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# Between THE LINES Lines<sup>TM</sup>

SUMMER OF PRIDE

**RAINBOWS EVERYWHERE**

**Pride Radiates Throughout  
Small-Town Michigan**

**THE INTERVIEW**

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Reflects on Shooting  
'Prayers for Bobby' in  
Metro Detroit**

**CONCERT COMEBACK**

**Openly Gay Artist  
Greyson Chance  
Heads to Michigan  
for Two Gigs**

**PLUS**

**Former BTL Publisher  
on Her Unforgettable  
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**SWEET AS A**

# Cherry Joemato

**He Grows His Joematoes in Southfield.  
His Partner of 45 Years Makes the Sauce.**



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Courtesy: City of Eastpointe Arts and Cultural Diversity Commission

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By Ellen Shanna Knoppow

**VOL. 2926 • JUNE 24, 2021**

**ISSUE 1177**

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# 5 Queer Things You Can Do Right Now

BY EVE KUCHARSKI

Art, fitness... God? Get a taste of all the above when you cap off Pride Month with these events. After all, some introspection, mimosas and a good workout — yes, we've got you covered — might just be the recipe for finding a little divinity this Pride season.



Photo courtesy UMS

## Get Deep Into LGBTQ+ Artistic Achievement

Picture gay, 18th-century poet Walt Whitman exactly the same way you did in school but in drag and you get the genius of Taylor Mac's "Whitman in the Wood." Then, follow that performance with the existential questioning found in NYC-based trans actor and writer Becca Blackwell's zine confessional piece "They, Themselves and Schmerm." Also among University Musical Society's first-ever free Digital Pride? Choral ensemble Conspirare's moving concert-length work "Considering Matthew Shepard." "UMS would not exist without the LGBTQ+ community, and we're excited to bring our Digital Pride events to a broader audience," says UMS Vice President for Programming and Production Michael Kondziolka. UMS's Digital Pride runs through July 6.

Visit [ums.org/season/digital-pride](https://ums.org/season/digital-pride) to explore the full range of UMS's Pride offerings.

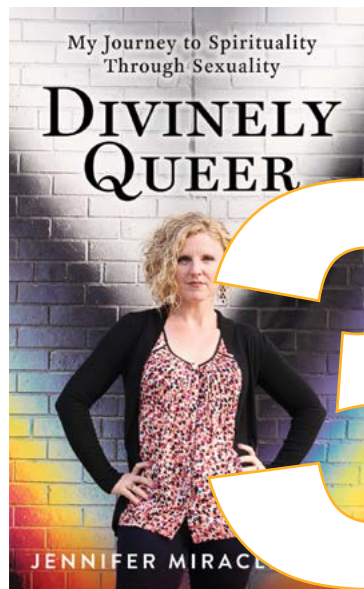


## Paint for Pride

Sign up to Paint for Pride at The D Loft Lounge in Detroit and show off your rainbow art skills while also giving back to the queer community. Created by Operation Give Back, which is an eight-month service project designed to spread community and wealth within Metro Detroit, attendees are in for a chill afternoon of painting and LGBTQ+ pop hits. The most fab part, though? Donations will benefit the Ruth Ellis Center, which provides support for homeless and at-risk youth in Detroit.

Register for this June 27 event online and purchase tickets (\$25) at [eventbrite.com](https://eventbrite.com).

## Find the Spirituality in Sexuality



After a month of packed Pride events, Redford Township is closing out June with an introspective talk from hometown author Jennifer Miracle-Best. Miracle-Best is best known for her book "Divinely Queer: My Journey to Spirituality Through Sexuality," which explores the difficulty of coming out, grappling with one's faith and persevering through it all.

"Divinely Queer" ultimately tells the story of my journey from a place of pain and unworthiness to a place of liberation, empowerment and divine connection, and particularly how my sexuality was the very vehicle that got me there," she said in a 2018 interview with BTL. "When my dad first learned about my first relationship with a woman, like many parents, he declared me unworthy of God's love and said some incredibly hurtful things." Later, she said, that allowed her to "walk" in her authenticity. We love an empowered, self-actualized queen.

Attend the event at 6 p.m. Tuesday, June 29, at the Redford Township Marquee. It will be catered by LuLuG's Mobile Comforts.



## Do Some Queer Yoga in the Park

Yoga's always been about finding inner peace. Stretching and breathing, too, but mostly the inner peace thing. At Zion Well, a Ypsilanti-based yoga and meditation studio, yoga is about acceptance, too. Participate in an accepting and accessible yoga practice from 10-11 a.m. June 27 at Ypsilanti's Riverside Park. While the event itself is free, event organizers are collecting donations of at least \$7 to support Ozone House, which provides free, confidential and voluntary shelter and support for homelessness. Ozone House affirms LGBTQ+ people who make up roughly 40 percent of the homeless population.

*Riverside Park is located at 2 East Cross St. in Ypsilanti. Register online at [eventbrite.com](https://www.eventbrite.com).*



## Get Fit. Get Mimosas.



It's all in the name: Rebel Strength and Fitness is a gym that caters to anyone and everyone looking to prioritize health and wellness. That means LGBTQ+ people, too. And at 10 a.m. on Sunday, June 27, it's pairing that workout mindset with mimosas — served by the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, no less. I mean, who better to serve you a hard-earned brunch drink after pumping some serious iron? And in the spirit of inclusivity, all fitness levels are welcome to attend this Pride-filled end to June.

*Learn more about the gym and the event online at [rebelstrengthandfitness.com](https://www.rebelstrengthandfitness.com).*

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# Pride Radiates Throughout Small-Town Michigan

BY D'ANNE WITKOWSKI

How protected an LGBTQ+ person is in Michigan depends largely on where in the state they call home. While there are major cities and smaller enclaves vocally supporting LGBTQ+ people, the state of Michigan does not recognize legal protections for LGBTQ+ people.

It might not seem like a big deal to some if a city hall flies a Pride Flag in June or paints a rainbow crosswalk. In the face of historic LGBTQ+ discrimination and a continued lack of legal protections, however, such acts go beyond symbolism.

The fact is, LGBTQ+ people are everywhere in Michigan. From up north to Downriver, Pride in the Great Lakes State radiates from unexpected places.

## Marquette/Big Bay

The Upper Peninsula isn't known for LGBTQ+ culture and acceptance, but Upper Peninsula Rainbow Pride (UP Pride) has been holding Pride since 2014.

Big Bay resident Marissa Jayne Wolfe, 39, created UP Pride after taking an inspiring trip with some friends to Chicago Pride. Wolfe says that while there were some drag shows and small gatherings in the UP, "there was no Pride Fest."

"When I came out in 2009, there weren't many trans people around," Wolfe tells BTL. Wolfe describes being harassed after her 2009 transition: "I was spit on, denied housing, had to fight for my job and the right to see my daughter."

Even now, she says, "We're kind of behind the times, at least as far as people being exposed to things."

Still, Wolfe sees changes. These days, she says, "Everybody probably knows someone transgender, gay, transitioning or LGBTQ+."

Michael Bradford, 27, UP Pride's treasurer, lives in Marquette, which he says is uniquely progressive — "a blue island in a sea of red."

"Growing up, I was raised with a fairly religious family. I had an uncle who was gay, and I always had a good relationship with him," Bradford says. His family, however, "basically straight up said [his uncle] was going



Marissa Jayne Wolfe, co-founder of Upper Peninsula Rainbow Pride. Photo courtesy of Marissa Jayne Wolfe

to hell."

Bradford refused to accept this, marking his start as a vocal LGBTQ+ ally.

UP Pride started small, but, Wolfe says, "people kept coming back. I think they realized there was a need for it." She estimates around 1,500 people attended the first Pride Fest.

UP Pride had to adjust its Pride plans in the face of COVID. "2020 was supposed to be our seventh annual Pride Fest," Wolfe says. The festival would have been the first in a new, more visible location.

Still, UP Pride wanted to celebrate Pride in 2021. "Something to show that we're still here, the community isn't going anywhere, and we're not slowing down any time soon," Bradford says.

The result is Ride with Pride, which will kick off Saturday June 26 at 4 p.m. with a promenade around Marquette starting at the Northern Michigan University PEIF parking lot.

Bradford encourages participants to "decorate your cars, and if you

don't have a car, decorate your bike. If you don't have a bike, decorate yourself."

## Bay City

Scott Ellis, 30, Executive Director of Great Lakes Bay Pride (GLBP), says he lives "in the greatest region in the world."

"Everything you could possibly need we've got here," the 12-year Bay City resident says, including Lake Huron, "a Great Lake that's four miles away from my house."

"I have been out pretty much since the start of college," Ellis says. After coming out to close friends, he participated in a radio interview for National

Coming Out Day and "came out to 5,000 people — I wanted to go big or go home."

The Great Lakes Bay region isn't known for progressivism or attracting young people. Ellis says, "When I was going to school, I often felt like there was an attitude of 'get in, get your degree and get out.'"

Instead, he says, he "really made that conscious decision to stay in the region... and I've loved every minute of it."

Still, he knows there is more work to do. "I think everybody has their own idea about the life they want

to build," he says. "I know there are folks... who are not able to be their authentic selves. It's hard to see. We have a long way

to go toward building an inclusive community."

Like last year, GLBP is distributing yard signs for a "Pride at Home" celebration. In 2020, they distributed 600 signs. The goal this year is 1,000.

"I believe we have far more allies in our region than we probably even know. That to me is a good thing," he says. "We're moving in the right direction."

Ellis encourages young people to consider living in the area long-term. "We need younger people to either come back here or stick around... to really create the communities we want," he says. "I would encourage folks to really consider that. We're happy to have you back."

Meanwhile, he will keep working to make the region more desirable. "It's my mission in life to turn us into the gay mecca of northern Michigan," he says.

## Battle Creek

Deana Spencer, co-president of Battle Creek Pride (BCP), has lived in the Battle Creek area her entire life. However, she can't really speak to how LGBTQ+ acceptance in the region has changed because, for a long time, it was simply not on her radar.

"I didn't come out until I was in my 30s," Spencer tells BTL. She says she had been "just really surpassing who I was all those years."

"I didn't really know the climate [for LGBTQ+ people] in Battle Creek because it didn't pertain to me and my life, so I never looked at it," she said. "Not even as an ally. I was almost terrified of it. And so I didn't."

This fear stemmed from something that happened just seven years before she got married at 19.

"I had an experience when I was 12 years old of being in love with another female, and my parents found out and told me how sinful and wrong it was, and it was really traumatic for me," she says. "I knew it was not an option. Period. The end. That's all there is to it. So I never explored it again."

But she hadn't forgotten.

