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WHITMER TALKS PRIDE

Why Michigan's Leading Ally Feels a
'Dichotomy of Emotions' This Month

By Chris Azzopardi

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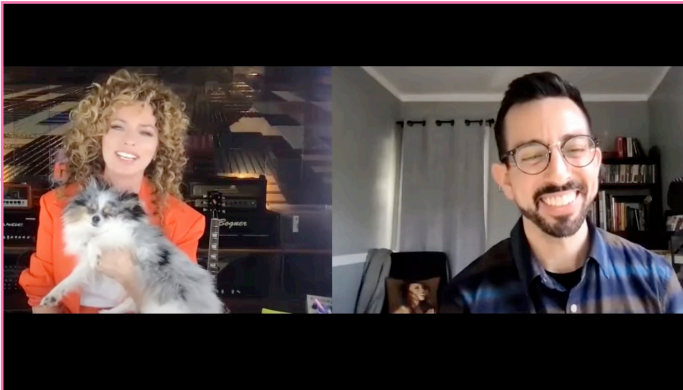
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Gov. Whitmer greets the crowd at Motor City Pride on June 11, 2023. Photo: Casey Hull

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5 Queer Things You Can Do Right Now-ish

BY SARAH BRICKER HUNT

Though we're closing in on the latter half of the month, the Pride flame burns bright and strong. Could there be a better time to burn that candle at both ends, though? There are still several Pride fests scattered throughout Michigan over the next two weeks alongside smaller (but just as queer-affirming) events like an LGBTQ+ art show, a Black queer Juneteenth variety show, a wine tasting accompanied by smooth jazz vocalist Ben Sharkey and a queer prom alternative in an unlikely Michigan small town.



Celebrate at Pride

If it's June, it's still prime Pride festival season. Several events are scheduled for the next two weeks across the state. On **June 17**, check out fests in Grand Rapids, Grosse Pointe, Lansing and Livonia. On **June 24**, several festivals are on the schedule: Bay City, Benton Harbor, Flint, Holland, Monroe County, Owosso, Rochester, Three Rivers. **June 25th** festivals include Berkley, Big Rapids, Macomb County, Port Huron and Saint Clair Shores.

For more details, view the 2023 Pride Source Pride Festival Calendar at pridesource.com/article/2023pridecalendar.



Pontiac Creative Arts Center. Photo: Facebook

Visit an LGBTQ+ Art Exhibit

Head to Pontiac June 17 for the opening of Kaleidoscope: A Celebration of LGBTQ+ Artists and Designers. The installation, hosted by the Pontiac Creative Arts Center, will feature wide-ranging art pieces created by LGBTQ+ community members in acknowledgement of Pride Month. Several local queer artists will be represented in the show, including Kelz (@kelz.create on Instagram).

June 17-July 23, Pontiac Creative Arts Center (47 Williams St., Pontiac). Opening wine and cheese reception June 17, 6-9 p.m.



See a Black Queer Variety Show

Step outside the Pride Month norm and into Juneteenth Jamz, a Black queer variety festival featuring drag, burlesque and more in honor of Juneteenth, the June 19th holiday commemorating the emancipation of enslaved people in the U.S. The event, set for June 17 at The Congregation in Detroit, features several standout local and national performers, including Ypsilanti drag king Burnie Mac, Dahlia Desire, Adira Elphram, burlesque performer and twerking teacher Lottie Ellington, drag queens Miss Thang and Valentina Rose, burlesque performer Josephine Shaker, Flint Pride performer Baddie Brooks and burlesque and go-go dancer Oshun Hathor.

June 17, 6 p.m., The Congregation (9321 Rosa Parks Blvd., Detroit). Advance tickets at bit.ly/43WRudh.



Ben Sharkey.
Courtesy photo

Enjoy Ben Sharkey Over Wine

Mix it up this weekend with the vintage old-school cool vibes of musician Ben Sharkey, a Michigan native (and Ann Arbor Pioneer High School grad). Sharkey fuses classic jazz and soul with pop energy and a velvety voice that draws on the spirits of Frank Sinatra and Dean Martin with a little Michael Bublé and Harry Connick Jr. sprinkled on top. The singer is set to perform June 16 at a cabaret winemaker dinner at the Vegas-style Andiamo Celebrity Showroom in Warren. Tickets include a five-course dinner with wine pairings featuring Adobe Road Winery winemaker Garrett Martin.

"I'm really excited about this event! I'm performing with an eight-piece band of stellar musicians including the Woodward Horns," Sharkey tells BTL. "We will be taking the audience on a musical journey with sounds from the roaring 20s, mid-century rat pack swing, Latin, Motown and disco. I will be peppering in some of my original songs that have been inspired by these musical eras."

June 16, Andiamo Celebrity Showroom (7096 E. 14 Mile Road, Warren). Tickets at shop.vicarirestaurants.com/product-category/andiamo



Attend a Queer Teen Prom Alternative

Prom can be a time for making wonderful memories, but for queer teens, it's not always the magical evening it could be. That's why Queer Families of Livingston decided to throw a queer prom for teens 14-19. "We want teens in Livingston County to feel connected and supported," board member Sara Steinhauer tells BTL. "This is a great opportunity for them to connect with other teens from surrounding communities and just be themselves." The event, set for June 23 at the historical Howell Opera House, will feature dancing, crafts, prizes and more. Ticket holders are invited to a pre-party at 4 p.m. with snacks, games and assistance with getting ready in a safe space.

June 23, 7-10 p.m., Howell Opera House (123 W. Grand River Ave., Howell). Ticket link and more information at qfliuco.org.

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



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Attorney General Dana Nessel, Gov. Whitmer and Lt. Gov. Gilchrist at Motor City Pride on June 11. Photo: Andrew Potter

Whitmer Talks Pride

Michigan's Leading Ally on Her Mixed Pride Feelings, Violence Against Trans Women and Her Latest Reaction to Running for President

BY CHRIS AZZOPARDI

It's Pride Month, but this one feels different. There's both a sense of joy (because the Democratic majority in the Michigan legislature is still working to protect its queer population) and dread (because, nationally, anti-LGBTQ+ laws are rampant). This "dichotomy of emotions," as she calls it, is one that is familiar right now to Gov. Gretchen Whitmer, an LGBTQ+ ally whose own daughter, Sherry, is lesbian.

The Michigan governor leads the charge on strengthening the state's pro-queer powerhouse status, thanks to the Elliott-Larsen Civil Rights Act amendment that grants protections to LGBTQ+ people, which Gov. Whitmer signed into law in March.

Shortly after the signing, when asked

by BTL about conversion therapy — two bills were recently introduced in the House and Senate that would essentially end the practice on minors in Michigan — Gov. Whitmer said she was "eager to continue working with the legislature to expand rights and protect fundamental rights for the LGBTQ community."

Then, just days later at Motor City Pride last weekend, Gov. Whitmer announced a new statewide initiative benefiting LGBTQ+ community members. Michigan's first LGBTQ+ Commission will focus on issues impacting the community, including health, safety and economic opportunity.

When she recently checked in again with BTL before Motor City Pride, Gov. Whitmer discussed her mixed feelings during Pride Month, how she

sees the trans community as "uniquely vulnerable" after another trans woman, Ashia Davis, was recently murdered near Detroit and her thoughts on bringing her pro-queer allyship to the national level.

I hope you get a chance to see our June 8 Pride issue. It includes a big celebratory nod to Michigan as a leader in LGBTQ+ issues in our country right on the cover. Michigan is leading a Pride parade with other states in the back, especially Florida.

[Laughs.] Poor Florida. I mean, not poor Florida but poor people of Florida, right? It's really a very new day in Michigan. And it's a good day, that's for sure.

We're seeing states like Minnesota and New York becoming sanctuary

states for transgender and gender non-conforming people. Do you think Michigan could potentially become one too?

One of the great things about getting Michigan on the right side of history, finally, after so many years of trying to get this done, with this new legislature we can get it done, and we did it in the first 100 days. People know that the future of our state, the future of our economy, the future of our population, depends on Michigan being a place where all people, no matter who you are, how you identify, who you love, what color your skin is, what decisions you make about your life, about your body, about your future, it's gonna be a real selling point for Michigan. And so part of my message to the LGBTQ+ community across the

country is, "Maybe you should make your home in Michigan. We will be a place where you'll have respect and protection under the law, and that's one huge step that we've taken." But our work's not done yet.

