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Michigan Trans Man Named Teacher of the Year

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Photo by Andrew Potter

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Mark Leibowitz's Stereotypes Project.
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Some of our latest online-only pieces:

Photographer, Director Mark Leibowitz Challenges Stereotypes with Virtual Exhibit
By Eve Kucharski

Ash Christian, Prolific Gay Filmmaker and Founder of Cranium Entertainment, Dies at 35
By BTL Staff

Gay Former Catholic Official Charged with Stealing \$2.1 Million in COVID-19 Relief Funds
By Lou Chibbaro Jr.

Also, make sure to check back for continuing COVID-19 coverage.

Cover Story

Inclusive Instruction

Michigan Trans Man Named Teacher of the Year

BY EVE KUCHARSKI

After a months-long application process, Oak Park English language arts teacher Owen Bondono was pleasantly surprised to learn that he became Michigan's Region 9 Teacher of the Year in May. But after meeting the other nine candidates in the running for the statewide honor in an online video call, he was convinced that this was "as far as I go."

"I was completely surprised. In the Zoom call of where they make the announcement of who won I think you can see the roughly 30 seconds of just TV static happening in my brain when they said my name," he said. "I wasn't even expecting to win the regional teacher of the year, much less anything beyond that."

After the fog faded, the reality of the win set in. Bondono realized that much of his role as MTOY would mean not only being an advocate for the over 100,000 teachers across Michigan but the 1.5 million students they educate. Bondono has set his sights on both making students' virtual educational experience during the pandemic an equitable one and on being an advocate for marginalized voices among the state's students. As an openly transgender teacher himself, he said it's valuable that every student has the opportunity to feel secure at school.

"I think that, in general, as teachers it is our job to make students safe and comfortable in our room so that they can bring whatever version of their authentic self that they're comfortable bringing," he said. "Because, beyond the academics, our whole purpose is to grow them into confident, successful people."

Building Empathy, Fostering Identity

This fall, Bondono will start his sixth year teaching at the Oak Park High School 9th Grade Learning Community. He said that while a teacher of any subject can create a deep and lasting connection with their students in the classroom, he believes that teaching ELA "uniquely situates" him to help students explore not only their own identities but their thoughts on literary themes that are applicable to society as a whole.

"I think school is the first real place where students get to assert their own identity free from things like their own family obligations or how the people in their lives already see them. Every year they get the chance, if they want to, to try and reinvent themselves. And sometimes in high school, students from class to class are

trying to reinvent themselves," he said. "So I think one of my greatest joys as a teacher is getting to see a student play with different identities and decide for themselves who they want to be and sort of settle into a comfortable version of themselves in front of me."

Bondono said he has two main criteria for choosing student reading material: it has to be a well-written example of the English language and it should be relatable and enjoyable for students to study.

"One of the big purposes of ELA is to read from a lot of different perspectives and take those perspectives in ourselves. And, naturally, that grows our empathy," Bondono said. "So, I think in discussing the sometimes fictional, sometimes nonfictional lives that we read about, we discover a lot about ourselves."

And because of his own trans identity, Bondono hopes to reassure students and parents that those who discover they are LGBTQ should not be ashamed.

"[Trans activist and actress] Laverne Cox talks about being a possibility model rather than a role model, and that's something that I'm hoping I can be for trans students and also other trans teachers or potential teachers: just someone who says, 'Other people may say that they don't want queer people teaching their kids, but even though that may be true some places, there are places where you'll be welcome and you'll be able to make an impact,'" Bondono said.

A Safe Space for Discussion

But merely choosing thoughtful content for students to digest is not enough for a true sense of safety, and subsequently confidence, in the classroom — particularly for those students who are in marginalized communities like the LGBTQ. Bondono said that much of his success in the classroom relies upon him showing his support for students daily.

"In a physical classroom, one of the first things I try to have up is just representation that shows them physically when they walk in that they are safe. I have a rainbow flag behind my desk, I have some of my classroom decorations purposely include historical figures from all kinds of books of the global majority — including LGBTQ," Bondono said. "But that's not something that will necessarily be available to me in an online setting [during COVID-19]. I think the biggest way that you show it — posters and stuff are great — but students have learned, especially LGBTQ students and other students of the global majority, to be wary of those kinds of symbols. Somebody can put up



BTL Photo: Andrew Potter

a poster without having done the internal work to truly be an ally."

Additionally, Bondono says it's vital that he doesn't let students get away with any discriminatory discussion while in class — whether they intended their statements to be harmful or not.

"[I] combat not just any casual homophobia or transphobia that comes out of my classroom but also sexism and racism and colorism and classism and so on. And [I try] to not make it about punishing the student who said something wrong, but, instead, when those things do come out in my classrooms ... I will stop and I will pivot our conversation in a way that hopefully doesn't call out or embarrass the student who said anything. But it instead asks us to examine what attitudes that comment may have come from and what learned roles they may be perpetuating and why we may not want to perpetuate those things."

Valuable Self-Instruction

When asked how he works to monitor his own biases so that he can effectively regulate classroom discussion, Bondono was frank: he's unafraid to reach out for help. He works to create online learning-focused communities through social media. There, he connects with fellow educators and can confer about the appropriate way to handle different classroom issues.

"I can't tell you the number of times I've jumped on Twitter to say, 'Hey, this happened in my classroom today, I knew it wasn't OK but at the time I didn't know how to respond,'" he said. "And then I get responses from other people, I absorb their thoughts, and the the next day I might start off class by saying, 'Hey, something happened yesterday in class and I want to talk about it now that I've had time to think about it myself.'"

He added that willingness to admit he was wrong is key to building trust among his students, too.

Owen Bondono realized that much of his role as MTOY would mean not only being an advocate for the over 100,000 teachers across Michigan but the 1.5 million students they educate. Bondono has set his sights on both making students' virtual educational experience during the pandemic an equitable one and on being an advocate for marginalized voices among the state's students.

"A lot of teachers get this idea that they can't apologize to students or that they can't appear weak like they have any gaps in their own knowledge or experience in front of students, but I think the opposite is true," he said. "They need to see that you're human and that you can learn from your own mistakes and say, 'Hey, I should have called that out yesterday, but I didn't know enough to do it then and now I know better.'"

But as big of a student advocate as Bondono is, there may come an unforeseen element of self-advocacy during his time as MTOY. Specifically, Teachers of the Year from across the U.S. get the opportunity to meet with the president, but in 2019 an LGBTQ educator from Minnesota, Jessica Dueñas, refused to attend the event because of Donald Trump's anti-LGBTQ legislation. Bondono said that depending on the results of the November election, he might do the same.

"The timeline for my award year is such that I would be meeting the president in 2021, so my hope is that I will not have to make any choices about what to do with the current president," he said. "However, if it comes down to that, I don't see myself in good faith being able to shake someone's hand who has tried to take away my rights."

Bondono will remain MTOY until 2021. To find out more about the process of application and to see his full list of responsibilities, visit gaybe.am/wj.

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54-Bill Package Aims to Remove Outdated Anti-LGBTQ Language from State Law

BY EVE KUCHARSKI

While LGBTQ marriage equality was passed by the Supreme Court in 2015, outdated language on Michigan's lawbooks hasn't been amended. In fact, many bills still refer to marriage as an act between one man and one woman, like Michigan's 2004 same-sex marriage ban. But that soon may change, as State House Minority Floor Leader Yousef Rabhi (D-Ann Arbor) has, along with 28 Democratic representatives, sponsored a 54-bill package that would remove discriminatory gendered references across Michigan state law.



Rep. Yousef Rabhi.

"What people often forget is that state laws are also still on the books right now that are contrary to the federal Supreme Court ruling," Rabhi said. "And while federal law, of course, supersedes state law ... it is important to clean the books at the state level and ensure that our state laws are in compliance with federal laws so that if things are to change at the federal level, we would still have our state laws on the books that are protective of everyone's equal rights."

In addition to the 54 bills, Democrats have introduced House Joint Resolution T that would put a question on the ballot to repeal the same-sex marriage ban in the state Constitution.

Historically, Michigan's Republican representatives have not budged when it comes to passing pro-LGBTQ legislation like amending the Elliott-Larsen Civil Rights Act to include statewide legal protections for gender identity and sexual orientation. When asked if he felt the push to update the outdated language was a viable one, Rabhi was confident.

"Because this is purely technical in nature, I don't see any reason why this should not pass," Rabhi said. "I think that, obviously, the bills that are more explicit about removing the marriage ban in state law will be the most difficult to get passed. I do think that of the 54 there's one Constitutional amendment and there are three other bills that change within state law the specific ban on same-sex marriages, those are probably the most difficult, though they are technical in nature."

He went on to say that "none of these bills should be political."