Spencer was working in a grocery store when she reconnected with her first love, Mitzi Harrison. "She came through the checkout line," Spencer

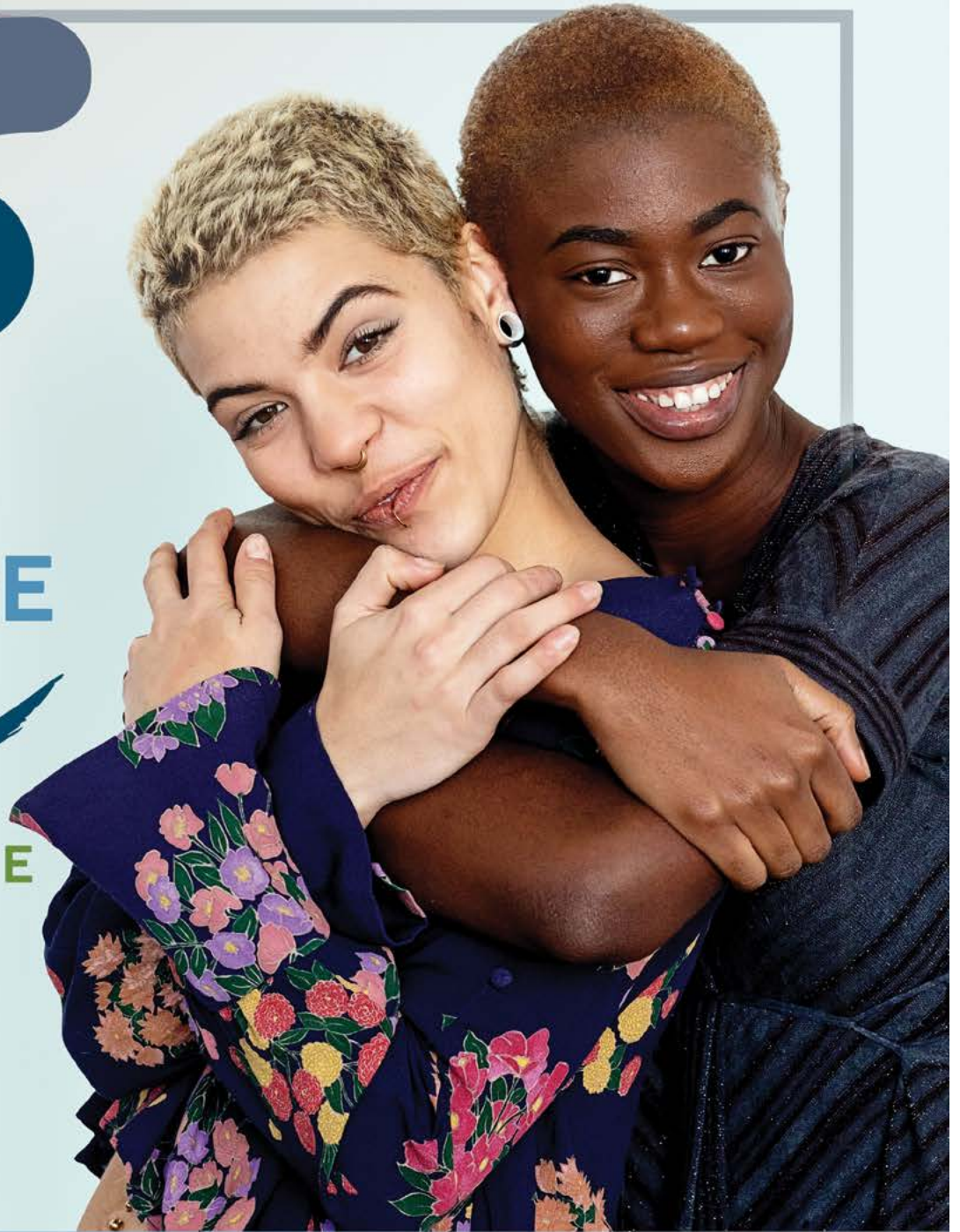
*"I believe we have far more allies in our region than we probably even know. That to me is a good thing."*

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# ‘Michigan Really Gave the Film a Home’

## Sigourney Weaver Reflects on Shooting ‘Prayers for Bobby’ in Metro Detroit



Actress Sigourney Weaver walks Washington Avenue in Royal Oak where she shot the Lifetime movie “Prayers for Bobby.” Photo: Lifetime / Ben Mark Holzberg

BY CHRIS AZZOPARDI

Sigourney Weaver almost didn’t make it to Michigan to film “Prayers for Bobby.” In fact, the star of “Ghostbusters” and “Alien” didn’t think she could even make time to shoot the TV drama, which has resonated deeply with LGBTQ+ audiences everywhere since it premiered on Lifetime in 2009.

At the time, the actress had another job, and her daughter was about to graduate from high school. But Weaver couldn’t say no once she read the Lambda Literary Award-nominated book — a harrowing and inspiring true story, written by out journalist Leroy Aarons — and Katie Ford’s script about the real-life Mary Griffith, a Christian woman who becomes a devout LGBTQ+ crusader after her gay teenage son, whom she once vehemently condemned, commits suicide. (Griffith died just last year at the age of 85.)

In addition to portraying Griffith, Weaver also co-produced “Prayers for Bobby” alongside executive producers Daniel Sladek, Chris Taaffe

and David Permut, who had been trying to get the film made for 11 years before it finally aired on Lifetime.

“I just felt it was so important,” Weaver told me when we spoke in June 2008, during a break from shooting. Though the movie is set in 1980s San Francisco, it features many familiar Metro Detroit locations: Pronto! and the United Methodist Church, both in Royal Oak; Ferndale High School; Backstreet nightclub in Detroit, and a Bloomfield home, the setting for the Griffith residence. The film’s final scene takes place up and down Washington Avenue in Royal Oak, as Weaver’s Mary leads a PFLAG parade alongside about 1,000 Michigan extras.

“Prayers for Bobby” has gone on to be screened globally, at festivals, conferences, universities and faith-based organizations. It was even, by invitation of European Union Parliament then-Vice President Ulrike Lunacek, screened by members of Parliament on International Day Against Homophobia in 2015. To this day, both PFLAG National and the Trevor Project consider the film a valuable educational tool. As for Weaver, in addition

to receiving Emmy, Golden Globe and Screen Actors Guild nominations, she was honored with the Trevor Life Award from The Trevor Project for her participation in the film.

An encore presentation of “Prayers for Bobby” will be available to watch on Lifetime on demand for cable subscribers through the end of July.

Without her even saying it, it’s clear the film is still important to the veteran actress, who tells me at the onset of our conversation that she’s “really glad” we get to reconnect about the film 12 years after its premiere. During our interview, Weaver told Between The Lines why she considers “Prayers for Bobby” one of the most significant films she’s ever made and how Michigan “really gave the film a home.”

**It means a lot that you’d take time out to talk about this movie still, after all these years.**

Well, unfortunately, it’s still as relevant as ever. Maybe even more so during this weird year where they’re trying to pass so many anti-LGBTQ laws. They need to see the

movie. (Laughs.)

**Well, recently in Michigan, Governor Gretchen Whitmer signed an executive order that will bar state or federal funds to be used for conversion therapy in the state.**

I read that. I’m so shocked that conversion therapy was being done in Michigan, which I think of as a very (laughs) sophisticated place. And even state funds were being used to conduct conversion therapy against teenagers, which is heartbreaking because I believe that the attempted suicide rate for kids who have been through that is higher, understandably. I think that after this COVID year where there was so much more isolation for LGBTQ youth, it’s really the opposite of what one would hope would happen this year.

**The governor’s executive order, though, is a positive step forward. Hopefully, other leaders follow in her footsteps.**

Very positive. I hope it’s being picked up all over, you know? Because good for her.



Start banning conversion therapy instead of banning LGBTQ youth from sports teams and bathrooms.

**I bet when you made the movie 12 years ago, you didn't realize that you'd be talking about it every June for Pride Month, but it sure seems that way.**

Yeah, and I'm glad because I think it's taken the producers quite a bit of work to continue to get the movie out there. It wasn't shown enough when we first did it, and I think they're constantly working on showing it all over the world. Every time Pride Month rolls around, I wish we could show it more than once, but at least it's playing on Lifetime and that's great.

**You thanked the state of Michigan in your GLAAD acceptance speech when the movie won for Outstanding TV Movie or Miniseries. Why was Michigan important to the filming of this movie for you?**

Michigan really gave the film a home, and Michigan is an interesting place because I feel like it has very strong political sides there. And what I felt about the production of "Prayers for Bobby" is that we had a lot of crew from Michigan. We were in a very kind of upscale neighborhood shooting, and I felt everyone that I came across seemed to be there for a personal reason, fighting for the same thing.

You know, a crew member would have a member of the family or a good friend who was LGBTQ. Everyone was trying to make a movie that would help in some way. And I felt that also about just where we were in Michigan, even though it has this reputation, I guess, of being a very corporate state. It's such a complex place, Michigan. (Laughs.) We just had the best reception there. I imagine there were states that probably didn't want us to shoot there. And I think it would still be the same, unfortunately.

**Did shooting in Midwestern Michigan towns that aren't all that big provide the film with benefits that maybe shooting in a big city sprawl like LA or Atlanta couldn't have?**

Oh gosh, yes. I felt that very much. I felt that it contributed to the intimacy of the story. Here they were, this family that was so close, and Mary idealized family life and she felt that Bobby's being gay went against that. But I hope that other mothers who are conservative would have a different outlook, 'cause it seems to me that even all across the political spectrum, people are wanting more recognition of LGBTQ problems and solutions. I think that's across the board because I see these state legislatures trying to pass very punitive, insensitive laws against the LGBTQ community.

**The amazing thing about what you've done with that role is that you've allowed the viewer to even sympathize with Mary, which is difficult for gay viewers like myself, watching somebody condemn their gay child. And yet, you come to**

**an understanding of where Mary has come from and why she is the way she is.**

I'm glad you feel that way. The day I spent with Mary was such a powerful experience, because her desire to make amends is much too small a concept. Her conversion into a person who sees people and accepts people for what they are, it was so profound, so you see someone who is blind but they're trying to find their way out of this thing. I guess that reminds me, especially during this very political time, not to demonize (laughs) the people who are behind these laws. It must be about fear and ignorance.

All we can do is continue to, in your case, put out these stories and articles about how things are changing and how much more needs to be done, and in my case I've just finished a movie called "Call Jane," which is about the group of women that came together in 1968 (the Jane Collective). They formed a sort of clandestine abortion service and ended up performing the abortions themselves and performed almost 12,000 abortions without losing a single patient. It was very clear to me when I read the script, even though it's not overt, that this woman was in a gay relationship.

**You've done so many iconic movies, but when it comes to the impact of your work, where does "Prayers for Bobby" rank?**

It's very high up there in terms of making a movie with a very specific endpoint, to make this movie for this community. To encourage them. To let them know that we're here for them. I think that I would put it in the top three.

