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WEDDING EDITION

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Wedding Vows

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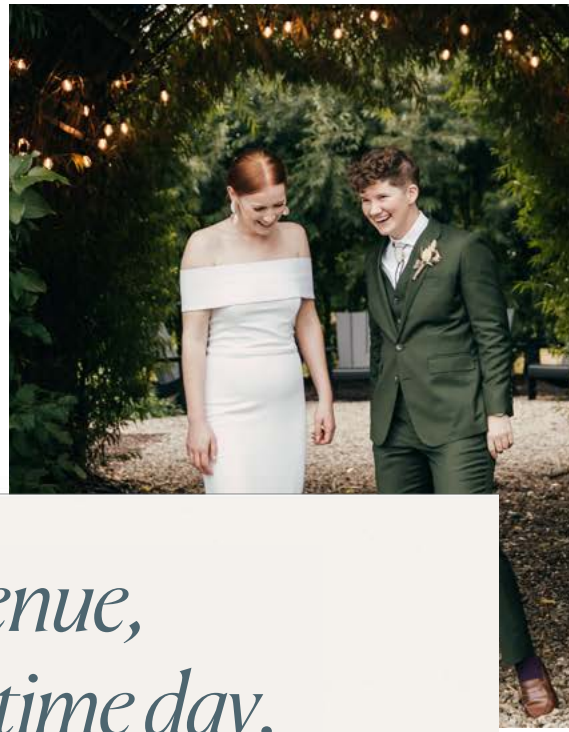
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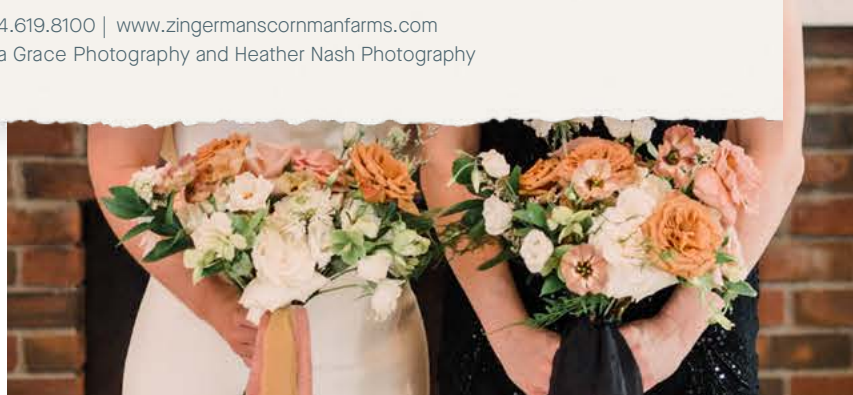




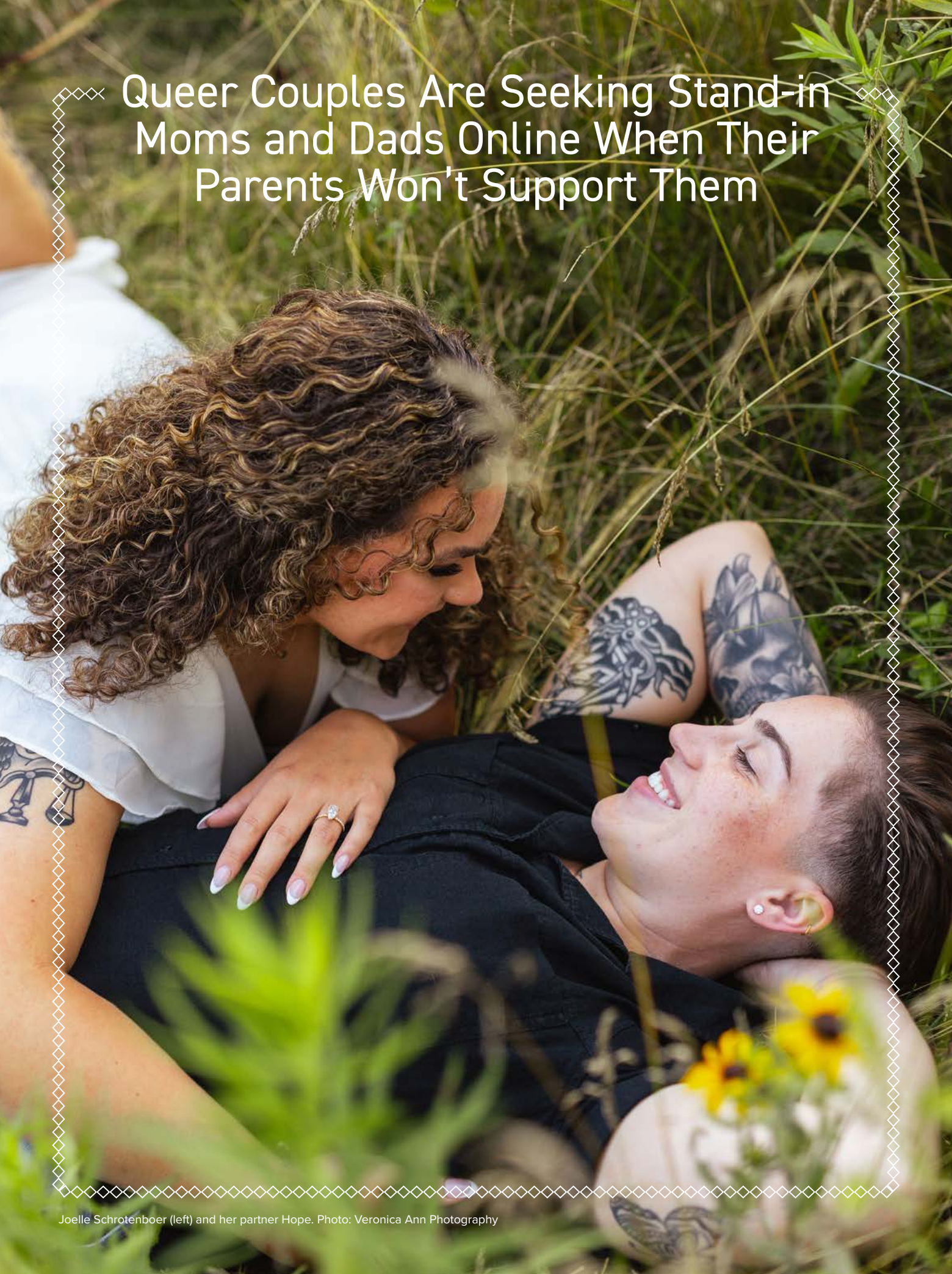
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Queer Couples Are Seeking Stand-in Moms and Dads Online When Their Parents Won't Support Them



Joelle Schrottenboer (left) and her partner Hope. Photo: Veronica Ann Photography

No need to walk down the aisle alone thanks to this massive troupe of stand-in moms and dads

BY NAYANIKA GUHA

Joelle Schrottenboer got engaged to the love of her life in May 2023. She met her partner, Hope, almost four years ago, which is also when she came out to the people around her, including family members who were less than supportive. The disapproval became more than evident once the couple announced their engagement, complicating an already difficult relationship with her biological mother, adoptive mother and her father. "It is a very cold relationship, and [my parents] have refused to have any part in the wedding, but do welcome Hope to their home as [my] best friend, never really acknowledging her as my partner," she said.

