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a Role Model Since
Walking Off His Job

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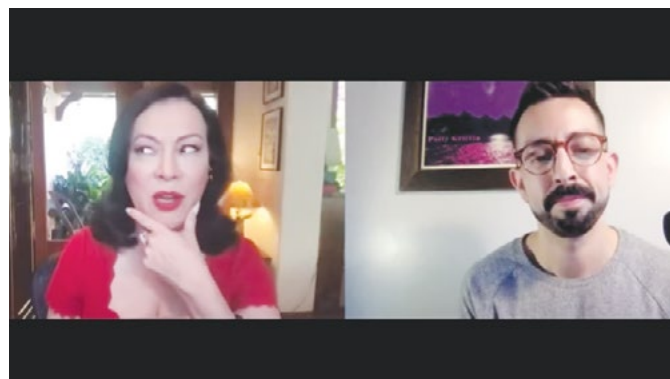


12 COVER STORY

Photo courtesy of Gina Chavez



Find Pride Source on YouTube to check out all of our latest videos, including new interviews with Jennifer Tilly, JoJo Siwa and Robin de Jesús.



VOL. 2950 • DECEMBER 9, 2021

ISSUE 1189

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5 Queer Things You Can Do Right Now

BY JACKIE JONES

With the holiday season in full swing, it's time to mix, mingle and celebrate (when it's not time for your favorite cozy, indoor activities). Whether you're the literary type or just in it for the Christmas cookies and tucking, we're here for it. Grab your family (chosen or the one you're stuck with), some friends and frienemies, all your neighbors and one-night stands and take advantage of one — or all — of our favorite five queer things you can do right now(ish).

Stay Entertained at Beauty Beyond Drag's Holiday Revue

Everyone's favorite wig-snatching ensemble, Beyond Beauty Drag (BBD), will appear in Grand Rapids at the Division Avenue Arts Collective (DAAC) for a one-night only holiday revue at 8 p.m. Dec. 18, in collaboration with Grand Rapids Pride Center (GRPC). The Revue will help raise awareness for GRPC amid unique festive cheer. "You can expect holiday tunes, lots of variety and conceptual performances," says Bradley Haas, co-director of BBD. "This is our way of celebrating the holidays and bringing our cheer to you." BBD's emeritus, DeeDee Chaunte, will host, and B.R.I.T will co-host. In addition, attendees will get a chance to offer donations at the end of the show.

Head over to [Eventbrite](#) to get your tickets.



Emeritus DeeDee Chaunte. Photo: Beyond Beauty Drag



David Sedaris. Photo: Jenny Lewis

Spend an Intimate Evening With David Sedaris

Find out firsthand why Alan Cumming once described David Sedaris's worldview as "a fascinating hybrid of the curious, cranky and kooky." The beloved out essayist and frequent NPR contributor will stage an intimate evening featuring readings from his latest collection, "A Carnival of Snackery: Diaries (2003-2020)." The best-seller will also offer a Q&A and a book signing at the event, set for 7:30 p.m. Dec. 13 at DeVos Performance Hall in Grand Rapids.

Attendees need proof of vaccination with a printed vaccination card or a negative COVID-19 test taken within 72 hours. Purchase tickets at the box office or [Ticketmaster.com](#).



Play Santa for Trans Youth

Spread some joy to trans kids and young adults struggling with family and other heavy issues this holiday season. Pick a letter to Santa shared on [@transanta](#) and start filling your (virtual) sleigh with gift requests — many choices include gender-affirming products the recipient is typically unable to access. Whether you opt to remain anonymous or reveal your true identity, playing Santa to trans youth is sure to be a highlight of your holiday season.

To donate or learn how to offer help, go to their Instagram [@transanta](#).

Indulge in Desserts, Drinks and Drag Queens at the Royal Oak Farmers Market

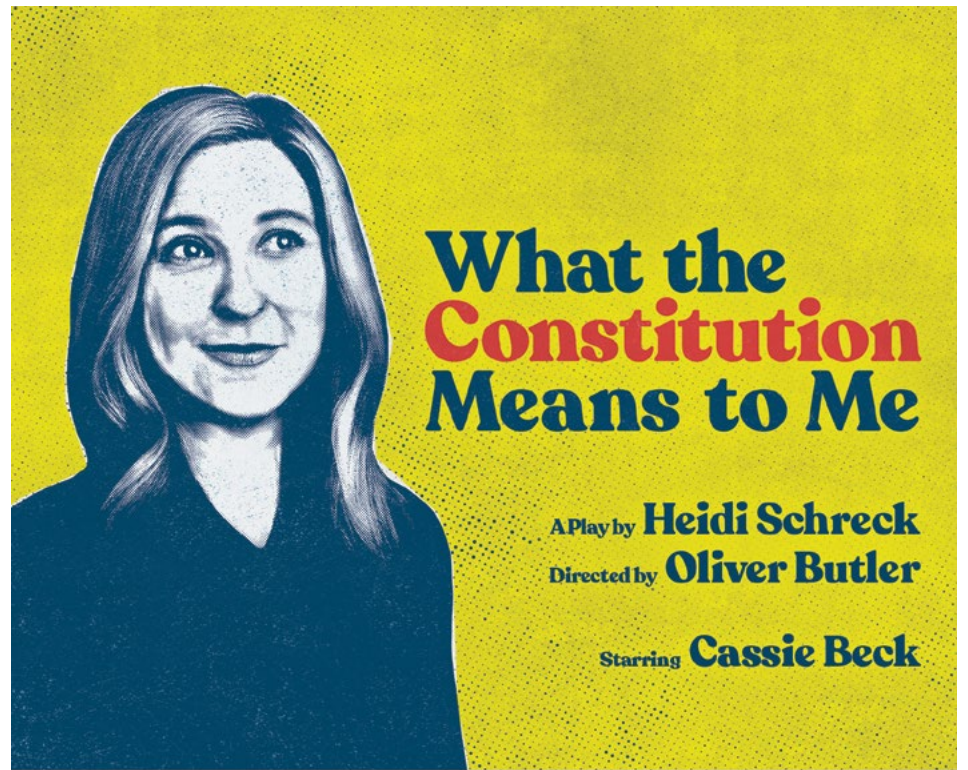
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Bill Lonskey, owner of The Quintessential Event Company, says this event promises “the sweetness of the bounty of desserts” and “the outrageous sassiness of the amazing and talented queens from Five15 Royal Oak.” Which, objectively, sounds incredible.

Desserts, Drinks and Drag Queens, set for 5-9 p.m. Dec. 16 at the Royal Oak Farmers Market, will feature decadent desserts from multiple local bakeries, savory food options, dessert-inspired cocktails, a boutique selection of holiday gift vendors and a two-hour drag revue show. Drag personality Nikki Stevens will emcee the revue with Tasha Long, Victoria Sanchez, Prince Cole, Rialto Reign and others. Keep the festivities going at the optional afterglow at Pronto! Royal Oak.

For more information and to purchase tickets, go to celebratemetrodetroit.com.



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Photo: Heather H Photography

Let Loose at LIVE Nightclub’s Candy Bar Night

Let go of that holiday stress for an evening and head to Ann Arbor for LIVE Nightclub’s next Candy Bar night at 9 p.m. Dec. 16. Candy Bar, a queer variety-themed event, will include DJ Medusa and live performances from local acts such as Nelly Beans, Baha Blast, Stevie Phoenix, Astoria Addams, Fearless Amaretto and Art A’Miss. Force Majeure, LIVE’s producer and stage manager, says, “if you are looking for entertainment, great music, a low-key environment and a welcoming community, there’s a reason we’re called the Candy family.”

You must be 18 years old to attend and have proof of vaccination or a negative COVID-19 test within 48-hour. Tickets at the door.



Will He Ever Teach Again?

Bisexual Teacher Who Quit After Being Ordered to Remove Pride Flag on His Next Career Move, and Why He Worries About LGBTQ+ Youth



Russell Ball recently walked off his job as a teacher at Three Rivers Middle School after he was told to take down his Pride flag in his classroom. Photo courtesy of Russell Ball

BY JASON A. MICHAEL

Growing up, Russell Ball always knew he wanted to be a teacher.

“Teaching was my first calling,” Ball, 43, told BTL recently. “I went to Western Michigan University to be a math and physics teacher. I decided that wasn’t the subject matter I wanted to teach. So I took about five years off from school.”

When Ball returned to college, he earned an undergrad degree and then a master’s degree in adapted physical education. Currently, he is working on a second master’s degree in education leadership.

“I just really like working with kids and teaching them good health behaviors,” he said. “I really like seeing the kids grow and explore on their own and reach their own successes in things that are important to them.”

Despite his passion and dedication to the education field, Ball, who identifies as bisexual, is not sure he’ll ever teach again. He left his position teaching health at Three Rivers Middle School in Southwestern Michigan last week.

And he didn’t just quit — he walked off the job in protest of demands by school administrators that he take down the LGBTQ+ Pride Flag that hung in his classroom. His walkout — and the subsequent video he posted announcing why he was leaving — has garnered him national exposure.