The national sentiment around LGBTQ+ issues right now is very different from what it is in Michigan. As a staff, we've been wrestling with the current competing realities of being joyous and celebratory during Pride Month, but fearful for our community at large. What's on your mind right now when you think of Pride Month?

I feel that dichotomy of emotions. Because you see the hate that is then normalized and that has grown in certain parts of our country and in certain parts of the internet and in certain rhetoric. And yet, I feel very hopeful and pleased about the steps that we've been able to take in Michigan. But we've gotta stay vigilant. We cannot ever assume that the job is done. We can never assume that all people understand why this is important. We can never assume that there aren't people who are listening to that rhetoric who might take it upon themselves to do something harmful to others.

And I hate to say that, but after the last few years and just the ugliness that has been directed my way, that's a lesson that I take to heart. It's gonna be important for people like me or any person who's got a platform, whether it's a corporate platform or a government platform or an online platform. Use it to show support for the LGBTQ+ community and to call out and hold accountable those who want to harm their fellow Americans.

You used the word "vigilant" and that is the word that comes to mind when I think about what it's like to walk the streets as an LGBTQ+ person right now. Ashia Davis was a trans woman who was recently killed in Highland Park on June 2, the beginning of Pride Month. Ashia was not the first trans woman to be killed in the Detroit area — there have been several trans women killed here. It is a national epidemic too, and we are seeing that kind of violence against trans people right here at home. What does our state do to solve this ongoing problem that is both a national and local issue?

I think so much of our work is around coalescing allies, raising voices and educating the public. But

See **Whitmer**, page 18

www.PrideSource.com

Meet Whitmer's Queer Content Creator

Julia Pickett on How She Selects the Governor's Memes

BY SARAH BRICKER HUNT

Gov. Gretchen Whitmer has employed many winning strategies to run her multiple successful campaigns, but her ace in the hole might just be her exceptionally strong social media game. Whether it's a meme-tastic tweet beckoning queer people stuck in other, less affirming states to "Come on in" or a TikTok playing on Big Gretch's famous "Fix the damn roads" chant, the governor's messaging is always on point — creative director Julia Pickett makes sure of that.

It's Pickett who dreamed up viral social media posts like an Election Day tweet featuring a play on lyrics from the Geto Boys hit "Damn, It Feels Good to Be a Gangsta." "Damn, it feels good to be a Michigander" the tweet read. Often, Pickett crafts posts centered on Whitmer's famously fun fashion sense, including her epic jacket collection (who could forget the "pronoun jacket" designed by Pickett?).

Lately, Whitmer has been shouting out to the queer community from stops at celebrations like Motor City Pride over the weekend. Pickett, an out lesbian, is especially well positioned to help shape authentic posts geared toward the queer and ally audience, but there's a lot more going on in Michigan than amending the Elliott-Larsen Civil Rights Act or battling down anti-LGBTQ+ legislative proposals — Pickett is tasked with the monumental task of figuring out which issues to highlight and how to position them in a way that resonates with citizens and Whitmer's political stances.

The process, she says, is ever-changing, "but first and foremost, I want to make sure that no matter what we're posting and where we're posting it, the governor's authenticity shines through, that we're staying on message, staying true to our values, but also, I'm looking at how we can do that in fun, engaging ways."

This past spring, Pickett made sure to highlight the governor's focus on infrastructure. "How do you make that interesting? Obviously

everyone cares about the roads, but how can we talk about it in new ways?" Pickett landed on launching a series of TikTok videos (@BigGretchWhitmer) focused on different infrastructure products. The platform, she says, is her favorite to work with. "It allows for much more creativity than the others."

Pickett, who is a professional photographer in addition to her social media role, says she never expected to land a position like this



Julia Pickett and Gov. Whitmer at Motor City Pride. Photo: Twitter / @GuliaPickett

during her career. Originally from Rhode Island, she moved to Detroit to attend the College for Creative Studies as a photography major with a passion for politics.

"I envisioned something like being a National Geographic photographer," she says. "But, really, my passion for politics grew more than I anticipated, and at one point I began to notice the governor and her work and I was like, 'I'm gonna work for her one day — I will.' And luckily, it happened. It took a while to get here, working odd jobs, going to school and so on, but I just feel so lucky and fortunate."

When Pickett isn't crafting Gov. Whitmer's next viral social media post, she's likely to be found at her new home in Madison Heights, which she shares with her wife and the couple's menagerie of rescued stray animals. "It all sounds a little stereotypical," she says, laughing. "But one of the strays is a rabbit!"



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Orion Story Wants You to Find Your Inner Superhero

Lansing Pride Performer on Drag Bans, Voting and the Power of Drag

BY EVE KUCHARSKI

Every June, the LGBTQ+ community gets an opportunity to reflect on the importance of Pride. June can serve as a reminder of strides made, past and future battles, and an affirmation of the long road ahead, still, to securing true nationwide equality.

Chance Lambert, aka West Michigan-based drag queen and “RuPaul’s Drag Race” alum Orion Story, is set to headline Lansing Pride this year, and despite a seemingly record year for political attacks on both the drag and transgender communities, Lambert predicts that Pride 2023 will be one of the biggest and wildest ever.

Before Lambert graces the stage as Orion Story in Lansing’s Old Town on Saturday, June 17, they caught up with BTL to talk about the state of drag, its use as a conservative talking point and why it can bring out the “superhero” in all of us.

Since lawmakers have started to target drag, in many ways it feels like the public’s perception of drag has become less accepting than even a few years ago. Have you noticed a shift in the landscape as a performer?

I’ve been doing drag for almost four years now, and I think even since I started doing drag, things have changed so much, even with the community. And it’s interesting because every year it changes, and I think it’s something that’s going to continue to change. The thing with the political climate and everything going on and drag being a big target for conservatives, [is] it’s not about drag. It’s not about children. It’s a smoke screen. It’s a diversion. If they really cared about protecting their kids and this and that, then we wouldn’t have mass shootings in schools. There would be more gun control. There are bigger issues. They don’t care about drag. They don’t care about kids. It’s a ploy to cover up whatever is really going on. At the end of the day, [drag bans are] anti-trans bills, essentially. The way that they’re wording things, the way that the bills are very meticulously written, it’s really to criminalize trans people.

I have spoken to several drag queens who have shared that people have been more confrontational with them at shows and in public, recently. Have you experienced that?

I haven’t had, luckily, any personal confrontations with that, besides family members who will say that they are



Orion Story. Courtesy photo

supportive but then, on the other hand, they’re voting for Trump and they’re still conservative and they’re voting against my well-wishes, basically. It’s hard. I’ve had to cut out a lot of my family. They don’t understand. And people like that, it’s very hard to get through (to), and as soon as you try to dismiss their beliefs, they are not gonna listen to what you’re saying.

Have any of the drag bans affected your work personally?

I personally haven’t had a lot of my work affected, but lately I have been doing a lot

of costume commissions and things like that and I do know a lot of friends who have been affected by it. I have a lot friends out in Nashville who have been affected by it, and it’s nice that a lot of venues have been reaching out and saying, “Hey, if there is anyone out in Nashville that needs work, send them my information.” It’s great that the community is coming together to support each other, but it seems like it’s getting worse and worse, you know? It’s very unpredictable, which I think is the scariest part.

Has the news of these drag bans changed your

approach to drag at all?

I wouldn’t say that it affects the way I approach drag, but I think it’s very similar to how Covid was with work, because everything shut down and we weren’t able to perform and that was a struggle for a lot of people — myself included. This is a similar situation in a different way, but I think as queer people, we always rise above everything. We always come out on the front, and we always find a way.

But I think now it’s even more important because this isn’t like Covid that we can all avoid — it’s people voting against us. It’s one of those times where, even if you’re not political, you have to be. You have to be sure to be registered to vote. You have to make sure that your voice is heard, because if it’s not, there are people who are gonna try to outlaw you, basically.

Do you think it’s possible to change people’s opinions on drag?

Some people you can’t change, and you can’t expect everyone to change, but the biggest voice you have is making sure you’re voting and that you are out there protesting and actually making your voice heard. Because, when it comes down to it, people’s opinions are one thing, but laws and bills and action? That’s what it really comes down to. That’s the biggest voice, is action. It’s scary that people are coming to drag queen story hours with guns and sitting outside and sending death threats and harassing, and a lot of the times, the law is protecting those people.

