

MICHIGAN'S LGBTQ+ NEWS SOURCE SINCE 1993

# Between THE Lines™

**VIEWPOINT**

Finding Resources for Disabled LGBTQ+ People in Michigan Is Difficult. It Shouldn't Be.

**THE POWERHOUSE**

Nonbinary Michigander Who's Revolutionizing Gaming for the Disabled Community

**COVER STORY**

Ryan O'Connell on Why His Groundbreaking Show Has Felt Like a 'Bad Boyfriend' and Gay Sex on TV

- PG 16

**PLUS**

Ann Arbor's Kathy Kozachenko Inducted Into LGBTQ Victory Hall of Fame

**THE**

**QUEER & DISABLED**

**ISSUE**





**LIVE**

**SATURDAY  
JUNE 5, 2021  
3 - 5 P.M.**



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Month of June  
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4 5 Queer Things You Can Do Right Now

8 First Openly LGBTQ+ Elected Official, Ann Arbor's Kathy Kozachenko, Inducted Into LGBTQ Victory Hall of Fame

12 Parting Glances: Honoring a World Gay Hero

12 A Few Words About Caitlyn Jenner

13 Creep of the Week: It Burns! It Burns! Andrew Wommack Proposes a New Mark of the Beast for Gays

## QUEER & DISABLED

14 Meet the Nonbinary Powerhouse Who Has Revolutionized Gaming for the Disabled Community

16 Ryan O'Connell Wants You — Yes, You! — to Talk More About Queer Disabled People

16 Finding Resources for Disabled LGBTQ+ People in Michigan Is Difficult. It Shouldn't Have to Be.

18 Deaf Is Beautiful: Genderqueer Artist-Author Chella Man Wrote His Book 'Continuum' During the Pandemic



## NEWS

26 'Where We Go One, We Go All': Equality Michigan Chair Buzz Thomas on Coming Out and Standing Alongside the Trans Community

28 GoFundMe Campaign Launched for Lesbian Detroit Rapper Miz Korona



## 16 COVER STORY

Photo courtesy of Netflix

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## HERE ARE SOME OF OUR LATEST ONLINE-ONLY PIECES:

Ruth Ellis Center Kicks Off June With STRIDE for PRIDE Fundraiser

By Ellen Shanna Knoppow

LGBTQ+ Out Loud Chorus to Perform First Live Show Since the Pandemic Began on June 5

By Jason A. Michael

Police Investigating Death of Grand Rapids Trans Woman Who Allegedly Suffered Falls

By Jason A. Michael

'Everyone Is Awesome,' Lego Says So With Upcoming Pride Set Release

By Jason A. Michael



The "Everyone Is Awesome" Lego set to be released June 1, 2021. Courtesy photo

# 5 Queer Things You Can Do Right Now

BY EVE KUCHARSKI

As cooped up as we've been all year, it's easy to feel like you've watched everything your streaming services have to offer. And who knows? Maybe you've gotten close. But somehow, I did it: I found new things to watch. Here's a lineup of LGBTQ+ content highlights along with other entertainment options for however you want to spend the rest of this quarantine.

1



Meshell Ndegeocello. Courtesy photo

## Catch a Show While Honoring Queer Literary Achievement

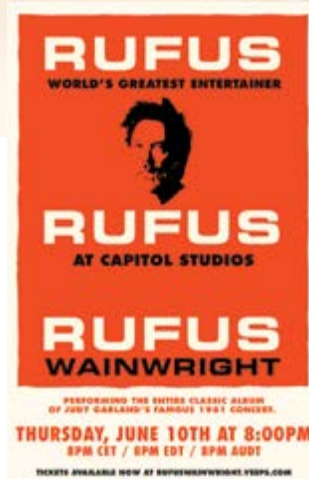
While it's a sad reality that LGBTQ+ bookstores aren't as common as they used to be, with the Lammys around, there's no excuse not to be caught up on our community's latest and greatest books. Since the 33rd annual Lambda Literary Awards are virtual this year, you'll get to add more must-reads to your list while joining in on the fun of seeing presenters like Ryan O'Connell of Netflix's "Special" and bestselling bisexual author R.O. Kwon honor LGBTQ+ writers from around the world. And why not stay and see headliner Meshell Ndegeocello perform, too? "What better way to kick off Pride than the Lammys?" Sue Landers, the executive director of Lambda Literary, tells *Between The Lines*. "It's the single largest celebration of LGBTQ books, and with the ceremony streaming this year — across the globe and for free — you're bound to meet some of your favorite writers and hang out with the biggest booklovers of the LGBTQ community."

*The 33rd annual Lammys are scheduled from 7 to 8 p.m. Tuesday, June 1. Register for this free event on [eventbrite.com](https://www.eventbrite.com).*



Rufus Wainwright and Renée Zellweger. Photo by Sean James

2



## See Rufus Do Judy for the First Time in Five Years

In celebration of what would have been Judy Garland's 99th birthday, double Grammy Award-nominated artist Rufus Wainwright will perform a virtual concert tribute to celebrate the gay icon's body of work. And, if this wasn't exciting enough for the theater gays, double Academy Award-winning actress Renée Zellweger — who won one of those Oscars for her performance as Judy in the biopic "Judy" — will join Wainwright with a four-piece band. But wait, it gets gayer: Since this is the first complete performance of the "Rufus Does Judy" show in five years, Wainwright's longtime friend and gay fashion icon Michael Kors has collaborated on a unique T-shirt commemorating the event.

*The event will premiere at 8 p.m. Thursday, June 10. Tickets for "Rufus Does Judy at Capitol Studios" are available now exclusively via [rufuswainwright.com](https://www.rufuswainwright.com) and are priced at \$30 (advance) and \$35 (day of show).*





### Join a Lesbian Book Club

Let's face it, we all said we would read more because we were sheltering in place during COVID-19. But, instead, Netflix got the best of us. Now, you can catch up on all those books you never read — and maybe some you learned of at the Lammys — through the (currently virtual) LezRead. It's a book club for queer women hosted by the Jim Toy Community Center. Organizer Kerene Moore said that, besides the books, the club was how she learned about LGBTQ+ culture. "Lezread has met virtually throughout the COVID-19 pandemic," she tells *Between The Lines*. "We love books and the steady respite they provide in today's world. Though we read a variety of books, we primarily focus on adult fiction and graphic novels with queer women characters. We welcome new members to share in upcoming Zoom meetings."

Email [kerene.moore@gmail.com](mailto:kerene.moore@gmail.com) to join the private Facebook group, and visit [a2lezread.tumblr.com](http://a2lezread.tumblr.com) for more information.



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4



### Get Inside Madonna's Grooves with a Critically Acclaimed Podcast

A rabid Madonna fan, like most of us, Edward Russell loved diving into the stories behind the queen of pop's most iconic hits. But he took it a step further when he got the idea for a podcast. That's when "Inside the Groove" was born, and it wasn't long before his stories about Madge's hits like "Music" and "Hung Up" earned him a nomination for a Canadian Podcast Award alongside heavy-hitters like "The Bald and the Beautiful" and "My Brother, My Brother and Me," all the while earning glowing reviews from The New York Times. Now, Russell is gearing up for the podcast's third season, and his (blond) ambition means he's only getting started. "You can dance... for inspiration' — that's how Madonna opens her hit song 'Into The Groove.' But what are the inspirations of a girl born in the late 1950s just outside of Motor City in Detroit?" says Russell. "Through Motown, glam rock, soul and disco, in a special upcoming episode this season, we'll not only look at the songs a young Madonna heard on the radio but also show how they were referenced in her own music in later years."

Tune into "Inside The Groove" here: [insidethegroove.co.uk](http://insidethegroove.co.uk).

5

### Take a Bathroom Break with "Stalled"

Big or small, the bathrooms at gay nightclubs are wild, mysterious places. You never know who (or what) you'll run into. In the case of "Stalled," a new queer web comedy series from art collective Gal Pals Present, they managed to fit the whole show's cast and crew into a Brooklyn nightclub. The story features Jordan (played by Teddy Qin), a 19-year-old who scams their way into becoming a bathroom attendant armed with no customer service skills and a desire for human connection. Written by Lia Hagen and directed by Marley Jean Fernandes, "Stalled," much like real life, is about the unexpected — you just never know who will walk through that bathroom door.

The first episode will be released on May 24. Catch the trailer on the Gal Pals Present YouTube channel.

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# First Openly LGBTQ+ Elected Official, Ann Arbor's Kathy Kozachenko, Inducted Into LGBTQ Victory Hall of Fame



Courtesy of Kathy Kozachenko.

## BY D'ANNE WITKOWSKI

On May 2, The Victory Institute inducted 21 leaders to its newly formed LGBTQ Victory Hall of Fame.

The intention behind the Hall of Fame is “to honor the LGBTQ elected officials, appointed officials and candidates who made a lasting impact on LGBTQ political history,” according to a press release.

“The launch of this Hall of Fame is an opportunity to ensure their contributions are forever remembered and to honor the future leaders who will advance representation for our community,” Chris Abele, chair of the One Victory Board of Directors said in a statement.

Included in this first round of inductees are high-profile people you’ve likely heard of like former U.S. House member Barney Frank (D-Massachusetts), Harvey Milk and U.S. Sen. Tammy Baldwin who will be inducted as a Lifetime Achievement honoree.

And then there’s Kathy Kozachenko. While not as widely known as, say, Harry Milk, Kozachenko served on the Ann Arbor City Council from 1974 to 1976 and is the first out LGBTQ+ person ever elected in the U.S.

“It was definitely an honor,” Kozachenko tells BTL about being included in the LGBTQ Victory Hall of Fame. “I’m very humble about

the part that I played as far as where the LGBTQ community is today. It took many actions, many voices, many people standing up and being open for us to be where we are today.”

