show or a movie and have a celebrity crush, they may be crushing on someone of the same sex."

Dalton Connally, founder and CEO of Connally Counseling, an LGBTQ-affirming mental health service in Ann Arbor, adds, "You may think that 9 years old is too young to think about sexual identity, but it isn't, or they wouldn't be asking the question."

2. This isn't about you.

"Many parents only think about themselves and don't consider their child's feelings," says Annie Martin, deputy director of development at Affirmations, Michigan's LGBTQ+ community center, and herself the parent of a queer child. "This is a time for uncertainty and enormous emotional growth. Give your child the space to figure out who they are. Don't decide for them."

And if they confront you, telling you they feel you are exhibiting anti-gay behavior, don't get defensive. Believe them. Respond not as if this is about you and your emotions, though you may feel hurt to hear this, but about them, entirely. Because it is. "Finally, realize that if you as a parent are confused and need more information, that's on you to get support," says Martin. "Not your kid."

3. Be open to growing as an ally.

Straight parents, no matter how many episodes of "Queer Eye" you've watched, you'll never understand what it's like to be LGBTQ+. So let yourself be guided by queer friends and family who can relate to your queer kid, but most of all, listen with compassion and understanding to the needs of your LGBTQ+ child. Your kid knows who they are better than anyone else, even if you think they're too young to understand who they are. "No matter what their identity or sexual orientation, all you need to do is to believe them," says Keith. "Questioning them or declaring that this is a phase will potentially do irreparable harm."

4. Learn from your kid.

If you're reading this right now, you're already making considerable progress! But also, Keith says, why not let your child be your teacher this time? After all, odds are they've already been, while on their journey to self-discovery, exploring their identity on their own through books and YouTube videos. Ask them if they'd be willing to share that experience with you.

Buy them some books that you think may

speak to their experience (some of Keith's favorites are "The Transgender Child" and "The Transgender Teen"). Find an in-person or virtual support group in your community to get peer parent support from those who are on the same journey you're on. Acceptance, after all, is more than saying "I accept you."

As Martin says, "Acceptance means looking at the language that you use with your child, the values and ideas that you have around sexuality and gender, educating yourself on the topic and experience, and paving the way for your child when they're ready to share with family."

5. Engage to show your support.

And don't just do it at a Pride parade in June. Yes, that month has traditionally been Pride Month, but even that has changed — Pride is recognized in the summer, but your child's identity should be recognized and celebrated year 'round. In fact, why not get yourself a rainbow pin and wear it in public every month? Show them that you're the ally you say you are all year long. My mom did in many ways, but especially when she took me to a Cher concert shortly after I came out at 18. I had never seen so many queer people in my life; it might as well have been a Pride parade. The point is: I didn't feel alone anymore, finally. Thanks, Mom. And thanks, Cher.

6. Secure affirming care for your kid.

Is your child's pediatrician unsupportive? Stop going. Is your child's school teacher holding back on supporting your kid when they're bullied for being lesbian? Call the school. This is not the time to sit back and watch homophobic adults treat your child as if they're inferior. It's your job to not only support your kid but make sure everyone around them supports them too — be an advocate, all the time, as often as you're called on to advocate. Find them a queer therapist. Seek out a gay pediatrician. And if they're not already close to a gay relative or a queer friend of yours, now's the time to pull those LGBTQ+ people in your life closer. Out to dinner with the family and you see the server wearing a Pride pin? Tell your lesbian girl how cool it is to see someone expressing themselves so openly.

When I was a kid, one of the first gay people I knew was my dermatologist. And I only knew he was gay when he saw me on the brink of suicide. He must've recognized something I wasn't yet comfortable openly acknowledging — that I was gay — and simply told me, during an office visit, that he was gay. I finally saw an adult version of myself in the world, and it — *he* — changed my life.