Last October, Schrottenboer, who lives in Grand Rapids, made a post seeking connections on the Midwest chapter of the Facebook group Stand In Pride, unsure of what to expect. Her post read, "We currently do not have any wedding plans, since we don't have a lot of family support."

A few months later, things are drastically different. With the support of newfound friends, Schrottenboer says that they have made plans for a private elopement and have planned the wedding for mid-May. Due to the lack of family support in Michigan, they have decided to elope and have a reception when they get back.

"We have been blessed by being introduced to a very good friend through the Stand In Pride group who has had a huge part in the planning of our wedding and reception," Schrottenboer said. "She has stepped up as a motherly figure to both Hope and I and shown us so much love, and I could not be more blessed or feel more valued." The couple's new motherly figure accompanied Schrottenboer while shopping for wedding dresses, bought her veil for her as a wedding gift and is also hosting the wedding reception at her home, as well as helping a great deal with planning.

Stand In Pride, founded by Tennessee-based Daniel Blevins in 2021, takes the form of a series of regional Facebook groups formed to connect queer people with straight allies. In these regional groups, straight allies post offers of support to become "stand-in family" — sometimes in the form of walking queer people down the aisle, other times simply showing up at their graduations or just offering emotional support. Queer people post introductions and specific requests for support, and group members step up to help.

Blevins was inspired by the founder of Free Mom Hugs, Sara Cunningham. "I thought, 'I want to do that as a dad.' And I made a TikTok video offering to stand in for LGBTQ+ couples whose dad wouldn't or couldn't attend their wedding. And here we are, three years later," said Blevins.

Blevins never expected the TikTok video he posted to get so much engagement, but he soon realized there was a huge need for a platform where queer people could connect with other queer people and allies who can offer familial support. Initially, the focus was international, but as the demands of the group grew, Blevins realized the best way to manage them was to break the group into

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“Making content for queer people on TikTok and Instagram has been my way of being the representation that I didn’t have growing up as a little gay boy in East Tennessee,” said Blevins, who was closeted for many years, even to his own children, despite having a long-term partner. “So Stand In Pride is just kind of built on that.”

Stand In Pride’s popularity is unsurprising when considering the high rates of lack of familial support for queer people. A study on LGBTQ+ weddings in 2018, in partnership with Equality Institute, found that 41% of respondents did not have support from their parent(s) around their engagement or wedding.

Affirmation and support is critical. According to a 2022 report by The Trevor Project, LGBTQ+ youth who felt high social support from their family reported attempting suicide at less than half the rate of those who felt low or moderate social support. The report revealed that fewer than 1 in 3 transgender and nonbinary youth found their home to be gender-affirming.

For many young people facing unaccepting families, Stand In Pride has provided unique solace.

For 26-year old Jessica Young, one thing she constantly talked about with her partner while planning her wedding was the fact that her mother wouldn’t be there and how sad that made her. When Jessica made a post about her wedding on the Stand In Pride group, several people inquired about attending, which shocked her. “I wasn’t sure on the day of my wedding who or if any would show. Surprisingly, I had a family from Louisville, which is about an hour and half away from where I live, show up,” said Young. “I was shocked and so happy. I couldn’t quit thanking them for coming to just simply be there to support me and my now wife.”

Considering that fewer than 40% of LGBTQ+ young people find their home to be LGBTQ-affirming — with research suggesting that family acceptance correlates to better self-esteem, social support and health and also protects against depression, substance abuse and suicidal ideation and behaviors — chosen family can step in to provide crucial care.

The fast-growing nature of the



Kesha with her stand-in-dad Daniel Blevins at her wedding. Courtesy photo

community is also a testament to its value and need today. Blevins makes an effort to ensure that every post gets attention by implementing strategies such as only approving 10 posts per hour, because he doesn’t want anyone to feel ignored. “There’s a lot of moving parts. And I have a group chat for every regional group, so I’m constantly telling them, ‘Take a breath, calm down, it’s OK. Yeah, we’re gonna get through this. You may have 1,000 post approvals waiting, but it’s gonna be OK,’”

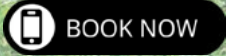
he said.

In a world where queer individuals may face isolation and rejection from their biological families, groups like Stand In Pride can be transformative. “Coming from a non-supporting family, having people around to support you and who are proud of you for just being you makes you feel less alone,” said Young. She added that, for many, it signals something potentially life-saving: “That your life does matter and that you are worth something.”

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How couples are queering their wedding vows

BY KELLI DUNHAM

My perhaps ill-advised decision to permit connection with my extremely heterosexual and extremely traditional mom on social media has resulted in many fascinating discussions. What is a content warning? Why so much chat about Taylor Swift's necklace? Who's the man?

Our embrace of the full spectrum of gender notwithstanding, she has seemed most confused by the photos of me, dressed in my best red flannel shirt and ostensibly matching tie, officiating the weddings of my friends.

I'm a queer ex-nun and comedian with an open heart and a willingness to do paperwork. I have a round face and a codependent streak the width of Lake Michigan and the depth of Lake Superior, which makes me a diligent try-hard with parents and a favorite of everyone's zany and slightly problematic Aunt Edna. My dubious wardrobe choices make me no one's enthusiastic first-choice celebrant. But my mom can understand why, in an emergency, I am sometimes asked to serve as defacto queer secular clergy.

However, she remains puzzled about why I agree to officiate these weddings when, as she said in one early morning text, "you talk like you don't even believe in marriage."

It's true that I don't express enthusiasm for marriage as an institution with the

same relentless and inscrutably optimistic zeal that plagues my mom, who had been married no less than seven times when this conversation occurred. Marriage, on a personal level, doesn't seem to be a good fit for me. Also, I lost two partners in a row to cancer, so I'm taking zero chances with any mentions — even implied — of this "until death do us part" business. It seems way too close to a dare. But I agree to officiate weddings because I'm continually amazed and inspired by the revolutionary creativity LGBTQ+ folks use to transform traditional institutions and components of weddings, including marriage vows, so that they serve our sometimes nontraditional lives and relationships.

For example, we might use a typical vow but subvert it with our own meaning.



the symbolic actions accompanying them. For example, in many wedding ceremonies, each member of the couple processes into the service carrying their own candle. The couple then lights a single unity candle and extinguishes their own. When Holly Nanette Ferrise married her then-partner in Ypsilanti, they chose to have the individual candles continue to burn. Ferrise explained the decision: “Symbols mean a lot to me, and we wanted to highlight that coupledness doesn’t erase individual selves.”

Instead of starting with a prefabricated wedding structure, whether informed by religion or a book checked out of the public library, LGBTQ+ folks often build their ceremonies from the ground up, leaving maximum room for creativity. Shanna Katz, a queer nonbinary polyamorous leather femme living in Ypsilanti, explains how they planned relationship celebration ceremonies with their partners: “I honestly don’t think using traditional style vows ever occurred to us. Our relationships are not ‘normative,’ whatever that means, and so everything about our ceremonies and celebrations was customized to our love and connection, so it just made sense that our vows would be as well.”

Starting from scratch often gives us maximum room to be our most authentic and to make promises with precise intentions. Bethany Joy Winn and her wife composed their own particular vows for their wedding ceremony. Now an ordained clergyperson in Grand Rapids, Winn explains, “I work with partners of many varieties to guide vows that

My mom’s subsequent text (she drank a lot of coffee that morning, apparently) said, “I know your gay friends are not vowing to obey anyone,” and that’s not entirely wrong. In my experience, indeed, many queer weddings don’t include the promise to “obey.” However, for some friends in the leather community, a marriage ceremony would be incomplete without the affirmation of the explicit and joyful agreement to do just that.