But it wasn’t just the flag, though it *was* undoubtedly the last straw. Truthfully, Ball said he’d begun feeling burnout about five years ago.

He said that when he was teaching in Benton Harbor, a district he describes as “extremely difficult,” he was given multiple pay cuts and experienced a stressful working environment that included teaching during the pandemic. He was also feeling that he, and his beliefs, were being targeted by conservative parents’ groups in the area. “I didn’t want to be a part of that anymore,” he said.

So after changing jobs and transitioning to the Three Rivers Community Schools district, and then receiving repeated instructions to take down his Pride Flag, Ball said he just couldn’t do it.

“I was livid. It was a combination of being disheartened, and I just couldn’t believe it was happening at the school I was at,” he said. “We had Pride Flags up since the first day I started there. It was almost encouraged.”

Ball recounted that the school’s mission centered on inclusion, acceptance and empathy, yet he was being asked to take down what he thought was a “clear representation” of that mission. Administrators at the school, Ball said, told him the instructions were coming at the behest of the school district’s law firm in response to a legal challenge made by a community member. The firm indicated the flag should be removed at least on a temporary basis, but Ball said there was no clear indication the removal wouldn’t be permanent.

And if the Pride Flag went away, what was going to be next?

“It’s happening all across the country where mostly white, conservative parents are attacking these things,” Ball said. “Pride Flags are being challenged all over the country. That’s one of the big things that ran me off from

teaching. It’s all under attack, and you can’t teach the way you want to. We have to teach this white-washed version of history, and it’s not good.”

Teacher burnout aside, it’s the children, said Ball, who suffer the most.

Ball said that part of his training to become a certified sex ed teacher in Michigan included working with LGBTQ+ students, who, he noted, tend to experience more mental health issues, poor attendance, higher suicide rates and higher attempted suicide rates. “The biggest thing that was always taught,” he says, “is that inclusion and visibility matters.” To Ball, that visibility comes from the flag. Removing it from the classroom, he said, felt like it was setting up his students for “future harm.”

“It wasn’t anything I wanted to put my students through,” he explained.

Leaving his students behind was not easy: “I love working with young people. I like seeing them grow into their authentic selves. One of the things I liked about being at Three Rivers was there was a large number of students who identified as trans or part of the LGBTQ+ community.”

Ball said students have confided in him about their pronouns and chosen names, but sometimes ask that they don’t use those indicators in front of their parents. Some students, he explained, “can’t fully embrace themselves,” a thought Ball said is “really sad for these kids.”

“There’s so much support among the student body,” Ball went on. “But it’s really the adults in their lives that are ruining it for them.”

Ball is for now focused on being a full-time dad. He and his wife have a blended family of five. The youngest is 10 months.

“She needs all the attention, so I’m enjoying staying at home and taking care of her and doing some housework,” he said. “Teaching is so demanding. You miss so much family time. I’m glad to have some back.”

When he does go back to work, he envisions working for a non-profit.

“I’ve always considered myself an activist,” he said. “It’s definitely something my wife and I kind of hold as our core values, being that voice and sticking up for people who may not have a voice for themselves.” Ball doesn’t know exactly what he’ll do next, but activism is sure to play a big role. He said he is considering a potential political run, as well, at the state or local level — somewhere he could help create policies aimed at helping young people.

When not teaching, parenting or advocating for others, Ball said his interests are simple.

“I like to run. I like to cycle. I’m an endurance athlete. My ultimate drama is I missed out on the Olympics as a younger kid,” he said. “But there’s the senior Olympics, and I’d like to be competitive in some regard. I enjoy housework and woodworking and building things with my hands.”

Learning to accept himself and his bisexual identity is still something Ball is working on.

Though he came out “five or six years ago,” Ball said acceptance is something he’s struggled with since his late teens. “I grew up in a very conservative, white, middle-class area,” he said. “It wasn’t really something that was allowed to be explored or discovered or even an option. So, it took me a good 20 years to figure it out.”

Initial reaction to his coming out announcement was not good.

“I was in a previous relationship, and they weren’t that open-minded or accepting. I remember being with that person and talking about wanting to come out and be more open about who I was,” he said. “And the woman I was with was against it. She said, ‘What will people think about my kids?’ It really took me back and put me back in my shell for a while. It’s hard when you start hearing that negative sentiment from someone you’re with.”

“My current wife is supportive,” Ball continued. “She knows about it. But it’s kind of a challenge when you’re in a relationship, but you still have an attraction to the opposite gender of what your mate is.”

Ball said he and his wife tried experimenting with an open relationship for a time. His wife, he said, was supportive and involved, but the pair found the arrangement wasn’t the best fit for their relationship. “We definitely prefer more of a monogamous relationship,” he explained. “So, it’s a lot of keeping fantasies open, but not acting on them.”

He said it’s key to have a partner that’s supportive and understands that he has attractions and desires, but understanding that the person you’re with is the person you’re with, and that “you’re not going to stray out of that,” he said.

Now, Ball is being seen as a role model. Something he never expected, even after making his video public.

“When I posted to TikTok, it was more for a few students who were following me and would want to know what happened and why I disappeared in the middle of the day,” he said. “I thought I would get a few likes, but the outpouring of support I’ve gotten and people saying I’m a role model is far beyond anything I ever imagined.”




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Four Michigan Cities Win Top Scores on HRC's 2021 Municipal Equality Index

BY JASON A. MICHAEL

Four Michigan cities received the top score of 100 on the Human Rights Campaign's (HRC) 10th annual Municipal Equality Index.

Ann Arbor, Detroit, East Lansing and Ferndale earned perfect scores based on factors such as non-discrimination laws, municipal services, employer protections, law enforcement and leadership on LGBTQ+ equality.

"I'm excited that Ferndale continues its 100 percent score, [and] I'm proud the city of Ferndale continues to lead with its value of inclusiveness and equality," said Ferndale Mayor Melanie Piana. "We compassionately and fervently believe 'You Belong Here' and that everyone needs to feel accepted and safe in the community they call home."

Other cities in Michigan that made the list include Grand Rapids (92%), Kalamazoo (80%), Lansing (87%), Pleasant Ridge (55%), Sterling Heights (61%), Traverse City (84%) and Warren (16%).

Though Warren rated a dismal 16% score, resident Cindy Sanders says she feels comfortable and safe in the city.

"I haven't had any problems," she said. "I'm a

Though Warren rated a dismal 16% score, resident Cindy Sanders says she feels comfortable and safe in the city.

57-year-old transgender, post-op woman. I've lived here for nine years. I work part-time at the Warren Home Depot as a cashier where they do not allow gay or transgender discrimination at all."

Still, Warren has been lagging on the list for years. The city currently has no non-discrimination ordinance in place to protect LGBTQ+ people from discrimination in employment, housing or public accommodations.



Everywhere, More LGBTQ+ Candidates Are Running for Office. Here's Why.

Michigan Political Strategist Roland Leggett: 'We Are the Ones We've Been Waiting For'

BY ELLEN SHANNA KNOPPOW

Fifteen openly LGBTQ+ Michiganders ran for elected office in 2021, according to Out on the Trail, a report compiled by the LGBTQ Victory Fund. Nine won their races.

Compare those results to 2019, the last off-year election, when an estimated eight openly LGBTQ+ candidates ran in Michigan and three prevailed. Sarah LeDonne, senior communications and marketing manager of the Victory Fund, who provided the numbers to BTL, said there may have been candidates the Fund wasn't aware of.

The national numbers are impressive, too. At least 184 out of 430 openly LGBTQ+ people who ran for office in 2021 claimed victory, a record-breaking number of candidates and wins. As a result of the most recent election, approximately 1,038 LGBTQ+ elected officials will serve next year.

LeDonne confirmed that Michigan currently remains fifth in terms of states with the greatest number of LGBTQ+ elected officials, trailing

California, Pennsylvania, Illinois and Florida. However, that might change slightly because some of the 2021 election results are still pending.

But Roland Leggett and Amritha Venkataraman, who strategize with some of Michigan's nearly 40 elected officials, don't need hard data to be convinced that more and more LGBTQ+ people are becoming politically engaged. They see it in their everyday work.

Leggett, who chairs the LGBT & Allies Caucus of the Michigan Democratic Party, says he is "encouraged" by the number of people expressing an interest in entering politics, whether or not they launch a campaign.

"The fact that folks are thinking about the way in which they can interact with elected officials in government is great in terms of our community," Leggett says. "And then the actual number of people that are running, I'm even more excited about that."

As Michigan State Political Director for the

See **LGBTQ+ Candidates**, page 10



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Three-Term State Legislator Hopes to Funnel Financial Support to Progressive Candidates

BY ELLEN SHANNA KNOPPOW

While Jon Hoadley isn't running for office this election cycle, the openly gay former state representative hasn't been politically idle. Quite the opposite.

Hoadley and his friend Jason Franklin have been busy relaunching the West Michigan Progress PAC, a political action committee supporting state level and down ballot candidates in the west and southwest Michigan region.

