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How Local Advocates Are Dismantling the Outdated Legal Defense

ELECTION DAY

Can a Queer, Non-Muslim Candidate Bridge a Divide Within Hamtramck?

HOW

Melissa Etheridge

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By Chris Azzopardi



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Amid Unspeakable Violence in Israel, Silence Isn't An Option

Most mornings, we wake from our dreams. But on Oct. 7, Israelis and all who support them awoke to a nightmare. Hamas, the terror group that rules the Gaza Strip, viciously attacked Israel by land, sea and air, on the Sabbath and a Jewish holiday. Hundreds of Israelis have been murdered, thousands more are injured and many others have been taken hostage. This horrifying act of violence is personal to all Israelis, and to many other Americans, including me.

Read Washington Blade reporter Ethan Felson's full op-ed on the developing Gaza-Israel conflict online.

5 Queer Things You Can Do Right Now-ish

BY SARAH BRICKER HUNT

It's time to whip out that planner and pencil in some unique, queer-charged local events for the coming weeks. From a Broadway show ("Company" at the Fisher) to a scholarly event focused on the cultural significance of drag as art, there's something on tap sure to hit you the right way. Don't miss your chance to get a little weird with strangers at Dance Church or a free screening of "The Times of Harvey Milk." It's also not too late to grab tickets to see queer humor icon David Sedaris when he travels to the Great Lakes State this month.



Monét X Change. Photo: University of Michigan

Learn How Drag Can Serve as Resistance

Dig into a juicy cultural conversation and dazzling drag performance Oct. 12 when Necto, U-M Arts Initiative and the Spectrum Center join up to present "Drag as Resistance: Conversation and Performance" in honor of LGBTQ+ History Month. Held at queer-inclusive hotspot Necto, the extravaganza includes performances by double-crown winner from "RuPaul's Drag Race All Stars" winner Monét X Change, National Entertainer of the Year nominee Jadein Black, trailblazing Black drag king Riley Poppyseed, Pinball McQueen and Perry Dox, plus a conversation with UM professor and author Lawrence La Fountain-Stokes. The event will dive into the history and cultural significance of drag performance, examining why the art form is both celebrated and so frequently attacked.

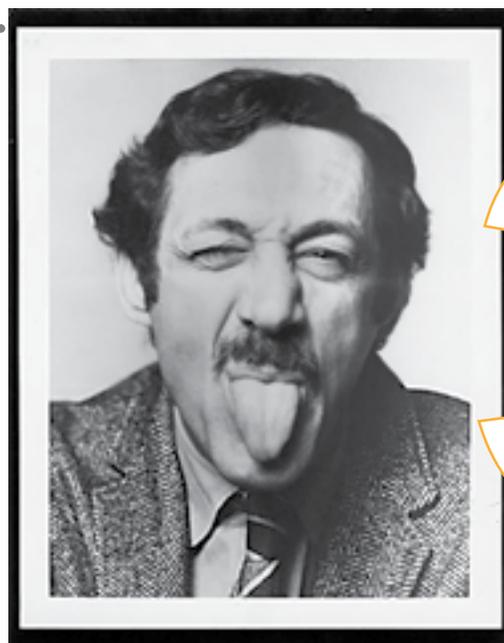
Oct. 12, 7 p.m., Necto (516 E. Liberty St., Ann Arbor). Tickets and more information at bit.ly/45i6AXd.



Get Yourself to Queer-Led (Dance) Church

Looking for a "pleasure-centered fitness space for all bodies"? University of Michigan dance department alum and queer interdisciplinary artist, drag performer and makeup artist Rowan Janusiak, who has participated in events like the Detroit Dance City Festival and Midwest RAD Fest, promises all that and more at Dance Church - Ann Arbor. Each week, dancers join together and simply... move. "I'm so excited to bring the Dance Church experience to Ann Arbor and welcome everyone to join us on the dance floor," Janusiak says. "Whether you're an experienced dancer or a first-time class-taker, Dance Church is a space for you to move, connect and experience joy through dancing and letting it all out." The 70(ish)-minute class is geared toward all levels and is designed for people of all shapes and sizes, backgrounds and identities. The only prerequisite is open-mindedness. To get a sense of the community, check out @dance_church on IG.

Wednesdays, 7 p.m., The Phoenix Center (220 S. Main St., Ann Arbor). Learn more at go.dancechurch.com/rowanjanusiak.



Harvey Milk. Photo: San Francisco Public Library

Attend an LGBTQ+ History Documentary Event

Head to Wayne State Oct. 24 to catch a free screening of "The Times of Harvey Milk," the 1984 Academy Award-winning documentary directed by Robert Epstein. The film shines a bright light on Milk's human rights activism and the circumstances leading to his assassination in 1978. You'll also glimpse a rare insight into day-to-day life in San Francisco's influential Castro District in the '70s through exclusive archival footage. Stick around for a discussion about the film.

Oct. 24, 12 p.m., Wayne State University, Applebaum Building #610. Reserve your place at bit.ly/45mRlwh.



David Sedaris. Photo: Facebook

Spend an Evening with David Sedaris

Iconic queer humorist David Sedaris returns this month with two stops in Michigan — Interlochen on Oct. 20 and East Lansing on Oct. 24. The bestselling author of classics like “Naked” and “Me Talk Pretty One Day” will read from his latest collection of personal essays, “Happy-Go-Lucky.” The book details Sedaris’ experiences during the pandemic lockdown, when he spent time walking miles through a nearly deserted city, found himself vacuuming his apartment twice a day and contemplated how people working as sex workers and acupuncturists were managing the unique circumstances related to quarantine.

Oct. 20, Interlochen Center for the Arts and Oct. 24, Wharton Center in East Lansing. Find more details and ticket information at dauidsedarisbooks.com.

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Britney Coleman in “Company.” Photo: Matthew Murphy

Enjoy a Broadway Show Close to Home

Broadway in Detroit welcomes “Company” to the Fisher Theatre stage Oct. 17-29. The touring production of the Stephen Sondheim musical is a five-time Tony Award winner (including Best Revival of a Musical) that focuses on a funny, relatable tale about 35-year-old unmarried Bobbie, sick of fending off questions about when she’ll get married or start a family — it’s a notable departure from the 1970 original, which featured a male lead. The musical features several award-winning songs, including “You Could Drive a Person Crazy,” “The Ladies Who Lunch” and “Being Alive.”

Oct. 17-29, The Fisher Theatre (3011 W. Grand Boulevard, Detroit). Find tickets at broadwayindetroit.com/shows/company.

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Can a Queer, Non-Muslim Candidate Bridge a Troubling Hamtramck Divide?

Lynn Blasey will certainly try — one cup of tea at a time

BY ELLEN SHANNA KNOPPOW

In 2021, two years before the all-Muslim city council voted unanimously to ban Pride flags from government property in Hamtramck, Lynn Blasey was on hand to help raise a Pride flag legally in a park across from city hall. Despite the heated debate, it was a proud moment for the city council candidate. At the time, Blasey told BTL, it felt good in her soul to participate in an act that means so much to the LGBTQ+ community.

Now, with the recent ban, Blasey is frustrated that the meaning of the Pride flag has been misconstrued.

“The rhetoric I hear around this discussion is often based on, ‘Someone’s different than me,’” Blasey said. “‘They’re going to try to convert me to be like them, and I’m uncomfortable with that. So I’m going to act out.’”

“The Pride flag, to me, represents community and hope,” said Blasey, who has a degree in Middle Eastern history and studied at the American University in Cairo. “It represents, of course, the historic struggle that queer folks have gone through to even have a voice and to exist in the public sphere.” She called it a beacon to people of all ages who are struggling with their identity and trying to figure out where they fit in the world.

Blasey’s platform isn’t built on Pride flags alone. Yet flags surely figure into her story. Part of the reason she decided to be more open about her sexuality is that some of the flags flying at her own home were vandalized. Blasey is ace, or asexual, and her ace and Philadelphia Pride flags have been torn more than once. With American and Palestinian flags flying at her home as well, Blasey was attacked on social media for flying those four flags together. She recognizes the reaction as fear



Lynn Blasey. Courtesy photo

and misunderstanding that the flags could somehow constitute an oxymoron.

“My response to that person was that the flags flying in front of my home represent the identities of those people living in my home,” Blasey said. “And none of those identities are mutually exclusive. You can be those identities at once, and you can have relationships with people that have complex identities.” At the same time, Blasey says, “My queer identity is a very small part of who I am.”

Blasey believes something is missing from the flag debate. “There’s so much space for nuance in this discussion — and that’s not sexy, that doesn’t get headlines,” she said. “And so this divisive dialogue just gets perpetuated over and over again.”

As a candidate in a very diverse city, Blasey stands out for her cultural competency. Of about

28,000 Hamtramck residents, two-thirds are Muslims of Yemeni or Bengali origin, according to the Arab American News. “Everything I do is really rooted in community,” Blasey said. After college, Blasey was an educator at the Arab American Museum where she gave tours and worked offsite. Today, Blasey works at the College for Creative Studies in the Community Arts Partnerships department.

When Blasey’s not at work, “I’m out in the neighborhoods building relationships with people, usually addressing whatever their needs are,” she said. “So I’m very in touch with the pulse of Hamtramck.”

Blasey has a diverse inner circle in Hamtramck, including progressive Muslims, but they declined to be interviewed because they feel burned out on “the flag issue.”

In a text exchange Blasey had with one of them, the friend

stressed that many LGBTQ+ Muslims have no “home.” They don’t feel religious people are always welcome in LGBTQ+ spaces, especially as Muslims, since the flag ban has been a hot topic. Further, queer Muslims are not a monolith: There are traditional Muslims who are queer and choose abstinence. And the community should accept that as valid.

However, “Muslims need to learn how to not oppress if they won’t outright support,” Blasey’s friend said in the exchange. “There is a balance between what some people ask for and what is minimally necessary. We don’t need Muslims to fly Pride flags; we need Muslims to not tear down Pride flags.”

To an outsider, Hamtramck might not appear queer-friendly, but Blasey described it as a mixed bag. “That’s a tough one,” she said. “Historically, Hamtramck

has been very queer-friendly. We have a large queer population. We have places to hang out that are safe for our queer residents to live authentically.” Yet she said recently it’s been challenging because of a divide between safe spaces and the public. For example, the theater Planet Ant is a welcoming space but, outside, their Pride flag has been vandalized.