"Certainly not changing 'husband and wife' to 'spouse' so that we can include everybody in our state laws," he said. "That, to me, is a fix that would be meaningful and impactful. But it should really not be one that Republicans have a problem with."

Black LGBT Group Wins Award to Combat Voter Suppression

BY BTL STAFF

LGBT Detroit, the city's Black LGBTQ+ service provider, has been awarded new grant funding by the American Civil Liberties Union of Michigan to help eliminate a range of enduring racial, gender and sexual minority disparities persisting in civic participation throughout Southeast Michigan. This year, LGBT Detroit's flagship voter engagement program, PRIDE Decides 2020, specifically targets LGBTQ+ communities of color in Wayne and Oakland Counties with its get out the vote message. In addition to expanding the LGBTQ+ people of color electorate in the region, the ACLU MI has also charged the organization with working with area partners, influencers and gatekeepers to increase community investment in the democratic process in what is as an exceptionally polarizing voting environment. The agency's collaborative efforts are made all the more challenging by the novel coronavirus pandemic and concerns for voter safety, pushing LGBT Detroit to innovate such tried and true in-person organizing strategies as street canvassing, voter registration and traditional door-knocking campaigns usually used to engage constituents as part of voter education and other GOTV activities.

"Of course, the coronavirus requires us to be more on our toes in talking and partnering with Michigan residents about the issues and platforms that are most important to us all," said Jerron Totten, LGBT Detroit's Social Outreach Coordinator, Legislative Advocacy Specialist and Field Director for PRIDE Decides 2020. "That said, thanks to this support by the ACLU of MI, we aren't too worried about reaching folks. With these additional resources, we'll be able to use state-of-the-art technology in voter engagement software, stage online community mobilization events, and host several aggressive virtual campaign strategies that meet Michigan residents where they are."

While LGBT Detroit and its partners will heavily rely on new and emerging technologies, the initiative is also still relying on traditional methods like phone banking and the distribution of voter education print information to also reach those Michiganders who may still be part of the digital divide and not have access to the internet.

"We welcome those interested in volunteering with us on the phones and in the community to both capture



PRIDE Decides organizers. Photo courtesy of LGBT Detroit.

what's happening on the ground with Michiganders in terms of barriers to casting their votes and making sure that the community is receiving giving accurate, helpful and up-to-date information on how to cast such things as absentee ballots with a now even slower and potentially less reliable mail system," Totten said. "There's also a lot of misinformation out there to combat and new strategies to suppress the vote are ever-evolving and must be immediately countered."

Not new at assisting constituents in overcoming such barriers, LGBT Detroit has been working to educate, inform and galvanize residents in various civic engagements since its inception, including candidates forums, canvassing campaigns and other classic political organizing efforts. However, recognizing the heightened importance of 2020 as both a census and presidential election year, LGBT Detroit has upped its game, from its ongoing U.S. Census participation initiative which reaches residents through online pep rallies to its digital and social media canvassing to reach prospective voters to find out what is needed to move them from the fence to the polls. Toward those aims, in July of this year, the agency became a national pioneer by hosting the first web-based and live-streamed Black LGBTQ+ Pride in the U.S.

There, repeatedly the themes of voting necessity as a form of resistance to increased voter suppression activities, the economic benefits of census participation, and the need to reform the state's Elliott-Larsen Civil Rights Act to include LGBTQ

legal protections in housing, education, employment and public accommodation were seamlessly woven into the fabric of the agency's four-day event. With less than four months to go until election day, LGBT Detroit intends to increase the beat and insistency of its drum to get LGBTQ+ POC and other often disenfranchised area voters to cast their ballots through mail-in absentee voting measures to protect both residents' health and vote.

"It's critical, even in the age of COVID-19, that we allow nothing to impede the democratic process or get in the way of our community's vote. If that means absentee voting, social distancing and line seating for elders at the polls, or just getting as creative as possible to ensure the Michigan voters' will is heard and responded to by these candidates, then our partners and we will have done what needed to be done" said Curtis Lipscomb, Executive Director of LGBT Detroit.

Lipscomb added, "In these last few election cycles, I believe Detroiters, and all Michiganders, have learned how crucial the Michigan vote is to make or break what happens politically in this nation. While some may say so goes California, so goes the rest of the nation. I say no, dear, that would be Michigan. So, it's up to us to know the power we have and act accordingly by showing up on or casting our ballots by Election Day as only those in our great state can."

To learn more about how to get involved as a volunteer for LGBT Detroit's Pride Decides 2020, please visit the LGBT Detroit webpages at lgbtdetroit.org/getinvolved.

Michigan Supreme Court Chief Justice Hosts Zoom Town Hall, Urges Community to Flip Ballots Over

BY JASON A. MICHAEL

A virtual town hall meeting hosted by Michigan Supreme Court Chief Justice Bridget Mary McCormack, who is running for reelection, and Supreme Court candidate Elizabeth Welch, took place Wednesday, Aug. 12 via Zoom. The meeting, which was moderated by newly appointed Regional Political Director for the Biden campaign and LGBT Caucus Chair for the Michigan Democratic Party Roland Leggett, also featured Jay Kaplan, staff attorney for the American Civil Liberties Union of Michigan's LGBT Project.



Michigan Supreme Court Chief Justice Bridget Mary McCormack

"We're still at a stalemate with our current legislature and the party that is in the majority is not willing to move pro-LGBT legislation forward," Kaplan said. "So, therefore, we have to rely on our executive branch to see things they have the legal ability to do as well as the courts to see what they have the ability to do. So it would be a significant step forward [to have a pro-LGBT majority on the State Supreme Court]."

Michigan State Supreme Court Chief Justice Bridget Mary McCormack agreed. McCormack, who joined the court in 2013 has been chief justice since the beginning of 2019, lamented the fact that she was short a progressive or two on the court. She also expressed her frustration at the large number of people who don't even vote for State Supreme Court justices as they appear on the back of the ballot in the nonpartisan section.

"A lot of people who vote for Joe Biden and Kamala Harris will not cast a vote in the nonpartisan section of the ballot," she said. "So that means they're not having equal say on who sits on the State Supreme Court and that is a mistake because the Supreme Court makes incredibly important decisions that affects all of our families."

Welch said much of the same.

"They drop off the ballot, or worse, they guess," Welch said. "That's a lot of voters for judges. And we don't want them to guess, which is why I'm so glad you're on this call to learn more about us. ... This is a swing seat if you look at who's nominated. Right now, there are four Republican nominees and three Democrat nominees."

Welch took time out to explain the significance of the State Supreme Court and its role in state government.

"We know there's now an expansion of the reading of Title VII to include LGBT protections," she said. "I do employment law, so this is my world. However, if you're an employer that's less than 15 employees you're

not covered by Title VII. You're covered by Michigan law at that point. And Michigan law is not expanded. So while there is a lot of efforts around that, which Jay can certainly talk more about, if a lawsuit were to be filed in Michigan around this issue it would be decided by the State Supreme Court because that's a state law.

"The courts could decide ... historically [The] Elliott-Larsen [Civil Rights Act] has been interpreted to kind of mirror Title VII in some cases, but that's undecided," Welch continued. "But that's an issue that could come before the court."

All three speakers mentioned the issue they believe is going to be the next big step in LGBTQ rights law.

"One of the biggest threats to LGBT equality is the attempts by faith based organizations, by individuals who are citing religious beliefs saying they should be exempt from complying with civil rights laws even where they might be receiving a government contract to provide government services," Kaplan said. "It has the potential to take us down a very dangerous slippery slope. Because we're not talking about religious activity. We're talking about providing a governmental service. So, the courts are going to be playing an incredibly important role."

McCormack concurred, citing that religious freedom civil rights law conflict is "the next frontier." Welch agreed.

McCormack and Welch have been campaigning together and McCormack made it clear how much she wanted to see Welch on the court.

"We are really lucky to have Elizabeth Welch willing to stand up and run for that seat," she said. "She's been a longtime ally, advocate for every good idea that there is in the state. And, also, is really smart and energetic and knows how to run a campaign."

"I will not be happy on election night if I win and she doesn't," McCormack went on. "It's that simple. Her help is what I need to keep getting stuff done."

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Corktown Health Center Joins With WellPartner to Expand Prescription Access

BY JASON A. MICHAEL

LGBTQ-focused health care providers Health Emergency Lifeline Programs and Corktown Health Center announced on Wednesday, Aug. 12, a new relationship with Wellpartner, the 340B program administrator of CVS Health, to expand and improve prescription drug access for its patients. The announcement was made by Corktown Health CEO Anthony Williams.

"HELP and Corktown Health Center implemented an integrated care model to help our patients achieve the best health outcomes," Williams said. "The relationship with CVS Health strengthens that model by helping providers, pharmacists and patients all work together. In addition, the large geographic footprint of CVS locations will be a convenient choice for our patients to get their prescriptions from anywhere in the country."