"The PAC is focusing on progressive candidates who can make a difference in the offices they're running for," Hoadley said. "So not just state legislative races, which we know is incredibly important because of the impact on statewide laws, but we'll be looking at county commission races to school board races and community college trustees."

Hoadley said his region of Michigan hasn't adequately supported progressive candidates for some time. He hopes the West Michigan Progressive PAC will address that need.

"One reason that we're focusing on the geographical area of west Michigan and

See **Jon Hoadley**, page 22

Jon Hoadley's Next Big Political Move

Photo courtesy of Jon Hoadley

→ LGBTQ+ Candidates

Continued from page 8

Human Rights Campaign (HRC) since 2018, Venkataraman has noticed this, too. "I've seen so many folks come in [and] volunteer," she says. "They care about the issues, and they want to do a little bit more than cast their ballot. So they're volunteering and then they're realizing, 'These are systems that are accessible to me. I can run for office. I want to be part of my local elected officials, local community.' And it really grows from there."

It's not just the higher profile statewide offices attracting LGBTQ+ candidates. Leggett said something that stands out to him is the number of out LGBTQ+ people expressing interest in down ballot races.

"Obviously, folks are very familiar with the governor's races and the Senate races and Congressional races, but I'm seeing more and more folks from our community being interested in running for county commission or for school board. And those are such important roles," Leggett says. The data already aligns with Leggett's experience: Of the 38 LGBTQ+ elected officials in Michigan counted by the Victory Fund, 29 are local officials, excluding mayors, of which there were two. Three judges, three state legislators and one statewide elected official round out the total.

Elliot Imse, vice president of communications for the Victory Fund, calls the trend a "virtuous



Amritha Venkataraman

cycle."

"Every time a [LGBTQ+] person wins a tough race in a city or state where there are few LGBTQ elected officials, it inspires more LGBTQ people to run," Imse tells BTL. He gave as an example the nation's first openly transgender statewide elected official, Danica Roem. Now, six years after her historic 2015 win, there are eight state legislators who identify as transgender. "All of them attribute Danica's win to helping inspire them to run for office and making them feel like it is possible," Imse says.

Michigan has experienced this phenomenon, too. Leggett says Attorney General Dana Nessel's win shouldn't be underestimated.

"We've been fortunate in Michigan to have a number of trailblazers that have shown really dynamic leadership in the role that they've had," Leggett says. "Dana Nessel comes to mind. The fact that she was able to convincingly win that race and in my estimation is one of the best, if not the best, attorney generals we've had, really shows how much power our community has in our ability to hold statewide office."

Venkataraman suggests another driving force. "I think that a lot of people were activated by the 2016 election because they understood that this was not representative of their values," she says. She also sees that the more opportunities there are for LGBTQ+ people to become involved in politics in any number of ways, "It gets a little addicting. You want to continue to be part of the change," she says.

The influence of Gen Z figures into the equation, too. Venkataraman points out that "one in six Gen Z-ers identify on the LGBTQ+ spectrum...so we're a very real part of the electorate, and I think that has a lot of power."

While the Victory Fund is only beginning to collect age data, Imse suspects Gen Z is having an impact, too. With an increasing number of individuals identifying as LGBTQ+ from that age cohort, especially queer and nonbinary, more of them are running for office — and winning.

Greater participation of non-cisgender candidates is just part of this year's "rainbow wave," which GLAAD calls a symbol of the increasing acceptance of LGBTQ+ people in

American culture. Findings from GLAAD's 2021 Accelerating Acceptance report show that 81 percent of the general population expect that nonbinary and transgender people will become a more familiar part of life, just as gay and lesbian people have. And 43 percent believe there are more than two genders, up from 38 percent in 2020.

Yet Imse says the record-breaking numbers mask how far the LGBTQ+ community has to go to achieve equal representation in elected office. "Right now, [we] hold about point two percent of elected positions in the United States, despite us representing 5.6 percent of the U.S. population. So we need to elect 22,000 more LGBTQ people to public office to achieve equal representation."

We can't wait, Leggett says. As important as it is for more LGBTQ+ people to serve in elected positions, it's also vital to support candidates who share the values of the community. "The LGBTQ+ community needs to be front and center of any candidate that our community supports," he says.

However, Leggett emphasizes, "I believe that it's important now more than ever for us to run for office ourselves. We are the ones that we've been waiting for. And as caucus chair, and as the movement politics director at Michigan United, I'm here to give whatever resources or any help that I can to folks that are interested in doing that because it takes us to make the change."



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Gina Chavez

Is the **BOSS** in Both
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Photo courtesy of Gina Chavez

Bilingual Singer-Songwriter to Perform at the 45th Ann Arbor Folk Festival

BY D'ANNE WITKOWSKI

You can call 2020 Latin Grammy nominee Gina Chavez a lot of things: Queer. Catholic. Bilingual. Singer. Songwriter. Pop rock artist. Social justice advocate.

She's also very much in love.

All you have to do is watch the video for her song "Heaven Knows," which includes footage from her wedding to her wife Jodi Ganado. The love between the two is clear.

But "Heaven Knows" isn't your everyday love song. "That was the song that for me really talks about the struggle of being queer and Catholic," Chavez, who is performing as part of the 45th Ann Arbor Folk Festival on Friday, Jan. 28, tells BTL.

Chavez and Ganado, who have been together for 16 years, met at the University of Texas at Austin's Catholic Center.

Chavez describes her college self as "super Catholic." "We're both still practicing Catholics," she says. "Our entire relationship has been because of and in the church."

Of course, the Catholic Church isn't known for being champions of LGBTQ+ people and causes. The Church's stance caused the couple considerable pain at the beginning of their relationship. "When we first kissed, I remember feeling like the world was going to end. As Catholics we were going to get struck by lightning," Chavez recalls. "And then for it to be the most beautiful thing I've ever experienced."

Instead of being struck down, they were lifted up by their love, though it took considerable time.

"We've been lied to," Chavez remembers thinking. "In the moment I was like, 'WTF God?' Like, this is the most God I've ever felt." She remembers it being an experience "in life that you feel like there's something bigger."

And yet, Chavez recalls "trying to pray my own gay away and stop it."

That approach did not work.

"I think it probably took about six years into our relationship to say, 'Oh, this is really beautiful; maybe we should...stop waiting for God to end it and realize that God has blessed us.'" It was out of this realization that the seed for "Heaven Knows" was planted.

Chavez says it's "definitely a love song to my wife, but also one that says Heaven knows exactly how I feel, Heaven knows exactly the kind of beautiful love we have, and it's even because of Heaven that we're able to have this love."

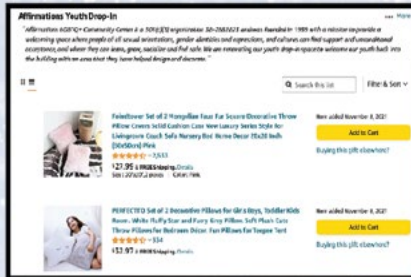
The song addresses "growing up in a world that said you couldn't be both [queer and Catholic] and then reconciling the fact that, yeah, you can. Just because the world isn't creative enough to have enough space for that doesn't mean that God is not," Chavez says. "What does it mean to love my faith and love Christ and social justice and to love my wife? Those are very much parts of the same thing and they're not contrary

See **Gina Chavez**, page 18

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Queer Gun Control Activist X Gonzalez Was Right All Along

In 2018 Op-Ed, Gonzalez Placed Blame for Inaction on Politicians and Lobbyists

BY JASON A. MICHAEL

“Gun violence has torn up many communities across the country,” wrote queer gun control activist X Gonzalez in a March 2018 op-ed for Teen Vogue.

School shootings are something Gonzalez knows about. In February 2018, when they were a senior at Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, a 19-year-old former student, Nikolas Cruz, shot and killed 17 people and injured 17 others.

In the three years since Parkland, dozens of school shooters have killed or wounded dozens of students and staff, but when it comes to sensible gun laws in the United States, not much has changed.

Gonzalez writes that common sense gun laws have been out of reach due to “negligence on behalf of local and national government to properly regulate access to guns, ignorance to their constituents’ varying situations, and willingness to take money from organizations that very clearly do not have the best intentions for the future of the United States.”

Following the shooting in Parkland, Gonzalez became an anti-gun violence advocate, helping to organize youth across the country. While the Parkland shooting was particularly notable because of the high number of fatalities and injuries, it was far from unique. Since 2018, there have been 87 school shootings where at least one person was injured or killed, Education Week reports.