We don’t merely rewrite the words of the vows — we sometimes reshape



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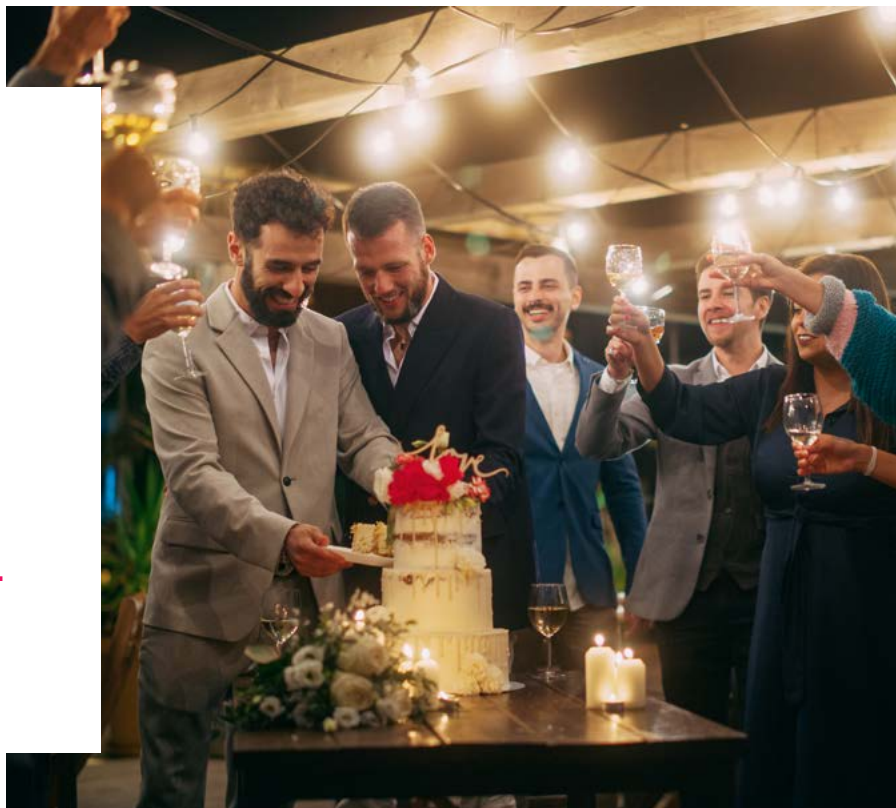


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“Opponents of same-sex marriage for many years framed the rhetoric around a vague concern we would somehow undermine heterosexual marriage. The reality is quite the opposite.”



reflect their honest commitments.”

Chaya Milchtein, a queer automotive educator who lives in the Midwest, described how she and her wife composed their pledges: “Instead of feeling a lot of pressure to write something classically romantic, our vows reveal our belief that romance has to be found in the day to day, and whatever you have to promise to your partner will probably be very romantic to them, regardless of what society thinks.”

For example, Milchtein vowed: “Part of growing with each other has meant learning to travel and explore, vacation and adventure. I promise you that I’ll always make time to travel with you, planning adventures as often as we can afford them because life is short, and I want to see the world with you before we leave it. And I’ll try to stay off my phone too.”

Many LGBTQ+ ceremonies also include an acknowledgment of the challenges of long-term relationships. In one ceremony that I officiated, the couple asked members of their community to take their own vows to support the couple through those inevitable hard times. Although detailing potential struggle beyond a passing “in sickness and in health” might not be the stuff of which romantic comedies are made, Kate

Walker, who identifies as both queer and polyamorous, explained that they believe including this conversation demonstrates a commitment to the reality of the process that makes relationships work.

Walker’s wedding ceremony to one partner included the declaration, “I have already learned with you how embracing challenging moments with honesty, vulnerability and self-examination makes conflict not the opposite of intimacy, but part of it and our strong foundation.”

This same ceremony incorporated an acknowledgment that some romantic partnerships are not for a lifetime and promised a commitment to an evolving relationship: “If we ever arrive at the decision that being together is truly no longer right for us, I commit to going through that process with honesty, dignity and respect and working hard to find a new way to remain each other’s family.”

Domi Shoemaker, a kinky queer disabled polyamorous Portland, Oregon writer whose partner Kelly Jeske is originally from Michigan, celebrated their relationship with a ceremony that featured community contributions, including a ballet number, a piano piece and their partner’s 96-year-old grandmother’s

virtual addition: playing the accordion from her Traverse City home. Shoemaker made the promise: “My beloved girl. Before our friends and family, I declare my love for you, my commitment to you, our family and our home for as long as we both consent.”

I’m unlikely ever to get married, but I am thrilled to officiate ceremonies for many queer and trans people because of the beauty and creativity our community demonstrates when building our relationships and celebrating our love. Opponents of same-sex marriage for many years framed the rhetoric around a vague concern we would somehow undermine heterosexual marriage. The reality is quite the opposite: I see us instead making valuable contributions to the conversation about what all humans can and might promise each other in relationships.

“Writing custom vows isn’t even a thing just for queer and trans folks and those practicing non-monogamy and/or kink and leather,” said Shanna Katz. “People are starting to recognize that we do not have to use what no longer serves us and, rather, create connective experiences that honor our realities.”

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When You're Stuck on the 'Where'

SPONSORED EDITORIAL

Tips on selecting a venue from Tabitha Mason of Cornman Farms

One of the most critical decisions engaged couples will make is choosing a ceremony and reception venue. These choices will impact almost every other choice, so it's important to get it right, but it can be challenging to narrow down the options and find something that feels like the best fit. Tabitha Mason, managing partner and owner of Zingerman's Cornman Farms in Ann Arbor, shares her insights to help couples navigate the early planning stages.

1. Nail down the basics.

Mason suggests sketching out the big

event by answering some basic questions that will inform your decision-making throughout the planning process:

When do you want to get married?

Are you hoping for a quick turnaround or do you want to plan farther ahead? Is your heart set on a specific day or a particular season? "Once you announce your engagement, your well-meaning friends and family members will immediately start asking, 'When are you going to get married?' and being able to answer that question will buy you some time to figure things out," Mason says.

What is your budget?

Mason urges couples to address finances early in the process since that information will determine the wedding's scale, guest count and overall feasibility. There's another

benefit to setting and adhering to budget early: "A well-documented budget can prevent conflicts and enhance the planning experience," Mason explains. Trust her — as the owner of a very popular wedding venue, she's seen it all!

Are you thinking big or small?

Define the size of your wedding to align with your preferences and budget. "Having a general idea about whether you prefer an intimate wedding or a grand guest count will also help you think about budget and will ensure you don't spend time looking at venues that won't work for your wedding size," Mason says. Most importantly, she adds, consider who you want by your side on the big day. This will help you narrow your venue options.



Photos by Lolagrace Photography and Mae Stier Photography. Photo (right): Finch Florals

Make choices that align with your values and beliefs.

“One thing we see more and more couples prioritizing is ensuring they are spending money with businesses and people whose values align with theirs,” Mason explains. “It is easier than ever to see if a vendor you are interested in shares your beliefs. You can gauge a lot of insight based on the language they use on their website and the type of content they curate can quickly reveal whether or not they do not discriminate and are making a commitment to show they are focused on inclusion.”

