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Project Helps Local
Libraries Serve as Safe
Spaces for Queer Youth

TIPS FOR LGBTQ+ PARENTS
What You Can Do to Help
Your Kids Through a New
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CHECKING IN WITH QUEER STUDENTS
How Do LGBTQ+ College Students
Feel About Going to School Amid
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5 Queer Things You Can Do Right Now-ish

BY SARAH BRICKER HUNT

As another summer draws to a close, it can feel tempting to lean into all that Big Pumpkin Spice energy emanating from your social media feeds. But before you break out your figure-flattering cardigan stash, enjoy the sunshine and warmth on your bare skin while you still can. Head out for a fun library event where you can meet trans TikTok star Mercury Stardust, see a Tove Lo show, plan a road trip to Mackinac Island Pride, get in one last summer dance party or share some love with local queer youth through a life-saving local organization.



Mercury Stardust. Photo: Instagram

Meet Mercury Stardust, TikTok's Trans Handy Ma'am

Mercury Stardust, aka The Trans Handy Ma'am, uses her social media platform to advocate on behalf of the trans community to her 2.4 million followers while sharing home improvement tips and tricks anyone can use — especially renters. "You deserve a safe, comfortable home," she reminds viewers as she demonstrates how to patch a hole in drywall or fix a clogged garbage disposal while sharing poignant personal stories about growing up trans and advice for weathering the current transphobic political storm. Meet Mercury Friday, Sept. 1 when she visits the downtown branch of the Ann Arbor District Library to read from her new book, "Safe and Sound: A Renter-Friendly Guide to Home Repair."

Sept. 1, 6:30 p.m. Ann Arbor District Library (343 S. Fifth Ave., Ann Arbor).
Learn more at aadl.org/node/620143.



Tove Lo. Photo: Facebook

See Swedish Singer Tove Lo

Rolling Stone once described Tove Lo (pronounced "Tuvulu") as Sweden's "darkest pop export" in reference to the singer-songwriter's focus on her sometimes self-destructive tendencies in matters of love and life. The outspoken bisexual artist has hit her stride in the past few years as a performer, earning Grammy nominations for songs like "Glad He's Gone" and "Love Me Like You Do" and putting her songwriting mark on hits for artists like Lorde and Ellie Goulding. Lo will bring her ethereal, sex-positive vibe to the Royal Oak Music Theatre Sept. 8.

Sept. 8, 7 p.m., Royal Oak Music Theatre (318 W. Fourth St., Royal Oak).
Reserve tickets at bit.ly/3QXGd5s.



A Straits Pride event. Photo: Facebook

Plan to Attend Mackinac Island Pride

Last year, the Straits Pride organization threw the first ever Mackinac Island Pride, a multi-day event that attracted attendees statewide, from above and below Michigan's iconic suspension bridge and beyond. The 2023 event, set for Sept. 14-17, promises to draw another big crowd with a mix of events that add unique Mackinac Island flavor to typical Pride fest activities, including an island Pride ride by bicycle, horse-drawn carriages that ferry Pridegoers between events and island accommodations, and plenty of handmade fudge for all. Learn more at straitspride.org and reserve a room soon on the island or somewhere accessible by ferry on the mainland.

Sept. 14-17, Mackinac Island. Visit straitspride.org for schedule and more information.



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Donate or Volunteer to Help Local Queer Youth

Back-to-school time can trigger a whole lot of anxiety for queer kids, especially when legislators all over the country are attacking educational and parenting rights. Local organizations like Stand with Trans and Ozone House are a lifeline for hundreds of local queer students and their families, and they always need your help. Consider making a donation or volunteering some time to a local organization doing the difficult, often thankless work of affirming and advocating for local students:

- Stand with Trans (standwithtrans.org)
- Ozone House (ozonehouse.org)
- GLSEN Southeast Michigan (www.glsen.org/chapter/southeast-michigan)
- LGBT Detroit Leadership Academy (lgbtdetroit.org/theacademy)
- Ruth Ellis Center (ruthelliscenter.org)
- Affirmations (goaffirmations.org/youth-programs)
- PFLAG Detroit (pflagdetroit.org)

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 The Hollywood Reporter

Mrs. Doubtfire
 The New Musical Comedy

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Enjoy One Last Queer Summer Dance Party

The unofficial end to summer might be upon us, but there's at least one more chance to get tropical among scantily clad partygoers, fruity beverages and the thumping bass of the best beach party you're likely to find this far from the Atlantic or Pacific. 215 W's Tropical Beach Party happens Sept. 9 in conjunction with SOHO and promises a chance to shake your coconuts with go-go dancers and special bathing beauty drag hosts.

Sept. 9, 9 p.m., 215 W. (215 W. Nine Mile Road, Ferndale). Reserve advance tickets at bit.ly/3QXmeUG.

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Inside a New Queer Erotic Art Show and the Senior Talent It Celebrates

4x4: Queer Exposures
Runs Through
September

BY JASON A. MICHAEL

A new art exhibit at Affirmations, Ferndale's LGBTQ+ community center, has a unique focus: erotic art created by senior artists.

Four artists from Affirmations' Senior Koffee Klatch are presenting their work as part of the 4x4: Queer Exposures exhibit, which opened Aug. 30. Local artists participating in the event include John JD Dennis, Dave Gelbach, Richard Miller and Steven Schoeberlein, who will each display four works of art.

Dennis, who came up with the concept for the show, said he was inspired by the annual Mississippi Mud exhibit in Detroit, the area's only Black erotic art show. "It made me think that this could be something that we could pull off — a queer erotic art show," he said.

So Dennis turned to a few of his friends from the Koffee Klatch. "They're a really large, active group at Affirmations, which we refer to as the Chit Chat Club." Dennis says he goes every Wednesday and has for quite a while. "I noted the art on the walls and one day I went to the front desk and said, 'Who do I talk to about putting some art up on these walls?'"

The person he needed to talk to was Justin Bettcher. Bettcher got permission from the higher ups for Dennis to put up a show on the Purple Wall in the center's Pittman-Puckett main gallery space. Dennis turned to his friends from Chit Chat Club who he knew also did art. "I had been in a class taught by Steve Schoeberlein," he said. "Then I knew Richard did photography." In addition, Dennis asked Dave Gelbach. A fifth artist, Robert Evans, might be added to the show if there is room.

Dennis, born in Iowa and currently residing in Royal Oak, has

lived in Southeast Michigan most of his life. Finding the Senior Koffee Klatch was, he said, "a blessing," adding that "the group is a great and fun social outlet."

In addition to holding regular meetings at the center, they have group picnics, game days, group dinners, trips to the movies, golf, museums and shows. "It's sometimes tough to make new friends when you get older," said Dennis, noting that the Koffee Klatch has been a great place to start.

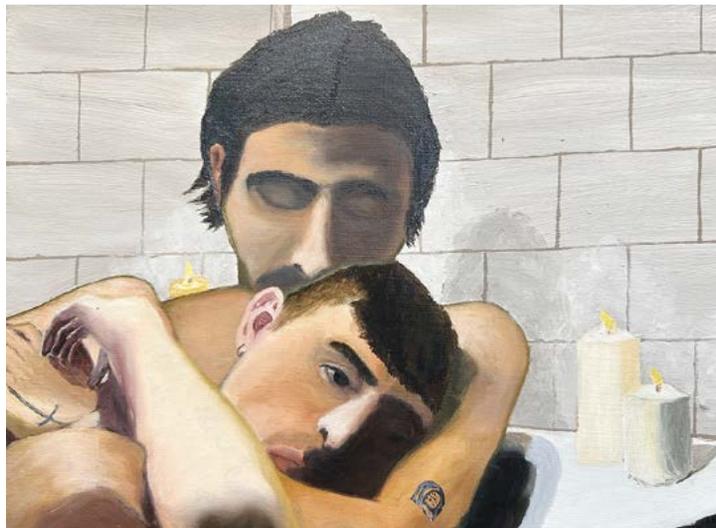
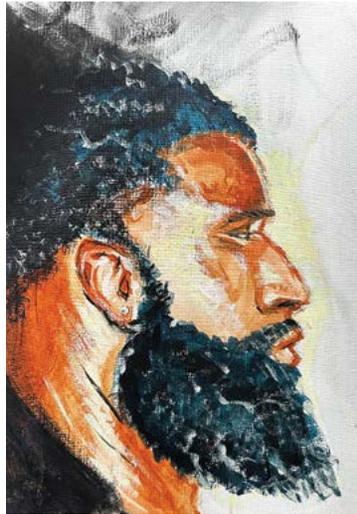
Of the show, Dennis said the subtitle Queer Exposure "means the works are primarily R-rated oil paintings, photography, silk screens and drawings. This show is intended for mature and progressive adults who are not offended by artistic depictions of nudity."

Miller, Dennis said, has been instrumental in helping to create the show. He created the flyers and posters and other advertisements. "He has a great eye for format, color and presentation. He's a multi-talented silk screen artist and photographer, among other forms of artistic expression."

And as for Gelbach and Schoeberlein? "Their paintings are just so incredible and fantastically different as they both have a terrific grasp of color and of that very difficult medium of oil painting. And Robert Evans, his work is fun and quirky and adds a whole different element to the show."