The Federal 340B Drug Discount Program plays an important role in ensuring that eligible health care providers that serve vulnerable populations can help qualified uninsured and



underinsured patients access affordable outpatient prescription medications. As a 340B covered entity, HELP/CHC is authorized to purchase outpatient prescription drugs at discounted prices and make them available to its patients through select contracted pharmacies.

Wellpartner will deliver end-to-end 340B program administration for Corktown's CVS Health relationship to help optimize its ability to provide important, affordable health care services and prescription medications to patients. In addition, CHC aims to improve continuity of care. Doctors and clinicians will have access to tools to understand prescription adherence for their patients filling at participating pharmacies. This in turn will help them better monitor patient therapy and can help improve overall patient outcomes.

"Across our CVS Health enterprise, we are committed to helping address health disparities in the United States, and we use many aspects of our business to increase access to affordable care and prescriptions for vulnerable populations," said Kenneth Bodmer, president of Wellpartner and vice president of CVS Health. "Through our integrated and comprehensive 340B program management capabilities, we are able to help covered entities like HELP/Corktown Health.

Corktown Health Center is a health clinic created by and for Southeast Michigan's LGBTQ community and the providers who serve them. The first of its kind in Michigan, the clinic provides a range of primary care services, including integrated HIV care. The center also partners with Wayne State University and others in the medical field to train health professionals in providing LGBTQ care, conduct relevant research and develop best practices.

For more information about this change, visit corktownhealth.org.



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Parting Glances

BY CHARLES ALEXANDER

Book in Process (No. 2)

My mother took me on Sundays to the First Baptist Church in Detroit from the time I was five until I turned 12. We rode with a Mrs. Williamson and her two sons, William and Robert.

Detroit's First Baptist, now People's Community Church, was affiliated with the American Baptist Convention, a liberal group, in contrast to the fire-and-brimstone Southern Baptists.

When I turned 12 — “the age of NT accountability” — I became eligible for church membership through the rite of total-immersion baptism instead of sprinkling. I took this step seriously, even though I looked with some interest at the other boys who, naked, were putting on their white, full-length baptismal robes.

I was also dimly praydar aware that the organist and choir director, Dr. Cyril Baker, had a funny walk and exaggerated mannerisms. But his selection of music was impeccable and contributed at some level to my nascent aesthetic sensibility.

Following my baptism I was given a Holy Bible, in which the Rev. Ernest L. Honts wrote, “To Robert (my middle name), May you always be a good monk.”

To this day I don't know what he meant. Suffice it to say, I've spent a small — very small — portion of my long life performing sackcloth and ashes penance for my many sins of commission and omission.

My mother insisted that year I was baptized that I go to Baptist camp. Whether or not the brothers William and Robert went as well I don't recall, but, devout Baptist that I was, I was eager to go.

Quite innocently I thought nothing of taking along several issues of “Strength & Health” magazine, which featured my musclemen idols Clarence Ross and Steve Reeves.

I did everything that one was expected to do at a religious camp. I prayed, read scripture, wrote poetry (“A day at camp is a happy one.”), swam, canoed, played baseball and got brown as the proverbial berry.

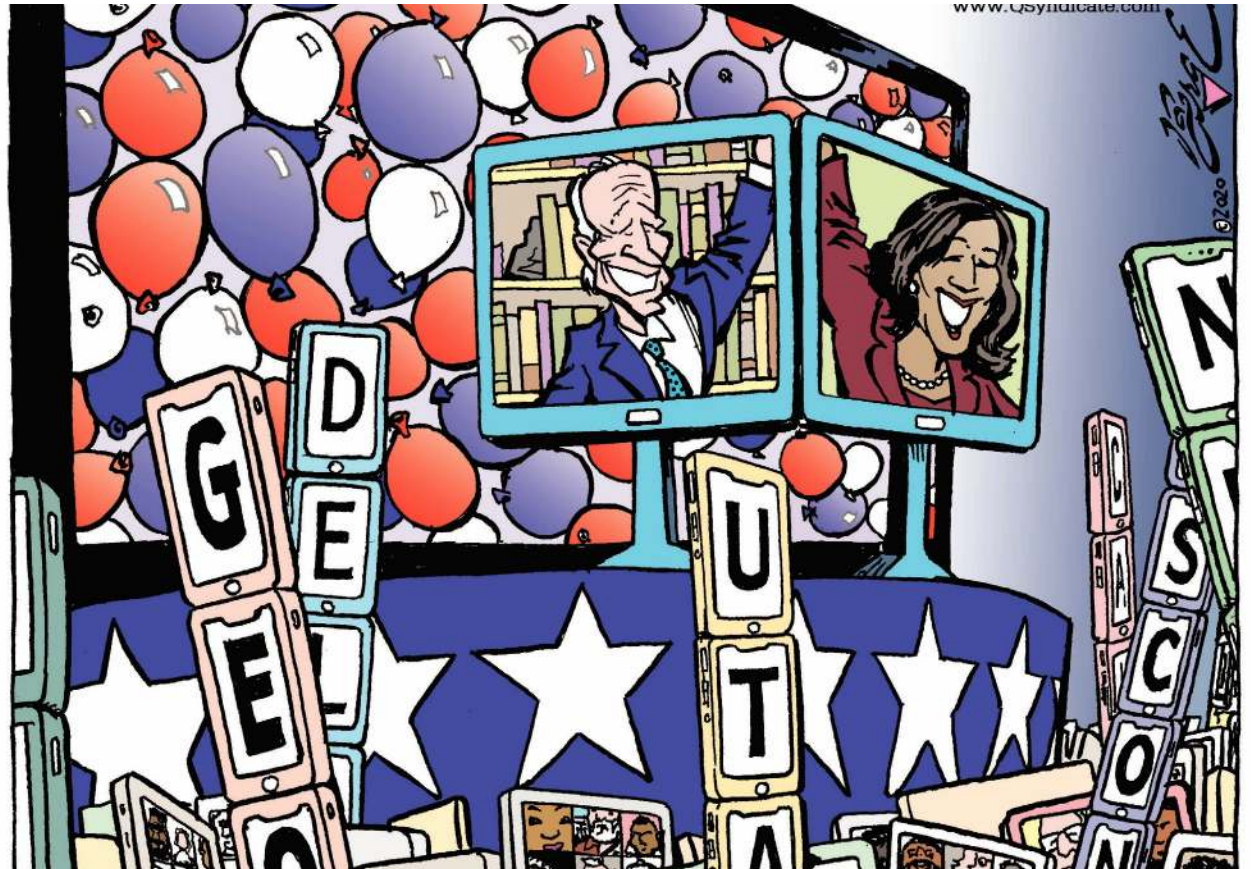
I also developed an attachment — actually a crush — on my camp counselor, Jerry Johnson. I was in tears when I had to say goodbye and wrote him several chatty letters. He answered none.

I stopped going to First Baptist shortly thereafter, probably because Mrs. Williamson moved and there was no one to drive us to service. By the time I turned 15 I found a friendly neighborhood church to attend: The Missionary Workers Tabernacle (Interdenominational), which I attended faithfully three times a week.

The curious thing — and today I would say marvelous thing — is that the Tabernacle was run by women who, despite the biblical admonition “suffer not a woman to speak in church,” felt the call to preach the gospel. They played banjos, guitars, trumpets, mandolins, tamborine, preached and sang. They also held services at Detroit's Campus Martius.

The Tabernacle was founded in 1923 by Anna Curry

See next page



Transmission



BY GWENDOLYN ANN SMITH

In the Matrix

There really wasn't a lot out there that was aimed at me when I was a young, closeted trans kid growing up in the suburbs. You might sometimes see trans characters used as moral lessons and moments of growth for the non-trans main characters, such as on “All In The Family,” or as homicidal maniacs in films like “Dressed To Kill,” or trans characters as comedic relief in shows like “Soap.”

As a result, you might find yourself looking at films that don't feature explicit trans storylines and overlaying your own feelings to it all. Much like generations of our gay, lesbian and bisexual siblings, we might feel a longing akin to Dorothy Gale of “The Wizard of Oz,” or we might find a kindred spirit in “Mulan,” whose ties to trans lives I don't think I need to explain much further.

Not all films are as obvious as that, however, which brings us to the late 1990s sci-fi classic, “The Matrix.” When it came out, a lot of my trans friends went nuts. It's not that there were any obvious trans characters in the story — more on that in a bit — but we could relate to the story. It featured characters who felt out of place in the so-called real world and who existed

in a fabricated reality far from their truth.

The story included a couple badass characters who were able to upend the status quo and create their own realities, and that was something we could all relate to. It was revolutionary in the community spaces I hung out in, even without very obviously trans characters being present on screen.

