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BY CHRIS AZZOPARDI

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gay icon
herself

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HIV and AIDS Still on the
Minds of Gen Z

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5 Queer Things You Can Do Right Now-ish

BY SARAH BRICKER HUNT

Whether you're planning to bathe yourself in every drop of holiday splendor you can squeeze out of the 2023 holiday season or just hoping it will go quickly, you're not alone. If you're in the former camp, join up with other merry revelers at holiday shows, including Mariah Carey's "Merry Christmas One and All!," PRISM's holiday choral concert and a special holiday Ringwald Theatre performance celebrating Barbra Streisand. You'll find non-holiday events to keep on your radar, too, like a World AIDS Day commemoration and a young adult educational event through Stand with Trans focused on financial literacy.



Mariah Carey. Courtesy photo

Have a Mariah-y Christmas

The Queen of Christmas herself will kick off December in the merriest of displays right here in Detroit. Mariah Carey's "Merry Christmas One and All!," set for Dec. 1 at Little Caesars Arena, is sure to feature the kind of sing-it-to-the-rafters, sparkly holiday joy you've come to anticipate from the queer icon, just in time to fortify you ahead of the busy season. Of course she will also perform everyone's favorite modern classic, too — don't miss your chance to see it live, sung by the Queen herself.

Dec. 1, 7:30 p.m., Little Caesars Arena (2645 Woodward Ave., Detroit). Tickets at 313presents.com/events/detail/mariah-carey.



Commemorate World AIDS Day

Head to Royal Oak First United Methodist Church on Dec. 1, the 35th annual World AIDS Day, for a special presentation featuring speakers Dr. Paul Benson and Kathy Gerus-Darbison. Light refreshments will be served and attendees can view a panel from the AIDS Memorial Quilt. Sponsored in part by the Oakland County Health Division, the commemoration will also include a candlelight vigil and a performance by Sing Out Detroit.

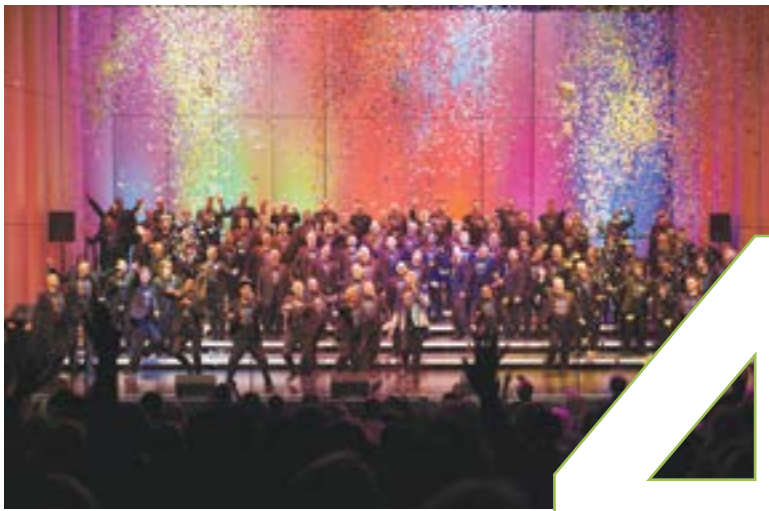
Dec. 1, 6:30-9:30 p.m., Royal Oak First United Methodist Church (320 W. 7th St., Royal Oak).



Learn About Financial Independence

The latest offering in Stand with Trans' community education workshops will help young adults ages 13-24 learn how to be financially independent. "Learn to Do Life: Financial Literacy," sponsored by Community Financial Credit Union, will cover topics like reading pay stubs, the ins and out of filing taxes for the first time, basic information about banking services (including how to open an account), and some tips on building up a savings account and using credit responsibly. Lunch is included.

Dec. 2, 10:30 a.m.-12:30 p.m., Community Financial Credit Union (500 S. Harvey St., Plymouth). Register at bit.ly/howtodolife23.



PRISM Men's Chorus. Courtesy photo

Get Tickets for PRISM's Holiday Show

Reserve your tickets now for the always-popular PRISM Men's Chorus holiday concert. This year's event, PRISM Men's Chorus Lights Up the World, is set for Dec. 16. Bill LeAnnais, PRISM Chorus production chair, invites the community to a performance that he told BTL will feel like a warm hug — "something we all need more than ever." "We set out to make an inclusive program to lighten up your December," he adds. "It's been such a blast singing music from so many genres, languages and traditions — all with the throughline that light unites all of our world's celebrations and therefore all of us."

Dec. 16, 8 p.m., Macomb Center for the Performing Arts (44575 Garfield Road, Clinton Township). Buy tickets at bit.ly/3SKzaxJ.



See 'Jingle Babs' at the Ringwald

Save some room on your calendar for a holiday show a little different from the rest. "Jingle Babs," written by Ringwald Theatre veteran actor Vince Kelley and directed by Ringwald co-founder and media director Brandy Joe Plambeck, will transport audiences back in time to Christmas Eve, 1967. Barbra Streisand (played by Richard Payton) is preparing for a live televised concert featuring famous friends until an ill-timed snowstorm puts the kibosh on her plans. Always the winning improviser, Babs enlists the help of the everyday people who happen to be on hand. Can the janitor pull off a convincing Liberace? Reserve your tickets to find out!

Dec. 1-18, 8 p.m. Fridays, Saturdays and Mondays and 3 p.m. on Sundays, The Ringwald Theatre at Affirmations (290 W. 9 Mile Road, Ferndale). Tickets at bit.ly/3ssGgfw.

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World AIDS Day is a day to unite in efforts to end the global HIV pandemic, show support for those living with HIV, and remember those who have lost their lives to the disease.

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 - ▶ **Severe liver problems,** which in rare cases can lead to death. Tell your healthcare provider right away if you get these symptoms: skin or the white part of your eyes turns yellow, dark “tea-colored” urine, light-colored stools, loss of appetite for several days or longer, nausea, or stomach-area pain.
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Transphobic Facebook Post Leads to Discrimination Charges for Michigan Salon

BY SARAH BRICKER HUNT

Studio 8 Hair Lab is in the “find out” phase of its “fuck around and find out” transphobic journey that began in July.

On July 10, the business posted to Facebook, “If a human identifies as anything other than a man/woman please seek services at a local pet groomer.” To drive home the point that they really, really mean it, Studio 8 added, “You are not welcome at this salon. Period. Should you request to have a particular pronoun used please note we may simply refer to you as ‘hey you.’”

As BTL reported at the time, the salon’s owner, Christine Geiger, took down the post and the studio’s social media accounts when things didn’t go her way (to the tune of hundreds of super angry responses and angry-face reactions), but everything on the internet is potentially immortal. Screenshots of the post spread quickly, and a would-be localized story about a single anti-trans hair stylist in a quiet Michigan town soon made international news.

Five months later, the Michigan Civil Rights Commission has handed down a discrimination charge to the Traverse City business, which faces potential fines and the suspension or revocation of its business license. A hearing will be held before an administrative law judge.

John Johnson, Jr., executive director of the Michigan Department of Civil Rights (MDCR), said during a press conference on Nov. 15 that the salon “flagrantly violated” the Elliott-Larsen Civil Rights Act’s (ELCRA) public accommodation provisions, describing the case as “not complicated.” “It is not a case that relies on complex legal concepts or that requires expensive or convoluted arguments to explain. Christine Geiger has responsibilities under law as the owner of a business offering services to the public in the state of Michigan,” he added.

While the expanded ELCRA provisions related to LGBTQ+ rights does not go into effect until Feb. 13, the commission has interpreted the law to include sexual orientation and sexual identity for many years, an interpretation upheld by the Michigan Supreme Court in 2022.

Geiger has not participated in the MDCR’s investigation. “Our staff attorney attempted to set up a meeting with [Geiger] to address the issues in the complaint and to go over the sufficient evidence that we found,” MDCR Director of Enforcement Marcellina Trevino said at the news conference. “To our dismay, the respondent refused to participate in conciliation, and therefore our staff attorney drafted a charge which was filed this morning with the Michigan Office of Administrative Hearings and Rules.”

The salon has, however, sued the city of Traverse City and three individuals who filed certified complaints with the MDCR on free speech and free exercise of religion grounds in late October, citing her business’s right to “use its talents and the expressive platform they have to celebrate and promote God’s design for male and female.”



Why These State Reps Are Working to Change Michigan’s Surrogacy Laws

Queer Michigan parents often have to break the law to grow their families

BY SARAH BRICKER HUNT

Becoming a parent as a member of the queer community is often a challenging, expensive process. In Michigan, it can be downright criminal.

Right now, contracting with a surrogate in Michigan is literally a felony, according to the 1988 Surrogate Parenting Act, which was enacted after a paid surrogate who used her own eggs refused to relinquish the child after giving birth, resulting in a drawn-out legal battle with the biological father.

However well-meaning, the criminalization of surrogacy has made the already challenging process of becoming a parent an even more daunting prospect for members of the LGBTQ+ community, for couples experiencing infertility and for anyone who wants to grow their family with the help of a willing surrogate. That’s why the Michigan House passed a bill package on Nov. 9 that is set to make surrogacy contracts legal in the state, aligning Michigan with the majority of the country.

The law states that any surrogacy agreement made in Michigan is null, void and unenforceable and that the surrogate (and their spouse, if there is one) are the legal parents. Gaining parental rights means parties who have hired the surrogate must go through the traditional adoption process or gain approval through a judge.

Michigan Rep. Samantha Steckloff, a sponsor of the bill package, has been candid about her own fertility struggles following chemotherapy. According to Steckloff, the primary focus of this legislation is on “parentage and protecting our families,” ensuring the well-being and recognition of all Michigan’s children, regardless of how they enter the world.

State rep and co-sponsor Laurie Pohutsky, who is openly bisexual, told BTL that the bill package aims to bring Michigan

laws up-to-date with modern technology and medicine and acknowledges that families are created in various ways, including with assisted reproduction. “The package will ensure that families utilizing assisted reproduction, including those from the LGBTQ+ community, have the same rights and protections other families do,” she said.