Miller, for his part, is a Grosse Pointe native who lived in Los Angeles for more than 40 years. Like Dennis, Miller said the Koffee Klatch has become very important to him. "I was lost when I first moved here, looking for any gay resources I could find online. I found Affirmations and found Senior Koffee Klatch. I quickly discovered that I enjoyed it a lot. The group has a huge heart, immense kindness and empathy. The people who don't possess those qualities seem to attend one meeting and they never return."

Miller started taking photos at the age of 8. "In the swinging 1960s, I was only about 13 years old, but was



(Clockwise from top left) Artwork by John JD Dennis, Steven Schoeberlein, Dave Gelbach and Richard Miller. Courtesy photos

heavily influenced by that period," he said. "I discovered artists that I greatly admire, photographers like Diane Arbus and George Platt Lynes. I enjoyed Andy Warhol's work, which got me interested in silk screening."

In May, Miller returned to L.A. to empty his storage space, which included his photos and a massive number of photo negatives. "I shipped it all back and have begun to sort through a lifetime of work." Miller said he has digitally scanned about half of his images so far.

"I would describe my art as 'ever evolving,'" he said. "I embrace any new digital technology, and I use Photoshop, Illustrator and other programs to either improve or alter my images."

Miller said he has not done any showings of his work since about 1990 and that this will be his first show in Michigan. It's important to him, he said, because his work pays homage to a dear friend he lost to the AIDS epidemic.

"He is the blond model in some of the photos in the exhibit," said Miller. "He died at age 30. He was a beautiful man, inside and out." Christopher Hall, the model, was a dancer in Las Vegas shows and even appeared behind Jane Fonda in a couple of her exercise videos.

Schoeberlein is not a Koffee Klatch regular but has attended a couple of their meetings. He works now as a full-time artist. He currently has work at the Hannan Center and

the Scarab Club. Schoeberlein also teaches part time at Articipate in Berkley.

Schoeberlein said Queer Exposures "has the common thread of the male as subject." He said he is happy to be a part of the show, where "all of the artists have a niche in individual expression and a signature that identifies their work."

4X4: Queer Exposures will run through September at the Affirmations LGBTQ+ community center in Ferndale (290 W. Nine Mile Road). The Senior Koffee Klatch meets each Wednesday at 1 p.m. at Affirmations in Ferndale and on Fridays at 1 p.m. at the Royal Oak Senior Center (3500 Marais Ave.).



\$10 Million Grant To Address LGBTQ+ Health Disparities

Funding Part of New State Budget

BY JASON A. MICHAEL

For the first time ever, the state's recently passed and signed 2023-2024 state budget will include an investment to address LGBTQ+ health disparities — to the tune of a \$10 million grant. The initiative is a result of work undertaken by Sen. Jeremy Moss and Rep. Laurie Pohutsky, as well as by Gov. Whitmer and the state's entire LGBTQ+ Caucus.

The funding model, which will support the work of community-based organizations, is unprecedented.

"Simply put, it's never happened before," said MiGEN Executive Director Angela Gabridge, one of a coalition of leaders who pushed for the grant. "This is the first time in Michigan the Department of Health and Human Services (MDHHS) will have targeted resources at their disposal to invest specifically in improving health outcomes and social determinants of health for the LGBTQ+ community."

Beneficiaries include youth all the way through to older adults, Gabridge pointed out. Qualified LGBTQ+ nonprofits and community-based organizations interested in accessing support will participate in an application process through MDHHS. Details on timing, qualifications and project priorities will be forthcoming as they are still being worked out. An issue of vital concern to the coalition is ensuring all qualified organizations interested in participating in the process are able to do so.

"To that extent, we explicitly built language into our planning that encourages open sharing of technical assistance, being willing to act as fiduciaries for grassroots or smaller organizations, collaboration, embedded

models, etcetera," Gabridge said.

The effort to secure this funding was spearheaded by a steering committee that included Affirmations, Corktown Health, MiGen and Trans Sistas of Color Project. "We could not have put together as thoughtful and thorough a proposal as we did without the output and support of the full coalition," Gabridge said.

In Michigan and across the country, Gabridge pointed out, government invests in impacted communities in ways intended to improve equality and access to education, quality care, housing, food and many other things. "As we know, the LGBTQ+ community is more likely than any other, particularly given the community's intersectionality, to be impacted by social determinants of health and issues surrounding access to and provision of care in health settings."

The funding initiative was made possible by the state's Democratic majority in both the state House and Senate.

"Our new majority is finally ensuring all Michiganders are valued through our policy and budget making process," said Sen. Moss in a statement. "Along with recent equality-focused changes in our law, the creation of this new grant will help ensure fair access of healthcare, education and other support services for hundreds of thousands of LGBTQ+ people who call Michigan their home."

Pohutsky agreed. "This funding comes at a crucial time," she said. "As Michigan becomes a more welcoming state, particularly for the LGBTQ+ community, it's important we address disparities not just through policy, but also through funding, and this grant is an important first step."



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Queer College Students Seek Shelter from Political Storm

Local Campuses Offer Respite From National Anti-LGBTQ+ Rhetoric, Legal Fights

BY DREW SAUNDERS

At a time when state legislatures across the country have been presenting hundreds of bills attacking LGBTQ+ rights, Michigan has gone in the opposite direction since the 2022 midterms. A whopping 520 anti-LGBTQ+ bills have been introduced in state legislatures across the country just this year, according to Human Rights Watch. Michigan, meanwhile, has passed a modification of the Elliott-Larsen Civil Rights Act, which extends anti-discrimination protections to queer Michiganders.

But what does that mean for Michigan's LGBTQ+ college students?

For Koda, a queer, transmasculine, non-binary senior at Oakland University who spoke to BTL on the condition that we only use their first name, they said they feel safe on campus in the urban parts of Oakland County and, "at the moment," across Michigan. However, they said, "I feel a personal responsibility because I feel safe to make sure that other students feel safe when they are in queer spaces."

"I believe that the community has persisted despite everything," they added.

"In particular, we have seen an influx of students who have sought out this space specifically at Oakland University because of our approachability to LGBTQIA students. I have had several students [say] 'I come from this place, where they have anti-trans legislatures' that are seeking out a location where they can grow in themselves and express their gender appropriately."

The story of LGBTQ+ life over the course of history has been a constant story of assessing where it is safe to be yourself in public and where it isn't. Michigan students interviewed for this story consistently said

they felt safe on campus and in the city they live in. Outside of that, safety is a more complicated question. Joey, a bigender, bisexual social work graduate student also at Oakland University, said that he often scopes places out in his male-presenting form before being comfortable going there in more feminine attire. Joey feels safe on campus, but not in his home city, Troy.

"There's a lot of hostility and tension due to all of this misinformation and ignorance about our community. It's very difficult to really present the way that I am in public. I feel safe if I'm not presenting, but if I'm

being who I am, no, I don't feel safe," Joey, who also asked for anonymity, told BTL. The more urban a place, the safer Joey feels.

"Let me define safe: Do I feel like I'm going to be physically harmed? For Michigan and Oakland County, I'm more worried about ostracization. That's how it is in a good portion of the United States, at least for me. I'm six-three and very muscular so I'm not worried, but for other people who aren't my size and frame, I'd definitely be worried. There are places across Michigan and the United States, where regardless of how I present, it's dangerous to be queer."

Certain Michigan universities are already known for providing LGBTQ-friendly environments, like Eastern Michigan University, where journalism major Ameera Salman will be a junior this fall.

"I personally think that history moves in a progressive trajectory, however I think that in the United States specifically we have a lot of foundational systems that are harming people: capitalism, white supremacy, homophobia, transphobia, heterosexism," Salman said. "Those are in the foundation of our country, so even though in 2008 we had our first Black president, even though we passed gay marriage, even though we had a lot of progress in the last 20 years — maybe not counting the last eight — you can say that it's almost like it was just putting a Band-Aid on a bullet hole."

Wayne State University takes steps to visibly include the queer community across campus and throughout the curriculum, according to Simone Chess, the director of Gender, Sexuality, and Women's Studies. Wayne State will be opening its first ever gender and sexuality center in the student center this fall. This will be an interdisciplinary research center, combining several different areas of curricula and student resources, which will centralize already existing resources with new ones.

"That's exciting and new, a big deal for us," Chess told BTL. "I think it's a hard time right now for all of us who are queer, especially young people watching the legislative shifts that are going on across the country. We feel lucky in Michigan to have some protections, but we don't take them for granted. I think this

is a period where people are feeling both tender and convicted in wanting to protect our rights."

Some states have seen business and people go elsewhere because of anti-LGBTQ+ legislation. Florida is perhaps the most

considered a Florida university when first going to college, but wouldn't go now after the "Don't Say Gay" bill passed.