Two decades after the film, and both directors of the film, Lana and Lilly Wachowski have come out as transgender women. What's more, in an interview recently, Lilly Wachowski opened up about “The Matrix,” confirming the many fans who have long since felt the movie could well tie into trans lives.

“I'm glad people are talking about “The Matrix” movies with a trans narrative, and I'm grateful I can be a part of throwing them a rope along their journey,” Wachowski said. “I'm glad that it has gotten out that that was the original intention. The world wasn't quite ready for it. The corporate world wasn't ready for it.”

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► Transmission

Continued from p. 12

Wachowski also spoke about one character, Switch, who was edited in the original film, initially having a dual gender presentation, noting “‘The Matrix’ stuff was all about the desire for transformation, but it was all coming from a closeted point of view.”

“We had the character of Switch, who would be a man in the real world and then a woman in the matrix,” Wachowski added, “and that’s where our head spaces were.”

Of course, none of this seems to be what people outside of the trans community saw. It was a bit of a “Shoot ‘Em Up” good versus evil story about a dystopian world, where you could take a “red pill” to escape and fight back. Honestly, they’re not wrong — it’s just that there is so much more going on.

That people missed the subtext to the story, let alone continue to ignore any of this in the years since the Wachowski sisters came out is, I think, an allegory of its own.

When transgender people come out, even now, we often face a backlash. Family and friends, who may have told us that their love was unconditional, learn that this is simply not the case. Many are cast out from the places they once assumed would always welcome them.

In many cases, too, we are told that we are wrong in our beliefs, and our very identities are ignored. People will continue to use the name we may have been given at birth and pronouns that simply do not fit who we are as a way to punish our decisions to somehow “prove who we really” are.

Lately, too, the widely debunked concept of “rapid onset gender dysphoria” has been making the rounds, a notion that a person only “thinks” they may be trans

because they see friends transitioning or see information about transgender people. The assumption being that they never saw anything about their friend that made them think they were transgender before their friend came out — hence the “rapid” part.

I dealt with the same when I came out. I did a better-than-average job of appearing as a man, and my coming out surprised many — even knowing that I had, intentionally or not, dropped more than a few clues. My parents, for example, were blindsided, even though they found caches of clothing and makeup hidden in my room dating back to my preteen days.

We learn to hide ourselves, out of what is sometimes very justified fear. We often do the best we can to try to be the men and women everyone expects us to be and have reinforced in us since birth. Nevertheless, our trans selves may well have been there all along, telling us that something isn’t right about all this. Until, one day we cannot keep it a secret anymore, and we need to, at last, speak our truth.

Consider this time, at long last, to be the “coming out” of “The Matrix.” After all the clues, all the moments in the film that may have made it plain, people can now look beyond the more obvious story of murderous machines and heroes who can bend reality and see a deeper meaning. Let Kansas go “bye-bye,” and see “The Matrix” as it truly is now: a trans allegory.

Gwen Smith used to take a couple red pills a day in the 1990s. You can find her at gwenasmith.com.

Perhaps most disturbing was the sad plight of one of the younger Missionary Workers, blonde-braided Sister Anderson, whom I recall one Sunday service being completely distraught and sobbing uncontrollably.

Her brother had died unexpectedly “unsaved” and was now suffering the torments of hell. (Presumably, these 60 years later, he’s still suffering for his unrepentant sins.)

Charles Alexander is prolific both as a BTL columnist (700-plus columns) and as a well-known LGBT community artist (1000 Facebook images). He is a Spirit of Detroit Award recipient and an Affirmations LGBT CENTER Jan Stevenson awardee. Connect with him at Charles@pridesource.com.

► Parting Glances

Continued from p. 12

Spellman, who, it was quietly said, was related to — notoriously closeted — Francis Cardinal Spellman.

Attending there — I was usually the only teen at the Wednesday Night Testimonial Service — certainly kept me from getting in trouble in a neighborhood that was above-average rough.

Even so, a few things puzzled me. I speculated about what sort of sins regularly drove Brother Townsend to the altar to confess them — although it certainly wasn’t any of my business. I also felt it was somewhat unchristian for Sister Norton to say that “Blacks should attend their own churches. Races shouldn’t mix.”

Creep Of The Week

Donald Trump

BY D’ANNE WITKOWSKI

But Republicans have never been so brazen in their attempt to steal an election before. Trump is 100% not interested in running a campaign and competing on his merits. Because he has no merits. He’s a trash human whose resume boasts racism and rape. It’s astounding to me that anyone still supports him, but they do.

In the middle of a pandemic Trump is literally destroying the post office right before our eyes because he doesn’t want people to be able to safely vote by mail. He’d rather people go to the polls...

Wait a minute, what am I saying? Republicans don’t want people to vote. High voter turnout is good for Democrats. Regardless, the Republicans think nothing of driving people out into a public space when there is still a deadly virus ripping through the country.

To be clear, Trump and his wife have applied for absentee ballots so that they can vote by mail in the November election.

I love the post office. Maybe because I was born a couple decades before the internet boom. Maybe because I met my wife in 1997 right before she left for 11 months to study in Japan. Getting letters and postcards from her made my life. And I sent many to her as well.

Republicans have long been after the post office, wanting to privatize it because as far as the GOP sees it, if it doesn’t make a profit then what’s the point? This also helps to explain why they hate public schools and would like to see the system taken over by for-profit corporations who have to answer to shareholders, not parents and students.

But Republicans have never been so brazen in their attempt to steal an election before. Trump is 100% not interested in running a campaign and competing on his merits. Because he has no merits. He’s a trash human whose resume boasts racism and rape. It’s astounding to me that anyone still supports him, but they do.

While phone banking for the state house race I’m working on, I talk to a good number of people. Most do not want to talk to me. Frankly, a lot of people are rude. Some holler, “Put me on the do not call List!” and hang up the phone, as if they think that I have access to some grand master list I can delete their name from.

But nothing makes me more disheartened when I talk to someone who says, “I’m not interested in politics.” It is often younger, presumably white men, who say such things. And my first instinct is to yell, “MUST BE NICE!” into the phone.

It’s a luxury to not care about politics. Or, I should say, it’s a luxury to not have to think of the policies that other people are making for you because you are not the one who will be harmed by such policies.

I’ve been an out lesbian my entire adult life. There has never been a single day when I didn’t have to think about how policy affected my life. There were literally laws against me loving another person. So, yeah, I take it personally when a registered voter tells me they don’t care

about voting.

Especially now! Trump has literally been the worst president. He is a terrible person who has spent his entire life harming other people. And since taking office his ability to hurt people has become seemingly limitless.

We’re in the neighborhood of 170,000 deaths from COVID-19, certainly more by the time you are reading this. I remember reading a dire prediction that we would have 200,000 people dead by the November election. And we’re on track to even surpass that.

In 2016 we had a choice between a good person and a bad person for president. We chose the bad person. And we have paid a price.

In 2020 we have a choice between a good person and a bad person for president. We need to choose the right person this time.

I DGAF how you feel about Joe Biden. He wasn’t my first choice. Or my second. Or my third. Putting someone in charge who actually cares about Americans dying in droves should be an easy lift.

Which is why Trump is throwing tantrums so hard right now. He has shown us who he is over and over again. And, sadly, his words and actions have become normalized in this country. He isn’t normal. This isn’t normal.

I urge you to vote. Get your friends to vote. Get your family to vote, unless they’re the family you dread seeing at Thanksgiving because they love Trump and think that racism isn’t real.

If you’re planning on voting by mail, get your shit together. Make a plan. Know your state’s election laws. In Michigan, I advise that you get your application for a ballot in early. Take your completed ballot to your clerk’s office yourself. Put a mask on and drop it off.

On Twitter I keep seeing posts like, “Retweet if you would crawl naked over broken glass and rusty nails to vote Trump out in November.” The way things are going, that’s not farfetched. And that’s not normal.

Monday Night Democratic National Convention LGBTQ Overview

BY LISA KEEN

Long gone are the days when the Democratic National Convention slated only a token openly gay person on its pre-primetime schedule. Monday night, the first day of the DNC's four-day 2020 convention, openly LGBTQ people were everywhere: in the opening video, in conversation with the nominee, leading conversations with health care workers and sharing stories of loss from the novel coronavirus epidemic.

Some of the convention's LGBTQ speakers Monday night were well-known: Chicago Mayor Lori Lightfoot and international soccer champion Megan Rapinoe.

Just 30 minutes into the convention broadcast, the Democratic presidential nominee Joe Biden appeared in a staged "conversation" with five people, including Lightfoot. Biden asked Lightfoot how she prioritizes all the things she has to do as mayor to tackle systemic racism. Lightfoot said, "It's really all about economic empowerment."