When she ran for office in 1974, Kozachenko was a 21-year-old creative writing student studying poetry at the University of Michigan. She won against a Democrat while running as a member of the local Human Rights Party, which is now defunct. HRP focused on issues like workers’ rights, gay rights and racial justice. Where the Democratic Party uses a donkey and the Republican Party uses an elephant, HRP used a hippopotamus.

Ann Arbor in 1974 was uniquely primed to elect Kozachenko.

According to Bloomberg News, “Six months before her election, two City Council members also from the Human Rights Party simultaneously acknowledged their sexual orientations at a council meeting. Jerry DeGriek and Nancy Wechsler, both then U-M

graduates, were the first people anywhere to come out while holding public office.”

Ann Arbor has long been considered a progressive city, but three openly gay members of a city council was unprecedented anywhere in the country. Still, this feat garnered little attention then or through the decades.

In 2015 Kozachenko told Bloomberg News, “Well, yeah, I felt left out, because I am particularly proud of the fact that it was a third party and not the Democratic Party that elected the first gay person.”

Bloomberg also excerpted part of her acceptance speech including this declaration: “Ten years ago, or even three years ago, lesbianism would have meant automatic defeat. This year we talked about rent control. We talked about the city’s budget. We talked about police priorities, and we had a record of action to run on. Many people’s attitudes about gayness are still far from healthy, but my campaign forced some people at least to reexamine their prejudices and stereotypes.”

Kozachenko served only one term on the

“I think we’ve made enormous progress in opening the country’s consciousness to the fact that there are many ways of living, there are many ways of loving, there are many ways of expressing who we are.”

someone who is into party politics per se.”

Still, she is proud of what she did, recognizing in retrospect that it was historic.

“I think we’ve made enormous progress in opening the country’s consciousness to the fact that there are many ways of living, there are many ways of loving, there are many ways of expressing who we are,” she says. “It’s not ‘Leave It to Beaver’ or ‘The Partridge Family.’ Cookie-cutter families are not who everyone is in this country.”

There is, however, much more to do.

“We have so, so far to go in so many things,” she says, noting that the lack of affordable housing, egregious income disparity and institutional racism are huge problems in the U.S.

She also points to the fact that people often have much more in common than they might think with those who are different than them.

“We’ve got to somehow communicate with each other so we see our commonality,” she says. “And that doesn’t mean giving people a pass when they say something offensive or inappropriate. It means having discussions with people in an attempt to communicate and be able to open people’s hearts and minds.”

And speaking of hearts and minds, Kozachenko still writes poetry.

“Not as much as I used to,” she says. “Actually, one of the things I’m very much looking forward to as I retire is doing more of that.”

When asked what she would tell her 21-year-old self, Kozachenko pauses for a long moment.

“I would just say, ‘Keep going. Don’t ever forget who you are. You’ve been this person since way before you were elected and you’re going to be this person when you’re in your 60s and 70s, so do your best to fight for change and social justice, but be kind to yourself, too.’”



Ann Arbor-based Kathy Kozachenko was the first openly gay person to be elected to office in the U.S. Photo: Victory Fund.





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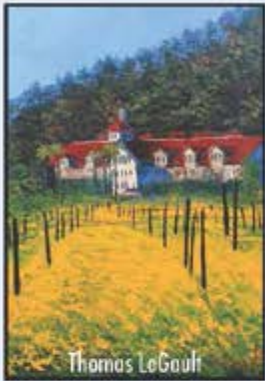
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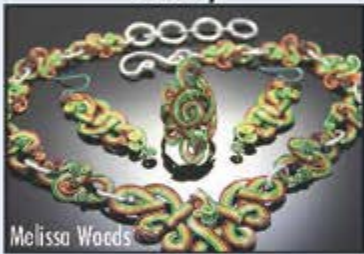
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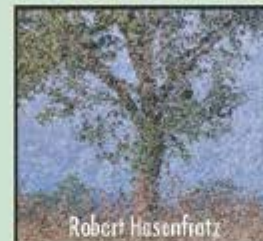
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**Food Trucks • Art Activities**



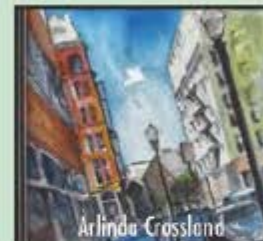
Between the lake and the cabin at Palmer Park

Juried Artists



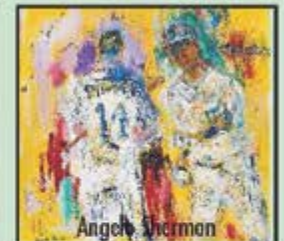
Robert Hasenfratz

Detroit Art Teachers



Arlinda Crossland

Emerging Artists



Angela Sherman

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Photos courtesy of Gilead

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## Parting Glances

BY CHARLES ALEXANDER

### Honoring A World Gay Hero

On June 13, 2021, Her Majesty's British Government — God save the queen, so to speak — will issue into circulation its newly minted 50-pound note honoring Alan Turing, the gay mathematician, intuitive computer and artificial intelligence pioneer genius.

Turing, who served as a World War II Nazi code encryption breaker, is estimated by historians today to have saved some 21 million lives because of his ability to intercept Nazi messaging in favor of the Allies.

Lifelong London resident Turing was born on June 23, 1912. Despite his massive historical impact, the brilliant logician, cryptanalyst, philosopher, theoretical biologist, general-purpose computer inventor and word wizard died by suicide 42 years later on June 7, 1954.

Because in spite of his unquestionable genius — coupled with good looks and rugby sports interests and active team participation — in 1952 Turing was discovered by the U.K. military authorities to be homosexual and openly involved in a same-sex relationship. In the country at the time, homosexual activity of any kind was in violation of God's Eternal Law, nature and the innate British sense of decorum, good manners and polite social non-amatory intercourse. (Remember what happened to exiled playwright Oscar Wilde and others of his public homosexual persona, a few too many to mention.)

Despite his immense aid to the war effort, Turing's contributions weren't acknowledged during his time. He was stripped of his military rank for being a sexual deviant and was given a demeaning choice: a stiff prison sentence of five to 10 years or a form of sexual reorientation that then amounted to ongoing chemical castration — England's method then of what these days might be called reparative therapy.

For then-Prime Minister Winston Churchill, U.K. survivors of WWII and the ensuing power struggle among rival nations, Turing's enforced silence also meant that the encoding system he had developed was safe from foreign exploration or attempted political exploitation, should anyone be tempted to share his one-of-a-kind expertise abroad.

For Turing, prison or chemical castration was a terrifying, soul-wrenching choice. So, he made do with a third option when he ate an apple laced with cyanide poison.

Rumors soon circulated that his suicide came after watching the Walt Disney film "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs," where the film's evil queen famously gives protagonist Snow White a poisoned apple.

Over the ensuing years, it slowly became a realization that Turing's breaking of the German Nazi's battle plans encoding system saved millions of British and Allied lives, including American, with estimates by prominent historians as high as 21 million.

In 2013, Queen Elizabeth II granted a posthumous U.K. Royal Pardon to Turing. In 2016, a similar mass pardon was announced by the U.K. Ministry for all gay males in general. The brand-new, 50-pound U.K. currency to be introduced into circulation on Turing's June 23 birthday carries a handsome picture of the multi-gifted, gay hero of the 20th, and 21st, Century.

The newly minted currency also carries a quote of his worth contemplating.

"This is only a foretaste of what is to come, and only the shadow of what is to be." Indeed. One might add: Let there be LGBTQ+ light.



BY GWENDOLYN ANN SMITH

### A Few Words About Caitlyn Jenner

I really don't want to talk about Caitlyn Jenner. Rather, I find myself in the unenviable position of having to write about Jenner. As a transgender writer in 2021, it is largely unavoidable, and, as such, I am resigned to this fate.

It's not that there aren't things about Jenner that aren't worth writing about. She will always be the 1970s-era Olympic hero/reality television celebrity who transitioned in the public eye. She is part of the glitz and glamor of the Kardashian family and all that that entails.

Likewise, my own personal reasons for not wanting to write about her are not because I don't see her as "legitimately transgender," whatever that means. Jenner is a transgender woman. She has transitioned. I'm not going to disparage her on the basis of her transition, or her birth gender or any of that, and I will urge you to not do so either.

I also am not envious of her. My feelings toward her have nothing to do with the gold she brought back from Montreal in 1976 nor her ability to make money off either that or her reality television lifestyle. I'm happy with my life, and don't much feel a need for the trappings of wealth and fame.

As it is, I wrote about Jenner before, as she came out with a cover story in Vanity Fair, then later during the run of her two-season long "I Am Cait" reality show. Even then, however, I didn't much want to write about her.

Back then, I saw her as an extremely naive trans woman making all the mistakes newly out trans women tend to make.

Unfortunately, given her celebrity status, everything she said or did was projected that much larger. She continued to act as if her life was not going to change and she could enjoy all the prestige and privilege she'd grown accustomed to in the decades following her decathlon victory.

In some ways, she is right on that. She is insulated enough from the experiences of the majority of her trans siblings that she will never likely have to pay the dues so much of us face in this life. This has allowed her to circumvent so many of the challenges transgender people face today, and it has helped to form the Jenner we see today.

I had hoped, after the Vanity Fair article coming out — and even more so as I saw those riding along with her on "I Am Cait" tried to drill sense and reality into her — that maybe she would learn. I had my own share of naivety, as I hoped that — like so many trans people before her — she would learn, grow and come to understand what the world is truly like. I even hoped that after she publicly admitted she was wrong about Donald Trump that, perhaps now, she was finally starting to mature.