A resident since 2008, Blasey has connections to Hamtramck that run deep. She has received numerous resident awards for community service such as her work for the Hamtramck Arts and Culture Commission, Hamtramck Community Initiatives and Hamtramck Mutual Aid, among others. Blasey is also an active board member of API Vote Michigan.

Last year, Blasey initiated monthly teas where residents can gather outdoors to get to know one another. “I just show up with all the supplies: hot water and tea bags and beautiful cups,” she said. “Tea is a very universal way for people to connect.”

As a volunteer, the impact of Blasey’s contributions to Hamtramck cannot be overstated. She was instrumental in launching a disaster relief program after a flood during the pandemic left some residents with sewage in their basements.

“Around November of 2021, I sat down with a couple of community leaders and a representative from FEMA,” Blasey said. “And we wrote out the bylaws and a plan for what is called a FEMA Long Term Recovery Group to set up this organization to make sure that those residents didn’t get forgotten.” Currently, volunteers shovel out the basement “goop” so construction crews can rebuild; funding is available to replace appliances and other necessities.

As an extension of her service to the community, Blasey has

See Lynn Blasey, page 17

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It's Smooth Sailing for the Queer Community at Port Huron's Blue Water Ally Center

\$10,000 in Covid relief dollars will go a long way for the little center

BY ELLEN SHANNA KNOPPOW

All hands on deck: A brand-new LGBTQ+ community center is making waves in Port Huron, and BTL recently sat down with Blue Water Ally Center board member Laura Hillman to get the inside scoop. Hillman is especially psyched about an upcoming homecoming gala, set for Oct. 20, featuring a court of “drag queens, kings and other nonbinary royalty.” Since launching the center this summer, the crew has been very busy.

“It’s been kind of a whirlwind because we just really opened our doors in June,” said Hillman, who is openly queer and grew up in the Thumb area. “And sometimes I’ll say that we’re still building the boat while we’re trying to sail it.”

In fact, the “boat” that Hillman speaks of is a renovated ice cream parlor and cafe that sits in the heart of downtown Port Huron on Military Street near the St. Clair River.

Hillman said the need for the center was great. What began as a fund with a local hospital soon grew and was taken over by the Community Foundation of St. Clair County, where the organization raised \$30,000 with zero advertising. “And the Community Foundation looked at that and said, ‘Well, this is like a mandate from our community saying that there’s a need here and we need to do something,’” Hillman said. The Foundation conducted listening groups with the LGBTQ+ community.

Over and over, they heard folks were looking for a safe space where they could be themselves. That didn’t surprise Hillman. The assessment also revealed folks needed affirming physical and behavioral healthcare. The St. Clair County Health Department has already begun offering immunizations at the center, and there are two practicing physicians on the board of directors. LGBTQ-specific recovery groups and programs for social and artistic expression were requested as well.

Hillman describes her own experience as a queer person in Port Huron as easier than most, thanks to the support she’s had along the way. “I know that I live a charmed life,” she said. Yet she hears while doing volunteer recruitment for the center that many queer young adults don’t feel accepted or are ridiculed by their families. Hillman doesn’t think this is unique to Port Huron or the



Front door of Blue Water Ally Center in Port Huron. Courtesy photo

surrounding area.

“I don’t think it’s more dangerous than anywhere else,” Hillman said. “But I also think that it still is dangerous to be queer in our country. I worry about my husband, who’s a transgender man, if he is in the bathroom for too long.”

As a municipality, Port Huron is not easy to categorize. “Living in Port Huron is not rural,” Hillman said. “But it’s not really suburban. It’s definitely not urban.”

What’s it like to be queer in St. Clair County? BTL heard a range of answers, but none reported threats or other hostile acts in their present lives for being LGBTQ+.

For Jacie Sanders, who grew up in Flint and has lived in the Port Huron area for 40 years, blending in means she doesn’t experience

discrimination. “I’m a woman who’s transgender,” said Sanders, a longtime leader of a Transgender Michigan group in the area. “Being an older woman, they don’t pay much attention to any kind of male markers that they might pick up. Not like it was before.” She said others don’t have it as easy. “So I’m blessed that way. I’m very comfortable.”

John Middleton is 45 and grew up in Port Huron. He’s moved and returned a few times. Middleton said he has no problem telling people about his husband, but they don’t hold hands in public. And his husband is unable to be out in his career. Still, it’s a far cry from what Middleton experienced growing up in the ’90s.

Back then, “I would be walking to school, and just because I always had crazy haircuts

and stuff like that, people would yell ‘faggot’ out the window to me,” Middleton said. “And I’m like, how do you know? It’s a haircut!” He said he also sees more Pride flags around town these days.

Lisa Naveen feels comfortable, too. She said her neighborhood in Fort Gratiot is particularly welcoming. Openly queer, Naveen grew up in rural St. Clair County and today works there as an elementary school teacher.

“My coworkers know my situation and my identity,” Naveen said. “I don’t feel comfortable sharing about my family or anything like that with my students or my students’ families for the most part. So there is a big contrast.”

Even 10 years ago, when Jamie Smedley, 25, was in school, things were different.

“It was definitely tough,” Smedley said. “Our town is pretty traditional. Most people are not always necessarily open to things that aren’t cis and straight.”

But several pointed to the downtown area as becoming more welcoming, and next summer, the city will welcome back Blue Water Pride. What began with 150 visitors in 2022 grew to nearly 1,200 last year. The festival is now a program put on by the center, which achieved 501(c)(3) nonprofit status in April.

Last month, the Blue Water Ally Center received some welcome news: Nearly \$10,000 in American Rescue Plan Act dollars was secured primarily for security features for their building after a contentious meeting of the St. Clair County Commission. Lisa Beedon, the lone Democratic county commissioner, supported the application. But word got out that the county GOP would oppose the measure, and a call was subsequently blasted on social media by the Blue Water Allies and amplified by friends like the St. Clair County Democrats.

With around 40 public comments — largely supportive — over nearly two hours, the community showed up in force. In the end, the vote was 4-3 in favor. Hillman was in attendance.

“It’s really even hard for me to put together my feelings, even going on 10 days later,” Hillman said. “I never anticipated that so many people in 24 hours would take time out of their day to come and support us.” She feels that because of the positivity and variety of stories that were shared, two of the commissioners who were on the fence voted for the proposal.

Middleton, who had doubts about the success of the proposal, was thrilled. And when it comes to the existence of the center,



Rep. Laurie Pohutsky. Courtesy photo

Michigan LGBTQ+ Advocates Working to Dismantle ‘Gay Panic’ Criminal Defense

The state would become the 19th to eliminate the ‘dehumanizing’ legal argument

BY SARAH BRICKER HUNT

In a move Michigan LGBTQ+ advocates say is long overdue, the Democrat-led Michigan legislature is moving forward on HB 4718, a bill that would eliminate the “gay panic” defense across the state. The bill made it out of committee on Oct. 3.

The LGBTQ Panic Defense Elimination Bill, sponsored by openly bisexual Rep. Laurie Pohutsky (D-Livonia), aims to prohibit homophobia or knowledge of a person’s gender identity or sexual orientation as a legal defense for violent crimes. Under this bill, such defenses would no longer justify the use of force against LGBTQ+ individuals, and they would not be considered in voluntary manslaughter or insanity pleas.

“The LGBTQ panic defense is often deployed as a component of other defenses to play on the unfortunate prejudices of some judges and juries in an effort to mitigate penalties for these crimes,” Pohutsky said. “At its very core, this defense asserts that the crimes against the community carry less weight because we are inherently less human and, therefore, less valuable. What I’m asking the committee to do today is to reject that notion.”

At a hearing on Oct. 2, she emphasized that the gay panic defense perpetuates the idea that LGBTQ+ individuals are inherently less human and less valuable. Pohutsky cited the American Bar Association’s 2013 resolution urging governments to ban the gay panic defense and noted that Delaware recently became the 18th state to do so. Michigan would become 19th.

Emme Zanotti, director of advocacy and civic

engagement at Equality Michigan, supported the bill, emphasizing that using the panic defense is an abuse of the social contract among human beings. She argued that violence against the LGBTQ+ community remains high, fueled by unfounded, dehumanizing rhetoric.

“Using the panic defense, even as a sincere defense mechanism, is an egregious abuse of the social contract we should abide by as fellow human beings. Killing or assaulting someone simply because they aren’t your type or is not your ideology is an incredibly dangerous precedent to set and one that wouldn’t be entertained if it were the other way around when we’re talking about sexuality and gender identity,” Zanotti said.

“Additionally, violence against the LGBTQ community remains high alongside the heightened and unfounded rhetoric that seeks to spread malicious falsehoods and dehumanize LGBTQ people, often specifically transgender Americans,” she said.

Zanotti acknowledged that discussions were contentious on previously moved bills to give LGBTQ+ Michiganders basic non-discrimination protections, but she hoped the panel would act differently on this bill. “I hope all the members of this committee and this esteemed chamber can see their way to agreeing that being ideologically opposed to a person’s existence, or even ideologically opposed to your own physical attraction to that person and the justification of murdering them because of it, is plainly morally bankrupt,” she said.

Zanotti expressed hope that the committee would recognize the moral bankruptcy of ideologically opposing someone’s existence or physical attraction and justifying violence. The panel did not take questions during the hearing due to time constraints, but Chair Rep. Kara Hope (D-Holt) indicated that further discussions on the bill would take place in future meetings, with opportunities for questions.

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Wisconsin Gov. Says ‘Nope’ to Republican Gender-Affirming Care Ban Attempt



BY D'ANNE WITKOWSKI

I am gutted by the fighting between Israelis and Palestinians right now. I'm no foreign policy expert, but I do know that nothing good can come from one group of people not seeing another group of people as human.

Needless to say, the routine dehumanizing of transgender people by right-wing extremists in the United States is alarming. Attacking this tiny minority of already marginalized people has become a major priority for the Republican Party, even while the party seems to be falling apart. The party can't keep a Speaker of the House on the job, but Republicans across the country seem to have all the time in the world to make life harder for trans people.