Rep. Jason Morgan, another openly queer member of the Michigan House and a co-sponsor, said he is proud to have supported the bill package. “Updating Michigan’s surrogacy and reproduction laws not only expand family options but champions equality, empowering LGBTQ+ families to build their futures without discrimination,” he said. “This package establishes a legal framework for LGBTQ+ families to pursue parenthood and will enable families to make this decision for themselves.”

The bills, which passed the House with a 56-53 party-line vote and will head to the Senate next, would permit paid surrogacy contracts and modify birth certificate requirements to automatically include children born through surrogacy as legal heirs for inheritance purposes.

Although the bills faced unified Republican opposition, with concerns raised about turning surrogacy into a for-profit industry, Steckloff told 9 and 10 News that the legislation doesn’t mandate payment for surrogacy services. Instead, it provides the option for compensation, emphasizing that Michigan’s regulations require surrogates to be at least 21 years old and have had a child before.

Co-sponsor Rep. Jason Hoskins notes that Michigan has some of the toughest laws on the books when it comes to surrogacy, statutes that have hurt both gay and straight families over the years. “In a political landscape that can often be cruel, I’m happy to be a part of a positive change so that everybody, including people like you and I, can have a shot at the family of their dreams,” he said.

LGBTQ+ Candidates Scored Big Throughout Michigan in the 2023 Election

Cheers to the queers who won and ran proudly

BY ELLEN SHANNA KNOPPOW

With the 2023 municipal elections in hindsight, there are some key takeaways to keep in mind when viewed through a queer lens. That's what BTL found after sitting down with two openly LGBTQ+ political pundits, former Michigan Democratic Party First Vice Chair Mark LaChey and Kelsey Heck Wood, Michigan state political director of Run For Something. Each analyzed the significant queer wins and interpreted the trends.

First up is Spencer Calhoun, who won his race for city commission not too many years after being kicked out of his parents' home for being gay. The city of Mount Clemens embraced Calhoun, who will now return the favor by serving as an elected official. Calhoun was sworn in to office on Nov. 13.

"It's remarkable that in our community, someone just like me can show up and be adopted by members in the community and by the community as a whole," Calhoun said. "It speaks volumes how I was able this time to run openly and share with people my story, my full story and my full self, that people accepted it and related to it. And that means a lot. It's a big deal."

Calhoun is looking forward to a more open and transparent city government that's accessible to residents. With plans to encourage greater participation in boards and commissions, he is also intrigued with another municipality's recent move to remove gendered language from the city charter and ordinances.

Mount Clemens' soon-to-be youngest city commissioner is known well by the folks at Run For Something, an organization that recruits and supports progressives up to age 40 in local races. Calhoun was first endorsed in his 2022 school board race. Wood said Calhoun learned from that loss.

"Something that we really love and pride ourselves about at Run For Something is if you run and lose, you should run again,"

Wood said. This time around Calhoun started earlier in the game. He worked hard for small donations and for the support of the community and organizations.

"And I know that he was really focused on knocking doors, as well," Wood continued. "I think those campaign basics really paid off for him. His story is just really incredible and moving, and I'm really excited for what he's going to do for Mount Clemens."

Another queer-friendly enclave of Macomb County, Eastpointe, has elected Mike Klinefelt, who was sworn in as mayor on Nov. 13. Along with Calhoun, Klinefelt is one of the only known elected officials in Macomb County to run as an openly queer community member. He is the county's first openly LGBTQ+ mayor.

Heading out the door is homophobic Mayor Monique Owens, who left crime and scandal in her wake for as long as she served.

"I'm looking forward to improving the reputation of our city government with our residents, and improving the perception of our city for those who live outside of our community," Klinefelt said. He's confident that next year, a Pride Month resolution will be successful after years of the issue being viewed negatively by Owens and her predecessor.

LaChey applauded the victory. "We win where we show up and where we run," he said. Today, people look to see whether the candidate will do a good job for the city, not whether they're LGBTQ+. "It's a win for Eastpointe and a win for Macomb County," LaChey added.

Wood commented on the support Klinefelt received from the Macomb County Dems. "I think that Macomb County is going to be one of the most watched places in the country next year," she said. In particular, she's looking at the county prosecutor and school board races.

"When we're thinking about book bans and trans issues in schools, making sure that we're getting people running for school board who care about protecting kids and protecting their ability to learn safely, that's something that I'm personally really invested in," Wood said.

Heading to the Upper Peninsula on the Wisconsin border, the conservative town of



Spencer Calhoun. Courtesy photo

Menominee saw 33-year-old gay Republican Casey Hoffman beat the incumbent mayor to become possibly the first openly queer elected official in Yooper history. Hoffman said he recognizes the significance of that and praised his opponent for being an ally. One of Hoffman's first tasks will be to establish June as Pride Month in Menominee.

"I campaigned on restoring funding to the local library, taking the trash out on time and creating jobs," Hoffman said. "Voters slowly started paying attention to my ideas instead of my sexuality. It didn't start out that way. I was defeated for state

representative in 2022, in part because voters were afraid of electing a gay person."

Both Wood and LaChey agreed that oftentimes in local races, it's the focus on community issues that count, not political party. Pointing to Ottawa County, Wood observed the "interesting alliances" of progressive groups and traditionally Republican groups. What they're looking for is competency over ideology, she said. "They want the water to turn on and to be safe to drink."

See **Post Election**, page 15

One Million Moms Aghast at Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade Non-Binary Extravaganza



BY D'ANNE WITKOWSKI

I'm not really a parade person. I've never understood the allure of Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade (MTDP). New York is really cold in late November. I've caught glimpses of the parade on TV over the years, and even that feels cold. So many people in earmuffs and puffy jackets. Hard pass.

Except for this year, mind you. Because I just found out that MTDP is going to be a non-binary and transgender extravaganza. Is that enough for me to pack a bag and high-tail it to New York? Absolutely not. But I will be cheering the queering of the MTDP from my couch in Michigan. In spirit, really, because I likely will not be watching the parade regardless.

I never even would have known that MTDP was going gay all the way if it weren't for One Million Moms (OMM), a group of, presumably, moms, who rail against anything and everything LGBTQ+ in popular culture. The organization also does not have one million members. But I have to agree that One Million Moms sounds better than One Thousand Moms or A Handful of Moms Who Are Haters.

Honestly, I can't really think of a better PR team for any company or entity that wants

Fierstein In Drag As Mrs. Santa, OMM writes, "The non-binary and transgender extravaganza on display this Thanksgiving will be brought to you by Macy's during their annually sponsored Thanksgiving Day Parade. Unless they are forewarned about it, this year's holiday parade will potentially expose tens of millions of viewers at home to the liberal LGBTQ agenda."

It's wild to me that conservatives still believe that sexual orientation and gender identity are contagious. Especially since so

It's wild to me that conservatives still believe that sexual orientation and gender identity are contagious. Especially since so many of these same conservatives refused to believe the same thing of COVID-19 while people all over the world died (and are still dying).

people to know it accepts LGBTQ+ people than to be targeted by OMM. Like, I'm a card-carrying member of the Gay Agenda, and I didn't even know what Macy's was planning. OMM truly has its finger on the pulse.

On their website, under a photo from the 2003 MTDP of Harvey

many of these same conservatives refused to believe the same thing of COVID-19 while people all over the world died (and are still dying). Anyway, I suppose OMM believes they are doing the Lord's work and forewarning about what they believe will be an LGBTQ+ super spreader event.



I read on, anticipating the juicy details. "Performances showcased in the parade will include music from two Broadway musicals, '8 & Juliet' and 'Shucked,' both of which feature transgender and non-binary performers in major roles," OMM writes.

Wait, OMM is mad because MTDP will include... performances from Broadway musicals? What? Is OMM just now learning that musicals are, um, not exactly known to be the domain of the straights?

"Justin David Sullivan, who personally identifies as non-binary, will be featured in the '8 & Juliet' parade performance. On stage in the musical, Sullivan plays the role of 'May,' a non-binary friend of Juliet," OMM writes. "This year, Sullivan declined eligibility for the Tony Awards, saying traditional acting categories need to be reconsidered to become more 'inclusive' of gender non-conforming actors."

Hmm, sounds like Sullivan is, well, kind of awesome? Declining eligibility for a Tony in order to stand up for what you believe in sounds pretty badass to me.

"Alex Newell, a biological male who also identifies as non-binary, won a Tony Award this year for his starring performance in 'Shucked,' playing the female role of Lulu," continues OMM. "Newell, who uses all pronouns (he/she/they), has worn women's clothes in

recent public appearances and dressed in a shimmering, gold ball gown for the Tonys."

Hmm, I keep scanning this part about Alex Newell looking for the problem. It sounds like OMM is mad because Newell is too fabulous?

OMM then helpfully informs readers that "Thanksgiving Day, this liberal nonsense will be broadcast live from New York on NBC, starting at 8:30 a.m. Eastern."

Mark your calendars!

OMM urges people to sign their petition telling Macy's: "I do not agree with the LGBTQ agenda you are pushing on families during your Thanksgiving Day Parade. My family and I will not watch this indoctrination. Since this event goes against our beliefs and values, Macy's has left conservative and Christian families with no choice but to avoid the parade and its stores, even during the holiday season. My family will not support Macy's; you have lost our trust."

At the time of this writing, the "one million moms" had gathered around 30,000 signatures. Which means 30,000 fewer people to contend with on Black Friday while getting those sweet, sweet Macy's deals. Thanks for the shopping tip, OMM!

THE SCROLL

QUICK HITS & CAN'T MISSES

Ozone House Youth Shelter Seeks Holiday Gifts for Residents

According to the National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty, around 4.2 million youth experience homelessness in the U.S. each year, with LGBTQ+ youth 120% more likely to versus their non-LGBTQ+ peers. Ozone House in Ypsilanti serves as a lifeline to local youth facing these situations, providing 24/7 support, emergency shelter, housing and other services for runaway, homeless and high-risk youth, including many LGBTQ+ kids who have been turned away from home.

The holiday season can be extra difficult, which is why the organization is asking community members to help celebrate Ozone House residents and support recipients by providing a holiday gift from an online wishlist. Visit amzn.to/3G4oumf to view the list or go to ozonehouse.org to make a direct donation. You can also email Development Associate Megh Hollowell at mhollowell@ozonehouse.org to donate gift cards, new winter jackets or other holiday items.



