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Photo courtesy of Motown Sound. Illustration by Shelby Powers.

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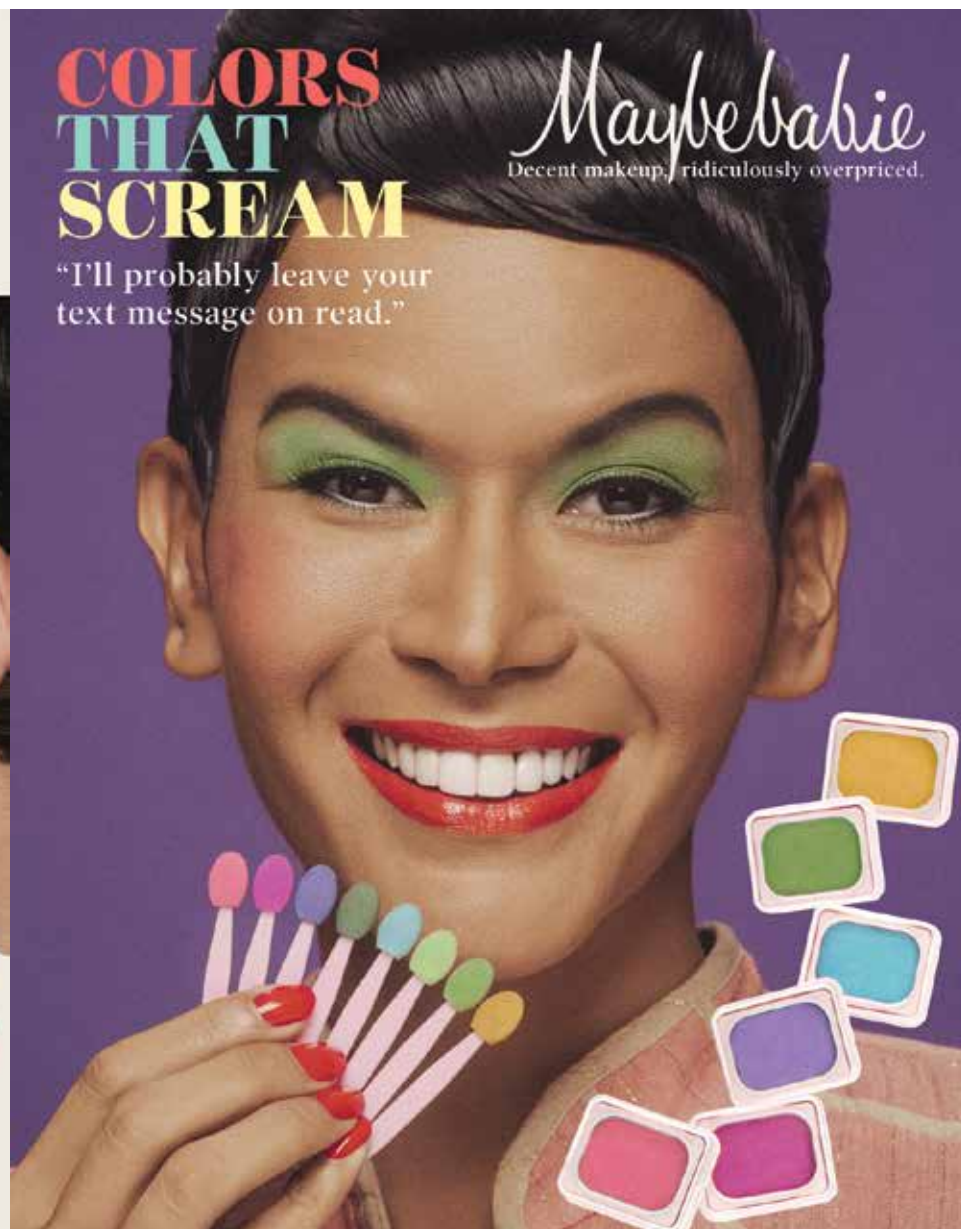
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Prim-n-Poppin is the work of New York-based Photographer Julia Comita and makeup artist Brenna Drury. The reimagined vintage ads redefine '70s fashion with a more inclusive lens. Courtesy photos.

A New Campaign Redefines '70s Beauty Standards With LGBTQ Themes

BY EVE KUCHARSKI

Without dispute, the '70s were an iconic fashion decade. Tie-dye, floral, bell-bottoms, mini (and maxi) dresses. It's not hard to pick out a seminal trend whose influence can be seen even in modern day wear.

But despite its fun fashion, the decade idealized white standards of beauty, largely leaving out anyone who didn't meet the mold of skinny, cisgender female models. Now, with

Prim-n-Poppin, which officially launched in January, New York-based photographer Julia Comita and makeup artist Brenna Drury have imagined a world that better reflects the diverse world we live in.

The online project is a series of reimagined vintage magazine ads that includes models of various races from the body modification, vitiligo and body positivity communities. But it's not only representative of physical diversity, Prim-n-Poppin showcases five reimagined vintage beauty ads that also highlight models with ranging sexual orientations and gender

identities.

It includes detailed interviews with each model and allows viewers to access an in-depth resource list of allied companies and organizations that value beauty just as much as the emotional health and well-being of the people who are interested in fashion today, unlike the antiquated original source material.

Recently, Comita and Drury shared why inclusivity is as important as ever in fashion today, what it was like breaking modern makeup rules to create the project, and why seeing diverse representation in these vintage

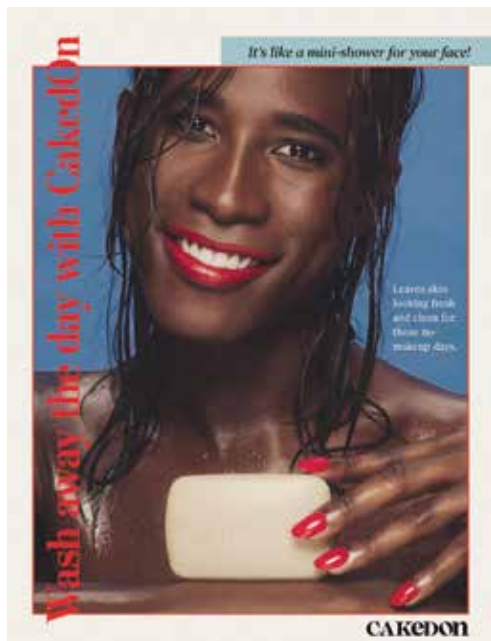
ads brought out an emotional response in both the project creators and the participating models.

Where did the name for Prim-n-Poppin come from?

Julia Comita: We like that name because "prim" is sort of alluding to the vintage portion of it. You know, more old-school and more proper, if you will. And "poppin" is more alluding to present-day. It is a combination of the two. And it's just a fun title.

What was the process of coming up with the idea?

Brenna Drury: We met through Instagram. I messaged her to collaborate. That was in early summer 2019 and I made a few mood boards, three of which were more along the beauty lines of pops of color and fresh skin. And then I threw in the vintage advertisements, which were just colorful fun. We started with that and agreed that we would like to do something a little bit different. And then, while looking through the vintage advertisements, we were picking up on the undertones like how non-inclusive they were, and just the more conversations we had, we were able to narrow it down to exactly what we wanted it to do.



Cory Walker. Courtesy photo.

Once the project was completed, what did you feel when you saw all the diverse faces represented in this traditionally exclusive way?

Comita: Very emotional. I don't know, it just makes me smile. If I look at all the original ads all together, from a surface-level perspective I might be like, "Oh, those are funny." But if I really look at them, I don't feel good because it doesn't feel correct. It feels very one-sided. So, seeing all of the faces together now, it makes me feel kind of emotional because this is the world we live in. Especially in New York City, we go out the door and we see so many different kinds of people. These are our friends.

Drury: We would love to expand on the



Kaguya. Courtesy photo.

project, of course, but it's a start to seeing the advertisements as how I see my world today, which makes me very happy.

It's great that the concept of diversity extended out to sexual orientation and gender identity as well. How did you find the LGBTQ models featured in Prim-n-Poppin'?

Comita: There are a number of great agencies out here that are catering to a more diverse group of people. There's places like We Speak that we pulled talent from. They even have a whole category in their roster for fluid. And Slay was another agency that we cast from; Slay is the first exclusively transgender agency. I actually didn't know those agencies before we did this project. This was something Brenna and I had talked about. Brenna did a lot of research and sent some agencies to my attention and we were able to find everyone except for Cory (Walker), who did the soap ad, who I was referred to from another project a few months before who I shot with. I just really loved their energy and they photograph really well.

Was there an artistic challenge that was unique to shooting this project?

Drury: For me, I wouldn't say it was a challenge, but the makeup aesthetic was obviously different during that time, and the way that I like to do makeup now is skin-forward. Back then it was more caked on, so it was an adjustment to put that much makeup on my clients. I knew that it would read how I wanted it to read, but that was the only thing for me.

Comita: I don't know if I would call this an artistic challenge per se, but I guess one of the things that was different about this project was making sure that everybody was being a little bit silly or over the top. We're not asking them to model to make themselves the best they can look; it's more about, "Let's get the feeling across of this picture and what we're trying to communicate."

Drury: Posing was something that we talked a lot about, whether it was like they were selling the cellphone and it was like this (pained smile). Now, it's just more casual, but I feel like there was a period of adjustment when the talent were getting out of their normal modeling state and being just, like, extra. (Laughs.)