At the very least, she seems to be dropping back off the popular culture meter.

That all changed, however, with an equally bizarre move to recall California Gov. Gavin Newsom. Jenner cast herself as the Golden State's own Donald Trump: a reality show businessperson with a big wallet, here to somehow "save" California with her supposed professional acumen and her sense of "winning."

## Viewpoint



“I know I will need to write about Jenner again someday. I may even still hold onto a shred of naive hope that she will one day learn from her mistakes.”

The race so far has been one gaffe after another, from lying that she golfed rather than voted in the 2020 Presidential campaign, a “hangar-side” chat with Tucker Carlson where she talked about her poor neighbor at the airport who is tired of having to see homeless people, to her basic misunderstanding that California District Attorneys are not controlled by the governor. She is painfully unqualified for the job.

Perhaps the largest gaffe, however, was Jenner siding with far-right ideology on transgender students participating in sports stating, “That’s why I oppose biological boys who are trans competing in girls’ sports in school. It just isn’t fair. And we have to protect girls’ sports in our schools” in what appeared to be a largely staged “ambush interview” by TMZ in a Malibu parking lot.

The statement, whose phrasing comes straight out of the right-wing playbook, is a 180 of comments she gave to Outsports.com managing editor Dawn Ennis in April of 2020.

“I think every trans person, if they’re into athletics, should have an opportunity to compete and to improve themselves,” she told Ennis. “I’m all for it.”

Then again, she also told Ennis, “Politics is something I don’t talk about any longer.”

At last, we reach exactly why I don’t want to write about Jenner.

Much like her “Caitlyn for California” website, she is devoid of any policy position. She will take any position she seems as advantageous, telling a transgender reporter what they want to hear while cozing up to what the right wants to hear in an attempt at the governor’s seat.

At the same time, Jenner has that Trumpian narcissism that requires her to be talked about. She needs it like I need air. Writing about her, even to criticize her, simply feeds her. It gives her the visibility she craves, and it gives her a sense of relevance in a world that would much rather leave her on the golf course.

I know I will need to write about Jenner again someday. I may even still hold onto a shred of naive hope that she will one day learn from her mistakes.

Yet, at heart, I know that that day is unlikely to come while her ego remains in charge.

*Gwen Smith was given a gold medal in 1976: it was made by Mattel Toys. You can find her at [gwensmith.com](http://gwensmith.com)*

## Creep Of The Week

# It Burns! It Burns! Andrew Wommack Proposes a New Mark of the Beast for Gays

BY D’ANNE WITKOWSKI

When I was a kid in the ‘80s I saw an episode of the “Twilight Zone” called “To See the Invisible Man.” In a future society, people get a mark on their foreheads, kind of raised and fleshy, like a circle of scar tissue, as punishment. Once someone has this mark on their foreheads, it can’t be removed or obscured. If they try to cover it with, say, a hat or a hand, it will burn through the covering. And in the episode, it is mandatory to shun marked persons. It is essentially like being put in solitary confinement, without the confinement part.

Anyway, I say this because Andrew Wommack came up with the same idea, only for gays.

Well, OK. It’s not the *SAME* idea. Wommack didn’t mention anything about a mark that would burn through your hand, but maybe he just didn’t want to be so obvious about stealing from a 1986 TV show.

On Wommack’s “Truth and Liberty Livecast” he and guest Janet Porter, founder and president of Faith2Action, wax hyperbolic about the Equality Act.

Porter tells Wommack that she’s praying for Caitlyn Jenner.

“Homosexuals have like three times as much suicide as heterosexuals, and then you go into transgenders [sic], and it just continues to go up,” Wommack replies. “It’s a very destructive lifestyle. They have 20 years less than the homosexual lives than a heterosexual. And, you know, cigarettes take an average of seven years off of a person’s life, so homosexuality is three times worse than smoking. We ought to put a label across their forehead, “This can be hazardous to your health.”

It sure is cute to have people with political clout and social capital talking about how LGBTQ+ people shouldn’t have and don’t deserve equal rights, not to mention the right-wing obsession with denying transgender people any shred of human decency, talk about LGBTQ+ suicide rates. Surely it must be the intrinsic filth of being LGBTQ+ and not, say, the people who have made it their life’s work to denigrate LGBTQ+ people that results in emotional and mental harm.

I also wonder who this forehead label would be for, especially with the completely vague word “this” starting the warning out. “This” could be anything! And then there’s the “your.” Is this message intended to warn other people away from said LGBTQ+ person, or is this message intended for an LGBTQ+ person looking into a mirror? Then wouldn’t it need to be written backward? So many questions.

Porter is on the show to promote her anti-Equality Act website and reveals that while the government is censoring her everywhere else, she’s found a little known work-around to getting a message out: sending bright orange anti-Equality Act postcards that read, “WE SAY NO” through the U.S. Postal Service.

This is curious. First, I think people know about the post office, Nancy Drew. But also, if you were worried about getting censored by the government, wouldn’t a postcard, a piece of



Photo: Facebook

mail with everything written on the outside, be the easiest thing to censor? And would you make them neon orange so that they stand out? If I were a censor at my local mail distribution center (I’m not. But they are hiring!) and it was my job to censor Porter, well, she’s certainly made my job easy.

Not to mention that Porter’s arguments against the Equality Act are the same homophobic racist garbage talking points you’ve heard before.

“It should be called the Criminalization of Christianity Act,” she says.

She claims that it would make it legal to “castrate your child” and that Sunday school classes would look like Drag Queen Story Hour.

If you want to send these postcards to your U.S. senators, all you have to do is go to Porter’s website and “you click one button. Now you can send a postcard to each one of your U.S. senators,” she says.

AND HERE’S THE KICKER, “For \$9.95 we’ll print ‘em, we’ll personalize ‘em, we’ll mail ‘em for you for less than 10 bucks.”

WHAT A DEAL!

Obviously, that’s not a deal. What she really wants is for you to pay \$29.99 to mail 110 postcards to all of the U.S. House members, the Supreme Court and the White House. And, well, that’s actually not a bad deal. I mean, if you’re bargain shopping for hate.

“What [the Equality Act] would do basically is say that gender choice and homosexuality and all these things are like civil rights, just like, you know, ethnic,” Wommack eloquently says.

Can’t wait to hear his thoughts on Critical Race Theory.

The Equality Act has passed the U.S. House, but it will go nowhere in the Senate unless Democrats get rid of the filibuster. The best defense against the hate card brigade is to contact your U.S. senator and tell them to GET RID OF THE FILIBUSTER. And yes, I’m yelling.





# Meet the Nonbinary Powerhouse Who Is Revolutionizing Gaming for the Disabled Community

Clarkston native Courtney Craven carries on her late partner Susan's legacy by delivering workshops on gaming accessibility for the deaf and hard-of-hearing. Photos: Andrew Potter

## Courtney Craven Is Carrying on the Legacy of Their Late Partner, Who Was Deaf

BY MELISSA HART

Courtney Craven was napping in the bedroom when their partner Susan Banks — in the living room playing a video game — suffered a massive stroke and died. The couple had recently launched “Can I Play That?” (CIPT), a review site designed to let people know before they drop \$60 on a new game whether it’s accessible to those with specific disabilities.

Craven and Banks recruited a staff of disabled reviewers to weigh in on the newest games, building a robust online community of grateful readers. And then Banks passed away unexpectedly two years ago, leaving Craven with a legacy they weren’t sure they wanted.

“I like being behind the scenes,” says Craven, 38, who has lupus and is hard-of-hearing. “Let me be the hermit writer that does all the writing reviews. Don’t make me interact with people, Jesus. But when Susan died two years ago, it was either throw in the towel, quit the site and find something new to do, or step up and fill the role that she was in.”

### From Clarkston to Chicago

Craven grew up in the village of Clarkston 40

miles northwest of Detroit, misdiagnosed with juvenile rheumatoid arthritis which turned out — decades later — to be lupus. As a child dealing with constant inflammation and pain, Craven found escape in stories — specifically, in Laura Ingalls Wilder’s “Little House” novels.

“My dad and I would go spend two weeks up at his dumpy cabin in the Upper Peninsula, and I read the whole series there,” they recall. “There’s something about the country and farm life that’s always been comforting to me.”

At home in Clarkston, they played the iconic video games Duck Hunt and Super Mario with their brother. “And then we got the cow box — the Gateway computer — and the games were so much more story-rich,” they say. “That was my thing. I wanted a good story, told to me in a way I wasn’t used to from TV or movies or books.”

After graduating from Clarkston High School, Craven found in-person college classes at Oakland University impossible to navigate because of neurological complications from lupus. Instead, they fell into a series of low-paying jobs. While cleaning out stalls, Craven got kicked in the head by a horse. They lost hearing in one ear, and then — after a bout of West Nile meningitis — lost partial hearing in the other.

They moved to Chicago in 2010. “I needed to live somewhere I felt welcome as a queer person,

far away from all the straight cis white privilege [and] ignorance I grew up surrounded by,” they explain. Looking for work, they came across a Facebook post for a dog walker who knew sign language. Susan Banks — a wealthy deaf woman who adored video games — lived in a brownstone in Chicago’s Lincoln Park neighborhood with her Boston terrier. Craven, who’d taken sign language in high school, got the job. They became friends. And then they became a couple.

### A joke turned serious

In 2014, Banks and Craven purchased a game console along with the open-world role-playing game *Destiny*, which asks first-person shooters — playing solo or in teams — to save Earth’s last safe city from aliens. Due to poor deaf/hard-of-hearing accessibility, however, Banks was forced to quit just 20 minutes into playing.