I know it’s very cliché to say that drag changes lives, and I think as somebody who has been doing drag for a few years — obviously there have been so many people who have been doing it so much longer than I have — I feel like I attribute a lot of my confidence and figuring out who I am and what kind of person I am, even out of drag, to drag. When you put yourself in a position where you’re performing every night, you’re putting yourself out there, and you’re in front of all of these people all the time. Especially being on a show like “Drag Race,” which has millions of viewers and is one of the biggest shows on TV, it’s really crazy how much you learn about yourself through drag. And I think even watching other people and being inspired by that — I have so many people that come up to me and are like, “I want to start doing drag.”

See **Orion**, page 26

Wilson 2

GAME. SET. MATCH!
By Tracy L. Spada

SETTING- Various Locations
TIME- Present Day

Synopsis- When invited to her ex-girlfriend's wedding, Abby makes the decision to go...but not without a date; thus begins her journey into the world of online dating. Hoping for the best, she experiences a myriad of interesting, exciting, and ultimately disappointing situations. And just when the search for something casual seems impossible...she may have just found something significant!

CAST

Abby	Caitlin Cavannaugh	Cis woman in search of love. Any ethnicity.
Kyla	Alysia Kolasz	Cis woman. Abby's ex-girlfriend. Any ethnicity.
Shea	Meehan Van Arsdalen	Cis woman. Abby's friend and tennis partner. Any ethnicity.

Queer Play Marks a New Era for Tipping Point Theatre in Northville

'Game. Set. Match!' Explores Modern Lesbian Dating Scene Through the Lens of Tennis

BY SARAH BRICKER HUNT

When Tracy Spada left Northville and her role as stage manager, director and actor at Northville's Tipping Point Theatre in 2020, she couldn't have predicted she'd return a few years later with a surprising mission: to produce her queer play, "Game. Set. Match!"

After all, the theater had been unwilling to move forward with the production when she offered to direct it in 2020. But that, as they say, was then, and this is now. And now, Tipping Point has two new artistic directors on board, who are not only embracing diverse representation, but actively seeking it.

Spada, a Metro Detroit native and Eastern Michigan University grad, returned to Tipping Point earlier this year to direct "Steel Magnolias"

after spending time in Virginia and D.C., where her partner was working during the pandemic. Like most theaters, Tipping Point closed in early 2020, abruptly halting Spada's 15-year career there. Spada took a deep breath and decided it was an ideal time for a change of scenery.

While she can't pinpoint exactly why the theater had been hesitant to produce the play, she recalls a previous artistic director being very resistant to the idea. "Ultimately, he just decided that it wasn't the sort of play our theater patrons would care for," she recalls. "And I casually asked, 'They don't like romantic comedies?' There was a great pause on his end..."

These days, Tipping Point's focus has shifted

"Where else can we go with visibility? I just remember that feeling of sitting in that room with so many like-minded people and all of us wanting and craving the same."

See **Tipping Point**, page 24

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Nonbinary Detroit Chef Cooks Up Success at Freya

Phoebe Zimmerman Has Opened the Space to Young Queer Artists in the City

BY LAYLA MCMURTRIE

For Phoebe Zimmerman, the charming, tattoo-covered chef de cuisine at Freya, cooking isn't just about skill — it's about connection, too. Both aspects are surely at play when it comes to why the Detroit farm-to-table restaurant was the only Michigan business featured in the New York Times 2022 America's Best Restaurant list.

Zimmerman's refreshing approach to fine dining is an ideal fit for a Detroit restaurant in the midst of a cultural renaissance. "Those are the things you need to bring a city back for sure: queerness, art, music, fashion and food," Zimmerman told BTL.

Owner and executive chef Doug Hewitt met Zimmerman through a mutual connection a few months before the fine dining restaurant opened in November of 2021 and was immediately drawn to them. So, Zimmerman, a Detroiter who identifies as nonbinary, has worked at Freya ever since, delivering inclusive ideas and bright-colored dishes.

In the midst of a variety of life challenges, Zimmerman's focus at Freya has remained constant and has served as a beacon connecting them to the community through food.

Alongside Hewitt and sous chef Cole Lauri, Zimmerman helped create the menu at Freya, which includes a range of vegan, pescetarian and omnivore new-American "experiences" that customers can choose from.

"What makes Phoebe great as a chef is they're fearless. Phoebe cooks with a ton of layers of flavor. Everything Phoebe does is very well thought out and calculated," Hewitt said. "People need to experience Freya and experience Phoebe. They won't be disappointed."

Now 38, Zimmerman came out as a lesbian at the age of 16. Their "coming out 2.0" happened in September 2021, when they realized that the term nonbinary best describes their experience.

Growing up in Grosse Pointe, Zimmerman said there wasn't a lot of



(Top right) Phoebe Zimmerman at work in the Freya kitchen. (Bottom right) Phoebe Zimmerman and owner/executive chef Doug Hewitt. Photos: Rush Zimmerman

queer representation, but they always felt there was a part of them that was “boyish.”

“I have my femininity in my divine womanhood that I find very powerful, that’s where I think a lot of my strength and resilience comes from,” Zimmerman said. “I definitely feel like I have womanhood, but I don’t feel like a man either. But I definitely feel like a boy and I think the boy part of me is this deep joy of playfulness and boundless kind of curiosity.”

After experiencing body dysphoria for a long time, Zimmerman got top surgery in November 2022.

“It’s hard to look at me. It’s hard to be intimate with people. It’s hard to be naked,” Zimmerman said. “It wasn’t easy for me. I just felt like I was carrying bags. Like luggage, feeding apparatuses, or whatever. It was never a beauty thing for me. When the bandages came off, when I got to see it for the first time, it was like, ‘Oh my god, there you are.’”

Zimmerman is proud they can be who they are and look the way they do while working as a successful chef.

“You’ll never know everything when it comes to food and I feel the same way about the self — we’re constantly changing,” they said. “It’s like, ‘What am I feeling today?’ And I feel like that is really closely knit with food. For me, it’s like a way of expression, expressing who and what I really am and being able to bring people together that normally wouldn’t be.”

Last year, Zimmerman hosted a vegan dinner at FRAME in Hazel Park to celebrate Pride Month. The dinner was just a week after Zimmerman’s mom died, but ended up being a huge success nonetheless. “A lot of people were like, ‘Don’t do it. You don’t have to do it.’ And I was like, ‘She would be so pissed,’” Zimmerman said. “It went so smooth.”

While Zimmerman said they love the ability to make a living and be “weird and creative” through fine dining, their main reason for cooking is connection. One goal of theirs is to grow the accessibility of their

food for Detroit locals.

“This is what makes me really actually quite happy,” Zimmerman said. “The community that we’re in, which is Milwaukee Junction, is the heartbeat of Detroit.”

The chef said Freya has “masc energy” and described the space as “dark and sexy,” with basement block windows that give the building a mysterious speakeasy feel. Speaking with general manager Thor Jones about ideas for Black History Month, Zimmerman said they realized Freya was “screaming to be an art gallery.”



Freshly prepared dishes at Freya.

So, they made it just that.

Freya’s first event, called Blue Love, showcased five Detroit artists of color: Sheefy McFly, Tony Rave, Phillip Simpson, Tony Whlgn and India Solomon. “This Black History Month, we are launching an ongoing installation honoring Detroit’s Black artists and their invaluable contributions to sustaining, preserving and stewarding the city’s culture,” said a post ahead of the party from @freyadetroit on Instagram.

See Phoebe Zimmerman, page 16



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When It Comes to Transphobia, Dee Snider Isn't Gonna Take Criticism or Responsibility



BY D'ANNE WITKOWSKI

My music of choice is heavy metal. I love it. I buy the music, the merch, and I go to shows. I support the art I love, and it brings me

a lot of joy.

The metal world is very dude-centric, specifically cisgender white dudes. More of these dudes than you might expect are LGBTQ+ allies, while a not insignificant number are homo/transphobic creeps.

On April 30, Paul Stanley of Kiss decided that he needed to step into the discussion about trans kids. In a post that began, "My Thoughts On What I'm Seeing," he said that parents of trans kids were "turning this into a game" and "normalizing it as some sort of natural alternative."

"With many children who have no real sense of sexuality or sexual experiences

fad," Stanley wrote.

