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7



18



22

- 4 5 Queer Things You Can Do Right Now-ish
- 6 Stand with Trans and Other Michigan Orgs React to Trans Teen Nex Benedict's Death
- 7 The Michigan-Made Film Revealing Hidden Layers of LGBTQ+ Relationships Censored From a Cinema Classic
- 10 Creep of the Week: Death of Nex Benedict Shines Spotlight on Oklahoma's Anti-LGBTQ+ Agenda
- 11 The Scroll: Dana Nessel Seeks to Dismiss Lawsuit Filed by Transphobic Michigan Salon Owner
- 12 At Home with Local LGBTQ+ Leaders: From Jay Kaplan's Sanctuary to Corporal Dani Wood's Kitchen
- 14 Saying Goodbye to My First Home and Welcoming Homes Yet to Come
- 18 For This Real Estate Expert, Home Is Her 'Bargain Block' Family
- 20 Why Two Friends From Ann Arbor Created a Podcast About Asexuality
- 22 After 'Drive-Away Dolls,' Geraldine Viswanathan Is Ready for Her Next Lesbian Movie



Kayla Kaszyca and Sarah Costello. Photo: Ben Catlin/Catlin Creative

VOL. 3210 • MARCH 7, 2024

ISSUE 1248

PRIDE SOURCE MEDIA GROUP

www.pridesource.com
Phone 734-263-1476

PUBLISHERS

Benjamin Jenkins
benjamin@pridesource.com

Publishers Emeritus: Jan Stevenson & Susan Horowitz

EDITORIAL

Editorial Director

Chris Azzopardi
chris@pridesource.com

Managing Editor

Sarah Bricker Hunt
sarah@pridesource.com

Senior Staff Writers

Jason A. Michael

CREATIVE

Cartoonist

Paul Berg

Graphic Designer

Sarah Wolf

Contributing Photographers

Andrew Potter, Andrew Cohen

ADVERTISING & SALES

sales@pridesource.com

Carolyn Cardenas

734-263-1476

carolyn@pridesource.com

Tim Powers

734-263-1475

tim@pridesource.com

Ann/Andy Cox, 248-613-2513

anncox@pridesource.com

National Advertising Representative

Rivendell Media, 212-242-6863

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5 Queer Things You Can Do Right Now-ish

BY SARAH BRICKER HUNT

With the promise of spring just around the corner, it's an ideal time to nourish your mind by joining a banned books club or hearing author Chasten Buttigieg talk about his memoir. Beyond book events, support Ferndale Pride and the Ferndale Community Foundation at a carnival benefit hosted by Mx. Trans Michigan Blanca Sapphire or catch the latest Ringwald Theatre performance, "Beautiful Thing." It's also not too early to grab tickets to see Kathy Griffin in April.



Chasten Buttigieg. Photo: Wikipedia Creative Commons/MyCatsAChonk

Attend Chasten Buttigieg Book Talk

Traverse City native Chasten Buttigieg, husband of U.S. Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg, will head to Michigan State University in East Lansing on March 16 to discuss his memoir, "I Have Something to Tell You." The 2020 book explores Chasten's journey to finding acceptance as a gay man (Buttigieg released an updated version in 2023, "I Have Something to Tell You - For Young Adults"). Audience members can ask questions about the book, his LGBTQ+ activism and his background in theater, which he has credited with helping him get through his young adulthood. The event is free, but ticket reservations are requested.

March 16, 7:30 p.m. Pasant Theatre (at the Wharton Center, 750 E. Shaw Lane, East Lansing). Reserve free tickets at bit.ly/3T4rTYe.

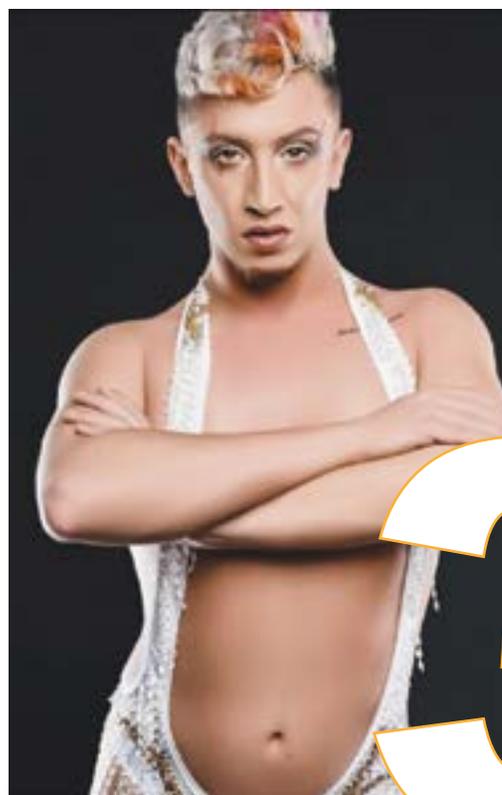


Kathy Griffin. Photo: Facebook

Get Tickets for Kathy Griffin's April Show

Kathy Griffin has been through it, ya'll, and while the comedian has made a career out of poking fun at her attempts to stay relevant in the world of Hollywood on what she terms "the D-list," her latest forays into public life have centered on the all-too-real struggles with everything from lung cancer, which she beat in 2021, to severe PTSD. Through it all, Griffin has been a staunch, vocal LGBTQ+ ally, frequently (and very publicly) going toe to toe with powerful anti-LGBTQ+ political and entertainment figures. Grab your tickets now for Griffin's latest show, "My Life on the PTSD List," April 19 at the Royal Oak Music Theatre.

April 19, 7 p.m., Royal Oak Music Theatre (318 W. 4th St., Royal Oak). Buy tickets at bit.ly/3Tj2viT.



Blanca Sapphire. Photo: Facebook

Dazzle at Blanca's White Carnival Benefit

Forget that old rule about waiting until Memorial Day to break out your favorite bright white fashion pieces — in fact, Blanca's White Carnival Benefit, hosted by Gigi's Cabaret and happening March 24, asks that you do. The carnival showcases Mx. Trans Michigan Blanca Sapphire in support of the Ferndale Community Foundation and Ferndale Pride as they get ready to vie for their second Mx. Trans USA title. The event will feature a performance by Blanca Sapphire, games, carnival food and "secret surprises," according to Gigi's Facebook. White clothing is optional but strongly suggested.

March 24, 2 p.m. (doors open at 1 p.m.), Gigi's (16920 W. Warren Ave., Detroit).

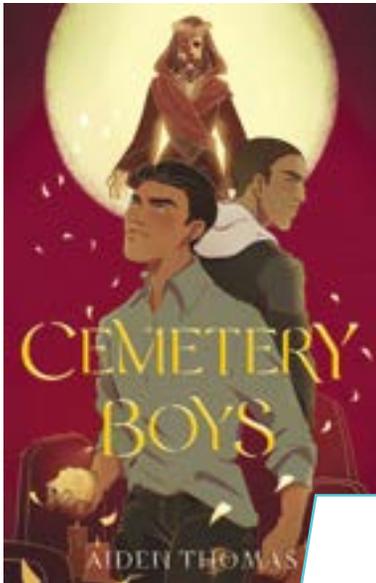


Jamie (Cole VanAmberg, left) and Ste (nick Easterling, right) in "Beautiful Thing." Photo: Brandy Joe Plambeck

See 'Beautiful Thing' at The Ringwald

Don't miss The Ringwald Theatre's latest show, "Beautiful Thing," directed by Joe Bailey. The performance focuses on playwright Jonathan Harvey's coming-out and coming-of-age story about two teens (played by Cole VanAmberg and nick Easterling) who are neighbors experiencing personal traumas. When the two seek solace in the company of one another, an unexpected relationship blooms. The story, press materials read, is one of "community, friendship, rites of passage and what it is to be 16 and in love."

March 8-April 1, various times, The Ringwald Theatre (inside Affirmations at 290 W. Nine Mile Road, Ferndale). Tickets are available at theringwald.com/productions/beautiful-thing.



Join the Stand with Trans Banned Book Club

Find out why the far-right has its panties in a bunch about children's and young adult books that have been targeted across the country at the Stand with Trans Banned Books Club, which meets online on the fourth Friday of each month. Facilitator Aaron, a non-binary trans man, will lead a discussion about Aiden Thomas' "Cemetery Boys," a paranormal adventure tale with a focus on the power of identity on March 22. Attendees can also participate in a special art project.