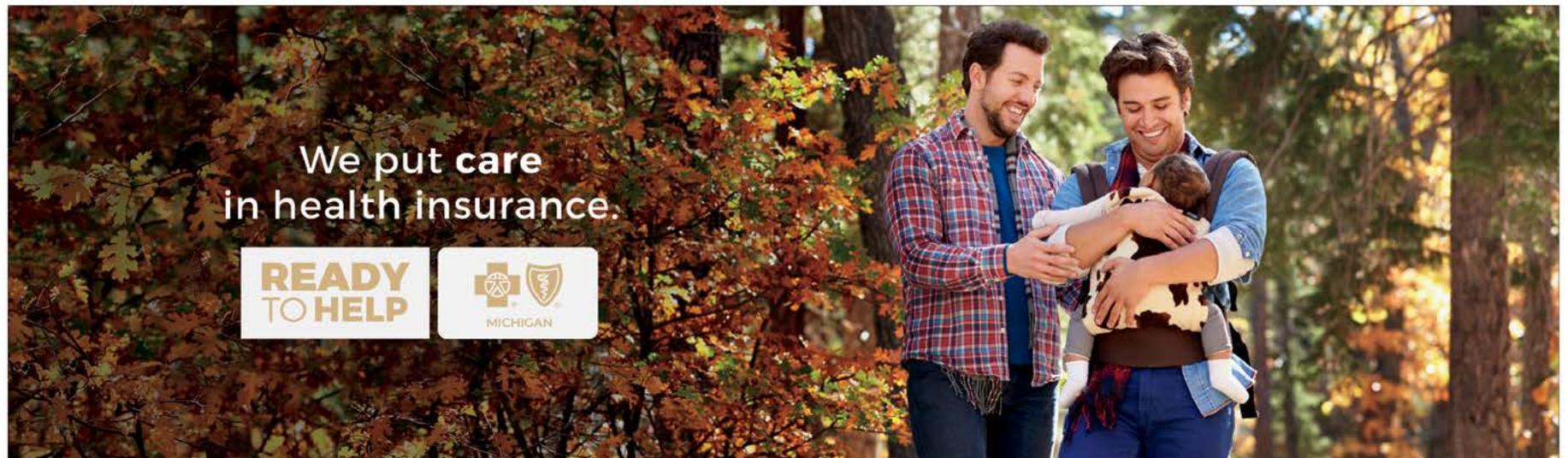
"My family's from West Virginia, and I identify with that culture," Joey said. "I feel that in certain parts of West Virginia, there are certain places where it's definitely safe and OK to be queer. But at the same time, there's certain parts of West Virginia where it's dangerous, in rural areas. That is the same thing for certain urban areas. I wouldn't feel safe anywhere in Florida — Miami, yes, but anywhere else. Or Texas or Louisiana, I wouldn't feel safe, urban or rural."

Joey pointed out that none of the anti-trans talking points being deployed today are new, arguing that the same fear mongering trans Americans face today was used against gay men and women just a few decades earlier.

When asked if they thought that the wave of anti-LGBTQ+ laws was a phase or a new normal, Koda said, "I think it will last longer than this upcoming election, but it is definitely the new thing that the Republican Party and far right have latched their teeth onto — they use fear tactics in order to get votes in elections. They are using trans and queer people as fodder for attention, for their own personal gain. I think that they won't always focus on it, but it will always be a running point, especially with the attention they have gotten up to this point."

The story of LGBTQ+ life over the course of history has been a constant story of assessing where it is safe to be yourself in public and where it isn't.

extreme example, passing the "Don't Say Gay" bill along with other parental rights bills, bills censoring history and racial discussions in schools and anti-immigrant bills. Koda had



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How GLSEN's Rainbow Library Supports LGBTQ+ Students in Michigan and Beyond

Project Helps Local Libraries Serve as Safe Spaces for Queer Youth

BY ELLEN SHANNA KNOPPOW

In more affluent communities, school libraries are often taken for granted.

Until eight years ago, the Muskegon County Career Tech Center, where Lindsay Pulsipher serves as librarian, had no collection of books for students to read. So she joined forces with teachers to stock the library with donations and later lobbied for a budget.

"The idea is that Muskegon County has a very low reading level compared to the rest of the state," Pulsipher said. "And so we're trying to get

kids interested in reading. I've relied on things like First Book and the Rainbow Library program to bring in books so that it is affordable and stays diverse enough for our population."

Rainbow Library, a program offered by the LGBTQ+ nonprofit GLSEN, provide free sets of grade-appropriate, LGBTQ-affirming books to schools in select states. Now in its third year, what began as the project of one GLSEN chapter has become so popular that in Michigan alone, 272 schools — more than a third in rural areas — have received books. There is also a waitlist. The program relies on national sponsors like General

Motors as well as private monetary donations.

Outside of the west Michigan city of Muskegon, whose residents elected an openly gay mayor and where one can attend an annual Pride festival, the county is relatively conservative, Pulsipher says. None of the books in the Career Tech Center's collection have been challenged, perhaps because the students are older and the books go unnoticed. By contrast, in one middle school in the county, a Moms for Liberty group targeted a teacher for "exposing minors to pornography."

Pulsipher said the administration

of the career tech center, which draws 800 students from 16 school districts, supports the Rainbow Library initiative, even if some teachers would rather keep LGBTQ+ issues out of the classroom: They focus on careers. Period.

"You do your work and then you go home," Pulsipher said. "So the library is kind of a safe space for students. And as students have come in and seen themselves represented, whether it is the Rainbow Library of books or books that represent persons of color or whatever it is, they go, 'Oh my goodness, that's me.'"

Michael Rady, director of the

Rainbow Library program, is a former third-grade teacher.

"Michigan was one of the states that submitted more Rainbow Library requests to us than nearly every other state," Rady said. "We hear time and time again, from educators, from school librarians, just how valuable these books become and how much in demand they are once they are received. We've heard stories of a school getting our books on a Friday, and then on Monday all the books are checked out."

In one middle school in a small town in the Upper Peninsula, that was the case with the graphic novel

series “Heartstopper,” which the library added to its collection outside the GLSEN Rainbow Library program. Language arts teacher Kevin said he can’t keep it on the shelves. Kevin asked that his last name and the name of his school not be disclosed due to anti-LGBTQ+ sentiment in the community.

“The ‘Heartstopper’ series was so heavily read within the first year of having it that I’ve had to replace the books,” Kevin said. “The books were falling apart.” And sometimes the books go missing — but Kevin said he’s not here to judge. “To me, it’s not a thing of ‘You stole a book.’ It’s more about they found something within [the book] that was special to them, and for better or for worse, it’s theirs now.”

Kevin was faced with overhauling the outdated library where he teaches. In his case, the existing books were at least 30 years old.

“I wanted to make sure students had access to books that are just from people with different perspectives, different life events, different feelings,” Kevin said. “Also, just the students who fall into the LGBTQ+ umbrella, they just know that there are books for them. There are books with people who have had similar stories to theirs.”

An ally to his queer students, Kevin found certain LGBTQ+ young adult literature broadened his horizons too. Though it is not a part of the Rainbow Library collection at this time, he pointed to “Parrot Fish,” read in a book club with older students. “It opened my mind,” Kevin said. “I had no idea that there were young adult or YA books that just told these stories in these meaningful [ways]. I just remember that moment.”

Downstate, bordering Detroit, the Rainbow Library came to Eastpointe Community Schools under the direction of openly gay library director Patrick Taylor. As soon as Taylor informed the administration of the books’ arrival, they

called for a social media blast to celebrate their district’s new set of queer literature.

Like the majority of schools that have received a Rainbow Library in Michigan, Eastpointe is a Title 1 school where students are eligible for free lunch.

“In those [book] titles, there was a lot of intersectionality,” Taylor noted. “So not only was it highlighting the queer community, but it was also highlighting



[Rainbow Library] has become so popular that in Michigan alone, 272 schools — more than a third in rural areas — have received books.

the BIPOC queer community. And I thought that was just kind of a really cool thing.”

In fact, Rady said the sets of books don’t differ based on demographics. Sixty percent of the books are written by queer BIPOC authors and 40 percent are trans or nonbinary. There’s a reason for that. “These are the books that have had the least presence in public schools and public education and public libraries,” Rady said. “And they’re the most pressing to be getting in front of kids.”

One book with this kind of queer representation is “Genderqueer,” a book that isn’t part of the Rainbow Library collection, but which has been especially

popular in Eastpointe, where the local city council declined to enact a Pride Month resolution this year. That book had one trans student returning to the library after a two-year absence. Not only that, one of the teachers now uses the text as part of her high school curriculum.

Taylor was invited to speak before the board of education on the state of the libraries. Among other things, he

highlighted the Rainbow Library.

“Two of the school board members applauded me in not shying away from what could be controversial and keeping current with what our kids want,” Taylor said. “So, again, it was all around just a supportive response from the community, from the students, from the staff, from administration and from our board of education.”

Nationally, the Rainbow Library program has reached more than 2.5 million students. At the same time, a teacher in Georgia was fired earlier this month for reading a book to her elementary school students that age-appropriately discussed gender identity. Rady said that the firing only serves to punish teachers for teaching about the world as it is and tells them that they and their students don’t belong.

“I would say that GLSEN stands with that teacher and all teachers that are doing everything they can to affirm their students in their classrooms,” Rady said.