He's basically arguing that adults who support trans kids or their health care needs are being reckless and don't have the best interests of the kids at heart. That's the right-wing narrative that lawmakers across the country are using to ban trans health care or, like in Florida, declaring parents of trans kids as unfit and taking their kids away. To be clear, it's not a game or a fad and no one who loves and cares for a trans child, especially in the face of so much hatred and bigotry, thinks that it is.

Stanley also confuses gender with sexuality, which aren't the same. To allow a kid to express their gender identity is not sexualizing them. That's another gross right-wing talking point.

The next day, Dee Snider decided that he, too, needed to weigh in on the topic and defended Stanley. "You know what? There was a time where I 'felt pretty' too. Glad my parents didn't jump to any rash conclusions! Well said, Paul Stanley," Snider tweeted.

Except, for all of the reasons I've stated,

it was not well said. Stanley's were not the comments of someone knowledgeable about this issue, and he was perpetuating danger. And so, Snider was disinvited from the San Francisco Pride event where he was going to perform his signature song, "We're Not Gonna Take It."

"When we were notified about the tweet in which Dee expressed support for KISS's Paul Stanley's transphobic statement, we were heartbroken and angry," San Francisco Pride said in a statement, continuing that they "appreciate Dee seeing this as a teachable moment and a reminder that even allies need to be educated to ensure that they are not casually promoting transphobia." Except Snider has apparently not used this as a teachable moment. Instead of saying, "I'm sorry, I'll do better," he has made this all about him. He's the real victim here.

"I was not aware the Transgender community expects fealty and total agreement with all their beliefs and any variation or deviation is considered 'transphobic,'" "For some Transgender people (not all) to accuse supporters, like me, of transphobia is not a good look for their cause," Snider said in response.

It's like he doesn't understand, or feel the need to understand, why Stanley's comments were so harmful. The idea that little kids are being sliced and diced as part of a trans agenda is an incredibly harmful lie that incites violence. Stanley was perpetuating

that lie. And Dee's response was to AGREE WITH HIM.

"As a parent, I disagreed with children's ability to make cognizant decisions at the age of five, six and seven. In my learned opinion, they are not capable," Snider said on June 8, doubling down. "You're not canceling me. You're not shutting me up. And...the LGBTQIA+ community, and whatever letters we're adding, they need the support of not just the people who agree with them one hundred percent, they need the support of the middle, and that's where most of us are."

And that is true. Most people are in the "middle" on this issue. Unfortunately, what constitutes the middle is not at all clear since it's hard to find a middle ground between "Let trans kids exist and be happy" and "Eradicate transgender kids and terrorize them." Stanley's comments were much closer to the latter. Snider agreed with him. And he doesn't see it as a problem. That's the problem.

There is a difference between Stanley and Snider, however. Stanley (kind of) apologized. "I'm not apologizing," Snider said. "Not when I did nothing wrong."

A teachable moment, indeed.

Oh, and if you want to check out some awesome queer metal, check out Project: Rowenwolfe (their new self-titled album absolutely rips), Transgressive and, of course, the mighty Judas Priest. Rock out with your Pride out. \m/



"WELCOME, PAT ROBERTSON! YOU'RE JUST IN TIME FOR OUR LGBTQ+ PRIDE MONTH CELEBRATION!"



caught up in the 'fun' of using pronouns and saying what they identify as, some adults mistakenly confuse teaching acceptance with normalizing and encouraging a situation that has been a struggle for those truly affected and have turned it into a sad and dangerous

Taylor Swift Makes Strong Case for Gay Icon Status During Eras Stop in Detroit

Full of Queer Energy, the Show Had One Fan Screaming ‘Happy Pride Month to Me!’



BY CHRIS AZZOPARDI

On my way to Ford Field in downtown Detroit for the first night of Taylor Swift’s brilliant and breathtaking Eras Tour on June 9, I joked with my concert mate that he’d have to remember the show for me, even though that was my job. That is *if*, of course, he wasn’t about to literally lose his mind, too.

I’d read about the Taylor Swift “amnesia” phenomenon — Swifties reporting that the experience was so overwhelming they felt guilty they couldn’t remember more of it — and I wondered, would the pop magic, all 44 songs, go poof at 11:15 p.m. when Taylor popped off stage? Should I interview 20 Swifties about what happened just in case my mind went blank? What if they couldn’t remember all too well, either? Would we all wander around like Dorothy in Taylor’s Oz, Technicolor-dazed and too far from home?

This is how three hours and 20 minutes of Taylor Swift live in Detroit all started — my wild, out-of-body experience during what has been called “the tour of her generation.” Based on the light research I’d done before the show, I knew the first Detroit Eras Tour stop I attended would serve Big Taylor Energy with a stylish, over-the-top pageant feel that rivaled anything I’ve seen before (including decades of big pop spectacles from gay icons like Madonna, Cher, Janet and Mariah), so overwhelmingly massive and magical that I could barely take notes. I only took three, so that tells you a lot. But contrary to what I’d been warned about regarding Swift amnesia, my mind isn’t exactly the blank space I thought it might be. I actually remember so much! Most of my memories include, naturally, the queerest parts of the show.

I distinctly recall “Vigilante Shit,” performed during the final “Midnights” portion of the show,

when the queer person next to me shouted something that was certainly on my mind and must’ve been on the mind of many other LGBTQ+ Swifties: “Happy Pride Month to me!” She was specifically referring to Swift and her incredible troupe of diverse dancers doing a burlesque-style chair dance on a tiered video pedestal stage. Some were women, but dancers Sam McWilliams and Kevin Scheitzbach, who were on either side of Swift in heels, exuded queerness in a way that made me appreciate the ambiguous expression of gender happening onstage during the show’s sexiest number, in front of a multigenerational crowd of over 50,000 people. If I were a little gay boy seeing that, I might be titillated, yes, but mostly I’d be like, “Mom, get me a sparkly one-piece right now.”

Though Swift’s Ford Field shows were just down the street from where Motor City Pride took place in Hart Plaza, she didn’t make any Pride-specific mention on Friday like she did in Chicago the week before at the beginning of Pride Month, when she essentially used her powerful platform to call out anti-queer legislators. Like her casting of Laith Ashley, the trans male model who played her lover in the video for “Lavender Haze,” Swift’s support of the LGBTQ+ community in Detroit was expressed entirely artistically. For instance, it was only four songs in when she sang her gay anthem “You Need to Calm Down,” which got her pro-queer message across loud and clear when a stadium full of

fans shouted her “shade never made anybody less gay” zinger, a line Swift ensured stayed in the truncated live version.

Queer energy ran heavily through a lot of the “Midnights” section, actually. Sure, it began with “Lavender Haze,” which, naturally, has sparked conversations among her lesbian fans — lavender, after all, has historical roots as lesbian iconography. But after that song came “Bejeweled” and “Karma.” Seeing those bops come to life in the most exuberant live setting made both songs — the former about still shimmering in the face of ugliness, the latter a kitschy clapback — seem even more Taylor (er, tailor)-made for a drag stage near you. During “Karma,” Swift and her dancers had boas draped over their shoulders, their collective colors resembling a shiny rainbow. If you’re a boomer, you might imagine this kind of delightfully camp-level excess at a Cher show. And if Swift

wanted to go one step further, she might consider producing the kind of all-access concert movie that captured Madonna during her 1990 Blond Ambition World Tour, which, alongside overt feminist themes (of which there are many during the Eras Tour), is fondly remembered for showcasing queer visibility.

So yes, I will remember a lot about the Eras Tour — Swift amnesia, be damned. I got a friendship bracelet from the person whose new Pride anthem is rightfully “Vigilante Shit,” an example of the surprising sense of community I felt at this show. I didn’t expect to get a bracelet, especially from someone else who’s queer, but it had me reflecting on being in this overwhelmingly joyous space after a couple of years of pandemic isolation.

It was 2020 when “Folklore” came out, and there was so little to look forward to. I have a feeling a lot of Swifties at that show might’ve felt like I did that year — scared, depressed,

more hopeless than I’d ever been. I clung hard to those songs like they were magic, and then the magic was happening right in front of me. When I heard Swift’s spoken-word version of “Seven,” which opened the “Folklore” section of the show, it briefly took me back to that difficult stretch of isolation. Then I looked around, tens of thousands of light-up bracelets shining like distant stars all around me. The Eras Tour is special in that way — for a night, it brought us together to remember not just the night, but the journey we took to get there.