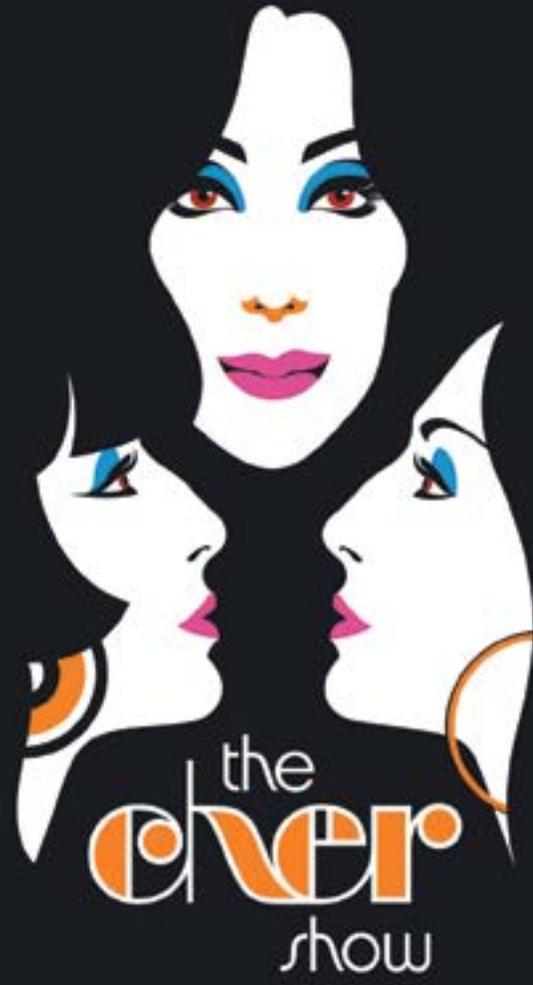
Upcoming books include "Love & Other Disasters" by Anita Kelly in April and "Hurricane Child" by Kacen Callender in May.

Fourth Fridays, virtual. Register at bit.ly/3wEpqw6 for login information.

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Stand with Trans and Other Michigan Orgs React to Trans Teen Nex Benedict's Death

Far right pushes for national anti-trans, anti-LGBTQ+ measures

BY SARAH BRICKER HUNT

Even as conservative members of the U.S. Congress threaten to shut down the federal government unless new anti-trans measures are adopted, organizations across the country, including several in Michigan, are responding to the recent death of a 16-year-old non-binary student in Owasso, Oklahoma and demanding action from elected officials.

Six Michigan-based organizations released a joint statement on Feb. 23 about the death of Nex Benedict, who died after suffering severe head injuries during what police have described as a “physical altercation” in their high school bathroom. The statement, issued by Equality Michigan, Grand Rapids Pride Center, Great Lakes Bay Pride, Outcenter Southwest Michigan, the SJ Call-In Coalition and Stand with Trans, read in part, “As a collective of organizations, we strongly condemn the events leading to the untimely loss of Nex Benedict, a valued non-binary individual. Nex, like all children, deserved the chance to thrive without enduring months of bullying and discrimination. The politically incited violence that claimed Nex’s life, stemming from ignorance and intolerance, is unacceptable.”

The statement urged action from voters and elected officials in Michigan and beyond. “Join us in demanding a thorough and transparent investigation into Nex’s tragic death and holding those responsible, including government officials and school staff, who were entrusted with their safety, accountable. And let’s also hold accountable the parents of the students who assaulted Nex,” the statement continued. “Stand up for trans and nonbinary youth by actively intervening and advocating for change. Remember, your vote holds power! Together, let’s propel our schools and nation towards a future where affirmation and acceptance is a shared commitment for all.”

“We are steadfast in our commitment to defending voices

threatened by hate every day. Additionally, we will continue to support our administrators in Michigan and bring accountability to those allowing cultures of harassment and generally hostile school environments to persist,” the statement read. “We proudly collaborate with community partners, offering education, networking, resources and advocacy for the LGBTQ+ community and allies nationwide. Our heartfelt condolences go to Nex’s family and friends during this challenging time. Together, let’s strive for a future where love and acceptance triumph over hate and violence.”

Grand Rapids Trans Foundation posted a statement to Facebook on Feb. 27. “We mourn the heart-rending loss of Nex Benedict (he/they),” the post began. “Nex was a 16-year-old Nonbinary and Two-Spirit Choctaw student who was assaulted and died at the hands of his peers. Our hearts break from this tragic and senseless violence.”

“Events like this do not happen in a vacuum. We are in an increasingly hostile climate where our community is intentionally misunderstood, scapegoated, dehumanized, demonized, and targeted for violence. We’ve seen a surge in anti-2SLGBTQIA+ legislation nationwide that seeks to mar our character, to ignore both science and our lived truths, and to legislate us out of existence,” the post continued. “What happened to Nex — and what’s happened to countless other Trans & Nonbinary lives lost every year to anti-Trans violence — leaves scars on our collective hearts. We let this pain remind us that more action is required. We cannot continue to allow these tragedies to happen. We call on you to join us: band together, organize, educate, legislate, protect, and fight like hell for Trans youth everywhere. Their lives depend on it.”

The organizations joined a chorus of voices nationwide calling out for compassion and renewed support for LGBTQ+ students. “My heart goes out to Nex Benedict’s family, friends and their entire community,” said



Nex Benedict. Photo: GoFundMe

Vice President Harris on Feb. 23. “To the LGBTQI+ youth who are hurting and are afraid right now: President Joe Biden and I see you, we stand with you, and you are not alone.” Meanwhile, Karine Jean-Pierre, the first openly gay White House press secretary, addressed the tragedy at the start of the Friday White House briefing. “Every young person deserves to feel safe and supported at school,” she said. “I know that for many LGBTQ+ students across the country, this may feel personal and deeply, deeply painful. There’s always someone you can talk to if you’re going through a hard time and need support.”

The Human Rights Campaign (HRC) issued letters to the Departments of Education and Justice demanding federal investigations into Benedict’s death. “Nex’s life demands justice,” a letter from HRC to Attorney General Merrick Garland read. “The Department has various tools available for addressing anti-LGBTQ+ hatred and violence,

including through the bringing of a hate crimes investigation and potentially charges that could help hold the perpetrators of these horrific acts against Nex accountable for their hate-fueled violence. In addition, the Department should work with the Department of Education to support their assessment of violations of Title IX and the Equal Protection Clause.”

Police in Owasso have said that the death was not caused by physical trauma from the fight at school and are awaiting toxicology reports for more insight into the circumstances surrounding the incident. Benedict’s mother has called the police response a “big cover” and cites months of bullying leading up to the altercation.

In the meantime, Congress is stalled on passing the final federal budget after a delay last year, in part because of a letter published Feb. 21 by the House Freedom Caucus, a group of 46 far-right Republican Congressmembers. In the letter, the cause listed several policies that must be passed for the new budget to

receive the support of its members, including policies restricting gender-affirming care, transgender participation in sports, DEI programs and defunding Planned Parenthood. Additionally, several riders targeting transgender people have been included in various government spending bills that could result in large-scale government shutdowns, according to independent journalist Erin Reed on her Substack, Erin in the Morning.

Reed reported on Feb. 21 that Speaker Mike Johnson’s negotiations reportedly do not include gender-affirming care policies, “upsetting Republicans who have pushed for the inclusion of those policies in the final bill.” President Biden appears opposed to a bill that contains this language. A letter from the House Freedom Caucus, Reed reports, indicates that unless these policies are included, the “probability that the appropriations bills will be supported by even a majority of Republicans” is low.



A still from the concept trailer for "Unlocking Desire." Courtesy photo

The Michigan-Made Film Revealing Hidden Layers of LGBTQ+ Relationships Censored From a Cinema Classic

Filmmaker Barbara Neri reimagines 'A Streetcar Named Desire' — with plans on entering Cannes

BY BRIDGETTE REDMAN

Classic stories often compel us to tell and retell them from multiple perspectives. Just ask Barbara Neri, who has been discovering new complexities in Tennessee Williams' "A Streetcar Named Desire" for more than a decade.

On Saturday, March 16, audiences are invited to a free event at The Scarab Club, where Neri will reveal the latest regarding her deep exploration of the play, in which LGBTQ+ relationships, climate change, mental health, Hurricane Katrina all intersect.

The highlight of the event will be the unveiling of "Unlocking Desire," a soon-to-be-made art house film based on the play of the same name that was performed at the Marlene Boll Theatre in 2011. Attendees will experience a concept trailer, visual art related to the film, two scenes shot on Belle Isle and Detroit's Dubois Street, poetry read by actors and a ballad by Paul Bowles with lyrics by Tennessee Williams. They will also learn about opportunities to get involved. Neri is holding the event in hopes of attracting

investors and donors and finding people to be involved on screen and behind the scenes, including LGBTQ+ people.

The feature-length film is a mystery centered on an institutionalized woman who claims to be the iconic heroine Blanche DuBois from "A Streetcar Named Desire." It appears to pick up where the play ended,

but viewers soon discover she is not who she says she is and that there are many complexities and twists.

The popular 1951 movie starring Vivien Leigh and Marlon Brando based on the classic Williams' play excised all mention that Blanche's husband was gay and that he committed suicide after she discovered him with another man. That aspect was censored despite its central role in the play. Neri restores that

importance, bringing in a character named Raoul, a gay man.

"The story of Allan was censored out of the movie," Neri said. "There was no mention that he was homosexual and why they married. All of that is gone. It's in the

"This story and its relevance has come around again. It needed to be a film and reach a bigger audience."

— "Unlocking Desire" filmmaker Barbara Neri

See **Unlocking Desire**, page 24

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Death of Nex Benedict Shines Spotlight on Oklahoma's Anti-LGBTQ+ Agenda



BY D'ANNE WITKOWSKI

I wish I did not know the name Nex Benedict. At least, I wish I didn't know the name for the reason that so many of us now do.