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Soccer Socks It to Us
Puzzle on page 25



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I Just Called to Say ‘Tread Lightly, Bitch,’ and I Mean It From the Bottom of My Heart



BY D'ANNE WITKOWSKI

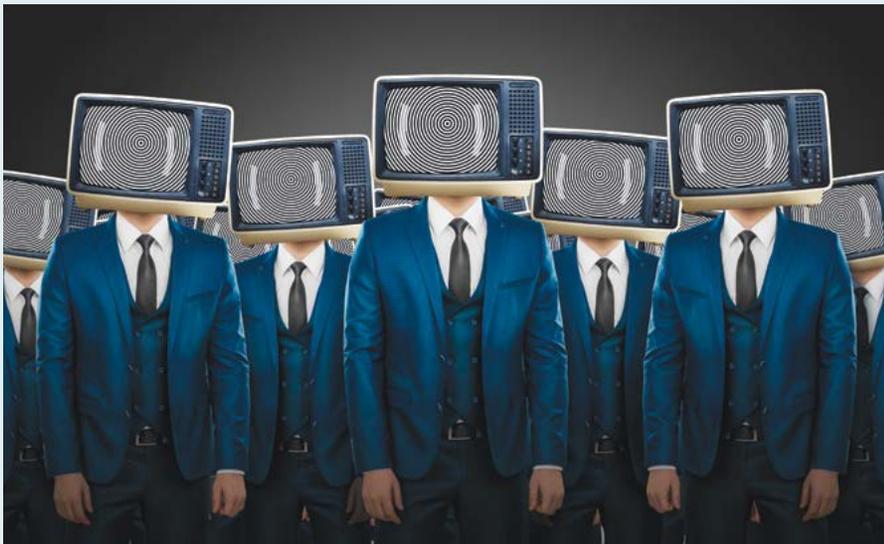
I recently learned that there will not be a second season of “A League of Their Own,” and that is a big bummer. Abbi Jacobson is a goddess

and a genius and a star and this is an outrage.

To be clear, I do not blame the striking Hollywood writers and actors. I support them 100%. I blame higher ups in the industry who don't give a shit about the artists who make their “product” and would be happy to pay them next to nothing and/or replace them with AI bots.

Also, fun fact: my sister's children get amazing hand-me-down clothes from Jacobson's sister by way of Jacobson's mother, who is good friends with my sister's husband's mom.

Anyway, my point is that I am disappointed. I know that this is but one small disappointment in the grand scheme of things, but there have



just been SO MANY lately. Would a second season of “A League of Their Own” solve the issue of transphobic laws being passed across the country? Would it have stopped libraries from taking LGBTQ+ books off of their

shelves? Would it have made Ron DeSantis and Donald Trump drop out of the presidential race and enter lives of hermetic silence? We'll never know.

Granted, it probably wouldn't have stopped Abigail Jo Shry from leaving incredibly racist voicemail messages for Rep. Sheila Jackson

Lee (D-Texas) and U.S. District Judge Tanya S. Chutkan, who is overseeing the criminal prosecution of disgraced former president Trump for conspiring to overturn the 2020 election.



Shry, from Texas, called Chutkan a racial slur and said “You are in our sights, we want to kill you. Trump doesn't get elected in 2024, we are coming to kill you, so tread lightly, bitch.”

According to NPR, she also threatened to kill “Congresswoman Sheila Jackson Lee, a Texas Democrat, all Washington Democrats, broadly, and all members of the LGBTQ community, according to the Department of Homeland Security special agent who signed the court filing.”

That's... an awfully long list. I mean, the energy it takes to hate that many people, not to mention plotting their murders.

According to reports, Shry has been charged four times for doing similar shit in the past year.

“According to her father,” The Advocate reports, “she is a nonviolent alcoholic who sits on her couch watching the news all day, becomes drunk and agitated, and then calls around making threats.”

Not unlike the disgraced former president himself (just replace alcohol with Diet Coke).

Look, I don't know what Shry's issues are. If she's an alcoholic, I hope she is able to recognize that, ask for help and receive it. That said, calling people up to tell them you want to kill them doesn't sound like the hobby of a nonviolent person. Also, there are no doubt plenty more Abigail Jo Shrys in this country.

“Even though this individual may have certain issues we don't know, who else is thinking about it?” Jackson Lee told CNN. “The temperature needs to be brought down,

and the former president needs to be actively engaged in stopping the hysteria and egging people on, provoking them to do things that are against the Constitution and the order of this nation. Law and order has to prevail, not only for us, but for him.”

Alas, Trump is engaged in exactly the opposite. And he has no real incentive to stop. This is the stuff his followers love. They love his hate because his hate is their hate. At least, that's what they think. But Trump sycophants like Shry don't seem to realize that Trump hates them, too. In his eyes, they're losers because they aren't rich like him. But he's perfectly happy to let them wreck their lives defending his name.

And they are apparently happy to do it. As USA Today reports, “Last year, federal officials charged more people over public threats — against elected officials, law enforcement and judicial officials, educators and health care workers — than in any of the previous 10 years, according to research from the National Counterterrorism Innovation, Technology, and Education Center at the University of Nebraska, Omaha.”

And this isn't a “both sides” issue. “The majority of the threats currently being prosecuted by the federal government are coming from the far-right,” according to USA Today.

Sadly, it's only going to get worse as we move toward the 2024 election. Brace yourselves.

Pink's Other Brave Summer Act: Modern Pro-Queer Protest Singer



BY CHRIS AZZOPARDI

I watched in gasping awe on Aug. 16 as Pink spun through the cool Detroit air, a soaring trapeze artist with a soaring voice

to match. Take, for instance, the way she zipped to all corners of Comerica Park during her Summer Carnival Tour, her first-ever stadium show in Detroit, while somehow still singing her playfully cocky hit “So What” against the city’s skyline. That acrobatic entrance alone definitely earned her the glass of wine and bubble bath she took shortly afterwards, according to her post-show Instagram post.

Twenty-plus years into an enduring career built on reinvention — something to admire, especially when you consider Pink’s underdog status in the era of Britney and Christina — the singer-acrobat has become known for this circus act. It wasn’t until her second album that she dropped the R&B persona that defined her 2000 debut “Can’t Take Me Home” and went full on pop-rock. Though her path seemed clearer based on that album’s success, its followup in 2003, “Try This,” was a commercial flop. During that time, when she first made being a misfit look cool, who could have predicted that it would be Pink selling out stadiums across the country in 2023? Not to mention, breaking a Comerica Park record — her sellout crowd of 45,000-plus is now the biggest reserved-seat attendance in the ballpark’s 23-year history, besting acts such as the Rolling Stones, Billy Joel and Elton John.

The first time I saw Pink was in Detroit at the State Theatre in 2002 for the Party Tour. There were no “holy shit, she’s flying” moments; she was on foot the whole time. Still, I knew she had something even more daring than a circus act to give this fickle world — that’s real talk, no matter the consequences.

A few years later, in 2006, Pink released “Dear Mr. President,” a joint effort with the Indigo Girls. The song, where she called out those opposing same-sex marriage, was coincidentally



Pink performing at Comerica Park in Detroit on Aug. 16. Photo: Christopher Schwegler

released the same year the Chicks released “Not Ready to Make Nice,” a song the country trio directed at those who blackballed them after speaking their mind about then-President George W. Bush. Pink didn’t let what happened to the Chicks stop her, however. In Pink’s song, she blasted Bush with her signature no-bullshit approach. I was already paying close attention to her as a fan of her music and a teenage misfit myself, but it was that show of direct allyship, a gesture she made as a relatively new artist at what seemed like peak fame, that gave me a newfound respect for her.

Years later, she’s still peaking. And her platform has changed — it is, fortunately, even bigger now. It is stadiums in Nashville, Cincinnati, Omaha — all places where anti-LGBTQ+ legislation has passed in the last year — and Detroit, where I realized no one seems to be talking about the other gusty part of her Summer Carnival Tour.

No, she’s not swinging from the top of a stadium, but Laura Ann Carleton, a mother of nine, was fatally shot in California last week, allegedly killed by a 22-year-old because of the Pride flag she proudly put in her store window. In 2023, it’s dangerous to even be an LGBTQ+ ally. So as I watched a sold-out crowd of 45,000 people, surely some of them Trump supporters and others who may be oblivious to the threat of simply being LGBTQ+ or even an ally right now, I was also seeing Pink the pro-queer advocate — someone who has not backed down from the fight for equality, even as she commands her most massive audiences yet.

At Comerica Park that night, any anti-queer fans had to confront the reality of pervasive homophobia and racism in our country, not to mention the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* and gun violence. The flying was a thrill to watch, but these days it seemingly takes even more guts to stand up for basic human rights.

Pink did just that several times during her show in Detroit, performing her politically charged protest song “Irrelevant,” written and released last year. On giant screens were protest images from #MeToo, Pride and Black Lives Matter marches, many of which appear in the song’s music video. One said “Queer solidarity.” Many of the clips shown had rainbow flags, the same cheerful, defiant imagery that got Carleton killed.

I looked around plenty at the show to understand the crowd, and I couldn’t come up with many examples of pop performers who appeal to such a broad spectrum of people like Pink does, from gay men to lesbians to some sloppy-drunk small-town suburban moms and their husbands — the same ones who don’t think trans people should be able to pee wherever they choose. Well, not only did they get Pink’s 2017 anthem “What About Us,” a message to Trump on how to be a president for all people, but those

husbands also got Brandi Carlile, an out lesbian and multi-Grammy winner who is also an unapologetically vocal LGBTQ+ activist.

I love this circus act because only Pink can do it, I have never seen anything like it in the pop music world, and it gets people who might not otherwise listen to how minority communities are hurting to perk up their ears. But also, Pink is onto something by marrying the wide appeal of a carnival act with her more polarizing political views — through the art of flying, she’s made it impossible for anyone to look away.

Chris Azzopardi is the Editorial Director of Pride Source Media Group and Q Syndicate, the national LGBTQ+ wire service. He has interviewed a multitude of superstars, including Cher, Meryl Streep, Mariah Carey and Beyoncé. His work has also appeared in The New York Times, Vanity Fair, GQ and Billboard.