See *Prim 'n Poppin'*, continued on p. 6

Michigan's Poppin: A Closer Look at Prim-n-Poppin Model Jesi Taylor Cruz

BY EVE KUCHARSKI

It'd be easy to assume that Jesi Taylor Cruz's lifelong dream was to be a part of the fashion industry. After all, they've modeled for Vogue and been featured in Allure and Glamour. But the Michigan native said that they have long felt ostracized by the "traditional" — white, cisgender — beauty standards idolized by mainstream fashion media. Growing up in Union Pier, Cruz felt that the combination of their nonbinary and pansexual identities, their experiences being bullied for their vitiligo, and struggles with bulimia made modeling seem like a distant fantasy.

"Fashion was never really my goal, but I did always have an interest in having some part in changing what representation looked like when it came to vitiligo," says Cruz, now based in New York with years of modeling under their belt. "So, I didn't know how that would happen, what that would look like, how I would even get involved, because I knew that whole industry, that whole world, wasn't in a place that I technically belonged."

Modeling came into Cruz's life by chance not long after they had moved to New York. One day, when they were out shopping for books at NYC's famous Strand Bookstore, unprompted, a woman from diverse role model platform StyleLikeU approached Cruz and invited them to be a part of a beauty series on vitiligo.

"I met them and did a series with them for Allure magazine where I was just talking about vitiligo and beauty and bullying and stuff like that. And it was in doing that where they were like, 'Hey, you should really consider modeling. You have an interesting story, and the way that you talk about some of these things could be really good if you were to enter the industry in some way,'" Cruz says.

It wasn't long after that Cruz found We Speak Model Management, an inclusive modeling agency that pledges to actively fight against tokenism, systemic racism, fast

fashion and unequal wages. They applied, were accepted, and, for the first time, fashion seemed accessible. Cruz is still with We Speak today.

"They're literally aiming to change not only the face of the industry but really change the values and the mindset and the belief systems of the people in these industries so that the focus is less on perpetuating harmful stereotypes and dangerous norms," Cruz says, referencing the company's mission. "So that more of the media that we consume really reflects what the world actually looks like."

Since joining, Cruz said they feel lucky that We Speak gives them a voice to turn down modeling gigs for brands that might perpetuate noninclusive ideals, harm the environment or otherwise promote systems of oppression. That's why, when Cruz learned of the Prim-n-Poppin campaign that sought to bring inclusivity to vintage '70s ads, they hopped on board.

"There are so many deliberate choices made in marketing and advertising that essentially are just perpetuating harmful ideas about 'beauty' and what people are supposed to look like and what bodies are supposed to look like," Cruz says. "It's so deliberate, but it's also so normal, that these ads will just fly by us and we won't even stop to think that what they're really doing, at the core, is getting us to change things about ourselves to fit some ridiculous beauty standards that are not only antiquated but just actively being pushed out the door."

Read more about Prim-n-Poppin on page 4. Find out about Cruz online at jesi-taylor.org.



Jesi Taylor Cruz. Courtesy photo.

→ Prim-n-Poppin

Continued from p. 5

Did you find yourself breaking all the modern makeup rules of today?

Drury: (Laughs.) Well, just eyeshadow all the way up to the brows that's the same color — these things that I would not do to my clients right now. But that was also the fun of it, to do something like that.

Comita: Totally. There are few times where you want to go balls to the wall with everything. Things are more understated now because it can look really tacky (laughs), but in this case, that was the most appropriate direction. So I think we were all doing things stylistically that we wouldn't be doing otherwise.

Drury: In Kaguya, the one where she had all

of the makeup (in her hand), a few of the people that we showed it to once it was done, there was a question of like, "Is that rubber band supposed to be there?" It's funny because that's not something you would find now, but in the original ad, that's exactly what it was.

What do you hope will be the first impressions of people who get to really sit down and take a look at this? Do you think they'll be tricked at first into thinking it's a real vintage ad?

Comita: That would be cool! (Laughs.) I actually shared this with a friend last night,

and he is in the queer community as well and he's Black. And he was saying that, for him, looking at the pictures it was as if they had always been there. And that was a really special response. I would love for that to be the case. It would be great if people looked at them and thought, "I could have seen this then."

Drury: I would (love) people seeing it to feel a sense of comfort.

Comita: And community.

Find out more about Prim-n-Poppin' online at prim-poppin.com.

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Cold As Hell Winter Pride Brings Back Kink in 2021

BY JASON A. MICHAEL

On Saturday, Feb. 13, LGBT Detroit presented its second-annual Cold As Hell Winter Pride. A ticketed event highlighting LGBTQ sexual expression in the leather, kink and fetish communities, Cold as Hell was entirely prerecorded. Viewers got the opportunity to learn about the safe execution of various kinks and fetishes from community members in various demonstrations and panel discussions.

The film was hosted by performers Sir Oya Ra and Ironman. Sir Oya Ra is the current Mr. Maryland Leather. Hailing from Baltimore, Sir Oya Ra describes himself as a “millennial leather classicist and kink prodigy.” He is also the Head-of-Household for the Tribe of Mount Saint Oya. Ironman, also known as Al Davis, is a former Mr. Bulge and a Bulge ambassador from Atlanta.

The two opened the evening with a flogging demonstration featuring Jerron Totten who by day works as the organizations’ social outreach coordinator and legislative advocate.

“I entered the leather/kink community two years ago,” Totten said. “For those two years I have been in a daddy/boy power exchange dynamic with Al Davis, who is a returning host of Cold As Hell. I am definitely grateful to work in a space that I can be my complete self. Cold As Hell provides space for Black and Brown leather folk to provide education on the leather/kink community and exhibit their

expertise in leather culture.”

Totten encourages others interested in the leather/kink community to “start having conversations with your partners. Seek information from those who are already in [the scene] and definitely watch Cold As Hell.”

Even two years in, Totten said he has much yet to learn.

“I definitely look forward to expanding my horizons in kink and fetish play. I also want to continue to provide these educational spaces for those who are interested in entering

the culture,” he said.

In addition to Totten’s flogging scene, other kinks and fetishes are, of course, featured. These include sounding, fisting, fire impact and wax play. Participating in these demonstrations, in addition to hosts Sir Oya Ra and Ironman, are Panthro Onyx, Sango, Travis Jon XXX, Goddess Lakshimi, John Tatum and Kenn Kennedy.

Panel discussions focused on the topics of femmes in leather and dynamics and power



exchange.

“This year was amazing,” Totten said. “This being our second year doing this particular project, I feel that we have learned so much in one year to be able to produce such quality content. As project coordinator I am definitely thankful to my team of content developers Anthony Martinez and Chris Sutton of Climax Films. This year we featured leather folk and leather title-holders from across the nation. They worked really hard this year to bring this vision to life. I only see this program expanding from here.”



Cold As Hell is available to rent online for \$10 for 72 hours. It is available until March 26. To learn more, visit coldashell.org.

Pushing Forward: Roland Leggett Re-elected MDP LGBT&A Caucus Chair, Talks Term Goals

BY EVE KUCHARSKI



Photo: Andrew Potter

For many Americans, 2021 likely feels like a welcome political reset as the nation starts to settle in to the next four years under the Biden/Harris Administration. For the LGBTQ+ community, even in the short month that new leadership

has been in office, actions like the transgender military ban reversal and promises to pass LGBTQ rights legislation within Biden's first 100 days in office make clear that presidential priorities have shifted toward inclusivity.

While the results of the election may have seemed like a one-time struggle, it is due to the work of activists like Roland Leggett over months and years that made the change possible. Leggett, who served as the Biden campaign's regional political director in Michigan, was re-elected this week to serve another two years as the chair for the Michigan Democratic Party's LGBT&A Caucus. For him,

"now is the time to get the work done." He caught up with Between The Lines via phone to outline the next steps to ensure a successful term and talk more about what inspired him to join the Caucus.

"We're exiting a very difficult part of American history when it comes to our community in particular. ... We have to make sure that we're not placed in that position again," Leggett said. "[We're] holding the folks that we got elected accountable to make sure that we're getting the things that the folks in our community need."

'We Came Very Close'

Alongside Leggett, Grace Wojcik, Jacob Johnson, Emme Zanotti and Susan Grettenberger were all voted in by registered Michigan Democratic Party members to serve as the Caucus's first, second, third and fourth vice chairs respectively. Leggett said that in 2021, the caucus will prioritize the needs of the transgender community first.

"We're focused on the needs of the transgender community in particular as a result of our trans brothers and sisters being statistically far more likely to succumb to homelessness or violence," he said. "The murder rate for transgender women of color in Detroit is the highest in the country, and we're going to

continue to push the candidates that won our support based on those policies that best help address what I was just describing."

Work with families and supporting pro-LGBTQ candidates is a must as well, and Leggett is excited for an upcoming roundtable meeting that is in the works. There, LGBTQ+ people from around the state will have the opportunity to engage with LGBTQ+ and allied leaders to discuss where they can best allocate their resources to best serve the population.

Finally, within 2021, the Caucus has plans to "tweak" a few things internally within its own structure.

"There's a conversation that we have every few years about whether or not the name of the Caucus reflects the diversity of our community. We don't want to send a false message that there are folks in our community that aren't included," Leggett said. "... We're also going to be taking a look at our bylaws to ensure that the language reflects the inclusivity that I was talking about."

Perhaps most importantly, however, the Caucus's work will center around ensuring that there is political accountability in elected and running officials in Michigan. Due to the state's progressive, LGBTQ+-supportive leadership like Attorney General Dana Nessel, Gov. Gretchen Whitmer and Oakland County Executive Dave Coulter, Leggett


remains optimistic that the Caucus is uniquely positioned to do so.

"In 2019, the idea of having an openly gay Oakland County executive seemed like that was very far away, so I'm really excited to see how we could partner with him to make sure that the policies and the focus that he's interested in implementing in Oakland County reflect the needs of our community. And that's something that we couldn't say for decades," he said. "Let's now remember where we just came from and how fragile this is and how easily we can lose the ground we've made. I would just encourage folks to remember that February 2021 feels much better February 2020 did, but remember that we came very close."