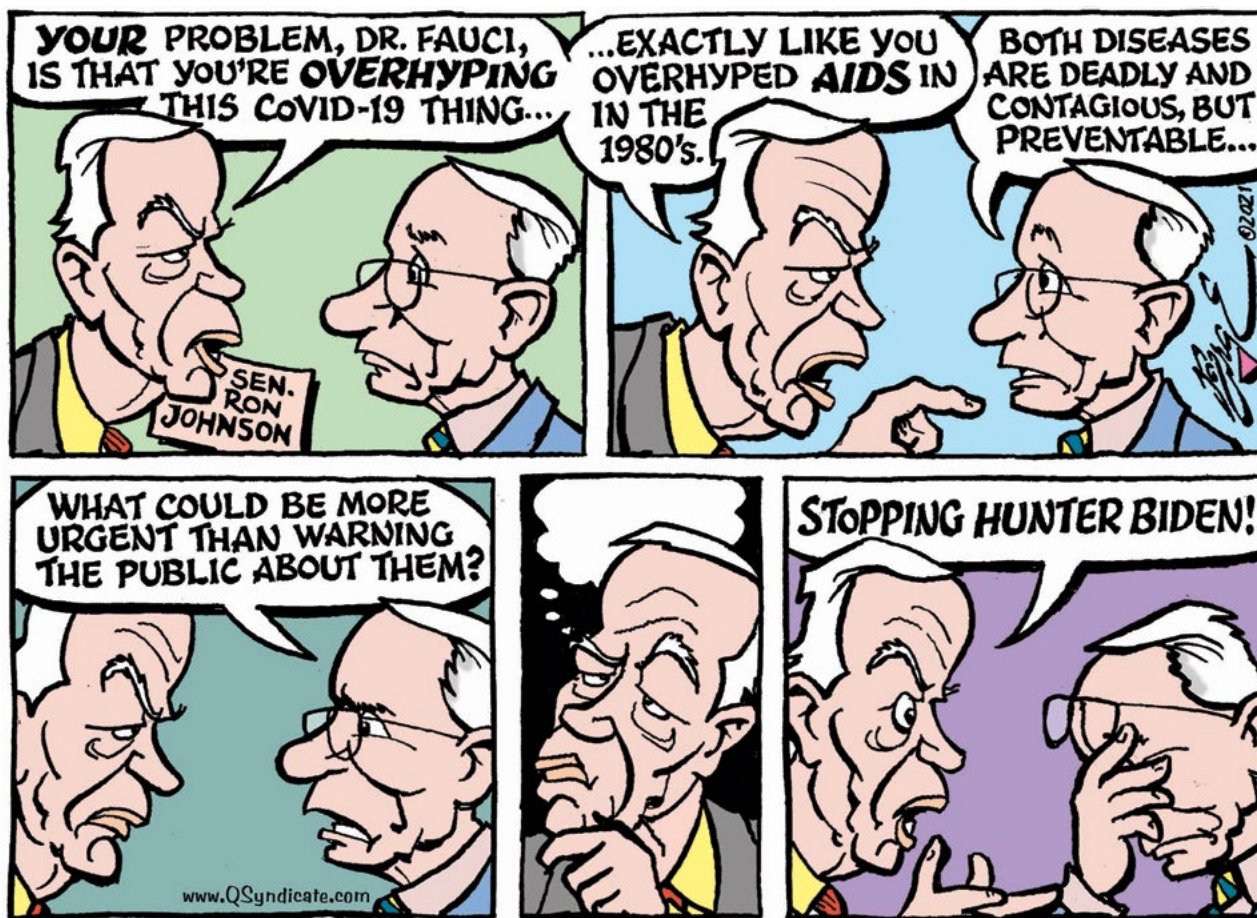
The recent mass shooting at Oxford High School, north of Detroit, marks the deadliest mass school shooting in the U.S. in three years; a mix of 10 students and teachers were shot and killed by a student. With a few weeks left in the year, 2021 has already seen a record number of school shootings — 29 and counting, according to Education Week.

These figures don’t take into account two of the most harrowing high school shootings in recent history (the 1999 Columbine, Colorado shooting where 12 students and one teacher were killed and Sandy Hook, Connecticut, where a former student shot and killed 20 children between 6 and 7 years old and six adult staff members).

Despite efforts by activists like Gonzalez and several parents of Sandy Hook victims, who have worked tirelessly to curb school shootings, not much has changed when it comes to gun violence in recent decades. Oxford, sadly and tragically, is proof of that.

Allegedly, Ethan Crumbley, a 15-year-old sophomore at Oxford, used a 9mm handgun purchased by his father on Black Friday and opened fire at his school on Tuesday, Nov. 30. Since then, Crumbley, who is being charged as an adult, has been charged with shooting four of his schoolmates

See **X Gonzalez**, next page



Sondheim Found Just the Right Words to Illustrate My Life as a Gay Man

BY JOE BAILEY



I never met Stephen Sondheim or had an endearing correspondence with him.

Apparently, there are a lot of people who have framed letters from him, or a tantalizing story about a chance encounter. Neither of these scenarios apply to me. (I did have a close call once, but I’ll get to that later.)

Shortly after his death, I saw a meme that said, “Stephen Sondheim always began with the assumption that we were all adults and there was no sense in bullshitting each other about what life actually was.”

Life wasn’t glitz and glamour. It wasn’t Jerry Herman. Life was awful, and beautiful, and fragile, and bountiful. It was so many other contradictions, too.

He was a gentle maverick who refused to become “commercial.” His sound was

distinct, but varied. This was a man who could write the plaintive confessional “Send in the Clowns” and the grab-life-by-the-balls call-to-arms “The Miller’s Son” (and these were both from the same show). He also gave us the heartbreakingly beautiful “Sunday,” which always, always makes me cry.

My first Sondheim encounter was as a senior in high school. For some reason my drama teacher thought the best choice for the spring musical would be his biggest flop, “Merrily We Roll Along.” I was cast as one of the three leads, and the love began.

In college I was cast in “Company,” and the love flourished. However, it was “Into the Woods” that hit me where I lived. I encountered it on PBS in the early ’90s. Seemingly a mashed-up fairy tale, it goes so much deeper. Written at the height of the AIDS crisis, it deals with profound loss; friends and family die, sometimes randomly.

It also illustrates the power of one’s chosen family, those friends who we gravitate towards who stay in our lives. They’re not blood, but they’re family

nonetheless. As gay people, especially in the ’80s and ’90s, death was all around us. A simple assignation could lead to, what was then, a death sentence. My circle of friends then, my chosen family, understood me in ways my biological family couldn’t, because they were going through the same things; the same dangers that could befall us simply by venturing into the woods. We were just trying to survive as the government and so many others turned their backs on us.

Once I discovered Stephen Sondheim was a gay man, my love grew exponentially. Of course he was gay. Only a gay man could have written that brilliance at that time. He was writing from first-hand experience:

*Sometimes people leave you
Halfway through the wood
Do not let it grieve you
No one leaves for good
So much truth in four lines.*

See **Sondheim**, next page



→ X Gonzalez

Continued from previous page

and is responsible for injuring seven people. If found guilty, he would face mandatory life in prison without the possibility of parole.

In her Tuesday remarks about the incident, Gov. Gretchen Whitmer said gun violence is a “uniquely American problem” and “a public health crisis that claims lives every day.”

Gonzalez, whose lived experience includes surviving a mass school

shooting, blamed the inaction on representatives beholden to the power of lobbyists like the National Rifle Association (NRA).

“Young people in this country have experienced gun violence for their entire lives, only to be faced with a number of representatives and officials who have been seduced by the gun lobby or have generally failed to make effective change,” they wrote in the Teen Vogue op-ed. “The pro-gun propaganda peddled by the National Rifle Association feeds myths about gun ownership, and these myths arguably perpetuate the suffering of thousands of Americans each year.”

→ Sondheim

Continued from previous page

In 2018, I was in New York seeing “Hello, Dolly!” for the second time, this time starring Bernadette Peters. As I was taking my seat, I looked up and Stephen Sondheim was taking his seat two rows in front of me. Every gay bone in my body was screaming. At intermission, I timed my trip to the lobby perfectly so I was right behind him as he headed out as well. I wanted so badly to reach out and grab his arm and tell him how much his work had meant to me. But I couldn’t do it. I’m sure he got that sort of thing all the time, and in the end I just wanted him to enjoy seeing his friend in her show.

I mourn his passing, but I can’t believe our luck that we lived at the same time as him. We got to experience that exhilaration of a new Sondheim show opening that future generations won’t. Like Shakespeare, his shows and songs will be around for generations to discover, to explore and perform. And we will continue to reap the benefits of his truth. The truth about life. The only truth that matters.



Stephen Sondheim. Photo courtesy of Library of Congress / Bernard Gotfryd

Joe Bailey has appeared on stages around the country and is currently the founding artistic director of The Ringwald Theatre in Ferndale. He lives in Hazel Park with his husband Brandy Joe Plambeck.

Creep Of The Week

There Are More Guns Than People in the U.S. — Republicans Call This a ‘Good Start’

BY D’ANNE WITKOWSKI

These are dark times.

The Supreme Court is going to either overturn or completely gut *Roe v. Wade*, making abortion illegal, or at least impossible to get, in states across the country. We’re still in a pandemic which has killed well over 807,000 people in the United States alone and yet Republicans are still all, “Vaccines are a Biden plot to make you magnetic and/or put a tiny robot in your blood to track you” all while calling themselves the Pro-life party. Then there’s the Republican plot to do away with democracy in favor of some kind of white-supremacist dictatorship.