Leading Queer Kids to a Better Life

Wilson Cruz on His Continued Dedication to LGBTQ+ Youth Through His New Role at GLSEN

BY CHRIS AZZOPARDI

Wilson Cruz doesn't love thinking too much about his childhood in Michigan, but he won't deny his years growing up in Holland either. The Tulip Time Parades. The Windmill Island Gardens. The report he wrote on then President Gerald Ford. "I think back at that and I'm like, 'Wow, that was full-on indoctrination that they were doing,'" he tells BTL.

But it really does get better for some. It did for Cruz — the 49-year-old actor and activist became the first openly gay actor to play an openly gay high schooler on primetime TV while starring in "My So-Called Life" as Ricky Vasquez in 1994.

As for third and fourth grade in small-town Michigan? "It's not something I like to remember," Cruz says during a recent Zoom call.

It was also during that time that the "Star Trek: Discovery" actor realized others were catching onto what he already felt — that "I wasn't a sport-playing 'normal' boy," he says.

When his family moved to the suburbs of Los Angeles, he experienced much of the same as a young singer and dancer. "I was the antithesis of what they thought a boy my age should be," he recalls.

"I remember there were some male teachers who tried to push me in another direction, fearful of my effeminate tendencies as they saw it," Cruz adds. "And I think that leaves a scar for any child. Like, 'Oh, am I not OK?' Is there something wrong with me? And we're seeing that now. The very people who are supposed to be protecting our students, who are supposed to be championing them and inspiring them to be their best, are the very people causing damage."

Now chair of the board at GLSEN, a 33-year-old multi-racial, intergenerational organization that has worked to ensure that LGBTQ+ students are able to learn and grow in a school environment free from bullying and harassment, Cruz brings his own school experiences to his activism and fundraising for the youth advocacy group. As LGBTQ+

kids are currently up against a hostile climate for queer people, particularly in schools, GLSEN — and Wilson's role within it — is especially vital.

Where does your mind go now about what kids are experiencing when you think about what you went through as a gay kid growing up in Holland?

Just look around the country, over 650 some anti-LGBTQ and anti-trans bills around the country. Look at North Carolina where the legislature has just overridden a governor's veto and are now passing three major laws that hamper the school experience for LGBTQ students. And it's infuriating to me that here we are in 2023, 40 years after the outcry and activism of those people in the '80s who fought and died for our right to exist. And we're still fighting very similar battles. And they lose these battles all the time, and they never learn the lesson. And that's what's really infuriating. North Carolina hasn't learned its lesson. There was the bathroom bill in 2019 that was overturned in 2020, and here we are three years later dealing with something even worse. And there will be a backlash. They will suffer the consequences of this overriding of vetoes in the election. Parents vote. Kids grow up and vote. They will feel the heat from this. Make no mistake about it.

Hearing your history, it just seems like this role at GLSEN is a perfect match. How did your past as a gay kid inform why you stepped up?

My relationship with GLSEN, it has been a long one. It has always been something that I've always felt very passionate about. I always felt like it was a good fit for me just because of, let's just say it straight out: I was the first gay teen on television. I think Ricky Vasquez was an education for an entire generation of young people and their parents. And so having been fortunate enough to be the person who played that role, I think [that] comes with some responsibility. I've always felt that. And working with GLSEN was a

direct way to deal with the issues that I felt passionate about and that Ricky Vasquez himself had to deal with. I felt like I could connect those dots for a lot of people.

That being said, being on the board and being the board chair are two very different things. And I was hesitant to take on the role, to be honest with you, just because I am a working actor, obviously. And sometimes that work, when we're not on strike, calls me to not be as available as I should be or I can be. And so that's why I wanted a vice chair, a powerful voice to be able to fill in when I couldn't. And Imara Jones is the perfect person for that, believe me.

So I took it on because this moment in our history requires GLSEN to be incredibly visible. And if there's one thing that I can help with is that visibility. For better or worse, within our community and within the media, I can use my platform in that way to highlight the work that GLSEN does, but also to rally support. I think that's my job: to support the work of the staff and our executive director and her staff, who I love so deeply. But also to sound the alarm, to use my voice to say that GLSEN is here and we have the resources and the capacity to make a difference in this fight in terms of the education of our queer youth.

What's a day in your life as chair of the board at GLSEN?

This is a turning point for the organization. This is our 33rd year. It's a new executive director. The first time that this organization has a leadership team that is all people of color and non-binary and trans [people]. We are covering the gamut, and we look like the people who need GLSEN the most. So it's a turning point for the organization. We are revamping. And really recreating this organization for this specific moment.

The way that we look at it is if we make schools better and safer for a young Black trans girl, then everyone benefits from that. So



Wilson Cruz. Courtesy photo

that's our vision. How do we make school a place that is the safest place for a young trans African-American girl or a person of color to excel to live up to their potential? Because if they can do it, then everyone else also benefits from those efforts. So my job is to help envision an organization that can support that goal. And I raise money. I'm fundraising. We need money in order to do that work.

What would be GLSEN's role in making sure that a young trans person of color at a school feels protected, safe and comfortable?

We fight for comprehensive policies. Passing and implementing comprehensive policies that support LGBTQ youth to make sure that they're safe in those schools. We work to make sure that there are supportive educators in every public school in this country. So that there's at least one person from elementary school through high school that a queer student knows they can go to. We are kind of the central hub of GSAs. Those used to be called Gay-Straight Alliances,

See **Wilson Cruz**, page 24

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BACK-TO-SCHOOL TIPS FOR LGBTQ+ PARENTS

Overwhelmed Already? Here's Some Help From a Parent Who Knows the Feeling



BY DANA RUDOLPH

Back-to-school time can be daunting for any parent, as we leave our children to the care of others and subject to peer circles that we can't fully control. LGBTQ+ parents may have particular concerns, too, about how welcoming and inclusive the administration, teachers, coaches and students will be to our children, especially in states with school-related anti-LGBTQ+ laws. I'm not here to tell you it will all be fine, because I can't make such guarantees, but I will offer some advice based on seeing my son through 12 years of public school and into college.

Remember that much education happens at home. Perhaps not the academic subjects (although some of us parents can contribute here, too), but definitely the core lessons about values and ethics. If we can convey our values through our own words and actions, we can give our children tools to assess and interpret what they are taught elsewhere, even if that differs.

We can also make our homes inclusive even if our schools are not, buying or borrowing LGBTQ-inclusive kids' books and ones with protagonists of identities that we both do and do not share. Yes, I believe schools should offer

these materials, too, so that all students can have a full view of themselves and their world, but when they don't, we can still do so at home.

Be visible if you safely can, but listen to your kids. LGBTQ+ parents are often advised to meet with our kids' teachers and/or school administrators before the start of the year to answer any questions they may have and make sure they will be inclusive of our families. That can be helpful, especially when kids are young and/or starting at a new school — but it's also not right for every family at every time. Sometimes we may feel it unduly stresses our differences; we may prefer a quieter visibility, such as simply showing up for Parent's Night and introducing ourselves as our kids' parents. And as our children grow older, they may prefer to come out about their family in their own time and way. We should always be guided by what our children are experiencing and feeling, though, no matter which path we choose — which means encouraging open communication and letting them know we are always there for them.

Be active in the school community. Kids often benefit from parental

involvement in their schools — and for LGBTQ+ parents, our presence can contribute to an important visibility (though see the tip above on listening to our children here). We can join the PTA or other parent groups, participate in our kids' classrooms as guest readers and the like or help chaperone field trips. Right now, too, when anti-LGBTQ+ policies are being pushed forward in many school districts, participating in school board meetings can be critical.

Nevertheless, sometimes our work schedules or other important obligations (like other children or an aging parent) mean we cannot be as active as we'd like. We shouldn't feel guilty if we can't do everything — but we should ask ourselves if there are alternate ways of helping. Can't attend a meeting? Make phone calls or send emails to encourage others to show up. Help another parent prepare their remarks; share helpful resources online. And no matter what, vote!

Pick your battles and plan your tactics. Chances are, there are many ways our kids' schools could be more inclusive, starting with basic policies for safety and respect, to updating school forms, stocking LGBTQ-inclusive

books, incorporating LGBTQ+ history and biographies in the curricula and starting a Gender and Sexualities Alliance (GSA), among other things. If you feel moved to make change, evaluate what is likely going to have the biggest impact on students' lives and what is most likely to actually happen in your location. These two things may not always coincide, so you'll have to prioritize; sometimes you'll want to start small, while other times you'll want to address a critical immediate need, such as a piece of anti-LGBTQ+ policy or legislation. Consider, too, what efforts may already be underway and where you may find allies among other parents and school personnel.

Know that help is available. One excellent new resource is Safe Schools for All (safeschoolsforall.org), a project from GLBTQ Legal Advocates & Defenders (GLAD), GLSEN, the National Center for Lesbian Rights (NCLR) and PFLAG, with information about student rights and what to do if you experience bullying, harassment, or discrimination. And the new Parenting with Pride site (parentingwithprideflorida.org) from Equality Florida and a host of partner

organizations offers tools, resources and more to help parents and families "create communities where every LGBTQ+ child feels safe, affirmed, and loved." While intended for families in Florida, much of it is broadly applicable and may be useful to those in other states as well. I also list a range of LGBTQ+ back-to-school resources at my own website, mombian.com.

A purported concern for children has always driven much anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric, and schools and young people are on the front lines right now. LGBTQ+ families have long shown, though, that we can survive and thrive despite the obstacles — and today, there are more resources and more ways of communicating with other LGBTQ+ families and allies than ever before. I have no doubt we have a difficult road ahead, but I also firmly believe we are up to the challenge.