2. Narrow your choices.

Check out multiple venues that fit within your budget. Be sure to see them in person, and take lots of notes — you’ll be thankful you did later on.

Get organized.

Whether you’re a super planner who loves a good spreadsheet or more of a tactile note-taker, old-school notebook in hand, Mason recommends documenting everything and centralizing your notes and quotes for efficient comparison between venue options.

Identify your unique priorities.

As you explore venues, you’ll likely find yourself drawn to certain elements. Try to define what those qualities include. Is it the aesthetic appeal? Culinary reputation? What calls to you about your top choices? Identifying those qualities will help if your top pick isn’t available.

“The reasons couples choose Cornman Farms are as diverse as our couples,” Mason notes. “Some come to us because they see a breathtaking picture on

Instagram and fall in love with the beauty of our garden. Others choose us because they know Zingerman’s reputation for great food and service and are thrilled to share that with their guests on the most important day of their lives. Some have eaten at one of the restaurants around the world that my partner, chef Kieron Hales, has cooked at and can’t believe they can provide a meal prepared by a chef of his caliber. Once we hear what they’re excited about, we craft a day that builds off of that.”

3. Read. the. contract.

Mason can hardly stress enough how important it is for couples to understand the legally binding contracts they will need to sign to secure a venue and other vendors. “It’s not glamorous, but read that contract!” she says. “It’s true that I almost



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always check the box telling Apple I've read and understand their updated terms and conditions without actually doing so, but wedding contracts are a different beast."

She urges couples to read these documents very carefully, checking details like last call, decoration rules and venue restrictions that may not have been discussed during the tour. "Contracts are there to protect you — the couple," she says. "Don't assume anything... get it in writing. If you can't imagine walking down the aisle without flower petals strewn everywhere or making a grand entrance in a cloud of dry ice smoke, it's best to know if the venue allows it or not before putting money down."

4. Enjoy the planning process.

"Take time to enjoy being engaged," Mason says. Reach out for advice from recently married friends and family. "And remember — wedding planning is a collaborative process, so keep it fun and positive," she adds.

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Can't Figure Out Those Vows? Not to Worry — ChatGPT Is

Romantic AS Hell.

Is asking ChatGPT to write your wedding vows a smart 21st-century move or a sign of the end times? We'll leave that existential crisis for another day, but our unscientific experiment rendered some surprisingly romantic — and in other cases, predictably hilarious — suggestions for brides and grooms suffering from writer's block.

We asked ChatGPT to craft vows for a modern, queer wedding. Within seconds, the program spit out something surprisingly usable:

In the radiant glow of our shared journey, surrounded by love's kaleidoscope, we stand here, two souls intertwined, ready to embark on a lifetime of adventure, growth and unwavering support.

In the spirit of authenticity and celebration of our unique identities, I vow to honor and cherish you, my love, for all that you are and all that you aspire to be.

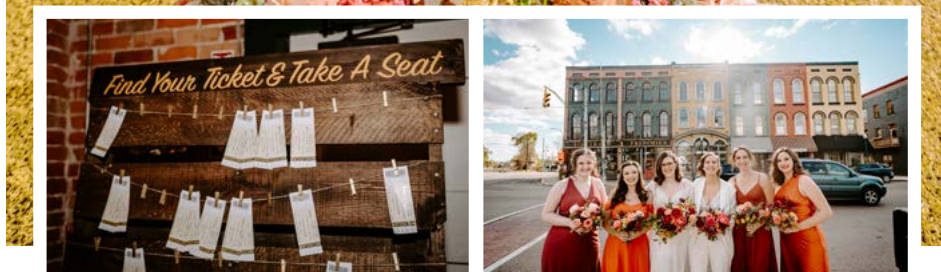
Together, we'll create a sanctuary of acceptance and understanding, where our differences are not only embraced but celebrated. I pledge to be your ally in the pursuit of happiness, equality, and a future filled with shared dreams.

Today, I declare my commitment to you, my beloved, in the presence of our chosen family, as we weave our own narrative of love, resilience, and the beauty of being authentically, unapologetically us.

Honestly, it's not bad! But now we feel compelled to push for more. What if there are dogs who need to be included? "No sweat," says ChatGPT.

In the embrace of our shared love story, surrounded by the warmth of our chosen family and our two furry companions, I stand before you, my heart

See [ChatGPT Vows](#), page 22



Top: Rachel (left) and Lauren Myers at Michigan Stadium. Bottom left: The couple printed seating place cards on Michigan gameday ticket cardstock. Bottom right: The wedding party in Ypsilanti's Depot Town. Photos: Liv Lyszyk Photography

An Authentically Michigan Affair

How Ypsilanti brides Rachel and Lauren Myers created a deeply personal, intentionally local event

BY SARAH BRICKER HUNT

For local couples seeking inspiration on hosting a thoroughly Michigan wedding, look no further than the November 2023 nuptials of Ypsilanti brides Rachel and Lauren Myers. From a ceremony at Ann Arbor's Matthaei Botanical Gardens to seating cards printed on University of Michigan game ticket cardstock to a reception at the Ypsilanti Freighthouse, the affair was as much a love letter to the Great Lakes State as it was a celebration of their own (super charming) love story.

In some ways, the couple's origin story is typically modern — they both swiped right,

and it all worked out. But adding a little Covid-era social protocol into the mix meant creative early dates and a little trauma bonding over the stressful, often sad circumstances the world was experiencing in 2021. That year, Lauren had received an early vaccine as an employee at the Veterans Administration in Ann Arbor, but Rachel had to wait, so things were complicated at first. "It forced us on a lot of outdoor dates, walking around the park. We'd meet up at Gallup Park and sit under the pavilion, eat some charcuterie. It was fun, actually," Lauren recalls.

Before long and despite the pandemic, the two were soon inseparable. "I knew pretty quickly," Rachel says. "I was like, 'Girl, I know.' Within that year, she moved in. It was just right, and I felt so at ease with it from my end. I wasn't trying to wait!" By November 2022, the



And they Ate Cake Happily Ever After

*Fresh flowers not provided.

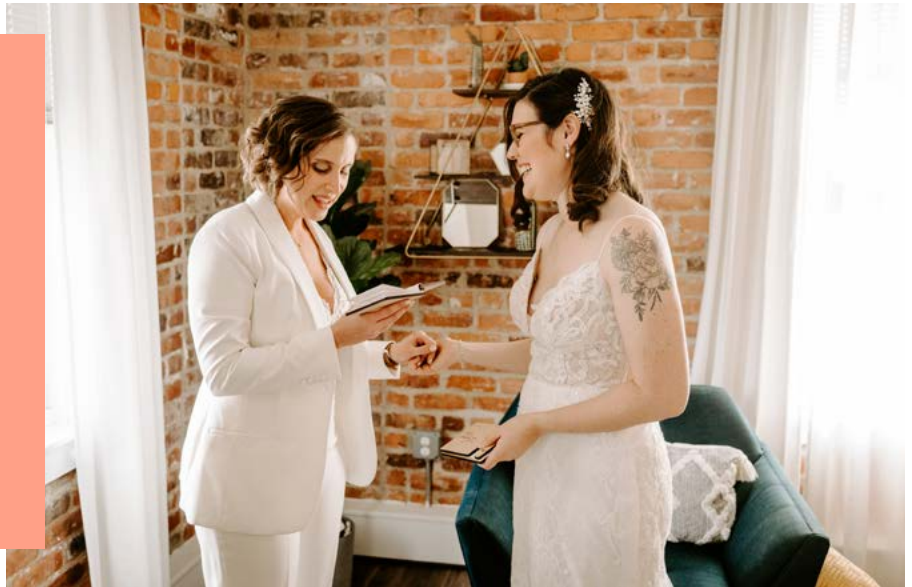
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The brides enjoy their "first look" and exchange private vows ahead of the big event. Photo: Liv Lyszyk Photography

women were planning a very Michigan (and mostly Ann Arbor-Ypsilanti) wedding.