7. Be aware of poor allyship consequences.

Everything you say and do matters — and even more than you may think. Telling a queer kid they're too young for a Pride parade when other parents are taking their straight-identifying kids to more traditional events like a Thanksgiving parade implies that you don't support them. That rejection can lead to destructive behavior and fuel mental health issues, including depression and suicide. A 2022 national survey conducted by The Trevor Project, the world's largest suicide prevention and mental health organization for LGBTQ+ youth, reported that suicidal thoughts have trended upward among LGBTQ+ youth people over the last three years. The Trevor Project found that 45% of LGBTQ youth seriously considered attempting suicide in the past year, while fewer than one in three transgender and nonbinary youth found their home to be gender-affirming. Martin called these stats "really frightening."

"These are the reasons why your child needs your love and support unconditionally and giving them a safe space," she says. "The world can seem cruel, but your kind words, understanding and willingness to stand with them as they traverse their path in life will, in the end, play a huge role in making sure they are happy and healthy adults."

8. Tap into useful resources.

Now's the time to be clicking the night away on Google. Look up LGBTQ-affirming therapists in your area who will create a safe space for you and your child to speak openly. It's important to remember, too, what skilled, effective therapists are designed to do: allow your kid to honestly explore who they are. So if you're bothered by having a queer kid, know that gender-affirming and queer-supportive therapists are only there to encourage introspection and growth, not push some "gay agenda" that scares fearful parents away.

You can also get involved at Affirmations and take your kid to one of their youth programs, whether that be Reading Rainbow, a book club for kids ages 8 to 12, or the Youth Drop-In Center, a safe learning and networking space for youth ages 13-18 to watch a Netflix movie together or play board games. Other Michigan orgs to keep on your radar are the Ruth Ellis Center, Stand with Trans and Transcend the Binary. "Many use our center without their parents knowing," Martin says. "One young person said, 'I stay away from the house and come here because I hope the more I stay away, the less they notice that I am gay.'"

And support isn't just out there for your child — it's out there for you, too, as you navigate this brand new period of parenthood. "Find support for yourself," Martin says, "because there are millions of other parents who have traveled this road, and they are willing to share with you."



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Detroit Police Corporal Dani Woods. Courtesy photo

Openly Lesbian Detroit Police Corporal Dani Woods Named to Michigan Women’s Hall of Fame

BY JASON A. MICHAEL

Corporal Danielle “Dani” Woods, a 20-year veteran of the Detroit Police Department, was inducted into the Michigan Women’s Hall of Fame at a ceremony in Detroit this month. In 2013, she was assigned to the Chief’s Neighborhood Liaison Unit as the first ever LGBTQ Liaison for the department.

Woods said she is “both humbled and honored to be recognized by Michigan Women Forward, and wholeheartedly appreciates being inducted into the Michigan Women’s Hall of Fame.” The openly lesbian advocate and dedicated public servant went on to say that “it’s been a whirlwind adventure these past few years, but I appreciate the ride.”

During her time as LGBTQ Liaison, Woods has worked to repair the strained relationship between Detroit law enforcement and the queer community. She established the first

LGBTQ Advisory Board to the department to “eradicate negative stereotypes that exist within and out of both entities.” Her efforts were rewarded when Detroit earned back-to-back perfect scores on the Human Rights Campaign’s Municipal Equality Index in 2016 and 2017.

Woods also established the first LGBTQ Community Council. The council invites members of the queer community to come together to share their concerns around law enforcement. Woods previously received the Spirit of Detroit Award presented by the Detroit City Council in 2017 and also received the McAllister Award at the Equality Michigan awards dinner in 2016.

When BTL interviewed Woods earlier this year, she said her goal as LGBTQ Liaison is to promote “equality across the board and surety that our community is treated respectfully and with dignity as human beings, no matter their sexual orientation or gender identity.”

◀ School Board Trustees

Continued from page 15

Association of School Boards.

Maddock had her own opportunity to educate a board member.

“We were having a phone conversation and [they] had said something like, ‘Well, I don’t really know anything about sexual orientation stuff, but it’s not that I’m homophobic,’” Maddock said. “And I was like, ‘Well, I think that that’s part of the problem, though — you have told yourself it’s not something that you need to know about. It’s important that we all understand the differences between identities.’”