Chris Azzopardi is the Editorial Director of Pride Source Media Group and Q Syndicate, the national LGBTQ+ wire service. His work has also appeared in The New York Times, Vanity Fair, GQ and Billboard. Reach him via Twitter @chrisazzopardi.



Taylor Swift during her Eras Tour in Detroit, June 9. Photo: TAS Rights Management



Jazz McKinney. Courtesy photos

How This Executive Director Led a Michigan Organization Out of Pandemic Hardship

Under Jazz McKinney's Direction, Grand Rapids Pride Center's Budget Jumped From \$700 to \$630,000

BY JASON A. MICHAEL

Jazz McKinney, executive director of the Grand Rapids Pride Center (GRPC), is leading the non-profit organization into a new era — one focused on a renewed spirit of equity and community engagement for all.

A native of Detroit, McKinney moved to Grand Rapids in 2004 to attend Grand Valley State University. After a change in majors, McKinney ended up with both a bachelor's and master's degree in psychology. That experience is no doubt helpful to McKinney, who identifies as non-binary and uses the pronouns they/them, as they navigate GRPC into its post-pandemic era.

Here, McKinney talks to BTL about what brought them to GRPC and where they hope to take it.

Today you identify as non-binary, but that wasn't always the case?

I came out as a trans man in 2008. Here in West Michigan, we know that non-binary and stuff existed, but it was not very well known or popular. You could be a trans woman or a trans man. Those were your options. I came out as a trans man and that didn't feel great either. I don't think I'm fully a man either. So I just kind of floated for a while as I started to learn more.

You also identify as two-spirit?

I've always known the fact that I was indigenous. I'm an indigenous mutt. I have multiple tribes in there. But as far as the identity, I think that journey happened as I learned more about myself. I grew up in Detroit when it was not cool to be mixed. You were Black and that was it. That is what I saw anyway. That's kind of how my family was raised, to hide the indigenous side. Not necessarily between ourselves, but kind of that mentality that it's already hard enough to be Black. So why add another piece to it? There are no protections in place for Native Americans, even less than Black people. So you kind of have to pick — which oppression

do you want?

Prior to joining the center, you worked as a psychologist. Why were you drawn to this field?

I've always been a natural healer. I've kind of naturally been able to talk to people and make them feel better. I've always been interested in the way the mind works and how it's connected to your body and soul. So, in a very colonized way of thinking, that to me meant that I would be a teacher or a therapist. When I got to school, they told me that psychology was not a teachable major. You couldn't get a degree in psychology and education because you can't become a psychology teacher. I said, "What are you talking about?" I definitely took an AP psychology course in high school.

You came to the center in October 2020, at the height of the pandemic, as interim executive director. In March of 2021 the board dropped the "interim" and you became the center's full time ED. What can you tell me about your early days at the center?

I definitely inherited a mess. Nothing against the previous ED. He did the best he could with what he had. Because of the pandemic, a lot of our services were closed down. So I could do some internal work. We started talking about our philosophy, who we wanted to be as a center. Also, during the same time we had the racial uprising. So this took place in the middle of the George Floyd situation. There was a lot of focus on racial equity or inequity.

We as a center had gotten called out about how we have a history of racism, a history of not treating people how they should be treated and catering our services to a particular set of folks. It really helped us to be able to take the time to look at our policies and our focus. There was a group of folks that we were obviously missing. It was like 85 percent of the people we served were white. We took a look at that. We weren't serving a lot of elders, we weren't serving a lot of people with disabilities. So we really took a good look at ourselves, and we're still in that process.

And today? How are things going?

Things are going great. We're in the middle of strategic planning right now. We might be changing our mission statement. We haven't had a strategic plan in at least 10 years. We just need to have good practices and the policies in place so we can hopefully do better for our BIPOC community, our senior community, our trans community. We want them to feel welcome, as well as our white folks and our men. They're still important. We're just trying to make sure everyone else gets served, too.

Can you give us your greatest hits list? What have you brought to the center since you started?

I've worked very hard to change some of what I inherited. When I took over, 90 percent of our income was coming from our Pride festival. We had to cancel in 2020 and couldn't pay our ED. In January 2020, we had \$700 in our bank account. So when I say I inherited a mess, that's what I mean. It's been a time, let me tell you. However, now this year's budget is \$630,000 as opposed to the \$200,000 I inherited. Now our funding goal is to get our funding to be 33%



grants, 33% fundraising and 33% donations. We're definitely close to that now.

Finally, who is Jazz at home, when they are not working to better the center?

I have four children. I love paranormal fiction. And I have been with my spouse, DL, for 20 years. I am also passionate about working to decolonize gender roles and identities as well as discussing the impact that harmful gender binaries can cause within our communities.

Pride in Detroit



Michigan's largest annual Pride festival, Motor City Pride, drew huge crowds to Hart Plaza in Detroit June 10 and 11. Gov. Gretchen Whitmer and Attorney General Dana Nessel were among those who greeted the sea of rainbow-inspired Pridegoers, who spent the day soaking up sun, music and affirming good vibes. Photos by Andrew Potter



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◀ Phoebe Zimmerman

Continued from page 11

For the showing, Freya created a specialized menu, almost all of the art sold and around 300 people attended, Zimmerman said. “It was one of the most magic moments. It’s like, ‘Yeah, we show up in Detroit.’”

Now, in addition to Zimmerman’s multicolored dishes, the local art makes the restaurant brighter.

“We’re trying to do things that are impactful to the neighborhood, the culture that was here before we got here and the culture that will follow; we’re just trying to be a part of it,” Hewitt said.

Thinking about the city of Detroit, Zimmerman related the culture and people to a “heart that has continued to beat.”

The chef helped Freya host a set of trans and nonbinary artists on May 8 for an event

called “Abundance,” and hopes to continue their “passion project” of curating events like this for the community regularly. “I want to provide a place where people can live in their dignity and feel like they belong and are safe,” Zimmerman said.

As someone who is a recovering drug addict, Zimmerman compared gratitude,

“the foundational piece of recovery,” to their work with food, mainly by framing their success as a gift and a result of their continued sobriety.

“Sometimes I don’t know how or why I have been able or offered so many blessings, so many great things,” Zimmerman said.

“What recovery has taught me is that I don’t know anything ever and to continue to

“It’s like, ‘What am I feeling today?’ And I feel like that is really closely knit with food. For me, it’s like a way of expression, expressing who and what I really am and being able to bring people together that normally wouldn’t be.”

remind myself that I get to do the things that I’m doing. Even the hard shit is an opportunity. Like even the hardest shit, at least I’m here for it.”

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(Left to right) Attorney General Dana Nessel, Gov. Whitmer and Lt. Gov. Garlin Gilchrist at Motor City Pride, as Whitmer announces first-ever LGBTQ+ Commission. Photo: Casey Hull

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Healing a Divided America

Petals Sandcastle on Tripping, Radical Acceptance and Shattering the Binary



Petals Sandcastle. Courtesy photo

BY SARAH BRICKER HUNT

Petals Sandcastle, founder and CEO of Ann Arbor's Express Your Yes and NOW Studios, has had a very busy 2023 so far. In between traveling around the continent, hosting events at the studio space and spearheading Ann Arbor Is Burning, a "radically queer takeover" of the city's annual Summer Fest beginning Thursday, June 15, Sandcastle has been focused on healing our collective soul.

Sandcastle sat down with BTL over Zoom recently to discuss the challenges related to radical acceptance, living in America in 2023 as a queer person and bridging the gaps that exist within overlapping yet disconnected segments of society.

So, how are you?

I'm well. I'm on an endless cyclical roller coaster of being alive. I just had a super great last meeting, but how are you?

Well, we have a tornado watch, it's very humid and I just wish the storm would get it over with already.

Yes! Rip the Band-Aid off, terrorize us and get on with it. Well, I'm in New York, where we don't have a tornado watch.

What brought you to New York?

Being in small places or small towns, or the Midwest in general, even a place like Ann Arbor, becomes, well, a bit of a sardine can, if you will — a bit muted and not expansive enough to really engage the fullness of who I am and all the nuance and depths. And so, I routinely have to retreat to places where I just feel a great amount of inertia, like last night, I was at a "RuPaul's Drag Race" event with Sasha Velour, a book talk. I'm chatting with Sasha Velour and listening to her mind, and it's like that all the time. There's just so much possibility and life in big cities that we're deprived of in the Midwest.