Wishing your children and you a school year full of happiness and learning.

Dana Rudolph is the founder and publisher of Mombian (mombian.com), a GLAAD Media Award-winning blog and resource directory for LGBTQ+ parents.



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The Raymond Shepherd House, located on E. Nine Mile Road will offer safe, inclusive, and affordable housing for senior LGBTQ+ adults. Photo: Drew Saunders

Construction Begins on Affordable LGBTQ-Friendly Housing in Michigan Project Seeks to Affirm Aging LGBTQ+ Adults

BY DREW SAUNDERS

Affordable housing has been a problem across the country for years and it can be especially problematic for aging LGBTQ+ people who, according to Rev. Dr. Roland Stringfellow of the Metropolitan Community Church – Detroit (MCC-D), can force some aging queer people to go back into the closet to find housing.

The new Raymond E. Shepherd House, an affordable LGBTQ-friendly housing project at the corner of Nine Mile and Paxton Street in Ferndale, is one way local organizations are helping to overcome this issue. After a groundbreaking ceremony Aug. 23, construction is now underway for the project, a group effort co-sponsored by MCC-D, MGen, Affirmations, Housing Options for Older Adults Moving Towards Equity in Southeast Michigan (HOMES), Gender Identity Network Alliance and Transgender Michigan. County Executive Dave Coulter said that the desire to get this project done has existed ever since he became the mayor of Oakland County.

“Even though Oakland County is a very wealthy county in general, 40 percent of Oakland County residents are housing insecure. It’s an issue not just in Ferndale or Pontiac, but across the county,” Coulter said. He added that he wants to encourage more projects like this through Oakland County’s Housing Trust Fund. “I knew this as mayor: Not everybody wants a single family home. People want options and choices of where they live. What I think we need to do a better job of across the county is giving people a variety of

options – apartments, condos, townhouse, single family or affordable housing.”

The project, a news release about the groundbreaking notes, is named after a life-long Ferndale resident, Raymond E. Shepherd. Shepherd was an out gay man and a deacon at MCC-D who also served as a volunteer at Affirmations. “Ray lived alone most of his life and longed for community where he felt safe and welcomed,” Rev. Stringfellow said in the news release. “He found those places at our church and Affirmations. It was appropriate for us to name this building in honor of his memory and his desire to see an affordable option for seniors who identify as LGBTQ+.”

“This has been a project that has been seven years in the making. I’ve been passionate about providing affordable housing for older adults since I heard the story of a transgender individual who had to go back into the closet in order to get housing,” said Rev. Stringfellow at the groundbreaking. “That individual ended up taking their own life.”

The four-story building is located on a recovered brownfield site. It will house 53 one- and two-bedroom units and offer on-site amenities like laundry facilities.

No applications have been accepted yet. Prospective tenants can visit fcommunities.org, which will stay updated with information about the application process. The building is expected

See **Shepherd House**, page 26

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A COMMITMENT TO HIS QUEER STUDENTS, NO MATTER WHAT

Why Willie Carver Left Teaching and How We Can Shift the Conservative Narrative

BY SARAH BRICKER HUNT

When Willie Carver finished his first book of poetry, he landed on the perfect title — or so he thought. Carver's chosen title came from an Appalachian proverb: "The Truth Will Stand When the World's on Fire." But while it was an apt title that called attention to the socio-political era in which we find ourselves in 2023, his publisher was drawn to one of Carver's suggested subtitles: "Gay Poems for Red States," which is out now.

Ultimately, Carver concedes, his publisher was right. "First of all, the title feels political," he tells me in a recent Zoom interview. "But you have to stop and ask yourself, 'Why is it political? Why don't we associate queerness with red states?' You have the same percentage of queer people in all places. We do exist in red states."

The reality, of course, is that while there are plenty of LGBTQ+ people living in solidly red states, many of them feel, as Carver puts it, "absolutely invisible." "Gay Poems for Red States" is a title that speaks directly to two audiences Carver is trying to reach — queer people who he hopes feel less alone and those who need to hear his unvarnished truth about his lived experience as a queer kid growing up in Appalachia.

Carver focuses much of his tireless advocacy, which includes his participation in a long list of causes and organizations mostly focused on young queer adults, on the concepts of visibility and erasure, especially in areas where LGBTQ+ rights are constantly under attack.

Building a teaching career in Eastern Kentucky means teaching kids who sometimes rely on school not simply as a place to learn but as a respite from realities that are more common there than in more affluent areas.

As Carver said at a recent stop on his book tour at The Mercantile Library in Cincinnati, "There's always water at school. There's always electricity and something to eat." And for kids in Carver's classroom, there was always an advocate at the front of the room who grew up in the same circumstances — someone who didn't really think of himself as living in poverty, but who grew up shaped by the experience of frequently going without, nonetheless.

Carver was teaching French and English in Kentucky's Montgomery County Schools in



Willie Carver. Photo: Amy B. Hunter (The Mercantile Library)

the small town of Mt. Sterling when a few of his students nominated him for 2022 Kentucky Teacher of the Year, a designation granted by the Kentucky Department of Education. "I was quite sure I wasn't going to win," he remembers. "But in time, I realized how important it was that I made it as far as I could — not for me but for that queer kid I once was and for the ones who are still there."

Months went by as the list of nominations shrunk. Eventually, Carver did win. That's when his world caught fire.

It's not that Carver expected his local district to suddenly change course when it came to how they'd approach the taboo subject of his gayness. After all, early in his career, Carver says he was told by an administrator, "No one will protect

you, including me." So it wasn't shocking when the administration was wholly unresponsive to a dramatic uptick in threatening behavior by members of the community who were appalled by Carver's existence as an out teacher, the nomination and, eventually, his win.

For a while, Carver fought back hard, calling out the onslaught of personal attacks, which included entirely baseless allegations about his behavior with students. There came a point when he no longer felt safe, not at home and not at school — still, he felt a responsibility to stand tall in the face of ongoing attacks. The kids needed him. Soon, though, the detractors amped up their attacks in a way Carver couldn't abide: attacking the kids themselves.

When the world's on fire, maybe the best

strategy is to try to shift the flames away from the most vulnerable, to give the people with the fire hoses somewhere else to aim. And so, Carver resigned for a second time from the district where he was never supported by the administration but where he'd spent years of his life championing kids who needed a champion, anyway.

The first time Carver walked away from Montgomery County, in 2011, to escape what he terms "extreme homophobia," he fled with his husband, Josh Taylor, to a dramatically more progressive community in Vermont. "We had maybe \$200 in the bank," Carver recalls. "No savings. We just got in the car and drove, found an apartment and said 'Well, we have to land on our feet because there's no other option.'

And we did.”

Vermont, though, wasn't Carver's calling. He missed Kentucky. He missed his students, and he knew he was needed. The district hired him back and he went on to spend almost a decade working under a new, better administration. “For a while, it was really nice. And then, it wasn't.”

This time, it wasn't just the administration, though instead of the hero's welcome one might expect after bringing home a coveted statewide teaching award, the higher-ups were mostly silent — the district didn't even mention that Carver had met President Biden as a result of winning the award. This time, it was 2022 and somehow extremist rhetoric had wormed its way into mainstream Republican messaging, especially a narrative focused on “the children.”

Picking up where Anita Bryant and her Save Our Children movement left off in the '70s, the modern anti-LGBTQ+ movement has been focused on unsubstantiated links between the LGBTQ+ community at large and child harm. Local (and frequently, activists from far away places) began showing up at school board meetings to rail against Carver — he cites his breaking point as the time a woman incessantly accused him of “grooming” students at one of the meetings as members of the administration remained silent.

There are benefits to school board meetings when it comes to community debate: They are structured and follow an inherent semblance of order. The Wild West of social media land is another story. Soon, the fire spread to places like Facebook, where community members left behind any pretense of politeness or respect. A member began posting images of Carver and LGBTQ+ students there, boldly captioned with homophobic comments and slurs. Carver asked for help; supportive parents did, too. But as always, the administration refused to intervene. “Call the cops,” they told him.

“And that was that,” Carver says. Once again, he found himself turning in his resignation. Packing up his carefully decorated classroom. Disappointing students who, on one hand, needed his guidance and advocacy and who, on the other, were being targeted by adults simply because of who he was. Who he would always be. This moment of leaving would be a true turning point, a moment when Carver's smalltown advocacy would be amplified a thousand-fold.

Carver was invited to testify before the House Subcommittee on Civil Rights and Civil Liberties in May 2022, where he shared his experiences dealing with the district and his lifelong community, but mostly, where he advocated on behalf of queer students everywhere. “Inclusive teachers are thrown under the bus by the people driving it,” he testified. “Forty-five percent of LGBTQ youth seriously considered suicide this year. We chip away at their dignity and spaces to exist. The systems meant to protect them won't even acknowledge them.”

Today, Carver is still working in education as an advisor at the University of Kentucky and serving as an advocate for LGBTQ+ youth with national and state level organizations like the Kentucky Youth Law Project, Progress Kentucky, and the American Federation of

Teachers LGBTQ Task Force. “I think where there's children involved, and you are privileged enough to know the seriousness, it's hard not to move,” he says. “I don't think any human being would watch a child on the edge of a cliff and not run to protect them.”