Unlike Maddock’s negative experience with the school board candidate forum in Kalamazoo, Ciechorski had a positive one during a forum headed by the Royal Oak High School diversity club. As an openly gay school board member, his presence is appreciated, and he has the receipts.

“Those kids were so excited when I was elected, I got little emails from them,” Ciechorski said. “We’re so glad there’s somebody like us on the school board. Thank you.”

Estep is fighting burnout. Yet she persists even in the face of pushback she sometimes gets from leadership. She was displeased that after parental outcry, the district created an opt-out for the Human Rights Campaign’s “I Am Jazz” reading, a nationally recognized curriculum featuring a transgender child as the main character. But just last year she had some wins as chair of the board’s policy committee: the creation of the Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Advisory



Charlie Fulbright, Trustee, Battle Creek Schools Board of Education. Courtesy photo

Committee Policy and the Transgender and Nonbinary Students Policy.

Both policies passed unanimously.

“I’ve seen so much change and growth in our district since I’ve been on the board,” said Estep, who was first elected in 2018. “We now have policies that our administration and teachers can lean on and proudly continue the DEI initiatives that our district is committed to. While I have personally faced adversity as a queer woman during these efforts, it has been so worth it. Our students are thriving and know that they are all supported. And our community is stronger because of it.”



◀ Valarie St. John

Continued from page 21

that “huge.”

“I hope that a lot of youth who are maybe feeling badly about themselves can see that and say, ‘You know, it’s not as if [I am] some big business owner who has a lot of money and influence,’” St. John said. “I have actually only lived here for four years, so our communities are also usually not super welcoming to newcomers. They usually favor people who have been here for four generations.”

“I don’t try to hide my identity,” she continued. “My wife is also a big part of the community. We’re respected members of the community. I’ll be a trusted authority in our district. I think that that kind of representation can have a big impact on kids who are struggling in an environment that might not be so supportive of them.”

Valarie St. John. Courtesy photo



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◀ Mark Erwin

Continued from page 10

resources on site. "It's [served] a huge need," Erwin says. "It's one of the reasons Ruth Ellis Center was established 23 years ago."

Before REC, there were no supportive services in the city specifically for young LGBTQ+ people, many of whom were experiencing family rejection. "The fact that the center has been able to really embed ourselves in these systems, so that we can better support these young people, is really a testament to what the center is all about," he says.

Though Erwin's career success is personally gratifying, he's far more likely to tout the successes of the people REC has helped over the years. Case in point: Krystina Edwards, who Erwin met on his very first day on the job in 2011. At the time, Edwards, a trans woman of color, was 16 and living in one of REC's residential foster care facilities. "She was big and vibrant, just this incredible person," he remembers.

Over time, Edwards became involved in the center's peer leadership program and served as an important volunteer. When she aged out of foster care and went off to college, Erwin sent her care packages — "ramen noodles and shaving cream and all the things college kids need" — and served as a mentor, guiding Edwards as she started a career in the nonprofit world. When Edwards decided to move back to the Detroit area, she called Erwin and asked that he let her know if a position opened up at REC.

In a true full circle moment, it was only a few weeks later when a community engagement manager position became available. "I encouraged Krystina to apply for the position and interview for it, and she did, along with many, many other individuals," he says. "Ultimately, Krystina was the best person for this position." Edwards has served in her new role since February.

"It's just cool to see a young person who has gone through all the programs and services at Ruth Ellis Center, and then go off to college and get her undergrad degree, and then to come back and want to continue doing the work that she was able to benefit from as a teenager," Erwin says.

Edwards says Erwin played a big part in helping her succeed and overcome challenges she faced as a teen. "When we first met, I was a very outspoken and troubled young woman," she says. "Mark played an important role in helping me channel my focus on completing my goals. He basically showed me the things I wanted were realistic, and he helped me get there. I don't think I would be where I am if we never crossed paths."

Reflecting on his 11 years with REC, Erwin says his early work on the ground, working directly with young people as director of programs, still informs his work today as the guiding force for the entire organization.