So, that's my long, circular answer. I'm coming to recharge my batteries so I can get back to the work.

Is this something you're trying to pull into your work in Ann Arbor, the idea that there's a whole big world we're

all connected to?

That is a huge, huge, huge part of it. I think we're conditioned from a very young age to have this sense of fear and anxiety around the "other." But if the goal is to keep people voting for the lesser of evils and being OK with trillion dollar war budgets and unfettered capitalism, then the only real way, I think, to keep people running on the hamster wheel is to keep us separated and divided and afraid of each other.

And once you really start to travel out there, whether that's in a book or actually geographically or through mushrooms or a drag show or whatever, you really start to dislodge some truths that feel contradictory to what we've always been taught and conditioned through education and religion and everything from a very young age. So certainly existentially, philosophically, that is a huge tenant of it. But also just creatively and artistically thinking about, you know, even if we were never to make any sort of political inroads just like I think there's something to be said about creativity for creativity's sake.

On the Express Your Yes/NOW Studios website, you mention concepts like "radical acceptance" when it comes to gathering community together in your space there. What does that mean to you in 2023?

Well, this is actually the challenging tightrope walk that I think those of us who consider ourselves activists or artists have to walk because we want to create a radically served, non-normative base. Not only for the LGBT community, not only for queers, you know? But we're thinking about neurodivergent folks, thinking about BIPOC folks, thinking about people who just don't fit into the recipe.

Our space is radically safe. It's a space for all of the margins to gather to really come together and see each other and shingle a single roof above our overlapping dreams and persecutions. I think that you know there's a real concerted effort to keep us divided and thinking that our causes are not similar. And so a real desire of mine is to really not

only find the overlap but celebrate the overlap and stick with the overlap.

If life is a trust game, how do we move from constantly being on the defense? How do we move from endlessly reacting to the systems' moves and sort of reclaim the power in the chest, becoming the grandmasters ourselves and sort of leverage our collective ability to be taken seriously and also be heard and not tokenized?

NOW studios is like our fifth or sixth iteration of space. And really the challenge is like, how do you make really safe spaces for people who need it while also facilitating? And how do you create the incredibly necessary and nuanced dialogue between the disparate parts? How do you both create space for Trump supporters and their queer sons to come together and hash it out and also have radically safe space?

Hmm, yes, how do you do that?

Well, it is a big charge and it is a big task, and I think a lot of folks are very confused by our organization and what we're trying to do. I've had many people in our queer community who are like, "You can't simultaneously say you're a safe space for the margins and also say you're trying to have a discourse with the normative society that marginalized us." But I think that's the only thing we can do at this point. Those of us who've been deserted by the system, and we heal, and we go out and we really set it all down and we re-establish our baseline. You know, we really redefine our joy and realize birth is our permission.

I also realize that I'm coming up against existential rubs with that entire landscape and concept, which I've really devoted so much time to because the reality is, who wants truth if it's a hard bed — that kind of idea. And I think a lot of Black and brown and clear and neurodivergent artists are just disinterested, like they have zero interest, in negotiating their rightful place to just exist and thrive.

Why do you think that is? Fear? How do you convince people to overcome inherent fears and distrust and gather together?

The thing is, 75, 76 million people voted for Donald Trump, and those people aren't going away, and so if the goal is to not continue the

binary games, until we are literally siloed off at the polls, we have to figure it out.

Not to get all doomsday here, but I do think there is a very concerted effort by nihilists without dreams. A lot of people who've lost touch with their inner child and their creative connective ability to see we're all entangled in this gorgeous quantum soup, you know? And all the eight plus billion others are our siblings.

Do you think Michigan and Ann Arbor are good places to have these conversations?

Well, it can feel naive here or, sometimes, intentionally phony. Like Ann Arbor gets voted Best City in America, but there's a disconnect between the brochures and what's actually happening on the pavement. Closing that disconnect requires some really challenging, difficult stuff. There must be structures and containers where we can unpack all of this and unwind all of this and stand soul naked in

space with people who we don't like, who we are afraid of. It's super conservative folks being in a room full of, say, Black, empowered trans people and the margins having to hold space to be compassionate and empathetic and open to people who feel like tyrants.

But in that difficult space, there's this post-binary space — drugs can help get us there, travel can help, meditation, too. Just quieting the outside world and getting back to a grounded, neutral, connected place with the entire universe. And once you're there, once you realize you're divinely interconnected with

the entire universe then, suddenly, it really does open this new space up, this new compassion, this new empathy for people.

So yes, we run events with these goals in mind right in Ann Arbor. Like our Say Yes Fest, a two-month festival where we took over Main Street and we had silent discos where some of them had over a thousand people, every color, race, gender, size, shape, all coming together.

What drew so many people to the events, do you think?

I think it's the power of creativity. It's pre-language, like dance and flow and movement and art and theater and drama. Sunsets, babies crying and cooing. These are the things

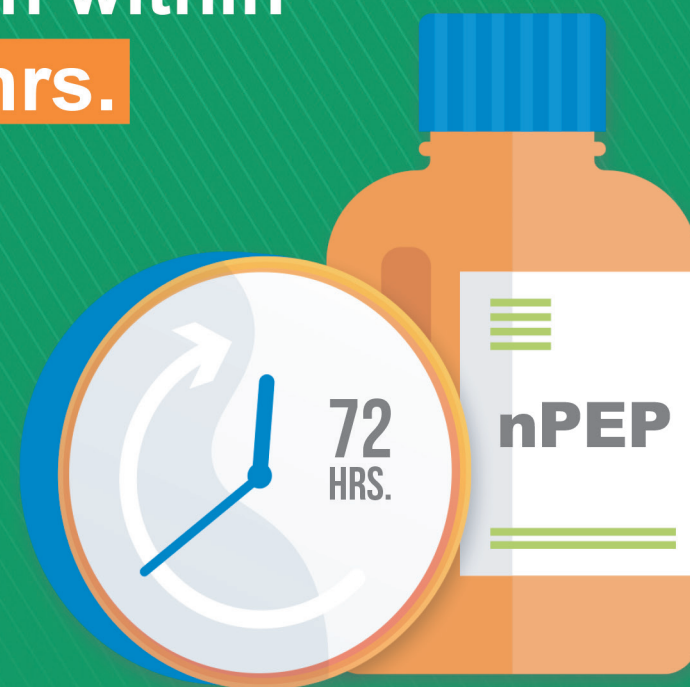
See *Petals*, page 23

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Your 2023 Michigan LGBTQ+ Pride Calendar

Pride Season is in full bloom for 2023, and you'll find all the important details right here. From small-town Prides in unexpected places to the big mainstay events happening in June and beyond, there's something for every Michigan Pridegoer.

JUNE

Saturday, June 17

Grand Rapids Pride

Grand Rapids will hold its 35th annual Pride celebration, themed "Unapologetically Me" in 2023. The bustling festival, one of the largest one-day events held in Grand Rapids each year, will offer 100+ vendors, a beer garden, entertainment on multiple stages, family and children's activities, food trucks, local artists, a sensory space and teen/youth activities. 12-10 p.m., Calder Plaza (320 Ottawa Ave. NW, Grand Rapids). grpride.org/festival

Grosse Pointe

WE GP will feature a short march, music, activities for kids, a selfie station and activism opportunities. Attendees are encouraged to bring signs, joy and Pride. 1-3 p.m., downtown Grosse Pointe at the corner of Kercheval Avenue and St. Clair Street. wegp.org/event-5267072

Lansing Pride

Michigan's capital city boasts a long, influential history as the birthplace of several modern LGBTQ-influenced movements and organizations, including the long-running Women in the Arts Festival (held in neighboring East Lansing each November). The annual Pride event will include more than 100 vendors, live entertainment all day long and a beer tent. 1-11 p.m., Lansing's Old Town neighborhood (centered on the 1200 block of Turner Street). lansingpride.org

Livonia Pride

Livonia's very first Pride event runs from 11 a.m.-1 p.m. at Livonia Civic Center Park (15218 Farmington Road). facebook.com/events/1223582008522184

Saturday, June 24

Bay City (Great Lakes Bay Pride)

11 a.m.-6 p.m., Wenonah Park (801 N. Water St., Bay City). greatlakesbaypride.org/regional-pride-celebrations/#pride-festival

Benton Harbor

12-6 p.m. Dwight P. Mitchell City Center Plaza (127 Pipestone St., Benton Harbor). outcenter.org