Ferndale Pride Awards Grants to Local LGBTQ+ Advocacy Groups

Ferndale Pride and Ferndale Community Foundation distributed \$24,500 in grant funding at a recent city council meeting. The funds, made possible by the success of this year's Ferndale Pride, went to 11 community groups, including Affirmations, ACCESS, Gender Identity Network, Matrix Human Services, TG Detroit and Transgender Michigan.

"Events like Ferndale Pride and the Ferndale Pride Golf Scramble provide opportunities for LGBTQ people to enjoy life and find community," said Ferndale Pride Executive Director Julia Music at the event. "We are proud to bring the community together and to have given \$350,000 over the past 13 years to local nonprofits."

Susan Crocker, director of operations for Transgender Michigan, said the grant helps them to host events like Transgender Pride in the Park, Transgender Health Fair and Transgender Job Fair.



Voters Re-Fund Library Targeted by Book Bans

Voters in West Michigan sent a clear message to far-right book banners on Nov. 7. The famously defunded Patmos Library has secured taxpayer support after facing closure

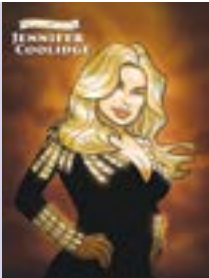
triggered by controversies surrounding LGBTQ-themed books. The 63-37 vote marks the end of one of Michigan's most fervent culture wars over books and perhaps the beginning of a wider effort to fight the nationwide, coordinated effort to ban books from libraries and schools by groups like Moms for Liberty and Ottawa Impact.

Pink Showers Fans with Banned Books

Thousands of Pink fans in Florida took home special gifts after concerts in Miami and Sunrise earlier this month — copies of books frequently banned in the state. The peaceful act of defiance is thanks to a partnership with PEN America, which works to defend and promote freedom of expression. "Books have held a special joy for me from the time I was a child... I am unwilling to stand by and watch while books are banned by schools," Pink said in a news release.

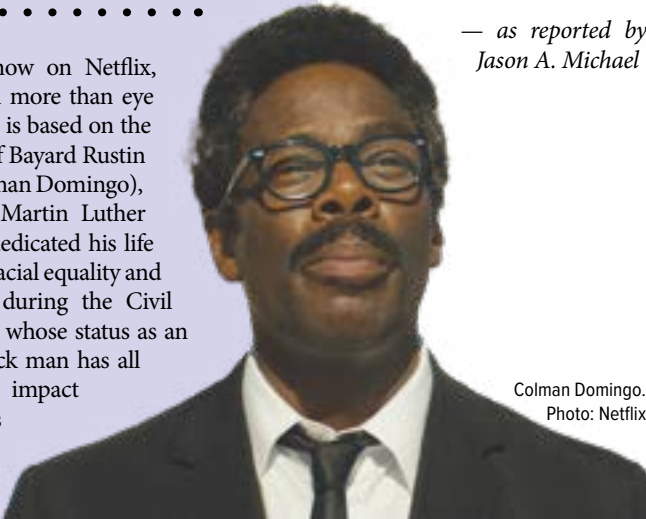
New Comic Spotlights Jennifer Coolidge

A new digital and print comic book, "Female Force: Jennifer Coolidge," written by Darren G. Davis and illustrated by Ramon Salas, features the beloved LGBTQ+ ally in a biographical format perfectly suited to the larger-than-life persona and vegan animal-lover. The Female Force comic book series focuses on powerful female figures like Michelle Obama, Madonna and Dolly Parton. Learn more at tidalwavecomics.com.



Netflix's 'Rustin' Features Queer Civil Rights Hero

"Rustin," out now on Netflix, offers up much more than eye candy. The film is based on the real-life story of Bayard Rustin (played by Colman Domingo), an advisor to Martin Luther King, Jr. who dedicated his life to fighting for racial equality and human rights during the Civil Rights Era, but whose status as an openly gay Black man has all but erased his impact from the annals of history.



— as reported by Jason A. Michael

Colman Domingo. Photo: Netflix



Ice goddess and gay icon Cher. Photo: An Le

Cher talks Christmas album, anti-LGBTQ+ ‘insanity’ and never taking credit for co-writing ‘Believe’

BY CHRIS AZZOPARDI

After being introduced to Cher on the phone as her “old friend Chris” by Cher’s longtime publicist Liz Rosenberg, there is only one sensible way for me to respond: “Hello, old friend Cher.”

Calling Cher an old friend to Cher feels completely natural — well, almost. There is at least some familiarity in knowing her off the phone too, through a treasure trove of a half-century’s worth of artistic contributions, even if the icon is a higher pop culture power. But then, at the same time, the enduring gay icon has also been like an old friend to those in the LGBTQ+ community, including me.

Just a couple of years after coming out at 18, I saw my first Cher concert with my mom, who brought Cher into my world when I was a young kid, before I felt confident enough to tell her I was gay (weird to think that now even Cher knows I’m gay). The 2002 show at the Palace of Auburn Hills, part of her not-so-farewell “Farewell Tour,” is one of my earliest memories of finding other gay people outside of male-for-male AOL chat rooms — so many gay Cher fans in one big space, a glittery, strutting pop goddess our master of ceremonies.

From her California home on a recent November day, Cher says this relationship she has with us runs even deeper, though. That particular connection, she notes, began at 9 when she first felt like an outsider herself. Now, at 77, it has only strengthened after six decades spent growing a gay icon status built on music and film, live shows across the globe and the kind of loyal allyship that feels like a mother’s love. “We’re family,” she tells me.

I first interviewed Cher in 2018, just after she released an album of ABBA covers for “Mamma Mia! Here We Go Again,” which also starred the Oscar-winning actress. This time, our conversation was prompted by a different project, one that she surprisingly has never tackled until now: a Christmas album.

Titled simply “Christmas,” Cher does the holidays her own way, with a couple of Christmas party songs — the “Believe”-style club romp “DJ Play That Christmas Song” and the funky hip-hop track “Drop Top Sleigh Ride” with rapper Tyga — along with two collaborations featuring fellow gay icon Cyndi Lauper and a duet with Darlene Love on “Christmas (Baby Please Come Home).” On the poignant album closer, “This Will Be Our Year,” she, like the best of friends, keeps the light flickering in the dark. “I won’t forget the way you held me up when I was down,” she sings, “and I won’t forget the way you said, ‘Darling, I love you, you gave me faith to go on.’”

An “old friend” can also get away with joking that they’ll punch you if you print something that is said off the record, which Cher did during our wide-ranging interview on everything from the possibility of touring again and anti-trans hostility to being “so stupid” for not taking credit for co-writing “Believe.”

It’s wonderful to talk to you again.

I bet you didn’t think you’d be talking to me again. Is this the third time?

This is the second. Where are you going to be in your career the third time we talk?

I’ll be singin’ in heaven, baby! I think that we could get a long extension cord.

I heard you were just at the gym.

Well, I was doing steps for “DJ,” and I was down in the gym earlier working out. So put some ketchup on me because I’m fried!

I miss you on what was formerly known as Twitter. I just miss the constant witticisms.

Can I tell you something? *I* miss it. You have no idea how I miss

it. When Twitter was real, I did it through Tweetbot, and so when I came on, everybody that was a fan of mine just came there. Now, everybody is scattered. I can't find people. This is just, please... I don't know. Don't fuck with something that's good, OK? If you buy it, why ruin it?

That sounds like a good career motto.

[Laughs.] It always hasn't been true, Chris.

How so?

This is the weird thing: People always say, "Oh, you keep reinventing yourself." That's not exactly true. I've probably been like this since I was about 5, but I have valleys that are like, "What is going on here?" And then I do something, and it comes to the public and all of a sudden people go, "Oh my god, she reinvented herself again." No, I just got a job. Tell me, have I ever been different?

I feel like the essence of Cher has always been Cher.

Even on this album. It's a Cher album.

There's no "Silent Night," right?

No, there's no "Silent Night."

What songs were you eager to do and which ones did you say no to?

I just picked all the songs. And I had some friends that gave me songs and I took some of them. Like Rob Dickins gave me "Run Rudolph Run" and then Sarah Hudson, who I've known since she was 4, wrote "DJ," "Drop Top Sleigh" and "Angels in the Snow."

But I didn't have anybody in the beginning. I wasn't planning it either. I called Cyn and I said, "If I did something on my Christmas album and it was good for you, would you want to do something?" And I have no idea why I did it. But it happened really with Stevie [Wonder]. Because I'd done the song ["What Christmas Means to Me"] and there were parts that were just... I couldn't find them.

So I called Stevie and I was like... well, if I say something, will you not print it?

Off the record between us?

Yeah. I want to say this one word and it won't sound... you have to swear to God or I will come and punch your lights out!

Can I say *that*?

[Laughs.] All right. Anyway... oh, fuck. I don't want to say it. I'm afraid it won't sound good. So anyway, I was really, really frightened and I was saying, "Do you think Stevie will remember that we knew each other?" And so I called him and I was like, "Stevie? Um, this is Cher." "Hi, Cher." "Well, Stevie, uh, I did your song but there are parts in it that I can't do and I need you to do it." He said, "Is it one of

Oh, did you hear about how the Pope came out? I mean, he didn't come out, but you know what I mean. [Laughs.] He came out with a thing where he's recognizing the LGBT community. They can be godfathers and they can be whatever. I was so, so happy. Prejudice in this country is... I can't find the word because I don't know words bad enough. I mean, it could be an atomic bomb of a word. I just don't know words bad enough to say how I feel.

I wanted to ask you about how hard this year has been for LGBTQ+ people because the community is so close to your heart.

“*Prejudice in this country is... I can't find the word because I don't know words bad enough. I mean, it could be an atomic bomb of a word.*

my songs?" And I'm like, "Yeah, of course it's one of your songs." And so then he said, as we were hanging up, "Cher, you want me to play harmonica?" And I passed out. And then I ran around my room screaming and jumped on my bed, and I was screaming, "Stevie Wonder's going to be on my album!" Over and over and over. Until I fell down dead.

I love the idea of Cher being starstruck. It's like, you are my Stevie Wonder right now.