"My goal with philanthropy at Ruth Ellis Center has always been, first and foremost, to advocate on behalf of the young people who come to the center and rely on the center, and then beyond that, be a source of education for the broader community and community partners so that they can intimately learn about the experiences of LGBTQ+ young people, and especially LGBTQ+ people of color," he says.

When Erwin isn't working, there's a good chance he's hanging out with his canine companions, 13-year-old Henry and 10-year-old Macintosh. "They're probably less excited about me becoming executive director because of the longer hours I'm putting in," he jokes.

Erwin's human family, on the other hand, has always been highly supportive of his work with REC. His mother has been a volunteer with the organization for many years and became the resource coordinator, working on the "Ruth's Closet" clothing program. Erwin's dad volunteers handyman services for the center. His two brothers have also served the greater Highland Park community as firefighters. "My family has been really committed to Highland Park and Ruth Ellis Center," he says. "And so, it's been just sort of an incredible journey for all of us."

Erwin also spends some of his free time enjoying and creating art, camping, and engaging with music. He's a lifelong musician — he sings and can play piano and string bass — who graduated from the internationally recognized Interlochen Center for the Arts, located south of Traverse City. Focusing on music helped him get through his teenage years, when he says he struggled with his identity. "Having the opportunity to go to Interlochen was my very first experience of what can happen when you are celebrated for who you are," he says. "And that made a big impact on me and has been a recurring theme throughout my career — trying to create those kinds of spaces for young people."

Looking ahead, Erwin says REC is focusing on getting Clairmount Center fully operational and taking stock of processes and procedures as the organization reflects on its extensive growth over the past several years. "As an organization, our goal is always to provide the best resources possible based on the needs of the young people we serve, and so we're providing space to really hear from our community about what is working and where we can do more. That should always be our focus," he says.

He anticipates the center's recent rapid growth to slow down as the organization evaluates its best next steps. One new program that is set to launch, in January, is an education employment support program called Thriving Futures, which will focus on helping young professionals launch their careers.

Above all else, Erwin says, "We want to ensure that LGBTQ+ young people are safe and supported, no matter where they go."



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BY MIKEY ROX

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See Gay Gift Giving, page 32

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PrEP Advocate Damon L. Jacobs Gets Real in Splashy Web Series

Tub Talks Features Honest Conversations About Sex, Body Image and HIV

BY NEAL BROVERMAN

“What do you like about your body?”

That’s typically one of the first questions that therapist, life coach, author, PrEP promoter and longtime HIV activist Damon L. Jacobs asks his guests on his YouTube show, “Tub Talks With Damon L. Jacobs.” This query is posed while Jacobs and his guests (mostly men, but sometimes women, too) are naked and sitting inches from each other in a sudsy bathtub.

Launched after COVID, “Tub Talks” allows people like a U=U proponent (Randy Davis), a sex writer (Alexander Cheves), a “thickfluencer” (Alex Borsa), a journalist and ACT UP legend (Liz Highleyman), and even one of President Obama’s HIV experts (Greg Millett) to talk about everything from self-esteem to self-care to substance abuse to sex positivity. “Tub Talks,” now with dozens of episodes available, is the latest feather in Jacobs’s cap, a New York-based marriage and family therapist who first became known in HIV circles for his early support of PrEP and U=U knowledge. Jacobs spoke to us recently about the origin of Tub Talks and why so many people let loose when their clothes come off.

Tell us about your work as a therapist and the kind of folks you specialize in helping.

I have been proudly serving the LGBT community as a psychotherapist since 1996, in private practice in New York City in 2010. My work utilizes facets of cognitive behavioral therapy, Buddhism and a little bit of Cher, to help people experience peace, power and pleasure in their daily lives.



Damon L. Jacobs. Courtesy photo

How did you get connected with the HIV-positive community?