In Wisconsin, Republicans are laser-focused on anti-trans legislation. Gov. Tony Evers, a Democrat, has promised to veto all anti-trans bills.

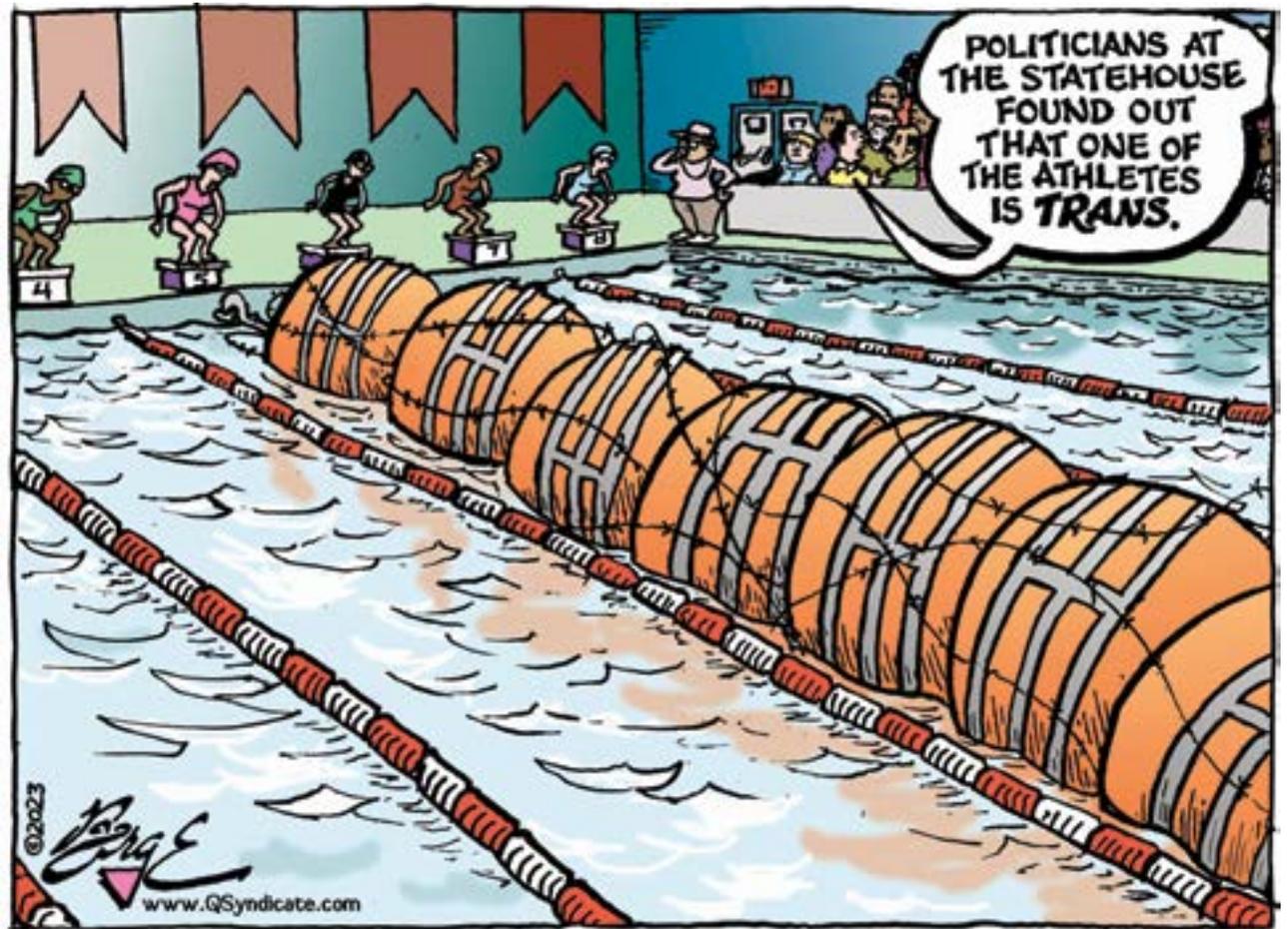
According to The Advocate, Evers wrote on social media, “My message to LGBTQ folks — especially our trans kids — is this: you are welcome, you are wanted, and you belong here. And I'll veto any bill that makes Wisconsin a less welcoming, less inclusive, and less safe place for you to be who you are.”

Evers made this comment “while legislators were hearing testimony on anti-trans bills — one to ban gender-affirming care for trans youth and two that would bar trans girls from competing in girls' school sports,” The Advocate reports.

Rep. Scott Allen is a co-sponsor of the bill to ban trans-affirming care for young people.

“To any transgender individual who may be listening today,” Allen said at a hearing on the bill, according to the Wisconsin Examiner, “I want to say you matter, and you contribute to the state of Wisconsin.”

Oh, hell no. He's giving some real “love the sinner, hate the sin” energy, and I am not here for it. You absolutely do not get to co-sponsor an anti-trans bill and tell the people you're hurting that you care about them.



“Tell me you know nothing about gender-affirming care works without telling me you know nothing about how gender-affirming care works. Actually, he did tell us. He made it very clear.”

Allen then went on to describe the type of care that he's trying to ban as “experiments,” even though gender-affirming care is far from experimental. He said he wanted young people to “consider the long-term consequences of gender transition and make an appropriate choice for them when they become a legal adult.”

Tell me you know nothing about gender-affirming care works without telling me you know nothing about how gender-affirming care works. Actually, he did tell us. He made it very clear.

It's wild that the people who are pushing these kinds of bills through legislatures

nationwide seem to think that kids decide to be transgender on a whim.

“It's not like it's something where kids just one day decide that they're trans and the next day they suddenly have surgery,” Stephanie Budge, an associate professor of counseling psychology at the UW-Madison, told the Wisconsin Examiner. “That's not how it works. There's a big process that happens for youth and how they discuss their identity and the kind of work that they do with their therapy team, their pediatricians or endocrinologists. There are a lot of people who are involved in this process, and it's not easy or quick decision-making.”

But wait, I thought kids became transgender because their woke schools had the graphic novel “Gender Queer” in their libraries, and their woke teachers told them how cool and awesome being transgender is? But this “professor of counseling psychology” is trying to tell us that it's more complicated than this? How could that possibly be? I'll take my medical advice from a random state rep in Wisconsin, thank you very much.

Obviously, I'm kidding.

A favored argument against gender-affirming care is that people grow up to regret it. But such regret is rare, Budge tells the Examiner, calling the difference for clients who have access to care “night and day.”

“I've seen people go from me, like feeling like this person probably will not live for another six months, to having that person become completely joyful and be able to be themselves, to actually be a kid and to be a person,” Budge said.

Gender-affirming care saves lives. Republicans want you to think that doctors are slicing and dicing kids' private parts, but that is not the case.

What is the case is that trans kids deserve to “be a kid and to be a person.” Dedicating yourself and your power as an elected lawmaker to deny them of such a thing is sick.

THE SCROLL

QUICK HITS & CAN'T MISSES

Michigan Supreme Court Mandates Pronoun Respect in Courtrooms

The Michigan Supreme Court has issued an order requiring all judges to address individuals in court by the pronouns they use. This historic decision was approved with a 5-2 majority.

The rule allows parties and attorneys to use honorifics such as “Ms., Mr. or Mx.” as preferred forms of address, in addition to gender-affirming pronouns. Alternatively, they can refer to individuals by their titles or roles in the case, along with their last names. The rule explicitly states, “Courts must use the individual’s name, designated salutation or personal pronouns, or other respectful means” when addressing individuals, whether orally or in writing. It will go into effect on Jan. 1, 2024.

Michigan is the first state to formally acknowledge and enforce personal pronouns in courtrooms, marking a significant milestone in LGBTQ+ rights. In her written response, Justice Elizabeth Welch underscored the responsibility of judges as public servants to treat everyone with civility and respect, acknowledging that gender identity is a fundamental part of an individual’s identity.



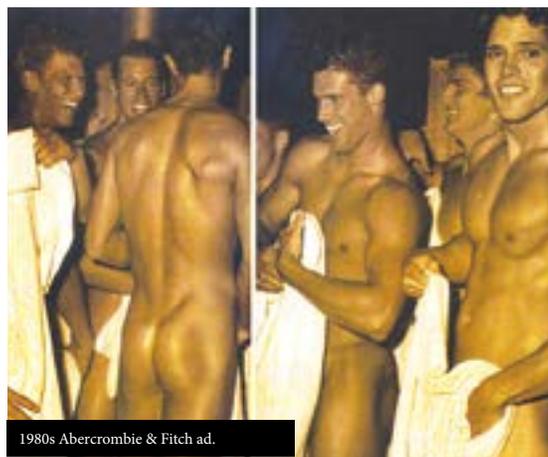
Laphonza Butler Sworn in as Nation’s First Black Lesbian Senator

On Oct. 3, Vice President Kamala Harris swore in Democrat Laphonza Butler as California’s newest U.S. senator. Butler, the first Black lesbian senator, previously led EMILY’s List and advised Harris during her 2020 presidential campaign. Butler was appointed by Gov. Gavin Newsom to fill the vacancy left by the late Sen. Dianne Feinstein and will run for the seat in the upcoming elections, facing competition from high-profile Democrats like Barbara Lee, Katie Porter and Adam Schiff.

The appointment fulfills Newsom’s promise to appoint a Black woman to Feinstein’s seat, emphasizing progressive priorities. Senate leaders and supporters attended the ceremony.



Sen. Laphonza Butler (left) with wife Neneke Lee at Butler’s swearing-in ceremony Oct. 3, 2023. Photo: Washington Blade/ Michael Key



1980s Abercrombie & Fitch ad.