I can never even remember what I've done when I get a question like this (laughing), but I would say I'm grateful to have had an opportunity to tell a story in a movie that was made for such an important purpose. That makes me very happy, to use my work and come together with other artists to put something out there that's going to make a difference for young people and their families around the world. There's nothing more powerful than that. That's what an actor dreams of: to make a difference with their work. And it's very gratifying to me to be able to talk to you. This year, I think, has been a bit shocking in terms of how much legislation there is out there, and yet, at the same time, I feel that things have opened up in the LGBTQ world. There's much more attention and compassion riveted on young people in this regard.

**My hope is that every 10 years or so we get to check in and talk about "Prayers for Bobby" in the scope of the larger world. So next time we talk, hopefully a lot more will have changed for the LGBTQ+ community.**

Well, let's not make it 10 years. I may not even be here. (Laughs.) Let's make it two.

*Read the full interview at [Pridesource.com](http://Pridesource.com).*



## *Sweet Like a Cherry Joemato*

Joe Rarus and Gary Brewer, his partner of 45 years. Photos: Andrew Potter

# He Grows the Tomatoes. His Partner Makes the Sauce.

BY JILL A. GREENBERG

On a recent Sunday morning, Joe Rarus stands under a canopy in his yard, surveying the overflow of tomato plants that line the grass outside his greenhouse. There were about 1,200 in all, not including his two experimental offsite test gardens.

For the last 12 years, Joe has sold tomatoes from his home on a quiet street in Southfield, where he lives with Gary Brewer, his partner of 45 years. The business, nicknamed Joematoes, attracts customers from as far as Chicago every

season.

“I’ve never worried about feeding myself,” he says, waving his hands toward the countless plants on display. “I’m in the middle of it.”

The backyard sales are open for about 11 weeks, beginning in late March through early June. Although Joematoes has closed sales for the season, he still keeps busy with 107 varieties of tomatoes in his test gardens.

While Joe, 71, always knew his hands were destined to be in dirt, an opportunity to do it professionally appeared mid-career. After spending 20 years working as an inventory and control specialist at Hewlett Packard in Novi,

Joe took a job with the City of Southfield as director of its community garden. It’s a role he would hold for the next 20 years.

When it comes to eating tomatoes, Joe can’t pick just one as his favorite. He’s quick to qualify this decision depending on the category and use. But for slicing tomatoes he doesn’t even flinch. He will always grab a Chocolate Beefsteak because of its dark red flesh and rich flavor.

The most misunderstood tomato? The green one, of course. “It takes a long time to convince people to just try it. When it’s rock hard, it’s not ripe. But when it gives just a little bit,” he says,

demonstrating by gently squeezing his fingers, “or changes on the bottom from green to a light green, then it’s ripe.”

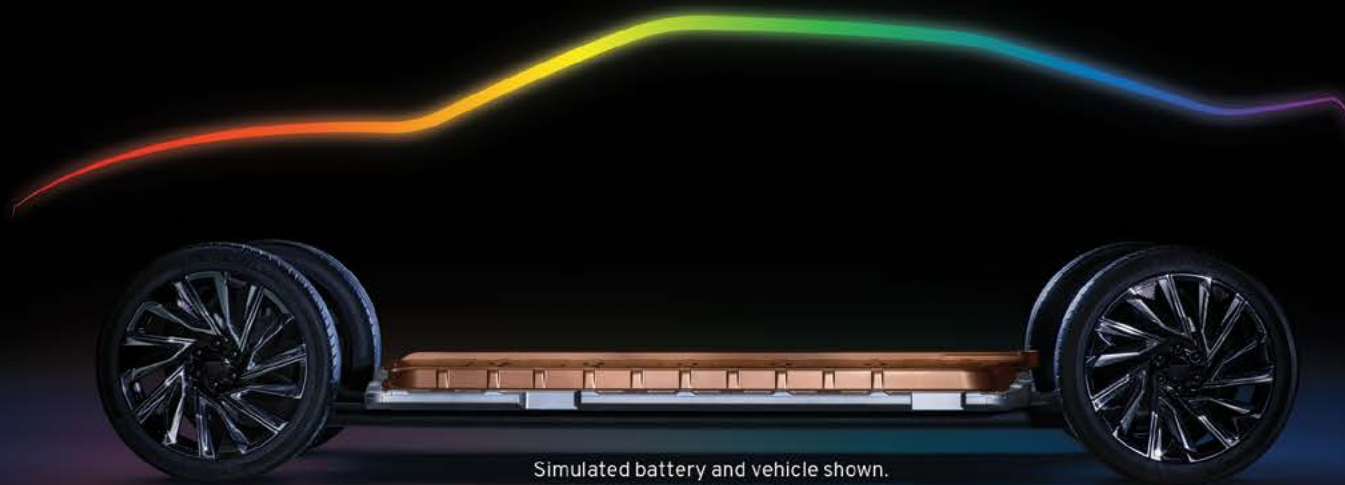
In the years Joe has sold the plants, he’s never run out of inventory. In fact, at the end of his sale season, he donates what’s left — last year giving 340 plants to the local Salvation Army. “They were gone in an hour-and-a-half,” he says, as he straightens opaque plastic drinking cups, each holding a seedling about 10 inches tall. This year he decided to forego donating leftover plants, and he grew a large crop just

See **Joematoes**, page 18



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# Not Just Business as Usual

## Lt. Gov. Gilchrist's Stopover at LGBT Detroit Aimed at Encouraging LGBTQ-Owned Businesses



LGBT Detroit's Jerron Totten and Lt. Gov. Garlin Gilchrist. Photo: Chris Sutton

BY JASON A. MICHAEL

Michigan Lt. Gov. Garlin Gilchrist gave a talk at LGBT Detroit's Northwest Detroit office on Monday, June 14, on how the state could help minority business owners succeed.

"I want to understand from you how we can better serve you," he told the crowd of about 25.

Gilchrist went on to say that Michigan's economy needs to be built back up better than it was before the pandemic.

"[The economy] doesn't need to be jumpstarted in a way that looks exactly like things were before. Things before weren't that great. It wasn't optimized for your success ... for business members like you who are not only members of the LGBTQ community but just representing a group of people who have been previously, intentionally, designed out of opportunity."

But all that, said Gilchrist, is changing.

"We want to be the right kind of partner," he said. "Entrepreneurs have been marginalized because of your identity, your location, whatever it has been. We've tried to design our state programs to fill in those gaps and that's worked sometimes. But it could be better.

"I want Michigan to be the best place to start a business."

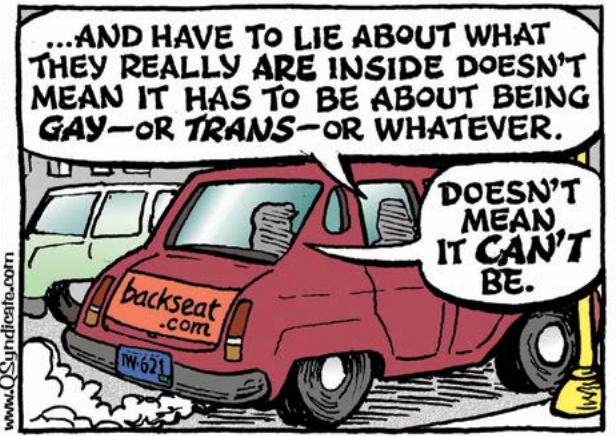
Ulysses Grant listened to Gilchrist hoping to hear something that could help him. He started Taylor One Gourmet Catering in 2013.

"[The talk] was inspiring to a degree," said Grant. "But you're still missing the gap in between the business owners, like myself, and the resources available to them. Even when I applied for some of the pandemic stuff that was out there. There was always a glitch to the application, like you have to have so many employees. But if I'm just doing it as the owner/operator, I have to do all the work. In most situations they're looking for people with more than 10 employees. The only time I use 10 or more employees is when I have a job that calls for that."

Longtime community activist Chris Sutton started Inspire Inspiration, a media company, back in 2010.

"The lieutenant governor seemed very intentional in trying to engage with Detroit's LGBTQ community but especially Detroit's LGBTQ business community," Sutton said. "There were so many entrepreneurs in the room and small business owners who identify under the LGBTQ spectrum. He really wanted to hear from them, and he really took the time to listen and tried

See **Gilchrist**, next page



## Viewpoint



## I've Fought for LGBTQ+ Equality for Decades. Then a Dream Came True: I Threw Out the First Pitch at a Detroit Tigers Game.

BY JAN STEVENSON

On June 11, I realized a dream come true 33 years in the making when I got to throw out the ceremonial first pitch at the Detroit Tigers game, part of the celebration of LGBTQ Pride Night at Comerica Park.

It all began in 1988. Gary Roberts had just filed paperwork to create Affirmations Community Center and we were about to have our first board meeting. On the agenda was the election of our inaugural officers and there were two candidates for president, my friend Sue Pittman and me. We were asked to speak to the assembled group of a couple dozen members, all crowded into a small house in Detroit owned by Sue and her partner, Christine Puckett. The couple let Affirmations use this vacant rental property for the new organization's first six months.

Sue went first and then I spoke. I talked about how we could build a compassionate community center that would provide a home and a public face for LGBTQ+ people in the region. After outlining potential programs and other plans, I fantasized with them about how one day we would all be

celebrating our new found freedoms and Pride at Tigers Stadium.

The vote was held. I was elected president. The rest is history. In 1988 it wasn't even legal to be LGBTQ+. Police stings were a regular threat; it was almost impossible to be an out LGBTQ+ politician or business leader. AIDS was raging. Trans issues weren't even on the radar. We were not allowed to serve in the military, and our relationships had to be kept secret or we could lose our jobs. We could only dream about a future that was inclusive, welcoming and safe.

But we did have hopes and dreams, and we had each other. And we kept at it.

We quickly got to work setting up the Hotline, scheduling volunteers and starting our first support groups. Many more joined us, some at Affirmations, some creating new organizations and projects. We made progress and suffered terrible setbacks, none worse than the 1992 brutal murder of Sue and Chris by their homophobic neighbor.

Now 33 years after that first meeting at Affirmations I

was standing on the field at Comerica Park and looking out at rainbow flags all over the stadium. I heard the announcers welcome the exuberant crowd to LGBTQ Pride Night at Comerica Park. Four LGBTQ leaders and their respective institutions were honored on the field and presented with donations from Comerica Bank, including Roz Keith of Stand With Trans, Dani Woods from the Detroit Police Department, Kevin Heard of the Detroit Regional LGBTQ Chamber of Commerce and Mark McCormick from the Ruth Ellis Center.

Just before we stepped onto the field I got a text from April DeBoer wishing me luck throwing out the first pitch.

April and her partner Jayne were the plaintiffs in a federal lawsuit that went all the way to the Supreme Court, resulting in the landmark Obergefell v. Hodges decision that legalized marriage equality nationwide in 2015. The effort, struggles, victories and tenacious hard work to organize, energize and mobilize our community for decades seemed to collapse into that moment standing there on the field.