Carver spends a lot of his time trying to protect students from harmful administrative decisions. “A good example is what's happening in Boone County, Kentucky,” he says. “I've heard from five or six different people working in the district that they're going to forcibly out students and not allow the students to know that if they share this information with teachers, they'll be outed. The goal is sort of entrapment.”

Carver knows all too well what can happen when students are outed to unsupportive parents. He's worked with many students whose parents would have made them homeless, or worse, had they found out. It's hard enough for LGBTQ+ youth to handle the emotional toll of merely existing in the current socio-political climate.

Carver says he thinks a lot of people would be responding differently if they actually knew what was happening. “My goal is to have other people understand — to tell the stories they need to hear so they can see the real situation,” he says. “We have to speak to the prejudice in a positive way and counter it, truthfully, without referencing it. We have to tell the sad stories and the scary stories. What LGBTQ youth need is not the same as what the people around them need.”

“Those youth need inspiration and hope and the ability to imagine a better world. And the adults who are taking care of them need to know the seriousness of the situation.”

“Take it from a fat, gay, weird sissy from up the holler,” he writes in the poem “Promise”:

*sometimes you gotta cry
and let the moon pull
the pain-polluted tide out of your body
onto the shores of your face so your oceans
can be pure again;*

*sometimes you gotta cuss,
gotta hurl hot, raging high-voltage
divinations into the air
so they can turn tables and set fire to the
hills*

*to clear a path for you to keep going;
sometimes you gotta mourn
and gather together enough time and space
to create gravity
that wraps its roots deep and intimately
around a moment*

*so you can be sure of what was real;
so you go ahead and cry, cuss, and mourn,
but keep your head pointed towards the sky
because this moment
will not be the end of you.*



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Trish Horstman, owner of My Little Needle Tattoos. Courtesy photo

Moving the Needle, in More Ways Than One

A Queer-Run Tattoo Shop in Plymouth That Affirms Every Client

BY LAYLA MCMURTRIE

At My Little Needle Tattoos in Plymouth, the staff invites clients in with open arms. The mostly queer team shares a mission to make the vulnerable experience of getting a tattoo more comfortable and welcoming for

the LGBTQ+ community.

The studio's owner, Latricia (Trish) Horstman, began tattooing in 2002 and opened My Little Needle shortly after in 2008. Ever since, she says, she has been "living her dream every day."

"I always say that this place is like me in building form. I always wanted it to be a zen

zone... I always want people to feel embraced here, walk in and feel comfortable, like they're taken care of," she says. "More than half my staff is queer, we have a couple of artists who are trans, and it's really important to me that they know this is a place that supports them wholeheartedly, no matter what."

While the makeup of staff at the shop has continued to evolve, the current crew is like a family, they all say. Everyone sticks up for and supports one another. In the shop, there is a no-tolerance policy for misgendering, deadnaming or bigotry of any kind. This familial culture among the staff helps create a climate where customers feel seen and respected as part of the family too.

"This definitely feels like one of the safest environments I've ever worked in, which is pretty amazing," says Natasha Pehrson, the shop's studio manager. "Being a queer person and someone who's nonbinary, just something as simple as my coworkers using my correct pronouns is really huge."

Horstman's relationship with her team is mutually beneficial, as she often learns from her staff just like they learn from her. "I absolutely adore my crew here. They are really wonderful humans," she says. "Basically everybody here loves each other. Everyone has mutual respect, we talk about our art, we criticize each other in a constructive, healthy way."

Their close bond helped Horstman get through her pregnancy last December when she had her twin babies two months early. "It was a really traumatic birth, I actually almost passed away during it," she says. "These guys kept this place afloat and checked in on me on the regular, and it was really good to know that I built the studio up and had the right people in place where I could not physically be in the building, and this place ran like a charm."

Having a place to be themselves is something that all of Horstman's staff are grateful for.

"Personally, it feels like how a family should feel," says Tyler Nguyen, a tattoo artist that has been at the shop the longest. "It's nice to have a space where you can be yourself, be a person and exist in that environment without having to worry about someone trying to knock your head."

One of the shop's tattoo artists, Oberon Rattus, came out as transgender during his time working at My Little Needle and says he has received nothing but support.

"I didn't lose my job, I didn't get beat up by my coworkers," Rattus says. "I just got my name legally changed this year and it hasn't ever been an issue. When I had to ask for accommodations with my paychecks and when I needed time off for my top surgery and for my hysterectomy, Trish was incredibly supportive and very, very cool about that."

Specifically, Horstman helps support her employees by providing queer-supportive benefits. "I want to make sure that when [Oberon] is off work, his time is paid for, so we have insurance that makes sure that he gets paid time off for his healing," she says.

Rattus' personal, lived experience as a transgender man has positively impacted clients' experience at the shop. When he started at My Little Needle in 2019, Rattus noticed that the paperwork customers fill out didn't have a spot for pronouns and a preferred name, which he knew his queer customers would need. So, he says he "timidly" asked Horstman to add it; she was quick to do so and the form has been

updated ever since.

“This was my second or third week working here... and she was so cool about it,” Rattus says. “She was like, ‘Oh my god. Let’s go change that right now.’”

Every employee agreed that Horstman is always open to feedback and listens to people’s ideas.

“The thing that makes all this work is Trish, I’ll be honest,” Nguyen says. “It sounds biased because she taught me, but I travel a lot, I do guest spots, and I’ve never met a shop owner that just listens to somebody and is like ‘Yeah, you know what, we’ll try that and if it doesn’t work, then it doesn’t work.’ She’s done that for everything that I’ve ever brought up.”

Horstman’s intense desire to pour love into the shop’s clients is a constant priority — and that intensity is contagious.

“It’s only fair to extend that same feeling and respect to my clients because it’s what my boss

puts out and so that’s what I wanna fucking put out too,” Rattus says. “Trish specifically as a human being has been so receptive to what is good for all of our clients, certain types of accommodations, certain types of language that we use around here, making sure our staff is aware and trauma-informed.”

As part of Still Not Asking For It, an annual nationwide

tattooing fundraiser with the mission to raise awareness about sexual violence, staff at My Little Needle take yearly classes focused on trauma-informed communication.

For the event, shops submit an application to be qualified as a “safe space.” Then, each artist creates small flash pieces for \$100 each and work hard during a long day of tattooing. All of the money made during the event goes to a charity of the shop’s choosing.

This year, My Little Needle Tattoos was able to raise \$14,000 to donate to Avalon Healing Center, a Detroit nonprofit working to empower people affected by sexual violence.

Unfortunately, people in the tattoo industry are still experiencing sexual violence and sexism. While tattooing originated thousands of years ago in various cultures outside of America, in the United States, the industry is mostly made up of older straight white men.

“We have a very young history in America with tattooing where we can actually almost build a family tree,” Horstman says. “However, it’s been predominantly white men, so because of that, being a woman, or being queer in this industry, you’re a minority.”

Horstman said that there have been times when a male-presenting tattoo artist has been

at the front of the store with her and customers will speak to him before her, thinking he’s the owner. When he corrects them, their tone often changes when they realize they have to speak with a woman. And that’s not the only form of sexism she has faced in the industry. “I’ll sit in a room with other male tattooers at times, and they’ll all talk about each other’s work, and see each other on the same level,” she tells BTL. “But when it comes to talking to me, I deal with sexual advances or get talked down to. When I was first coming up, they didn’t talk about the idea of being a queer-friendly place and there were a lot of awful jokes that would go around. That doesn’t happen here; we defend each other and we stick by each other.”

These experiences, along with being a pansexual woman herself, are all part of the reason why Horstman wants her shop to be a safe place for everyone. This is not only true when it comes to people being comfortable living

authentically, but also when it comes to people’s bodies, as she takes pride in using safe ink and tattoo supplies.

In 2019, Horstman got involved in Michigan’s board for rewriting tattoo laws and has helped a lot in the process of creating new tattooing guidelines for the state.

“We are kind of trying to bring it up to date where we know for sure that artists are protected

and clients are protected, as far as cleanliness, as far as the quality of the materials that are put into and used on our bodies and artist safety,” she says. “To me, just equally important as making a safe space is having quality ink going into the skin, quality products used here, so I sell everything to my artists to make sure they have top-notch supplies.”

Moving forward, My Little Needle Tattoos wants to continue to be a safe place for clients and hopes that all tattoo shops can do the same.

“Acceptance is definitely not one of those things that just happens passively, so I’m hoping that more people stick out and stand up for those who need to be stood up for,” Nguyen says.

Fellow artist Rattus agrees: “I hope that this shop and tattooing in general just continues to become more positive and friendly and accepting.”

Horstman has recently accomplished a goal to help make sure that at least her shop can stay forever, purchasing the building where My Little Needle Tattoos resides. “I wanted a solid space that no matter what, like, let’s say, I got hit by a bus tomorrow, my artists have a place to go and work,” she says. “No matter what, without me or with me, this place is going on. My Little Needle lives on.”



My Little Needle Tattoos in Plymouth. Courtesy photo



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◀ Wilson Cruz

Continued from page 14

but now they are Gender-Sexuality Alliances.

Can you tell me how the name evolved into Gender-Sexuality Alliances?