On Feb. 7, 16-year-old Benedict was beaten by three older students in a bathroom at Owasso High School in Owasso, Oklahoma. The next day, Benedict died. While the exact cause of death has not yet been reported as of this writing, it's not a huge leap to think that being physically assaulted might have something to do with it.

"This incident has shed light on the harsh realities faced by transgender, nonbinary, gay, and otherwise queer students in Oklahoma, particularly against the backdrop of anti-transgender rhetoric and legislation by state officials," reports *The Advocate*. "A law enacted in 2022 mandating students to use restrooms corresponding to their birth certificate sex and a proposed bill aiming to ban discussions of gender identity and

Oklahoma and does not have a background in education or children's development.

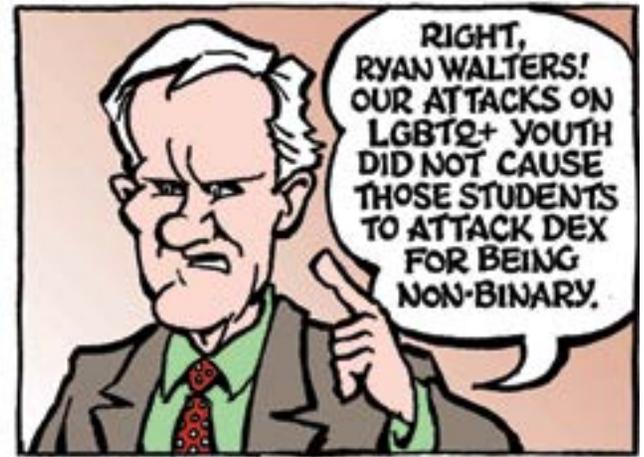
Truly, she's the worst person you could possibly have making decisions about what your kids can and can't read.

Ryan Walters, the state's superintendent of public instruction, posted on X, "No one has done more to expose what the radical left is all about than Chaya Raichik and Libs of TikTok. Her's is a powerful voice to protect Oklahoma kids from porn in schools and woke indoctrination. I'm proud to have her on our team."

This is the environment in which Benedict was beaten in a bathroom for the crime of being nonbinary or transgender (media accounts differ on how Benedict identified, with some reporting that Benedict was

a two-spirit person of indigenous Choctaw descent). It was a disaster in the making for LGBTQ+ kids, as people had warned.

One of those people is Sean Cummings, identified by *The Advocate* as an Oklahoma City business owner and local politician. He attended a February Oklahoma Department of Education meeting and did not shy away from his anger. A video of Cummings was posted to X on Feb. 22 by user @TizzyEnt.



sexuality in schools contribute to a hostile atmosphere for students in the state."

And if all of that wasn't enough, do you know who the Oklahoma Department of Education appointed to the Oklahoma State Department of Education's Library Media Advisory Committee? Chaya Raichik, the person behind the anti-LGBTQ+ social media account Libs of TikTok. As *The Advocate* points out, Raichik does not live in

"Three older girls don't just jump a 16-year-old in the bathroom for no apparent reason, especially when they are of the alphabet community, who you personally have attacked ever since you ran for office. And you brought in the chief attacker of this, Chaya Raichik. Ok? It's on you," Cummings says.

Gotta say, I'm not wild about the term "alphabet community," but his heart is in the right place.

"I think what you're looking at now is a federal lawsuit for each one of you personally. I hope it happens because it'll bankrupt you," Cummings continues. He says that the board has "legal culpability" for its pattern of anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric. "You have actual blood on your hands."

Regarding Benedict's death, Cummings says, "We'll see who gets charged and how many families lose their children to prison," highlighting the fact that there are no winners when the flames of anti-trans hatred are fanned. Everybody loses. Some more than others, mind you.

The Department of Education Secretary Miguel A. Cardona has opened an investigation into Benedict's death in response to a letter from the Human Rights Campaign.

"All people — including transgender and gender-expansive youth like Nex — deserve to be accepted, seen, and safe,

particularly in our nation's schools," wrote HRC President Kelley Robinson in a letter to Cardona. "However, efforts to stoke hate and discrimination across the country are having a direct, negative impact on the lives of trans and gender-expansive students. This includes young students like Nex, who face harsh social and public environments largely influenced by this discourse that undermines their lives."

And kids in Oklahoma have it worse than in a lot of other states.

"Oklahoma has considered more than 85 anti-LGBTQ+ pieces of legislation since 2015, passing seven into law," outlined Robinson. "This gives it the dubious distinction of being one of the nation's top five promulgators of anti-LGBTQ+ discrimination following Texas, Missouri, Tennessee, and Iowa."

Not great company to be in. Not at all.

Reach out to the transgender people in your life and let them know you stand with them, especially the young people who are no doubt feeling this tragedy so acutely. This is a scary time and no one should have to go through it alone.

If you are in crisis and need someone to talk to, visit [The Trevor Project](http://thetrevorproject.org/get-help) at thetrevorproject.org/get-help to connect to a crisis counselor 24/7, 365 days a year, from anywhere in the U.S via text, chat or phone. The Trevor Project is 100% confidential and 100% free.

THE SCROLL

QUICK HITS & CAN'T MISSES

Dana Nessel Seeks to Dismiss Lawsuit Filed by Transphobic Michigan Salon Owner

Michigan Attorney General Dana Nessel, on behalf of the Michigan Department of Civil Rights (MDCR), filed a motion Feb. 20 to dismiss a lawsuit filed by Studio 8 Hair Lab, a Traverse City salon charged with transgender discrimination by the MDCR in November. Studio owner Christine Geiger claims in the Grand Traverse Circuit Court filing that the MDCR infringed on her religious beliefs and right to free speech.

“Under Michigan law, religious freedoms are taken into

consideration under the Elliott-Larsen Civil Rights Act,” Nessel said in a statement. “Michigan’s recently enacted protections for the LGBTQ+ community will be enforced to the fullest extent as the constitution permits.”

Geiger’s latest lawsuit comes after she sued Traverse City and three residents who filed a complaint against Studio 8 in October, claiming they had violated her “sincerely held religious understanding that God created a man and a woman and that any other conception of a man and a woman violates God’s plan.” Geiger’s sincerely held beliefs apparently include the idea that transgender people should seek salon services at a “pet groomer,” according to the Facebook post at the center of the discrimination charge.



AG Dana Nessel. Photo: Kate Gowman

Chasten Buttigieg Goes After Moms For Liberty

Michigan’s own Chasten Buttigieg took to X on March 3 to leave a pointed comment about a recent “60 Minutes” interview with Moms For Liberty co-founders Tiffany Justice and Tina Descovich. During the segment, reporter Scott Pelley asked why the group consistently refers to LGBTQ+ community members as “groomers,” a term describing people who build trust to exploit or abuse victims, often used in the context of child sex abuse. Justice shuffled through printed notes before responding, “Parents want to partner with their children’s schools, but we do not co-parent with the government.” Say what?

Buttigieg, clearly unimpressed with the performance, shared the interview segment with a single, snarky comment: “They literally have to look at printed talking points.”



Roland Leggett. Courtesy photo

Michigan Democratic Party LGBT&A Caucus Announces Spring Meeting

As the nation careens toward a tumultuous 2024 election cycle, the Michigan Democratic Party (MDP) is hard at work preparing for local elections and supporting the national party’s efforts to reelect President Biden. It’s “all hands on deck” season at the MDP’s LGBT&A Caucus under the

leadership of Caucus Chair Roland Leggett, and that includes every like-minded Michigan voter.

Join the LGBT&A Caucus at its virtual spring meeting March 23 from 10 a.m.-12 p.m. to learn about the candidate endorsement process, fundraising, participating in local campaigns and to share feedback with the caucus. “We’re looking forward to having a community conversation about how exactly we want to be doing this work moving forward,” Leggett told BTL recently — more on this wide-ranging interview in an upcoming issue. Register at facebook.com/TheLGBTACaucusoftheMDP.

Lady Bunny: Frack Off, RuPaul

Never one to mince her words, Lady Bunny laid into RuPaul on Instagram, calling him out as a hypocrite and delivering the devastating line, “Mama Ru fracks, Mother Nature dies.” The post references an excerpt from RuPaul’s new memoir, “The House of Hidden Meanings” where he discusses building a bunker to protect himself from humans who are “in the cycle of destruction.” RuPaul’s husband George owns land in Wyoming that has been leased, in part, to oil companies for fracking and drilling.



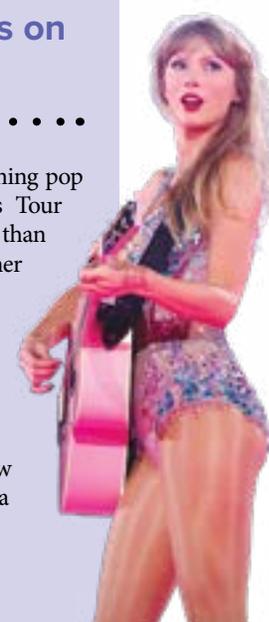
Lady Bunny. Photo: LadyBunny.net

Contribute to Our 2024 Pride Calendar

Pride season is just around the corner and BTL is working overtime to get the word out about every festival in Michigan, from the Upper Peninsula to the shores of Lake Michigan to our publication’s Southeast Michigan home. Email Managing Editor Sarah Bricker Hunt at sarah@pridesource.com with details about festivals planned in your local area and we’ll include them on our 2024 Pride Calendar and interactive online map.