Leggett then gave an example of how the public can rely on the Caucus to hold even pro-LGBTQ+ politicians to their word, like when Sen. Debbie Stabenow asked the Caucus to hold a fundraiser.

"I said sure if the senator would take a tour of the Ruth Ellis Center and sit down with senior staff to have a conversation about the needs of the organization. She agreed to do that and it was great. That was a great example of accountability," Leggett said. "... [We need to make] sure that they know that we are a robust organized presence ... so that when crucial

See **Roland Leggett**, continued on p. 13



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Parting Glances

BY CHARLES ALEXANDER

Detroit's Black History Month Celeb

When Detroit-born, Cass Tech graduate Bernard Johnson died, age 60 in 1997, the New York Times carried a quarter-page obit celebrating his life as “a Renaissance man in dance.”

Little bigger than a metronome minute – at 5-foot-4 – he started dancing at age 11. We became friends during our CT senior year, and were part of an integrated Black/white circle of gay art and music students who often gathered after class to “dish” and let our hair down at a nearby Dunkin’ Donuts Shop in downtown Detroit.

As art students we were free to roam all seven floors, freehand drawing in pencil and charcoal, mastering the intricacies of one- and two-point perspective. During warm weather we sketched, painted watercolors, socialized in shady nearby Cass Park.

Bernard Johnson majored in fashion design, and was much admired for renderings of furs, fabrics, dresses and accessories. In the late-1950s there were few Black CT students majoring in fashion design.

He was also known as an interpreter of ballet and modern dance, invited by our senior art/design instructor Donald Thrall to perform for an all-school talent extravaganza.

Bernard wore a discreetly brief costume, and his body was painted a shimmering gold. When he stepped stage center into the spotlight, there was an expectant hush among the 1,500 students gathered in the balconied auditorium.

He paused. Struck an elegant pose. Smiled expectantly. Snapped into stunning. Full! No-let-up! Choreographic mastery!

Music was Les Baxter’s LP recording of “Le Sacre Du Sauvage.” Live bongo drummers drummed Bernard through each flashing movement. Performance was primitive. Limber. Elastic. Gleamingly muscular! When he took several well-deserved bows, sweating glitter from an energetic and orgiastic cadence, everyone stood, whistled, applauded.

Though we didn’t know it then, this was a preview performance for a long and successful career in dance, choreography, film set and costume design, stretching over 40 wonderfully creative years.

“I believe in the power of metaphysics,” he once confided to friends. “Be the best. Associate only with the best. These are the principles I was raised on.”

He was fun company. Just a bit “swish” and campy. He carried his books like a well-bred debutante.

But he was not to be trifled with, as a classmate who called him “Miss Thing” during bell change soon found out.

Bernard – who had an impeccable sense of timing – knew just when, where and how to settle a score. In the midst of our design class he loudly confronted the offending dimwit.

“If it’s not too much trouble to put that brain you’re sitting on in gear, I’d like words with you.”

See next page



BY RHIANNON CHESTER-BEY

Reclamation of Self: Navigating Shame and Healing

I am because we are. I come from a lineage of mothers — Black mothers, strong mothers. Mothers that have made a proverbial way out of no way. Mothers that have stared down the barrel of structural racism, misogynoir, and colorism.

When I asked my 90-year-old grandmother, “Are you satisfied with your life?” She empathically replied, “Yes! I’m the reason you’re here.” Undeniably, in the literal sense, had she not given birth to my mother I would not have been born. I had a feeling that there was deeper meaning to her proclamation of satisfaction, and, being the curious person I am, I probed for more.

She continued, “Everything that I’ve done has made it possible for you to be where you are and who you are.”

Again, undeniably so. I sat with the decades of decisions, sacrifices, pride and joys in her voice. Knowing only a fraction of what it took from my lineage of mothers for me to be who I am today. I give thanks to them all and give my adoration to Rosie Harland — the matriarch of my family.

As far back as I know, acknowledging there is so much I do not know, my maternal lineage has its roots in Alabama. I do know that my grandmother was a sharecropper, forced to discontinue her education in order to pick cotton, okra,

sugar cane and more so that her mother could care for the other children. She recounts being in the fields until moonlight and fireflies guided her back home. Having not experienced this firsthand, it was easy to romanticize how beautiful it must have been to be able to see the stars and the flickering of moonlight. Yet, she reminded me of the terror and tragedy of the conditions with a quick rebuttal, “I was 6!”

With her laboring hands, she saved enough money to change her conditions. Her journey led her to Detroit with her children.

I grew up mostly on the west side of Detroit — a city that has been majority Black since I was born, and it too stares down the barrel of systemic oppression. My experiences are rooted in the culture of Detroit — a culture of community and fighting for liberation. I grew up in the aftermath of Reagan’s war on drugs coupled with massive job loss and industry cuts — I witnessed in my childhood the political criminalization of my community. During high school, I fought the against privatization of public education and helped organize student voices to fight for our schools and our city. During this time, I was also quietly navigating shame and fear around my sexuality.

See Viewpoint, next page

→ Viewpoint

Continued from p. 10

I do not intend to tell my coming out story, rather the story of how I realized “the personal is political.”

Though the feminist theory is critiqued for focusing on personal issues rather than systemic issues, it summarizes that the parts make the whole and it illuminates the personal impact of systemic issues. I was terrified of the potential violence, abandonment and impact that my attractionality and sexuality may have had on my livelihood, which, in turn, impacted my mental health.

Navigating shame around marginalized identities is deeply individual and also collective. The messages of shame come through a myriad of channels like media and religious figures, therefore, being internalized by us all. It is the response that differs. Had it not been for the healing that started when I began to question “what is” to find out “what is true,” I would indeed have been “eaten alive.” I know what the bite of shame feels like and find it sometimes still trying to nibble away at me. Shame encourages you to turn away from your own knowing — who you are, what you deserve and how you want to show up in this world.

I have vowed to reclaim myself and my knowing! The “reclamation of self” calls for the unlearning of the mistruths I was encouraged to believe in and opening the pathway for my joy. Being joyful can feel like a tiny revolution itself. Shedding the knowledge that does not serve me in service of what makes me feel whole has undoubtedly made some people uncomfortable, even those close to me, but I owe it to my grandmother to change my conditions if they do not suit me so that one day, when I am asked, “Are you satisfied with your life?” I can empathically proclaim, “YES!”

Being myself, unapologetically, has made space for others to be their authentic selves.

Defining yourself is truly a liberating act of revolution in a world that is constantly trying to shape you for the benefit of others. The conditions

“If I didn't define myself for myself, I would be crunched into other people's fantasies for me and eaten alive.”

— Ancestor, Audre Lorde

that we in my lineage have lived through were not determined by us and while they have shaped us they have not defined us. I have taken the lessons in my DNA and made them into my very own tapestry.

I am the lesbian daughter of a lineage of mothers — Black mothers, strong mothers.

Rhiannon Chester-Bey is a cultural visual artist, writer and healing arts practitioner born, raised and educated in and by Detroit. She is a longtime activist, advocate and contributor in the Detroit LGBTQ+ community. Headshot photo credit to Nick Hagen.

→ Parting Glances

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We held our breath. One by one he read the guy's beads. We savored every delicious put-down.

His accolades are many: fantasy costume designs; many Broadway musical performances; teaching at the University of California at Irvine; induction into the Black Filmmakers Hall of Fame; close friendships with Josephine Baker, Judy Garland, pre-controversial Bill Cosby, Lena Horne, Harry Belafonte, Aretha Franklin; international tours, command performances for King Hassan II of Morocco.

For us CT art students – straight, gay, questioning – Bernard Johnson, though short of stature, was someone we all looked up to.

Charles Alexander is prolific both as a BTL columnist, having contributed 700-plus columns, as a well-known LGBT community artist having shared over 1,000 pieces of art via Facebook. He is a Spirit of Detroit Award recipient and an Affirmations LGBTQ center Jan Stevenson awardee. Connect with him at charles@pridesource.com.

Creep Of The Week

One Million Moms

BY D'ANNE WITKOWSKI

American Girl dolls are pretty ubiquitous these days. These expensive dolls have an endless collection of accessories and outfits that your stimulus check won't even come close to buying. There are also books. So many books. The dolls have their own history and backstory and kids apparently really dig it. Sounds pretty innocent.

But it is NOT.

Or so say the One Million Moms group that is throwing a fit over Kira, the new American Girl doll.

Apparently American Girl chooses a Girl of the Year each year and makes said girl into a doll? And there's a book that goes a long with the doll. Kira is the Girl of 2021 and in her book she travels to Australia to help work at a wildlife sanctuary where she gets to bottle feed Koala bears and stuff.

Kira's transgression? She has lesbian aunts in Australia. Two ladies. Married. To each other! All Kira dolls must be rounded up thrown into a fire in the town square! May they melted down and then used to make something wholesome, like a doll that is actually a Bible.

One Million Moms, which does not actually have one million members, is livid. They are now boycotting American Girl until they do the right thing and kill off Kira's lesbian aunts in the next book.

Oh, wait. I have that wrong. They want the aunts GONE. NOW. Like, burn the books gone.

In the One Million Moms petition they plead, “Please stick to making innocent dolls and books appropriate for any and all ages and refrain from making political and social statements. I urge American Girl to discontinue its storyline that includes Kira's two lesbian aunts – immediately.”

You hear that? IMMEDIATELY! Off with their heads.