When it comes to wedding planning, one could say it's all about fitting a million little details into a single, picture-perfect puzzle. Every couple has a unique approach to fitting those pieces together — for some, it's a chaotic romp to the finish line, filled with surprises and last-minute decision-making. Rachel and Lauren's approach would likely fall on the other end of such chaos. There were spreadsheets involved, and most of the details were in place within a few months. "For us, it made sense to start with the reception venue, and once that was in place, we kind of built out from there," Rachel remembers.

The couple worked with a wedding planner on some elements of the event, but the small details were uniquely them. Rachel, who is "passionate" about athletics and has built her career working for teams like the Detroit Pistons, Detroit Shock and Chicago Fire before returning to work for University of Michigan Athletics, connected with the school's ticket sales director to source the same cardstock that game day tickets are printed on. Each guest's seating assignment was printed on the ticket, an understated, yet deeply personal nod to Rachel's love for athletics.

For Lauren, it felt important to honor her Jewish heritage. "I grew up Jewish, and I affiliate with the culture of Judaism, but not necessarily the religion," she explains. "I had to figure out a happy medium of

what felt good to incorporate in a Jewish wedding while limiting the religious portions to what felt good." The brides decided to incorporate a chuppah into the ceremony. "We built it together — bought the wood, stained it, sanded it and put it all together," she says.

Along the way, the brides were intentional about selecting vendors who were part of the state and local economy, and often, part of the queer community. "Our photographer, Liv Lyszyk, for example, is from Grand Rapids and she shoots almost exclusively queer weddings and other queer photo shoots," Rachel says. Catering duties went to Angel Food Catering in Belleville, and Love Plus One provided a "freaking awesome" DJ.

Floral elements were everywhere at the fall-themed event, which featured bridesmaids' dresses in shades of autumn orange. We Adore Flowers put together the couple's "unbelievable" arrangements. "Jenny at We Adore is pretty spectacular," Lauren says. "She grows the flowers out of her house and runs a local flower club in the Ypsi area." The florist offers community events like wreath-building and flower-drying classes.

Another integral wedding element was Lauren's dress, which she sourced through an Ann Arbor non-profit, The Bride's Project, which supports adults and kids impacted by cancer. The organization donates proceeds from the sale of donated dresses to the

Cancer Support Community of Greater Ann Arbor. "Everybody who works there is a volunteer," Lauren explains. "It's a pretty awesome organization, and also the best experience — my sisters came with me, and the staff was super helpful. It was a good feeling donating money toward a community like that."

The newly minted Myers acknowledge that wedding planning can be quite stressful. Maintaining a cooperative spirit and making sure both partners are on the same page are two ways they approached the process. They also checked in with a couples therapist from queer-affirming Connally Counseling in Ann Arbor. "We recognized that most religious people would maybe go to a church, and neither of us are super religious, but it just felt like a good first step to take," Rachel says. "We were able to talk about our goals and values and what we want out of this partnership together."

When it comes to nailing down all the details, Lauren advises couples to be realistic with their timeline and to create a budget early (and then stick to it). "Don't be afraid to break away from tradition," she says. "We made this wedding very 'us.' It was authentically who we are, so don't be afraid to get creative." The couple did several DIY projects, sourced from places like Pinterest, with materials often found on Facebook Marketplace.

Ultimately, Rachel encourages couples in the wedding planning stage to enjoy the process. "Really soak it in," she says.

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◀ ChatGPT

Continued from page 18

overflowing. With tails wagging and paws padding beside us, we embark on this journey as a united pack. As we exchange vows under the open sky, I promise to honor not just our connection but the unique bonds we share with our canine companions, creating a home filled with love, laughter, and paw prints.

But what if it's a couple who loves "The Golden Girls"? ChatGPT chuckles. "Picture it: Sicily, 1948..."

In the warmth of our love, surrounded by laughter and the golden glow of shared memories, I, [Partner's Name], take you, [Partner's Name], as my lifelong confidant and cherished companion. I vow to be your Sophia, offering wisdom with a dash of humor; your Rose, bringing optimism to our days; your Blanche, adding passion to our love story, and your Dorothy, standing by you with unwavering strength. Like these iconic ladies, I promise to make our journey a blend of laughter, love, and unwavering support. Together, we'll create a love story as timeless and vibrant as the friendship we celebrate today.

Well played, ChatGPT. We can work with this. Still. Maybe it's two queer poets who want to deliver their vows in verse but are feeling uninspired? Maybe this is a bad sign, but we're not here to judge — we're just here to stump an AI chatbot. But ChatGPT just seems bored at this point: "Whatever. I can do this all day, and please challenge me with more details. Where are these people from?"

Beneath Michigan skies, our love takes flight,
Two souls entwined, hearts shining bright.
In the Great Lakes' embrace, our journey unfolds,
Through autumn leaves and winter's cold.
With each season, our bond will grow,
A love that blossoms, as the tulips show.
In Michigan's beauty, our vows are spun,
A promise to cherish, to laugh, to run.
Hand in hand, through life we stride,
In love's embrace, forever side by side.

Clearly, having ChatGPT or another AI bot write your vows takes the authentic spirit of your relationship right out of the equation, but honestly, it's not a bad place to start if you're feeling stumped. And remember — your vows are important, but they aren't everything, no matter how you arrive at the wording. Here's what ChatGPT told us when we asked, "Are people more likely to get divorced if they have AI write their wedding vows?"

The likelihood of divorce is influenced by numerous factors, and having AI write wedding vows is unlikely to be a significant contributor. Marital success depends on communication, commitment, compatibility, and various personal and relational dynamics. While AI can assist in crafting creative and meaningful vows, the success of a marriage is ultimately shaped by the couple's connection and ongoing efforts to nurture their relationship. AI-generated vows can be a unique and heartfelt addition to the ceremony, but they should ideally reflect the genuine sentiments and values of the individuals involved.

We'd never truly encourage anyone to use AI to replace real writers, but it's still hard to argue with that!



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Author Chukwuebuka Ibeh. Photo: Erin Lewis, Washington University in St. Louis

'Blessings' in a Country Where Same-Sex Marriage Is Outlawed

Nigerian author Chukwuebuka Ibeh on his debut novel about a teenager forging his own path to self-acceptance

BY SARAH BRICKER HUNT

African novelist Chukwuebuka Ibeh tells the story of a queer boy struggling to define himself while seeking out affirmations in post-military Nigeria in his debut novel, "Blessings." The book is set to publish June 4 via Doubleday, a Penguin Random House imprint. Already, USA Today has included it in their list of the Best Books by Black Authors to Read in 2024.