“Susan played games for the story,” Craven says. “In games, just like in movies, the story is conveyed most of the time in dialogue. So if the captions are bad, and you’re deaf, you miss the whole thing. It might be pretty to look at, but really, what’s the point of watching a movie with no sound and poor captions?”

To help others make informed decisions before a purchase, Banks and Craven started the now-

defunct blog [oneoddgamergirl.net](http://oneoddgamergirl.net). They spent five years writing deaf/hard-of-hearing accessibility reviews. Craven had other gaming issues, as well — lupus caused their hands to ache, which made using a mouse painful and holding game controllers uncomfortable; these barriers would eventually become a key focus in their game reviews for players with physical disabilities.

The website CIPT began as a joke. Whenever they purchased a new game, Craven would play it, and Banks would ask, “Can I play that?” The answer was almost always no. Craven bought the domain name and gave it to Banks, saying, “Here, you can just put all the answers on this website.” But the idea caught fire.

The Entertainment Software Association Foundation estimates that 46 million gamers in the U.S. have at least one disability. In November of 2018, Craven and Banks launched CIPT in earnest. They recruited writers with various disabilities to review games and reached out to the disabled gaming community on Twitter. Development studios around the world began to read and share their reviews and news stories. So did Xbox and PlayStation executives Phil Spencer and Hermen Hulst.

Slowly, games began to improve. Still, Banks and Craven felt the sting of disappointment when they came across an inaccessible new product.



“We felt like we were making progress, making a change,” Craven says. “People were listening, you know? And then we realized, oh, okay, well, some people were listening. Not everybody cares, or knows.”

Craven was content to stay behind the scenes, leery of the online gaming community online. “Gamergate had happened in 2014, and prominent women in games were doxed and their lives threatened just because they were women who existed in this field,” they say. “I saw gaming through that lens, and I didn’t want anything to do with that toxic crap.”

But then, Banks fell ill. She’d contacted MRSA years before, which led to inter-related health problems including seizures and strokes. “She went from a perfectly healthy marathon-running woman to needing caregiving 24 hours a day over the course of two years after she got sick,” Craven says. “We always knew it was possible that she could die, but we didn’t think it would happen.”

And then, it did.

## Finding community

A few weeks after Banks’ death, a friend offered Craven a job writing captions for interactive entertainment company Epic Games which operates Fortnite

— one of the world’s largest games. “Being able to start that job played a major role in me not succumbing to grief and depression after [Susan] died, and instead deciding to get the counseling and treatment I needed [to] stay alive,” Craven says. They took over CIPT’s Twitter feed, as well, wanting to ensure that the website remained a safe place for disabled writers to pitch, even if they didn’t feel welcome in the video game journalism industry. “Mainstream sites only cover accessibility when it’s trending. They make it pretty clear it’s of interest to them when it’s a hot topic and only then,” Craven explains.

Previously, Craven had been unaware of the large, supportive LGBTQ+ and disabled gaming communities on Twitter. These days, the platform is responsible for most of their close friendships. “Every little tweet is a story, and through them, you get to know people and yourself,” they explain. “It’s how I’ve learned everything that I’ve come to understand about myself later in life. For so long, I thought there was something wrong with me because I was asexual and nonbinary. I didn’t know these were a thing. I just thought that I was broken.”

But right as Craven began to grow comfortable with both their identity and their work as the face of “Can I Play That?” they received an advance copy of Ubisoft’s Assassin’s Creed Valhalla and tweeted about the discriminatory language in a character description. “Ubisoft made the mistake of apologizing for it and committing to do better publicly in a reply to my tweet,” Craven says. “That started a three-week storm of angry white

men sending me horrible emails, telling me what they’d do to me if they ever saw me out in public, sharing my private information across various far-right forums.”

Craven chalks up the anger to the increase in women and people of color working in, and playing, video games. The experience was similar to what happened with #GamerGate. “I think some white men are mad because they feel like they’re losing ground, and they’re acting out in the most reprehensible ways, like actually endangering the lives of the people that they hate,” they explain.

Dismayed by the doxing and the cost of housing in Chicago, longing for solitude in a natural setting, they relocated back to Clarkston. Now, when they’re not writing captions or reviewing games, they’re outside hiking with their rescue dog, Tali. “Being back here feels like home,” they say. “I know that I’m never going to be as accepted or as welcome as I was in Chicago, but I feel better here.”

They’d found themselves resenting their work writing content for CIPT, especially when jealousy surfaced within the community of disabled gamers. “People want the success we’ve had without having to do the years of work, so they lash out instead of actually wondering why CIPT has

been so successful,” they explain. “Doing all that work for no money just stops being worth it, so it came down to me deciding to either shut down CIPT entirely or find a new way to make it feel good and enjoyable again.”

Recently, they’ve shifted focus, teaming up with author and inclusion educator Yi Shun Lai and disabled streamer/accessibility consultant Stacey Jenkins to deliver workshops for game studios including Ubisoft, Creative Assembly and Square Enix. Sony hired Craven as an accessibility consultant, and the director of the Game Developers Conference has invited them to present on gaming accessibility. “I love doing the workshops,” Craven says. “It’s amazing how well-received they’ve been, and just as I was hoping, I feel good and excited about CIPT again.”

Gone are the days when their work felt like shouting into a void with the occasional affirmation. Susan, they say, would approve of where the website is now. “She’d be astounded by the strides made by CIPT and the rapid embracing of accessibility by the gaming industry,” they say. “More and more women are working in games, more and more people of color and disabled people are working in games. It’s really exciting.”

*Melissa Hart is the author, most recently, of “Better with Books: 500 Diverse Books to Ignite Empathy and Encourage Self-Acceptance in Tweens and Teens.” She grew up with two moms, and lives in Oregon. Reach her on Twitter and Instagram @WildMelissaHart.*

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Photo: Netflix

# Ryan O'Connell Wants You — Yes, You! — to Talk More About Queer Disabled People

BY CHRIS AZZOPARDI

A gay man with cerebral palsy. You won't find that kind of important representation just any time you flick on the TV, which is why Ryan O'Connell's Netflix show "Special" has been uniquely refreshing and profoundly revolutionary.

It began as a memoir — his memoir, entitled "I'm Special: And Other Lies We Tell Ourselves" — and then evolved into a full-fledged, semi-autobiographical dramedy in 2019 on Netflix. He created it, he stars in it, he writes it. And he does so once again with the second and final season, which expands episodes from short bits to sitcom-length servings, with openly gay actor Jim Parsons still producing. During this season, which premieres May 20, lead character Ryan (the actor, who is gay and living with cerebral palsy himself, shares his name with the title character) continues his journey to self-fulfillment. That path is lined with hiccups involving an open relationship, topping and his relationship with his mother.

Here, O'Connell talks about his honest approach to gay sex (and why he thinks most gay sex on TV is "dire"), deciding to incorporate a storyline on the, uh, shitty part of butt play and how it's important for him to still, after "Special," create stories about people living with disabilities.

## I'm gonna miss TV Ryan.

Oh, I know, I know. It's a bummer. But, uh, at least you get more time with him for Season 2, right?

## How're you feeling now that the show has come to an end?

Honestly, it sounds weird to say, but I feel pretty good about it. I mean, obviously, the decision to end the show was not mine, but here's the deal: I'm gonna give you a little blurry timeline of the show. We pitched it in 2015; it took four years to get made. Then it came out April 2019 and took us five months to get renewed and then COVID shut us down. (It took) us two years for Season 2.

So, as amazing as the show has been, and incredible, it's also kinda been like a bad boyfriend. This has been a part of my life for six years, so because we knew from the jump that this was going to be the last season, we were able to really craft, I think, a really complete and final season. So from the storyline perspective, it feels totally right. "Special" has been really incredible, but it's been a really, really difficult show to make and it feels like it's always hanging on by a thread and, yeah, I think I'm ready (laughs) for a new anxiety moment.

## Difficult in the sense of you being so involved in every aspect of the show or...?

Well, no. That I love 'cause I'm a Type A Virgo from hell, so that's where I thrive. I refused to do 15 minutes again, so we had to do a whole new deal, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. Everything was really protracted and it's been a journey with the show, man. She has not been easy!

## Listen, boyfriends are work too.

They (are), and they give you amazing orgasms sometimes.

## So what you're saying is the payoff was worth it in the end?

The payoff was totally worth it.

## With this season, where do you end and where does the other Ryan begin?

See *Special*, page 20

# Finding Resources for Disabled LGBTQ+ People in Michigan Is Difficult. It Shouldn't Have to Be.

BY JEM ZERO



In 2018 I wrote an article about accessibility in LGBTQ+ spaces. This year, I want to analyze what local options are available to disabled queer people looking for support in Southeast Michigan.

Rather, I wanted to. What I found instead was disappointing.

After searching many resource lists for both disabled people and

LGBTQ+ people, it was immediately clear that the individuals compiling LGBTQ+ lists did not consider indicating disability-friendly resources, and similar for safe spaces for disabled people indicating queer acceptance.

Some examples include Affirmations, a well-known community center in Ferndale that supports a number of LGBTQ+ needs; University of Michigan; the Michigan government website; and the official Henry Ford Health System website. Both Michigan's government site and Henry Ford have LGBTQ+ resource pages with no mention of disability inclusion.

Affirmations surprised me most — its Health & Wellness section on its website does not use the word "disabled" a single time, and only cites two references that cite support for physically disabled people. The list prioritizes mental health resources, but LGBTQ+ people struggle with more than mental health concerns.

LGBTmap has a report on disability within the LGBTQ+ population. Based on data from the 2016 California Health Interview Survey, two in five transgender adults and one in four LGB adults report being disabled. In the 2015 U.S. Transgender Survey, which surveyed more than 26,000 transgender people, 39 percent of trans people reported having at least one disability.