The Eras Tour Debuts on Disney+

Are you ready for it, Gaylors? Reigning pop queen Taylor Swift’s massive Eras Tour makes its Disney+ debut sooner than initially expected, hitting the streamer at 9 p.m. EST March 14 with the premiere of several bonus songs, including “Cardigan.” Swift performed for two nights in Detroit during June Pride Month. Editorial Director Chris Azzopardi was on the scene to review the show and wrote that “Taylor Swift makes a strong case for gay icon status.”



Taylor Swift, obviously. Photo: Disney+

At Home with Local LGBTQ+ Leaders

From Jay Kaplan’s sanctuary to Corporal Dani Wood’s kitchen, how home is more than just a place

BY SARAH BRICKER HUNT

Home. Is it a place or a feeling? For some people, “home” is just somewhere to lay your head. For others, home can be a safe haven — a respite from a larger world that increasingly includes an anti-LGBTQ+ sentiment that has infected every level of government and can

unexpectedly permeate any social interaction at any time. Is there anything better than the feeling of closing the door behind you, ditching the jeans and relaxing into the space you’ve curated with one overarching design element in mind — you?

Here, several local LGBTQ+ leaders weigh

in about the spaces that help them feel relaxed, inspired, invigorated or just plain cozy. Often, local leaders told us, these spaces are emblematic of triumph and security — hard-won sanctuaries that represent hopeful futures and places to make cherished new memories.



Corporal Dani Woods, Detroit Police LGBT Liaison

So I am a self-proclaimed soul food chef! I love my kitchen and everything in it. I love to spend hours in the market (I always have to have someone with me because

I don't like push shopping carts — that's a whole different story, though) touching, smelling and examining produce so that I have the freshest ingredients for my meals. I will travel miles to experience different markets and what they offer to inspire my meals. I love to entertain, so trust that if ever anyone is visiting, I'm preparing a meal or fancy snacks to enjoy!



Jay Kaplan, staff attorney for the ACLU of Michigan LGBT Project

My house is only 840 square feet, but as I get older, I find it more and more a sanctuary from the outside world of work and current events. After a house fire in 2013 gutted my home and resulted in being rebuilt, I realize that as much as I am a social creature and a disciple of FOMO, I am also a homebody.

Aside from social justice, my passion is theater, and as you can see, I have decorated the walls of my home with posters from shows,

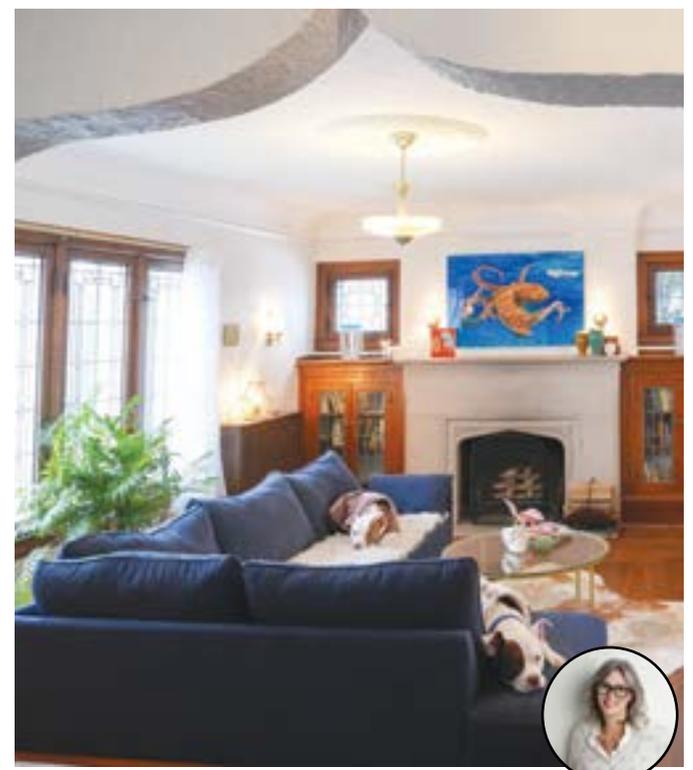
most of which would be considered obscure (I have a thing for the underdog). I also love to read books — fiction, non-fiction and lots of scripts. Having many books around and bright-colored posters to look at gives me a feeling of warmth, security and contentment. The words and artistry of others can often transcend the turmoil that we see in the world and inspire me to do my part to make things better.

Ruth Crowe, West Michigan artist and creator of The Journal Project

I live alone. I lost my dog in January 2023 to cancer; she lived a good full life and she also loved this exact same spot on the lounge chair with me, laying in the warm sunshine. I miss her also. I am an artist and I live in Douglas, Michigan, where Mother Nature lends us the greatest access to the lake of lakes, Lake Michigan.

This is my absolute favorite spot in my home — it just happens to be right outside my door on my back deck. It is my oasis away from my day-to-day stressors. I have numerous bird feeders that I sit and watch throughout the day. Have an evening cocktail or morning tea... heaven on Earth. And yes, I do struggle in winter months when I can't sit with nature and enjoy this peace, but I appreciate it so much after the long cold months that keep me trapped indoors.

In this photo, you'll see my boots that I wear in the studio and an early copy of my traveling art exhibit called The Journal Project, which I'll take to places like the “just say gay” state of Florida twice this year and the ArtPrize festival in Grand Rapids.



Angela Gabridge, executive director of MiGen, Michigan’s LGBTQ+ Elders Network

I grew up very blue collar and we moved around a lot. No place ever really felt like “home.” In my 20s, I was a single parent and struggled with poverty. We continued to move around as I worked to get my feet beneath me and began to create the life for us that I always dreamed of, but never really felt I deserved for just myself. For as long as I can remember, part of that dream included living in a big, old house, full of life.

Moving into this house eight years ago was like walking into a warm hug. It is safety, it is stability, and it is the launching pad every day, every season for me and my family as we bash around this thing called living. I was honestly hard

pressed to pick a single space, but in the end I chose the living room. We spend a good amount of time in here during the winter, in front of the fireplace reading, listening to records and rubbing dog bellies.

I never thought I'd be able to call a space like this mine, and I'm so grateful to have it. I live in Grosse Pointe Park with my family plus our pets — two rescued American Bulldogs named Barry and Roo(ster) and one very spoiled guinea pig (Benny the Jet), who has made it clear humans are the only companions he is interested in.

See **Leaders at Home**, page 16

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Saying Goodbye to My First Home and Welcoming Homes Yet to Come

One writer's journey to putting down roots



BY ALEENAH ANSARI

Where's home for you? Is it an apartment, a soft place to land or somewhere where you feel wholly loved, wrapped in the comfort of knowing that you're safe there? In college, the apartments where I lived were all of this and more. Usually, these apartments consisted of a handful of roommates and me with a small common area and bedrooms where I could barely open the door without hitting my chest of drawers or desk table, the two or three pieces of furniture I owned.

the first time in my life. Somehow, 1,000 square feet felt like way too much room for one person, considering I went from living in a room that was previously a closet to having multiple in my home. I furnished the space with a combination of hand-me-down furniture from family members, my college desk (my bed frame and chest of drawers were too broken to



The author's art wall and view while on calls. Photo: Aleenah Ansari

"It's the end of an era but not the end of having a home that I love. I've learned that I can find home in any place where I feel like the best version of myself."

Just because the spaces where I lived were small didn't mean they weren't full of love, though. My friends and I were always playing music videos or games, planning our next nacho night and pretending to do homework when we were actually staying up late talking about who we had a crush on that week.

I made a big shift during my final year of college when I bought a condo with the help of my family. The noisiness of college quieted around me as I had a space fully to myself for

survive the move) and a few new things like a bed frame and an espresso machine.

I didn't spend much time in my new condo during the first year. I was transitioning from being a full-time student with three jobs to working full-time in tech. Usually, I was running between working at the writing center and doing early morning interviews to going to late-night classes and making boba runs with friends. My home and I felt like passing ships, and while I was grateful for the shelter, I didn't see it as

much more than that.