New BBC Documentary Spotlights Sex Abuse at Abercrombie & Fitch

A new BBC Panorama documentary, “The Abercrombie Guys: The Dark Side Of Cool,” investigates allegations against former Abercrombie & Fitch (A&F) CEO Michael Jeffries and his partner Matthew Smith. The men accuse Jeffries and Smith

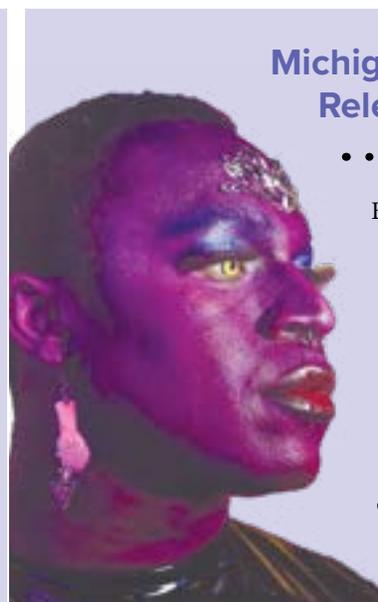
of sexual exploitation and abuse at parties held between 2009 and 2015. Victims claim they were recruited for “sex events” and misled about the nature of these gatherings. Several victims, including model Barrett Pall, share experiences of coercion and harm. Two former U.S. prosecutors suggest potential sex trafficking charges. A&F has publicly disavowed the alleged behavior, telling the BBC the company is “appalled and disgusted” and that today, the company has “zero tolerance for abuse, harassment or discrimination of any kind.”

It’s a Good Thing All We Want For Christmas Is Mariah

Queer icon Mariah Carey is gifting us some holiday joy this year with her “Merry Christmas One and All!” tour, which will play 13 U.S. arenas, including Detroit’s Little Caesars Arena on Dec. 1. It’s her first Michigan arena show since 2006. Expect classics like “All I Want for Christmas Is You,” though we’re holding out for a holiday miracle — a rare live performance of “Miss You Most (at Christmas Time).” Tickets are on sale now, and VIP packages offer premium perks.

Queer Ghosthunter Docuseries Set to Premiere on Hulu

“Living for the Dead,” a Huluween original docuseries produced by Kristen Stewart and created by the team behind “Queer Eye,” follows five queer ghost hunters as they travel the country, aiding both the living and the dead in haunted locations. The show began as a fun idea but evolved into a meaningful and entertaining venture. It marks the debut of Stewart’s production company and promises exciting journeys across the spooky world. Premiering on Hulu on Oct. 18, the show promises a unique blend of humor, emotion and supernatural exploration.



Michigan Trans Powerhouse Releases Debut Album

Transgender Ferndale Pride headliner Baddie Brooks released her debut LP, “Reclamation,” late last month. The 16-track album features Brooks’ richly layered trademark sound and plenty of queer themes, including songs titled “Trans,” “Lgbt” and “Gworlz and Gayz.” Mixed into the bass-heavy electronic vibe is Brooks on trumpet, her primary instrument; the end result is emotional and defiant. Available to stream everywhere.



Melissa Etheridge on Broadway. Photo: Jenny Anderson

How Melissa Etheridge Is Healing

In a new book and on Broadway, the queer icon reflects on the painful loss of her son, Beckett

BY CHRIS AZZOPARDI

Not so quietly, Melissa Etheridge has been grieving. At just 21, Beckett Cypher, the son of Etheridge and her former partner Julie Cypher, died from causes related to opioid addiction. Three years after his death in 2020, Etheridge is doing what she's done since she showed the world what lesbian women can do on stage in the 1980s — opening the windows to her life through her writing. This time, though, her confessional style is found within the pages of a new book, titled “Talking to My Angels.” The title is a reference to the closing song off her 1993 Grammy-winning album “Yes I Am,” which established Etheridge as a rock force to be reckoned with.

In the book, which she summarizes in the foreword as “an ode to love,” Etheridge lays a lot on the line, delving into many of the intimate details of her sturdy four-decade music career, her romantic relationships, surviving cancer, losing Beckett and raising four children: Bailey Jean Cypheridge, Miller Steven Etheridge, Johnnie Rose Etheridge and, of course, Beckett.

Etheridge called me at the end of September while en route to the Circle in the Square Theater on Broadway, where she was about to launch her “My Window” show, which was co-written by her wife, Linda Wallem-Etheridge, and runs through Nov. 19. In a review by Laura Collins-Hughes for *The New York Times*, Collins-Hughes wrote about Etheridge’s approach to Beckett’s death, writing that “the most starkly

powerful part of the show *Off Broadway* ... works less well on Broadway.”

“I cannot fault Etheridge for her stiffness in that delicate section at the performance I saw, or for reaching for words — like her blunt assessment, ‘He was difficult’ — to convey her memories,” she added. “But this is where relying on the script’s gentler, more contextual language could assuage what must be a terrible vulnerability.”

When I spoke to Etheridge while in previews for the show, she said, “I don’t know my head from my feet,” as she was entering a car to take her to the theater. Whatever discomposure she was experiencing, on topics such as her initial ambivalence toward being a parent to her opioid research foundation inspired by Beckett, she spoke her truths with

the kind of clarity we have come to expect.

Before we get into parenting, let’s talk about Broadway. How do you distill your life through music into a Broadway show?

We want to get it to two hours. It’s a bit over now. So that’s what we’re doing today is still cutting it down, because man, when I first threw my first idea together, it was like four hours long. I was like, “OK, yeah, that’s not going to fly.” So it’s really choosing the beats that I want to say, and how I want to get from beginning to now, and how to do it. And that’s art. That’s the craft of this. It’s been quite fun and interesting and exhausting.

See **Melissa Etheridge**, page 26



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The King Of Tennis Puzzle Solution
 Puzzle can be found on page 25

How My Older Sisters Equipped Me for Adulthood (and a Great Sex Life)

Parents can teach us a lot, but for this writer, sister knowledge is special

BY BONNIE JEAN FELDKAMP



While my sisters were out living their seemingly grown-up lives, I played their records and wore their clothes without permission. Old enough to date, they had secret knowledge of boys and sex. We didn't get any sit-down "talks" with our parents, and I had so many questions. The thought of asking my parents was horrifying, but I could ask my sisters. My ignorance would be embarrassing but tolerable, and I'd get the honest information I was after. Not the watered-down health class logistics parents liked to rely on.

While washing dishes one afternoon — a rotating chore — I asked my middle sister, "What's foreplay?"

I was in middle school but good enough to play in the high school marching band. The joke I'd heard went like this: What do you call warm-ups? Foreplay! Cue the

“My questions poured forth, and she answered them. I clung to the one-on-one attention and the care in her responses. She became my trusted source.”

laughing trombone.

My sister remained quiet. I turned from dishwashing to see if she had backed out of the room. She hadn't, but I could tell she didn't know whether to give me a mature answer or to burst out laughing.

If I had asked the question in the presence of both of my sisters, there would have been no struggle with maturity. My middle sister would have doled out information while my eldest sister provided the sound effects.

We were free-range-latch-key kids of the 1980s and '90s. No cell phones and no parents at home after school. I was

13 and had so much to learn from my 17- and 18-year-old sisters before they disappeared from the house and into adulthood.

I learned early on that it was best to just be quiet, listen and hope they'd let me linger. They'd soon leave me in an empty house to experiment with all the knowledge I'd acquired. Sexuality was never something they shamed, and I was grateful because puberty made me curious, and I longed for their kind of knowledge.

See **Sisters**, page 19



10 Myths About LGBTQ+ Families

Debunking those nagging stereotypes once and for all

BY DANA RUDOLPH

Misconceptions and misinformation about LGBTQ+ families can perpetuate stereotypes and lead to actions and policies that harm our children. Let's therefore debunk 10 long-running myths and offer some useful facts for countering them.

Myth: LGBTQ+ parents are a new phenomenon.

Fact: We first heard of out LGBTQ+ parents in the 1940s, mostly in the context of cases that denied them child custody after divorce from different-sex, cisgender spouses. By 1956, the lesbian civil rights group Daughters of Bilitis held discussion groups on lesbian parenthood. And queer parents in the broadest sense go even further back, arguably to the Greek poet Sappho (c. 600 BCE), who may have had a daughter.

Myth: Having LGBTQ+ parents negatively impacts children.

Fact: Cornell University's What We Know project analyzed 79 scholarly studies from 1980 to 2017 about children with gay or lesbian parents. Of those, 75 concluded that they fare no worse than other children. In the four other studies, most of the children were actually raised by different-sex parents, one or both of whom later came out. Their families, therefore, had "added stress and often disruption or family breakup," and it was that — not having gay parents in itself — that led to more negative outcomes, says the Cornell team.

In addition, a 2023 meta-analysis of 16 previous studies published in *BMJ Global Health* found that overall, children with LGBTQ+ parents have similar outcomes to those with heterosexual parents and may even

See [LGBTQ+ Family Myths](#), page 16

Fall Family Events

Little Goblins
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Family Workshop
November 4

Bird Walk
November 5

Storytime: *The Mitten*
November 7 & 14

Maker Studio: Fused Glass
November 18



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THE PARENTING GUIDE ♥

◀ LGBTQ+ Family Myths

Continued from page 15

have better ones in some areas, such as psychological adjustment and parent-child relationship quality. Other studies have shown that children of same-sex parents are more likely to have higher self-esteem, a broader conception of gender roles and to deal better with differences and conflict. There has been less research specifically on children of transgender and bisexual parents, but the little there is also points in the same direction.

Myth: LGBTQ+ families are white, middle class and living in LGBTQ-friendly states.

Fact: Same-sex couples of color are more likely than white ones to be raising children, according to the Williams Institute at the UCLA School of Law. Williams researchers also found that children of same-sex couples are more likely to live in poverty than children of heterosexual married couples. Additionally, the highest proportions of same-sex couples raising children live in Southern, Mountain West and Midwestern states, which are often less LGBTQ+ friendly.

Myth: Our kids won't be affected at all by having LGBTQ+ parents.

Fact: As noted above, children of LGBTQ+ parents may, in fact, have some positive differences from children of other parents. Yes, children of LGBTQ+ parents may also be teased or bullied about their parents' LGBTQ+ status, and their families may face legal, social and financial obstacles. Yet the root cause there is not the parents' LGBTQ+ identities per se, but rather biased attitudes and unfair laws.

Myth: All LGBTQ+ families have same-sex parents.

Fact: Although most current data, research and media attention have focused on same-sex parents, we are far more varied. According to studies from the Williams Institute, as many as 2 million to 3.7 million children under age 18 may have an LGBTQ+ parent, but only about 200,000 are being raised by a same-sex couple. The others are being raised by bisexual parents (who comprise nearly two-thirds of all LGB parents) or other LGBTQ+ parents in different-sex couples, or single parents. (Or, I would add, LGBTQ+ parents in polyamorous or co-parenting



relationships of more than two adults.) Heather had her two mommies, but the possibilities go beyond.