Yeah, but he's a genius.

And you mean the world to people like me who are queer.

I know, and I'm so angry. I'm so angry with America for every fucking thing — racism and anti-Semitism and being anti-LGBT.

Do you know why? Do you have any idea why?

I know you and the community go way back.

Way back to 9. But it's because we're both outsiders. We're all outsiders.

You've always felt that way about yourself?

Always. And so I gravitated to these two [gay] guys and then I met my first lesbian and she was fabulous. She was a friend of my mom's, and then as I started to grow up, I came in contact with everybody [in the community]. I said to some guy the other day, "You're my brother." We're brothers and sisters. We're family. It came out of me, but that's kind of the way I feel.

In a lot of ways, it feels like I was raised by my mother,

but I was also raised by Cher.

Well, it doesn't get better than that. You have two moms.

But what you're saying about how hard things have been this year, as a gay person, it has felt particularly harsh this year.

Babe, it's been since Trump. Can I tell you a little story?

Yes, of course.

I had a friend and he had a friend and she was this little girl who worked in the FBI and she infiltrated a white supremacist group. She was with them, I think,

was nervous and I was afraid, and Chaz is my child and I'm Cher and I thought, "This is going to be a major spotlight." But Chaz is so happy and we have so much fun together. Also, I have to tell you this, and this might not be politically correct, but when you have a trans child, you know the child you had, but you don't know the new child. There's a big difference. But the person is the same. But Chaz has different feelings about things, you know? Like, Chaz comes from a guy's point of view.

What would you tell people who struggle to understand or accept trans people?

I would tell them if I woke up tomorrow and I was a guy, I would just lose my mind. [Laughs.] And that's what I would tell people: "What if you woke up tomorrow and you were in the wrong body?" Everyone can understand that. It's like, if you woke up tomorrow and you were a different sex but you had no control, you would just want to kill yourself.

There's been so many attacks on drag queens in the country, and I'm thinking about all the Cher drag queens when I ask this next question. But what are your thoughts on how conservatives think that drag queens are trying to groom children?

Oh my god, it's fucking insane, OK? Like, you're just going to pull that out of you know where? I think Democrats, they've got to get some show business. They've got to get something that's not dry, because they don't really understand how to sell it. I mean, I think Joe's doing a great job. Not in everything. I don't agree with him on a few things, but he's done a lot of good, and the thing is, no matter how bad any other candidate would be, it couldn't touch the hem of Trump's garment with how horrible he is. We can't use that as an idea because that has a religious connotation and I just forgot. I just meant no one is as bad as he is. I can't fathom what it would be like to be him.

See **Cher**, page 22

On Choosing to Not Choose a ‘Chosen Family’

For this writer,
family — by any
definition — is
complicated

BY DANI LAMORTE

Choosy moms select something. I forget what, if I ever knew, but they choose and that’s the American way. We choose our political representatives, or at least we fill out a nifty form with such implications. We choose from nearly identical consumer products, each labeled with spectacular specialness. Women had a right to choose for several decades, but some not-so-choice politicians erroneously saw themselves in clumps of mindless cells and chose to kill the present to save a future that was never on the way. Choice stands in for freedom. Choice, choosing, making things chosen is taken to be a sign that you’re free.

Choosing your mom is another matter. Despite conservative jangling about your right to make choices while not-yet-you was still in utero, there’s no consensus that you should have a say in who your family is. When people attempt to intervene in biological assignations, we use a frustrated term: chosen family. Chosen, because the family members were consciously selected. Family, because, well, you can’t just choose to not have a family at all. Choice has its limits.

Family, as it’s sold, is made of obligations. You call and check in. You help and hold. As it’s sold, all those benefits flow in reverse, too, giving you the support and attention you need. You’re obliged to keep the family ever extending, whether that means roping your reluctant spouse into a cookout or trotting all your children to Gam Gam and Pap Pap’s for Memorial Day.

If you choose to reduce the size of the family by leaving, perhaps it’s because family has failed. For many LGBTQ+ people, it might be a failure by others in your first family to find lovable, or even tolerable, what you desire. For me, it was an intensely patriarchal tenor that organized the group: adults resenting each other’s joys, perennially suspicious of one

another’s goodwill. Fulfillment and pleasure were taken as cues to ask: “Who do you think you are?”

Family is the original context for our lives. It was decided, without you, that you would be born and would be kept in the family. For adoptees, it was decided you would be brought in, added to the family from elsewhere. You’re given a family name, by which schools, churches and governments all index you. The shape of your face and speech mimic the fundamental characters from your early years: mom, dad. Some of us work to change these things, but we have to work to change them. It is not encouraged. I think of family, and I admit to my bias in this, as an injunction. Family says: Don’t.

Choices are limited.

Dr. Michael Shulman, an Ann Arbor-based psychologist and psychoanalyst says, “We all have an unconscious mind, which can lead us to find partners, friends and chosen family members who have been modeled on our caregivers in growing up. Often, we choose partners who are not people who bring out the best in us.” It’s not self-sabotage exactly, but more of an attempt to repeat a scenario, perhaps to confirm or resolve it. We may also try to repeat good relationships we lost to death, or lost when we opened up about ourselves. Family, chosen or not, is a kind of repetition.

It’s no easy thing, choosing to choose. Legally and socially, things are not set up to help you share resources with your neighbor-as-mother or inherit custody of your friend-as-niece’s children when she suddenly passes. When was the last time a health insurance company extended “family coverage” to a lesbian-sports-league-teammate-as-sibling? Family is a system for managing property and people-as-property as much as anything else. Choosing to choose a family is not an escape from obligation, but a complication. Some personal sorrow meets indifference from the state. Failure to be seen in one arena leads to invisibility in another.

We might ask if the very idea of family is the trouble. Family is generally seen as goodness. Compare “family” to other group words like “gang,” “cult” or “ring.”



Family seems clean. It’s a floating virtue, without a clear history or politics. “Families’ are pure present and always tense,” scholar Hortense Spillers writes in her lauded 1987 essay, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book.” As Spillers explains, this sense of the floating, good, present family is an intentional fabrication.

Choice, as it relates to family, has always been a racial matter. Consider anti-miscegenation laws which, for more than a century, made mixed-race heterosexual coupling illegal. Consider also the transatlantic slave trade which made the branches and nodes of family difficult to understand. The rape of enslaved Black women by white enslavers meant that a child may have in one individual both a father and a man who owns them as property. In its multitude of cruel impacts, slavery turned the whole structure of family against Black individuals and communities, made ties to one another uncertain and conflicted. In the midst of this, the legal and social concept of

family encouraged the procreation of white generations who inherited wealth, land and networks of enslaved Black individuals who were denied the benefits of the same concept. These brutal histories make it difficult to know just what we mean when we say “family.”

If there are multiple meanings — conscious and unconscious — at play when we say “family,” I think writing by Judith Butler suggests we might also not know why we’re saying “family.” In a 2002 article on the gay marriage debates in France, Butler writes that both proponents and detractors treated “Is gay marriage correct?” as the question to be answered. That question took up all the space in the discussion, making it difficult to ask: Why is marriage the answer to our socio-political troubles? Let me borrow from Butler to ask: Why is family, even chosen family, the answer?

I have no family. It’s a matter of some choice by me, some choice by others. What I have, instead, are

friends. They vary in their closeness to me and how long we’ve known each other. We do not always agree, and maybe do not always fully support one another. Linkages grow, diminish, change, reform, surprise. My friends are who I turn to when I desperately want to confide in a parent or sibling. At times, I glimpse the kinds of memories and conflicts Dr. Shulman mentions, memories and conflicts I’m reworking with and through.

For all that, I never call them my family. Family is about obligation, and we aren’t obliged to love one another. Family is about origins and names, and we know each other beyond and around and against these. Family is about controlling desires and property, and we share freely, maybe foolishly, maybe against the possibility of it all being remembered in traditions or stories.

Family wants to go on forever, in name or deed. Friends want to love right now. I would never choose family over that. Then again, the choice is never quite mine to make.

When it comes to Hoffman’s political affiliation, LaChey cautioned to view it differently from the GOP at the national level, which is very clearly focused on an anti-LGBTQ+ agenda.

“When you get down to local races, we can have LGBTQ Republicans win elections and then not only represent their local community but become a seat at the table to say, ‘Hey, we’re here and don’t continue your policies that are against us,’” LaChey said. “For our effort to move forward for equality, we can honestly not just rely on one political party. We need people in all corners of Michigan and people in all corners of our political spectrum.”

In another mayoral race, this one closer to home, ally candidate Raylon Leaks-May bested her LGBTQ+ opponent in a landslide with 81 percent of the vote. Leaks-May is well known to Ferndalians as a council member, former school board trustee and for her longtime involvement with the community. She holds the distinction of becoming Ferndale’s first Black mayor.

LaChey, who knows of Leaks-May from his years in Pleasant Ridge politics, commented on the inability of a queer mayoral candidate to gain a foothold in an LGBTQ+ stronghold.

“We can elect allies that will actually do

better for our community,” he continued. “Raylon absolutely put her footprint on the community for a long, long time and showed that to the electorate at large, including, apparently, the LGBTQ community in Ferndale, that she would be an asset to Ferndale as mayor.”

For the Ferndale city council races, the three candidates who ran for two open seats were all highly qualified and all LGBTQ+. Donnie Johnson was the early winner, while Rolanda Kelley also earned a spot after coming in slightly ahead of Dennis Whittie.

“Ferndale continues to represent,” said LaChey, who then reflected on the 30 years since he served on city council in Pleasant Ridge. It still holds true that in certain races, competitors of LGBTQ+ candidates are subtly (and sometimes, blatantly) implying that queer candidates don’t hold “family values.” Proving oneself as able to represent the entire community can be a hurdle to overcome, even today.

There are many more openly LGBTQ+ municipal-level candidates today than in the ’90s, and that’s important for a couple reasons, LaChey explained. “One, it shows that we are serving our communities that we live in and that we care about,” he said.