And then there are the guns. In the U.S., we have more guns than we have people. Which means that some people (a lot of people, actually) have NO guns, while some people (too many people, actually) have A LOT of guns.

I hate guns.

I hate how they’re so widely and easily available. I hate how they are designed to kill people. I hate how gun culture is fetishized in this country. I hate that legislators think it’s cool to send out a Christmas card of themselves surrounded by their family where everyone, including the kids, are holding weapons designed to kill. I hate how we are the only country on earth where school shootings occur regularly.

On Tuesday, Nov. 30, it happened again. This time at Oxford High School. A 15-year-old child killed four other children. Oxford isn’t that far from where I live now, and it is even closer to where I grew up. In fact, I went to high school with the mother of the shooter. Same graduating class. I didn’t know her very well. I don’t remember that much about her. To be fair, she probably doesn’t remember much about me, either.

My son and my wife, who is a teacher, did not go to school on Friday because their schools were closed. Too many threats, not enough time to track them down. Too big of a risk.

Thankfully, this has given Michigan Republicans the chance to do what they have planned to do all along: nothing. Or, worse than nothing. They want guns to be

even easier to get and carry. They’re talking, again, about arming teachers. With them, “more guns” is always the answer.

I was just reading about Robert Fehring, a 74-year-old New York man who was arrested for “mailing dozens of letters threatening to assault, shoot and bomb LGBTQ-affiliated individuals, organizations and businesses, including New York City’s annual Pride festival,” according to NBC News. When police searched his house, they found two loaded guns and hundreds of rounds of ammunition.

His letters are vile and hateful. Something that would make Fred Phelps and his Westboro ilk proud. I won’t quote them here. But I will say he wanted to make the 2015 Pulse Nightclub shooting look like “a cakewalk.”

Have you ever done a cakewalk? I know now that a “cakewalk” actually has a complicated history that is tied to slavery, which basically sums up American history. But the only cakewalk I ever participated in involved walking around a room with numbers on the floor. There was music that stopped, like musical chairs. If you were on the number they called, you won a cake.

One thing I know with certainty is that a cakewalk definitely does not include the murder of 49 people. It does not include guns. It does not include an attack on LGBTQ+ spaces. And anyone who thinks the shooting of over 100 people is a “cakewalk” definitely shouldn’t have guns.

According to NBC News, Ferling said that there is “a sick overdose of that stuff being shoved down everybody’s face on the paper, on the TV and all over the place, and I’m not a fan of any of the homosexuality, homosexual thing.”

And so his response is to threaten death and violence and prepare to enact it.

There are a lot of things I am not a fan of. There are certainly things that you, reader, are not a fan of. But it’s a symptom of our toxic-masculinity obsessed culture that the way to approach things you don’t like is with a gun.

It’s almost like there’s a sick overdose of that stuff. And it’s killing us.



Supreme Court Looks Shaky on Abortion Rights

Why This Matters for LGBTQ+ People

BY LISA KEEN

The primary issue before the U.S. Supreme Court on Dec. 1 was abortion, but a swirl of other critical questions drew the justices' attention. Among those questions was how the court's decision on abortion might affect its previous pro-LGBTQ+ decisions and the perception that the nation's highest court is increasingly seen as being motivated by politics.

Such prominent LGBTQ+ decisions as *Lawrence v. Texas* (which struck down bans on sex between same-sex partners) and *Obergefell v. Hodges* (which struck down bans on marriage between same-sex partners) were part of the mix in the two-hour argument over a new Mississippi law that bans abortion after 15 weeks of pregnancy.

Numerous legal observers covering the argument in *Dobbs v. Jackson* said they believe the court's conservative majority is poised to undercut *Roe v. Wade* and *Casey v. Planned Parenthood*. *Roe* (1973) and *Casey* (1992) are long-standing decisions that have upheld the right of women to have an abortion. *Roe* said there is an implied right to privacy and liberty guaranteed by the Constitution that covers the right to choose an abortion; *Casey* said that, once the fetus becomes viable, states could regulate abortion to further health and safety as long as those regulations did not create an undue burden to women who seek an abortion.

Supreme Court analysts from National Public Radio, Associated Press, the New York Times, Washington Post, and CNN (among others) all

predicted the court would seriously undercut *Roe* and *Casey*.

One concern for LGBTQ+ activists is how damaging such a decision undermining such long-standing precedents might be to other Supreme Court precedents, such as *Lawrence* (2003) and *Obergefell* (2015). That concern was heightened by comments from Justices Amy Coney Barrett and Brett Kavanaugh. Barrett said that upholding previous decisions (known as “stare decisis”) is “not an inexorable command.” She pointed to the 2003 *Lawrence* decision overturning the 1986 *Bowers v. Hardwick* decision. Kavanaugh also pointed to *Lawrence* as an example of the Supreme Court overturning its previous decision on an issue. He mentioned *Obergefell*, too, though he did not identify what Supreme Court opinion he thought *Obergefell* overturned. (In 1972, the Supreme Court summarily dismissed a gay couple's appeal to recognize same-sex marriage, in *Baker v. Nelson*.)

Sharon McGowan, legal director for Lambda Legal, said *Lawrence* and *Obergefell* “expanded individual liberty, not the opposite.”

The *Lawrence* and *Obergefell* decisions, she said, are ones “on which we rely today to protect our community's civil rights,” adding that both “were built directly on the foundation of *Casey* and *Roe*.”

“They reflected the growing societal understanding of our common humanity and equality under law,” said McGowan. “Just as the Supreme Court in *Brown v. Board of Education* rejected the lie of ‘separate but equal,’ the Supreme Court's decisions in *Lawrence* and *Obergefell* appropriately overruled precedent where it was clear that, as was true with regard to race, our ancestors failed properly to acknowledge that gender and sexual orientation must not be barriers to our ability to live, love, and thrive free of governmental oppression.”

Small middle with big implications

Most court observers predicted that three conservative justices — Clarence Thomas, Samuel Alito and Brett Kavanaugh — seem almost certain to vote to uphold the Mississippi abortion ban. Barrett's comment that precedent is “not an inexorable command” could be read that she is amenable to chopping down *Roe* and *Casey*. The three progressive justices — Stephen Breyer, Sonia Sotomayor and Elena Kagan — appear poised to vote against the Mississippi ban.

That leaves Chief Justice John Roberts and Justice Neil Gorsuch to cast the key votes. Both made comments suggesting they were open to a ruling that might reflect some middle ground. For instance, the Chief Justice wondered whether Mississippi's regulation at 15 weeks was really different than *Roe* and *Casey*'s allowance of regulation at fetus viability.

Justice Sonia Sotomayor dramatically raised the issue of how undercutting *Roe* and *Casey* would likely undercut the reputation of the Supreme Court in the minds of the public. Noting that Mississippi acknowledged it brought

its appeal because there are new conservative justices on the Supreme Court, Sotomayor said she did not see how the Court could “survive the stench that this creates in the public perception that the Constitution and its reading are just political acts.”

“If people actually believe that it's all political, how will we survive?” asked Sotomayor, of Mississippi's Solicitor General Scott Stewart. “How will the Court survive?”

When Stewart said the court just needed to ground its opinion “in the Constitution, in text, structure, history, and tradition,” Sotomayor retorted, “*Casey* did that.”

“In *Casey* and in *Roe*,” said Sotomayor, “the Court said there ... are certain personal decisions that belong to individuals, and the states can't intrude on them. We've recognized them in terms of the religion parents will teach their children. We've recognized it in their ability to educate at home if they choose... We have recognized that sense of privacy in people's choices about whether to use contraception or not. We've recognized it in their right to choose who they're going to marry.”

A few minutes later, Justice Barrett asked the Mississippi solicitor general whether a decision in favor of the state ban would call into question any of the cases Justice Sotomayor had just identified. Stewart said “No,” adding that those cases, including *Lawrence* and *Obergefell*, were “safely out of reach” of the Mississippi abortion decision. He specifically added that, “you can't ban intimate romantic relationships between consenting adults, can't ban marriage of people of the same sex.”

Sotomayor said Stewart's answer did not seem to make any sense and added that Mississippi's new abortion ban amounted to a “religious view.”

“The issue of when life begins has been hotly debated by philosophers since the beginning of time,” said Sotomayor. “It's still debated in religions. So, when you say this is the only right that takes away from the state the ability to protect a life, that's a religious view, isn't it?”

LGBTQ+ groups have long considered the right to an abortion to be one of “vital importance” to LGBTQ+ people. In briefs filed by parties with strong interest in the appeal, U.S. Senators Tammy Baldwin and Kyrsten Sinema, along with all nine LGBT House members, signed onto a brief urging the Supreme Court to strike down Mississippi's ban. Two dozen LGBTQ+ groups — including Lambda Legal, GLAD, the National Center for Lesbian Rights, the Human Rights Campaign, Equality California, Equality North Carolina, LPAC, and longtime marriage equality activist Evan Wolfson — also filed a brief arguing against the Mississippi ban. The groups' brief states that the *Roe* and *Casey* decisions, upholding the right of women to have an abortion, are of “vital importance” to sexual minority women, noting that federal statistics estimates one in 12 women between 18 and 44 is a sexual minority.