Myth: All our kids will be LGBTQ+.

Fact: Even though it shouldn't matter if this were true, every legitimate study that's looked at this has found that most of our kids are not LGBTQ+, just as with the general population.

Myth: None of our kids will be LGBTQ+.

Fact: Statistically, of course, some will be, just as with any large group of humans. Additionally, a few studies have found that children of same-sex parents were more likely to report a same-sex attraction or to question future heterosexual romantic relationships than children with different-sex parents — but that doesn't mean that queer parents “make” their kids queer. As Dr. Nanette Gartrell, principal researcher of the long-running National Longitudinal Lesbian Family Study, has explained about her findings, this may simply be because the children were “more attuned to their own same-sex sexual feelings because of the environment in which they were raised” and their parents were “nonjudgmental about their exploration of non-heterosexual relationships.”

Myth: We're completely different from any other type of family.

Fact: Diapers. Laundry. Sports and music practice. Homework. Family dinners. On balance, our similarities outweigh our differences.

Myth: We're just the same as any other type of family.

Fact: We are still fighting for full, legal parentage equality in most states, and we still struggle for acceptance, understanding and inclusion. We may have overcome more obstacles to starting our families and may have additional people under our family umbrellas, such as gamete donors, surrogates and birth parents, although we are neither limited to nor unique in that. We are also part of a long, proud history of LGBTQ+ people and their accomplishments.

Myth: We are redefining family.

Fact: The definition of family has varied throughout history and across cultures. In the 20th century, changing divorce laws, more open attitudes toward adoption and advances in reproductive technologies are only a few of the other factors that are continuing these evolutions.

Myths, like all good stories, have the power to mesmerize. In the real world, however, it's best to stay clear-eyed.

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



Lynn Blasey. Courtesy photo

◀ Lynn Blasey

Continued from page 6

ambitious plans if elected. She'd like to take a deep dive into Hamtramck's ordinances, something she feels suited for, with strengths in setting up and evaluating systems. She called the way the ordinances have been edited over the years "a hodgepodge."

"I would like to revisit our ordinances thoughtfully," Blasey said, "considering what is still relevant, eliminating redundancies, clarifying language — specifically with the knowledge that [for] a large portion of our Hamtramck residents, English is not their first language." It can be confusing for

native English speakers too, she noted.

Blasey is also concerned that decisions made by council are not necessarily thoughtfully considered. She has seen the council approve things just for their persuasive presentation, and that can breed mistrust. But before trust can be established, residents' basic needs must be met.

If elected, Blasey will be the lone non-Muslim councilmember. And the only woman. She said she wouldn't be running if she weren't up to the challenge.

"There are a lot of places where I would say we have more in common and we have more parallel or similar goals than we do have differences," Blasey said. "I'm willing to have those

difficult conversations and listen and see what the concerns of council are, what the concerns of the public are."

"We're not going to agree on everything," she continued. "But if we can at least listen to each other, I think that is an important step in the right direction. And I'm absolutely willing to be the dissenting vote to make sure that the voices of residents are represented, even if it's not in line with what the majority wants."

Learn more about Blasey's campaign at facebook.com/LynnBlaseyforHamtramck.

◀ Blue Water

Continued from page 8

now in its fifth month, words like "excited" and "ecstatic" came up repeatedly in these interviews.

"It's honestly such a blessing, really, to Port Huron," said Smedley. "I grew up here, and I've been openly queer since I was a teenager, and we never really had anything like this. Obviously, you could kind of create your own little communities, but having literally a brick-and-mortar place to go is completely different."

Sanders, who originally started a nonprofit herself, was excited too. "Unbeknownst to me, they were working on it too," Sanders said. "So I've kind of joined them." Sanders is mostly concerned about youth, "but I like it covering everyone," she said.

Naveen mentioned one of the programs.

"It is really nice to be able to go to art class and know that it's going to be an open and affirming group of people there," she said. "The teacher is going to be affirming, and no one is going to assume that 'my husband let me come.'"

"It is nice even though there are a lot of allies that are also at the different events and the activities that are at the Blue Water Ally Center," she added. "Everyone is very open and affirming and just lovely."

Naveen is looking forward to the homecoming gala, as is Middleton. He's going with his husband. "I actually got him talked into it because at first he wasn't sure," Middleton said. "So I was like, 'You're doing this.'"

For more information about the Blue Water Ally Center (1519 Military St., Port Huron) or the Starry Night Homecoming Gala set for Oct. 20, visit bluewaterallies.com.

Dr. Ziyad Iskenderian, MD, is an Internal Medicine physician with the Ascension Medical Group in Ferndale and Lathrup Village.

He provides primary care with a focus in weight loss, obesity management, diabetes, hypertension, and congestive heart failure.

He focuses on LGBTQ+ health and advocates for health equity.



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Parental Rights Groups Somehow Not Concerned About the Rights of Parents Like Me

BY D'ANNE WITKOWSKI

Good morning! Or whatever time of the day you're reading this. I happen to be writing this in the morning as my son, who is in high school, gets ready for the day. I remember prior to being a parent, I dreaded a future that included getting a kid off to school in the morning. I imagined it would be nothing but tension and stress and fights about putting on shoes and taking showers all while the clock counted down how many more minutes we had before being late. And there have definitely been mornings like that. But it's not as bad as I feared it would be. Most of the time.

This particular morning, I am thinking of an email I sent to my son's teacher and

principal responding to a message about a Patriot Week event I received from the school. They are having a "panel discussion and civic dialogue" that my son's class will be attending. I looked up the panelists, and they are all Republican, some of them very right-wing, such as a Michigan Supreme Court judge who has voted against LGBTQ+ rights and abortion issues.

But what concerned me most about this event was the involvement of the Patriot Week Foundation, which is described in the message from the school simply as a 501(c)(3) nonpartisan foundation. But this group is hardly some kind of innocuous entity. As I looked through their web page, I found articles with titles such as "Equity and the Race to the Bottom," in which the

author rails against "'woke' activists" and the "far-left excesses" of diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI). There are also posts criticizing the teaching or acknowledgment of systemic racism.

Needless to say, I'm not very happy that my son's school has invited this group to speak to its students, especially since the school district itself has a DEI program that it purports to stand behind. My wife and I chose this district for our son because it is one of the best in Michigan and one of the few that includes sexual orientation and gender identity in its non-discrimination language.

When I told my son about my concerns about this event, he asked if I would be upset if the panel were all Democrats. And

I said no. Which he called hypocritical. But I don't think it is. Because if the group were all Democrats, they wouldn't be against teaching about racism, which is real, or lamenting DEI initiatives, which are necessary to combat the systemic oppression of historically marginalized groups.

I tried to explain that there was no middle ground on some subjects between Republicans and Democrats because Republicans have become so extreme. Both my son and my wife pushed back on that. But I contend that you can't find a compromise with a party that, for example, believes that transgender people shouldn't exist and that anyone who is transgender or who supports transgender people is a

danger to society, especially children. You can't find middle ground on climate change when the Republican Party's position is that it's a hoax, even as we all see extreme weather events wreaking havoc around the globe with our own eyes.

It's not that I don't want my son to hear about a conservative perspective. If it were just the Michigan Supreme Court judge coming to talk to students, I would not be upset. Granted, I would ensure my son knew where this judge stands on issues important to our family. But it is the inclusion of this Patriot Foundation group that concerns me, especially since the event was framed as something nonpartisan. This group clearly has a political agenda and an interpretation of this country's founding principles that is decidedly right-wing.

All of this has got me thinking about the "parental rights" movement in this country. The many people who claim that school libraries carrying books that have any LGBTQ+ characters or themes violate their parental rights. That teaching about slavery or acknowledging past and present racism in this country violates their parental rights. That making kids wear masks during a pandemic, a decidedly scary and unsure time for everyone, violates their

parental rights. These groups claim that public schools are indoctrinating students, turning them into transgender Marxists.

What about *my* parental rights? These parental rights groups, like Moms for Liberty, have a very narrow definition of who parents are and what constitutes a legitimate concern. The fact is, parents already have a lot of rights when it comes to their kids' education, including putting them into private schools or homeschooling if they find public schools objectionable. Parents are free to contact teachers and administrators with questions and concerns — just like I myself did about the Patriot Week event. There is not some insidious left-wing agenda afoot in our public schools. There is, however, a movement of Christian Nationalists who believe that this country belongs to them — and only them. They are a minority, to be sure, but they are very loud.

Parents who believe in teaching actual history, including being forthright about this nation's history of racism, and who believe that LGBTQ+ students deserve to be protected and treated with acceptance at school have to be louder. There are more of us than there are of them. You have the right and a duty as a parent to speak up.

◀ Sisters

Continued from page 14

One sister said, "It's like sucking on an ice cube." The other sister demonstrated on her finger how she followed her tongue down her throat and avoided her gag reflex. She could also demonstrate with a pickle spear. I understood this to be a vital skill — not gagging. If I could have sat in the room with a notebook and gotten away with it, I would have. Instead, I kept my mouth shut so they would open theirs.

Our frequent family trips to Florida explored nature, not amusement parks. Once, we rented innertubes with the intent of floating down Rainbow River looking for blue crab and gars in the river's clear water. Our dad and stepmom quickly disappeared with snorkels and masks. We sisters stayed together.

The tubes had handles. We each held onto the handle of another's tube and created a curvy floating triangle. My sisters talked. At one point, my middle sister and I held our eldest sister's tube while she used a sunscreen stick the size of a large glue stick as a prop to demonstrate the technique and finesse required when engaging an eager penis. I watched wide-eyed. Alligators could have swum beneath our tubes, and I would not have noticed. My sister's nature lesson was far more impressive. I dared not speak — just soaked it all in and basked in the sunlight of her know-how. I wondered where my sister had learned all of this. Did an older cousin or more experienced friend teach her those things? Or had she fumbled around in the dark, a sexual pioneer without an elder female guide?

That day in the kitchen, my middle sister answered my foreplay question. She was straightforward and clear. Our conversation continued in her room upstairs — chores abandoned. My questions poured forth, and she answered them. I clung to the one-on-one attention and the care in her responses. She became my trusted source.