“I'm not buying into your social agenda to push homosexuality,” the Moms continue. “Your ‘2021 Girl of the Year’ Kira Bailey storyline offends me and many other Christians and conservative families. Your company did not even include a warning so parents would have a heads-up.”

I'm trying to imagine what such a warning would look like: “Rated LA for Lesbian Aunts” or “Parental Advisory: Existence of Lesbians.”

Apparently the Million Moms are upset about some racy illustrations in the book. Come on, Million Moms, I'm sure they're tasteful nudes.

“Within the first few pages of Chapter 1,” the Moms say, “Kira Down Under includes an illustrated picture of the two women walking down the aisle at their wedding.”

Oh, OK so no nudes then? Just two ladies

at their wedding? SCANDALOUS.

“This irresponsible storyline is dangerous to the well-being of our children,” they claim.

It's exhausting, frankly, to have group like One Million Moms claim that the very existence of LGBTQ people is a threat to children. It's also astonishing to me that they think if their children never learn about lesbian aunts then they can never become lesbian aunts. Or lesbian uncles for that matter.

Kira's book also deals with the topic of climate change, something a lot of those One Million Moms probably also find objectionable. Everyone knows global warming is a hoax and that forest fires are started by Jewish space lasers (if that doesn't make sense to you, Google it or ask U.S. Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene).

One Million Moms helpfully points out that “American Girl could have chosen another storyline or characters to write about and remained neutral in the culture war.”

And they're right! American Girl could have chosen to write about something else. They could have chosen to make Kira travel to space to gather moon rocks at the moon rock sanctuary run by her lesbian alien aunts. But something tells me One Million Moms would still find something to object about it. You just can't please everybody.

“If your child has not seen this yet,” they warn, “then make sure she is not exposed to this content. Do all you can to avoid a premature conversation that she is far too young to understand.”


First of all, young people are often the most understanding of two people who love each other. I remember helping out at a Valentine's Day party when my son was in Kindergarten. While he and another boy cut out heart shapes the other boy asked him, “How come you have moms but no dad?” To which my son replied, “Because my mom married another mom.” And they went on crafting.

“Why can't the toy manufacturer let kids be kids instead of glamorizing a sinful lifestyle?” they ask on their website. “American Girl is confusing our innocent children by attempting to normalize same-sex marriage.”

It's really not confusing. Some people are not heterosexual. That's just a fact. And the existence of LGBTQ people is normal. We're here, we're queer—no, seriously, we're right here.

I'm a mom. And I'm married to a woman. And we love our son very much and the idea that we're harming him by being his moms is what's truly offensive here. Would a “Fuck off One Million Moms” be offensive here? Good.

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Analysis: How Michigan's Surrogacy Law Harms Prospective Parents, Gay and Straight Alike



BY ELLEN SHANNA KNOPPOW

An Outdated Law

In a case that shines a light on Michigan's antiquated surrogate parenting law, a couple in Grand Rapids has been ordered to endure the process of adopting their own biological newborn twins. And while the couple in question is straight, the situation has far-reaching implications for all couples and individuals who wish to expand their families via compensated gestational surrogacy, which remains illegal in Michigan. To be clear, Michigan is an outlier: by mid-February when New York updates its statute, Louisiana will remain the only state other than Michigan with similarly draconian surrogacy laws. In that state, LGBTQ couples are barred from entering into surrogacy contracts entirely.

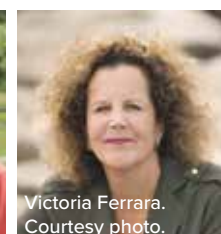
Tammy and Jordan Myers, parents of an 8-year-old, wished to have more children. As a breast cancer survivor anticipating this possibility, Tammy Myers had some of her eggs frozen before a planned operation to remove her uterus. The Myerses located a married woman with children who offered to be a "compassionate surrogate," meaning that she would carry their biological child conceived through in vitro fertilization—Tammy Myers' egg, Jordan Myers' sperm—without compensation. As part of the legal process, Tammy and Jordan Myers sought a pre-birth order from a circuit court judge in Kent County in January to establish parenting rights of their genetic children. That's where the trouble began.

Pointing to a decades-old statute, now-retired Kent County Circuit Court Judge Daniel Zemaitis stated the following:

"While this Court has genuine concerns about the present-day wisdom of the 1988 Surrogate Parenting Act, such concerns are better left to the legislative/political arena. This Court will not ignore by judicial action the clear language of (the law)."

As a less satisfactory alternative, Jordan Myers sought to establish parenting rights under the Paternity Act. This too was denied despite the fact that the surrogate and her husband make no claim to the children, who were born prematurely and are in the neonatal intensive care unit. No one is disputing that the Myerses are the twins' parents; however, the court has ruled that a traditional adoption—involving background checks and home visits—must take place.

Between The Lines consulted with Victoria Ferrara, an attorney



and international expert on surrogacy law who is herself openly gay and a mother. Ferrara heads the agency Worldwide Surrogacy, where she specializes in family formation through gestational surrogacy for couples and singles, both gay and straight.

Why Such Strict Laws?

It all began in Michigan.

In the early 1980s, commercial surrogacy was relatively new and had grown out the emerging field of assisted reproductive technologies: IVF opened up exciting new possibilities for prospective parents. Dearborn attorney Noel Keane became something of the father of modern legal surrogacy, as he helped countless couples expand their families. Keane was celebrated as a hero by many and called a villain by others who considered surrogacy exploitative.

Many will recall the so-called 'Baby M' case of the mid-1980s, in which Mary Beth Whitehead, a traditional surrogate using her own egg, refused to give up parenting rights upon the birth of the child. In the end, Whitehead lost custody and later sued Keane.

That led to the 1988 Surrogate Parenting Act, in which Michigan became the first state to make paid surrogacy a felony. Introduced by Sen. Connie Binsfield and signed into law by Gov. James Blanchard, it was explicitly designed to put Keane out of business. It did not. Other states followed suit, but as reproductive technologies have advanced, gestational surrogacy has become more common, and attorneys who specialize in this area have learned best practices. Michigan's state law has not kept pace.

Ferrara explained a critical difference between the circumstances that led to the 1988 Surrogate Parenting Act and the present landscape of surrogacy is this country.

"That case created a lot of controversy," Ferrara noted, of

Whitehead. “But I think it’s important to make a distinction between traditional surrogacy and gestational surrogacy. Mary Beth Whitehead was a traditional surrogate. She carried her own genetic baby ... and no one could take that baby away from her unless she agreed, after the fact of the birth.

“So, the thing about gestational surrogacy is people are coming together for the purpose of a woman carrying a non-genetic baby for another couple,” she continued. “And most of the time, people ask me, ‘Will they want to keep my baby?’ We say, ‘No, as a matter of fact, she wants to make sure you’re going to take your baby.’ So gestational surrogacy is so different all the way around than traditional surrogacy.”

Here is a brief timeline: In 1978, the first baby was conceived via IVF. Gestational surrogacy wouldn’t be successful until 1985. Slowly, gestational surrogacy has become more common: the number of gestational carrier cycles increased from 727 in 1999 to 3,432 in 2013, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Ferrara said she’s disappointed with what happened in Kent County and hopes the notoriety and press will help bring awareness and lead to lobbying efforts intended to change the law.

“I think in this case, what’s really sad is that the parents are the biological genetic parents, and everyone is on the same page: the surrogate, her husband, the two parents — and so I think the court came up with the wrong result. An unjust result. And actually, they had some precedent in Michigan to come up with a different result. My understanding is that ... there have been cases in Michigan allowing parents to become the legal parents of their babies in surrogacy arrangements.”

A Judge’s Perspective

Oakland County Circuit Court Judge Jacob Cunningham, who works in the family division and who is also openly gay, is one such judge who has set precedent by signing pre-birth orders to establish genetic parents as legal parents when an uncompensated gestational surrogate has carried the child or children.

Cunningham, who said he was unable to speak to the merits of the Kent County case or any pending case specifically, did explain in general terms how it looks from his side of the bench when he signs such orders.

To be clear, though, “the statute prevents a contract for surrogacy, full stop,” Cunningham said. “And that’s 100 percent, good law, on the books.”

However, a case can be filed in the family division with a code indicating “other,” which requires a hearing before a pre-birth order can be signed.

Cunningham explained the point of the hearing is to demonstrate two things. First, for the Court to ensure there must be no paid surrogacy contract in play that would run afoul of the current statute. In addition, the Court must verify neither the gestational surrogate nor her married spouse or significant other, if there is one, may be genetically related to the baby. This

requires testimony under oath or sworn affidavits by all parties involved. Cunningham added that treating physicians also can provide affidavits that may be helpful to the Court.

“Let’s be honest,” Cunningham said. “That statute was on the books decades ago, and there’s that phrase that sometimes the law is slow to catch up to the times or the technology. Back in the ‘80s when that statute was enacted, we didn’t have the strides in in vitro [fertilization].

“I know a lot of family judges, myself included, that would be thrilled to see change [in this very gray area] so that we can make sure that we have a guiding principle in the law, because our job is to follow the law as written and apply it,” Cunningham continued.

He then spoke of the benefit of having a law that would address the modern realities of surrogacy and IVF that would be uniform across all of Michigan’s 83 counties.

Seeking Resolution

That’s where State Sen. Winnie Brinks comes in.

Brinks is a Democrat who represents Kent County. She agrees with Ferrara and Cunningham that Michigan’s law has not kept up with advances in medicine and that should be to addressed by lawmakers.

“I think what’s become pretty clear to me is that judges are looking for clarity,” Brinks said. “And so, to the extent that that is the job of the Legislature, I think that we owe it to our constituents, and to, quite frankly, all of those judges who are deciding these kinds of cases, to take a look at this and see if we can provide a better guide for them.”