In the book, the powerful bildungsroman weaves in elements pulled from the real-

life Nigerian political battle over marriage equality in that country, which enacted the Same Sex Marriage Prohibition Act in 2014. The law further restricted the rights of LGBTQ+ people in a place where same-sex organizations and businesses — and homosexuality itself — have been illegal for decades and where, as late as 2013, according to U.S. Pew Research Center, 98% of residents feel society should not accept homosexuality. Ibeh draws parallels between this legal context and the Obergefell v. Hodges decision that legalized same-sex marriage in the U.S. In some ways, he says, Nigeria's same-sex marriage ban was a reaction to Obergefell.

"Blessings" is based partly on Ibeh's experiences in a Christian boarding school in Nigeria, where he felt safer remaining mostly closeted. The book focuses on

Obiefuna, a teen boy sent away to live in such a school after his father catches him being intimate with another boy. The school is strict and overwhelmingly conservative, but queerness is still a fact of life among the students, and there are blessings to be found along the long road toward self-acceptance.

Between The Lines recently connected with Ibeh, named one of the "Most Promising New Voices of Nigerian Fiction" by Electric Lit, to learn more about how he explores the devastating impact of the Same Sex Marriage Prohibition Act against the backdrop of his coming-of-age novel and how he feels about the global state of LGBTQ+ culture and acceptance.

How did the U.S. Supreme Court decision Obergefell v. Hodges influence

the Nigerian government on the marriage equality front and how did these legal moves influence your book?

I like to be clear that homophobia has never really been foreign to Nigerians — and it’s true that our earlier anti-gay laws were British colonial laws, but there’s a whole other context to that. I think, though, that part of the “effect,” so to speak, of the Supreme Court decision was an indication of too much liberal progress worldwide, which contrasted and alarmed a very religious, very conservative Nigeria. My guess is that Nigeria needed to send a message to the liberal West that it would not “allow its values to be corrupted.” It’s a stance I would otherwise find amusing for the irony, if it didn’t have actual victims.

The law, I think, was also part of a cynical political tactic by an increasingly unpopular government looking to score points with a conservative populace. These were among the things I wanted to explore in the novel, so I suppose “influence” is apt.

Your book focuses on Nigeria, but the story feels very universal — one that LGBTQ+ people anywhere can relate to on many levels. Would you agree with that assessment?

Yes, and thank you. I think all over the world, the liberal West included, queer people still don’t have full rights, still struggle with identity, acceptance — both self and external — and belonging. [They] are still more likely to be victims



of targeted violence and hate crimes. It’s always curious for me to hear Nigerians say things like “go to America if you’re gay” as if America is an absolute paradise for gay people. That couldn’t be further from the truth.

On the other hand, readers outside Nigeria and Africa stand to learn so much about a culture that is quite unique in and of itself. What are a few things about Nigerian culture you hope readers will take away?

I realize now that all boarding schools probably have similar structures and

hierarchies, but I hoped to showcase the uniqueness of Nigerian religious boarding schools. And then there are other things that I think a lot of Nigerian Igbo families [a deeply rooted southeast Nigerian ethnicity and culture that emphasizes traditional family structures and conservative values] are obsessed about — the impact of naming, for instance.

Do you think things are getting better for LGBTQ+ people in 2024 in Nigeria? What about the U.S.?

Against my writerly instinct, my general outlook on life is one of an eternal optimist. So, regardless of the fact that the anti-gay laws are still in place and there have been no plans to reverse it, I still believe things are getting better. If only that Nigerians seem to be having open conversations about it — problematic sometimes, granted, but we’re talking, at the very least. It’s my hope that this novel drives even more conversations, and sparks more debates.

It also seems to me that there is an increase in queer visibility and open existence in Nigeria. It can’t be easy, obviously, especially for Nigerians based in Nigeria, but it’s admirable to see. In the U.S., however, I sometimes worry about a possible retrogression and that people are getting a bit too comfortable with bigotry in the guise of free speech. It’s particularly jarring in the U.S. because you’ve been made to believe it’s different [in the U.S.]. In Nigeria, at least, you know early enough what to expect, and brace yourself ahead of time for the blow.

Finding a Wedding Dress Authentic to My Identity As a Queer Pakistani Woman

Something old, something new
— and for this writer, something
from her home culture too

BY ALEENAH ANSARI

Whenever I visit my grandmother, I ask her to tell me as many stories as possible. Some of them are funny, like the time she'd climb into her neighbor's yard to eat the ripe mangoes off their trees, or that day her brother braided her thick black hair into her sisters so they'd wake up confused and stuck together.

One day, I was talking to her about my upcoming wedding and asked what her wedding was like. I had seen one black-and-white photo of her and her husband smiling for the camera on the wall, but had never heard much more about what that day felt like for her. She told me that was the only photo she had because her mother-in-law didn't think they should have a photographer, so this photo was taken months later when her husband noted that they needed at least one photo in their wedding outfits. I'd seen photos from my parents' wedding too, where my mom is wearing a bright red lehenga with gold accents. That day was over 35 years ago, but I still see that fierce look in her eyes today.

It's clear that I have a strong lineage of Pakistani women who were rooted in their culture, but I still had a choice to make for my own wedding. Everything about this choice feels like a delicate balancing act. I hadn't spent much time dreaming of my wedding until I got engaged, but I had grown up seeing photos of brides in white wedding dresses with trains that went on for what seemed like miles. Usually, their jewelry was simple, their hair was down and they were accompanied by their dad as they walked down the aisle to their soon-to-husband, who was usually blinking back tears. Despite this idea of a bride in my head, I couldn't see myself fitting the bill, especially as a queer Pakistani woman.

I started to fill my head with ideas of what a Pakistani bride would wear, usually a lehenga, which is made up of a long flared skirt and top adorned with

Aleenah (right) with her partner, Liezel. Courtesy photo



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Left: The author trying on traditional Pakistani wedding dresses. Right: The brides selected a matching mehndi design for the big day. Photos: Aleenah Ansari

sequins, beading or mirror work. They say that you can't outdress a South Asian bride, and for good reason — an outfit is usually accomplished by bracelets that run up the arm, intricate designs of mehndi on the hands, and some kind of headpiece or tikka.

Much like my identity, my ideal version of a wedding outfit seemed to fall in the middle of what I had seen in Western media and with my own family. After all, I'm just as much Pakistani as I am American. I knew that I wanted to have intricate mehndi on my hands, a tradition I had grown to love during other people's weddings and during Eid celebrations. My fiancée and I decided that we would both have mehndi, a connecting thread that would bind us. I wanted to have gold statement jewelry that I could cherish and wear forever, but I also wanted my outfit that was more manageable than the 40-pound outfits covered in tiny mirrors that would cover up all my tattoos. Even more ideally, I wanted an outfit that I could wear again and again — the wedding may be one day in my life, but the memories and the pieces I got for it could last forever.

In my wedding dress shopping process,

I discovered South Asian designers that made me feel like a modern Pakistani bride. The outfits that I loved had sequins and beading that made me glow from the inside out. The best ones didn't make me feel like I was wearing a costume — instead, I felt like me, but with a little more sparkle. My mom found me a statement necklace and gold bangles in Pakistan that would add some sparkle to my outfit, but my mehndi would still peek through. Slowly but surely, the pieces of my wedding outfit came together.

Although I felt adamant about having a Pakistani wedding outfit, I still felt like something was missing. As someone who treats many parts of my life like an experiment, I felt like I had to rule out Western wedding dresses in order to be sure, so I made a bridal appointment. As I combed through the racks, I saw everything that I expected: There were ballgowns and mermaid silhouettes, dresses with full beading or nothing at all. It was everything I had seen brides wear in magazines, in television shows and on runways, which often didn't include queer people of color who were navigating the wedding planning

process. One thing did stick from all those conversations between brides and bridal consultants — the moment when you feel like you can say yes to the dress. That moment when you put on the veil and, with tears and a twirl, know that you were meant to find this outfit.