Years later, she would "come out" as a lesbian. She had taught me so much about boys that I never doubted her crystal-clear understanding that men were not what she wanted.

My eldest sister grew up to be straight and Catholic.

I landed somewhere in between. Heteroflexible. Forever grateful they never shooed me away from their revealing conversations. Sisters passing on knowledge in brave dialogue with details no parent dared to divulge.

A few years ago, I attended my younger cousin's wedding reception. She and her groom had an intimate destination wedding and hosted a larger celebration once they returned home. My beautiful cousin pulled me aside to tell me, "My husband doesn't know it, but he thanks you."

My sisters don't know it either, but they say, "You're welcome."

Bonnie Jean Feldkamp is the Opinion Editor for Pulitzer Prize-winning Louisville Courier-Journal. She is also an award-winning syndicated columnist with Creators Syndicate. Her columns often seek to understand how current events and family life intersect. Find her on social media @WriterBonnie.

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Judy Lewis. Photo: Andrew Potter

Why LGBTQ+ Advocate Judy Lewis Has Dedicated Her Career to Helping Michigan's Older LGBTQ+ Community

Lewis' negative personal interaction with local medical facility fuels her continued commitment

BY SARAH BRICKER HUNT

This article is part of the News is Out "Out and Aging" series, made possible with support from AARP.

Longtime queer community advocate and all-around rockstar servant of the people Judy Lewis isn't sure why we'd want to interview her, but she's happy to accommodate our request. "I'm here for whatever you need," she says. It's a phrase that could be a guiding

principle for a career that has seen Lewis jumping in to help people who've needed her for decades. She's just wired that way — "efficient, competent, trustworthy and one of the funniest people I know," says one longtime community partner, Between The Lines Publisher Emeritus Jan Stevenson.

In part, it was Lewis' personal perspective that led her down a path toward co-founding and serving in her current role as lead training and tabling manager for MiGen, the agency formerly known as SAGE Metro

Detroit that focuses on LGBTQ+ advocacy for community members 45 and up. "I had pneumonia, and I was at one of the hospitals locally," she recalls of an experience that happened around 40 years ago. "And the nurse must have recognized that the woman who brought me was my partner or a more 'intimate friend,' and she was not happy..."

The story Lewis recounts about the experience won't be unfamiliar to older members of the LGBTQ+ community.

"I was taken in a wheelchair for an X-ray,

and this woman turned the chair to face the wall, where the people in line waiting for their X-rays could see me. And all I could think about at that point, because I was just terrified, was not having enough air, somehow. And wondering, 'What are they gonna do to me?' I kept thinking, 'Just breathe into your nose and out through your mouth and don't cry or, or you'll die.'" At the time, Lewis' daughter was only a few years old.

Recently, Lewis visited the same hospital under dramatically different circumstances

“They’d move to these places and decide that from now on, they are no longer going to see their friends because they don’t want guilt by association.”

— Judy Lewis, remembering conversations with older LGBTQ+ people moving to care facilities before she co-founded SAGE Metro Detroit

when she delivered a presentation to the facility’s geriatric physicians and fellows. “I told that story, and they said that would never happen now,” she says with a smile. Today, the hospital has a diversity group and a task force focused on inclusion. Lewis made sure to confirm that “diversity” at the facility includes the LGBTQ+ community. It’s important to clarify that it wasn’t too long ago, Lewis says, that emergency workers could legally refuse to carry LGBTQ+ patients in their ambulances. “EMS could stop and let you out,” she remembers. “And you were not protected.”

Lewis and MiGen help deliver a wealth of services to Michigan’s older adult LGBTQ+ community, from helping clients overcome issues like food insecurity to connecting them to social groups, tech help, medical resources, transportation and more. The organization is a co-sponsor of the Raymond E. Shepherd House, an LGBTQ-affirming affordable housing project for older adults currently under construction in Ferndale.

MiGen Executive Director Angela Gabridge says Lewis has been a “consistent drumbeat in the need for this work and has worked with Area Agencies on Aging (AAA), long-term care providers and others across Michigan for many years to provide culturally responsive training that improves the lives and care of LGBTQ+ older adults.”

Prior to co-founding MiGen, Lewis worked in various leadership roles at local LGBTQ+ organizations, including as the executive director of the Jewish Gay Network of Michigan from 2009 to 2011. It was there that she realized how little attention was being paid to older community members

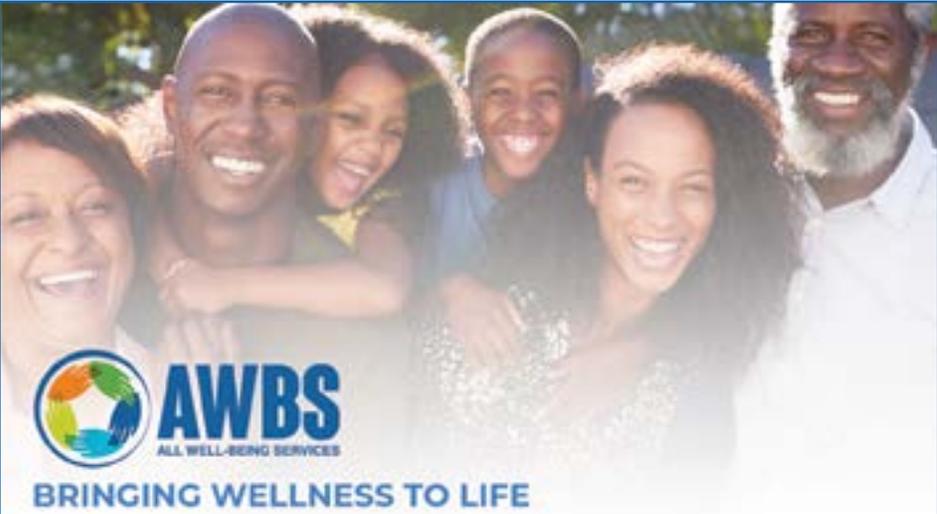
when it came to services and advocacy. She reached out to fellow community organizer Jay Kaplan and asked him to connect her with community professionals who might welcome programming focused on older LGBTQ+ adults. “And his response was, ‘Not only don’t I know anyone I can direct you to, but let me tell you some horrible stories...’”

When Lewis first contacted Kaplan, who now serves as an attorney for the Michigan ACLU’s LGBTQ+ Project, he recalls that there was no identifiable program within the LGBTQ+ community that addressed the issues and challenges facing older adults, let alone one with the required cultural competency to be effective. “I’d heard stories about long-term partners of same-sex couples evicted from their homes by their partner’s family after the partner had died and of families not permitting same-sex partners to visit loved ones at nursing home facilities,” he says. “I also heard about adult foster care programs prohibiting transgender residents from being able to present themselves in accordance with their gender identity.”

Social opportunities for older LGBTQ+ adults were sorely lacking, as well, Kaplan says. “There was nothing in 2010 — no LGBTQ+ organizations that I was aware of at the time offering any program that provided opportunities for socialization and visibility in the community.”

Lewis began to hear about trans folks having their clothing taken away and queer people being subjected to conversion therapy tactics in their living communities. Local advocacy groups like Affirmations reported

See **Judy Lewis**, page 27



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The Evolution of LGBTQ+ Online Dating

From Gay.Net to Grindr

BY MICHELE ZIPKIN

Special to BTL from the LGBTQ+ History Project

From casual hookups to friendships to meeting the love of your life, LGBTQ+ online dating was created out of a need for community.

When I first messaged my wife of six years on OkCupid in 2014, I didn't realize I was taking part in an online LGBTQ+ culture that first manifested in the early 1990s. I turned to dating apps specifically to find a romantic partner and to take the guesswork out of flirting with women in real life. But little did I know that the world of queer online dating and connection was born in part out of the need for solidarity between gay men during the early years of the HIV/AIDS crisis.

Andy Cramer, currently the CEO of Caregiving Network, launched the bulletin

board system Gay.Net in December 1993. Bulletin board systems (BBS) were the major online spaces. They were “local or regional dial-up networks — often running on a single computer or a handful of them — operated mostly by hobbyists or enthusiasts,” writer and software engineer David Auerbach wrote in the Slate article “When AOL was GayOL.” A lot of BBSs for gay men developed in the 1980s and 1990s, such as the Backroom and Gay.Net.

Cramer came up with the idea for Gay.Net after he had been operating several Headlines stores on Castro and Polk streets in San Francisco, which were “the epicenters of gay life,” he said. When HIV/AIDS hit the U.S. in 1981, Cramer and his employees across 10 stores became frontline workers over the next 14 years.

“We had fundraisers, we sold condoms for a penny,” Cramer said. “We did everything that we could do.”

Cramer thought about the thousands of people he helped over the course of a decade

and a half, how he lost so many friends to AIDS and how lonely that was for gay men who felt disconnected from the community.

“I went out and I bought a bulletin board system because at the time, there was nothing online,” Cramer said.

Cramer launched Gay.Net using BBS software with graphical overlays, and mailed out diskettes that allowed members to install the software. In the first year of its existence, 10,000 gay and bisexual men paid \$10 a month to access Gay.Net, which was initially run on just 16 modems.

“We had Prodigy, we had AOL and CompuServe,” Cramer said. “They were all heavily censored. I wanted to open up a site where people could be who they were. People first put on fake pictures, then they put on avatars, and then they put on real pictures, but the real pictures contained all kinds of things.”

Cramer even met his husband of 27 years, Al Farmer, through Gay.Net. Farmer initially couldn't log onto the platform for a month

because it was so popular and its modems were always tied up. After Cramer eventually took Gay.Net onto the web, Farmer, a technology expert who worked for IBM at the time, would sign on every day and help Cramer improve aspects of the site.

Cramer later merged Gay.Net with Gay.com, which grew from 1 million to 4 million users in 1999. He left the company later that year, and it went public in 2004. The site went through numerous leadership changes before it was eventually sold to the Los Angeles LGBT Center.

“I'm proud of it to this day,” Cramer said. “We created the first site where people can go who were lonely and unsure of themselves to be able to go meet each other. Some people met each other in many different ways, but it really was the first dating site. Even to this day, I get people walking up to me saying, ‘Thank you, I got married because of you.’ And ‘Thank you, I got my first boyfriend.’ I was very happy to bring 4 to 6 million people together.”