As I stepped up to throw out the ceremonial first pitch of the game I smiled at the gracious, welcoming Tigers staff, looked out at the beautiful rainbow-adorned crowd and remembered back to that board meeting 33 years ago. We'd made it to Tigers Stadium — a dream come true.



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*Jan Stevenson is the former co-publisher of Between The Lines (1995 to 2020). She served as the first president of the board of Affirmations Community Center (1988 to 1992), and as the group's first executive director (1992-1995).*

## → Gilchrist

Continued from previous page

to give constructive feedback.”

Sutton said he is used to hearing from a variety of folk during Pride Month. “We see a lot of this, especially during Pride Month, where we have a lot of different entities and corporations and politicians who take this month to notice that we’ve been here, we work here and we’re a part of the community,” Sutton said. “I know he has connected with different people in our community prior, but at the same time we pretty much had a room full of business owners who identify as LGBTQ. There are people who’ve been doing this work for decades and have felt unseen by other administrations.”

Sutton added that politicians would be wise to pay the LGBTQ community some attention.

“The LGBTQ community in the city and the region plays a pivotal part in our economy,” he said. “Not only do we need to be heard, but there needs to be a real constructive effort to make sure we have what we need to keep contributing to Michigan’s economy.”

## Creep Of The Week

# Kellogg’s Pride Cereal Sells Out, Demands Kids Put Pronouns in Writing

BY D’ANNE WITKOWSKI

I’ve gone from grocery store to grocery store buying up every box of the Kellogg’s Together With Pride cereal and I have them all listed on eBay.

I’m kidding, I did not do that. Although apparently some people did because good luck getting a box of this sweet, heart-shaped crunchiness online for less than \$20 a box.

This pisses me off, frankly. As a card-carrying member of The Homosexual Agenda, I should be entitled to at least one box of Pride cereal. But apparently Pride has just become too popular.

I should have known that the completely real and official Homosexual Agenda’s, um, agenda to make every single person identify as LGBTQ+ would backfire when it came to procuring limited edition breakfast foods.

Especially since I read that eating this cereal either makes you queer or increases your queerness. Think Popeye and spinach.

Which explains why the American Family Association (AFA) side hustle, One Million Moms (OMM), is so upset. Everyone knows that cereal consumption is directly correlated with sexual orientation and gender identity.

On June 18, OMM, a group of “millions” of moms followed by 4,138 people on Twitter, took to the interwebs to demand that Kellogg’s stop being so damn fabulous.

Under the headline, “Kellogg’s Continues to Use Cereal Mascots to Push LGBTQ Agenda” OMM Director Monica Cole writes, “Kellogg’s has supported the homosexual community for a long time, and now it is obvious they are going after our children. As part of an effort to say ‘all are welcome,’ Kellogg is collaborating with the Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) advocacy group once again.”

NOW it’s obvious that Kellogg’s is after children? NOW? It wasn’t when Pop Tarts released their Frosted Wildlicious Wild Berry flavor, which was designed in a lab to be completely unpalatable to adult humans?

“To attract children, the Together With Pride limited-edition box features beloved characters,” continues Cole, “including Mini holding a Pride flag (from Frosted Mini Wheats), Toucan Sam, Tony the Tiger, Sunny (from Raisin Bran), Honey Smacks Dig’em Frog, Snap, Crackle & Pop, and Cornelius (from Corn Flakes).”

OK. First of all, what is Kellogg’s supposed to do with their mascots? NOT push the LGBTQ+ agenda? Tony the Tiger has been making kids gay since 1952. Not only has he grown more buff since

his debut (clearly hitting the gym on the regular), but he’s always worn a red bandana. I would bet money I could find Tony the Tiger NSFW fan fiction online right now. I won’t. But I definitely could.

As for the Rice Krispie trio, Snap, Crackle, and Pop (and by the way, I doubt those are their REAL names), who can definitely say what gender they are? I mean, people assume they’re male, but that’s all it is: an assumption. Do better. And then there’s Toucan Sam, the mascot for Froot Loops. Enough said.

“The most disturbing feature is the box top that has a special spot for children to add their own pronouns of choice, which encourages children to pick their pronouns,” Cole writes.

THE HORROR.

But it’s true. Cereal boxes are the deciders when it comes to pronouns. Nothing you can do about it. Just the way it is. Chances are your kid is going to use pronouns someday. Start preparing yourself now. Because whatever your kid writes on that box is legally binding.

“Kellogg’s needs to hear from you,” says Cole. “Supporting the homosexual agenda versus remaining neutral in the cultural war is just bad business. If Christians cannot find corporate neutrality with Kellogg’s, then they will vote with their pocketbook and support companies that are neutral.”

Remaining neutral in the cultural war? Corn Flakes were invented in a sanitarium by a guy who thought “exciting and irritating food” caused people to masturbate, which he called “the most dangerous of all sexual abuses.” He thought a plain and bland diet would make people chaste. That guy was John Harvey Kellogg.

That’s apparently the Kellogg’s era that the AFA and its handful of excitable moms long to go back to.

I’ve said it before and I’ll say it again: no matter how many rainbows a company puts on its products, what really matters is how much money they’re giving to anti-LGBTQ+ politicians and candidates.

And a lot of rainbow happy companies have no problem selling out your civil rights and safety for a Republican who promises corporate tax cuts. That’s not “neutrality” in the culture wars. That’s arming one side with tanks while giving the other side a wink and a thumbs up.

Is it better than nothing that Kellogg’s is donating money to GLAAD? Sure. I don’t know what Kellogg’s political giving looks like, but there are plenty of companies who are supporting the very extremists who hurt LGBTQ people. It’s not “Grrreat!”



The rainbow-painted crosswalk in Battle Creek, Michigan. Photo courtesy of Deana Spencer

## → Small-Town Pride

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says. “Through all those years, I had seen her in passing in Battle Creek, [but] hadn’t spoken to her since I was 17 or 18. And just out of the blue, I said, ‘How have you been? I was thinking of you and want to know if you want to catch up.’”

They exchanged phone numbers. “I called that night, and we never stopped talking from that minute forward.”

Spencer divorced her husband and married the person she’d been in love with since she was 12.

Spencer and Harrison had bonded over a shared love for Joan Jett when they were kids, something they continued as adults. “The first thing we did when we first started hanging out was that we went to a concert in Detroit. That

became our thing. We followed her around.”

Sadly, at the last Joan Jett show they attended together, Harrison suffered a stroke and died the next day.

It’s been a long road, but today, alongside current partner Kim Haist, Spencer has moved on. “I have a wonderful partner now,” Spencer says. “I don’t question my life anymore, not one single thing. And I haven’t since I came out.”

This conviction is perhaps why she feels LGBTQ+ acceptance is moving much too slowly in Battle Creek.

“It isn’t always progressive,” she says. “I think people want to think it is, but I don’t think it always is. As a leader, it’s frustrating.”

She points to crosswalks BCP painted for Pride in 2019.

“I swear you would have thought the world came to an end,” she says. “It literally blew up in our faces, and it was such a controversy here

and such a drama.”

Facebook exploded with homophobic and transphobic comments, she says. While BCP knew the paintings were intended to be temporary, Spencer quietly hoped the city would decide to keep them, once installed. That did not happen.

The slow progress here leads to an inevitable question: Why stay?

“As much as I complain about Battle Creek, it’s what I know,” she explains. “And I don’t hate Battle Creek. There are things about Battle Creek that I love.”

Family is one big reason. Spencer’s kids and her partner’s family are there.

“I’m one of those people where if I’m comfortable, I’m comfortable,” she says. “I feel like Battle Creek still needs a bit of shaking up, and I guess I’m here to do that.”

## Haslett

Not everyone finds sticking around where they grew up to be what’s best for living as their authentic selves.

Learned Foote, 33, moved to Houston after growing up in rural Haslett.

“I was homeschooled, so a lot of my socializing was with my family and church,” he says.

He recalls that when “Lord of the Rings” came out in 2001, “I loved the movie and sort of had a crush on Elijah Wood at the time.” But his church friends made fun of the hobbits because they would hold hands and look into each other’s eyes, something they read as gay. Foote, however, identified with the characters.

Later, when “The Hours” was released, Foote saw it with his mom. “It was much more specifically about being lesbian and being queer,” he says. “I remember her saying afterward, ‘That’s a sign of what happens when you don’t have God.’”

In other words, being gay was not an option.

He says, “If it was talked about, it was in very negative terms by the adults around me.”

Foote’s coming out experience was sudden.

“I came out to [my parents] when I was 15, basically because my youth pastor wrote about it in his secret blog,” he says.

The pastor, later fired, had been writing about problems with the church. “I think he was more progressive and frustrated,” Foote says. “One of the topics was, ‘I have a kid who

“It isn’t always progressive. I think people want to think it is, but I don’t think it always is. As a leader, it’s frustrating.”

told me he’s gay. How do I help him have a happy life?”

The senior pastors figured out that the kid in question was Foote. Soon, his parents tried to make him see a therapist. “I was not into it at all,” he says. “I had to sit down every week and talk about scripture and why it’s bad to be gay, but I was kind of a rebellious teenager at that point.”

He says, “The teenagers, people my age, were getting the sense that things could be different.”

This sense came in large part to Haslett’s proximity to Michigan State University.

Foote remembers taking guitar lessons at Marshall Music in Lansing, where he saw a periodical from MSU that clued him in to the existence of an LGBT community. “I didn’t know how to access that community, but I knew it was out there,” he says.

Coming out strained Foote’s family relationships. His parents were not accepting, declaring, “We love you, but we don’t accept the lifestyle.” So, Foote says, “We just didn’t talk about it for years.”

Eventually, Foote left to attend Columbia University in New York, the city where he was born.

“I had family there, and I wanted to be in the gayest, most liberal place possible, and that seemed like New York to me,” he says.

Foote sees things a bit differently now. “I wouldn’t say Michigan is homophobic and New York is not because in New York you can still



Volunteers from Great Lakes Bay Pride and Dow GLAD distribute Pride At Home signs in Bay City. Photo courtesy of Scott Ellis

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## → Small-Town Pride

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encounter homophobia, and in Michigan, you can still encounter queer community.”

In the meantime, things are changing in Haslett, at least among Foote's family. “I feel like [my parents] eased up a bit over the years,” he says. Between him coming out and a sister announcing her atheism, “my parents' dreams of raising perfect Christian children were dashed.”

Recently his sister got married, Foote says, “and I brought my partner to her wedding.”

## Trenton

Trenton, the first Downriver community to pass an LGBTQ+-inclusive human rights ordinance, raised its first Pride Flag in 2021.