I ended up booking two follow-up appointments and trying 10 Western wedding dresses, but only one of them felt different. When I looked in the mirror, I found myself getting teary-eyed and saying, "I'm a bride." From that moment on, that dress was my dress. It felt like something that my ancestors might have looked at and said, "If I picked a Western wedding dress, this would be the one."

I found peace in the fact that I didn't have to choose between wearing a Pakistani outfit and a traditional Western dress. I could wear both, two sides of the same coin of my identity. My choice is as unique as my wedding, where my fiancée and I are bridging our Pakistani and Filipino cultures through our outfits and traditions. We get to celebrate our love our way, and that's all that matters to me.

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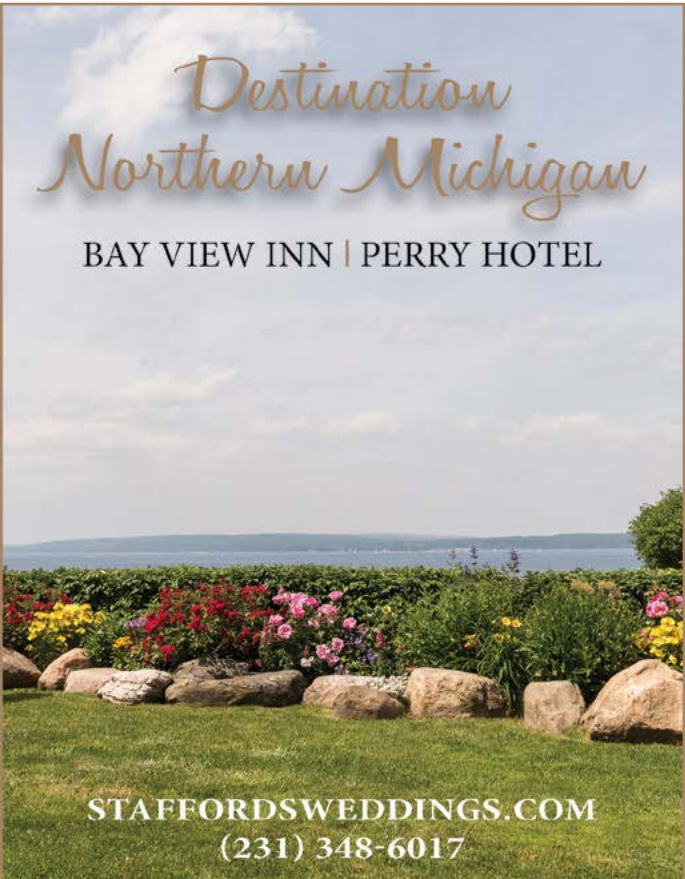


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Christian Cooper. Photo: Nat Geo

How Christian Cooper Spread His Wings After Racial Discrimination Put Him in the Spotlight

The cliff swallows aren't the only ones with a story to tell

BY CHRIS AZZOPARDI

The red-winged blackbird has officially returned to southern Michigan — its trill can be heard starting in mid-to-late February and into mid-March, a harbinger of the transition from winter to spring. You might spot one, identifiable by its jet black color with a red and yellow patch on its upper wing, calling out from a tree or a brushy hayfield. And if you're in New York, you might spot Christian Cooper looking at one through his binoculars in a park in the city, as he's famously done before.

Cooper had established a public persona before 2020 as the first openly gay writer

and editor of Marvel Comics, but it was an experience in New York City's Central Park that year that catapulted him to household name status and a national symbol of Black resilience just ahead of a major ramp-up of the Black Lives Matter movement. It was just another day spent on his favorite hobby, birdwatching, until a white woman named Amy Cooper (same last name, no relation) called 911 — frantic with her false, racially charged accusations, as caught on his cellphone in viral documentation — after he asked if she could leash her dog.

That same week a white Minneapolis police officer killed George Floyd, a Black man, igniting a civil rights movement that included numerous marches through the streets of the U.S. In "Better Living Through Birding: Notes from a Black Man in the Natural World," published in 2023, Cooper shares his own experiences as a Black

queer person in the outdoors, reflecting on what he tells me he has coined, as shorthand, "the incident."

"I try to set the incident in the context of the racial environment in the country, and in particular in Central Park, because there's a whole racial history to Central Park," he says. "But more generally, I try to put the incident in the context of my life, because that was like three minutes, and there's a whole lot of other stuff that happened before, and that happened after. So I'm very glad that I get to tell a fuller version of not only the incident, but to put it in context and tell a fuller version of me, which is what a memoir is."

His story continues to evolve beyond those brief but defining few minutes — a story that, in some ways, began much earlier, too, as Cooper started watching birds when he was 10, a cherished pastime

he shared with his father. Some 50 years later, and after the memoir detailed much of his personal history, Cooper's own show, "Extraordinary Birder with Christian Cooper," launched on Nat Geo and Disney+.

During an episode devoted to Alabama, where woodpeckers, eagles, shrikes and kites soar above one of the nation's most bird-friendly states, Cooper rediscovered what made that place so special to him when he first visited and then recreated it for this particular installment.

"It's still about birds because it's a birding show, but it also ends up layered over family history and civil rights history," he says. "We're in Selma and I walk across the Edmund Pettus Bridge — both of my parents are gone now and they both were very active in civil rights back in the day, but they never got to see [it]. I don't think either of them ever went to Alabama and saw the Edmund Pettus Bridge. So that was really moving."

Walking the bridge, Cooper couldn't help but think about the cliff swallows as historical observers, as he saw groups of the colorful songbirds nested underneath the very National Historic Landmark where "Bloody Sunday" occurred on March 7, 1965, when about 600 civil rights marchers headed east out of Selma on U.S. Route 80. They only reached Edmund Pettus Bridge six blocks away, where lawmen attacked them and drove them back into Selma. Those cliff swallows, he told me, "probably had been nesting underneath that bridge for decades, and were probably there when everything that happened went down on that bridge."

While contemplating what the birds might see as much as what he sees in the birds,

he thought of three people: his dad, mom and grandma. "It was like they were walking with me, it really was," he says.

As the fight for human rights and social justice continues, remarkably even in 2024, 61-year-old Cooper, who survived the devastating AIDS epidemic and Ronald Reagan's dismissiveness toward it, says he's struck by what it feels like to be a queer person in the country right now, where anti-queer rhetoric is unrelenting.

"It's not like back when I was a kid in the '70s, when you just didn't see gay people in public; that's not true anymore," he says. "And yet there's still this backlash coming at us, and that's really disturbing. It means they know us and they still hate us, and that's a bitter pill to swallow. And what does it mean, and how do we fight back against it?"

One way Cooper can counter the current wave of homophobia and racism, he realizes, is to speak out about these injustices that marginalized and oppressed communities are collectively up against — ones that, for him, have obviously and very publicly hit close to home. With his show and memoir, he's cognizant of reaching more people and new audiences about three of his passions: "justice for Black people, equality for queer people and wild birds for all people."