Flint Pride

2-8 p.m., Riverbank Park (100 Saginaw St., Flint). facebook.com/FLINTGAYPRIDE

Holland Pride

Out on the Lakeshore, the host organization for Holland's annual Pride fest, faced an unfriendly local county government this year when it came time to plan the popular event. Ottawa County, which has made national headlines driven by the actions of a vocal anti-diversity county commission, withdrew funding, but the organization pushed ahead to create a family-friendly festival complete with food, entertainment and a renewed commitment to support and affirm the region's LGBTQ+ community. 12-5 p.m., Centennial Park (250 Central Ave., Holland). facebook.com/HollandPride

Monroe County Pride

12-6 p.m., St. Mary's Park (111 W. Elm Ave., Monroe). bit.ly/43a65hV

Owosso Pride

2-6 p.m., Curwood Castle Park (224 Curwood Castle Dr., Owosso). facebook.com/events/1184185838868335/

Rochester Pride

1-4 p.m., Rochester Municipal Park (400 6th St., Rochester). linktr.ee/foreverpride?mibextid=Zxz2cZ

Three Rivers Pride

12-9 p.m., downtown Three Rivers. facebook.com/threeriverspride

Sunday, June 25

Berkley Pride (Block Party)

The second annual Berkley Pride Block Party is set for 12-4 p.m. at 12 Mile and Robina Avenue. downtownberkley.com/berkley-pride



Photo: Andrew Potter

Port Huron (Blue Water Pride)

10 a.m.-3 p.m., 701 McMorran Blvd., Port Huron. facebook.com/BlueWaterPride?mibextid=LQQJ4d

Big Rapids Pride

The second annual Pride Big Rapids Festival, themed "Live with Pride," will feature a beer tent, live music, a drag show, food vendors and more. 12-8:30 p.m., Northend Riverside Park (North 4th Ave., Big Rapids). pridebigrapids.org

Saint Clair Shores Pride March

Organized by the Saint Clair Shores Residents for Equality group, the second annual St. Clair Shores Pride March will feature speakers starting at 11 a.m. behind the Chapoton Pump Station (23001 E. Nine Mile Road, Saint Clair Shores). The march route follows Jefferson to Blossom Health Plaza to the end of the pier and then back to the start. facebook.com/events/108974112207197

JULY

Saturday, July 8

South Lyon (Pride in the Park)

12-5 p.m., McHattie Park (S

Lafayette St., South Lyon). facebook.com/SouthLyonPride

Friday, July 14

Hotter Than July

Through July 16. Hotter Than July, the world's second oldest Black LGBTQ+ Pride, is celebrating its 27th year in 2023. Hosted by LGBT Detroit, this three-day event focuses on entertainment, education and Black LGBTQ+ culture. Throughout the week, LGBT Detroit will host a candlelight vigil in remembrance of community members who have died, a book festival, a testing zone, an awards brunch, a worship service and a concert on July 15 at Motor City Casino featuring "Queen of Bounce"

Big Freedia and Detroit's Amber Chene and Nuandré. lgbtdetroit.org

Thursday, July 20

Battle Creek Pride

Through July 23. Battle Creek Pride's four-day event features an LGBT Q&A on July 20 (6:30 p.m. at Miller Stone Building), a Pride parade on July 21 (7 p.m. along Michigan Avenue, from Washington Avenue to Commerce Point), a festival on July 22 from 1-7 p.m. at Leila Arboretum (928 W. Michigan Ave., Battle Creek) and a candlelight vigil on July 23. battlecreekpride.org/pride-weekend

AUGUST

Friday, Aug. 4

Allegan Out Loud

Through Aug. 5. Allegan's second annual Pride festival, Allegan Out Loud, will feature an adults-only drag show on Aug. 4 at Griswold Auditorium (401 Hubbard St., Allegan) and a festival on Aug. 5 offering food, vendors, music, a drag queen story time and an all-ages drag show at Riverfront Plaza in downtown Allendale. facebook.com/alleganspeakup

Royal Oak Pride

Through Aug. 5. Details TBA. royaloakpride.com

Saturday, Aug. 5

Ann Arbor Pride

12 p.m., downtown Ann Arbor. facebook.com/AnnArborPride

Sunday, Aug. 13

Hazel Park Pride

Green Acres Park (620 W. Woodward Heights Blvd., Hazel Park). Details TBA. facebook.com/MotownDragBingo

Sunday, Aug. 19

Jackson Pride

12-6 p.m., Horace Jackson Park (intersection of West Michigan Ave. and South Jackson St., Downtown Jackson). experiencejackson.com/event/jackson-pride-fest

Saturday, Aug. 26

Transgender Michigan Pride in the Park (Ferndale)

Transgender Michigan is celebrating the 24th anniversary of Transgender Michigan Pride in the Park in 2023. The event, which features a vendor area and a bring-your-own picnic is a chance to socialize, learn about local organizations and businesses serving the Michigan transgender community and more. 12-6 p.m., Martin Road Park (1900 Orchard Ave., Ferndale). transgendermichigan.org/transgender-pride

SEPTEMBER

Thursday, Sept. 14

Mackinac Island Pride

Through Sept 17. Community Hall (7358 Market St., Mackinac Island). Details TBA. straitspride.org

Wednesday, Sept. 27

Traverse City (Up North Pride)

Through Oct. 1. Downtown Traverse City. Details TBA. upnorthpride.com



Petals Sandcastle. Courtesy photo

Petals

Continued from page 21

that I think feel like they are pre-language, you know; we can connect regardless of how you show up in reality or how life has led you to the place you're in with your mental landscape. We can all just come together and look at the sun setting and be like, "Holy shit," you know?

Have you been able to find that kind of common ground in your own life?

I'm from a suburb of Flint and one of 11 kids. Really, I'm the fruit that fell from the family tree and kept tumbling. I left home for undergrad (at UM), and I was a high school teacher in New York City for a few years, and that was really the first time that the curtain was really pulled from my face. Everything was kind of theoretical up to that point, but really being in the trenches and having 120 predominantly Black and brown and mostly Dominican kids in the inner city to teach, and I'm 22 and from this very small place.

Coming from where I'm from, I was totally blindsided by how much the system is designed to fail certain people. During World War II, they taught basically functional illiterate people to read in less than six months, but somehow in the inner city, 13 years of education can go by and you still have kids who don't know the difference

between t-o-o and t-w-o.

Anyway, so it was a long way from Flint to New York City, and teaching really broke my heart. After two and a half years, I was just like "Holy fuck." I resigned and was like, "I need to leave America." None of it made sense, and I fled overseas for a few years, couch surfing my way around the planet. Fifty couches, 30 countries. And in, I think, 2008, everything kind of stopped making sense. I resigned from that life that stopped making sense. And it was a winding back 18 years or so, to the place I'm at now. It was a recalibration, finding my due north.

And for you, that eventually meant returning home to Michigan?

My reason for being alive and my existential "why" came through an immense amount of travel and traveling, not only geographically, but traveling through ideas and cultures and religions and states of mind and structures and just really exploring the full breadth and width of what's here. Lots of deep meditation, which sends us into different states, delta states, places where we can get in touch with the trees. The trees can speak to us, our ancestors can speak to us. I just kept coming back to Michigan.

Visit expressyouryes.com to learn more about NOW Studios (715 N. University, Ann Arbor), including weekly open mics and other events.

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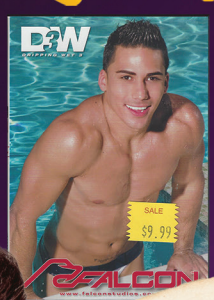
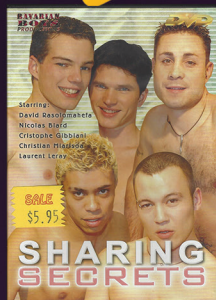
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Tipping Point

Continued from page 9

to having faith that patrons will embrace the queer-focused love story, which features a cast from all over Southeast Michigan. "I'm actually quite thankful it wasn't produced at the time I was trying to push it through, because it wasn't the right team of people at the theater at that time," Spada says. Under the new direction of artistic directors Julie Glander and Jamie Warrow, the theater was proactive in soliciting Spada to return and produce her play, an opportunity that "just

on and off the court."