“Like denying marriage to same-sex couples or criminalizing same-sex relationships,” said the LGBTQ+ groups' brief, bans on pre-viability abortions “deny women equal treatment under the law.”

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→ Gina Chavez

Continued from page 12

or opposite or in opposition."

Chavez describes Ganado as her hero. "My wife is incredible," she says. "Not only does she have a smile that continues to inspire me to write music and wake up in the morning and be excited about life, but she's truly the kind of person who has shown me what it is to love and to love on all levels."

Chavez jokes that the wedding footage was a way to trick Ganado into being in a video. Chavez describes Ganado, a public school teacher and high school varsity basketball coach, as more of a behind-the-scenes person when it comes to Chavez's performing life. Ganado is Chavez's manager, however.

The couple also run a non profit called Niñas Arriba, a college fund for young women in El Salvador. They started the fund after living in Soyapango during a mission trip where they taught English at an all-girls private Catholic school.

"It was such an amazing experience," Chavez says, and it felt wrong to just "walk away" after eight months. They'd met so many young women who wanted to go to college but did not have the opportunity, both due to money "but also being in a society that doesn't value education for young women."

Niñas Arriba has four graduates and a current cohort of four women. Chavez credits her fans, who she says are the ones who primarily support the fund.

And, yes, Chavez has a song about this, too. The song, called "Siete-D," dedicated to the young women she taught, won the grand prize in the Latin category for the 2014 John Lennon Songwriting Contest.

In the spirit of taking on social causes with her music,

Chavez's most recent release is a dance remix by Boy Sim of her song "She Persisted." The video features "RuPaul's Drag Race" royalty Rock M. Sakura, Cynthia Lee Fontaine and Kylie Sonique Love. It also marks the debut of GinaTonic Lee Fontaine.

"One of the reasons I wanted to do the video was to honor the drag community as a way of saying thanks," Chavez says, acknowledging their contribution to advancing LGBTQ+ rights in some of the movement's earliest days.

Chavez originally wrote the song about Republican Sen. Mitch McConnell's silencing of Democratic Sen. Elizabeth Warren. Chavez went on to perform it on the steps of the State Capitol at the Austin's Women's March for a crowd of 50,000.

Her goal in writing the song was to create a new kind of protest song that could be sung at the capitol, at a church, at a club, and now on the dance floor. "I want this to be a glitter fabulous gay remix," she says. She wants the people listening to it to think, "I am on the dance floor living my best life."

It could certainly be argued that Chavez is living her best life. Acclaimed and award-winning musician. A successful non-profit. A loving marriage. And that upcoming performance in Ann Arbor. She says she's looking forward to coming back to Michigan, even if the last time she played in Ann Arbor there was a winter storm that knocked out power to her Airbnb. A lifelong Texan, she was not accustomed to that kind of cold.

Thankfully, as she puts it in her song, "La Que Manda," she is "un fuego abrasador."

She sings, "Solía compararme con otros. Solía temer las consecuencias. Solía no creer en mi misma. Ahora, soy un fuego abrasador." ("I used to compare myself to others. I used to fear the consequences. I used to not believe in myself. Now, I am a scorching fire.")

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Cruz at work. Photo courtesy of Ludwin Cruz

Why a Straight Artist Is Dedicating Profits to Local LGBTQ+ Youth Center

BY D'ANNE WITKOWSKI

Artist Ludwin Cruz thinks in images. “I don’t talk to myself in my head, it’s just visuals of situations that are happening,” he tells BTL. “That’s just my language internally: It’s all visions.”

Cruz’s unique way of seeing is also how he approaches his artwork.

“Whenever I start to envision something, it’s almost like thousands of images flashing in my brain, and it’s always changing constantly,” he says. “I’m almost, like, capturing snippets at a time of what I can keep up with.”

Born and raised in Miami, Cruz graduated from Detroit’s College for Creative Studies with a degree in industrial design and a minor in illustration. He has been in Michigan ever since, currently working as a designer for Ford Motor Company.

When Cruz learned about the Ruth Ellis Center, he wanted to find a way for his art to help REC’s work with homeless LGBTQ+ youth.

“I honestly first heard of it through a friend, and she’s the one who kind of got me

acquainted with [Director of Development and Advancement] Marc [Erwin], from the REC. What they do is phenomenal,” he says. “To me, the biggest thing is always trying to find a way to give back to the community.”

His experience growing up in Miami inspired his desire to see homeless kids get the help they need. “Where I was born and raised, it was low income and not the safest environment,” he says. As a result he saw how kids miss out on opportunities. “It really resonated with me, what they do,” he says. “So that’s pretty much why I went forward and tried to make something happen with that.”

That “something” has taken the form of an upcoming Non-Fungible Token (NFT) charity auction.

Cruz will donate 50% of his profits from the sale of his first digital NFT series, “The Liliium Series.” The series features the faces of children overlaid with flowers. The juxtaposition is intended to illustrate the great potential for beauty in the children society casts off.

“Kids in the street are trying to make it happen. At the end of the day, just because they’re in that situation doesn’t mean they

don’t have positive things to give,” he says. “They still have a lot to offer the world.”

Cruz chose flowers because “flowers are very resilient. They grow back.”

“Given the fact that they’re in their environment doesn’t mean they can’t grow into something very beautiful,” he says. “There’s no reason why we can’t see what they see: the beauty in the world and what they can add to it.”

He says this series aligns well with the Ruth Ellis Center in that they are both “giving younger people more insight into what their future could possibly be.”

Erwin is happy about the partnership: “We’re very excited about the potential for NFTs to create value for our organization, and proud to be partnering with a local artist in this effort,” he said in a press release.

Cruz is excited about NFTs because they combine his love of art with his interest in crypto currency. Selling artwork as an NFT protects both the artist and the collector, he says. “As a creator it makes it so someone can’t steal my art and for someone who collects art no one can steal it from them.”

See **Ludwin Cruz**, page 22

**LOOKING TO REACH
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From Cruz's "Lilium Series."

→ Ludwin Cruz

Continued from page 20

Cruz created another digital NFT series he calls "The Bond," which depicts the connection between people who love each other regardless of factors like sexual orientation and ethnicity.

"It's showcasing the concept that you always have opposing interests," he says. "There's always a sense of trying to separate the two individuals who love each other, but the bond, the strength of that love, is what's keeping them together."

Cruz has experienced this personally in his relationship with his fiancé. He is Latino and Catholic while she is Muslim. "We had a lot of tough hardship trying to get everybody to be accepting of our love and our connection together," he says. This has given Cruz some insight into what LGBTQ+ people face, which

made him even more motivated to help the Ruth Ellis Center.

"I want to be someone who's going to be there and say this is OK and this is a beautiful thing. There's nothing to be ashamed about," he says. "And there's no problem with being associated with it either."

In other words, Cruz is not concerned that his connection to the Ruth Ellis Center might cause assumptions about his sexual orientation. "I have a lot of close friends who are gay, and growing up, I noticed a lot of hardships that they've gone through, and that's something that always bothered me," he says. "I believe that love crosses all kinds of boundaries. The fact that they support that community as well is something I'm totally for."

Cruz says he is proud to be an ally of the LGBTQ+ community, adding, "You can't just sit there and be quiet."

→ Jon Hoadley

Continued from page 10

southwest Michigan is because a lot of progressive investment that is happening across the state is really focused on southeast Michigan," he explained. "Having something that is focused geographically helps us make sure that we can define an area of investment."

That area is shifting blue. Starting at the local level, Hoadley wants to build a pipeline of diverse, progressive candidates "from the ground up." He called the increasing diversity of the region a major shift that many people in the state don't realize is happening.

"There is a growing Latino/Latina population in many parts of west and southwest Michigan," Hoadley noted. "There's indigenous tribes that live here; we have both African Americans in urban settings and a significant African American rural population that a lot of folks do not know about; and there's a growing API (Asian and Pacific Islander) population in Kent County."

As the population diversifies, the need for a reflective democracy where elected officials share the values of their constituents couldn't be more vital, Hoadley said.

The West Michigan Progress PAC is set up as a state independent PAC, which means they have flexibility in how donations are spent to meet the most critical needs. "That could be supporting candidates," Hoadley said. "It could also be talking directly to voters and paying for that communication. It can also be weighing in for, or against, a ballot measure that impacts all of us statewide."

Because the West Michigan Progress PAC supports only state level and down ballot races, it wouldn't have benefited Hoadley in his unsuccessful 2020 bid for Congress. But he says the kind of support he hopes to offer would have been welcome during his campaigns for state legislature.

"When I was first running for office as a state legislator, [the PAC] didn't exist," he said. "And I'm hoping that this can be an outlet to give other folks who are going to be good on so many key issues that we're facing as a state a start to impact public policy."