Patrick Taylor, 33, chair of the Trenton Cultural Commission, said the group's recommendation to the Trenton City Council to raise the Pride Flag, “passed unanimously and so quickly,” he tells BTL. “There was no debate, no discussion.”

A Trenton native, Taylor came out as a ninth grader.

“There was, of course, occasional teasing from kids at school, but it wasn't anything like some of the stories you hear and read about where it's just incessant bullying and traumatizing,” he says.

Taylor left Trenton to go to college and moved back to the Downriver area during the 2016 election.

“I'll be honest, it was kind of a bummer to see a lot of support for Trump in terms of signage throughout the community,” he says. “When I left Trenton to go away to school... it seemed a lot more progressive-leaning.”

Taylor's perception was partly due to Trenton's 2013 passage of anti-discrimination legislation aimed at protecting LGBT rights, Ordinance 777. Taylor's father, who he describes as “a bleeding heart liberal,” served on the Trenton City Council and had a direct hand in the ordinance's passage.

The raising of a Pride Flag this year is an important symbol of the “progress that we can continue to make,” says Taylor.

For Kurt Forrest, 18, Trenton's flag means a lot.

“It really does help me feel accepted,” says Forrest. “It makes home feel a little more homelike, I suppose.”

Forrest came out as transgender and gay during as a high school freshman in 2016.

“I transitioned pretty much all at once,” Forrest tells BTL.

“I knew for a while that I wanted to identify as male, and I pretty much showed up one day with a binder and a short haircut and a new name and a new set of pronouns,” he says. “I found out pretty quickly who was supportive and who wasn't.”

“It was scary but freeing,” Forrest says. “You're afraid of being ostracized and mocked, but at the same time, it also feels... I can't think of any other word than ‘freeing.’”

Forrest has a strong support system and is grateful for that.

“I think having adults who are supportive, and not only supportive but also members of the LGBTQ community themselves, is probably the best part of the flag-raising ceremony,” Forrest says. “It shows me and a lot of the other kids and teens... that there is a future.”



An inclusive Pride flag flies beneath the American flag in Trenton.

Forrest attended the flag-raising ceremony with his mother, Bonnie Forrest, who also served on the Cultural Commission.

“Pride means community,” she says. “You look around and think, ‘Yes, this is our community, these are our people. This is our base, our home.’”

*D'Anne Witkowski is a writer living in Michigan with her wife and son. She has been writing about LGBTQ+ politics for nearly two decades. Follow her on Twitter @MamaDWitkowski.*




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## → Joematoes

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for the Salvation Army.

On this sunny afternoon, as Joe welcomes prospective customers to his yard, he calls Gary over to take a group photo. “OK, get comfortable. ... I’m going to take a few,” he says, waving his hand as he urges everyone to squeeze in the frame. Afterward, Gary offers the visitors a black-and-white sticker that in part says: “All People Are Created Equal Members of the One Human Family.”

“It’s phenomenal. These people are coming here, and they just swear by his tomatoes,” Gary says, then turns to flash a huge smile at Joe.

As for growing tomatoes, Gary has no interest. “I’m not into gardening. I’m into cooking for him, and making sure he’s fed.” His go-to dish? Spaghetti sauce, using Joe’s paste tomatoes.

Joe and Gary met in the 1970s at longtime gay nightspot Menjo’s on West McNichols Road in Highland Park. It was love at first sight, and shortly after the two moved in with each other.

Gary remembers early in their relationship when then-rising pop



star and gay icon Madonna made a surprise appearance at the popular club.

“They held all the parking away from the front of the building and she arrived in a white limo. We

didn’t know Menjo’s was one of her hangouts. Then all of the sudden, the DJ came on and said, ‘We have a guest arriving.’

“And it was Madonna. We were all so excited.”

Over the years, Joe and Gary’s work lives also crossed as they both spent time working for Hewlett Packard, and later for the Department of Parks and Recreation in Southfield. Last year, Joe retired from the city and

devoted even more time to tomatoes.

Joe’s devotion reveals itself in his yard, where two laminated 8-1/2-by-11-inch sheets lay in the sun. They present the current menu of what’s available at Joematoes, 40 varieties in all. Each item features a photo and description of the color and size (“large red,” “medium pink,” “green when ripe”) along with variety (“Brad’s Atomic Grape,” “Little Lucky,” “David’s Pink”).

But getting to this point takes planning — and making room on his kitchen table.

“You should see it ... our kitchen is disrupted when he does that because he has them all stacked in trays and under the lights when they start growing,” Gary says, offering to give a quick look at what’s left after the earlier inside-growing efforts. He gets his kitchen back once the plants start getting to a certain size, and then they are transplanted into a cup for eventual sale at \$4 each.

Joe’s gardens weren’t always dominated by tomatoes. In fact, he found his first true passion in bonsai trees (an ornamental tree grown in small containers). So much so, he “had bonsai everywhere.”

See **Joematoes**, page 20

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## → Joematoes

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“When I do a project, I jump in two feet first,” Joe says.

After his love affair with bonsai, he took a liking to roses and before long had 263 rose bushes growing in containers behind his ranch home. But Joe’s heart and hands wanted to dig deeper. Maple tree roots prevented him from growing a proper garden out back, and that’s when he connected with the Southfield Community Garden.

It was here, about 20 years ago, that Joe turned his gardening gaze to tomatoes. He already knew he could grow things. So he decided to buy a pack of seeds for a couple bucks on eBay to introduce to his crop at the community garden.

“I thought, yeah. I can do that.”

And Joe sure did.

As the plants popped out of the ground, one caught his eye. “I was like, ‘Who are you, little lone star over there?’ It was called a Black Tomato; it’s not black but a dark, dark red. I told myself: ‘I like that, I want the name of that.’” In the next year Joe gathered catalogs, bought every kind of Black Tomato seed available and then grew them all. After a while he saw none of the tomatoes in his test garden matched that first Black Tomato. “That’s when I realized I like this,” and he started breeding and hybridizing his own plants.

Joe found fellowship in online groups like Tomatoville.com, where



he chats with other gardeners about growing techniques, shares pictures and swaps seeds. “That’s how I was able to get these unique varieties,” he says. Eventually people began to notice.

He won enough ribbons to fill a shoe box and received honors twice at the Michigan State Fair. But Joe doesn’t let these accolades go to his head. He’s got a garden to tend to. A garden

“It seems like Joe is really passionate and committed to producing wonderful tomatoes. And it’s clear that he cares a lot. That’s enough inspiration to put us on the road driving almost a couple hundred miles.”

that brings folks like Mary Malosh and her daughter Kiffi Ford all the way out from East Lansing.

Recently, the two took a long Sunday drive in search of heirloom tomato plants.

“We were going to grow them from seed,” Mary says. Until Kiffi found out about the Joematoes Facebook page from a friend.

The two ate their first heirloom tomatoes this past winter and were so impressed with the rich flavor they set out on a mission to plant their own garden. “We are addicted to the heirloom tomatoes,” Kiffi says, with a smile.

Mary and Kiffi say they didn’t think twice about driving to Metro Detroit.

“It seems like Joe is really passionate and committed to producing wonderful tomatoes,” Kiffi says. “And it’s clear that he cares a lot. That’s enough inspiration to put us on the road driving almost a couple

hundred miles.”

As the women gather their 21 plants, Joe gives them advice on how to properly plant them.


“You’ll want to throw a handful of sugar in with the dirt,” Joe tells them, and offers tips about the benefits of using crunched up Tums and Epsom salts in the process.

The cherry tomatoes need to be planted 3 feet apart, he says. “Even though a cherry (tomato) is small, don’t think small cherries, small plant. It will be this big,” he says, reaching up above his head.


“OK, Mom,” Kiffi says, lifting a box of Joematoes plant selections. “Did we bite off more than we can chew?”

“Don’t worry,” Joe assures them. “Sit back and they’ll tell you what to do.”

*Jill A. Greenberg is a veteran journalist and professional communicator. She’s also an urban chickeneer based out of East Lansing.*




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Double Feature p. 31

# Do Good While Looking Good

## 7 Pride Purchases That Support Michigan LGBTQ+ Causes



BY D'ANNE WITKOWSKI

Rainbows, rainbows everywhere, but not a dime for LGBTQ+ rights. That may be true for the majority of Pride merchandise, but here's a list of products you can be proud to buy in support of some truly progressive companies and organizations.

### Pride In Color Candle

Talk about flaming. Ann Arbor-based That Gay Guy Candle Company (GGCC) makes candles that are the perfect gift for any occasion, especially occasions where you want to express a sentiment NSFW.

Whether you want to announce to guests, "I only fuck Democrats," or you want to wish someone "Happy Birthday, Bitch," GGCC has you covered. They also have a limited-edition Pride candle, which is the only candle you can get in their leather scent. Or you can choose from scents like lemon pound cake or lush linen.

GGCC donates 5 percent of sales to organizations meeting the needs of the LGBTQ+ community.

### Human Rights Campaign 'Pride Lives Here' shirt

Proud to be LGBTQ+ in the Great Lakes State? Rep both with a "Pride Lives Here" shirt from the Human Rights Campaign (HRC).

According to HRC, "Each of our Pride Lives Here Rainbow T-Shirts is made with a super soft cotton blend with a worn-in look and feel" and "100% of every purchase of our Pride Lives Here Rainbow T-Shirt fuels HRC's fight for LGBTQ equality."

You can choose any state or territory in case you're not of the Michigan orientation. You can't return or exchange

it since this is a custom item, so make sure you're not accidentally picking Ohio.

### Eames Pride Hang-It-All

Bring Pride and the beautiful midcentury design of Charles and Ray Eames into your home with the Eames Pride Hang-It-All.

Whimsical and sturdy, this wall-mounted rack can withstand a coat in every color of the rainbow, so long as those coats don't weigh more than 50 pounds. According to Herman Miller, "This newly dressed classic makes a bold statement about LGBTQ+ equality in our homes and workplaces."

For every Eames Pride Hang-It-All purchased, they'll donate \$25 to OutRight Action International.

### Moosejaw Love the Love Collection

Perfect for LGBTQ+ people who like to put the "out" in "outside," you can put your entire Pride outfit together simply by shopping Moosejaw's Love the Love Collection, so long as you weren't planning on wearing pants.

The store's Love Tank Top is a cotton and polyester blend that's "ideal in the summer heat, whether you're marching in a Pride parade or just napping in the sun." The top features a colorful Moosejaw Fearsome Critter logo, which, the listing says, "shines with Pride at the front, nestled within the name of the city we love." Complete the look with Moosejaw's Love the Love Tote Bag and Ball Cap.

Get yourself something nice — Moosejaw will donate 20 percent of the sales to the Ruth Ellis Center.

### Great Lakes Bay Pride shirt

Looking for a shirt that celebrates Pride and your love of the Great Lakes Bay area in a more understated way? Look no further than the "I Am Great Lakes Bay Proud" shirt from Great Lakes Bay Pride (GLBP).