Even though Cramer had lesbian friends at the time, he didn't know how to foster the same sense of online community for queer women, he said. But that doesn't mean that there weren't digital spaces for lesbians in the early to mid 1990s. Even before email became mainstream, email lists became very popular for the lesbian community. Jean Marie Diaz created Sappho in the U.S. in 1987, which was ground zero for lesbian lists then, Auerbach reported in Slate.

However, lists that were designated as solely for lesbians sparked "debates" regarding whether users felt comfortable with bisexual and trans women taking part, Amy Goodloe told Slate. Goodloe ran numerous LGBTQ+ lists and created Lesbian.org in the mid 1990s, one of the first big lesbian websites.

In a NetCafe video interview housed on archive.org, Goodloe said she built the site "for women to be able to find each other; to be able to communicate with other women going through similar issues that they might be going through; to find other lesbians in their area, or women just struggling with their identity." She made the site for "people who want information about coming out; people who want information about support groups in their area; what is it like to be a lesbian mom?"

She added, "I wanted it to be, more than anything, a place for a group of people who [don't] have much visibility in the culture to come together and find each other and know that they're not alone."

Despite the existence of some online spaces and a variety of email lists for queer women, spaces for queer men continued to go full-steam ahead in the '90s. Services like Compuserve and AOL made it easier to get online by providing community forums and chat rooms, according to Auerbach. Later in the decade, AOL became rife with gay-centric chat rooms.

The website Gaydar, which launched in 1999, was another early mainstream gay dating site. It provided a space for queer men to talk to each other in chat rooms and one on one. "Gaydar was made to broadly appeal to guys wanting dates, relationships and just sex," according to PinkNews. Gary Frisch and his partner Henry Badenhorst, two South African men who have since passed away, founded Gaydar.

Although more queer-specific dating apps popped up in the 2000s as the internet became more sophisticated, one of the early web 2.0-era dating apps that attracted LGBTQ+ users was OkCupid, which launched in 2004. OkCupid matches people based on in-app questions, which are tailored for queer users and even vary for different sub-identities within the LGBTQ+ umbrella, said Michael Kaye, director of brand marketing and communications for OkCupid.

"I think LGBTQ+ people were always really early adopters to online dating," Kaye said. "Speaking from experience, we are limited to the safe spaces that we have available. However, when we first launched [OkCupid] and still to this day, we've always positioned ourselves as a dating app for everyone — no matter how you identify, no matter what you're looking for."

OkCupid was the first dating app to expand gender and sexual orientation identifiers,

which they fleshed out to 60 identifiers in 2021, thanks to a partnership with the Human Rights Campaign. The OkCupid team also works with GLAAD to expand pronoun options for users.

"We are seeing that with each generation, they're becoming more and more fluid," Kaye added. "They're becoming more open with sharing their identity. Almost 20% of daters in the United States on OkCupid identify as LGBTQ+. This was up from 18% in 2022 and 17% in 2021."

Dr. Timaree, sexologist, professor, writer and human sexuality consultant, said she thinks it's helpful for people to have as many options as possible when it comes to making connections.

"Whether you're queer, poly, a parent, trans, have specific political beliefs, a positive STI status, a religious affiliation — whatever — there are advantages to putting these parts of your life front and center, even as they narrow your potential targets," she said in an email. "An early example of this was when OkCupid let users choose to only be visible to other queer folks. If you're a lesbian who doesn't want to hear from a bunch of straight men, for example, that kind of option makes the experience of the site much better."

The landscape of queer dating seemed to change again when Grindr came out in 2009, a men who have sex with men-centric dating app that probably needs no introduction. Co-launched by tech entrepreneur Joel Simkhai, Grindr was the first geolocation dating app and one of the first third-party apps for the iPhone. It was created "as a casual dating app for the queer community," said Grindr's Chief Product Officer AJ Balance.

"Grindr is a community that welcomes anyone who wants to use the app," Balance said. "We have users of all genders and sexualities who use the app. Queer men are the largest segment but over time, we've seen more user segments adopt the app and then find value in it. Over time, Grindr has become really important to a lot of folks in the community. Many users do use it for casual dating, and users also find dates and long-term partners from the app."

As its usership grew over the years, Grindr started to provide sexual health resources to its userbase, including a blueprint for trans and nonbinary sexual health. The blueprint includes info on general sexual health concerns, the social determinants of health, sex work and other topics. Grindr also provides resources like free HIV/STI home tests, information about DoxyPEP and vaccinations, and other connections to resources. This effort is part of the social justice program Grindr for Equality, which centers on "LGBTQ+ safety, health and human rights worldwide," according to its website.

However, Simkhai left Grindr in 2017 after spending years as its CEO, during a time when issues of transphobia, racism and fatphobia permeated some of the app's usership, NBC News reported in 2022. That year, Simkhai launched the dating app Motto, which he created to try to stave off the culture of "toxicity

See [Online Dating](#), page 24

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◀ Online Dating

Continued from page 23

and discrimination” that has pervaded other queer dating apps, according to NBC News.

Balance, Grindr’s chief product officer, said that the team takes safety and privacy very seriously, and takes measures to ensure that users’ experiences are safe and confidential.

“We have both technology and operational processes to ensure user safety and privacy, including both proactive and reactive components,” Balance said. “For example, we have very robust moderation capabilities where users can report incidents and our team responds quickly to help address them. We also take proactive steps to help identify and prevent any negative experiences that users could face on the platform.”

Like Simkhai’s Motto, some queer dating app creators who have launched products a little more recently are making concerted efforts to be more inclusive of trans and nonbinary users. One such app is HER, which describes itself as a “FLINTA [female, lesbian, intersex, trans and gender] community and dating app.”

“At HER, we aim to create a secure space for queer folks to unapologetically be themselves and build meaningful connections,” HER founder Robyn Exton said in an email. “We have vigorous verification processes and community guidelines, all with user safety in mind.”

This year, the HER team upped the ante on its “no TERFs” policy, sent out user notifications and publicly conveyed an anti-TERF position on Lesbian Visibility Day, Exton said.

Before launching HER in 2015, dating for LGBTQ+ women had its challenges, Exton said.

“All of the online platforms for women were just reskins of sites built for gay men but turned pink, asking you how much body hair you had, or straight sites that were filled with guys asking you for a threesome. It felt crazy to me, at the time, that no one had truly made a dating product for women.”

Before rebranding the app to HER, Exton first released it as Dattch, which was solely a dating and hookup app designed for women seeking women. Exton found that Grindr was the first dating app that she thought created “an incredible experience for its users.”

“It was a huge inspiration for starting HER,” Exton said. “When we first came out, we were very similar to Grindr — very hookup-focused and it didn’t really work for our community. We learned that the experience on so many dating apps was designed to serve men, including all the straight apps. There was just nothing out there that displayed the information women wanted to see, that connected the community, that resonated with the young queer women I knew.”

Currently, HER provides users with more content, events and opportunities to connect with friends.

“We listened really carefully to what people were asking for and as we realized so many people were using the app to make friends,” Exton said. “We realized their needs sat so

much further outside of dating and we wanted to be a part of the total experience.”

Other dating apps exist that say they’re designed specifically for the trans community. One such app is Tser, “a trans dating app for transgender people and their allies to meet online,” according to its website. It also brands itself as a social community where trans folks can go to find friendship and support. The app website says that trans people created Tser.

However, Tser received mixed reviews on appfollow.com. One user said that despite the app not sending them notifications, “I’ve been pretty happy with this app so far. I can actually message people and see who messaged me for free, unlike other apps.”

Another user wrote on appfollow that they found Tser to contain “highly transphobic language everywhere, both from users and creators. Putting cis people in as ‘men’ and ‘women’ invalidates trans women and trans men as women and men. ‘Transsexual’ is an outdated term that many trans people find quite offensive and dehumanizing.”

Mary Richardson, who created the label-free LGBTQ+ dating app Bindr in 2022 with her business partner Brandon Teller, said they came up with the idea for it when “we felt like there wasn’t anywhere that we personally belonged in the dating scene.”

Bindr doesn’t prompt users to share their sexual orientation or gender identity, but they’re welcome to include those details in their profiles. Richardson said that trans women approached her table at Pride events and told her that they don’t typically feel safe on dating apps, but they would feel safe using Bindr because they know she’s in charge of it. Richardson reads every user support ticket herself, she said.

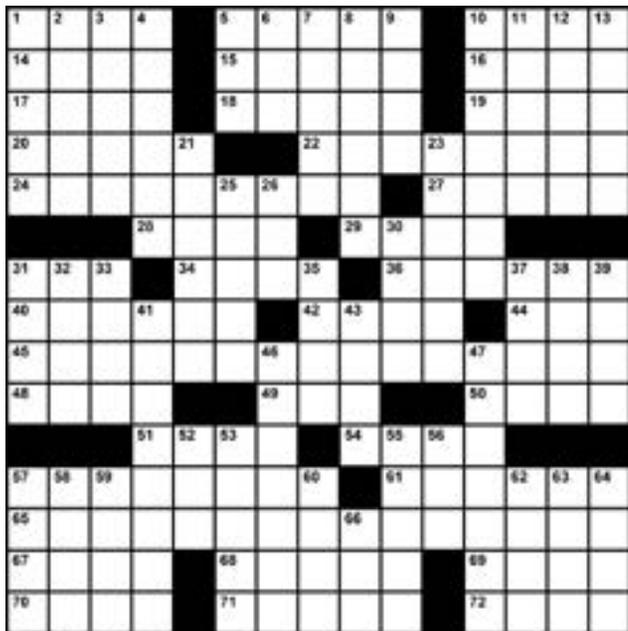
“My main goal is for transgender, nonbinary, everybody in between, all of these [lesser] known sexualities and gender orientations to have somewhere they can go and feel safe and not discriminated against,” Richardson said.

More of every kind of niche dating app exists these days, and because more and more people identify as part of the LGBTQ+ community, there are more queer-specific dating sites and apps in recent years, Dr. Timaree said.

“Whether it’s better or easier now is a matter of personal opinion,” she said. “More choices mean more opportunities but it also means a dilemma of too much choice. Dating apps create a marketplace-like dynamic where we’re more prone to see each other as products. We try to optimize what we get and we treat each as more disposable.”