Later in the broadcast, Rapinoe served as a moderator for a conversation with four front-line health care workers, including a male nurse. And then State Delegate Danica Roem, the first transgender person to be elected to office in Virginia, appeared in an opening video.

One of the convention's Day One speakers was Kristin Urquiza, who drew national media attention in June when she wrote an obituary for her 65-year-old father who died of COVID-19.

"He had faith in Donald Trump, he voted for him and listened to him," Urquiza said of her



As Kristan Urquiza spoke about her father's death from COVID-19, the convention saw photos of her and her parents and her partner Christine Keeves, chief of communications for the San Francisco LGBT Center. Urquiza and Keeves started an organization Marked by COVID-19 to promote prevention activities related to the pandemic. Screen shot from DNC convention.

father. When Trump and Arizona's Republican governor told people it was OK to go back to pre-COVID-19 activities, Urquiza said her father believed them. But soon after going to a karaoke bar, her father came down with the virus and, after "five agonizing days," he died.

"The only preexisting condition" her father had, said Urquiza, "was trusting Donald Trump."

As Urquiza spoke, the convention saw photos of her and her parents and her partner Christine Keeves, chief of communications for the San Francisco LGBT Center. Urquiza and Keeves

started an organization Marked by COVID-19 to promote prevention activities related to the pandemic.

Prior to the primetime broadcast, the party held several web-streamed meetings of caucuses, including the Women's Caucus. One of the featured members of the Women's Caucus was Rosemary Ketchum, a transgender woman who was just this year elected to the City Council of Wheeling, West Virginia.

The party's 80-page platform denounces the Trump administration's actions aimed at allowing discrimination in health care against

LGBTQ people.

"Democrats will reverse this rulemaking and restore nondiscrimination protections for LGBTQ+ people in health insurance," states the platform. "We will also take action to guarantee that LGBTQ+ people have full access to needed health care and resources, including by requiring that federal health plans provide coverage for HIV/AIDS treatment and HIV prevention medications like PrEP and PEP, gender confirmation surgery and hormone therapy."

The platform also commits the party to "fight to enact the Equality Act and at last outlaw discrimination against LGBTQ+ people in housing, public accommodations, access to credit, education, jury service, and federal programs."

It also commits the party to programs to help LGBTQ+ youth and those needed mental health and suicide prevention services.

Tuesday at noon EDT, the party's LGBTQ+ Caucus will meet. During the primetime convention activities, viewers will see openly gay convention Secretary Jason Rae direct the roll call votes. And in a new format for a primetime speech, 17 speakers, including three openly LGBTQ officials, will participate in delivering the "Keynote Address," at 9 p.m. The three are Long Beach, California, Mayor Robert Garcia, Pennsylvania State Rep. Malcolm Kenyatta and Georgia State Rep. Sam Park.

Check online at pridesource.com for ongoing coverage

FDA Approves Human Trial for Treatment to Cure HIV

BY LOU CHIBBARO JR.

American Gene Technologies, a Rockville, Md.-based gene and cell therapy company, announced on Aug. 11 that it has received approval from the U.S. Food and Drug Administration to begin its first human clinical trial for a unique cell altering treatment that it believes will enable the immune system of people who are HIV positive to permanently eliminate HIV from their body.

"AGT developed a new treatment to repair immune system damage done by HIV and allow natural responses to control the virus," the company says in a statement announcing the approval for its clinical trial. "From its research, AGT believes a cure is attainable and is now taking the significant step of testing in humans."

The statement says AGT is conducting its Phase 1 clinical trials at sites in the Baltimore-D.C. area. It says the Washington Health Institute in Northeast D.C., Georgetown University, and the University of Maryland's

Institute of Human Virology in Baltimore will be the three sites for the trials.

According to the statement, the Phase 1 trial will investigate the safety and efficacy of a product the company calls AGT 103-T, "a genetically modified cell product made from a person's own cells." It says the product and treatment should work to remove HIV infected cells from the body and "decrease or eliminate the need for lifelong antiretroviral treatment."

In an online virtual news conference held on Aug. 12, AGT Chief Executive Officer Jeff Galvin explained that the clinical trial involves a multi-step process of extracting blood from an HIV-positive person whose HIV is fully under control through anti-retroviral medication and immediately subjecting the blood to a process of Leukapheresis, which separates a type of white blood cells known as T-cells.

Galvin said the T-cell samples extracted through that process will be sent to a lab, where they will be genetically altered in a process developed by AGT. He said AGT believes the

genetically altered T-cells will make them resistant to HIV infection and enable them to do what HIV has prevented human T-cells from doing during the course of the 40-year plus HIV epidemic - to neutralize the virus and prevent it from harming the human body.

Once the gene altering process is completed and an initial waiting period is used to allow the altered cells to multiply in the lab, the cells will be "reinfused" into the body of the person participating in the trial and from whom the original collection of T-cells was obtained, Galvin said.

AGT has said in earlier statements that individuals participating in the clinical trial will initially continue to take their regularly prescribed anti-retroviral medication while testing of their blood continues to determine whether the newly infused T-cells are killing or neutralizing HIV to a degree that will no longer make the anti-HIV medication necessary.

C. David Pauza, AGT's chief science officer and the company's lead researcher in the

development of the genetically altered, HIV resistant T-cells, stated at the news conference that under FDA protocol, the process must be shown to be safe and not have significant side effects on the first person to undergo the procedure before the procedure is performed on the second person to participate in the clinical trial.

Pauza said he, Galvin and the AGT team consider the FDA's approval of the clinical trial an important development brought about by years of research and laboratory testing.

"This is momentous news that we have FDA approval to launch Phase 1 and conduct our first human trials," he said in a statement. "We are beyond excited to reach this milestone. This brings us closer to our goal of transforming lives with genetic medicines," he said.

"Based on our successful commercial-scale product manufacturing runs and features of the

See **HIV Cure**, continued on p. 14

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State Department Appeals Ruling Recognizing US Citizenship of Gay Couple's Daughter

BY MICHAEL K. LAVERS

The State Department has appealed a federal judge's ruling that said it must recognize the U.S. citizenship of a gay Maryland couple's daughter who was born in Canada via surrogate.

U.S. District Judge Theodore D. Chuang in June ruled in favor of Roe Kiviti and Adiel Kiviti of Chevy Chase, Md., who legally married in California in 2013. Their daughter, Kessem Kiviti, was born in 2019. The State Department on Aug. 13 appealed Chuang's decision to the 4th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in Richmond, Va.

Lambda Legal; Immigration Equality and Morgan Lewis, a private law firm, represent the Kivitis. The two advocacy groups also represent Derek Mize and Jonathan Gregg, a gay couple from Atlanta who sued the State Department after it refused to recognize the U.S. citizenship of their daughter, Simone Mize-Gregg, who was born in England via surrogate.

The couples maintain their children are U.S. citizens under Section 301(c) of the Immigration and Nationality Act that states "a baby born abroad to married parents is a U.S. citizen at birth when both parents are U.S. citizens and one of them has resided in the United States at any point prior to the baby's birth."

"It's sad that we have to continue this legal battle," said Roe Kiviti in a press release that Lambda Legal issued on Monday.

"Once again, the State Department is refusing to recognize Roe and Adiel's rights as a married couple," added Immigration Equality Executive Director Aaron C. Morris. "The government's attempts to strip Kessem of citizenship are unconstitutional, discriminatory, and morally reprehensible."

A State Department spokesperson on Monday declined to comment.

"We decline to comment on pending litigation," the spokesperson told the Washington Blade in an email.

Judge Blocks Trump Admin from Enforcing Anti-trans Health Care Rule

BY CHRIS JOHNSON

A federal judge issued an order Monday blocking the Trump administration from enforcing a rule allowing health care providers to discriminate against transgender patients — one day before the regulation was set to go into effect.

U.S. District Judge Frederic Block, a Clinton appointee, draws heavily in his decision on the U.S. Supreme Court's recent landmark decision in *Bostock v. Clayton County*, which determined anti-LGBTQ discrimination is a form of sex discrimination.

"The Court reiterates the same practical concern it raised at oral argument when the Supreme Court announces a major decision, it seems a sensible thing to pause and reflect on the decision's impact," Block writes. "Since HHS has been unwilling to take that path voluntarily, the Court now imposes it."

The Department of Health & Human Services rule, made final in June, vacated an Obama-era regulation interpreting the ban on sex discrimination in Section 1557 of the Affordable Care Act to apply to cases of anti-trans discrimination.

Block takes a swipe at the Trump administration for vacating the rule both before the Supreme Court had a chance to render a

decision in the *Bostock* case and reusing to change course after it was handed down.