Brinks believes that surrogacy contracts should be legal in Michigan—like nearly every other state.

“At a basic level, it seems that surrogacy contracts should be allowed and there should be safeguards for all parties, and it should be some respecter of biological parentage,” Brinks said. “There are some pretty deep questions here for a lot of folks, but I think if there’s a way to make it possible for us to serve those families or provide some legal guidance for those families who want to engage in surrogacy with some appropriate safeguards, I think that it would be a real service to the people of Michigan.”

Brinks also said she’s looking for partners in the Legislature to potentially help advocate for those changes.

There is no piece of legislation yet. However, Brinks said it is “in the works” and individuals may wish to contact their representatives and urge them to support a resolution for those families affected.

Ferrara, the surrogacy attorney, made clear that surrogacy is here to stay.

“Not coming along with the way the laws are evolving doesn’t deter surrogacy,” she said. “It’s a matter of all of use working in the area of surrogacy to come up with ethical laws and ethical processes that will protect everyone. And that’s completely possible.”

→ Roland Leggett

Continued from p. 9

votes are happening they not only know that we are watching but that we have the ability to shine a bright light on what they’re doing.”

A History of Politics

And with a 20-year history in social justice and political activism, Leggett has a better understanding than most of the LGBTQ+ community’s ability to organize. Originally from Metro Detroit’s suburbs, Leggett grew up in a family that prioritized volunteering and service. But it was because of his time at the Affirmations LGBTQ+ center’s youth program in the mid-’90s that he began to think of politics as a viable career.

“There was an organizer there named Sean Kosofsky, who eventually became the political director of Equality Michigan and now does work around the country, but when I was a teenager, he ran the youth program,” Leggett said. “He would train us on organizing other folks in our community.”

Leggett was given the resources to help fellow LGBTQ+ youth attend the center, and eventually, that translated into into his first paid position as an organizer at the American Civil Liberties Union. When asked why he didn’t run to be a LGBT&A Caucus member sooner than 2017, Leggett said that it didn’t feel like an option until he got older.

“One of the things that I’ve really appreciated and that I’ve noticed over the last few decades is the diversity of the folks that are making decisions about how to move forward as a community — that’s a great change,” he said. “And, frankly, we’re just far more resourced than we were before.”

In addition, he said that since the ‘90s he’s been pleased to see more buy-in to the legitimacy of the LGBTQ+ community as a political entity. He used Pride events as an example, where corporate advertising there once seemed “revolutionary.”

“It moved from a few companies doing that and that being considered a big deal to now we’re demanding that company’s support candidates that support us. And if they don’t, our organizing power has become so dynamic that they know we can boycott them and it affects their bottom line, which is what companies care about,” he said. “So you’re seeing the political pressure that our community, and others, can put on companies in such a way so that it’s not just about making a donation and having a banner at a Pride.”

To keep that forward momentum going, as LGBT&A Chair, Leggett is keeping his foot firmly on the gas.

To learn more about Leggett, the LGBT&A Caucus and its upcoming events visit [facebook.com/TheLGBTACaucusoftheMDP/](https://www.facebook.com/TheLGBTACaucusoftheMDP/).

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Gay-Owned Bingo Institute of Grooming Outgrows Old Location, Moves

BY JASON A. MICHAEL

The Bingo Institute of Grooming, where would-be doggie stylists train and learn the tricks of the trade, is expanding. Originally opened in 2015, the Institute, created by Bingo Pet Salon owner Brian Lane and Director of Education Jessica Conway, has moved from Royal Oak to a new, nearly twice as large, 2,500-square-foot space in Madison Heights.

“We started putting together the groundwork for the school back in 2013,” Lane said. “Our initial class of three students graduated in 2015. We currently have 12 enrolled students, and the average full-time student finishes in six to eight months, while part-time students finish in about a year.”

Conway had been thinking of opening a grooming school even before that.

“I had been researching the process for about a year before meeting Brian,” she said. “A mutual acquaintance introduced us after hearing both of our frustrations with not being able to find qualified help and wishing we could open a training facility.”

While there is no state certification for pet groomers and no required training, taking time to learn essential skills of the trade is imperative for new groomers, said Lane.

“Currently no state in the country requires any training for someone to be a pet groomer. This is extremely dangerous and the main reason we opened the Institute. We noticed that not enough groomers in the area were professionally trained and some had even just been self-taught. This puts animals and groomers at risk. If they do not know proper techniques to hold an animal, deal with a difficult or old pet, they could cut themselves or put themselves in danger of getting bit.”



Brian Lane is the owner of the Bingo Institute of Grooming. BTL Photo: Andrew Potter

Conway agrees. “There is a definite need for some standard of care and safety practices in this industry. We are working with other industry leaders to [create] the Michigan Pet Groomers Association with the hope of establishing some standards in Michigan.”

Currently, the Institute offers a professional dog grooming program and a dog and cat grooming program, too. Starting with bathing, drying and handling techniques, students who enroll move on to nail clipping and, finally, fur trimming and final

touches. Students also learn safe handling of the pets, cleaning and sanitation, equipment maintenance and client relations.

The most successful students “are the ones doing it for the passion and love of the work,” Lane said. “We have had students in the past who thought grooming would be easy, or a fun side job working with puppies. They quickly learned how physically and mentally demanding this industry is.”

Conway agreed, citing patience as the key to being a successful groomer.

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Andrew Potter

“They also have to be self-motivated and adaptable,” Conway said. “Above all, you have to have care and compassion for the animals.”

And for those who do have those qualities, pet grooming can be a lucrative trade.

“Our groomers can make anywhere from \$500 to \$1,200 a week not including tips, which usually range from an additional \$200-400 a week,” Lane said. “This doesn’t require an expensive degree that takes four years to get, so many groomers have less debt moving into their profession.”

Plus, added Conway, there are added benefits.

“Grooming is a skill that you can take anywhere and offers flexibility in a work schedule. I love that no two days are ever

the same, so it keeps things interesting. Some dogs really love the attention they get during the grooming and that brings joy to the job,” Conway said. “That being said, grooming is not a glamorous job. You get wet, covered in hair and you have to deal with pee and poop sometimes. It’s a demanding job, but I love it.”

And for those who think grooming is just about vanity, Lane emphasizes that there are often health benefits for the pets well, like when matted fur is removed.

“Pets who get regular grooming also are less stressed and handle the process better in most cases,” Lane said.

“Nails that are too long can grow back into the pad or affect the way a dog walks and eventually cause joint pain or arthritis,” Conway added. “When the coat becomes matted it can trap moisture or debris that can cause pain and skin infections.”

At the moment, four of the five groomers at Bingo Pet Salon are graduates of the Institute. And over at Conway’s salon, Pet Spa Grooming in Plymouth, all four groomers are graduates of the school.

Molly Graham now works for Conway.

“I was at the Institute for seven or eight months,” she said. “It was a great hands-on learning experience. They were very patient and allowed you to work at your speed. They don’t rush you through the program.”

She added that because the Institute accepts rescue dogs through the Bingo Cares program, there’s a huge variety of clients that offer a lot of great experience, not to mention the health benefits for the participating dogs.

“You get to see all kinds of dogs that come in and in all kinds of shapes, good condition and bad condition,” Graham said. “Going through the school you learn so much and there is no pressure on you.”

Working at the Bingo Salon is Christi Knight.

“I thought it would a little bit easier get into [grooming],” she said. “It was definitely more challenging than I thought.

But fun at the same time. There’s a lot more emotional, mental work that goes into it. I would recommend it, because if you like working with animals, it’s just a great thing to do.”



Andrew Potter

The Bingo Institute of Grooming is located at 28003 John R Road in Madison Heights. For more information, email info@bingogroomingschool.com, call 248-677-1540 or visit bingogroomingschool.com.

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Lesbian-Owned Detroit Vet Clinic Oldest in US



Dr. Glynnes Graham (left) of Patterson Dog and Cat Hospital sees a patient.

BY EVE KUCHARSKI

Detroiters and architecture buffs alike are well aware of the city's reputation for historical buildings. And while many of the best-known are tied to the auto industry, animal lovers will be pleased to know that Detroit holds a piece of pet history, too. Located on the city's west side, Patterson Dog and Cat Hospital is the oldest known operating veterinary clinic in the U.S., and it has been serving Detroiters and their furry friends for 177 years.

"It started out just with taking care of horses and farm animals, because that's what was here in 1844," said Dr.

Glynnes Graham, who is both a veterinarian and the Hospital's owner. "The original Hospital was downtown on Griswold Street, and then they moved their facility to kind of halfway between where we are now and the old Hospital."

Today, the building stands in a third location on Grand River Avenue that was constructed in 1905, and it has since been remodeled to focus treatment on dogs and cats only. Still, Graham said that those with a good eye can spot details of the building's past in design features like space previously used for horse stalls and, of course, the shape of the building itself, which to Graham resembles a "giant brick barn."

For the LGBTQ+ community, there's an added layer of history as well. Graham, who purchased the property in 1985 after years of working and volunteering there since she was a teenager, identifies as a lesbian. She came out shortly after purchasing the Hospital, and she has made a point of being authentically herself ever since.

"We don't advertise ourselves as a primarily LGBT [business], though many of my staff members are, and we try to support the community," Graham said. "We advertise in *Between The Lines*, and we try to make sure we have a presence in the community."

Graham emphasized that she's never prioritized her LGBTQ+ identity over the work of being a veterinarian, but she's glad that her practice has afforded both herself, her staff and pet owners a welcoming and accepting environment.

"I don't think there's anybody that knows me that doesn't know that I'm gay," Graham laughed. "It is absolutely not a secret and

it never has been. So, for as long as I have been out, that's just been part of who I am. ... I have certainly had employees that were concerned about their own ability to be OK [if they were out] in an [employment] situation, and I think they find it really great that here is a place you can come and nobody really cares."