Although downplaying the effect physical disability has on the LGBTQ+ population is harmful, it also is prudent to mention that 17.4 million disabled people, or 32.9 percent of the disabled population, also experience mental illness. LGBTQ+ people in Michigan, based on data from 2015-2016 by the Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System, were 44.2 percent more likely to have been diagnosed with a depressive disorder, versus 20.8 percent of non-LGBTQ+ adults. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, disabled adults report experiencing mental illness five times the rate of abled adults. If we are to take mental health seriously, it is mandatory that research and resource compilations not exclude physically disabled people and their intersections.

One microaggression that repeatedly stabbed me in the eyes



See *Finding Resources*, page 21



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**PREVENTION COUNSELOR**

**Position Title:** PREVENTION COUNSELOR  
**Department:** MATRIX COMMUNITY HEALTH

Plans and assists with HIV testing & counseling and other sexually transmitted infections. Conducts patient intakes, assesses patients risk, takes patients samples, provide testing results, and assists patients with developing risk reduction plans. HIV Test Counselors provides referrals, linkage to medical care and supportive services. Provides counseling to high risk individuals. Locates patients who are unaware of being infected with HIV and other sexually transmitted infections.

**INTENSIVE CARE COORDINATOR**

**Position Title:** INTENSIVE CARE COORDINATOR  
**Department:** MATRIX COMMUNITY HEALTH

Works with persons living with HIV who are poly-diagnosed and battling with active mental health or substance abuse issues, along with addressing HIV-related needs. Works closely with the patient's medical providers to understand what their medical needs are in addition to their psychosocial needs. Responsible for patient assessment, service plan development, periodic reassessment of needs, medication adherence counseling, patient education, ongoing monitoring of medical and psychosocial needs, monitoring and evaluation of the patient's progress, and patient discharge from services.

**MEDICAL CASE MANAGER**

**Position Title:** MEDICAL CASE MANAGER  
**Department:** MATRIX COMMUNITY HEALTH

Works with persons living with HIV helping them manage their HIV medical care needs to facilitate optimal patient outcomes (viral load suppression); promote ongoing long term engagement in medical care, and ensure appropriate service utilization eliminating any gaps in care. Works closely with the patient's medical provider to understand what the patient's medical needs are in addition to their psychosocial needs. Works closely with the interdisciplinary team moving clients from linkage to care to retention in care through highly coordinated services and efforts.

**PATIENT NAVIGATOR**

**Position Title:** PATIENT NAVIGATOR  
**Department:** MATRIX COMMUNITY HEALTH

Works with persons who are newly diagnosed with HIV or not in HIV medical care working to link these individuals into medical care and supportive services. Conducts outreach activities in partnership with counseling and testing partners to locate out of care or unaware individuals; identifies and establishes new referral relationships with organizations for linking newly diagnosed or out of care individuals to medical care; conducts patient intake and assessment; provides risk reduction treatment planning and counseling.

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Photo courtesy of Chella Man

# Deaf Is Beautiful

Genderqueer Artist-Author Chella Man Wrote His Book 'Continuum' During the Pandemic

BY LAWRENCE FERBER

It's hard enough finding a role model and road map for life as a marginalized individual. Chella Man already knows this, of course. The artist, actor, model and activist is deaf, genderqueer, Jewish, half-Chinese *and* pansexual.

Yet the Brooklyn-based 22-year-old, best known for his art-design collaborations with fashion brand Opening Ceremony and for playing mute superhero Jericho in DC Universe TV series "Titans" in 2019, will ensure that new generations can access his inspiring, multi-layered life experience widely this June 2 through "Continuum." The book is a

revealing autobiography from Penguin Random House's YA-g geared Pocket Change Collection. Authored by LGBTQ+ and BIPOC activists, other releases include Leo Baker's "Skate for Your Life" and Alok Vaid-Menon's "Beyond the Gender Binary."

The emergence of "Continuum" was serendipitous: Penguin approached Chella about the collection, which included close friends of his like Kimberly Drew, a former social media manager for NYC's The Met and Vogue writer; Adam Eli, founder of nonviolent direct action group Voices4, and Vaid-Menon, a writer and performance artist. He loved the books' accessible presentation.

"I got to a point in my life when I realized there have been so many checkpoints, so I

wanted to take a moment, reflect and unpack what I've been through," says Chella, who wore cochlear implants, a small electronic device placed in the ears that partially restores hearing, during our recent interview on Zoom.

Written while quarantining at his central Pennsylvania family home during the pandemic with artist and photographer girlfriend MaryV Benoit (during this time, the whole family contracted COVID-19 and recovered, although "my dad got very sick and it was very scary"), "Continuum" sees Chella dive right into his childhood as "Rachel."

"I don't feel like it's a deadname," he says. "I once did, because I internalized other trans individuals' ideas of what their names meant to them, but I'm OK sitting with and being

close to the name I was given at birth. If you look at my name now, I actually kept some of it. I took Rachel, cut off the 'ra' and added the little 'la' and here I am: Chella. And because I always still felt connected to what society deems feminine and femininity, I identify as genderqueer and felt I wanted to keep some of that with me."

In "Continuum," Chella recounts going deaf as a child and early gender identity epiphanies, the trauma puberty wreaked in middle school, and accessing first images of LGBTQs, including those of gay men kissing in public and lesbians holding each other. Contributing to the vividness of these memories was the fact Chella kept a diary over the years from

See *Deaf Is Beautiful*, page 25



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 **QUEER & DISABLED**

→ **Special**

Continued from p. 16

As the show's gone on, the character of Ryan has become less and less like me, especially in Season 2. Season 1, honestly, wasn't really like me either (laughs). I mean, I was never like this character; I was never this arrested development. I moved out of my parents' house at 18 — right on schedule! Lost my virginity at 17 — right on schedule! What I do relate to with this character of Ryan in Seasons 1 and 2 are the emotional themes, like what he's struggling with, this feeling of, "Is he enough?" This struggle with self-worth and independence. That really resonates with me deeply. But in terms of the situations this little goof troop finds himself in, I don't relate to that.

Like, I would never date someone in an open relash who has all these convoluted rules and be like, "Sure, I can see you Tuesday evening and I'm totally OK with that." I mean, maybe I would've, honestly. I would have done that in my early 20s. But the situation never presented itself to me. But emotionally I get it. I've been through what he's been through.

**I'm calling this season "Ryan's journey to being a dom top."**

Oh my. Well, at least emotionally, yeah. And actually, you're right, he does top! Oh my god, you're right! (Laughs.)

**How could you have forgotten?**

The metaphor is very thinly veiled, I would say. *Very* thinly veiled.

**And I'm just obviously being as literal as possible.**

Well, I think it works both ways, baby. I think Ryan has been emotionally and physically bottoming for a lot of people and this season is all about him coming into his own and asserting what he wants and not apologizing for it. He's not apologizing for taking up space; that's something I really, really relate to.

A couple years ago, I really experienced a shift in terms of realizing how much I was contorting myself to make everyone else around me comfortable while never asking, "Am I comfortable? Do I want to do this?" And then I would see straight, white males waltz around the world with such confidence, engaging their female baristas in non-consensual conversations about their band and my blood would boil because I'd just be like, I can't imagine going into an interaction not fully wondering what the other person is feeling and taking their feelings into account. I feel like I'm so hyperaware of how I'm being perceived and making sure that everyone else around me is OK with who I am. But I really have learned to let go of that completely and I just try to walk around with the confidence of a New York straight, white male. I cosplay as one every day. Not at the coffee shop, though. I leave those baristas alone. They don't need any of this, they don't.

**They're getting enough on their own.**

Exactly, exactly. They don't need to hear about my day, I can tell you that right now.

**It sounds like you had a past as a barista...**

No! As if I could carry anything, are you kidding me? A barista is a guy with cerebral palsy's worst nightmare. It's like all the

See **Special**, page 22

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→ Finding Resources

Continued from p. 16

while I was doing this research is the compulsory use of person-first language. Most disabled people prefer identity-first language, in which we call ourselves “disabled,” not a “person with a disability.” Despite this, the vast majority of academia, spearheaded by abled researchers and policy-writers, insist on using person-first language. While that isn’t directly in the control of LGBTQ+ organizations compiling resources, it is valuable to note that appropriate terminology is very important to LGBTQ+ people. Being misgendered or referred to by an outdated term, especially one considered a slur, is a damaging experience, which is why LGBTQ+ organizations should keep abreast of modern terminology. While understanding that this is critical, why are LGBTQ+ organizations ignoring the terminology needs within the disabled community? It is dismissive, and again, mostly overlooked by abled LGBTQ+ authority figures.

Despite all the room for improvement, there are still people doing their best to support disabled LGBTQ+ people.

The LGBT Aging Center has a solid number of resources for seniors in Michigan, and Detroit Disability Power has LGBTQ+ friendly events and resources. Michigan State University has a Sexual and Gender Minority Clinic in East Lansing. There is a SAGE resource guide that provides information about the Disability Network of Oakland and Macomb — even that one resource is better than nothing, though it would be great for that to grow even further.

One of the more exciting resources I found was information about the Ruth Ellis Center and Full Circle Communities collaborating to build 43 units of supportive housing for LGBTQ+ youth, who experience homelessness at a disproportionate rate. The development hopes to be open sometime in mid-2021,

though it has not been announced if this date has been affected by COVID-19.