Heather grey with white lettering, it'll be your favorite summer souvenir shirt. It's

also the perfect "thanks for watching my dog/cat/ferret for me while I was having fun in Bay City/Midland/Saginaw" gift for your LGBTQ+ dog/cat/ferret sitter.

Don't worry — if you must have rainbows, they've also got a nice GLBP tank top just for you.

### Up North Pride Gear

Going Up North this summer? Of course you are. Maybe you're headed up to Traverse City to eat some pie and drink some wine, and you want to show off your Up North Pride. Well, Up North Pride has you covered.

For your hot girl summer, they've got tank tops so you can show off your guns. Like your tank tops with sleeves? They've got 'em, and they're called t-shirts. Also, put on a hat so you can protect your beautiful face from the sun.

If you're feelin' chilly, pull on an Up North Pride sweatshirt with or without a hood. You can even get an Up North Pride yard sign if you prefer to go naked (local and state laws may apply). It's your life.

Proceeds benefit Up North Pride.

### 'Pride Is Protest' hat and patch from Not Sorry Goods

Whether you're queer or Black and queer, one thing's for sure: You're not sorry. Unapologize for yourself with the Pride collection from Not Sorry Goods.

According to their website, "Not Sorry Goods is all about looking good, feeling good and doing good — unapologetically. By focusing on upcycling, eco-friendly materials and locally-sourced goods, our intention is to create a more sustainable, inclusive and equitable future for all." Not Sorry Goods donates profits from the Pride Is Protest collection, as well as their "Trans Rights Are Human Rights" t-shirts, to Affirmations.



## ...Even More Pride Goodies That Give Back!

### Bombas Socks

Rep your identity in style with Bombas' all-encompassing spectrum socks collection that this year features a Progress Pride flag design in partnership with artist Daniel Quasar. For every Pride item purchased, one will be donated to someone in need within the LGBTQ+ community through three Bombas giving partners: Casa Ruby (Washington, D.C.), Mozaic (Columbus, Ohio) and the Transgender Resource Center of New Mexico. Bombas.com, \$12-\$57

### Trevor Project Shadow Palette

Paint your face a prism of color with the Give Back Trevor Project 12 Color Shadow Palette that sends \$10 from each case back to the eponymous org. BHCosmetics.com, \$19

### Marsha P. Johnson Goddess Necklace

Queer revolutionary and transgender activist Marsha P. Johnson — widely credited with throwing the first brick at the 1969 Stonewall Riots — is immortalized on a 14-karat yellow gold vermeil medallion on an enamel chain. Full proceeds from this addition to Awe Inspired's Goddess collection support the Marsha P. Johnson Institute in its mission to protect and defend the human rights of Black transgender folk. Aweinspired.com, \$200

### Positive Camp Flags

State your open-armed intentions with Oxford Pennant-designed camp flags inscribed with "More Love" (which supports the Pride Center of New York when purchased) and "We are all in this together," because, well, we are. They're ideal for erecting at home, in your office, or atop that mighty hill of inequality. Homage.com, \$48

### ALL Black Lives Matter Hoodie

Nearly twice as many (mostly minority) transgender Americans have died so far in 2021 than by this time in 2020 — and we're not even at the halfway point yet. Devious Designz reminds us that ALL Black Lives Matter on its unisex hoodie that refuses to let their memories die. Deviousdesignz.com, \$28

— Mikey Rox

Check out the full list at Pridesource.com.



# Michigan-Born Novelist On His Queer Book Debut

BY D'ANNE WITKOWSKI

Novelist Robbie Couch, born and raised in Clio, Michigan, does not like birds. Yes, there are birds on the cover of his novel “The Sky Blues.” Yes, there are images of birds on interior pages. But, no, Couch is not a fan. And he isn’t shy about it.

“I hate them,” he tells *Between The Lines* via phone from his home in Los Angeles. “I never want birds to be physically harmed,” he says. “I think that’s a misconception about me. I just don’t want them near me.”

Couch’s fear of birds started, as many fears do, when he was little.

“My first memory on this planet was getting attacked by a swan when I was 3 or 4,” he explains. “I was on a little trolley at a theme park that went through a wooded little park area, and a swan was hanging out there.” The trolley stopped. “And it came over and bit me on the leg.”

He’s had other run-ins. He’s “been shat on many times,” and then there was that probable pigeon pecking that left him with a scratch in Rome. So while he admits that penguins are

adorable and deems owls “tolerable,” it’s no wonder he considers the fact that birds are all over “The Sky Blues” ironic.

But it’s also fitting. Couch, 32, says Swedish artist Jeff Östberg nailed it with the cover art, saying it “perfectly reflected Sky’s story.”

A bird is a fitting symbol for a book about a young man navigating life outside of the closet, trying to figure out where he belongs and creating his own definition of family along the way. It’s about freedom and flight, but also the fear of falling.

Sky Baker, the book’s main character, is the type of person who, Couch says, “falls very hard.” “You learn right from Chapter 1 that he loves hard, and he’s a loyal friend,” Couch says. “His friends mean the world to him, but he’s also in a very vulnerable place when you meet him.”

Vulnerable, but not weak. “He’s certainly confident enough in himself to come out publicly in a small rural town where he’s the only person he knows at his school to be gay,” Couch says. “He’s also someone who’s very curious about the world around him, and that kind of leads him down some roads where he’s trying to figure out some unanswered



Photos courtesy of Sebastian Garnett and Simon & Schuster.

See **Robbie Couch**, page 24



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## → Robbie Couch

Continued from p. 22

questions.”

Couch adds, “Through trying to find answers to those questions, he really becomes himself. He discovers much more about his true self and is much more confident in his own skin.”

“The Sky Blues” is set in Rock Ledge, a fictional small town in Northern Michigan. Couch also grew up in a small Michigan town, which he described as “not great” when it came to being a young gay man.

“It’s certainly not something that’s specific to Clio,” he says. “There really weren’t any openly gay or openly LGBTQ people in that community.”

Couch couldn’t remember any teachers, school officials or coaches who were openly LGBTQ+, and homosexuality “was sort of either frowned upon or just not discussed.”

“There weren’t really any role models in Clio or in my community that I could have looked to that would have helped me feel more comfortable about myself,” he says.

As a result, Couch didn’t come out until college. “I didn’t know what I would face as an openly gay kid in a town with so few openly gay students,” he says. “They definitely dealt with shit. They got bullied, they got ostracized in some ways, and they had to have really thick skin. I saw that I didn’t want that for myself.”

That’s not to say Couch doesn’t have love for Clio. In fact, he says that LGBTQ+ people who grew up in small towns often have a complicated relationship with those places. “There’s oftentimes so many things we love about it, and it holds such a great place in our hearts, but it also comes with some deeply rooted challenges,” Couch says, adding that there can be trauma associated with these places.

“The name of the book is sort of a nod to that duality,” Couch says. It’s both a reflection of the physical beauty of

“I definitely relied on my own upbringing in small-town Michigan in a predominantly white rural working-class town to kind of inform the world around Sky. But a lot of the specific things he experiences and has to fight through and overcome I didn’t have to deal with.”

Northern Michigan where “the blues are bluer” and an acknowledgment that Sky is in a dark place, literally feeling the blues.

But things have changed a lot in Clio. Since the publication of “The Sky Blues,” several GSAs have reached out to Couch to do events — including the Clio High School Diversity Club.

“It’s so cool to know that a club like that exists, and it reflects progress and changing for the better, so that’s wonderful,” he says. “It was awesome to know the book really resonated with the students there, and it was a very cool experience for me.”

While “The Sky Blues” is set in a small town, it isn’t autobiographical.

“I definitely relied on my own upbringing in small-town Michigan in a predominantly white rural working-class town to kind of inform the world around Sky,” he says. “But a lot of the specific things he experiences and has to fight through and overcome I didn’t have to deal with.”

For example, there was no “Promposal,” an event looming over Sky with a countdown starting in the first chapter. There’s a guy he likes at school. And he wants to ask this guy to prom. The problem? One doesn’t just ask someone to prom at Sky’s school. It’s necessary to come up with an elaborate spectacle of some sort, which is stressing Sky out as much as the fact that he doesn’t even know if the guy he likes is gay.

Couch’s family life growing up was completely different from Sky’s.

“My parents are really accepting and

loving, and they have been from the beginning,” he says, “and that is not the case with [Sky’s] family.”

The concept of “found family” plays an important role in the book. “[Sky’s] struggling with some family rejection issues at home,” Couch says. “He’s navigating the world in an openly queer body for the first time, and unfortunately, he’s not getting the love and acceptance at home that all queer kids should be getting.”

Couch adds that a big part of Sky’s journey “is realizing that he can find his people and just because someone isn’t a blood relative they can still love you and you can be part of their family.”

If 32-year-old Robbie Couch could go back and tell his teenage self something, he’d say that he couldn’t imagine his life as a straight person.

“I would tell him that it’s gonna be a weird experience, but at some point, you’ll realize your queerness, your gayness is something you consider a strength and something you’re proud of and something that’s such a cool and important part of your identity and who you are and it’s no longer going to be something you’re afraid to show the world or something you think makes you a freak or abnormal or undeserving of certain things,” he says.

“I would tell him that it gets better.”

“The Sky Blues” is out now. For more info and to buy the book, visit <https://www.robbiecouch.com>.

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# The Unleashing of GREYSON CHANCE

## The Openly Gay Artist on His New Music, New Beau and New Michigan-Bound Tour

BY CHRIS AZZOPARDI

Seven years before Greyson Chance came out in 2017 in an open-hearted and emotional Instagram post, he became a viral sensation thanks to Ellen DeGeneres. The year was 2010 when Chance's profile rocketed after appearing on "The Ellen DeGeneres Show," where the Oklahoma native was invited to perform Lady Gaga's "Paparazzi" after producers came across his video performance of the song at his middle school talent show on YouTube.

That video blew up, going from a million page views to 30 million after the show. It has since ballooned to nearly 70 million views. Chance, the first artist signed to DeGeneres's now-defunct record label (and who had Madonna and Lady Gaga's managers representing him), was just 12 years old then.

Chance, now 23, has a new eight-song EP, "Trophies." It's a followup to his second studio release, "Portraits," which dropped in 2019. With titillating lines like "If you don't know how to touch it, let me educate you," "Trophies" is the perfect soundtrack for your slutty Pride summer.

He's even touring for the album. Called the "Trophies World Tour," Chance hits the road on June 25 for a North American tour that runs through August before he heads to Europe and South America. He'll stop in Detroit on July 24 at the Magic Stick and in Grand Rapids the next day at The Stache. In anticipation of COVID-era demand for live music after more than a year without it, a second round of North American dates is already set for January 2022.