Note: The final map for investments will be completed after the 2021 redistricting but will range across the 10-county region from Muskegon to Berrien counties and from the Lakeshore east to Kent, Barry, Kalamazoo, and St. Joseph counties.

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Former Disney Star Talks LGBTQ+ Relatably on ‘Saved by the Bell’ and What’s Next for Trans Representation

BY CHRIS AZZOPARDI

If you were expecting more of the same from “Saved by the Bell” when Peacock revived the series in 2020, you wouldn’t just be mistaken — you’d be pleasantly surprised.

A staple of TV for a generation of teens, the show, which originally ran from 1989 to 1993, has undergone a woke update that, this season, includes a powerful trans storyline.

Yep, in 2021, Bayside High now naturally reflects the world as we know it. And so there’s Lexi, the popular girl who just happens to be transgender. No big deal. At least that’s how the show treats it, and how former Disney star Josie Totah, the 20-year-old trans actor known for roles on “Glee,” the NBC comedy “Champions” and the Disney Channel series “Jessie,” prefers it.

Recently, Totah spoke about the important message for trans allies in the show’s latest season of “Saved by the Bell” and how she thinks trans representation on TV has finally started to depict transgender people in a relatable and authentic way.

This is not the “Saved by the Bell” I grew up with when it comes to LGBTQ+ representation. What does it mean to you to be a major part of that kind of representation on this more evolved and more queer-inclusive revival that’s far less hetero-centric than the original?

It’s awesome. Our show is so funny, and we get to tell so many cool stories that [weren’t] told in the original that are [relevant] to conversations that we’re having today, that represent people who’ve been around since the inception of time. And it’s awesome. It’s such a privilege.

Have you gone back and watched any original episodes of “Saved by the Bell”? I just wonder how you interpret the conversations that were being had then versus the conversations that are a part of this reimagining.

Yeah, we went back and watched it as a cast. I mean, I had seen the show before just in its rerun phase in the early 2000s. I feel like that was a very big thing. I really based my character on the classic “Mean Girls” trope that we all know and love, and [I] flipped it on its head and gave her some surgery to make her very interesting and cool. Less stereotypically basic.

Being a part of this show was so important to you that you put school off to be a part of it. Can you explain why?

Well, I put school off, and then school put me off because the pandemic happened.

So I was ahead of the curve, but I’m still in college. Somehow, I’m still graduating in May. [Showrunner Tracey Wigfield] told me that she had an idea of a character that she wrote for me, and I fell in love. We met up at a coffee shop in downtown L.A., and she’s just so cool. I love that woman so, so much, and that’s sort of how it happened. It’s one of the best opportunities I ever said yes to.

As a producer, can you talk about what kind of input you’re giving when it comes to LGBTQ+ representation on the show, specifically as it pertains to Lexi?

I got to sit in the writers’ room this season, which was so fun. I joined once or twice a week and sat in and had a great time. Just to get to be in the room with so many fantastic writers from so many different walks of life and getting to bring my own authentic journey and story to the show was awesome. And I think it [made] the story truer to real life and more entertaining because it was more unique, and there’s relatability. So getting to that was awesome, but also getting to be a part of the other stories that we get to tell, like Aisha [played by Alycia Pascual-Peña]; her journey through her life, particularly in episode seven, was super fun. I remember being in the writers’ room that week and getting to delve into that.

Episode five blew my mind, especially as a fan of the original series. If I would’ve seen episode five when I was a kid, it would’ve changed my life. How did the idea to explore Lexi dealing with a really serious incident of transphobia evolve?

Tracey has been very cool from the beginning and she’s just like, “We can talk about however much you wanna talk about when it comes to Lexi’s gender identity.” It was clear to us that we wanted to tell a story that sort of delved into her identity in a way that was more nuanced, that we hadn’t been able to come to last season, and that also sort of progressed her arc as a character outside of her gender identity. I just had my second COVID vaccine at the time in March when we were pitching different things of how we would tell this story, and someone came up with an idea for Lexi to write a play that would solve transphobia, which I think is literally the funniest thing in the entire world. It just is a ridiculously beautiful episode in that way, and it’s so funny.

It deals with a really important societal issue — who carries the burden of having to make change for the trans community when transphobia happens? How did that resonate with you on a personal level?

That’s just a very real thing when it comes to the burdening of trauma, and it’s crazy how people put the oppressed in charge of educating and solving things that everyone really should be

Josie Totah Leads the Trans Charge on TV

Photo: Peacock

working on. It was sick to get to tell it; it was very cool. And I'm glad that we show people probably how *not* to be an asshole when it comes to things like that, and also how to be a better ally.

By the end of the episode, Lexi realizes that she's got real support in her peers. But you also have Slater, played by Mario Lopez, on your side. You've got Jessie on your side. The original cast is advocating for you; they're allies of the community, clearly. What kind of conversations did you have with the original cast concerning that episode when it came to any kind of LGBTQ+ issues and transphobia?

None of the original cast, but Belmont [Cameli, as Jamie Spano], Dexter [Darden as Devante Young] and Alycia are some of my



Belmont Cameli and Josie Totah in the "Saved by the Bell" revival. Photo: Peacock

best friends in the entire world, and I'm so honored, particularly with Bel and Dex and Mitch Hoog [as Mac Morris], just to have three guys who are straight and cis and really understand me and see me for my full self and not just one part of me. But also recognizing that life is different for me. It's so beautiful, and particularly with Bel and Dex just because they were in that episode the most. They're just the most supportive guys ever. And I felt so loved and so privileged. It brought me to tears. We shared a lot of love, and I really felt like they were carrying me on their shoulders that week.

It's important for straight men to see that it's cool when you stand up for people in the queer community.

Yeah, it's hot.

What was your high school experience like?

I mean, I went to a Catholic high school where I would call teachers by their first names and they'd be like, "Shut the hell up, sit down. My name is Sister Rebecca." And I'd be like, "Becca." I thought that I was really cool, but I wasn't. [I was] kind of just this kid who people knew from the Disney Channel and they're like, "That's that weirdo."

Yeah, I was crazy, but I met two of my best friends there, and we're still best friends to this day, and we survived. I think if you can survive

Catholic high school with people, you're with them forever. But also it was an awesome Catholic high school, I will say. Very supportive of gender diversity and sexual orientation, and they were very cool. I was very, very privileged to not have a toxic experience.

I grew up Catholic too, and you don't hear that very often about the Catholic experience.

You really don't, but they always told me, "Boo boo, like, you might be weird, but God created you. So we blame him and not you. And you're meant to be who you're meant to be."

There's obviously been so much talk over the years concerning trans representation. How can we improve the representation of trans characters in TV and film? And how do you think Lexi advances trans representation in a positive way?

First and foremost, it's played by me, an actual trans person, which obviously is unfortunately revolutionary since so many of our stories have been appropriated and have been told by people who have no idea what the trans experience is like and have surrounded it with [the] negativity of violence. Also, I'm a producer, which is sick. Like, that's amazing because I think it speaks to the authenticity in front of and behind the camera, which is very, very important.

Like you mentioned, so many trans narratives are told through the lens of trans struggle.

That's important, but it's also important to tell other stories too, because we're fully encompassing human beings.

Do you see a change in how Hollywood is representing trans people that isn't focused on trans struggle?

I think we're turning a corner, but I wanna see a trans rom-com of a girl starring in her own movie and living her best life. I wanna see an undercover spy movie where a trans girl has to travel to Bulgaria and take down a drug heist. There are so many different realms that I wanna see and I'm going to do. And I'm so excited that I get to be young and able and afforded that opportunity to throw my hat in the ring. I'm grateful that I'm living in this time, and I'm also excited to hopefully be able to tell other trans stories and other stories of people of color and people from different marginalized communities too, and highlighting their own journeys as well, which I think is very important.

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Photo: Netflix

‘Coming Out Colton’ Bares Not All But A Lot

And What’s Up With That Ridiculous Montage?

BY LAWRENCE FERBER

When former star of “The Bachelor” and pro football player Colton Underwood came out on a “Good Morning America” interview in April 2021, there was one question interviewer Robin Roberts didn’t ask: What’s your type?

Fortunately, fellow out athlete Gus Kenworthy presses Underwood for that tidbit — the answer is daddies, y’all! — in the first episode of Netflix’s six episode docuseries “Coming Out Colton.” For those unfamiliar, Underwood’s claim to fame and infamy was his

season as the “virgin” Bachelor, subsequent to which he became obsessed with, stalked, and terrorized contestant Cassie Randolph, who ultimately filed a restraining order against him.

To its credit, the series doesn’t absolve Underwood of this behavior — he’ll be read to filth both virtually and to his face by the final episode — but it does go a long way to explaining how he became such a hot closeted mess.

The first four episodes are entirely dedicated to preparation for the “GMA” interview by coming out to family members and friends, seeking advice from Kenworthy and other

gay sports figures like NFL trailblazer David Kopay and Esera Tuaolo, and tackling the toxic religious and sports world homophobia that twisted him so profoundly (and led to a suicide attempt).