"What I hope is that by telling this very personal story, it makes it easier for people to get into the other aspects of the story, whether it's the birding, or what it's like to be gay and in the closet, and then get out of that closet, what that experience was like, or what it's

See **Christian Cooper**, page 33

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The author with a white-breasted nuthatch. Courtesy photo

For this writer, the outdoors is common ground for connection

BY ASHLEY D'SOUZA

The first bird I ever identified by ear was a northern mockingbird. At the time, I couldn't anticipate how one bird would shape my life, help me understand my identity and grow my community.

The northern mockingbird, a nondescript looking gray and white bird, is a master of disguise: It can learn and imitate 200 different sounds, ranging from other species' songs to car alarms, lawn mowers, sirens and dog barks. The bird seems proud of its vocal prowess, too; it perches atop lampposts, roofs and trees, belting loudly through the day and into the night, persistently repeating the same phrase before moving onto the next persona.

Not long after I encountered the mockingbird, I began to question my gender, launching a new era in my life immortalized by my "don't mind me, I'm just

having a gender crisis" playlist on Spotify. (It has only four songs that I listened to on repeat.) I had come out as bisexual a year prior, just stopped being someone's girlfriend, and realized that wearing floral dresses made me want to take my skin off. I turned to nature for answers.

Like the mockingbird, I felt most authentic when I wasn't boxed into a single mode of expression. My identity felt fluid, and I wanted to sing it out more loudly just for that. I found solace in observing birds in the wild because wildlife doesn't prescribe to the same social norms and hierarchies that we do, nor does it judge us. It is only in wild spaces that I can truly let my guard down and can switch from feeling like a potential target to a peaceful observer, an experience I trust is shared by other queer people of color, trauma survivors and members of marginalized groups.

Nature also helps me connect to other people. One of my closest friends and I bonded over birds when we first met; our opening messages on Bumble BFF consisted of memes about "weird duck season" and exchanges of our favorite

local birdwatching spots. Alex was my first nonbinary friend, and they taught me that I could be nonbinary and femme at the same time without feeling like a contradiction. During our friendship, they transitioned to fully using they/them pronouns, giving me the courage to do the same. They share my fascination with identifying wildlife and together we go on birdwatching trips, inaugurate new bird-curious acquaintances into our circle, and continue learning about birds and ourselves.

The northern mockingbird set me off on my birdwatching journey, and four years later, I can't imagine my life without birds. I write about them, photograph them and look for them everywhere I go. And I talk about them to anyone who will listen. However, I don't look like most of the other birdwatchers I encounter, and in birdwatching groups, I've often felt invisible. A 2022 survey by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service studied the demographics of people who participate in "wildlife-watching" — primarily birdwatching — and found that more than 70% of participants were white, and only 5% were Asian, like me. Less than

2% were gender-nonconforming. While these statistics are relatively proportional to national demographics, they don't make for the most inclusive environment for people like me.

I was grateful to learn that there are groups creating inclusive and safe spaces outdoors. The Feminist Bird Club, which has chapters across North America and Europe, is dedicated to providing a safe space for women, queer people and people of color to connect to the natural world. The club hosts free bird walks, each beginning with a round of introductions and pronoun-sharing for those who are comfortable with it, followed by an opportunity to borrow a pair of binoculars if you don't have your own.

At my first Feminist Bird Club walk, I was delighted to find myself surrounded by welcoming people of all ages and levels of birding experience who expressed their queerness openly and proudly. I hadn't known that spaces like this existed. The walk progressed at a comfortable, accessible pace, and the more experienced birdwatchers made sure that nobody missed out on a single sighting, pointing out each bird to the group and waiting until everyone had seen it before moving on. We were all accepted exactly how we showed up that day, and besides, the focus wasn't on us — it was on the birds.

The LGBTQ+ Birders of North America (QBNA) is another community of queer birdwatchers and their allies; the group facilitates discussions and meetups and hosts an annual birding conference. However, there are inclusive organizations

for all kinds of outdoor activities besides birdwatching. In Ann Arbor, The Queer Outdoors leads hiking, foraging and camping trips. On a national scale, The Venture Out Project leads backpacking and wilderness trips across the country for the queer community and trains its leaders and volunteers extensively in inclusivity practices. The Venture Out Project finds power in numbers when creating a safe space for queer people to experience the natural world.

"There's a lot of reflexivity when experiencing nature," said Krista Marquardt, a Venture Out Project volunteer in northern Michigan. Marquardt leads hiking and backpacking trips every month during the summer. "The more comfortable you feel, the more you'll get out of it. Going out in numbers with members of your community makes it easier to let your guard down and open yourself up to new connections with nature," she said.

Nature serves as common ground to connect with people outside of the queer community as well. Marquardt recounted a solo backpacking trip on North Manitou Island in Lake Michigan where she unexpectedly befriended two cis, straight, white men who were exhausted from their hike. She mentioned doing internal calculations as the men approached to determine whether or not it would be safe to engage before ultimately deciding to talk to them. The three shared food and equipment. Two years later, they still talk all the time.

"The act of connecting with nature for anybody, queer or not, is a grounding experience," said Marquardt. "It's integral to our humanity and allows us to peel away constructs and layers to become a more authentic version of ourselves so we can meet that authenticity in others."

There's still work to be done to make the outdoors a truly welcoming space for queer people and people of color. Rural areas, which boast breathtaking nature, remote trails and exceptional birdwatching, are often politically unfriendly — and historically dangerous — to people of color, the queer community and those perceived as female. I tend to steer clear of these areas. However, Marquardt has words of encouragement for those who worry they won't be welcomed in outdoor spaces:

"You may be delightfully surprised at how welcoming a majority of the outdoor community is," she said. "People who love the outdoors will find you and accept you for who you are most of the time. Sometimes, you need to take baby steps in spaces that feel a bit safer, then work your way up, but I think it will be much more welcoming than you anticipate."

I've found this to be resoundingly true in the birdwatching community. We're generally a very friendly and reflective lot, and I've never met another birdwatcher who wasn't eager to chat with me about the rare shorebird they spotted from 100 meters away, their attempts to befriend their neighborhood crows, or the mockingbird that helped them to finally find themselves and their people.

◀ Christian Cooper

Continued from page 31

like being Black in this society that is still rife with obvious and not-so-obvious racial bias."

When I spoke to Cooper, he acknowledged those who came before him and tirelessly built the platform he now speaks on, reflecting with humility on connections he didn't explicitly make during our conversation but were ever-present in the undertones in discussing his own unique experiences as a Black queer man in an America rife with racial and LGBTQ+ discrimination. Even if he wasn't on the

receiving end of a white woman's racially charged episode, and even if another Trump presidency wasn't looming larger than we'd like it to, what the Edmund Pettus Bridge represents wouldn't likely be too far from his mind.

He's in the spotlight, he says, due to the activists and freedom fighters who set this stage for him — both during the 1960s civil rights era and more recently after George Floyd's murder. "It's not all because of me," he says. "It's got to do with the current environment and the people who have come before me and a whole lot of other things that are creating the updraft that's letting me get some lift."

"As long as I've got the spotlight, I'm going to try and turn it on some other people and other things that need to have that spotlight, because it's not going to last forever," he adds, before nearly making his own red-winged blackbird migration analogy that materializes subconsciously — a comment that seems to express just how much nature connects to his own thoughts about being who he is in this current moment.

"It's going to go, it's going to move; that's the nature of the world. The spotlight moves on. So while I got it, while people are shoving cameras and microphones in my face, I'm going to use it to say what is important and what needs to be said."

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