“But also, it is vitally important because those are the building-the-bench type of races where people get known in their communities,” LaChey continued. “And



Newly elected Menominee mayor Casey Hoffman. Courtesy photo

we’ve seen it time and time again. I think of Mike McFall, for example. Dave Coulter. Jeremy Moss. Where people serve on a local level, get known in their respective communities, and then use that, if they so choose, to move into higher office. And it is not unique to the LGBTQ community.”

Recently, the Victory Fund reported a rainbow wave across the country in which

128 LGBTQ+ candidates (including 103 Victory Fund endorsed candidates) won their campaigns, shattering records from previous odd-year election cycles.

“It’s gratifying how far we’ve come,” LaChey said, “especially with all the stuff that is coming against us from many quarters.”

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Where Have All the AIDS Walks Gone?



BY JASON A. MICHAEL

AIDS walks used to be a pivotal part of the fall community calendar, and now they're virtually no more. Once upon a time, they were everywhere in Michigan — some nine across the state with two separate walks representing Detroit. They drew walkers by the thousands and raised substantial sums of money for local agencies working to combat the epidemic.

The first AIDS Walk Detroit (AWD) took place in 1991 in Royal Oak. It was a very grassroots effort put together by a handful of shopkeepers. AWD stood alone for a handful of years and grew quickly in size and scope. In 1999, along came AIDS Walk Michigan (AWM), an initiative to hold walks across the state under one umbrella. At its peak, AWM organized eight walks across the state, including Ann Arbor, Bay City/Saginaw/Midland, Detroit, Flint, Grand Rapids, Kalamazoo, Lansing and Traverse City.

I was at the first AIDS Walk Michigan — City of Detroit back in 1999. The walk was led by then Detroit Mayor Dennis Archer and Sandy Thurman, known as President Bill Clinton's AIDS czar. The enthusiasm was palpable on this day. Thousands filled Hart Plaza for the warmup and, then, the streets of downtown Detroit. The year 1999 was also the first time I covered AIDS Walk Detroit. This one was started off by then WXYZ Channel 7 Anchor Diana Lewis. The point is, at this time, both of these walks were a pretty big deal.

I continued covering both walks through the years. Corporate sponsors joined the cause. Thousands continued to come out — large employee groups from hospitals and department stores, groups of sorority sisters and, of course, many people who had lost someone they loved to AIDS.

Both walks continued to do well throughout the first decade or so of the new millennium. In 2013, Barbara Murray retired from AIDS Partnership Michigan, the parent group of AWM. She had been a driving force behind the statewide initiative, and no one really stepped up behind her with the same passion. Slowly, the initiative died.

Starting in 2015, AIDS Walk Detroit began seeing a significant dip in numbers of walkers and dollars raised. I wrote a story in 2016 called "Millennials Missing from AIDS Walk Detroit" wherein I talked about the fact that the crowd at the walk was getting old and that the 20-somethings and younger were no longer showing up as they once had. In 2017, the walk raised a mere \$50K.

By this time, the walk had been under the control and direction of HELP (now Corktown Health) for a few years. There was a walk planned for 2018, but it had to be cancelled because the usual location in Royal



No Longer a Death Sentence, HIV/AIDS Still on the Minds of Gen Z

Prevention, treatment options have significantly changed the conversation for younger generations

BY LAYLA MCMURTRIE

In an era where inclusivity and advocacy reign supreme, the queer Gen Z community emerges as a powerful force in reshaping the narrative surrounding HIV/AIDS. Beyond merely challenging stereotypes, young voices are fostering a more compassionate dialogue and propelling a new perspective on awareness and destigmatization.

The stats related to HIV and AIDS have shifted significantly from the peak of HIV infection rates in 1995. Since then, new infections have seen a 59% decrease and

AIDS-related deaths have reduced by 69% from the highest point in 2004. Women and girls comprise 46% of new diagnoses in 2022, according to a UNAIDS fact sheet.

As the 35th anniversary of World AIDS Day arrives on Dec. 1, significant medical breakthroughs have vastly improved outcomes for newly diagnosed patients and overall perceptions about a condition that was nearly always fatal only a few decades ago. The introduction of the HIV-

Welcome to long-acting HIV treatment.

**“With every-other-month
CABENUVA, I’m
good to go.”**

Jayson

Stays undetectable
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Results may vary.

CABENUVA is the only complete, long-acting
injectable prescription used to replace daily
HIV pills in certain adults and adolescents
who have their doctor’s approval.

Every-other-month CABENUVA is given by a healthcare
provider as 2 injections, initially 1 month apart for 2 months.
**It works continuously to help you stay undetectable*
for 2 months.**

Attend all appointments.

Important Facts About CABENUVA

This is only a brief summary of important information about
CABENUVA and does not replace talking to your healthcare
provider about your condition and treatment.
(kab' en ue vah)

ABOUT CABENUVA

CABENUVA is a complete prescription regimen used to treat HIV-1 infection
in people 12 years and older who weigh at least 77 lbs (35 kg), to replace their
current HIV-1 medicines when their healthcare provider determines that they
meet certain requirements.

HIV-1 is the virus that causes Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS).
CABENUVA contains 2 different medicines:

- cabotegravir
- rilpivirine

It is not known if CABENUVA is safe and effective in children younger than
12 years of age or weighing less than 77 lbs (35 kg).

DO NOT RECEIVE CABENUVA IF YOU

- have ever had an allergic reaction to cabotegravir or rilpivirine,
- are taking the following medicines:
 - carbamazepine
 - oxicarbazepine
 - phenobarbital
 - phenytoin
 - rifabutin
 - rifampin
 - ritapentine
 - dexamethasone (more than
a single-dose treatment)
 - St John's wort (*Hypericum
perforatum*)

Ask your doctor about CABENUVA

*Undetectable means the amount of HIV in the blood is below
the level that can be measured by a lab test. Results may vary.
Jayson has been compensated by ViiV Healthcare.

BEFORE RECEIVING CABENUVA

**Tell your healthcare provider about all your medical conditions,
including if you:**

- have ever had a skin rash or an allergic reaction to medicines that contain
cabotegravir or rilpivirine.
- have ever had liver problems, including hepatitis B or C infection.
- have ever had mental health problems.
- are pregnant or plan to become pregnant. It is not known if CABENUVA
will harm your unborn baby. CABENUVA can remain in your body for up
to 12 months or longer after the last injection.

Please see additional Important Facts About CABENUVA on the
following page.



CABENUVA

cabotegravir 200 mg/mL; rilpivirine 300 mg/mL
extended-release injectable suspensions

Watch
Jayson's
Story



Important Facts About CABENUVA (cont'd)

BEFORE RECEIVING CABENUVA (cont'd)

Tell your healthcare provider about all your medical conditions, including if you: (cont'd)

- are breastfeeding or plan to breastfeed. **Do not breastfeed if you take CABENUVA.**
 - You should not breastfeed if you have HIV-1 because of the risk of passing HIV-1 to your baby. It is not known if CABENUVA can pass to your baby in your breast milk.
 - Talk with your healthcare provider about the best way to feed your baby during treatment with CABENUVA.

Tell your healthcare provider about all the medicines you take, including prescription and over-the-counter medicines, vitamins, and herbal supplements. Some medicines interact with CABENUVA. Keep a list of your medicines and show it to your healthcare provider and pharmacist when you get a new medicine. You can ask your healthcare provider or pharmacist for a list of medicines that interact with CABENUVA.

Do not start taking a new medicine without telling your healthcare provider. Your healthcare provider can tell you if it is safe to take CABENUVA with other medicines.

POSSIBLE SIDE EFFECTS OF CABENUVA

CABENUVA may cause serious side effects, including:

- **Allergic reactions.** Call your healthcare provider right away if you develop a rash with CABENUVA. **Stop receiving CABENUVA and get medical help right away if you develop a rash with any of the following signs or symptoms:**

- | | |
|-------------------------|--|
| ◦ fever | ◦ blisters or sores in mouth |
| ◦ generally ill feeling | ◦ blisters |
| ◦ tiredness | ◦ redness or swelling of the eyes |
| ◦ muscle or joint aches | ◦ swelling of the mouth, face, lips, or tongue |
| ◦ trouble breathing | |

- **Post-injection reactions** have happened within minutes in some people after receiving their rilpivirine injection. Most symptoms resolved within minutes after the injection. Symptoms may include:

- | | |
|-------------------------------|--|
| ◦ trouble breathing | ◦ feeling anxious |
| ◦ narrowing of airways | ◦ feeling warm |
| ◦ stomach cramps | ◦ rash |
| ◦ sweating | ◦ feeling light-headed or feeling like you are going to pass out (faint) |
| ◦ numbness of your mouth | ◦ blood pressure changes |
| ◦ pain (e.g., back and chest) | |

POSSIBLE SIDE EFFECTS OF CABENUVA (cont'd)

CABENUVA may cause serious side effects, including: (cont'd)

- **Liver problems.** People with a history of hepatitis B or C virus or people who have certain liver function test changes may have an increased risk of developing new or worsening changes in certain liver tests during CABENUVA treatment. Liver problems have also happened in people without history of liver problems or other risk factors. Your healthcare provider may do blood tests to check your liver function. **Call your healthcare provider right away if you develop any of the following signs or symptoms of liver problems:**

- | | |
|--|--|
| ◦ your skin or the white part of your eyes turns yellow (jaundice) | ◦ nausea or vomiting |
| ◦ dark or "tea-colored" urine | ◦ loss of appetite |
| ◦ light-colored stools (bowel movements) | ◦ pain, aching, or tenderness on the right side of your stomach area |
| | ◦ itching |

- **Depression or mood changes.** Call your healthcare provider or get emergency medical help right away if you have any of the following symptoms:

- | | |
|-------------------------------|--|
| ◦ feeling sad or hopeless | ◦ have thoughts of hurting yourself (suicide) or have tried to hurt yourself |
| ◦ feeling anxious or restless | |

The most common side effects of CABENUVA include:

- | | |
|---|-----------------------|
| • pain, tenderness, hardened mass or lump, swelling, redness, itching, bruising, and warmth at the injection site | • headache |
| • fever | • muscle or bone pain |
| • tiredness | • nausea |
| | • sleep problems |
| | • dizziness |
| | • rash |

These are not all the possible side effects of CABENUVA. Call your doctor for medical advice about side effects. You may report side effects to FDA at 1-800-FDA-1088.