"By its own admission, HHS knew that the case was pending and would have 'ramifications'; it must also have known that a decision would be handed down before the end of the Supreme Court's term," Block writes. "It then had an (admittedly brief) opportunity to re-evaluate its proposed rules after the case was decided contrary to its expectations."

The lawsuit was filed in June by the Human Rights Campaign and the BakerHostetler law firm in the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of New York on behalf of two transgender women of color — Tanya Asapansa-Johnson Walker and Cecilia Gentil — with long histories of discrimination in health care.

Alphonso David, president of the Human Rights Campaign, said in a statement the order was a win for both for plaintiffs and marginalized communities suffering from the "impacts of the twin pandemics of COVID-19 and racialized violence."

"We are pleased the court recognized this irrational rule for what it is: discrimination, plain and simple," David said. "LGBTQ Americans deserve the health care that they need without fear of mistreatment, harassment, or humiliation."

The order stands in contrast to a decision from U.S. District Judge Reed O'Connor in 2016 barring the U.S. government from enforcing the Obama-era rule against anti-transgender discrimination in health care.

Now that an order has been handed down barring HHS from enforcing the law as well to prohibit anti-transgender discrimination it wasn't immediately clear how the department would implement Section 1557 of the Affordable Care Act.

The 2016 order, however, predates the *Bostock* decision, which Block indicates is the correct guide in reaching the conclusion the Trump administration's anti-trans exclusion is, in fact, inconsistent with the law and should be reversed.

An HHS spokesperson in response to a Washington Blade inquiry on enforcement deferred the Justice Department, which didn't respond to a request to comment.

"We are disappointed in the court's decision and refer you to DOJ for further comment," the HHS spokesperson said.

This article originally appeared in the Washington Blade and is made available in partnership with the National LGBT Media Association.

► HIV Cure

Continued from p. 12

product observed in our labs, this therapy has a high potential to be effective," Pauza said.

Galvin told the news conference that the current cost for the complete process of extracting cells from an HIV infected person, genetically altering the cells, and reinfusing the HIV resistant T-cells back into the person's body is about \$200,000. But he said he's optimistic that the cost of the procedure will go down dramatically as it is used more frequently in coming years. Among other things, he said that the extraction of the T-cells and the genetic alternation process can be done through machines in an automated process that can lower costs.

FDA spokesperson Monique Richards told



AGT CEO Jeff Galvin said genetically altered T-cells will make them resistant to HIV infection.

the Washington Blade the FDA is prohibited by law and regulation from commenting on or acknowledging the existence of an

"investigational new drug" application, known as an IND, or whether a clinical trial is taking place.

"The FDA supports the safe clinical development of these products and we are committed to continuing to work collaboratively with industry and the medical and scientific communities to provide the information and guidance needed to help foster the advancement of these promising therapies," Richards said in an email on Friday.

This article originally appeared in the Washington Blade and is made available in partnership with the National LGBT Media Association.



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Murder, She Kind of Wrote



Photo: Quibi

Out 'SNL' Alum Paula Pell Puts a Goofy Queer Spin on Jessica Fletcher in 'Mapleworth Murders'

BY CHRIS AZZOPARDI

Writer-actress Paula Pell knows it's ridiculous: a dowdy, out-of-touch suburban broad with an accent that is somehow a little British – or Irish, or something – who solves murders in her quaint town. But the Emmy winner, who wrote for “Saturday Night Live” for nearly 20 years and recently made a dildo-assisted splash in front of the camera as Val in the Netflix original movie “Wine Country,” ate up every bit of “Murder, She Wrote.” So playing a randy, gay Jessica Fletcher? It's the kind of role she'd kill for.

Luckily, she didn't have to. Fellow comedian and “30 Rock” actor John Lutz asked Pell if she'd be interested in portraying an amateur sleuth. She said absolutely. And now, for

12 short-form episodes on Quibi, she is. In the hilarious satire “Mapleworth Murders,” Pell's Abigail Mapleworth solves insanely silly murder-mysteries in her own peculiar way, with help from her millennial, selfie-obsessed niece (Hayley Magnus).

Recently, Pell called to talk about the show's shenanigans as a pandemic salve, why she thinks Angela Lansbury would be into the show, and that time she accidentally sent a dildo to her parents.

I don't think there could possibly be a better time for this show. I needed to laugh.

That makes me so freakin' happy. I hope that that is true for many people, and I hope that a lot of people watch it, because we loved making it so much. It was one of

those moments, and there are so few. “Wine Country” was one of them. But those true things you do and you go, “If I were able to do that as my job, I would do it all the time.” It was just such a romp of joy.

You know, we weren't sure what date we were launching because of everything that has happened, and schedules were so screwed up. It was getting so ... like, god when is this going to come out? And I really am glad it came out when it did because it does feel like our souls are so exhausted that we just need something to laugh at. Something weird that's *not* terrifying.

Are you eager to find out what Angela Lansbury thinks of this show? Because I am.

I am eager. At first we were talking about maybe having a tiny cameo or something if she was able to. I mean, in the second season we would love to have something where I'm having trouble with my niece and then I call my aunt and it's her; we're all connected.

Because we're so filthy in it, I was a little bit worried that if we called her and she saw some of it, she'd be like, “Oh, this is disgusting.” But then I remembered, of course, that Angela Lansbury is such a theater broad and she

played Mrs. Lovett in “Sweeney Todd,” which is just my dream role. And I'm like, “She can be *very* dark.” And very sweet, I've heard, from everyone I've ever talked to that has ever met her. I would be thrilled some time to have her even see it or look at it or know that it's just an homage, because it's got so much love behind it for her and for that show.

What was it like to bring Abigail to life?

So much stylistically made me so freakin' excited because the style is so specific. We wanted her to just be really eccentric and mix all these different patterns. By the end of it everyone on set was so funny because they're like, “I'm obsessed with the Mapleworth style, and I really, really wanna dress like Abigail Mapleworth.” The bucket hats, the trench coats, the scarves – it's such a reminder to me of all those old broads in my family: those great aunts, the grandmas and my mother, who is now in her 80s. She's hilarious, and she'll just get her slacks on with her little Chico's jacket and her scarf and her earrings and her lipstick and then she'll come home from church and go sit in her bra with her necklace still on and eat potato salad and a hamburger. Ha! Just very strong women who

are also dainty are my favorite thing of all. I have always loved matrons. I was born at 50. And like, is there anything better than “The Golden Girls”? I mean, you just want to live with them.

How did you land on that wild affectation for Abigail?

A little bit of it was this actress that I worked with, Anne Meacham, when I was in college. I understudied; we had a pro theater company at University of Tennessee. They would bring in people from Broadway and soap stars. I worked with Melissa Gilbert, and all these people who were on these shows in the '80s. And this woman was Anne Meacham. She was a theatrical actress on Broadway who did a lot of Tennessee Williams plays. She was also on “Another World,” the soap opera. And she was just this old theater broad with red-dyed hair pulled back in a tight bun. She was really skinny, and she was blind, and I had to take care of her the whole time because in “The Lion in Winter” she played the queen. And she was so eccentric: “I love you! I hate all of them! But I love you!” She would take my dog and put my dog’s face in her makeup mirror and she would put his face in there to make him look at himself in the mirror. She was the ultimate theater broad. And I ate it up! I was just so obsessed with her.

I’ve often thought of doing a one-woman show where I just was her and did a bunch of adventures that happened during that time. So all these years, I’ve had that voice in me. So Abigail has a bit of that dainty but sort of “Is she British? No” vibe. You’re like, “They’re born in Wisconsin but they talk like they’re European.” So I just love those dainty ladies that have a household of knick-knacks and a lot of dogs. And a “handywomanman.”

Speaking of a handywomanman, I had to take a double-take because that’s your fiancé Janine Brito as Junie.

Ha! When she kisses me and takes my earring out of her mouth.

Whose idea was that?

That was her idea. She was like, “I think once I’m whispering to you, I should come back and have your earring in my mouth.”

Did you do it in one take?

No. We did a bunch of different versions of that, because there were some where she was whispering a lot of things and I was saying, like, “Oh, well, we can do that together. Or separately and watch each other!” But we do want to do more of Junie. We want Junie to be in there always, like, cleaning out my pipes, or down under the floor, under my bed doing something. Just always working.

Your characters in both “Wine Country” and “Mapleworth Murders” are involved in some way with dildos. Which got me thinking: dildos really are as erotic as they are completely silly. Is that why they end up in your projects?

Ha! I spent a lot of time alone! There were times, like after my divorce or before I was ever even married, you do have to have that little drawer. You have to have something *in* that little drawer.