Perhaps it's the unique combination of inclusivity, history and track record of quality pet care that has been the secret to Patterson Dog and Cat Hospital's longevity. Whatever it is, Graham is eager to carry on those traditions, and she looks forward to celebrating its momentous 200th birthday.



"Our history is really important to us, and particularly important to me. I think the fact that we have such an amazing history is one of the things I really love about this hospital," she said. "We had a big celebration for our 150th anniversary, we had a big celebration for 175th and, absolutely, when we hit 200, there will be another big celebration."

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STANLEY TUCCI

Is the **Gayest** *Straight Actor You Know*

Photos: Bleecker Street

'Supernova' Actor Talks Playing Gay Since 1996, People Thinking He's Gay and Texting Cher

BY CHRIS AZZOPARDI

Stanley Tucci has survived the icy death stare of Meryl Streep's Miranda Priestly and told Cher to her face that she looks like a drag queen. Aside from starring as the queer second-in-command next to those gay icons in "The Devil Wear Prada" and "Burlesque," the 60-year-old actor also donned a poofy wig in "Little Chaos" as the king's gay brother.

The chameleonic actor is at it yet again with his latest gay role — Tusker in "Supernova," a moving portrait of a couple in crisis written and directed by Harry Macqueen. Here, he portrays a man suffering from early-onset dementia alongside Colin Firth's Sam, his partner of 20 years.

Aboard their old RV, the couple head out on a road trip across the mountainous region of England's Lake District to visit people and places that are special to them, their love tested as Tusker's memory continues to deteriorate.

During a recent call, Tucci talked about being a straight man who's been playing gay since

1996, his wife finding out that the internet *thinks* he's gay, and how he can't believe so many people actually tell him they love "Burlesque."

During the pandemic, I watched "The Daytrippers," which came out in 1996, and realized that you've been playing gay even longer than I thought.

Ha! That was my first gay kiss. I loved that movie so much. (Writer-director) Greg Mottola made that for no money, like \$65,000 or something.

When it comes to the way the film treated homosexuality, how do you compare a role like that, as Louis, to your role as Tusker in "Supernova"?

What I love about "Supernova" is that sexuality isn't even an issue. They're just two people who've been together in a long relationship for a long time, and they love each other. You could've made it with a heterosexual couple, but I think this is more interesting. And the fact that it's never dwelled on — it's never even mentioned — is fantastic, and hopefully

more movies like that will be made.

What I loved about "Daytrippers" was that there was no judgment on the part of anyone and the fact that this character was gay. What I liked was that it showed his complete confusion and how he felt he was supposed to live his life one way and then — we see it only in the end — when he says, "Help me. I don't know what to do. I'm really confused." I liked that because there are a lot of people like that.

I remember the days of a straight actor playing a gay man and how there was talk of how "brave" that was. What was the conversation around you playing gay in 1996 versus now?

You know what, there wasn't even a conversation about it. I'll be honest: It wasn't a conversation. Also, I was barely in the movie. You see me at the beginning and then you see me at the end, so there really wasn't enough there to talk about.

How have you gotten away with playing gay all these years when so many straight actors have not?

You have to tell me how I've gotten away with it. You're the one who has to tell *me*. Ha! I don't know! I don't know! Somebody said recently — it was written in a magazine or something: Colin and I are the only two straight men who, as far as they're concerned, are allowed to play gay men, nobody else.

I've been telling my friends that I think you're able to get away with playing gay because people think that you are gay.

Ha! There was a time when there were a lot of people out there who thought I was gay. I don't think that's the case anymore, but I don't know. Who knows. After this movie, you never know.

Listen, my feeling is: Whatever role you play, you just have to be truthful to the character and to the tone of the film. And if I'm presented with something, whether it's a gay character or a straight character or whatever character, if it doesn't ring true to me, then I really can't do it. Or I will do my best to have it rewritten, rewrite it myself, change the lines, and do it the way it should be done.

I'm curious about this time in your life when people thought you were gay. When was that? What do you remember from that period?

I don't remember anyone coming up to me and saying, "You're gay, aren't you?" It wasn't quite that. Ha! But it was quite a while after "The Devil Wears Prada," and I remember when I was dating Felicity (Blunt), my wife, she'd punch in my name on the internet and the first thing that would come up was "Stanley Tucci Gay." She was like, "See, look!" I was like, "Wait a minute!"

I didn't really care. And now if you punch my name in, I don't think that's the first thing that comes up. It probably just comes up "Stanley Tucci Old."

There's been increasing pushback on straight actors playing LGBTQ roles. For you, is there apprehension or a different kind of thought process when considering playing a gay role, and how has that changed for you over the years?

No, I'm not apprehensive. I do want to make sure there isn't — and I always feel this way — someone out there who's better for it than I am. And if there are people who are gay who are more right for it, then they should be doing it.

Now, I think that the problem here is that one of the reasons that gay actors have not played gay roles is that a lot of gay actors weren't able to come out and be openly gay for so long, not just in society but in Hollywood. So you couldn't be an openly gay actor because you would only be cast as a gay person, if you were lucky enough to be cast at all, and because you might be ostracized because you're openly gay.

Now that that's beginning to change, there can be more of a level playing field and gay characters and actresses can be openly gay and play straight roles, play gay roles, play whatever roles. And that's where we need to get to. There was this, "You were either



typecast or you weren't cast." That holds true for the African-American community. It held true for the Hispanic community. It held true for Italian-Americans, and I can certainly attest to that. And it's very disconcerting. I think what's happening now, finally: the

"I don't remember anyone coming up to me and saying, 'You're gay, aren't you?' It wasn't quite that."

playing field is at the very beginning of starting to be level.

What about your relationship with Colin allowed you to so naturally play two men who've loved each other for a lifetime?

Because we love each other. I love him. The only thing that would be different than what's on screen would be the sex. But I just love him. I'd do anything for him. He's like a brother I never had. When you come to know each other so well over 20 years at our age, and you've been through a lot — you've been through a lot of loss, you've been through a lot of difficult times, you've raised children, you've seen them go through hard times, you've helped each other out through all of those hard times — that's what great friends do for each other, which is not dissimilar to what married couples do for each other. And so you have all of that. It's all there.

And you traded roles in this film with Colin. Have you ever considered swapping roles before with another actor? Or ... an actress?

Ha! With an actress!

Maybe Cher in Burlesque?

She was desperate for my role. The only problem was I couldn't sing, so we had to keep it the way it was. Ha! But to answer your question, no, that's never happened before. And it's very unusual that that happens. Again, if you're good friends, you can do that.

You've acted alongside Cher and Meryl. What other gay icons would you happily call your boss? Barbra, Gaga, Elton, Mariah, Madonna and Liza all come to mind as options.

All of them. I met Elton John a couple of times, and I met

Liza Minnelli a couple of times, and I mean, as a straight man, I almost had a heart attack. They're just... these people are just incredible people. That talent is just staggering to me.

And I think working with Cher — I know

See **Stanley Tucci**, continued on p. 24

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Photo courtesy of Latrice Royale

Latrice Royale Is Not Here For the Buffoonery

The 'Drag Race' Performer on the Importance of Black History Month

BY ISABELLE KLIGER

Latrice Royale is not your typical drag queen. Standing at 6-foot-4-inches tall (seven feet in heels and hair), this “large and in charge, chunky yet funky” diva is the big girl with the even bigger heart — a plus-size icon with an infectious laugh and a smile that can light up a room.

For fans of “RuPaul’s Drag Race,” Latrice Royale is a household name. Having won the hearts of fans the world over when she appeared on season four of the multiple-E Emmy-award-winning reality TV show, Royale has been invited back twice to compete on the spinoff series “RuPaul’s Drag Race All Stars.”

But things have not come easy. Raised by a single mother in Compton, California, Royale fled from homophobia and violence and eventually settled in Florida, where she started doing drag. She later served a year in a Florida prison on a minor drug charge, after missing a parole meeting.

Despite having faced discrimination for her color, size and sexuality, Royale

continues to approach life with relentless positivity and integrity. This Black History Month, she hopes to inspire others to believe in themselves and never to let anyone tell them they are not good enough.

What was it like growing up in Compton as a gay Black kid?

Compton was a rough place with heavy gang activity. Two of my brothers joined the military and two got into the gangs. And then there was me, playing in dresses. I was exposed to a lot as a little kid, between the gangs, the violence and the drugs. In a way, I was protected, because my brothers were like the kingpins, so nobody would mess with me, even if I wore the wrong colors.

You can always tell when a kid has a little sugar in their tank, when they’re special and sweet, and that was evident when I was growing up. My brother beat me up because I was too sensitive. He was trying to make a man out of me because he didn’t want a little punk for a brother.

Why did you leave?

My brother outed me when I was 19. One night, when we were having dinner with my mom, my brother blurted out, “Your son’s a faggot.” We had this huge fight, it got physical, and then I just had enough: I ran out of the house, went to my friend’s house, bought a ticket and moved to Wisconsin. I spent a year there but didn’t come out until I moved to Florida.

What prevented you from coming out?