In March 2020, my organization pivoted to full remote work, which meant I was spending a lot more time in my home. I started to buy prints on Etsy and slowly amassed a collection of art prints by BIPOC artists. This little corner of my home inspired me every day, making me feel less alone in a time of Zoom birthday parties and goodbyes as friends moved away for

See **Welcoming Homes Yet to Come**, page 19

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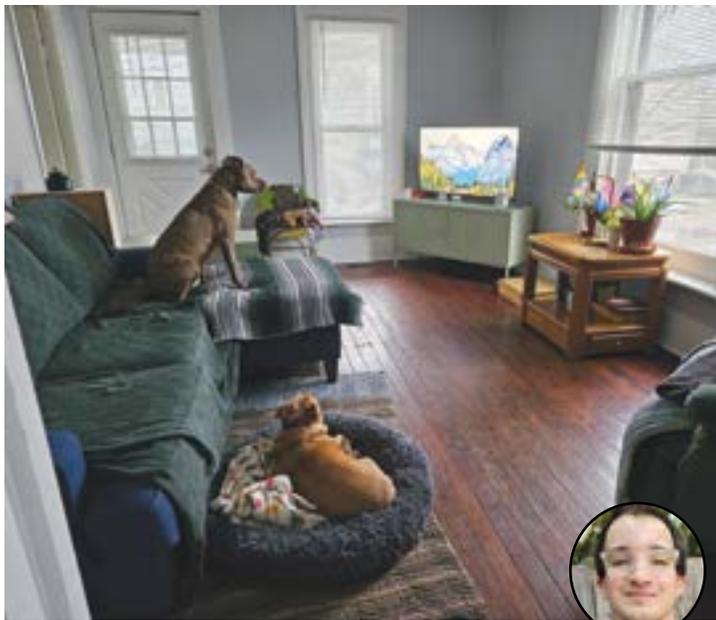
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◀ **Leaders at Home**

Continued from page 12



Logan TJ Harding, resource manager at transgender/nonbinary youth and family support organization Stand with Trans

I share my home with my very best boy, Carhartt the deaf pittie, and my girlfriend Ruth, who moved in with her little dog, Alex, a couple of months ago. I chose to share my (very) humble living room because this is the first place I've ever lived where I felt like I could settle down and try to establish a physical home for myself. I had never bothered to set up a living room before — I only ever owned the bare essentials to make my space livable, and a couch felt like a luxury reserved for those who had the money, stability and space to have one. That was never me.

I was a minimalist because I was poor and on my own in the world for the most part. I moved around a lot as a young adult in search of an affordable cost of living and personal development, and I experienced some homelessness and housing instability for various reasons over the years. Those experiences made the idea of having furniture and decorative items extremely stressful to think about. Could I afford to buy something that would be expensive to move or served no purpose other than “looking

pretty” when I was living paycheck to paycheck? Would it be more painful to have to leave things behind if my living situation suddenly changed again? Was it worth settling into somewhere, knowing that there was a high chance it wouldn't be long-term?

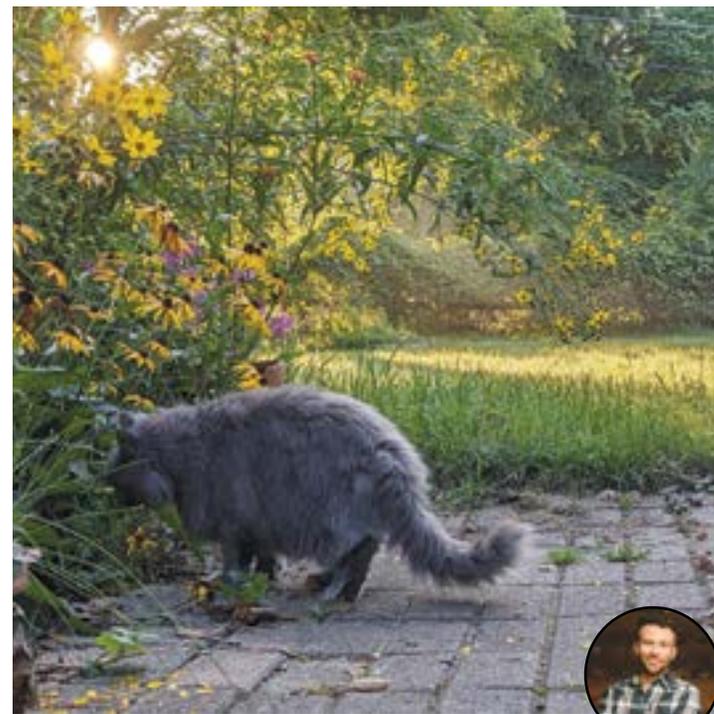
I lived in this survival mode from the ages of 17-27, always thinking that whatever I owned or valued had to fit in my car's trunk “just in case.” Being brought on to the Stand with Trans team in August 2022 changed so many things for me! I was given a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to earn some stability and do work that I truly care about, which was exactly what I needed to change my story. With my boss's support, hospitality and wise advice, I was able to get back on my feet and find this amazing rental in the heart of Lansing in May 2023. I love that this new sense of feeling at home in my life is slowly starting to reflect in my external environment. When I sit in this room, in this home, I think about the long journey it took for me to get here, and I'm grateful to be where I am.



Cheryl Czach, executive director of Affirmations, Ferndale's LGBTQ+ community center

I love mid-century design, and this front room is a space where I've combined a few vintage pieces along with modern reproductions of mid-century items. I also love a bit of whimsy and fun. I don't take myself too seriously and that plays out in how I decorate. Although I joke that my favorite color is black, the truth is, there is pink in nearly every room in my home.

What you can't see in this photo as it is just outside of the frame is my pink record player and vintage record collection. So this room for me is about listening to music, hopefully with a cocktail in hand!



Benjamin Jenkins, publisher of Pride Source and Between The Lines

My favorite spot at home is our garden. It's our go-to place to relax and unwind. We take our cats out back and let them roam

while we tend to the flower beds, greet the bees or just enjoy music together on the porch. In the summer, we'll sit on the porch and daydream about house projects and travel. It's a peaceful and simple atmosphere, which reminds me to take a breath and to take time to recharge without distraction.



A. Nzere Kwabena, executive director of LGBT Detroit, North America's oldest Black founded and led LGBTQ+ non-profit

This photograph encapsulates my sanctuary, where I retreat to rejuvenate, unwind and let my imagination roam freely. This cherished space, nestled within

my home in Detroit, is lovingly called The Grey Room.

Within The Grey Room, a curated collection of photographs adorns the walls, capturing the

artistry of some of my most beloved photographers, many of whom are dear friends. This visual tapestry serves as a constant source of inspiration and reflection.

In this sanctuary, my daily rituals unfold with comfort and familiarity. I indulge in the latest episodes of “The View” and “General Hospital,” thoughtfully recorded on my DVR. Engaging in personal conversations over the phone, diving into the pages of captivating books and savoring the timeless melodies of vinyl records enrich my solitary moments. Moreover, The Grey Room is a space of shared experiences where my partner and I bond over thrilling action movies, creating cherished memories together.

This photograph encapsulates more than just a physical space — it embodies the essence of solace, connection and creative expression I find within The Grey Room.

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What Cyndi Does
 Puzzle can be found on page 25

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For This Real Estate Expert, Home Is Her ‘Bargain Block’ Family

Shea Hicks Whitfield on better understanding the struggles of the queer community through her relationship with the dynamic HGTV home reno duo

BY JASON A. MICHAEL

A lifetime Detroit, Shea Hicks Whitfield is the third member of the superhero team on HGTV’s “Bargain Block.” For three seasons now, the real estate agent — along with real-life couple Keith Bynum, a designer, and Evan Thomas, a contractor — have taken some of the most dilapidated houses in Detroit and transformed them into stylish homes that any first-time homebuyer would be proud to own.

The show has proven to be a smash for HGTV, attracting more than 14 million viewers and ranking high as a non-news/sports cable series. It’s been such a success that it’s not only getting a fourth season, but its own kind of addition — along with a fourth Detroit-based season, HGTV recently greenlit a five-episode spin-off series, “Bargain Block New Orleans,” set in the Big Easy. Both will premiere in the fall.

At the same time, Detroiters get to experience the thrill in seeing their city brought back to life one house at a time. Husbands Bynum and Thomas, who moved to Detroit sight unseen a handful of years ago, have quickly become serious Michiganders. In addition to their home, the couple has a cabin in northern Michigan. They also have their own design firm and resale shop in Detroit.

For her part, Hicks Whitfield has her own successful real estate firm, Homes Sold By Shea, in conjunction with PREP Realty. She knows an unsightly home when she sees one, so it’s not surprise that she often looks horrified as Bynum and Thomas take her through tours of houses filled with muck and mire. But once they’re transformed, she stands in them proudly as she watches lives transformed by the team’s work.

Recently, Hicks Whitfield, who grew up in Detroit and went to Cody High School, spoke to BTL about Thomas and Bynum’s influence on her as an ally, the past and future of “Bargain Block” and what makes her



Shea Hicks Whitfield. Courtesy photo hometown so special to her.

How did you initially link up with Keith and Evan?

A mutual friend was aware of my knowledge of all things Detroit. So they thought we would be a good fit. We met for dinner, and it was love at first sight. We have not separated since that day.

How have you grown closer to the LGBTQ+ community through your relationship with Evan and Keith?

My relationship with Evan and Keith has evolved and shaped my views on the beauty that exists within the LGBTQ+ community, and the

challenges they face every day to live their best lives. The best role I’ve learned I can play is that of a champion of every one’s right to live how they want to live, love how they want to love and engage in our society in ways that grow togetherness in the face of those who would rather keep us separated.

What were your first impressions of the couple?

I found it to be very inspiring what they were doing, revitalizing homes in neighborhoods where a lot of investors weren’t. The fact that they were living in the homes, too, was very special.