These are great steps, but we need much more. The LGBTQ+ community is not truly inclusive unless the organizations providing resources consider intersections of race, disability, class and gender. As many people have said before, awareness is the first step. Decentering the narrative that forces respectability standards on LGBTQ+ people, portraying us as deviants

“The LGBTQ+ community is not truly inclusive unless the organizations providing resources consider intersections of race, disability, class and gender.”

with a few role models that are — more often than not — white upper-middle-class married couples, will go a long way to opening a non-stigmatizing narrative for LGBTQ+ people of color, disabled LGBTQ+ people and LGBTQ+ people who are considered

to have “high-risk” lifestyles, such as sex workers.

Yes, we are more than our disabilities and more than the ways we struggle or experience oppression. The LGBTQ+ experience, when allowed to thrive, is one of love and joy. Still, we won’t ever reach the “love and joy” part while excluding vulnerable members of our community.

Going into Pride 2021, I truly hope groups and events will take more care to provide accessible options for disabled members of the community.

*Jem Zero (ze/zir) is a disabled transmasculine whose work strives to communicate the frustration of being limited by one’s meatsack & brainjuice, while also being unapologetically queer. Ze has nonfiction personal essays published with Gertrude Press, the Thinx Blog, and Juniper Unlimited, among others, and is an aspiring romance novelist. As far as art goes, Jem primarily works in digital portraiture, focusing on pets and loved ones. You can check out Jem’s website at jemzero.com and keep up with zir on Twitter at twitter.com/jem\_zero.*

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**→ Special**

Continued from p. 20

things he can't do: hand-eye coordination, like balancing. Oh my god, I would be fired immediately. It would be a lawsuit waiting to happen.

**As for the gay sex on "Special": It's not the kind of gay sex that's watered the fuck down to make straight people more comfortable, which is why I love it so much.**

Yes, it's definitely ... you can tell it's written and performed by a gay person. And also,

I've been very vocal about how I only hire gay actors to play gay roles and people are like, "Um, it's called acting, ever heard of it? That's their literal job." And I'm like, "Honey, sweetie, darling, baby, that's not what this is about. I understand, I'm very aware of what acting means, but we don't live in a world where there's an equal playing field and that's why I wanna give people opportunities to get parts, because not a lot of people are giving them those opportunities." And also, from a selfish point of view, it's much easier to shoot a gay sex scene with a gay actor than it is a straight actor. I don't wanna fucking explain the mechanics of gay sex to a straight actor. Life is too short, honey.

**Somebody had to say it.**

Yeah. But we definitely pushed the envelope. And then we cum all over it for Season 2 in terms of sex. Sex is my muse, for better or for worse. I just don't understand why the representation of gay sex has been so dire. It's either hypersexualized and very porny and erotic, or it's done in a tent, off-camera, and you just hear lots of grunting and moaning.

So it was really nice to *not* do any of that and also not have sex that's cloaked in shame or secrecy. I'm not saying that there's not value to those stories 'cause it is a part of our existence, but I think we've reached a point where I'm like, "OK, I'm ready for us to level up for gay storytelling." I'm interested now in

stories that don't revolve around our trauma and our pain, or that include our trauma and pain but also include like, you know, anal sex jokes. We contain multitudes.

**Season 2 also explores the pleasures of being gay.**

Which there are so many. You couldn't pay me to be straight, it's horrifying. So I just think it's really, really important that we tell a different kind of story, 'cause I think we've earned it and I think we're ready.

**And the sex scenes, even for gay actors, are still pretty choreographed, right?**

Yeah, it is. Again, when you're doing it with another gay guy, it's pretty intuitive and very easy to construct because we've all done it and we've all been there. It's not like "Building a Mystery" by Sarah McLachlan.

**On the topic of sex, I want to say that I really appreciate the storyline involving anal sex and poop.**

Oh my god, I know. Why has no one talked about that? That's crazy.

**Well, this is why we're gonna talk about it. I want to know everything about that bit in the show, and mostly why you decided to write a storyline involving the part of butt sex so few gay men talk about.**

Well, because it happened to me when I was 17, losing my virginity: I shit on my boyfriend-at-the-time's dick and, again, there was no reference point for anal sex in 2004. There just wasn't anything; there was no Netflix series tackling it (laughs) with care. So you kind of had to wing it. And, uh, anal sex was really intense!

I remember the first few times we tried fucking, it hurt too bad 'cause I don't think we even realized lube was a thing. I mean, it was all very weird, it was a DIY affair. Then, finally, when I did my emotional exercises and was ready to do it, then that's when I had the accident and I remember thinking, "Oh my god, is my asshole broken? Is this like a cerebral palsy thing? Like, what the fuck is going on?"

I remember Googling — or I don't even know if there was Google, but whatever it was in 2004 — "Anal. Shit. Sex." Nothing really came up. So I remember feeling a lot of shame about that, and I didn't know about douching or anything like that so whenever I have to go through something and suffer, I'm always like, "Wow, this is a nice opportunity for someone who is a teenager who may be thinking about having anal sex for the first time to know that this does happen." Shit happens, literally. And you're not freakish, your asshole is not broken. Honey, it's a part of the fabric of our gay ass lives.

**Something that I have also never seen on TV: the guy who you meet who fetishizes disability.**





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**Nomadland p. 31**



**Were you faced with a situation like that in your own life?**

I've never been fetishized, but I've heard about it and I know that it's a thing. I think they're called "devotees," and I thought it was an interesting way to explore Ryan grappling with his self-worth. So it was really important to me that it was very clear that this is a consensual experience. Ryan's not being sexually assaulted. The guy says, "Is this OK?" and Ryan says yes because that's a very real thing that we don't talk about, which is basically sex that you're not comfortable having but you don't necessarily have the self-esteem to MacGyver yourself out of it.

**How do you hope "Special" has enlightened people within the LGBTQ+ community, and beyond, who haven't really considered the experiences of someone who is a queer person with a disability?**

I hate the word "normal," 'cause what is normal? But so little is discussed in terms of disability. I feel like disabled people often exist on the fringes of our society because they are quite literally shut out, based on this world not being accessible on a very basic level. So I think that the dialogue around disability is happening, but I still think it's not happening to the level that it should and I think people feel uncomfortable when talking about disability. I feel like they're worried about saying the wrong thing. I think with "Special," you know, comedy is the best superpower that I have, that I've used throughout my life to get through it. And I think that when you give people permission to laugh, it creates this general ease and comfort.

Ryan is disabled, but you don't have to be disabled to be feeling the things that he's feeling. So I think it's really just important to show a gay character who doesn't fit the physical ideals. I hope that it normalizes disability and I hope that it adds more texture to the queer experience, because in a lot of ways TV is gayer than ever. I feel like you can't sell a pilot without including a gay guy in there. But I still think that gay men are rarely allowed to be the complicated main course of the show. I think they're often relegated to being the appetizer. So I think it's really important that we show gay men and (their) rich interior life, not just in the context of them, like, shopping or being comedic relief.



**Looking ahead, what kind of stories do you want to tell next or be a part of? And in what form: film or television?**

Picasso had his Blue Period, and I'm still in my Gay Disabled Period. So, I wrote a novel called "Just By Looking At Him" that is about a gay guy with cerebral palsy who writes for TV. What?! She didn't stray too far for this one! That's being adapted into a movie with Greg Berlanti producing, so I'm gonna be writing that and starring in it, which will be really great. Then I sold a show to HBO Max called "Accessible," which is a teen disabled comedy, which I hope gets picked up to series. Sometimes I feel like, "Should I really kind

of dive into disability again?" or "I've already done that," but the fact is that there's so much that has not been explored and that's what really gets me excited as a storyteller: when you can say things like, "Wow, I've never seen that on TV before."

It's crazy that we're still saying that in 2021. Even though there are approximately 40 million shows on the air, there are things that still have stigma and still have taboo. So I'm only going to be playing in the world of disability for a little bit longer! And we'll see what happens.

*This interview has been condensed and edited for clarity.*

*Chris Azzopardi is the Editorial Director of Pride Source Media Group and Q Syndicate, the national LGBTQ wire service. He 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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➔ **Deaf Is Beautiful**

Continued from p. 18

which he could cull and repurpose entries. He said writing the book in the same family home he experienced the intense isolation and trauma of his youth was a “blessing and a curse.”

“It connected me to memories I wouldn’t have otherwise, but at the same time it was very heavy because I felt everything so deeply,” he recalls. Referencing the diary entries helped him formulate a fluid story, despite having lived a life that he says has been “extremely non-linear.”

“How do you explain systemic oppression to a child? I thought that was interesting,” Chella says, “and it encouraged me to look back on things I initially thought

(he was admitted to its early acceptance program while still a high school junior), transitioning via top surgery and testosterone — a process he shared at the time via social media and columns for LGBTQ+ digital news platform them. — and his relationship with MaryV, whom he says was encouraging throughout the process. “She wanted me to express myself freely

and share without restriction,” he says. “The first time she heard it, I read it to her. She has dyslexia, so I loved being able to see her reactions to each part, and it felt more intimate to be the one to read it to her.”

Since completing “Continuum,” which Chella Man also illustrated, he has served as an executive producer on Topic’s documentary series “Trans in Trumpland” and collaborated with NY genderless

streetwear brand Private Policy on a line of ear jewelry that celebrates “the beauty of being deaf” and directed its video promo, which is set underwater and features deaf BIPOC models (50 percent of pre-order profits go to Deaf Queer Resource Center).

“That was a dream come true, because since I was a kid I imagined that vision of, ‘How can I let people know how fucking beautiful it is to be deaf?’” he says. “I was surrounded by people who weren’t disabled and didn’t understand, and I wanted to amplify that and what’s more beautiful than being able to communicate underwater?”