GET MORE INFORMATION

- Talk to your healthcare provider or pharmacist.
- Go to CABENUVA.com or call 1-877-844-8872, where you can also get FDA-approved labeling.

March 2022 CBN:4PIL

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preventative drug PrEP and post-exposure prophylaxis drug PEP and advancements in HIV/AIDS treatments have shifted a positive diagnosis from a death sentence to a manageable condition. Modern resources, awareness and increased acceptance allow most queer youth living with HIV or AIDS to lead happier lives with reduced stress.

Reflecting on the challenges faced by the LGBTQ+ community in the '90s, Michigan ACLU LGBTQ+ Project staff attorney Jay Kaplan, a gay man who started the first HIV Legal Services program in 1991, shares the stark contrast between then and now. Many people he assisted at the time would pass away within months of diagnosis.

"I sang in a gay men's choir and I joined in 1990, and by 1995, I would say close to half of the members had passed away from AIDS. It was a very different time," Kaplan

says. "It was a frightening time and it was a very sad time because you saw so many young people whose lives ended way too short."


One positive aspect that came out of the epidemic was LGBTQ+ people coming together as a community in the face of

"Our generation is starting to really break down that it's not a death sentence and people can live long and healthy lives with [HIV]."

— Donald Coleman, a 22-year-old Eastern Michigan University student

government inaction. Kaplan feels it's important for everyone now to know about

See **World AIDS Day**, page 28



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Queer Michigan Representation On Stage in ‘Frozen’

Collin Baja on how he becomes a famous reindeer on stage

BY CHRIS AZZOPARDI

Collin Baja, a dancer and actor who grew up in Northville and Traverse City, is returning to Michigan soon, though not as himself — not even close.

Baja will be seen bounding around on all fours, shrouded in a big reindeer costume as Sven, one of the more physically demanding roles of the touring production of “Frozen,” which comes to the Detroit Opera House Nov. 29 through Dec. 17. Sven, of course, is Kristoff’s loyal, sleigh-pulling companion, who helps him and Princess Anna of Arendelle find her older sister Elsa.

The Juilliard grad, who has a bachelor of fine arts in dance, joined “Frozen” in 2019, his first national tour. On Broadway, he’s racked up several credits, including parts in the revival of “Hello, Dolly!,” “Spider-Man Turn Off the Dark” and “Gary: A Sequel to Titus Andronicus,” which starred Nathan Lane. As an animal puppeteer, he was part of the herd in the 2008 revival of “Equus,” with Daniel Radcliffe. Reflecting on the role, he told the San Francisco Examiner: “There was a very choreographed, very intense, climactic scene where I was jumping over [Radcliffe] and kicking by his face with these massive metal hooves and all I’m thinking is, ‘Please don’t let me kill Harry Potter!’”

In addition to performing, Baja is currently finishing up his master’s in clinical mental health counseling. Between shows on the “Frozen” tour across North America, he sees clients via telehealth. When he arrives in Michigan, that work will continue between playing Sven and seeing family, in addition to rediscovering Detroit. “It’s been quite a long time since I’ve explored downtown,” he says.



Collin Baja as Sven and Jeremy Davis as Olaf. Photo: Matthew Murphy/Disney

How did growing up in Michigan shape you artistically?

Growing up with two older sisters, I got dragged along to whatever extracurricular activity. So dance class, we were all put into it. I gravitated toward it very much and loved it. I was always performing in the living room, but I got bullied a lot

in Northville for it, and so I stopped. When we moved up to Traverse City, I felt a fresh start, excited even at 12 to get back into it. Traverse City was very formative; it led to Interlochen, which is really what made me the artist I am today.

Interlochen asked me to come audition for the dance department. I really was not familiar with what it was, even though it was so close. When

I got into the dance department, I was nervous because that obviously meant leaving my friends and I was starting to book good roles. Obviously, it was a no-brainer. It's such a good school, but that's how dance took over for a certain chapter as well.

How did you land the role of Sven?

I was doing a Broadway play called "Gary: a Sequel to Titus Andronicus" with Nathan Lane. Our movement coordinator for that play is a friend, a brilliant guy named Lorenzo Pisoni, who works with Disney. He and I did "Equus" together, my Broadway debut back in 2008, both as actors, and so we've known each other for quite a long time.

As "Gary" was coming to a close in the summer of 2019, they were still auditioning for Svens for the tour. I asked if I could come in for it. It came at a perfect point in my life where I was wanting to start sampling other

cities and I had just got divorced, so I wanted space and time away from the city.

They have a lightweight, rehearsal version of the Sven head, and they

“I think that America has this unique, funny double standard stigma that if you're body-positive, then it promotes a certain kind of sexuality, and I don't think that's true.”

strap you in and you get on the rehearsal stilts, both front and back, and you just have to try and fail. There's no real way to teach it prior to doing it, except that you're going to be in a plank and where to hold your muscles and this and that, but

they basically just say, "OK, now walk around, trot, try to lay down, try and smell something, bring life to this as much as you can."

Later, they said that they know pretty much within the first two to five minutes who looks like they have the body awareness, stamina and ability to eventually bring it to life.

Had you walked on stilts before you went into that audition room?

No, I had not done something on this level of puppeteering. Dan Plehal, the other actor I share this role with, comes from more of a circus background. I come from more of a dance background, but we both really had to be put through a puppet bootcamp specifically for Sven because it's so uniquely put together and so brilliant.

See Collin Baja, page 23



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Everything Jamie Lee
Puzzle can be found on page 27

While we’re talking about drag, a few years ago, you teased that you would consider going on “RuPaul’s Drag Race,” but you still haven’t been on.

But you know what? I don’t know why, and I love him. He’s the nicest person — really, really nice, and I’m not just saying it. I really don’t know why. I just feel like the bar would be so high that I just don’t know.

What do you mean the bar would be so high?

I mean, I’d have to go on and be I don’t even know what. I’d have to be 10 feet taller than I am.

Do you, though? You just have to be Cher, right?

Yeah, but you know those guys; they’re so tall, so they make you look like a dumpy little thump.

And that’s not what you want to get yourself into?

[Laughs.] No!

Is that really why you’re avoiding it?

I’m never going to be that. I exaggerate; it was just the biggest exaggeration I could come up with off the top of my head.

Sounds like you’d still be down for it.

Yeah.

You and Chaz are co-producing a horror film together called “Little Bites.” What can you say about that?

I had my hand over one eye and was just kind of squinting because it was too scary. I don’t really like scary films.

What is it like to work with Chaz?

Chaz is really easygoing. And also, I stay out of it. It’s not my gig. I’m helping.

“Burlesque” is getting the musical treatment, with Christina Aguilera co-producing. Are you involved in that?

They asked me if I would have something to do with it but I don’t know. I really don’t know how I feel about it, you know? I mean, it’s not negative. It’s just questioning.

What about it are you questioning?

I don’t know if I should be involved. Does it make sense? What kind of power do you have? I mean, my experience with my musical [“The Cher Show”] was a nightmare.

“Burlesque” has embedded itself in the queer community in a way you probably didn’t expect it to when that movie was first released.

Are you kidding me? Come on.

Ha! OK, fair point. You knew exactly who you were making that movie for.

Come on, babe, don’t try to pull that old chestnut.

Well, then I should say new generations of queers are discovering what I knew was gay when I first saw it.

It really was a good film; it was just too long. It needed better editing.

Getting back to “Christmas” and your collabs with Cyndi, when did you know that you both stood for the same things when it came to LGBTQ+ rights and equality? Is there a history there? I mean, I know there must be.

Of course there is, but the thing about being close with the community is that you kind of just are close. We could talk about some specific thing, a problem or a good thing or whatever. But we just know who we are, you know? We don’t sit around and talk about it. Because I know who she is, I know how she feels. So no, we didn’t. It just is.

When two of our gay icons come together, the gay fantasy is that you are talking about us all the time.

Of course! I think everyone’s talking about me all the time too! No, I don’t. I really don’t. [Laughs.]

But I don’t know what your interior life is like with Cyndi Lauper.

No, but it’s really good. We’ve had great times and I respect her so much and she’s so funny and she’s so crazy. We’re a good couple.

It’s good to have you two singing together on this album.

Yeah, it was really great. And Darlene, how great is that? That history is crazy. When I was 17, I did background on that song. Now we’re doing it together. And I called her and went, “I’m not going to do this without you. It wouldn’t be right.” And she said, “Oh, I’ll be there.”

“Drop Top Sleigh Ride” could be considered camp, and so could the album’s cover. Do you still enjoy leaning into the campiness of being Cher?

Well, I don’t consider it camp. I consider it a really good song. This is what I feel about the album: I just picked songs, and when they were all done, I thought, “Oh my god, do these guys go together? How is this going to launch?” And then, everybody around me loved it so much but then I thought, “But what if people don’t like it because it’s not what they expect and it goes from one place to another place and I made a wrong decision?” That was worrying me for a while. And then I thought, “Well, there’s nothing I can do about it now.” I did what I wanted to do. That’s why I never did a Christmas album, because I wanted to just take it and make it and master it and hand it in.

And that’s what you did here?

Yeah.

Let’s acknowledge the 25th anniversary of “Believe” this year.

Oh, do we have to? [Rosenberg chimes in: “Put a muzzle on her.”] I mean, do you know how fast 25 years has gone? Dude. It’s crazy. Also, I was talking downstairs about this: I wrote a part of that song, and I didn’t take credit for it because I was so stupid. That song was a monster. It was like... I don’t even know what. That song was like Trump in the beginning; it was horrible. What I thought, too, about the song is that a chick can be upset and crazy over her relationship falling apart, but she can only do it for the first verse. So I’m sitting in the bathtub and I got my toe stuck in the faucet, and all of a sudden, what came to my mind was, “I’ve had time to think it through, and maybe I’m too good for you.” And Jennifer [Ruiz, Cher’s longtime personal assistant] said, “Oh my god, that’s perfect.” And then she said, “You will get a writers [credit].” And I went, “No, no, I just want to do it for the home team.” And of course, I was an idiot.

So you’re kicking yourself, as you should, right?