From his plant-overrun home in Oklahoma City ("I live basically in a greenhouse"), Chance chatted about how finding pandemic-era love inspired "Trophies," how uncouth it is to be a homophobe in 2021, and foreseeing an emotional return to the stage.

**This tour is gonna give you a real opportunity to break loose.**

(Laughs.) Very much so.

**And this era feels a bit like a sexual awakening, at least musically.**

Full disclosure: I write all of my own music, and this record covers a lot of different topics, that definitely being one of them. I wanted to show this other side of myself to the world and to just have fun with it, right? "Hellboy" is a record that, for me, is a lot about just unleashing your inner beast and that badass side of yourself. And so, after a year of the pandemic, it was a record that really helped me find my confidence again.

**What has it been like to live out your sexuality in your music and really tap into your openness and authenticity?**

It just finally felt like such a weight had been lifted off my shoulders. Now being able to walk freely around in the industry and as an artist — to be known for who I truly (am) — was so important to me. But what's funny is everyone asks, "How did the songwriting change after you came out?" And to be completely honest, it really didn't. I sort of grew up and learned from songwriters that were always so open about this message of, "Hey, the best music is honest, it's authentic." So whether or not I was using certain pronouns in my music when I was writing, I think I was always channeling that vulnerability.

**What was something unexpected that happened to you during the pandemic?**

Falling in love. I actually met my boyfriend during the pandemic, and a lot of that I talk about on "Trophies." Remembering these first touches of romance and how you can feel in those first relationships. Another thing that

I talked about on the record was having that fear of losing love. That was something that I think was really pertinent in my mind as our relationship was deepening and growing. And I wrote a lot (about) that.

But in the pandemic I think the one thing that surprised me the most was just how much I needed... I'd like to think that I'm a bit of an introvert. I like a quiet night by myself. But after not having any ability to go out and be around people, you start to realize that we need that as human beings. And especially in the queer community where most of our interactions with our peers happen in those venues, and they happen in those clubs and in those bars. And so not being able to tap into that was hard. It was so challenging. It was very demanding on my mental health, as it was for so many people. So I think that was a surprise to me that I realized, oh, actually I do love going out to the club probably a little bit more than I thought.

**What songs on "Trophies" did your boyfriend Ben inspire?**

"O Violet" is probably one of my favorite songs from the record. (It's) about settling into love. It's not just the great moments — it's the bad ones too. And everything in between. It's a very romantic song.

**How excited are you to hit the road after being sequestered for the last year?**

It's a mixed emotion, if I'm being honest. I'm particularly very nervous. It's like getting back on a bike again, but I'll wake up in the middle of the night and I'm like, "Do I even know how to perform? It's been so long." I feel like the first few shows back will be just so emotional to celebrate being back in venues and playing again. But I also want to let anybody know coming to my show that we are still operating in a safe manner. I'm encouraging my fans to wear masks at the show if they would like, and also please get vaccinated. There's no reason why you shouldn't be doing it. It's a safe thing to do. I got my two (doses).

**Have you stepped on a stage yet?**

I have not, and I think that will be a tearful afternoon where it will just feel like a lot of joy.

**You're from Oklahoma, and so I assume opening the tour at Oklahoma City's Pride Festival will be really special for you. Why was it important for you to launch this tour there?**

I was born and raised here, as a gay person, as a person in the queer community. And Oklahoma City for, really, the first time in its history is not only having a Pride, but having this big moment. This is something that the city is getting very behind and that they're really pumping a lot of energy into. What I want to show to the people that are going to

be at that show is to commend the progress this place has made and that this city has made. Because we didn't have things like this when I was younger, (while I was) trying to navigate my sexuality. So it's gonna be such a triumphant moment. Also, to return back to playing live in my hometown for Pride is gonna cover a whole range of emotions.

**What was it like for you growing up in Oklahoma City when the city was less progressive?**

It was difficult. It was hard. I don't think it was any more or less difficult than what kids go through all across America and all across the world, but it was, "You're an outsider, don't be a part of that, stay in line, follow the rules."

As we look to the next generation of queer youth, we wanna make a life that's gonna be a lot better for them, and a world and a society that's gonna be better for them. And so as an artist, what I think my role is, is to create a space at my concert where I know anyone who feels like an outsider can come and finally fit in and really express themselves and be true to themselves. That's what I think my job is as an artist, and especially as a queer artist.

**Did you write and record "Trophies" during the pandemic?**

Yeah, all of it. And this body of work had many iterations. 2020 was a year in which I felt a significant amount of imposter syndrome, and I think a lot of that came from not being able to play live. I all of a sudden really didn't know my purpose anymore. I felt such a lack of purpose.

And so, I kept on writing through it and, to be honest with you, a lot of the music (laughs) was really bad for a second. You have to let yourself be bad sometimes (laughs) and just kind of accept it. Once I let go of this pressure, the record really came about.


**What does Pride this year mean to you?**


I think this one is gonna be extra special because, as I mentioned, the pandemic was not only hard for everybody, but I think it was especially hard for the queer community because our places of where we're truly able to go and let our hair down and really be ourselves are in areas and in places where we weren't allowed to go during the pandemic. So, I think this one is gonna be such a celebration of life, of progress, of knowing that, especially in America, we made it through four years of a very tough presidency. It shows you that the common good is still very, very strong and very alive. So it's gonna be a monumental Pride this year. And, again, my job as an artist is to make sure I can put on a really good show for everybody in the audience for Pride.


*This interview has been edited for length and clarity. Read the full interview at [Pridesource.com](https://pridesource.com).*


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## Normalizing Queer Youth, One Gay Kiss at a Time

Michael Cimino and George Sear on 'Love, Victor'

BY CHRIS AZZOPARDI

"Love, Victor," now in its second season, refuses to navigate coming out as simply a one-note experience.

The gay teen-romance, a series spinoff of the groundbreaking "Love, Simon" feature film, launched its debut season last year on Hulu. The first season was created for Disney+, but the company declined to air it after filming was complete. The show, Disney execs decided, was too grown-up for its young audience. Season 2, then, was created with Hulu audiences in mind, which means more mature emotional themes and a good amount of gay nooky — in fact, an entire episode is devoted to the show's romantic leads, Victor (Michael Cimino) and Benji (George Sear), having sex.

This season, the series follows Victor as a newly out high schooler, from all sorts of Benji-Victor ("Venji," as they've been collectively coined) romantic side plots — meeting the parents, learning about gay sex — to how homophobia, when complicated by deep-rooted cultural and religious beliefs, has to be unlearned.

Before you read any further, know that this interview with Cimino and Sear, who talk about all that making out (and why they opted out of an intimacy coach for those sex scenes), includes some spoilers.

**You guys owe me a few boxes of tissues for all the crying I did last night binging this season.**

**George Sear:** Yeah, it's an emotional one.

**Michael Cimino:** It's a roller coaster, for sure.

**Sear:** I, myself, was tearing up yesterday because I watched the first three episodes, and particularly the scenes with the parents.

**I also just have to start by saying that if I saw two boys making out as much as you two do in this season of "Love, Victor" when I was 16 years old, I would have made out with a lot more guys. Like, where were you in 1995?**

**Cimino:** I was still, um, not even a thought! I wasn't even a thought in either of my parents' heads. But no, I think we're moving in the right direction. I don't think we're in a very different time, but I think that we're moving in the right direction (with) shows like this, where young LGBT youth can watch it and be like, "Oh, this is normal. This is OK."

I feel like a lot of straight teens are like, "Oh yeah, I can make out with this person or this person, and it's completely fine." But it should be exactly the same for the LGBT community. They should feel no pressure and (it) should be completely normal to just kiss people in public.

**Or have sex with your boyfriend and have your mom or dad catch you, because that also happens with gay people.**

**Cimino:** Yes — yes, it does. It totally does. And I think that, obviously, right now, we're definitely talking about... this show

is definitely (about) queer Latinos and I love that about it. I think that it's kind of exactly like every other straight teen show but except through a queer lens. I love that part about "Love, Victor."

**Sear:** It does show the difficult realities of coming out in today's age, which is a difficult thing for most people, but also just the joy in celebrating who you are and embracing who you are on the other side of that. And living your truth.

**I think gay sex has been really neglected on television and I was pleased to see the second season of "Love, Victor" really go there with the sex. What did you appreciate about the way that this season tackled sex, George?**

**Sear:** I think just having LGBTQ writers bring their stories and their experiences into the script brings this authenticity and realness to the stories. So the writing is all there. You know, as an actor to be able to play this part and then have such great quality writing is really kind of everything. What about you, Mike?

**Cimino:** Honestly, the whole representation of Victor's sexual awakening and his sex life with Benji definitely relies a lot on George and I's chemistry. I think that George is — sorry to give you your flowers on here — so easy to work with and so incredibly understanding and so willing to just do things and try different things (to) see what works and what doesn't.

**Sear:** Yeah, it felt very explorative on set, didn't it?

**Cimino:** Yeah, for sure.

**Sear:** They did say, "Do you want an intimacy coach?" and we felt, to be honest, both really dedicated to these characters and wanted to honor this writing and we just sort of felt like we had a closeness and were able to do that on set.

**Cimino:** We actually completely opted out of having an intimacy coach. George and I both felt like we were very comfortable with each other already. We really just went for it, and I think that that kind of reads on screen, where it felt very explorative. It felt very new and exciting, and I think that's something that's really, really cool.

**Because the show has had an immense impact on LGBTQ+ youth — I mean, it would have changed my life, like I told you, when I was 16 — what's one letter you've received from a queer fan that really made you feel like what you were doing here was really affecting lives?**

**Sear:** Off the bat, one that sticks out to me — because there have been many — (was a) message from someone who's in the military. I don't think they had a very good experience with their sexuality, obviously, with the way things are in the military. And they said watching the show really just made them feel some sort of acceptance, and heard.

**Cimino:** I've gotten so many messages, but some of the ones that stick out to me the most are (from) people that are literally Latino and they're like, "This is my exact story and this is exactly what I've been going through with my mom, or my dad, or my uncle." It's crazy to know that we're still not in that place where people can just accept their children or their family for just being true to who they are as people. I think that it's really inspiring for me as an artist to continue to push myself harder and to continue to represent the community in an accurate way because I get to see the impact it's making on people's lives.