Chella is reticent to discuss other upcoming projects, barring a potential zine. About the zine, which is personal to him, he says, “It would be an accumulation of my thoughts or streams of consciousness that’s very unfiltered, but not on Instagram because I think Insta isn’t the place sometimes, and I’m looking for queer disabled printers to work with and think that could be a very special collaboration.” He’s also hoping to embark on a book reading tour at schools, bringing visibility and inspiration to any baby Chellas out there.

“I have, actually, this past year, been most privileged to mentor an 11-year-old who is deaf, genderqueer, Jewish and Chinese!” he says, enthused. Every so often, they meet on FaceTime, where Chella mentors the child. “I never thought I’d meet someone like that,” he says.

*“Since I was a kid I imagined that vision of, ‘How can I let people know how fucking beautiful it is to be deaf?’ I was surrounded by people who weren’t disabled and didn’t understand, and I wanted to amplify that and what’s more beautiful than being able to communicate underwater?”*



were complex to simplify them, and I realized they aren’t so complex after all. The world just makes us believe they are.”

Later passages in the book cover his move to New York to attend Parsons School of Design

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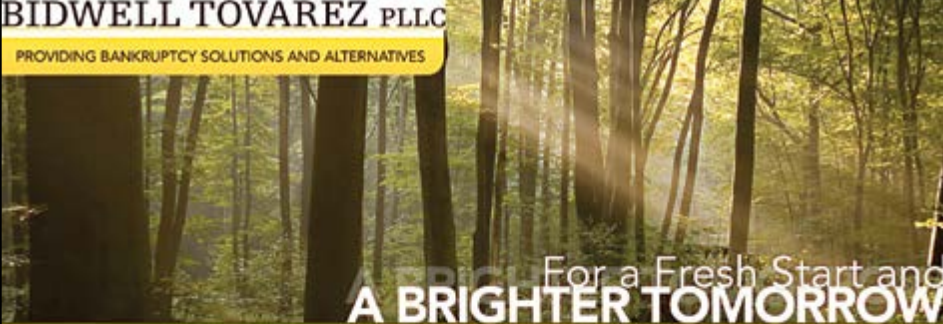
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# ‘Where We Go One, We Go All’: Equality Michigan Chair Buzz Thomas on Coming Out and Standing Alongside the Trans Community

BY ELLEN SHANNA KNOPPOW

A profile of Buzz Thomas should include the narrative of how the former state senator was, in his words, “that kid” who grew up surrounded by politics and



Buzz Thomas. Courtesy photo

whose career path always led in that direction. It should also talk about Thomas’ role as the recently elected board chair of Equality Michigan and his wide-ranging goals for that organization.

And it wouldn’t be complete without the tale of the time Thomas was absent from the state Capitol because he was celebrating World Pride in Paris, when only a few colleagues in the Legislature knew he was gay.

However, it begins with Thomas’ remarks about what’s most important to him today: a family member who was not originally an intended subject of this interview, but about whom Thomas frequently spoke. That person is Thomas’ longtime partner and husband of five years, Daniel.

“He’s probably the bigger, stronger activist within our family,” Thomas confessed, in reference to his husband, Daniel Vander Ley. “He grew up in a very unwelcoming Christian household in west Michigan that was very anti-everything that he is, and it had a profound impact on him. I see how he fights, and I see what he struggles with, and I see his motivation. And I just smile whenever I see that. And so, I’m very proud of him. He’s one of the people I admire most.”

## Closeted beginnings

These days, Thomas is very open about his sexuality. But it wasn’t always so. While in the state Legislature from 1997 to 2011 — six years in the House, including time as Democratic Leader and eight years in the Senate, including time as Democratic Floor Leader — Thomas was not out. Still, he supported LGBTQ+ causes, most notably combatting school bullying. The reason that issue spoke to him is not what one might guess. Thomas hadn’t been affected by bullying personally; it was someone else’s story that inspired him to take action.

“Honestly, I became incredibly passionate about [bullying] when I heard the story of Nathan Triplett, who is straight but was savagely

beaten in high school for being perceived as being gay,” Thomas explained.

Triplett went on to become the current board chair of the ACLU of Michigan and Democratic Legal Counsel for the state House of Representatives.

“Everything about bullying that related to sexual orientation just offended me,” Thomas said.

Thomas first introduced his anti-bullying bill in 2001 and he would do so repeatedly throughout his years in office, without success. Thomas was candid about what those years in Lansing were like, well before Chris Kolb became the first openly LGBTQ+ state representative in 2005. Beginning with his first run for office, Thomas hadn’t yet come out to himself.

“And so I kind of came to my own personal decisions and comfort in my own skin when I was already an elected official,” he said. “I went back and forth on it, and it was very difficult. And folks that hear it now probably don’t understand what it was like then. I was gay, I was African American, I was an elected official already and I didn’t know how to proceed.”

Thomas took the counsel of some of his straight friends who suggested that since they weren’t required to hold a press conference announcing their sexuality, Thomas shouldn’t have to either.

“Now, I continue to marvel at the other openly gay elected officials,” Thomas said. “It’s ironic. There have been others — we know who they are. Everyone kind of needs to make their own decision for them, and I think it’s a very personal one. And so I appreciate that people let me come out on my terms, at my pace.”

Thomas said he was determined that later in life, when out of elected office, he would devote his time, energy and talents to the activism he was unable to effect while part of the political

process. Impressed with their work on LGBTQ+ rights, Thomas joined the board of the ACLU of Michigan. Later, he would join the board of Equality Michigan in 2017.

After leaving Lansing behind, Thomas co-founded Thomas Group Consulting, whose work is “about connection and helping people find ways to engage into other people’s ecosystems,” Thomas said.

An example of the kind of work they do goes back to Detroit’s bankruptcy period, when Thomas’ business grew very successful working with organizations that wanted to help the city.

“Detroit really became a place that everyone wanted to come plant a flag and be a part of the solution that fixed Detroit,” Thomas recalled. “From around the country, folks were coming here with that goal. And they would get here and say, ‘Now what?’ We often found that ... their intentions didn’t necessarily meet the aspirations of the local community in which they were trying to impact that change. And so we’ve fixed our role as we help people find the ‘Now what.’ We help them find that meaningful connection to a community that aligns aspirations amongst various partners.”

personal life. It’s the reason Thomas said he loves cooking and entertaining.

“I think there’s something very special about people being able to sit around a table and share a meal,” Thomas said. “And bringing in strangers to share meals with you and using food as a way to break the ice from a tense situation or to something new and exciting. And so that’s always been a big part of who I am, is entertaining and making sure that people come and feel welcome into my community, into my home.”

Likewise, finding connection as it relates to segments of the LGBTQ+ community is something Thomas said he’d like to see happen as chair of Equality Michigan.

“I have never understood why there is such fragmentation within our community in Metro Detroit, why there is such separation between gay men, lesbian women, the transgender community, the African American community and everyone kind of operates separately. And so, that fragmentation within the community, I think, requires all of the organizations to act proactively. And I think that Equality Michigan, if it’s not contributing to solving that problem, is a part of the problem.”

Thomas emphasized the need for what he



## Finding balance and building bonds

Just as he enjoys making meaningful connections at work, that’s also key to Thomas’

called a “convening organization.” Naturally, he would like that to be Equality Michigan, but said they would be willing to play a supporting role. To begin with, conversations need to happen in order to collaborate, Thomas said.

Similarly, Thomas spoke of the need for



a convening organization relating to the work being done by the various LGBTQ+ organizations in the area.

“I think [Equality Michigan] needs to do a better job of being a convener of the table of organizations that are doing work within our community across the state of Michigan. If we are a statewide advocacy organization, we should be more engaged in convening others into discussion so that we are making sure that all voices are heard as we debate issues.”

Again, Thomas said, he would like that organization to be Equality Michigan but it could be another, and he’s eager to see it happen.

## Future goals for EQMI

Another goal that Thomas mentioned, since he thinks about strategy and engagement in his professional career, had to do with the board and the leadership of Equality Michigan.

“Making sure we have a long-term strategic plan that continues to promote excellence at the organization is important,” Thomas said.

Certainly, Thomas wants to ensure Equality Michigan’s financial security. He acknowledged the challenges of a couple years ago: “I really

appreciate the leadership that Jim Murray played and especially that Mike Rowady played at stabilizing the organization. Trevor Thomas as well, from our (c)(4) board.”

Along with his colleague of the same name, Thomas has the future of the Elliott-Larsen Civil Rights Act on his mind, too.

“Continuing the work, amending Elliott-Larsen Civil Rights Act is important,” Thomas said. “If it means supporting Fair and Equal Michigan, then we support Fair and Equal Michigan. And if it means there’s a legislative solution, then we certainly need to take it.”

To that end, Thomas stressed the need to educate hearts and minds in order to show the wider community the LGBTQ+ community is no different.

“And I think it’s incredibly important,” Thomas said in closing, “particularly at this moment in time, that we stand up and we don’t let the trans community be targeted and separated. We are all part of the same community, and we need to work extra hard to ensure that they are not scapegoated or left behind in any way. Where we go one, we go all.”

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# GoFundMe Campaign Launched for Lesbian Detroit Rapper Miz Korona

BY JASON A. MICHAEL

Detroit-based rapper Miz Korona is best-known for her role in the movie “8 Mile,” for being named Female Artist of the Year at the Detroit Music Awards and for last year’s “The Virus” EP. In recent months, she has fallen on hard times following multiple battles with COVID-19 and a diagnosis that requires her to have surgery this summer.

“Miz Korona has been faced with persevering through her parents’ multiple bouts with coronavirus in addition to her own battles with the illness on two separate occasions,” said Miz Korona’s friend Alexis Draper who created a GoFundMe page to help the artist with her healthcare costs. “Though she has been able to bring her normal level of perspective, creativity and ingenuity to the world by releasing “The Virus” EP with an accompanying merchandise capsule, and officially launching the high-end streetwear brand Triple Peaks, Miz Korona now needs our support to survive another



battle.”