Yeah, but you know why? It was because it was so horrible. It was such an awful time. I was so depressed. I got into a fight, the only fight I’ve ever gotten into with Mark [Taylor, the producer]. And I just felt like such a loser because I couldn’t get it better. That’s why I walked out. I just couldn’t make it better because the verses were not interesting. So then the whole thing happened with the pitch machine.

I didn’t know that you wrote that line in “Believe.” I guess not a lot of people would, because it’s uncredited.

Nobody does except my immediate friends. But I didn’t think I was going to be here this long. I’m upset about it in a girl way, you know? I didn’t want to be 25 years older in a minute. I turn around and I’m 25 years older.

Do you ever consider touring again, or are those days really long gone?

We were just downstairs dancing and talking about it. I would have to change the show somewhat because I just can’t run around constantly and do it. I mean, today

we were dancing and it was like, “Whoa, what happened here?” So I couldn’t do the exact same show, so I don’t know how it would be received. I mean, I still can sing. I sing well.

How about something more intimate? Cher in a chair.

Well, that’s what my sister said. She said, “You could just tell stories about your life.” You know, all of the monologues I make up myself. I want to do it. I’m a professional and I want to be really, really, really good, because I think I have been.

I heard you were close to finishing your memoir. What’s the process for you in writing your memoir? Is it hard to go back through some moments in your life?

You know what I have to do? I have to go back. I was thinking about this the other day. Or no, I thought about it months ago. But I was thinking, “You didn’t tell enough. You played this too safe. You’ve got to put your ass more on the line and let the chips fall where they may.” How is that for all the stupid, cliché sayings that I can put into one sentence? [Laughs.]

Is that because you learned that Barbra Streisand’s memoir is over 900 pages long?

[Laughs.] No. But do you know what it’s like? It’s like two of the film scripts couldn’t be done because everyone says you’ve lived too long and done too much. Sorry. [Spoken unapologetically.] But it’s true. It’s hard to get all my life in a book unless I came out with volumes, like the encyclopedia. Not that anyone knows what that is anymore. It is really, really a lot. I’m struggling. I want to do a better job than I did. I want to do a better job. I want to pick up my big girl G-string and just do a better job.

When do you think we’ll have the book?

I don’t know, babe. Don’t ask. Well, you just did, but don’t ask me again.

What most impresses you about how the movie has been adapted to the stage?

I'm blown away by the level of detail. Truly, I'm not just saying this. I'm still watching "Let It Go" from Caroline Bowman [who plays Elsa] every single night because Caroline blows me away, just the control. It takes a village to put on a show, let alone a touring show. Our crew, our wardrobe, everyone is working so hard and it shows in the results. Sven is a prime example of that, of no matter what it says and how you list it out in the program, everyone's convinced there are two or three people in that puppet at the same time.

I read that your head is actually looking out through the neck.

I have very limited eyesight out of the mesh part of the neck. We're doing our show looking at the other actors basically from their belly button down, so that Sven's eyes are the ones that are obviously making eye contact. We on four stilts in a 60-pound puppet with limited eyesight and limited hearing for two hours.

I get to make my Sven a very different version than Dan makes it. Mine is modeled very much so off of my dog — a little bit more queer, fun, sassy. I studied my dog when I booked this role and the ways that he lays down or stretches, and his little sideways glances. My family's going to make fun of me so much for talking about Balu. [Laughs.]

Your Instagram features lots of shirtless photos that make me think you may have had a modeling past.

Yes, so I lived in New York City for 17 years, and for about 12 of those years, if not longer, I was represented or currently still am with Wilhelmina Models. I modeled for quite a long time and actually used to spend my summers in Europe modeling and then would come back to New York for the school year for whatever Broadway shows.

As someone who doesn't seem to favor shirts, does it get hot in that Sven costume?

I love clothes, but I'm also very body-positive because I've been a dancer my whole life, and most of the time, any dancer



Collin Baja. Courtesy photo

you find is body-positive because we spend our entire lives learning about our bodies.

I think that America has this unique, funny double standard stigma that if you're body-positive, then it promotes a certain kind of sexuality, and I don't think that's true. If you're body-positive and you work hard at it, which I have to, not only for this role, but for every other role I've had in my life or career, I don't think that's something to be shameful of.

As a dancer, I imagine you're thinking about what your body can do every day.

How can I push its limits? How can I take care of it? This is my one vessel. I'm proud of the work I put into it. If someone has an attachment or idea or projection based on putting a workout photo or a modeling shot online, then that's theirs. That's totally fine, but I think it's a helpful way for people to embrace the fact that you have this one vessel — give it some love.



How Jaiyah Saelua, a Fa’afafine Trans Woman, Inspired Pivotal Role in ‘Next Goal Wins’

In American Samoan culture, gender non-conforming people tend to ‘grow into’ their identities versus ‘coming out’

BY SARAH BRICKER HUNT

Seeing herself portrayed in a Hollywood movie was an experience Jaiyah Saelua won’t soon forget, but she’s more struck by the way “Next Goal Wins” portrays the American Samoan fa’afafine (fah-fa-fee-neh) culture.

The Taika Waititi-directed film, out now, follows the semi-true story of the famously underperforming American Samoa national soccer team’s struggle to qualify for the 2014 World Cup. Both Kaimana, the first-time non-binary actor playing Jaiyah in the film, and Jaiyah herself are fa’afafine, a recognized third gender in American Samoa.

Jaiyah’s story is an integral part of the movie’s storyline, which focuses on Michael Fassbender’s Coach Thomas Rongen as he is relegated from the States to the South Pacific U.S. territory of American Samoa to turn a ragtag team of amateurs into professional-level players.

Early in the film, Coach Rongen, a cantankerous, moderately functional alcoholic who would rather be anywhere else, takes his angst out on Jaiyah, even using her deadname at one painful moment. Overall, though, “Next Goal Wins” approaches the subject carefully and much more directly than mainstream films have tended to treat gender

nonconformity.

As a team member describes different players to Coach Rongen, he says, “And there’s Jaiyah, the ‘Cindy Crawford of soccer’” and describes her as fa’afafine. “It’s part of our culture,” he explains. “They’re just one of us — but different.”

“But you guys are cool with this?” Coach Rongen asks. “How can I put this?” the player replies. “It’s like... imagine a world without flowers. Well, fa’afafine are our flowers. Be a pretty dull world without them — they’re beautiful.”

“I love that line,” Saelua says in a recent Zoom interview with BTL. “[Calling] fa’afafine the flowers of the world really stood out to me, and it’s true.”

“

If American society could just look through a lens into our existence in our Samoan communities, they would realize there’s nothing wrong with embracing this identity for who they are. We become more so of an asset to our communities that way.

Saelua hopes audiences will learn many things about Samoan culture, including the fact that multiple indigenous cultures around the world



Jaiyah Saelua. Photo: Pua Tofaeono



Kaimana and Michael Fassbender in "Next Goal Wins." Photo: Searchlight Pictures

recognize a third gender. Western societies, she says, fuel animosity and hostility toward trans women that feels quite foreign to her.

"It's not part of our realities or our experiences growing up," she explains. "If American society could just look through a lens into our existence in our Samoan communities, they would realize there's nothing wrong with embracing this identity for who they are. We become more so of an asset to our communities that way."

Saelua sees similarities growing up fa'afafine in American Samoa to growing up transgender in the U.S., but notes some striking differences. In particular, she did not experience "coming out" the way LGBTQ+ often do in Western cultures.

"It's more of a 'growing into it' rather than 'coming out' of something or a moment of realization," she says. "We slowly start to embrace our identities as we grow older. Some fa'afafine actually decide to transition and some don't — fa'afafine is an umbrella term."

Essentially, the term refers to people who live their lives differently from the male gender assigned at birth, she says. "You don't necessarily have to be a trans woman to be a fa'afafine because there are gay men who are fa'afafine, non-binary people who are fa'afafine. There are also fa'atama people — those assigned female at birth who live otherwise."

Saelua has served as a part of the Federation Internationale de Football Association's (FIFA) "11 for Diversity" jury panel, which selects the annual winner of the FIFA Diversity Award. The award is granted to nonprofit organizations working to increase accessibility to soccer programs and to destigmatize topics like gender nonconformity in the sport. Coming from a place like American Samoa,

where the fa'afafine culture is respected, she says she was surprised to discover such a great need for the program.

"When I was recognized as the first out transgender person to play in a FIFA-sanctioned tournament in 2011, I didn't even realize it was a thing, but in all the years FIFA has existed and with more than 200 countries that are members, there hadn't been a single person to represent their country at this level — not even from the Pacific region, where we respect our identities," she says. "I quickly realized there was a need for this role."

Saelua, though, also realized she wasn't the person for that role.

"The more I realized the responsibilities that came with the platform, the more I didn't want any part of it," she says. "Not only because I didn't have a passion for it, but because it was just a lot of things that I not only didn't know a lot about, but I just felt like I wasn't the right person. At the time, I didn't identify as trans, and I still really only claimed the fa'afafine identity."

These days, Saelua lives in Hawaii and has embraced a trans identity. "It grew on me," she says. "I was introduced to the pressures of having to be as passable as possible to live a comfortable life as a trans person in the United States. I pretty much forced myself into conforming, and then I realized that it was actually who I enjoy being."

Still, Saelua says she still holds her fa'afafine identity dear, as well — and others, through "Next Goal Wins," may come to understand why. The film, she says, has given her an opportunity to advocate for trans women in sports and "to help change the world into a better place and to teach the world about the fa'afafine identity, because I wouldn't be a fa'afafine if it wasn't for my community and my culture and my people."