You’ve become very close to

the couple since then...

They’re like my baby brothers-slash-uncles to [my son] Beau. We do hang out and as far as our onscreen connection, it’s because we’re friends in real life. It plays well, and that’s one of the reasons people seem to like the show so much.

What has your relationship with them and their relationship with Beau taught you about chosen family?

Chosen family is the best family. Every day we get an opportunity to choose how we spend our time, and the people we spend that time with. That is the ultimate symbol of love. The fact they are not from Detroit, and as our relationship has evolved into what it is, I do consider them my “little brothers” and our relationship continues to thrive with the love we’ve grown between us.

How did they become Beau’s “uncles” and what does that relationship mean to you? Though Beau is thankfully in remission now, how were they supportive doing Beau’s battle with cancer?

Keith and Evan have been super supportive to our family, and Beau has benefited directly from their presence in his life. As a term of endearment, Beau’s uncles maintained a consistent connection through regular check-ins on his health, providing myself and my husband “couples time” by babysitting Beau, and they have always extended themselves to be there when Beau needs them. Their presence through that process was a true blessing, and they continue to be positive adults in Beau’s life.

You’re the real estate guru on “Bargain Block.” How long have you been a realtor and how did you get into it?

This month marks 20 years. I lived in my apartment in Corktown, and I was looking for part-time work to earn some extra money. There was a newly constructed development in the area and the sales manager was looking for a real estate assistant. I applied and got hired on the spot. I started selling condos and I was like, “I need to get a real estate license because I’m pretty good at this.” And the rest is history.

Why is affordable housing for first-time buyers so important?

The importance of affordability for a first-time buyer is really critical. Mostly because the median income in the city of Detroit is only \$35K, which means a home buyer would qualify for a home between \$100K and \$150K. Rental rates have increased over the past few years. So a lot of times, rent is far more than it would cost to finance a mortgage and own a home. So it makes sense for many first-time homebuyers to invest in themselves and create generational wealth in their family. [For] a first-time buyer and their family, a lot of times they’ve never even envisioned themselves in their own home.

Evan is the master builder, and Keith the designer. Everyone loves the fun design concepts and the original art touches he incorporates into every home. What’s your favorite reno so far?

My favorite would be the Black House from Season 1. I love that house. I was so skeptical about Keith painting the interior of the house black, but it came out beautiful. Then from Season 2, when they revitalized our first flip, Chez Shea. And also their house. They did an amazing job renovating and adding onto their home.

What is about Detroit that you love so much?

I just love the vibe of Detroit. It's like I always say: Detroit is a big city with a small-time city feel. Everyone knows everyone, and everyone seems to be very connected. The neighbors speak to each other and look out for each other. I really appreciate the sense of community.

What do you love doing with Evan and Keith around town in Detroit? Can you share a favorite memory of you, Beau and them hanging out in the city?

Well, we do look forward to bringing Beau along in the future. Our best moments are spent having grown up time around Detroit, checking out new restaurants, enjoying art spaces and cocktails after a long work day, and many times, just relaxing at each other's home, being in community with each other. Best believe, no matter where we go, the party tends to follow, and laughter is always on the menu.

Tell us about some of your favorite spots in the city.

I would say the DIA. Then I love Belle Isle and the aquarium on the island. It's top notch. The corridor of development along Livernois between Six and Seven Mile has created some awesome walkability and is creating business. And I really love the sports teams. It's great to have all four teams downtown.

What can we expect from Season 4 of "Bargain Block"?

◀ **Welcoming Homes Yet to Come**
Continued from page 14

medical school or new jobs. Slowly, my partner and I started curating furniture that brought us joy, starting with our beloved gray couch from Costco. It became the place where we'd catch up on favorite television shows and, once the lockdowns eased up, where we'd host



Whimsical decor in the author's home. Photo: Aleenah Ansari

friends for dinner and play board games. We created collages of photos and postcards from our adventures together and slowly built up a collection of queer love stories, memoirs and fiction books, and I even got to interview some of the authors I had been reading for years.

I've never had a dream house, just an imperfect home that I've loved unconditionally



Hicks Whitfield with Evan Thomas and Keith Bynum on "Bargain Block." Photo: HGTV

More of the same. In Season 3, you got to see us hanging out a little more and doing things other than real estate. So, Keith and Evan have me walking through dungeons before turning them into beautiful dream homes. You get to see us hanging out as friends and having lots of fun and laughs. And, of course, Keith hitting it out of the park with his designs.

Between Evan and Keith, there's always really fun, unique details. Each is done with tons of love. Each home is like a work of art. Even though they're using building-grade materials, they lean toward custom work with a luxury feel that you don't find in homes at that price point.

You can find Shea Hicks Whitfield on Instagram at shea.whitfield. If you're interested in purchasing a home in Detroit, you may also email her at hello@homessoldbyshea.com.

because it has served as a gateway to the world. Where else can you get to your alma mater, grandma's house, concert venues, favorite bookstores and the airport with relative ease? I loved all the moments in between, even when I only got sunlight in the morning and had to race across the drawbridge next to my home to ensure I'd catch the bus on time?

Sometimes I feel like I became the person I am today while living in the apartment where I spent my early 30s. I lived in this home when I graduated college, started my full-time job, discovered freelance writing and turned it into a business, won awards, put up the first of many art walls, got engaged, planned a wedding and jetted around and returned to it after my first press visits. I filled my place with art and knickknacks from my favorite places like the little houses from Amsterdam and Germany and the disco lamp that greeted me with morning sparkles on a bright day.

Recently, I moved to a new place, and to say that leaving this condo felt like a form of heartbreak is an understatement.

In hindsight, it's the end of an era but not the end of having a home that I love. I've learned that I can find home in any place where I feel like the best version of myself. It's somewhere where I can invite my chosen family, make memories and write stories that would make my 8-year-old self feel seen and proud.



Don Chisholm



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Kayla Kaszyca and Sarah Costello, the hosts of "Sounds Fake But Okay." Photo: Ben Catlin/Catlin Creative

Why Two Friends From Ann Arbor Created a Podcast About Asexuality

The show's two University of Michigan hosts have attracted millions of downloads

BY ERIN HUG

Options for compelling, thought-provoking media on asexuality are sparse. As an asexual person myself, I know it can be hard to know where to turn. But podcast hosts Sarah Costello and Kayla Kaszyca, both University of Michigan alums, have been changing all of that with their show "Sounds Fake But Okay."

On the podcast, Costello and Kaszyca, who describe themselves respectively as an "aromantic asexual girl and a biromantic demisexual girl," discuss "love, relationships, sexuality and pretty much anything else they just don't understand." For those new to the asexual spectrum (aspec) community and longtime members alike, the podcast's thorough but laid-back approach creates an entertaining and welcoming atmosphere as

it digs into a wide range of topics: parenting, the kink community and passing as straight, all through an aspec lens.

Though Costello and Kaszyca are championing aspec awareness and attracting listeners from outside Michigan, that wasn't exactly the plan when they started in 2017. They initially met in 2015 as randomly assigned roommates at U-M, and when Costello came out as aromantic and asexual, she couldn't stop asking Kaszyca questions about things that didn't make sense.

"I don't understand making out... I don't get it!" Costello jokingly whines during our recent interview, recalling her confusion. After several of these entertaining conversations, Kaszyca had an idea: Why not make a podcast? At first, it was an opportunity for two friends to discuss the

merits of dick pics and how long sex should last (from an aspec lens, of course), but when AVEN (the Asexual Visibility and Education Network) took an interest and posted about them on Twitter, followed by a fundraiser they joined during Covid with other aspec activists, the podcast blew up. To date, the podcast has logged around 1.5 million downloads, according to Kaszyca.

Through in-depth, nuanced conversations, "Sounds Fake But Okay" challenges the notion that asexuality is anything but the punchline some people see it as. "The aspec experience can be really easy to stereotype," Kaszyca says, "and so having that deeper representation that shows the humanity of it hopefully allows people to understand it more." Costello points out that most online articles group asexuality into one of two categories: "These

people are saying no to sex!" or "These people don't experience sexual attraction but they still have sex!"

But through sharing their thoughts on, for example, being an asexual person at Pride and the meaningfulness of platonic relationships, they're spotlighting the true complexities of the aspec community and working to change people's perceptions. "[It] really makes a difference," Costello notes, "in understanding and empathy and just being open to other people's experiences."

For Costello, who acknowledges that coming out as ace (a frequently used shorthand for "asexual") can be a very different experience than other LGBTQ+ identities, these conversations hit home. When she told her parents, they were supportive, but didn't exactly know what it

meant. “It involves a lot more explanation,” she says. “It can really kind of flip their world upside down.” Kaszyca adds, “Because asexuality or aromanticism are often — but not always — actions not taking place or attractions not being there, there’s no ‘evidence,’ which is not a fair thing to ask for, but [something] people often want. It can be hard to prove this is not just a phase.” The more they shed light on what it means to be asexual, the more aspec listeners can find much-needed validation.