It came from the students. And also it happened because of the evolution of our movement. There was so much about our movement and our organizations that were gay and lesbian centric. You look at our history and we, for way too long, ignored our trans siblings. And so that's why organizations like GLAAD changed their name just to the acronym. It's why we will probably be doing the same thing very soon. But the GSAs, that came from students. We are sometimes led by our youth, thank god. And also we want to make sure that within the curriculum, that it is a comprehensive curriculum that includes our history. When young people see themselves in their history, how we got here, what we've been through, they feel seen. They learn those lessons.

Now, the problem with all of those things, even though we know that those are the things that work, those are literally the things that the opposition is working against. So our work is difficult and it is ongoing, but we have the ears of leaders in the federal government, at the state level, at the local level. So we have access to the change makers who can help us make that change.

Now, I'm not being pollyannaish and thinking that this is easy and that it's just like us walking in and going, "Oh, this is what you have to do." So much of our work is finding the local leaders and the students and educators who we can help in supporting [our] four pillars. So that's how we help an African-American trans student. And when all of those things are in place, even the white kids benefit.

Who were the people who made you feel safe in school?

Well, what's interesting is there were no teachers who were blatantly supportive of what they called "gay rights" then. But there were some teachers who signaled to me and to my friends, who I'll get to, that they were a place that we could go. So yes, I'm thinking of a specific English teacher. But for the most part in high school, my support came from a group of friends of mine who all came out to each other in our junior year of high school.

Now, believe it or not, I was the last one. Because I was also dealing with my own machismo father and all of that at home. And it was rough. But having those four people, and they were all of different ethnicities, we were all in the same class. A couple of them were incredibly politically active. We have to remember that this was literally the height of the AIDS epidemic. So we were living in fear. Everything that we read and heard

about being gay, as we were, pointed to our deaths. So it felt existential. It felt bleak. But with each other, we found a lot of hope and a lot of joy. And I remember toward our senior year, we all went to our first Pride festival together, where I met my first boyfriend, by the way. We got taunted on a daily basis.

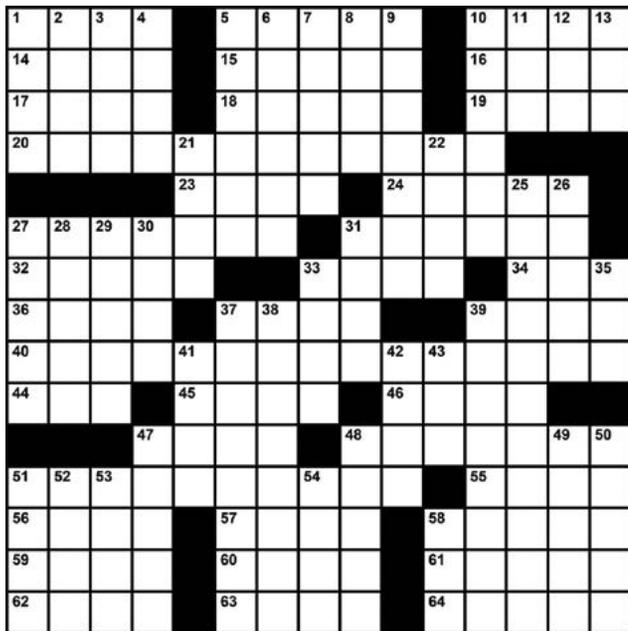
Now, I will also say that all five of us together ran that school in the end, even though we got so much shit. But I was in every play at my high school. I was the star of the show choir. I was in the band, I was in the student council. So were a couple of other of us. We kind of were this Justice League. We were smart enough and gregarious enough as a group that we could take all that shit that people were saying about us, let it fly off of us, like water off a duck's back. And as a big F you to them, we were also the most successful people at our school. And that's just the way we survived. But those people literally saved my life. And I know that I, and along with other ones, saved other people. I'm not going to say we weren't depressed. There was death happening all around us. In the middle of my high school experience, I lost my uncle to AIDS. It was an insane time. And I won't lie — by the time we got out of high school, we were exhausted of our own resilience.

I'm curious to know what kind of advice you would offer a student who is struggling like you did. What would you tell that kid?

First and foremost, I would say, and I hate to say this, but school is temporary. School is not the entire world. I would tell them to do everything they possibly could to get the best possible education they can where they are, but to keep their eye on the door. Because they're going to get out one day and the thing that they'll need most is that diploma and the ability to go to college and live up to their potential. And that there are places like GLSEN who have their back, who are fighting every day to make sure that their school experience is better.

I would say to them to find a teacher, a parent, a fellow student, a therapist, and say out loud all of the things that they're experiencing, that bothers them. Because having that outlet is incredibly important for a young person. But that this moment, as difficult as it is, is temporary. It's what I told people during the height of the pandemic. I was like, "This is temporary. This moment will pass."

And I say this to our movement as well. We have seen worse than this, and we have overcome worse than this. The success of our movement is not a straight line. The success of any movement is not a straight line. There is always going to be a backlash. Our job as members of this community is to not allow them to kill our spirits. To understand that we have nothing to be ashamed of, that we represent the best of what love can do. We are literally fighting for the right to love and to exist as who we actually are.



- 33 Byron poem
 34 Airline in "The Aviator"
 36 "Jaywalking" comedian
 37 Acted like a top
 39 Gaza Stripper, e.g.
 40 More of the quote
 44 Cone head?
 45 Gym bunnies do it to their pecs
 46 Sporty Camaro
 47 Horror writer Michael
 48 Interface device
 51 End of the quote
 55 Q to a Scrabble player
 56 Pop singer Lisa
 57 Eugene O'Neill's daughter
 58 "Twelfth Night" character in drag
 59 Oz visitor Dorothy
 60 Picks out, with "for"
 61 Like some Greek columns
 62 Von Trapp family escape route
 63 Get soft
 64 Atlas enlargement

- 11 Fit your first mate's mast
 12 Crack pilot
 13 Sinking ship's call
 21 Shakespearean soliloquy starter
 22 Maja painter
 25 They may be coming
 26 "In your dreams!"
 27 Events at Barneys
 28 South Beach setting
 29 Saki's real name
 30 Thames school
 31 Shakespeare's Hamlet, e.g.
 33 Jelly not for bread
 35 Muscle Mary's pride
 37 Where to find good-looking models
 38 Cruz of "Vicky Cristina Barcelona"
 39 Having children nonheterosexually
 41 Friends' pronoun
 42 "West ___ Story"
 43 Refrain syllable
 47 They come out of the choir closet
 48 Pull ___ one
 49 Porn director Francis
 50 Fail to keep a poker face
 51 "Beginning With O" author Broumas
 52 Offspring of a stallion
 53 Cry of one in bondage
 54 Pt. of IMF
 58 Caesar's lucky number?

Down

- 1 Piece of leg
 2 Anti-oxidant berry
 3 Plod through the mire
 4 Top target
 5 "Our" to Pasolini
 6 Had a seven-year problem with Marilyn Monroe?
 7 Juicy fruit
 8 Cartoonist Peter
 9 Like boobs in name only?
 10 Lullaby composer

Soccer Socks It to Us

Across

- 1 "Hairspray" list
 5 Try to bite, doggy-style
 10 Supporters of drag queens
 14 Sometime defender of gay rts.
 15 "Scary Movie" Cheri
 16 Puerto ___ (Ricky Martin's birthplace)

Q Puzzle

- 17 Mekong River country
 18 Like a stripper's attire
 19 Is unlike Dorian Gray
 20 Start of a quote from Alex Morgan, US women's national soccer team
 23 Bauxite and borax
 24 Fictional Willy
 27 More of the quote
 31 More of the quote
 32 Type of triangle

See p. 11 for answers

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◀ **Shepherd House**

Continued from page 18

to be complete by the fall of next year.

“There will be an interest list to sign up. Once you’re on that list, you’ll be able to keep up with construction schedules, the pre-leasing process and so on,” said Joshua Wilmoth, president of Full Circle Communities, who is partnering with MCC-D to develop the project. “Generally about four to six months before completion is when we send out notices [saying] ‘Please apply now.’ And as people apply, they will be on a waitlist broken down by their income levels and family size so we can pair the right folks with the right unit for their needs.”

The apartments will be available for tenants making between 30 to 60 percent of the Area Median Income (AMI), according to Wilmoth. AMI is a government-crafted formula to determine eligibility for affordable housing.

Rep. Haley Stevens (D – Michigan) said the project “represents so much of the needs that we have here in Oakland County. I am working on the affordable housing tax credit in Congress, for the Equality Act. So, I see this project as representing so much [of] what I’m working on in Congress. I can’t wait to brag about it in the halls of Congress.”

Some prospective tenants expressed concerns about parking at an info session held after the

groundbreaking. The size of the lot dictated the limited parking available, and Rev. Stringfellow said that it is presumed that some of the tenants will no longer be driving. Furthermore, it is intended that the bus routes along Nine Mile will provide ample transportation options for tenants.

“I think it’s wonderful. It’s very needed, and it’s been a dream of MCC as a whole,” said B.C.



Artistic rendering of the Raymond E. Shepherd House. Courtesy photo

Abad-Murphy Cabangbang, a 34-year MCC-D congregant. “We’ve always envisioned a place where gays can age and be out in old age because sometimes seniors have a tendency to go into a straight community where they have to temper themselves or go back in the closet because they don’t know how they’re going to be received. So here, it’s an inclusive place where everybody’s welcome. That’s the dream of America, right?”

If the project goes smoothly, Stringfellow is planning to launch similar projects across Metro Detroit.

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LGBTQ+ individuals report changes in thinking and memory more often than their cisgender heterosexual counterparts.

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