I have to tell you something funny about a vibrator. I bought a very haphazard vibrator on Amazon – ha! – not too long ago. It was at Christmas that I ordered this vibrator and I was like, “Oh, I’m going to order this very basic one.” I ordered it, and then I went home for Christmas and then went back home to LA after Christmas. It was January 15th, and I looked on my phone. It said, “Your package has arrived” and showed the picture of the vibrator and I was like, “Oh, did we get a package?” And I look out at my house in LA and I didn’t get a package. Then I looked, and you know how they show you where they delivered it? It was delivered to my mom’s front porch, like, with her poinsettias and her little beagle statue that says “Welcome.” So next to that is a box with a basic Amazon vibrator in it and it made me laugh so hard. I called my mom and was like, “There’s a package there, it’s something for me, just send it back to me.” Of course they opened it and then repackaged it with Orlando newspapers.

That seems horrifying.

Well, it was really fun to talk to props in two different projects about my vibrators and dildos and have them discuss with you, like, “Now, this one, you’re gonna have to push this” – like, the prop department is showing you! In “Wine Country” too. It was like, “Now this thing, this button is kind of ... it sticks a little bit. So you gotta turn this here.”

Would you be any good at solving a murder?

I’ve always loved the idea of being a detective, but I would want to be the one that’s in the office, or going to the people that aren’t scary and dangerous to ask them questions. I would love being part of solving something that helped people have closure or helped find a bad person. Like, I would *love* doing that. But I also have fear of that sort of repercussion of criminals. When I was young I was always afraid somebody was going to be stalking me for turning them in.

So I would love all the sitting and talking about the human nature of it and trying to interrogate someone and getting them to admit something and be good cop, bad cop. That part really is interesting. But the rest of it would scare me. I wouldn’t want to be the one in the danger part of it. I’m a chicken that way.

As editor of Q Syndicate, the LGBTQ wire service, Chris Azzopardi has interviewed a multitude of superstars, including Cher, Meryl Streep, Mariah Carey and Beyoncé. His work has also appeared in The New York Times, Vanity Fair, GQ and Billboard. Reach him via Twitter @chrisazzopardi.

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Michigan Opera Theatre Reconfigures Seating, Gears Up to Host Live Shows

BY EVE KUCHARSKI

As novel coronavirus pandemic restrictions are becoming something of a new normal around the state, venues like Michigan Opera Theatre are having to make do with virtual performances and online outreach to fans. But due to a recent reconfiguration of MOT's seating arrangements, live performances might soon be a reality. That's because MOT event organizers purchased a 9,100-square foot deck that can be installed above the theater's normal seating. Chief Administrative Officer Patricia Walker said that when in place, it will allow attendees to social distance while attending MOT's shows.

"When we're operating as a theater with theater seats, there are 2,700 seats in the opera house. So, utilizing traditional theater seating, you can get quite a few people into that theater. Now, it's a very different style of event when you put up the deck, but if social distancing is still in place, we can still fit probably 250 people on the deck and stage area and ensure the six-foot radius," Walker said. "When social distancing is not a requirement, we can seat over 500 on the deck."

The idea for the installation of the deck came about after Levitation Staging, a Grand Rapids-based staging equipment company, shut its doors. The company's representatives reached out to MOT and offered to sell the deck. Having used Levitation Staging's services before, Walker said that MOT jumped at the opportunity.

"We would lease it for specific events like 'BravoBRAVO!,' the MOT Gala and, on rare occasions, when somebody wanted to [use] the opera house for a wedding and they really needed a large space," Walker said. "... Thanks to the generosity of a donor from the Michigan Opera Theatre, Floy and Lee Barthel, we purchased the deck. And the decision to put it up and keep it up during the pandemic period is basically because of the need for social distancing."

In addition to allowing guests to attend shows like normal, Walker said that attendees can expect no interruption in food and beverage services and they will be able to view shows in unique formats — especially if it's a smaller, more intimate performance.

"It can give us a lot of versatility for how to use the opera house. But it also provides so much versatility for the kind of events we can do and how the event feels," Walker said. "So we can now build out that main floor decking and we can create more of a cabaret-style performance within the opera



house, so people are sitting at tables and it's a much smaller, more intimate feel and yet you still have the incredible Detroit Opera House Auditorium around you. And you can use it for a ballroom, for wedding receptions, you can use it for corporate meetings and we certainly are able to do concerts and things like that on the stage as well."

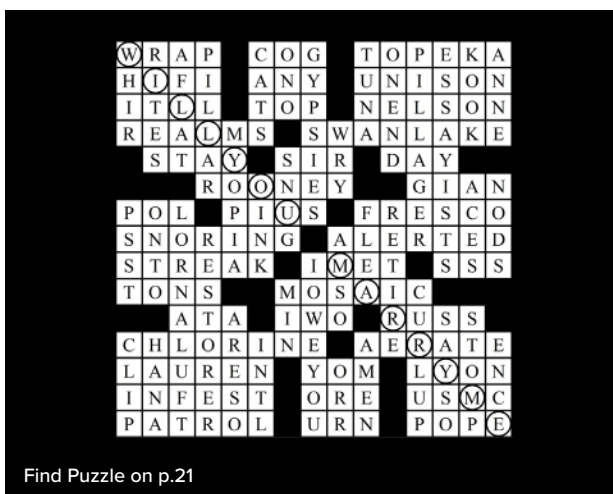
And regarding acoustics, Technical Director Dan Brinker said that there's a chance that the deck will improve the theater's sound.

"It certainly will be a different kind of feel, but it follows very closely the original slope of the stage, it's not a perfectly flat deck in our typical installation, and so it will mimic and maintain the good acoustics that we have there," Brinker said. "We expect it to be equally as good and possibly even a slight improvement in the acoustics."

And because the deck will bring guests closer to the stage, Brinker feels that it'll be an "interesting experience" for longtime MOT fans. And for those feeling insecure about attending an event in closer proximity than virtually, Walker outlined security precautions that MOT has been taking.

"We will have the ability to host indoor gatherings safely, and when we're ready to [host performances again] we will have our pandemic plan published on our web page," she said. "We've been working NSF International to create a national public health plan for reopening the opera house to ensure absolute safety. And by putting this deck in place we can offer social distancing in place to host any number of events at the opera house, and we're looking forward to being able to put those into practice."

Find out more about MOT online at michiganopera.org.



Find Puzzle on p.21

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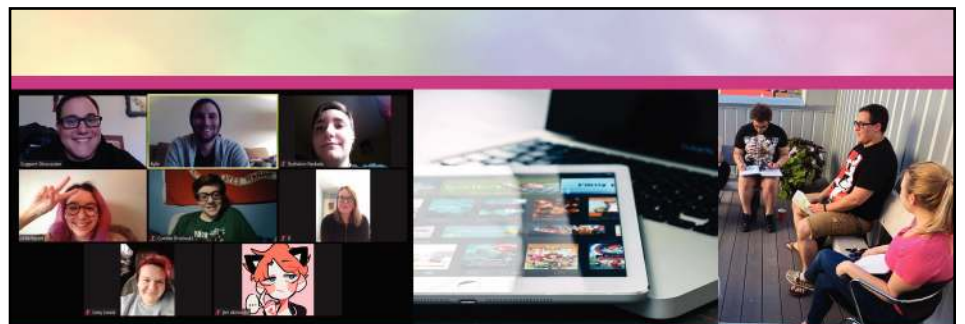
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Deep Inside Hollywood

BY ROMEO SAN VICENTE

'Connecting,' the COVID sitcom coming soon

It was inevitable. First there was the "30 Rock" remote reunion, then one from the late, great cult sitcom "Happy Endings." This month, the horror movie "Host" – directed remotely and shot entirely via Zoom – premiered on streaming platforms. And here comes "Connecting," a new sitcom for NBC, about a group of friends trying to stay close through video chats during the current global health crisis. Created by Martin Gero and Brendan Gall ("Blindspot," "The Lovebirds"), it stars "30 Rock" regular Keith Powell, Ely Henry ("Suburgatory"), Preacher Lawson ("America's Got Talent"), Jill Knox ("Keith Broke His Leg"), Otmara Marrero ("StartUp"), as well as queer cast members Parvesh Cheena and ("Crazy Ex-Girlfriend") and Shakina Nayfack ("Difficult People"). They've been given an eight-episode order, and if it goes well both on-screen and off, maybe the characters will all get to leave their houses and hang out again. Someday.



Preacher Lawson. Photo: KathClick.

queer Black women to do so. She's responsible for the TV movie "Stolen by My Mother: The Kamiyah Mobley Story," and will now develop four more films for Lifetime under her Robin Roberts Presents banner. The first to be announced is going to take you to church: "Robin Roberts Presents: The Mahalia Jackson Story," a biopic of the legendary Grammy-winning gospel singer and civil rights activist. Born in 1911, Jackson's long and revered gospel career placed her squarely in the center of the

Civil Rights Movement, performing for an integrated audience at Carnegie Hall, at John F. Kennedy's inauguration, and at the 1963 March on Washington. "Orange is the New Black" star Danielle Brooks, herself a Grammy winner and Tony Award nominee for "The Color Purple," will play Jackson. We're looking forward to this one, and to some gospel karaoke from the privacy of our couch.