“The aspec lens,” Kaszyca explains, “is really about questioning norms and questioning the things that we’ve been told to just assume are true.” Even simply being aware that not everyone in the world experiences attraction in the same way can be eye-opening and lead to so many other freeing realizations. “I think there’s so many possibilities to take pressure off and to teach people that they can customize their lives in a way.”

It’s something listeners who aren’t asexual can benefit from too. “People view romantic and sexual relationships as the most important thing that you have in your life,” Costello says. “It’s so important to me to explain to them that you don’t have to prioritize certain relationships just because they’re of a certain type.” There’s a huge benefit in building strong, platonic relationships, and Costello wishes more people outside the aspec community could

learn to value those in the same way they do romantic partners. “A lot of people look at aspecs and they’re like, ‘Oh, you’re missing something. That must suck.’ And it’s like, ‘No, I don’t feel like I’m missing anything because we can all have fulfilling relationships in different ways. Different people need different things.’”

Costello’s favorite part about using their voice to amplify aspec awareness? The community it has built. “We honestly had nothing to do with [it],” they say, laughing. “It definitely grew beyond us. It’s just been really cool seeing aspec people find community and really see themselves in what we’re talking about.” Thanks to the “Sounds Fake But Okay” Discord server, aspecs have found each other and formed long-lasting friendships, meeting online for movie and game nights. They’re excited to bond over the latest podcast episode, or simply find comfort in being surrounded by other aspecs. And last year, Costello and Kaszyca expanded their reach even further, publishing the book “Sounds Fake But Okay: An Asexual and Aromantic Perspective on Love, Relationships, Sex, and Pretty Much Anything Else,” which they worked on for two years.

Kaszyca adds, “A lot of people come to us saying, ‘I’ve never met another aspec person in real life.’” For those who still haven’t, it may be enough to just know that Costello and Kaszyca and their podcast exist.

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After ‘Drive-Away Dolls,’ Geraldine Viswanathan Is Ready for Her Next Lesbian Movie

The actress will ‘do catering’ if it means being on the set of another queer film

BY CHRIS AZZOPARDI

It’s quite the compliment to her time filming “Drive-Away Dolls” that Geraldine Viswanathan, after playing her first onscreen queer role, would “do anything” to make it happen again. “If I can weasel my way in there, honey, I’m going to. I’ll hold the boom. I’ll do catering,” says Viswanathan, an Australian actress who is part Swiss and Indian and earned recognition for her breakout role in 2018’s teen sex comedy “Blockers.”

She might be in luck, considering the filmmaking team behind “Drive-Away Dolls.” Ethan Coen, of the Coen brothers, and longtime film editor Tricia Cooke, who is Coen’s wife and also an out lesbian (they’ve been in an open marriage for over 20 years) told BTL recently that they are just getting started.

The film is the creators’ first lesbian B-movie in a planned trilogy of sorts, and stars Viswanathan as Marian, who’s yet to be laid, much to the dismay of her freewheeling best friend,



Geraldine Viswanathan. Photo: Focus Features

“To be a South Asian young woman talking about how she wants to get laid — historically, South Asians are very desexualized and not really in those roles.”

Jamie (Margaret Qualley), who has recently gone through a nasty breakup with her girlfriend Sukie (Beanie Feldstein). Together, Marian and Jamie head out on a road trip down to Florida, where it may be the ‘90s but “don’t say gay” is still implied when they have a run-in with government

officials for reasons that definitely seem like something Florida political figures would waste their time prosecuting.

During our recent chat, Viswanathan spoke about the first time she played a queer character, the “quietly revolutionary” tone of the film and how it honors lesbian bars as the safe spaces they’ve

always been.

How have you been describing this movie to your friends?

I describe it as a Coen movie, first and foremost, and I say it’s a wacky lesbian screwball road trip comedy caper where we’re driving down South and we have a package that some people really want.

Is it too much of a spoiler to say what’s in the package?

When I’m talking to my friends, I do. And I think there’s no surprises at this point. I’ve done so many movies in this vein, so I think it’s not a shock.

What are your thoughts

on this film being released during a politically precarious time for queer people?

I think “Drive-Away Dolls” is very quietly revolutionary. Initially, when reading it and while making it, it was just: Let’s make the most outrageous, funniest, wildest, queerest comedy that we can. Now, as the movie’s releasing, it does feel like there’s this added significance in this moment that we’re in where I feel like it’s a really great time actually for queer movies, and it’s rare that the three leading characters in a big theatrically released movie are queer women.

The way that sex and sexuality are treated in this movie, it’s something that I wish that I could

have seen on screen growing up, where it’s shameless and approached with lightness and silliness and authenticity. It really feels like the male gaze is not present in this movie. That’s a testament to the way that Ethan made space for Tricia’s vision and experience and what she has to say. It’s one of the best things that a movie can do that I think is within our power.

You mentioned we don’t see many lesbian women on screen, but then, of course, you are Indian, so that kind of intersectionality is even more rare. Can you talk about the importance of that representation?

See **Geraldine**, page 26



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◀ Unlocking Desire

Continued from page 7

play. It struck me that I had to figure out a way to bring that story out, to revisit it.”

In “Unlocking Desire,” Blanche meets Raoul in the institution and is convinced that he is the incarnation of her former husband, Allan, with whom she must make peace. She is so fierce that Raoul gives in and pretends to be him.

“They get a chance to talk about what happened,” Neri said. “Through film magic, they’re transported to the porch of an antebellum mansion where they are in altogether different costumes. That’s where they speak, and it’s transformative and sobering for them. They’re different

woman with voodoo powers. She is based on Williams’ childhood nursemaid, a Black woman who often told him stories and influenced his later work.

“The minute I learned about Ozzie, I knew she was going to be a character that I would create here,” Neri said. “She told Williams a lot of fanciful stories when he was a boy, but her influence has never really been given its due, so I wanted to highlight her.

Neri’s play had a successful launch, but it was soon followed by the Supreme Court ruling that legalized same-sex marriage, so



“Unlocking Desire” writer-director Barbara Neri with her DP for the Detroit shoot, Peter Poulos. Courtesy photo



A still from the concept trailer for “Unlocking Desire.” Courtesy photo

Neri moved on to other projects, feeling the time for this story had passed. However, the pendulum swung, and society is once again in a time where LGBTQ+ rights and well-being are under threat.

“The anti-trans legislation, the murders that are going on is deeply tragic,” Neri said. “So this story and its relevance has come around again. It needed to be a film and reach a bigger audience.”

A friend suggested she adapt it to a screenplay — which she did. In 2017, she submitted the screenplay to the Marfa Film Festival in Texas, where it was read by actors and received acclaim. The pandemic put a halt to its production, but it is now back on track and Neri is working on getting it made into a full-length film in time for the Cannes Film Festival.

In addition to the timeliness of the issues that “Unlocking Desire” addresses, Neri said there is a universal element that draws us to stories like this — stories that play with the “what ifs” of seminal characters from classic literature.

“Iconic writers like Williams and their characters just stay with us long after we witness the perfect tragedy,” Neri said. “Their stories offer us escape from our own. But sometimes we just have to revisit them. We can write new stories and explore what happened. What’s the back story? What’s the new story?”

Having explored one possible new story for Blanche Dubois, Neri now hopes people will join her in bringing it to the screen.

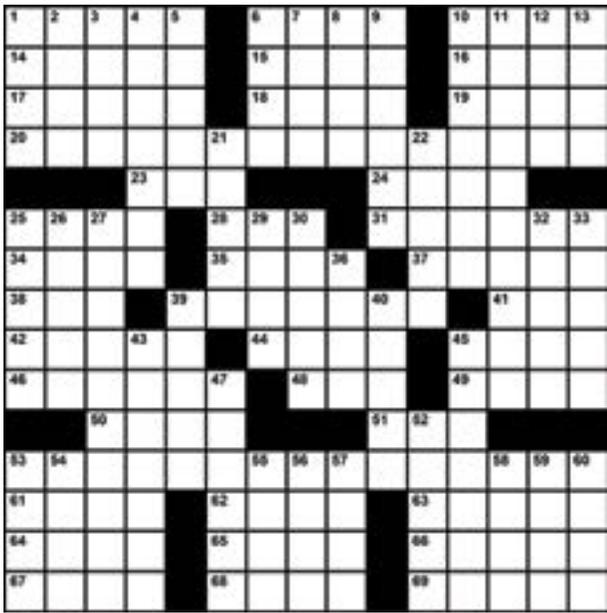
after that. Raoul is different because of what he couldn’t face — he now does — and Blanche has peace.”

The kernel for “Unlocking Desire” was planted when Neri was performing a one-woman show about English poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning and heard the line from one of her sonnets quoted in “A Streetcar Named Desire.” Shortly after that, Hurricane Katrina happened and conservative pundits were saying that New Orleans got what it deserved because it was a wicked city. She was struck by the aftermath and the betrayal of the people who lived there, particularly the African American communities.

“It all started coming together for me, and I felt that Blanche was very much New Orleans,” Neri said. “The way that she was treated by Stanley and Mitch was very much like how New Orleans was treated. These things started coming together for me and I just started writing.”