Even though I didn’t depend on my family, I stayed in the closet for fear they would disown me. At that point I’d already disowned them so I don’t know why that fear was still there. My mother was different: she saw the soul of a person no matter what their orientation or identity, but my brother and I didn’t talk properly until I was on television. When he saw my documentary where I explained how he’d choked me in the front yard, it shook him to his core. We are in a wonderful place now and

See **Latrice Royale**, continued on p. 24

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‘Weirdo Night’ Fights the ‘War on Nuance’ Through Queer Culture

Dynasty Handbag’s Variety Show Makes Its Sundance Debut

BY EVE KUCHARSKI

It’s all in the name. “Weirdo Night” is a variety show comprising stand-up, music, performance art and the straight-up bizarre that the Los Angeles community has been returning to night after night since it started four years ago. The gritty, sometimes gory and often raucously funny production is the work of performance artist Jibz Cameron, who curates the event’s performers and hosts as her alter ego, Dynasty Handbag. This year, a filmed version of the show made its Sundance Film Festival debut.

To create this self-described “radical and weird” expression of queer culture, Cameron worked with her partner, award-winning filmmaker Mariah Garnett, to create a pilot episode of “Weirdo Night” for a possible serial version of the show. Despite COVID-19 restrictions that made filming a live version impossible, the duo called upon the best and brightest of recent acts to create a Sundance-worthy selection.

“We needed to get the pros only,” says Cameron, laughing.

Or, as she calls them, the “real freaks” who don’t care to hide their unusual talents and proclivities for the sake of saving face in a social media-obsessed world.

“I feel like it’s very easy for people to maybe look the part, or present a certain way or co-opt another person’s look or talent — and you see this all the time with everything,” she says. “But I know that [the real freaks] are out there.”

No stranger to the world of weird, Cameron’s Dynasty Handbag persona has been in



Jibz Cameron as Dynasty Handbag in “Weirdo Night.” Photo courtesy of Sundance Institute.

development for over 15 years. She has been called a “crackpot genius” by the Village Voice, “outrageously smart, grotesque and innovative” by The New Yorker, and has performed as Dynasty Handbag at prestigious art venues like The New Museum of Contemporary Art and MOCA LA, among others. She has also worked as a theater performance and comedy professor at NYU Tisch Performance Studies.

In the pilot, Cameron is joined by fellow artists Hedia Maron, Smiling Beth, Patti Harrison, Vagabon, Sasami, BiBi Discoteca, Morgan Bassichis and Sarah Squirm. The

opening band The Dildo Police, fronted by Harrison, sets the tone for the evening with an electronic-inspired musical number, vividly outlining the lifestyle and

(Left) Performance artist Jibz Cameron, who plays Dynasty Handbag. (Right) Filmmaker Mariah Garnett directed “Weirdo Night.” Photos courtesy of Sundance Institute.

the favorite meal of “not gay” people — which, incidentally, is pre-packaged Black Forest ham.

“When [Harrison] said, ‘I’m going to do a song,’ I said, ‘Fine, I don’t care what it is,’” Cameron says. “And then when they said, ‘We’re going to play computers,’ they hit them with a drumstick.”

That level of creative freedom is the essence of “Weirdo Night,” where a potentially off-putting punchline that would play for shock value at a mainstream comedy show will, according to Cameron, get a response like, “We’re gay! We’ve all been pissed on!” And in its filmed version, the atmosphere stays true to its roots by bringing underground queer culture to the fore. But beyond its ongoing aesthetic of “weird,” on purpose and as a means of fighting the “war on nuance,” Cameron shies away from giving the long-running show, and subsequent film, a truly distinct categorization.

“By saying, ‘This is a queer show that centers marginalized voices,’ that’s using language for people who might not want to use that language about themselves. And it’s also not totally true. It’s somewhat true,” Cameron says.

In many ways, it’s about letting the audience stay in a space that “contains multitudes.”

“I want it to feel like a place you can go and not just feel like you’re waiting for them to make some fat joke, or race joke or gay joke, which is how I feel when I go to a comedy show. I definitely don’t want that. But I also can’t totally control it,” Cameron says. “There has to be room for people to like things and be curious about things and turned off by things ... or room to be surprised. And even if there’s things that don’t really work, every time someone will say, ‘That was a weird one.’ But you bought the ticket and it says ‘Weirdo Night’ on it.”

Garnett agrees.

“Yeah. It isn’t always a commodity. Because when something comes out of the underground and becomes mainstream, the context shifts and things become complicated,” Garnett says. “And it’s good to have queer visibility on a show like ‘Drag Race,’ which is trying to win money and be a big star. That’s great. But it’s also coming from a super underground space. So, I think people are trying to inhabit that in-between a little bit more. Because right now with the internet, it seems like maybe there aren’t any underground spaces because every space has a camera in it.”

Live or on screen, “Weirdo Night” performances serve as celebrations of the existing and often unseen facets of LGBTQ+ performance. It’s an exploration of what is new, innovative and subversive. That’s why Cameron, along with Dynasty, is always expanding her reach.

“There’s just so far and wide that I would like to explore just personally, and then kind of put it all together. But without the idea of spectacle variety, more the spirit of someone just doing what drives them — and then whatever I like,” Cameron says, laughing.

Because, in the end, while “Weirdo Night” is a well-curated queer variety show, it’s much more than that, too.

“I love that stuff, but it’s not exactly what I’m going for either,” she says. “I want to be entertained and moved in many ways all at the same time.”

Learn more about the film and Dynasty Handbag online at dynastyhandbag.com/weirdo-night and sundance.org.





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→ **Latrice Royale**

Continued from p. 20

I'm really thankful. My brother has become a church man and a vegan — a Black vegan, can you imagine?!

You often talk about the discrimination you have faced. What has it been due to?

The first thing people see is my color. Whereas I can conceal my gayness, I can't hide my Blackness and I've been called every name you can imagine. When I was a little kid, my mother taught me, "It's not what you're called, it's what you answer to." So it was instilled in me to pay no mind to people who call you names. Does it hurt sometimes when I'm feeling vulnerable? Can I go down the rabbit hole of feeling "less than" because of my color? Absolutely!

Have you experienced discrimination in drag?

In drag, the white skinny girls get sent to the front of the line. It's tough being overlooked when others get chosen because their skin tone and shape is right. My biggest obstacle is that people can't figure out what to do with the big Black guy. So I'm always written as the pimp or the thug or the comic relief. When I appeared in RuPaul's Netflix series "AJ and the Queen," I got to write my own character and I created Fabergé Legs, who represented my life story of getting out of jail and picking myself back up to become a success. And I was able to embrace and embody that.

How did "Drag Race" impact your life?

There was a shift when I got on "Drag Race." I felt like I'd made it. But it also resulted in more racism in the drag community. Behind my back, a lot of people were saying, "This big Black bitch, who does she think she is?"

I've always carried myself a certain way: I have standards, morals and integrity, and I don't get involved in the foolishness. I've been accused of being uppity. But what I will not be is one of these girls who gets into fights in the club, tears up her drag and rolls around in the street.

→ **Stanley Tucci**

Continued from p. 19

she's a gay icon and I had the biggest crush on her as a kid, and to be able to meet her and work with her and become *friendly* with her is just ... you know, sometimes I show my kids my phone and I go, "I'm just texting Cher."

Did you dislike "Burlesque" as much as Cher? She famously admitted she found it "horrible."

Yeah, ha! You know what? It had potential, but it didn't quite live up to it. Let's put it that way.

You're not here for that buffoonery?

I am *not* here for that buffoonery!

Where does your integrity come from?

It has to start from inside. You have to own it and never let anyone deter you from being who you are. When you stand your ground and have integrity, it's magnetic, it's attractive, it makes you confident without being cocky. People see that I can hold myself and be proud of my size and stature, regardless of what other people think. It's called being empowered. If you can't empower yourself, there's no way other people are going to see you as a strong force, and you certainly won't be able to empower anybody else.

What does Black History Month mean to you?

It is incredibly important! We don't teach Black history anymore in schools, but this entire country was built on the backs of Black slaves. The fact that so many people don't know that is astonishing to me. It's time to celebrate the Black people who made this country and change the way we think, look and feel about Black people in America.

Especially with all the racial tension, it's up to everyone not to be ignorant. The truth is ugly and people need to start accepting our country's history and acknowledging that it's not acceptable to claim superiority over another race. What's great is that the new generation isn't having it any more. Racism is not acceptable in this day and age — 400 years is enough!

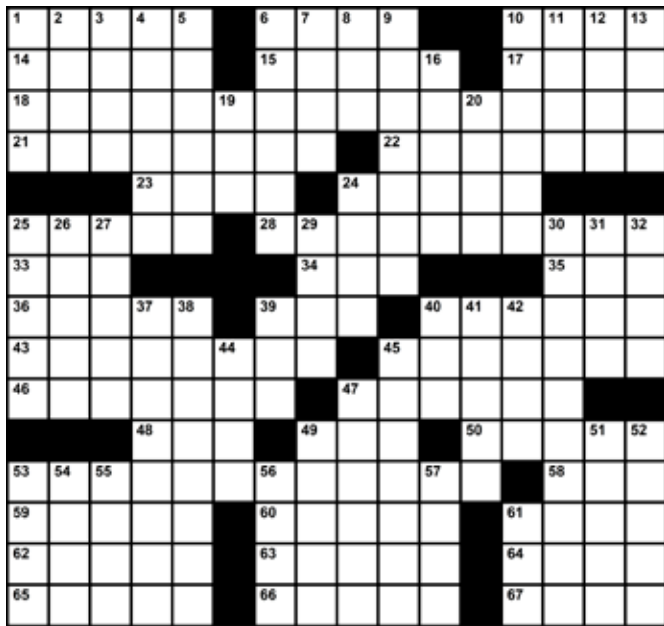
What message would you like to convey to queer Black kids this Black History Month?

Don't believe the hype when they tell you that you cannot! Don't believe that you're not worthy, or that there's something wrong with your color, your hair or your teeth. Persevere and push through, because there's something magical in each of us and it's just a matter of finding out what that is. Your skin and race do not dictate how special you are. I am where I am because I've never let my color, shape, or size impact my success.