I came out as a teenager in the 1980s, at a time when AIDS was devastating our community. I moved to the San Francisco Bay Area in 1990 where I loved and lost several friends, coworkers, lovers, clients, roommates, to AIDS. It seemed incumbent on me to challenge my training as a traditional “therapist” i.e., the kind that sits on their ass in an office all day. If I was going to take my role seriously as a healer, it means standing up, getting out, acting up, fighting back, doing something, anything, to stop the spread of HIV/AIDS. I started volunteering facilitating “Rubberward Parties” on college campuses in 1991, and have just continued to work/volunteer in HIV prevention in some capacity ever since.

Another source of inspiration was the fact that I continuously go to HIV conferences where people

sit around and say, “Why can’t we get people to use PrEP? How do we get people to learn about U=U?” And I’m like — maybe it’s time to try to not do the same thing over and over again and expect different results! What if we communicated and taught about sexual health and pleasure in creative ways that aren’t being done by hundreds of other people? That was part of it as well — could I deliver education and information in a way that is innovative and entertaining? I’m trying!

Do you think the worst of monkeypox is behind the LGBTQ+ and HIV+ community?

The data suggests that the worst of monkeypox is behind us. And to me that makes sense — it’s not like we had to reinvent the wheel here. Effective vaccines were already developed, the science was already available. It was just a matter of the government and

health departments using them — and that has been the biggest disappointment for me. In NYC the MPX vaccine distribution is a complete embarrassment, especially because they just did the same thing with COVID vaccines. They created a system that perpetuates racial disparities in vaccine access. It’s not like we didn’t see this one year earlier with COVID. And I’m skeptical anyone learned their lesson from MPX either. But yes, I do think that thanks to the eventual vaccine distribution happening now we are on the other side of what could have been so much more painful and traumatic.

How are you feeling about the state of HIV right now, especially with World AIDS Day coming up? Are you hopeful with some of the advances, like injectables and COVID research, or discouraged that we’re not yet at a vaccine or cure stage?

I don’t get discouraged so much as I’m a realist. I’ve been working in this field for 31 years. It was dubious then that we would ever have a vaccine or a cure for HIV, and it’s pretty dubious now.

Are there strides forward? Yes. Are there incredible people working their asses off to make that happen, yes. Is there sufficient money and funding to make it happen — as far as I know, yes. But HIV is a very tricky virus to cure and I’m not sure I’ll see a cure or an effective vaccine in my lifetime. Meanwhile — injectable PrEP allows you to reduce your risk of acquiring HIV by nearly 100 percent and all you have to do is get a shot every eight weeks. What is the effective difference between that and a vaccine?

My hope rests more in people understanding and utilizing biomedical interventions to embrace sexual health and pleasure. We have three FDA-approved ways of using PrEP now, and more than 50 FDA-approved medications that help someone living with HIV become undetectable. Some of those drugs only have to be taken once a day. When someone is undetectable they are untransmittable, meaning they cannot give HIV to their sexual partners. When I see people organizing, celebrating and connecting around their joy of sexual empowerment, that is where I feel hope, that is where I’ve witnessed substantial change.

Neal Broverman is the Editorial Director of Plus magazine. This column, which originally appeared in Plus, is a project of TheBody, Plus, Positively Aware, POZ and Q Syndicate, the LGBTQ+ wire service. Visit their websites for the latest updates on HIV/AIDS.

◀ Midterms

Continued from page 6

of the caucus also stands as a rebuke of GOP efforts to paint the community as being outside the political mainstream, and evidence that the electorate is much more tolerant than current Republican orthodoxy would care to admit.

3. Democrats take charge in Lansing

For the first time in nearly 40 years, Michigan Democrats are poised to control both the Michigan House and Senate, as well as the governor's office. This tectonic shift in power means the expanded LGBTQ+ Legislative Caucus will no longer simply be fighting the good fight, but fighting it with the power of the committee gavel on their side. No longer will Pride Month resolutions be delegated to dead-end committees while efforts to demonize trans kids be given a platform.

It also means significant progress can be made on issues like the aforementioned Elliott-Larsen Act. While the Michigan Supreme Court ruled in July it does encompass LGBTQ+ rights, placing it there permanently through legislation is the only

way to ensure its continued inclusion. If the overturning of Roe v. Wade demonstrated anything, it's that Supreme Court majorities come and go and non-codified rights could very well go with them. Having Democrats in charge of both the legislative and executive branch processes almost assuredly means that result will become a reality.