It is one of the reasons it is essential to her that the Blanche of her play and the film be played by a Black woman and that many of the characters in the story are Black — it is the story of their betrayal.

This includes a character named Ozzie, a



What Cyndi Does

Across

- 1 They won't pose for nude photos
- 6 Perfect serves from Mauresmo
- 10 "Why, ___ delighted!"
- 14 "Lesbians ignitel!" e.g.
- 15 Hiker's snack

- 16 Kahlo's cross
- 17 Word after "pinky"
- 18 Diva's piece
- 19 Brontë woman
- 20 Start of a Cyndi Lauper quote

- 23 Get hard
- 24 Floor coverings
- 25 The 411
- 28 Chemist's workplace
- 31 Accusations of pedophilia, e.g.
- 34 Swiss town with a bear mascot

- 35 Gave a pink slip to
- 37 Nancy Clue creator Maney
- 38 It may come before long
- 39 More of the quote
- 41 Breeder need
- 42 "Do" equivalent for the von Trapps
- 44 Roman deity identified with Diana
- 45 Carpenter's connector
- 46 Lili Taylor's "___ Pizza"
- 48 Get dressed, with "up"
- 49 Goes out with
- 50 Part of UTEP
- 51 Blind rage
- 53 End of the quote
- 61 Wilde country
- 62 Quartet after a desertion
- 63 Sal of "Rebel Without a Cause"
- 64 Begin to wake up
- 65 Fairy tale bad guy
- 66 Kind of bear
- 67 Jodie Foster's "Little Man ___"

- 68 Naysayers' words
- 69 What "Queer Eye" gives to straight guys

Down

- 1 Schoolyard retort
- 2 Like recently cut leaves of grass
- 3 Ted Casablanca bit
- 4 Decides not to go
- 5 Throng of people
- 6 Tutti-frutti ingredient
- 7 Stick it in your bunghole
- 8 Lake of Ohio ferries

- 9 Orgasms, e.g.
- 10 Brewed drink for teetotalers
- 11 Like a member needing lube?
- 12 Hide well
- 13 Former lovers
- 21 Words on a shingle
- 22 Representative Baldwin
- 25 Erection supporter
- 26 Socially challenged
- 27 Allen Ginsberg, for example
- 29 Doug Mattis leap
- 30 Humdinger
- 32 Stage show
- 33 Supporters in the bedroom
- 36 Bond foe
- 39 Like Emma Donoghue
- 40 Harry Potter's field
- 43 Place for trinkets
- 45 His poems inspired "Cats" song)
- 47 "___ Blossom" ("Show Boat" song)
- 52 Easy wins
- 53 Top
- 54 First name among lesbian writers
- 55 And so
- 56 k.d. lang record label
- 57 Coral hanky fetish
- 58 Etheridge's "I'm the ___ One"
- 59 Kind of time
- 60 Needing BenGay

See p. 17 for answers



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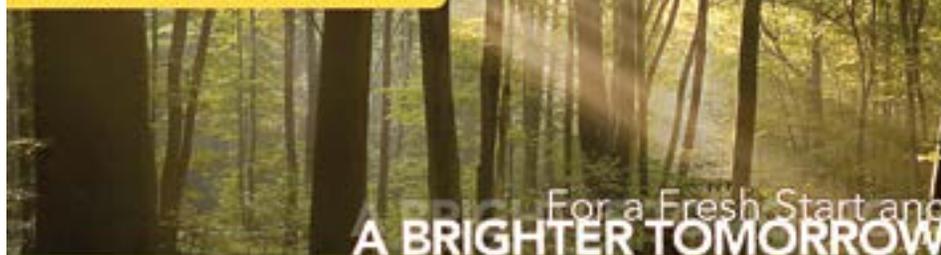
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4 Geraldine

Continued from page 22

I feel like my first movie being "Blockers," it felt significant to be the most outrageous and most sexual character in that movie. And then to be a South Asian young woman talking about how she wants to get laid — historically, South Asians are very desexualized and not really in those roles. I know that Ethan and Trish wrote this movie in the '90s, and I feel like the fact that we're making this movie now... maybe that's one of the benefits of making this movie now? I don't know if I would've been in this movie in the '90s. So I think it's really cool and that is not lost on me.

You said you worked closely with Tricia on developing the character's queerness. What was that collaboration like for you?

There were a lot of references to queer history in the movie that are quite subtle, but there and awesome, nonetheless. So Tricia gave us this pamphlet, a rundown of some references and queer history. And I met Trish's friend who I think Jamie is sort of based off of. Then I sort of realized, "OK, I think Trish is Marian, mostly." And so just hanging out with Trish and Trish's partner, this amazing activist, and I just tried to soak it all up and I was just all ears to anything that Trish had to say and was really grateful for her perspective in making the movie and just to have her on set. Her and Ethan were very equal in presence on set, which was really nice.

Is Marian your first queer character?

I'm trying to think. Oh, I just remembered I did a play in Sydney that was a lesbian love story; that was the bell ringing in my head. But that's theater. It's a different world. It was like a lesbian rom-com with two girls. Super cute. It was set in high school and it was called "Ellie and Abbie" and this queer writer, Monica Zanetti, wrote it in Australia, and we did it at a local theater, and then they turned it into a movie, actually. There's actually no men at all, which I don't know if I've seen. But yeah, this is my first time on screen.

With a film about young queer people, what is it like to be the one sharing that narrative with kids who

might be looking to see versions of themselves on screen?

It's super meaningful. I think if there's any throughline in my career, it's just liberation and freedom and self-acceptance, and it just feels like this is a part of that. And I love just working with women. I don't need to play a straight love story ever again. No shade to straight men, but I'm good. I don't need that. I can really live without it. So I think just getting to work with Margaret, just to have all my scenes with Margaret, was such a dream. I love that, not having to deal with too many male egos.

Did you draw from any personal



Geraldine Viswanathan and Margaret Qualley in "Drive-Away Dolls." Photo: Focus Features

experience or research to authentically capture the essence of Marian's queer identity?

I definitely did. I think it's all invisible work. It's all work that I did for myself to help me understand Marian, but I thought about my sexual awakenings and relationships and even people that I've been friends with and then been like, "Wait a minute." Yeah, there was plenty that I related to with Marian, even though on the surface I thought I didn't. But upon deeper reflection, I was like, "Wait, no, I totally relate to her" in that she's kind of specific and has a big, easily bruised heart and runs deep and is sort of an old soul and would rather skip all the frivolousness of dating and sleeping around and just wants to be cozy and wifed up and go to rallies.

This movie is a love letter to lesbian bars. Was part of the research for this movie to go to any lesbian bars?

Yeah, that's what's so cool. We did a press junket yesterday in this lesbian bar, Henrietta Hudson in New York, and it's one of two lesbian bars in the city left, and we found out that there's only 23 lesbian bars in America, and that just broke my heart. I can't believe it. That's so sad. So to have a love letter to those safe spaces is, again, so quietly revolutionary.

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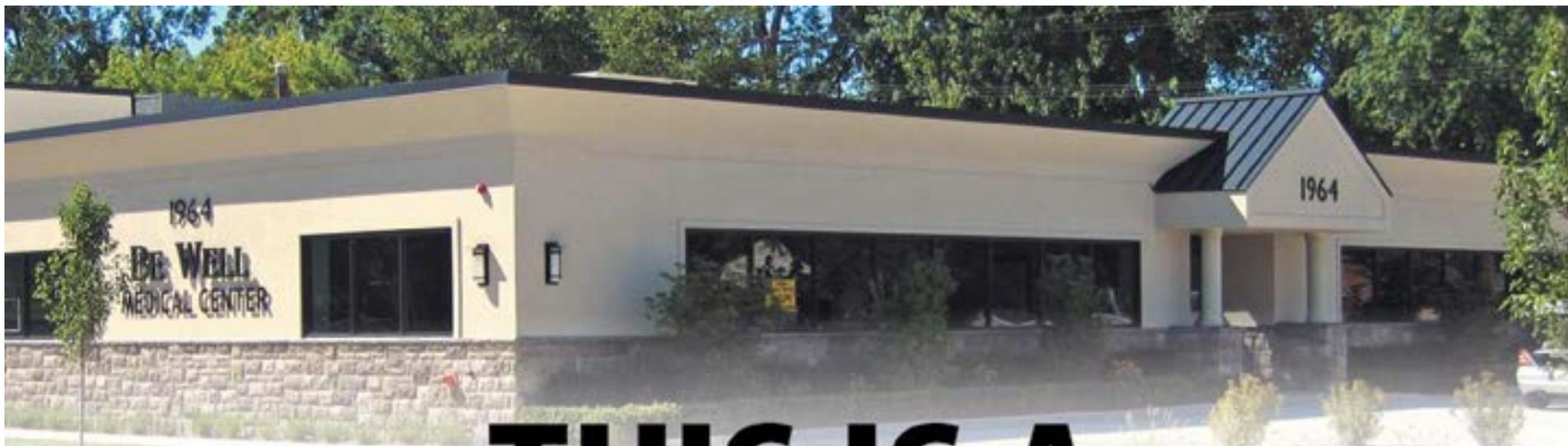
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