*This interview has been edited for length and clarity. Read the full interview at Pridesource.com.*

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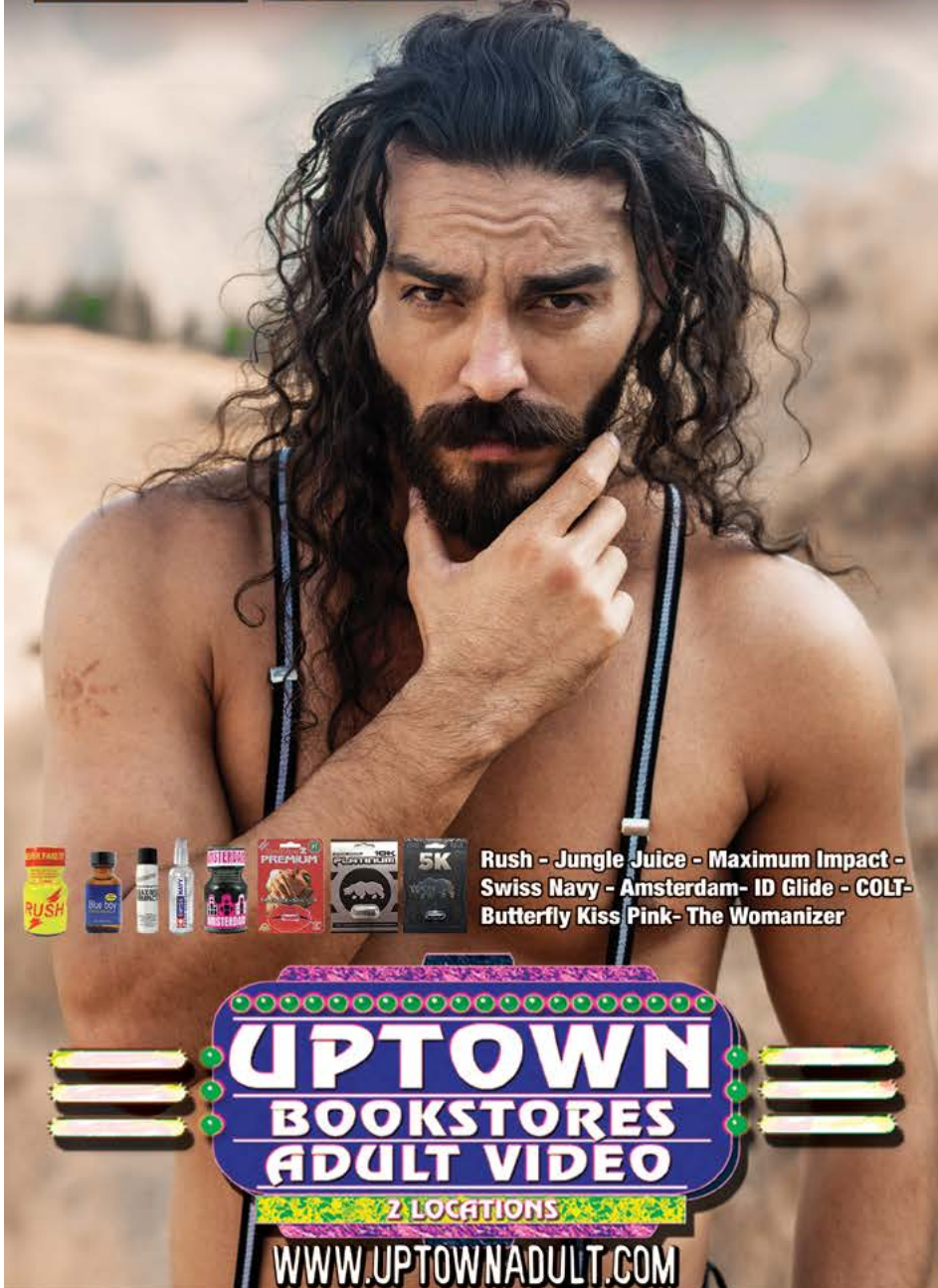
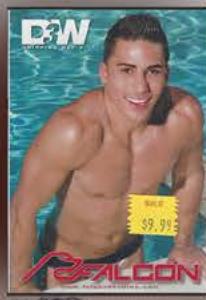
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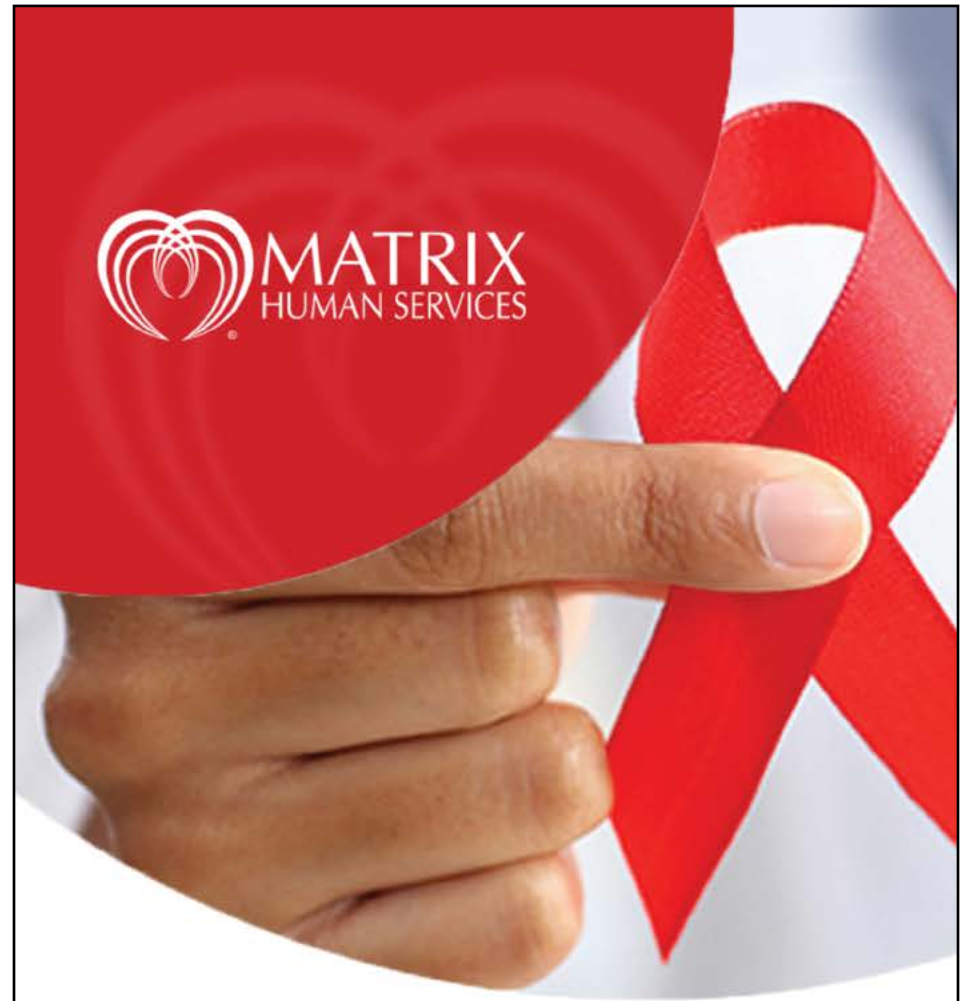
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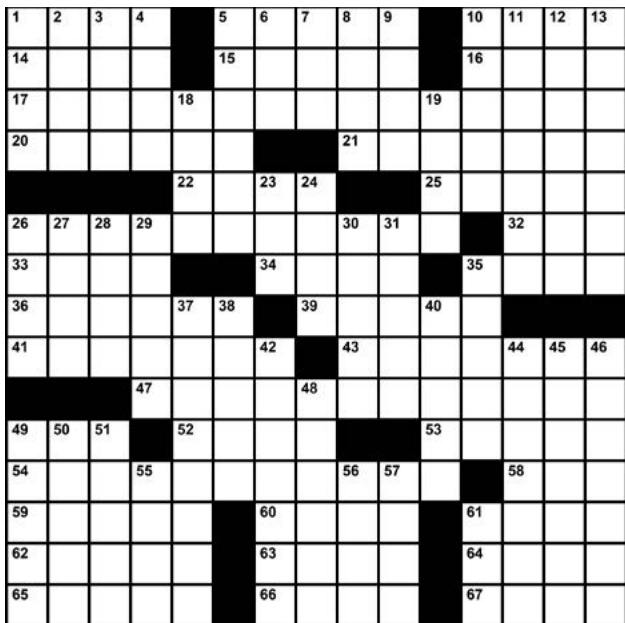
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- 36 Become rigid  
 39 "\_\_\_ to bury Caesar ..."  
 41 Skin decorations  
 43 Great Plains tribe  
 47 Musical with Nellie Forbush  
 49 Sex, crudely  
 52 "Star Trek" character  
 53 Chronicler of Poker Flat  
 54 Song for a double feature with the two movies of this puzzle?  
 58 "So, it's YOU!"  
 59 Speed skater Ohno  
 60 Cabbage, to Cocteau  
 61 "It's showtime!"  
 62 Screw up  
 63 Kramer, to Yale  
 64 Maria's "Do-\_\_\_"  
 65 Promoted to excess  
 66 Instrument for a perjurer?  
 67 Where to find Moby Dick

- 12 Moor jealous of his partner  
 13 To which  
 18 "Dallas" actor Keenan  
 19 Untouchable head  
 23 Frat hazing prop  
 24 Shankar of sitar  
 26 Dick and Jane's dog  
 27 Poet Gidlow  
 28 Armless garment  
 29 Cuts "Leaves of Grass"  
 30 Brief summary  
 31 What comes out in spring  
 35 Tone of many Stein photos  
 37 Grip on a 12-incher?  
 38 "\_\_\_ the Top"  
 40 Like the Village People's man  
 42 Impassive  
 44 They're thin at the top  
 45 Made an impression  
 46 "South Pacific" setting, broadly  
 48 To a large degree  
 49 Mortify with porn, perhaps  
 50 Like "Steel Magnolias," to many straight males  
 51 Single-master  
 55 "Would \_\_\_ to you?"  
 56 "The Children's \_\_\_"  
 57 TV newsman Brit  
 61 Gershwin of "Of Thee I Sing"

## Double Feature

### Across

- 1 Enjoy phone sex  
 5 Painter Francis  
 10 What the humbled eat  
 14 "...\_\_\_ take arms against..." (Hamlet)  
 15 Safari sighting  
 16 Wolfe or Woolf, e.g. (abbr.)

- 17 With 26-Across, Disney animated classic  
 20 Cartoon seaman  
 21 Emma Stone in "The Help"  
 22 NY Met, for example  
 25 Fence straddler  
 26 See 17-Across  
 32 Abductors of the '70s  
 33 Asked for on bended knee  
 34 Big name in stunt riding  
 35 "I \_\_\_ Andy Warhol"

## Q Puzzle

## Down

- 1 Where Dr. C. Torres works  
 2 Cube designer Rubik  
 3 Straddling  
 4 Gay horror writer Michael  
 5 Looked upon  
 6 Disney prince  
 7 Tin roof pussy of Tennessee  
 8 Bills stuffed in a G-string  
 9 Neighbor of Minn.  
 10 Word after space  
 11 Feeling great sexual\*desire

See p. 20 for answers

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- Screening Costs & Health Insurance Coverage
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- Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis (PrEP)
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