“For most of history, we met people at work, friends or family. There was an obligation to be baseline polite to each other, some accountability. Now you can talk to someone for weeks and then stop communicating suddenly without warning. It’s harder to be open to real connections when we’re guarding ourselves from that.”

This article is courtesy of Philadelphia Gay News as part of a shared media partnership related to the LGBTQ+ History Project.



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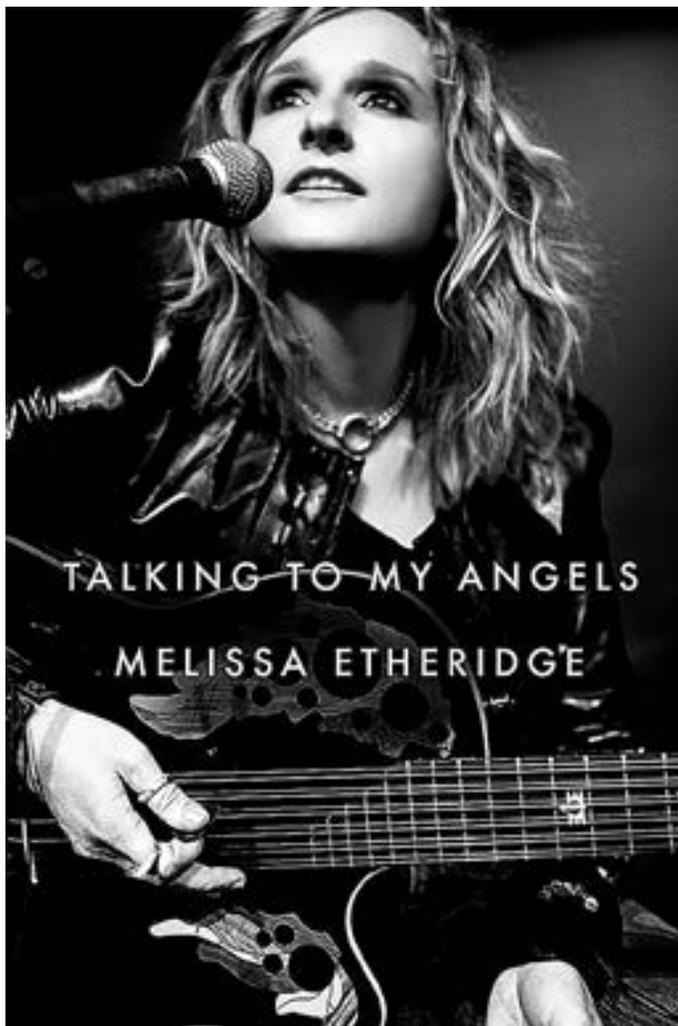
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◀ Melissa Etheridge

Continued from page 12

We last connected at the beginning of the pandemic, and if you're like other creative people I know or have spoken to, then perhaps you needed a project. It sounds like you found that in the show, but also the book. Was the pandemic a reflective time for you?

Yeah. My thing was, it just all started happening at once. I had three or four desires that I've been trying to do over the last decade, then they all came together at once. I think the pandemic sort of made everybody hungry, so all of a sudden it was the book and the show, and we have a documentary coming out next year about the women's prison in Kansas, but that's later. I can't talk about that now.

In the book, you write a lot about your parents and about now being a parent yourself. How has time shifted your perspective on how you reflect on the way you were raised by your parents?

As I grow and change, my memories grow and change. It doesn't stay the same. You see things

differently. I certainly have more of an understanding. I'm older than my father ever lived to be. I can look back and go, "Oh, this is what it's like to be a parent. This is what it's like to have lived your life and then have children." And so, the older I get, the more knowledge I have, and the more understanding I have of my parents and the events that happened in my childhood.

How has being a parent yourself helped you better understand your parents?

When we're younger, we tend to blame our parents: "Well, if my mother had loved me more, then I wouldn't be so sad or depressed." And at some point in your adulthood, you have to go, "I can either keep looking back and blaming and staying a victim or I can step up and go, 'Maybe all that happened, but that was

the past and I'm not going to have it define me now.'"

With my first book, my mother was very mad at me for quite a while. Because when we were growing up, it was, "We don't air our dirty laundry in front of people." Fortunately, there are people that have stepped up and go, "Hey, this happened." And it helps people that are going through it now, and I think that's the best part.

You get to Beckett's death in the beginning of the book, but you write that you didn't just want this book to be about his death. Instead, it's about accepting his death and then finding a way forward despite the pain. Why did that seem like the right approach?

[His death] had such a great effect on me. I can walk around and go, "All is love. Choose only love. It's important to be happy." But then when life happens, when the contrast comes, when it's things that seem to take you down to the bone, that's when I say — no, if I truly believe all is love, and we're going to choose only love here, I have to see this as a temporary existence that we all have, and we all make choices. Some of us are here for a little while, some of us are here for a

long while, and all in between, and no one is responsible for anyone else's happiness. And you can't save anyone; you can only inspire them. And the way that I can continue to inspire my friends and my family is to be the best I can be, to show what happiness and joy looks like, even when there is loss, which there always is. We are here to experience loss.

Your dedication to Beckett in the beginning of the book is so poignant: "For my son Beckett who is with me every day in the nonphysical." How do you interpret the nonphysical in relation to him?

Well, you can look at it a bunch of different ways. We can look at it esoterically, which is, we all really exist in our minds, and we are all just perceiving everything, and we only have the capacity to perceive a certain amount of the energy around us, that which we call the live energy. But if you look at it scientifically, we only perceive 4% of the energy that is in this magnificent energy field. And that's the scientific way of looking at it. So who are we to say that the 4% is all that there is? There's nothing in that 96%? No, there's a whole nonphysical energy field that I believe is larger than us and where we come from, and everybody calls it all different sorts of things: God, Spirit, the universe. But I do believe that we came from there, we are all connected to there and we're all going back there.

In the book, you acknowledge your initial ambivalence toward being a parent. Do you think that there's something about being a queer person, specifically a gay woman, that shaped the way that you thought about parenthood?

I don't know if it has to do with that, necessarily. Although growing up in the '60s and '70s, if you were gay, it just wasn't an option. It was part of what parents would be so upset about: "You're never going to have children," that sort of thing. I think that was my first kind of thought. And the second was, I didn't exactly have great love and affection for my mother, and so I was kind of like, "Well, what's being a mother mean?" It seemed like there was a lot that I wanted to do for myself, and I didn't know if there was any room to take care of anyone else. But then it's funny, and that's the whole other journey in itself — when it happens, or if it happens or if it doesn't, it doesn't really matter. There's no right or wrong to it. It's just going to be what you're going to walk in that moment, day to day.

And with your music, how has parenthood shaped that aspect of your life?

Couldn't write those naughty love songs anymore. [Laughs.]

Not when they were young, right?

No. Because I wasn't planning on children, I could write all those naughty songs and not worry about it, but now my kids are like, "Wow, what's that?" But I grew up, and just growing up makes a big difference. I don't know if it's the kids or anything, but your music changes as you change as a person. What's important to you, what moves you, what you want to write about, what am I thinking, what am I experiencing? It's just different than it was when I was 25 or 30.

Your daughter, Bailey, is queer. What's it like seeing her grow up now as a queer person compared to your own experiences as a young queer person?

I think it's really different, and for her, growing up with queer parents, she cannot understand any sort of limitations because she didn't grow up with that. So it makes absolutely no sense to her. She told me when she was an adolescent, "Mom, when you raised me, I actually thought there were at least as many gay people in the world as there were straight people," because that's all who she met. So she kind of comes from that equality place as a natural surrounding, but now she works for GLAAD, and she is very, very active and does so much because she does have such a sense of equality that she was raised with.

I don't have to tell you that the opioid crisis in America is devastating. And that hit home for you. Can you talk about what Beckett's death inspired, which was the Etheridge Foundation?

The path I've been on has been filled with a lot of understanding of plant medicine and psychedelics and how much it's helped me, and how much I've seen in the research, how much it helps others. It especially does help in opioid use disorder as just a way to get through this and off of this. It doesn't exist in the pharmaceutical world. And it's as much of just gathering the research and the data to show folks, because there's such a misunderstanding of it all. So that's what the Etheridge Foundation does. It raises funds for research and testing. It's not very easy because there's a bunch of laws that are in the way. So it's trying to change hearts and minds about all that.

Has the foundation helped you heal?

Oh yeah, hugely, because I wanted to do something. I felt so helpless. And it does make me feel like there's movement forward on this, and maybe I could help. This can help someone somewhere.

This interview has been lightly edited and condensed for clarity.



Judy Lewis. Photo: Andrew Potter

◀ Judy Lewis

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that longtime clients frequently requested their names be taken off mailing lists so they wouldn't be outed to staff or fellow residents at their assisted living facilities. "They'd move to these places and decide that from now on, they are no longer going to see their friends because they don't want guilt by association," she says. "They're afraid of what workmen might do if they came into their places and saw something that appeared gay."

It's a situation that still happens today, but much less frequently, thanks in big part to the kind of advocacy Lewis has spent years cultivating alongside other local community leaders, developing training and education programs for companies and organizations large and small. "We would talk to them about how to come out as an ally to your constituents, your clients, patients, participants and so on and, and it grew from there," she remembers.

"It's been quite a journey because now we cover sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, but the work is really the same — we're working to change the culture and to change the hearts of people."

Looking ahead, MiGen is partnering with the Michigan Department of Health and

Human Services on a program focused on expanding care and housing options and reducing abuse and neglect in the older adult community throughout the state. However, Gabridge says, forward momentum has stalled in at least one area due to language in the multi-year plan centered on diversity, equity and inclusion and providing responsive care to the LGBTQ+ community. The Delta County Senior Commission, based in the U.P., voted down the plan because of this language. Gabridge and MiGen are working to reach community members who need services in that part of the state and other rural communities.

Lewis acknowledges that legal achievements like the recent LGBTQ-discrimination amendment to Michigan's Elliott-Larsen Civil Rights Act are critical for the safety of the sss community but adds that legislative success doesn't always match the reality of everyday life for people experiencing discrimination. "I go back to the Civil Rights Act from 1965 and ask how that's going for us," she laments. "We're not done here."

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