Korona now needs to undergo a corrective and preventative procedure to address injuries sustained to her ACL and meniscus this summer. The surgery and its recovery time means

that she will not be able to work and support herself as usual. For Korona, who has been busy on the scene since releasing her debut project in ’94, that has been especially difficult.

“Working within the limitations

of COVID-19 as a performing artist and entrepreneur, Miz Korona has been able to plan for stable care and provision during her six-month recovery period. However, because of the nature of the injury that Korona

sustained and the extended time required for her full recovery, Miz Korona will not be able to work in any traditional capacity during that time.”

Draper said she is hoping to raise \$10,000 to help Korona.

“We, her friends, are asking that we rally around Miz Korona to ensure that she is able to meet the financial requirements of sustaining her life while covering medical expenses and follow-up care plans that are not covered by her health insurance provider,” Draper said. “We recognize that most others have limited resources, but we are asking that those who can please donate to Miz Korona’s crowd-sourcing campaign that will assist her in subsidizing her expenses while maintaining the integrity of independence.”

Visit [mizkorona.bandcamp.com](http://mizkorona.bandcamp.com) to learn more about her music. To contribute to the GoFundMe campaign, go to [gofundme.com](http://gofundme.com).

## Community Town Hall

**Tuesday, June 1, 2021 at 7 PM EDT**

**Watch via Facebook LIVE at [Facebook.com/Affirmations](https://www.facebook.com/Affirmations)**

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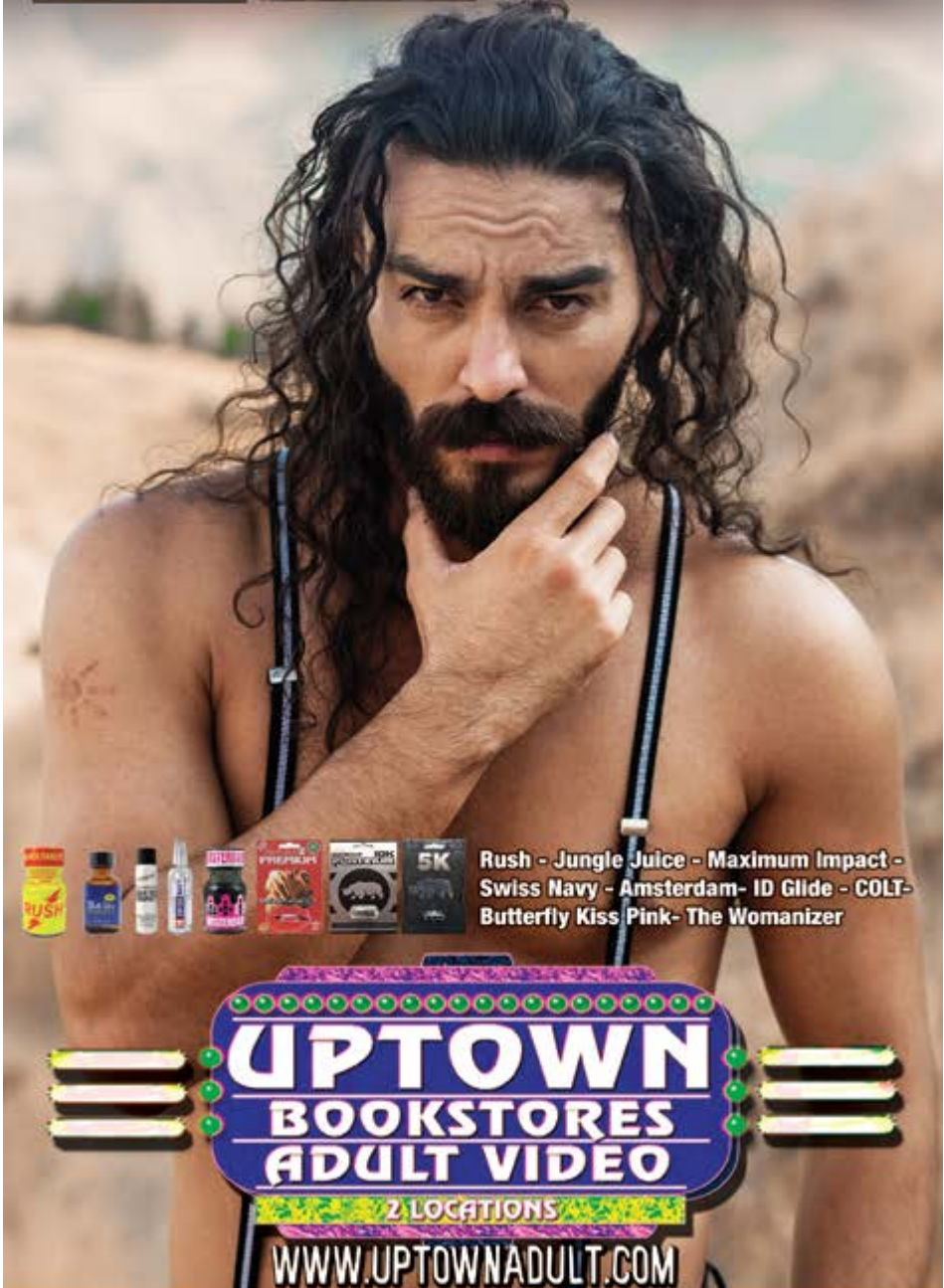


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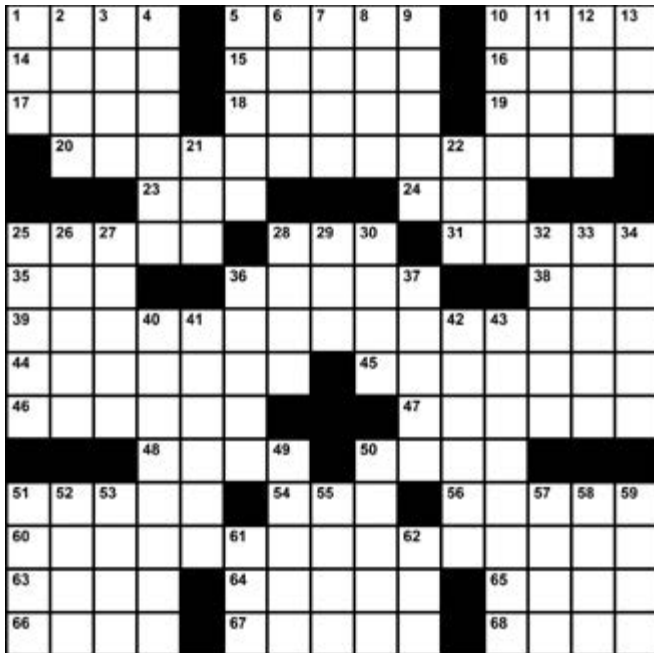
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- 38 Room opening?  
 39 More of the quote  
 44 Repair shop amenities  
 45 Sui \_\_\_ (unique)  
 46 Turkish bathhouse locale  
 47 Weather whipping boy  
 48 Expressed, as farewell  
 50 Alexander who was under Nixon  
 51 Loads  
 54 Dame E. Sitwell's heat measure  
 56 Deviate  
 60 End of the quote  
 63 "Six Feet Under" lead character  
 64 Fruit in a Vegas slot  
 65 Prefix meaning "outer"  
 66 Gave a pink slip to  
 67 Mortimer, with a wooden head

**Down**

- 1 Von Trapp rank (abbr.)  
 2 Petty of "OITNB"  
 3 Kramer, to Yale  
 4 Member, in slang  
 5 Does without oral gratification  
 6 Baseball's Babe  
 7 Prefix that means "queer"  
 8 Day, to Caligula  
 9 Targets of tops  
 10 Orator's delivery  
 11 Word on either bride's towel

- 12 Stallion's supper  
 13 Threesome for Marcella Hazan  
 21 Mel of Giants fame  
 22 Matt Cole's milieu  
 25 St. Teresa's town  
 26 Former "American Idol" judge  
 27 He's a wheel man  
 28 Hardness scale name  
 29 Cult actor Kier of Warhol films  
 30 Skater Mattis  
 32 "Scary Movie" Cheri  
 33 Woody secretion  
 34 Gay rodeo accessory  
 36 Fine fiddle, for short  
 37 "\_\_\_ little silhouette of a man ..."  
 40 With sustained force  
 41 Angel with six wings  
 42 Join the service  
 43 Take male enhancement pills  
 49 "The Wizard of Oz" dropout Buddy  
 50 Specialty of Wanda Sykes  
 51 Jodie Foster's role with the King  
 52 Trump's election fraud narrative, e.g.  
 53 Cigar butt?  
 55 Crack the whip at, e.g.  
 57 "Evita" lyricist Tim  
 58 Upfront amount  
 59 Role for Bela  
 61 Above-ground trains  
 62 "The Living \_\_\_"

See p. 22 for answers

**Nomadland**

**Across**

- 1 Leave marks on a lover's back  
 5 Bi role for Salma  
 10 "I \_\_\_ Andy Warhol"  
 14 Top of the world or bottom  
 15 Subjects of autoerotic fantasy?  
 16 Fruit homophone of a couple  
 17 "That's right!"  
 18 Digs for pigs

**Q Puzzle**

- 19 Art Deco name  
 20 Start of a quote from "Nomadland"  
 23 "\_\_\_ De-Lovely"  
 24 Baudelaire's bag  
 25 It's a good thing  
 28 Facial application  
 31 Fingerprint feature  
 35 Caesar's way  
 36 "Same here!"

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