4. Dana Nessel doesn't just win — she nails it

Heading into Nov. 8, the pundits consistently placed Nessel, an openly gay woman who helped usher in marriage equality, as being the least likely of the three Democrats heading up the executive branch to win re-election. Her 2018 win over Republican Tom Leonard was by less than three percentage points, and her outspoken advocacy for LGBTQ+ rights over the course of her first term was seen by some as making her politically vulnerable. So when she trounced Republican Matthew DePerno by nearly 10 percentage points on Tuesday, it was a vindication that unambiguous advocacy was not a liability, but instead a virtue that voters

would reward.

To be fair, DePerno was his own worst enemy, having started off his campaign by threatening to jail Nessel if he was elected, and then growing increasingly unhinged after Nessel jokingly suggested “drag queens for every school” in response to continued GOP bigotry. Nonetheless, Nessel never wavered in her beliefs, nor did she try and be anything other than who she is. In the process, she more than tripled her margin of victory.

5. The fight continues

While there was plenty of good news and excellent results to celebrate from the Nov. 8 returns, there is also still plenty of work to do and bigotry to overcome. One big example of that was a seemingly insignificant library millage in West Michigan that failed to pass. Except it was highly significant to the LGBTQ+ community

in that the Patmos Library in Ottawa County's Jamestown Township was targeted by homophobic extremists earlier this year by a group that called itself Jamestown Conservatives whose members objected to the book “Gender Queer: A Memoir,” which they wanted removed from the shelves. Group members also harassed Library Director Amber McLain, who is gay. She ended up resigning after a woman

came into the library and said she was looking for the person she called “that pedophile librarian.”

An initial millage failed in August, leaving the library to face having to close due to a lack of operating funds. So when the trustees decided to try a millage request again on Nov. 8, there was hope that the intense interest in helping the library, including from bestselling romance author Nora Roberts, would provide a different outcome. Alas, no. The millage again failed to pass and the library will now likely have to close its doors by 2024. There are many different stories that could stand as examples of work still to be done, but this one touches on a variety of important points.

Clearly, efforts to educate the public about the LGBTQ+ community must continue so that stories like “Gender Queer: A Memoir,” which recounts nonbinary author Maia Kobabe's journey from adolescence to adulthood, aren't viewed as so alien they automatically draw opposition. Secondly, the idea that books one disagrees with should be banned isn't ideologically that far a leap to the idea that lifestyles one disagrees with should be banned. So this is about more than just a library's funding. This is about freedom of thought and freedom of expression, which remain the most potent weapons against bigotry and ignorance.

While there was plenty of good news and excellent results to celebrate from the Nov. 8 returns, there is also still plenty of work to do and bigotry to overcome.



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Gay Gift Giving

Continued from page 28

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Mikey Rox is an award-winning journalist and LGBT lifestyle expert whose work has been published in more than 100 outlets across the world. Connect with Mikey on Instagram @mikeyroxtravels.

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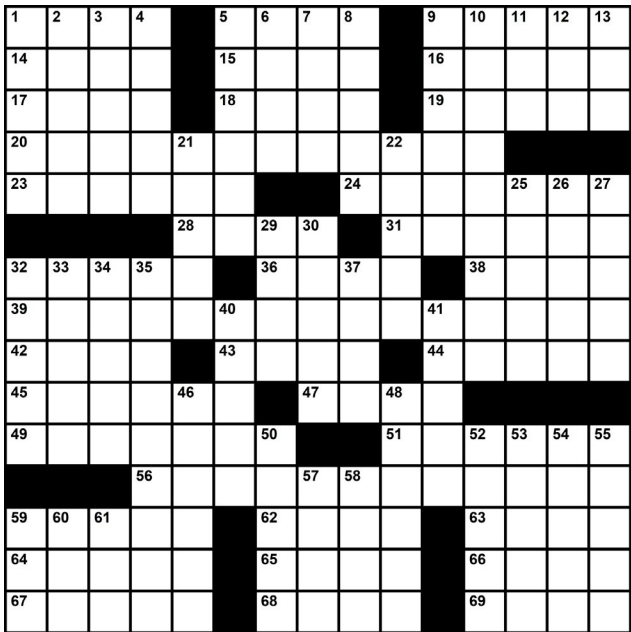
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Moon Landing Kiss