"I had so many dating experiences," she adds. "I would go on these dates and then talk to my friends about it and they were just loving my stories about being in the midst of dating and trying to find something. They weren't funny to me at the time, but towards the end of it all, I was like, 'I have all these stories and I'm really a storyteller. I need to do something with all of these experiences.'"

Spada says the fact that Abby is a lesbian is secondary to the core messages of the play, which can apply to anyone who has navigated life after a breakup or experienced not-so-great dating situations. Still, the writer-director

did not shy away from addressing Abby's identity head-on. When a character asks Abby when she knew she was gay, Abby replies, "Not sure I really knew. I mean, when I was young. But I knew that something was different. Like when my friends and I would play house, I would always be the father. Or when we'd roleplay, I was always the guy. Guess I thought that the only way to be with the girl was to be the guy."

As Spada prepares for her vision to unfold onstage on opening night, June 15, she can't help but think back to the first time she witnessed queer representation in live theater in the early 2000s, a Broadway in Detroit production of "Some of My Best Friends."

"It was standing room only — I've never seen so many lesbians in one place in my life, and we were all just starving for queer stories, for queer representation," she recalls. "I

doesn't happen very often," she says. "Getting a new play produced is very difficult, because a lot of theaters want something that has already been produced."

Local actor Stephen Blackwell welcomes Tipping Point's new focus. "This play is a wonderful step forward for Tipping Point," he says. "Too often, Tipping Point is solely recognized for their staid, conservative audiences. Putting this out there is not only impressive when it comes to opening closed minds, but remarkable in the scope of the theater's ambitions."

In "Game. Set. Match!," main character Abby's dating life takes centerstage when, unwilling to go alone, she seeks out a date for her ex-girlfriend's wedding. The audience gets a front row seat to trials and tribulations that will feel all-too familiar to anyone who's dipped a toe into the dating scene. The show isn't wholly autobiographical, but Spada explains she leaned into her own dating life and married that experience to her lifelong love of tennis.

"It's around the length of a two-set Serena Williams tennis match when she was at the top of her game," Spada says. "The play sheds light on the complex elements between the mental strategy of tennis and the games people play

was starved for stories about something that represented me, and it was just so fascinating to see this, because I know that the place sold out every night. You could barely get a ticket. There were all these interlacing stories and love matches and drama, but I had never seen anything like it, and it just blew my mind."

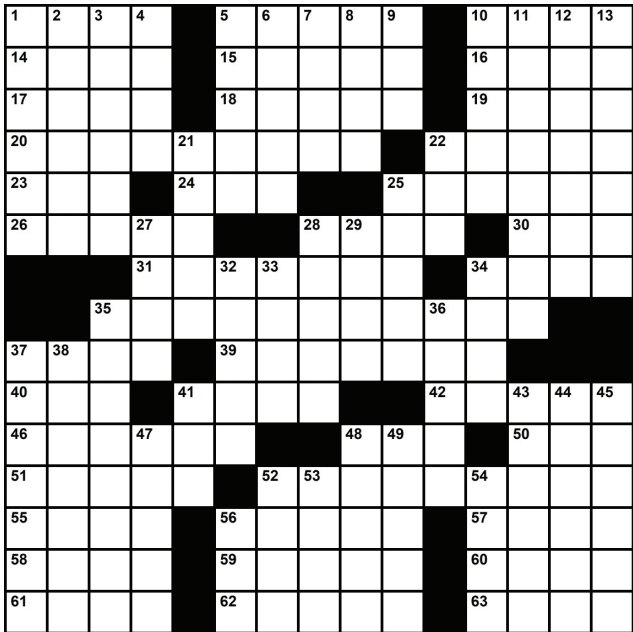
Today, in the post "L Word" and "Queer as Folk" world, she says, there's more visibility than ever before. "But my hope is in the future. Where else can we go with visibility? I just remember that feeling of sitting in that room with so many like-minded people and all of us wanting and craving the same."

Spada, who often works with younger actors, is especially aware of how powerful representation can be for the upcoming queer generations. "They have a lot to tell, a lot to share, and it's huge to give them a platform to be open and to reveal and to feel safe and for them to be able to go somewhere and see that it's OK that we exist."

"Game. Set. Match!" is set to play at Tipping Point Theatre (361 E. Cady St., Northville) June 15-July 9. Tickets at tippingpointtheatre.com. Join Tipping Point for a special opening night pre-glow wine reception on June 17 beginning at 5 p.m. prior to the 6 p.m. performance.



Tracy Spada. Courtesy photo



Not a Gambler,
But...

Across

- 1 Manly man
- 5 Does without oral gratification
- 10 Dick and Jane's dog
- 14 Popeye prop for Robin Williams
- 15 Landau's "Ed Wood" award
- 16 Burial site of Macbeth

Q Puzzle

- 17 "Am ___ bad guy here?"
- 18 Traps for suckers
- 19 Secluded valley
- 20 Though not a gambler, Beyonce says:
- 22 More of what Beyonce says
- 23 Always, to Emily Dickinson
- 24 Mauresmo's court divider
- 25 Decoration for skin
- 26 Can't bear the thought of

- 28 Vibrator in a mouthpiece
- 30 Suffix for Krypton
- 31 On deck, on a pirate ship
- 34 Treated a swollen member
- 35 More of what Beyonce says
- 37 Part of a Madonna bra
- 39 Endures the masochist role
- 40 Inc., to W.H. Auden
- 41 Words of woe, to the Bard
- 42 Expresses pleasure in bed
- 46 William S. Porter's pen name
- 48 Biter of Caesar's girlfriend
- 50 Writer's deg.
- 51 More of what Beyonce says
- 52 End of what Beyonce says
- 55 Use your mouth unfaithfully
- 56 What you say to get a lei
- 57 Toward shelter
- 58 Peace Nobelst Wiesel
- 59 Online stat exaggeration?
- 60 Ian McKellen and Elton John
- 61 Drum sound
- 62 That is, to Cicero
- 63 King James verb

Down

- 1 Acted maliciously
- 2 Metropolitan Community Church supporter, e.g.
- 3 "Psst!" from above
- 4 Maria's "do" equivalent
- 5 Choreographer Bob
- 6 "Downton Abbey" neckwear
- 7 Give the once-over in a bar
- 8 Unlikely to bite
- 9 MTF operation
- 10 Tourist attraction
- 11 Pete Buttigieg, for one
- 12 Monotonous
- 13 Did the last dance in Paris?
- 21 Grant money to
- 22 Abe Lincoln's boy
- 25 Many "Glee" characters
- 27 Where to look, in "Misty"
- 28 Poet from Prague
- 29 "Nurse Jackie" protraiter
- 32 Like many adages
- 33 It may be grand, to Glenn Burke
- 34 "Tell ___ the judge!"
- 35 Where dat bottom took it?
- 36 Nursing a sprain, perhaps
- 37 Knock into next week
- 38 Moor drama
- 41 Prince Valiant's boy
- 43 Earhart of the air
- 44 Lions or Tigers or Bears
- 45 Like condoms that don't leak
- 47 Dynamite inventor
- 48 Family of AIDS Quilt Arthur
- 49 Jean of "Designing Women"
- 52 "Glen or Glenda: ___ Two Lives"
- 53 Bag for shopping at Barneys
- 54 Badge site for the "morally straight"
- 56 Friend of Rimbaud

See p. 18 for answers

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Orion Story. Courtesy photo

Orion

Continued from page 8

There was a big stigma about drag years ago and it was kind of like, “OK, whatever,” and now everyone wants to do drag. I think that’s amazing. I’ve learned so much about myself and it’s one of the things that anytime anyone wants to start, or any new queen

needs some help, I am absolutely there to help anyone who wants to start doing that, because it’s something that I think can be so amazing for so many people. And somebody like me who has anxiety and has dealt with body dysmorphia in the past, it’s really liberating to go out there and kind of be someone else.

RuPaul has even said that drag allows the “superhero in you that’s dying to get out” to shine through.

One-hundred percent. That’s exactly what it is. I think finding that superhero inside of you helps you find yourself and build your confidence and it makes you inspire others, which I think has been the most liberating thing for me. I feel like this Pride season is going to be one of the biggest. And wild. I think especially with everything going on, I think this is the time that we really need to come together as a

community and show more love than ever and more support than ever and really just kind of revel in the fact that we are all in this together.

Catch Orion Story at Lansing Pride on June 17 and learn more about Lansing Pride at lansingpride.org.

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