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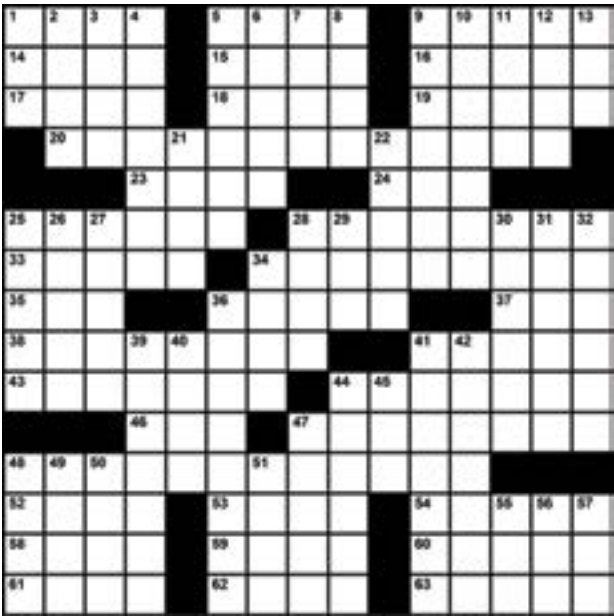
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Across

Everything
Jamie Lee

- 1 Comes out on the beach
- 5 Bites of Caesar's girlfriend
- 9 Mosque heads
- 14 Ill-mannered oaf
- 15 Boob, to a Brit
- 16 Assaults with a spray

- 17 Seduce
- 18 It penetrates the meat
- 19 "Come, come!"
- 20 1983 Jamie Lee Curtis flick
- 23 Disney's Mickey and Minnie, e.g.
- 24 Anka's "___ Beso"
- 25 Comes to
- 28 Rubber attachments
- 33 Netflix series with a gay FBI agent
- 34 2019 Jamie Lee Curtis flick
- 35 Obstacle, to Shakespeare
- 36 U.S. investment

- 37 Anal insertion procedure (abbr.)
- 38 1994 Jamie Lee Curtis flick
- 41 Ursula Le Guin writes it
- 43 Native of Socrates' land
- 44 What acceptance of gay rights should do
- 46 Enjoy Nick Malgieri
- 47 Glad tidings
- 48 2003 Jamie Lee Curtis flick
- 52 Let out
- 53 Fruit cover
- 54 Place for a rocker
- 58 The Pointer Sisters' "___ Excited"
- 59 Suffix with leather
- 60 When actors should come
- 61 Be a voyeur, e.g.
- 62 Lightly burn
- 63 Reading at Metropolitan Community Church

Down

- 1 Wing for Julia Morgan
- 2 Conflict with boxers
- 3 "Perry Mason" star Raymond
- 4 Show boat, for example
- 5 Top floors
- 6 Trough diners
- 7 Misfire sound
- 8 From A to B, to Debussy
- 9 Stalemate
- 10 Animals at a football game
- 11 BenGay target
- 12 Angry in., for example
- 13 Direction away from NNE
- 21 Drop shot, to Mauresmo
- 22 Hit the road

- 25 "What's it ___ to you?"
- 26 Blue, to interior decorators
- 27 Afghanistan's capital
- 28 Mireille, whose name rhymes with "penis"
- 29 Eng. class about Wilde
- 30 Chemical salt
- 31 Time to come home
- 32 Gertrude with a beer mug?
- 34 Trick joint, maybe
- 36 Some old pics
- 39 She loved Franklin and Lorena
- 40 Dike problem
- 41 Teetotaler's choice, perhaps
- 42 They're surrounded by skyscrapers
- 44 Big water heater
- 45 Poet McKuen
- 47 Screen siren Garbo
- 48 Turn the meat at Hamburger Mary's
- 49 "Julius Caesar" setting
- 50 Smooth sailing
- 51 Lavish party
- 55 Sometime label of David Bowie
- 56 ___-de-sac
- 57 Line of Todd Oldham dresses?

See p. 21 for answers

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(Left to right) Donald Coleman, Laurence Wilson, Tiger Onyx. Courtesy photos

◀ World AIDS Day

Continued from page 19

the history of HIV/AIDS and all that was lost because of it, especially to make sure that something similar never happens again.

“Sometimes I hear from young people that they don’t understand what it was like. Well, I’m glad they don’t have to go through what it was like at that time, I’m glad that progress has been made,” Kaplan says. “We never would have dreamed back in the 1990s that things would have changed this way, but thank goodness it changed, and hopefully that means that there’s not that same kind of stigma and same kind of prejudice that we saw.”

Fortunately, local Gen Z-aged advocates say that the stigma has eased.

Donald Coleman, a 22-year-old Eastern Michigan University student who identifies as a “queer nonbinary man,” reflects on the shifting attitudes toward HIV/AIDS within his community, which he describes as “Black, brown and queer.”

“Our generation is starting to really break down that it’s not a death sentence and people can live long and healthy lives with [HIV],” Coleman says. “If you do have it, now we have all these resources and medications readily available.”

However, Coleman highlights that not everyone has easy access to medication like PrEP, emphasizing the barriers faced by certain individuals, even with insurance coverage. While he was luckily able to get on PrEP himself, Coleman says it was a fight and says it’s an ongoing challenge to ensure equitable access to preventive measures for

many people.

Coleman also emphasizes that while discussions surrounding HIV/AIDS may be prevalent among the LGBTQ+ community, it is not exclusively a queer issue. “I tell my straight friends all the time [that] PrEP is not just for queer people,” Coleman says. “If you’re just a sexually active person in general, I would recommend you get on it, for sure.”

Madison Herrington echoes Coleman’s sentiment since STIs and HIV don’t discriminate. The 23-year-old EMU graduate is a pansexual cisgender woman who works as the Special Projects Coordinator at Michigan

most are aware of the sexual health services offered in their doctor’s offices but not at local organizations. Clients frequently would email or text me questions after our testing sessions and refer their friends to our website and contacts.”

Herrington emphasizes the importance of comprehensive sexual education and accessible resources to empower young queer individuals to make informed decisions about their sexual health.

“Overall, I wouldn’t say the queer Gen Z community is scared, but they’re conscientious of their potential exposure

Council, an agency dedicated to addressing the needs of people living with HIV. The pair emphasizes the collective strength of the LGBTQ+ community, urging unity to preserve healthcare rights, including access to PrEP and insurance coverage.

Wilson highlights the historical context, noting that healthcare, especially for the LGBTQ+ community, was not always a right. Similar to Kaplan, he says that increased awareness of the past might encourage youth to prioritize their overall health and advocate against potential cuts to HIV funding in Congress.

Now, Onyx says, there is fortunately less fear among Gen Z due to advancements in programs and the availability of accurate information on social media.

“I think the awareness gives them more control over their choices,” he says. “We’re working towards having more providers and clinicians that are aware of all the options and are informed about the different choices so that they can make clear and informed decisions so that the new generation can have fun, whichever way they want to.”

Many community organizations have the vision to provide inclusive information and materials about HIV. Some local resources include the Detroit Health Department’s HIV Program, Detroit Recovery Project, Matrix Human Services, UNIFIED, and ACCESS.

Community resource directories such as Findhelp.org can also help young adults locate resources for sex education, STI/HIV testing and linkage to care and treatment by zip code.

The collective strength of the LGBTQ+ community, spanning generations, is crucial in advocating for healthcare rights and ensuring a healthier future for all.

“Sometimes I hear from young people that they don’t understand what it was like. Well, I’m glad they don’t have to go through what it was like at that time, I’m glad that progress has been made.”

— ACLU Michigan LGBTQ+ Project Staff Attorney Jay Kaplan

Community Health Worker Alliance and is also a community health educator and harm reductionist.

Herrington, who has performed over a hundred STI tests, notes that there’s still work to be done. She sees a shift in attitudes, with young queer adults increasing dialogue surrounding STIs and safer sex. However, she points out that conversations specifically about HIV and AIDS often need prompting.

“I think Gen Z wants to be well-informed and spread that to others,” she says. “I think

to HIV,” Herrington says. “When people are routinely tested and linked to care and treatment after receiving an HIV diagnosis, antiretroviral therapy can let someone live and thrive at undetectable and untransmittable viral loads for decades. We still have a long way to go, but we’ve also come a long way, and that relieves some anxiety for young people getting tested.”

Tiger Onyx and Laurence Wilson, both queer millennials, are actively involved in the Southeastern Michigan HIV/AIDS

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◀ AIDS Walks

Continued from page 16

Oak was unavailable due to construction. Then, in 2019, the walk was cancelled amid plans to move it to the city of Detroit. Such a move, organizers found out, would greatly increase the cost of putting on the walk because they'd have to pay for police presence and street closures along the walk route.

And then, in 2020, came Covid. That put the kibosh on any possible walk for the year and, well, as other traditions slowly came back to life in 2021 and 2022 — Pride festivals and the like — AIDS walks continued to peter out. According to Anthony Williams, president and CEO of Corktown Health, AWD is not dead. Just on an indefinite hiatus. It has continued to support activities on World AIDS Day, but, he said, "I'm not sure when or if there will be another walk because we have not heard from very many organizations interested in participating in a walk."

There are still a few walks left across the state — the remnants of AWM — in cities such as Lansing/East Lansing and Central Michigan (Mt. Pleasant). But even if the walks are disappearing, AIDS isn't over. According to UNAIDS, an estimated 1.3 million people became infected with HIV in 2022. Over 40 million people have died of AIDS-related illness since the start of the epidemic. But with PrEP and antivirals, it's become known as a manageable disease and the sense of urgency to combat it has lessened.

Does Murray think AIDS walks are gone for good? Are they no longer necessary? "My bias is we need 'em," she said. "That's my bias. Or something that reminds people that here we are doing this and dealing with this. If not an AIDS walk, then what?"

I miss AIDS walks in a strange sort of

way. Even though they made me work hard for my money, taking photos every step of the way and then reporting the actual story, there was something special about the walks. A sense of common purpose, a feeling of togetherness and a show of strength against a deadly virus.

Young folks today are not dying of AIDS, not in anywhere near the numbers they once were anyway. Young folks also do not have the fear of AIDS that was ingrained in the people of my generation and those older than me. You get HIV, you get on a pill, you go on and live your life. That's the



Former WXYZ anchor Diana Lewis and her cousin led off AIDS Walk Detroit in 1999. Here, they are walking through the streets of downtown Royal Oak. Photo: Jason A. Michael

mentality today. It's remarkable and, in a way, a bittersweet sign of progress.

Still, the AIDS epidemic is more than a history lesson. People still do die of AIDS. And the millions who have gone on before deserve their remembrance. We should never forget those we've lost to AIDS. It ravaged our community. It took out a whole generation of gay men before it began spreading to others. It was ugly, hideous and horrendous and it must never, ever be forgotten — walks or no walks.

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