Across

- 1 Like a tight opening
- 5 "Desire Under the ____"
- 9 Piece of Schubert
- 14 Reid of "Josie and the Pussycats"
- 15 Fruitless
- 16 Reproduce without being a breeder
- 17 Jazz singer Anita
- 18 Barry Humphries' Dame

Q Puzzle

- 19 "Seascape" author
- 20 Comedy series about roomies
- 23 Stands next to O'Keeffe
- 24 Like a velvet Elvis
- 28 "The Music Man" setting
- 31 Gordon of "Oklahoma!"
- 32 Where to go straight
- 36 Mishima's continent
- 38 Eugene O'Neill's daughter
- 39 Start of a line from 20-Across about

- the first primetime gay kiss
- 42 Iago, notably
- 43 Producer Meron
- 44 Allow to penetrate
- 45 Cassablanca bit, with "the"
- 47 RuPaul's application
- 49 Battlefield formation
- 51 One who carries Melissa's amps
- 56 End of the line
- 59 It's a good thing
- 62 Patty Sheehan supporters
- 63 "Why, ____ delighted!"
- 64 Yours, in the King James Version
- 65 Make more bearable
- 66 Rimbaud's zip
- 67 Big tops
- 68 It may come before 69
- 69 Extra stipulations

Down

- 1 Resort in Howard Dean's state
- 2 Conductor Boulanger
- 3 Range of Nureyev 's land
- 4 Singer Crystal
- 5 Just the same
- 6 Cheryl of "Charlie's Angels"
- 7 Dynasty long before the Carringtons
- 8 Lewis Carroll creature
- 9 Tough bet
- 10 Use it to look at Uranus
- 11 Metro area
- 12 First note, in "The Sound of Music"
- 13 Program file extension

- 21 Defense in an Ellen Hart novel
- 22 Target before shooting off
- 25 Jolie's tomb-raiding role
- 26 Vietnam capital
- 27 Long for someone with a long one
- 29 Go down
- 30 Husband of a Duke
- 32 Bea Arthur's TV maid Esther
- 33 Seminal computer
- 34 "Macbeth" setting
- 35 Domestic partnership is one type
- 37 Man, as a cruising goal
- 40 Playwright Chekhov
- 41 "Candle in the Wind" singer John
- 46 Log Cabin and Stonewall candidate lists
- 48 Rubber
- 50 Sondheim's staff members
- 52 "The Seven Samurai" director Kurosawa
- 53 Knocked off
- 54 Where some may lie
- 55 Ideal spots
- 57 Straight, at the bar
- 58 High flat area
- 59 E. Wolfson, for one
- 60 "Murder, ____ Meowed"
- 61 Homophobia or gay-bashing

See p. 20 for answers

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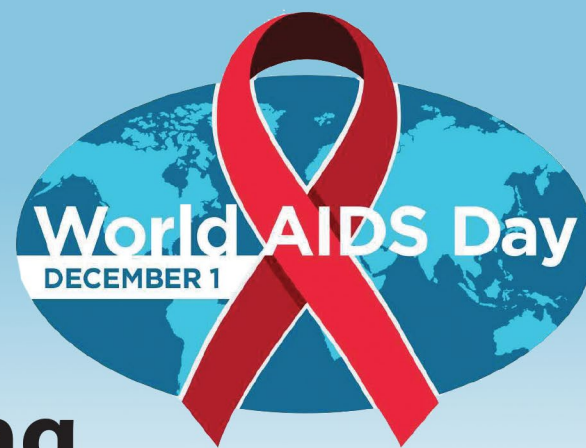
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