It's lived on in the gay community, though. You must know that.

I know! I can't tell you how many people come up to me, and not only people from the gay community. Everybody comes up and they go, "I love that movie. I love 'Burlesque.'" And I'm like, "Oh my god — really?"

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.



- 39 It swallows plastic
 40 Two-timer's liaison
 43 More of the quote
 45 "The Children's Hour" playwright
 46 Stonewall rioters and cops
 47 Get back, as losses
 48 Initial serving with meat in it?
 49 Waikiki paste
 50 More of the quote
 53 End of the quote
 58 Tigers of the NCAA
 59 Cruising, maybe
 60 Stud fees?
 61 Auto of Pasolini's land
 62 Kind of mill
 63 Howard, who crossdressed for "Miss America"
 64 Like a top
 65 Nuts don't have this
 66 Bodybuilding mag
 67 Roz portrayer on "Frasier"
- 11 Shot type for Patty Sheehan
 12 Tara portrayer Collette
 13 Video game name
 16 Lurer of phallic fish
 19 Neither Rep. nor Dem.
 20 Timothy Daly's sister
 24 "Beg pardon ..."
 25 A Village People character
 26 "King Lear" daughter
 27 "Hello" singer
 29 Mark on Bernstein's staff
 30 Where the bouncers are friendly?
 31 Future queen of "Star Wars"
 32 Craft store bundle
 37 Indicator of too much sex
 38 Scandal involving bottoms?
 39 Capp and Capone
 40 Old nuclear power org.
 41 Gay pride parade sight
 42 Totally screw
 44 Phi ___ Kappa
 45 Young farm animals.
 47 Team lineup
 49 Bicolor mount
 51 Old line for cockpit workers
 52 ___-frutti
 53 Luggage
 54 To be _lesbienne_
 55 "Beauty ___ the eye..."
 56 Pole of your first mate?
 57 Dickinson's "There ___ frigate like a book"
 61 Metrosexual

Dynamic Ceramic

Across

- 1 Bas reliefs of Lincoln
 6 Verdi slave girl
 10 "Macbeth" segments
 14 Words before once
 15 Barney's, e.g.
 17 Cobblers put the tongue here
 18 Start of a quote by ceramic artist Colin J. Radcliffe

- 21 Woolf in blue stockings?
 22 Dukakis of "Tales of the City"
 23 "All's Well That ___ Well"
 24 Gladiator area
 25 Other people's children.
 28 More of the quote
 33 Unwelcome ink color
 34 Ref for Lytton Strachey
 35 Stephen of "Breakfast on Pluto"
 36 Insurance worker

Q Puzzle

Down

- 1 Cable syst.
 2 K-12 grades, collectively
 3 Glenn Burke, formerly
 4 Backside, to a top
 5 Gertrude with a beer mug?
 6 Town in da Vinci's land
 7 "___ shame"
 8 Toon canine Scooby-___
 9 With thick plates
 10 Disney lyricist Howard

See p. 14 for answers

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- ✓ Insurance & Payment Guidance.
- ✓ PrEP Education

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 Detroit, MI 48201

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Community Connections

Find over 300 Non-Profit Listings Serving Michigan's LGBTQ Online @ pridesource.com

AIDS/HIV

There are dozens of AIDS/HIV organizations and resources listed at www.PrideSource.com. Here are just some of them:

Metro Care Coordination Network

Free, comprehensive services for those living with HIV/AIDS.
877-931-3248
248-266-5545
Metrocarenetwork.org

UNIFIED - HIV Health & Beyond

3968 Mt. Elliott St.
Detroit MI 48207-1841
313-446-9800
www.miunified.org
Michigan HIV/STED Hotline
800-872-2437

Matrix MAC Health

429 Livernois St.
Ferndale, MI 48220
888-226-6366
248-545-1435
<http://www.matrixhumanservices.org/programs/matrix-mac-health/>

Macomb County STD Clinic

27690 Van Dyke
Warren, MI 48093
586-465-8440
<http://health.macombgov.org/Health-Programs-HPDC-HIVAIDSCounselingTesting>

Oakland Livingston Human Service Agency (OLSHA)

196 Cesar E. Chavez Ave.
Pontiac, MI 48343
248-209-2647
www.olhsa.org

Arab Community Center for Economic and Social Service (ACCESS)

Sterling Heights Center
4301 East 14 Mile Rd.
Sterling Hts., MI 48310
586-722-6036
www.accesscommunity.org

Advocacy

Equality Michigan

19641 W. 7 Mile, Detroit, MI
313-537-7000
equalitymi.org
[Facebook.com/equalitymichigan](https://www.facebook.com/equalitymichigan)

Campus

Currently there are 19 organizations listed as active online at www.pridesource.com/ yellow pages. The following are some in the southeast Michigan area:

U-M Ann Arbor

Spectrum Center
Spectrumcenter@umich.edu
<http://spectrumcenter.umich.edu>
734-763-4186

Oakland University Gender & Sexuality Center

gsc@oakland.edu
www.oakland.edu/gsc
248-370-4336

Eastern Michigan University

LGBT Resource Center
emich.edu/lgbtrc
734-487-4149

The Lawrence Tech LGBT Resource Center

ltu.edu/student_affairs/lgbt.asp
Wayne State JIGSAW
[Facebook.com/groups/WayneStateJIGSAW](https://www.facebook.com/groups/WayneStateJIGSAW)
wsujigsaw@gmail.com

Community Centers

Michigan has eleven active LGBTQ community centers, with a tenth planned in Lansing. Here are three of them.

Jim Toy Community Center

Ann Arbor
www.jimtoycenter.org
www.facebook.com/jimtoycenter
or follow them on Twitter @JimToyCenter.
319 Braun Court
Ann Arbor, MI
734-995-9867

LGBT Detroit

Detroit
www.lgbtdetroit.org
[@LGBTDetroit](https://www.facebook.com/lgbtdetroit).
20025 Greenfield Road
Detroit, MI
Phone: 313-397-2127

Affirmations

Ferndale
<http://goaffirmations.org>
www.facebook.com/Affirmations/
or follow them on Twitter @GoAffirmations.
290 W. Nine Mile Road
Ferndale, MI
248-398-7105

Legal

American Civil Liberties Union of Michigan

Jay Kaplan, Staff Attorney, LGBT Project
2966 Woodward Ave., Detroit, MI
www.aclumich.org
313-578-6800

Fair Michigan

PO Box 6136
Plymouth, MI 48170
877-432-4764, 313-556-2300
fairmichigan.org
[Facebook.com/fairmichigan2016](https://www.facebook.com/fairmichigan2016)

Know Your Rights Project

Outlaws U-M student group
outlawslegal@gmail.com
734-995-9867

Older Adults

SAGE Metro Detroit

290 W. Nine Mile Rd. Ferndale, MI
313-578-6812
sagemetrodetroit.org
Facebook: SAGE Metro Detroit

Political

The LGBT and Allies Caucus of the Michigan Democratic Party

[Facebook.com/TheLGBTACaucusoftheMDP](https://www.facebook.com/TheLGBTACaucusoftheMDP)
Stonewall for Revolution
www.facebook.com/stonewall4reolution

Professional Groups

Detroit Regional LGBT Chamber of Commerce

P.O. Box 32446
Detroit, MI 48232
detroitlgbtchamber.com
1-800-DET-LGBT

Ties Like Me

Professional networking events
third Weds. 5:30 - 8 p.m.
TiesLikeMe.org
Suits And The City
Lansing, MI
suitsandthecity@gmail.com
www.suitsandthecity.org

Transgender

FtM Detroit

<https://www.facebook.com/FtMDetroit/>
ftmdetroit@gmail.com.

Get Listed, Promote Your Events

You can add or update any listing by going to www.PrideSource.com and clicking on Yellow Pages. Once you submit your listing, our staff will contact you to confirm your information. You can add your event to the Pride Source Calendar online and in print by going to www.PrideSource.com and clicking on Calendar, then "Add Event." Send any press releases and announcements to editor@pridesource.com



Find a digital version of PrideSource Magazine online under Our LGBT Yellow Pages

FtM A2 Ypsi

ftmannarborypsilanti@gmail.com
<https://www.facebook.com/ftma2ypsi/>

Transgender Michigan

23211 Woodward Ave.
Ferndale, MI
info@transgendermichigan.org
www.transgendermichigan.org
800-842-2954

Trans Sistas of Color Project

19641 W. 7 Mile Rd. in Detroit
313-537-7000 Ext 107
info@tscopdetroit.org
www.facebook.com/TSCOPD/

Youth

Ruth Ellis Center

77 Victor Street, Highland Park, MI 48203
info@ruthelliscenter.org
Facebook: Ruth Ellis Center
313-252-1950

Ozone House

102 N. Hamilton Street
Ypsilanti, MI
734-662-2265
734-662-2222

Stand With Trans

Farmington, MI
www.standwithtrans.org
248-739-9254

Find these resources online

- Adoption Services
- AIDS/HIV Hotlines
- AIDS/HIV Organizations
- Alzheimer's Association
- Animal Shelter
- Anti-Violence
- Archives/Collections
- Campus; Student and Alumni Groups
- Cancer Support Groups
- Choruses
- Community Centers
- Employee Resource Groups
- Families and Parents
- Foster Care
- Foundations and Funders
- Hotlines & Switchboards
- Labor Union
- Legal Organizations
- Museums
- Music Groups
- National Organizations
- Political Organizations
- Professional Organizations
- Religious & Spiritual
- Senior Living
- Seniors
- Social/Community Organizations
- Sports
- Substance Abuse
- Transgender Groups/Services
- Women's Health
- Youth Services

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