Lifetime setting up a 'Christmas Set Up'

You always knew it would be Lifetime that would go full-tilt Queer Christmas first. Sure, Hallmark just announced they were taking steps to make their annual slate of holiday movies more inclusive of people who are not white and straight, but everybody who watches this sort of thing is aware that Lifetime is the more daring network. (So what if that daring mostly involves movies about suburban swingers trying to murder each other? It's the thought that counts.) Which brings us to "The Christmas Set Up," the first made-for-TV holiday movie to center a gay male relationship. It's about a lawyer from New York City, returning home to Milwaukee for Christmas with his meddling mother, who's arranged for her son to "accidentally" run into his old high school crush, now a very successful computer person in Silicon Valley. Just as stockings are about to be stuffed, along comes a job offer in London that threatens to tear up this wholesome homosexual reunion. What will happen at Christmas? You already know the answer, so watch it when it airs just to prove that homophobes don't hold a patent on enjoying room temperature romance.

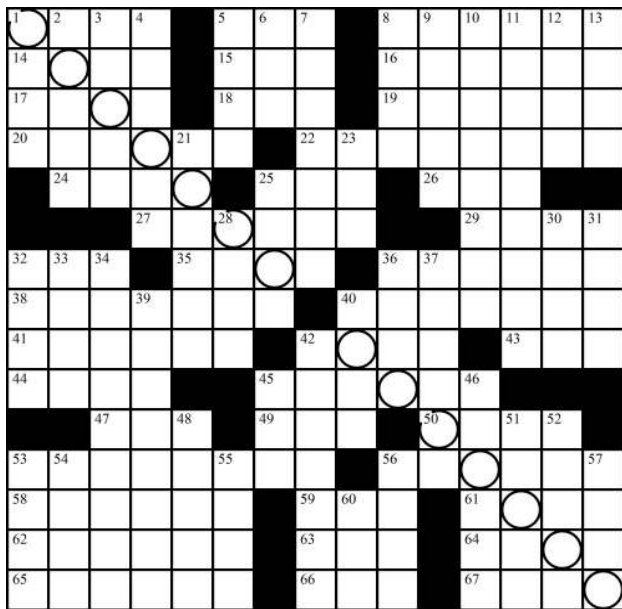
Romeo San Vicente is tall enough to hang a shining star upon the highest bough.

Lesbian Cartoon Alert: The return of 'Harriet The Spy'

Beloved children's novel "Harriet The Spy," by lesbian author Louise Fitzhugh, has endured through the decades, almost certainly bolstered by the fandom of young queer kids who found in it a smart, industrious baby butch (who, let's be real, was also kind of a brat, but in a great way). Harriet ruled her little corner of 1960s Manhattan, trying to learn everything about everyone, spying on and writing about people who caught her attention. Great news, then, that more than 20 years after the live-action feature film version, it's being adapted for an animated series on Apple TV+, with the title role voiced by Beanie Feldstein – herself a young lesbian and rising star – and co-starring Lacey Chabert and Jane Lynch. More cause for celebration: it's written by Will McRobb, who created the legendary, and legendarily odd, '90s kid-sitcom "The Adventures of Pete & Pete." Parents, bookmark this one and help your precocious kid grow up properly.

Robin Roberts producing Mahalia Jackson biopic

You know her as a host on "Good Morning America," but Robin Roberts has also broken into the producing game, one of the few



- 38 Making noise in bed
 40 Gave a heads-up to
 41 Barely move?
 42 Laura Nyro's "___ Him on a Sunday"
 43 Snake sound
 44 Singing duo Two ___ of Fun
 45 Tile arrangement
 47 Two-time link
 49 1945 battle site, briefly
 50 Tamblyn of "West Side Story"
 53 It's added to the pool
 56 Make fizzy
 58 Holiday, who played for the US women's soccer team...or... the recipient of the "circular thinking," with
 61-Across
 59 Day in Jerusalem
 61 French site of the 2019 Women's World Cup...or...see
 58-Across
 62 Overrun
 63 State of "Just Out" (abbr.)
 64 Nabor's branch,
- on TV
 65 Walk a beat
 66 Joe holder
 67 Jeremy Irons title, in "The Borgias"

Down

- 1 Spin like a top
 2 Baptism and bris
 3 Black key above G
 4 Support for the community
 5 Broadway hit inspired by the mews?
 6 "Double Fantasy" artist
 7 Cher's "___, Tramps & Thieves"
 8 Fish in a melt
 9 Without interruption
 10 Pirate, at times
 11 Oscar Wilde, and others
 12 Oddball
 13 A girl named Frank
 21 Mr. Magoo's malady
 23 Like Wanda Sykes' humor
 25 Fitting tightly
 28 Sty cry

- 30 Perfect serves from Mauresmo
 31 Drifts off
 32 Furtive "Over here!"
 33 Not taken in by
 34 Liza Minnelli's sister
 36 Boxer's problem
 37 Go to bed
 39 Antique shop employee
 40 Back-and-forth argument line
 42 Words in response to a favor
 45 Lots of secs
 46 Get comfy
 48 "You ___ right!"
 51 Affirm orally
 52 Put one's foot down
 53 Illegal block by Esera Tuaola
 54 Cosmonaut Leonov
 55 The I in IHOP (abbr.)
 56 Baldwin's "The ___ Corner"
 57 Suffix with prefer
 60 Bruin Bobby

Circular Thinking

Q Puzzle

Across

- 1 Bundle up
 5 Gear tooth
 8 Kansas capital
 14 Player of a Johnny Mathis song
 15 More than zero
 16 Not in parts, to a gay men's choir
 17 "___ never fly!"

- 18 Lover that you can't get over
 19 Basketball's Mariah Burton ___
 20 Where queens rule, perhaps
 22 "A chicken or a duck is a mistake, when you do ___"
 24 Choose not to come
 25 Title for Elton

- 26 Frequent Hudson costar Doris
 27 Judy Garland costar Mickey
 29 Composer ___ Carlo Menotti
 32 Capitol figure
 35 Fitting papal name
 36 Michelangelo method

65 Nabor's branch,

Clues pg. 18

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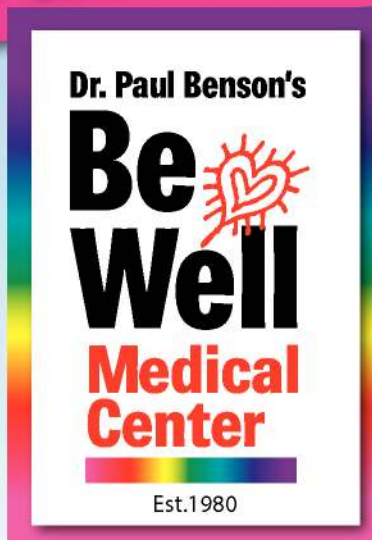
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3 On the Edge: Transcending the Standard of Care

(Dr. Paul Benson, Dorea Shoemaker & Gretchen Haughton) Release: **1/30/2020**

Take matters into your own hands and become an active participant in your health. We'll discuss Cannabidiol (CBD) and its properties to improve and manage health with an expert, Dorea Shoemaker. CBD may be a new and safer alternative for pain instead of Tylenol or ibuprofen. We'll also discover benefits of whole food supplements to keep us healthy.

4 The Transgender Population – Understanding and Embracing this Population (Leon Bullough) Release: **2/13/2020**

A report from the World Professional Association on Transgender Health's (WPATH) Annual Conference. Hormone Replacement therapy is only a part of the transitioning process. Community and mental health support is essential for success. Individualized care plans based on evidence based

medicine and created to match each individual's desires and pace is essential to make the transition process a safe and healthy journey.

5 Sexual Health and HIV Prevention

(Dr. Paul Benson & Mark Rosen) Release: **2/27/2020**

We'll discuss sexually transmitted infections and their prevention. Many healthcare providers sweep this topic under the rug, but outcomes improve when we talk about how to stay healthy and infection free. Sexual health is not simply the absence of disease. It's living comfortably without fear or stigma; and embracing your sexuality while living day to day in your comfort zone.

6 Living Well Over the Age of 50

(Dr. Benson and Colin Colter) Release: **3/12/2020**

We'll discuss simple steps you, with the assistance of your doctor, can implement to live longer and healthier. Proper health maintenance makes a big difference at any age, but becomes even more important as the decades pass. We'll talk about prevention and aggressive strategies to manage co-morbidities sometimes encountered as we age. We can't turn back the clock, but you *can* improve your heart, liver, brain function, kidneys, and virtually every organ system.



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