The first couple of episodes are annoyingly repetitive in their structure (coming out, advice session, rinse, repeat). But what packs a punch is Underwood explaining to a high school coach how the flippant, virulently antigay things he heard from fellow teens and mentors alike caused pain both then and now, seeking ownership from the man for allowing and engaging in that behavior. And a scene in

the religion-centric fourth episode (a tedious, fast-forward affair if you consider religion bunk or didn’t suffer that same upbringing), when Underwood seeks acceptance from his pastor via telephone call but instead receives an earful on the sinfulness of homosexuality and gay marriage because “the Bible makes it pretty clear,” legit sucks to watch. A crushed Underwood admits the call creates confusion and doubt even now, and he wonders if the devil’s working through him.

Underwood’s so green about all things LGBTQ+ that Kenworthy is like his Gay 101 teacher, schooling him in terms like PrEP. And it’s cringey to witness the pair visit a gay sex and clothing shop for the first time — when trying on a leather harness, Underwood asks “what’s the point of this?” to which Kenworthy responds, “dancing and vibing” — and meet with a central casting group of white as fuck male cisgays in Nashville for a “coming out party.”

Things get more interesting during episode five, titled “Public,” which focuses on Colton before and after the “GMA” interview, and lifts the veil on what the hell Underwood was thinking during his “Bachelor” run. As Kenworthy notes in Ricky Ricardo-speak en route to “GMA,” “You kind of have some explaining to do.” And he does.

Although all reality series are contrived and Underwood is a *major* reality whore (the Netflix series was announced the day after the “GMA” interview aired), it’s hard to deny the sincerity also at play when Underwood reveals his “Bachelor”-era motive to create a public persona as heterosexual on TV, and forge a relationship with Randolph, so he’d become straight off-camera. That’s so messed up, right?

Randolph reportedly declined to take part in the Netflix series (despite offers of compensation), but other “Bachelor” and “Bachelor”-adjacent personalities join by the final episode, plus there’s a clip from the show. Frankly, “Bachelor” clips and news reports at the show’s front end would have been helpful for context — and served as reminder why his coming out carries weight in certain circles (and Twitter). And there’s a ridiculous, cheesy, out-of-nowhere montage of gay trailblazers at the end which essentially places Underwood in the same context — and his coming out of the same impact — with Christine Jorgensen, Matthew Shepard’s murder, and Harvey Milk, which overstates his importance to a ludicrous, tasteless degree.

And who do I want to give my rose to? One of the series’ most memorable inclusions: Pastor Nicole Garcia, the first transgender woman of color to be ordained, part Judge Judy and part Dr. Phil minus the quackery and epic eye-rolling. She serves Underwood (who, spoiler alert, ditches his homophobic pastor and joins the LGBTQ-inclusive Metropolitan Community Church) a dose of seasoned, fierce wisdom and humility we could use more of. Can we get a “Pastor Garcia” season order, please?

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Jennifer Tilly Is Your Friend to the End

Longtime Ally on the ‘Chucky’ Series and Its Killer Queer Affirmations

BY CHRIS AZZOPARDI

Chucky is no Harvey Milk, but the killer doll with fire-red hair from openly gay creator Don Mancini is, at least, a good queer-affirming dad.

Dad, you ask? Let’s back up: So, yes, Chucky, Mancini’s terrifying brainchild, is the doll that made his debut in 1988’s “Child’s Play,” killing lots of people in really terrible, gruesome ways. He fell in love with another doll, named Tiffany Valentine (played by “Bound” actress Jennifer Tilly, who also plays herself in the franchise), and the two of them — stay with me — had a child, named Glen/Glenda, who is genderfluid and queer.

For years, Mancini has left his queer mark on the series, especially in “Seed of Chucky,” but Syfy’s “Chucky” is special in that it doesn’t treat queerness as a spectacle — there’s a sweet gay teen love story at the center, while Chucky, as chillingly wise-cracky as ever, still does his psychopathic killing thing. Chucky even tells the series’ protagonist, Jake, a high schooler struggling with his sexuality and his father’s homophobic behavior, that he’s on his side (to a point, that is; you know how manipulative Chucky can be). After all, Chucky himself has a queer kid. Representation is representation, even if it’s in plastic product form.

Tilly has a meaty multiple-episode role in “Chucky,” and she makes one helluva entrance — in bed, with Fiona Dourif (the daughter of Brad Dourif, the voice of Chucky), who plays Nica and is possessed by Chucky. Here, Tilly talks about the series’ casual queerness, her gay icon

roots and the major difference between her sex scene with Fiona and her iconic one in “Bound” with Gina Gershon.

Does Don ever have to do any convincing to get you to play yourself and Tiffany again? Or is this the easiest yes of your career?

He had to do a lot of convincing to get me to do the first Chucky movie; I just did not want to do it. And you know, I never watched horror movies. So, I didn’t understand the good in horror movies. He said when he was writing Tiffany he heard my voice in his head. [Laughs.] And I know the studio wanted him to cast a “Baywatch” actress that, you know, would [be maybe] less expensive. But he was like, “I just couldn’t get Jennifer out of [my] mind.” And so, they kept coming back to me. Once I read the script I was like, “Tiffany is really kinda funny and delightful.” And the idea that I was going into the doll’s body, once I played Tiffany I was really hooked.

But I never thought there were going to be more episodes. Now I’m talking in television talk. I never thought there were gonna be more movies because Tiffany dies not once, but twice. So I thought, “Oh, that was really fun. It was one and done.” And then a couple years later Don called up and he said, “We’re gonna make another Chucky movie, are you ready?” And I was like, “But Tiffany’s dead.” He’s like, “Oh,

See Jennifer Tilly, page 30

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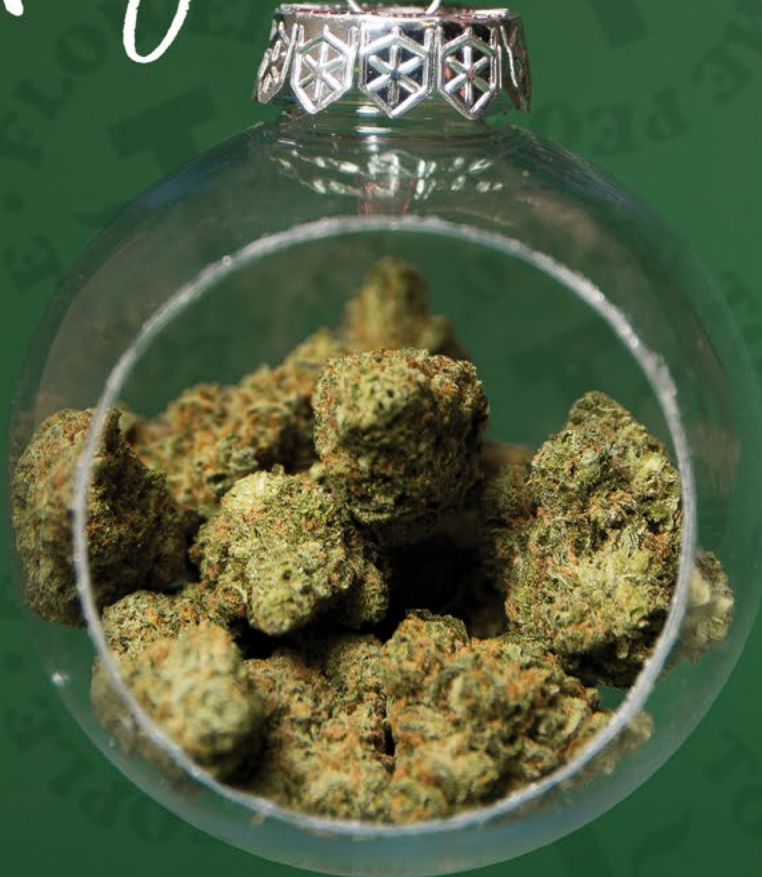
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Zackary Arthur as Jake Wheeler in "Chucky." Photo: Syfy

→ Jennifer Tilly

Continued from page 28

Jennifer, no. You're not familiar with the voodoo killer doll universe. Tiffany never dies."

There are so many layers of queerness in "Chucky." What excites you the most when you consider the franchise's — and now the series' — queer sensibility?

The one most likable character in "Bride of Chucky" [from 1998] was the best friend who was gay. And so that was a very positive role model. The trans community loved Glen/Glenda. It was sort of ahead of its time, and voiced by Billy Boyd in a very touching way. I've always had a big gay following for Tiffany. [Laughs.] So many drag queens have played Tiffany and put Tiffany in their act. And I was actually kind of a gay icon, to use the word loosely. I had a big gay following, let's put it that way, and now [I] sound really conceited.

It started with [the 1994 dark comedy] "Bullets Over Broadway." I was like, "Oh my gosh, I have a gay following." [Laughs.] I was so proud. I remember once I went to a club and I saw Sandra Bernhard in the club, and everyone in the club except for me and Sandra Bernhard were gay men. They're laughing at everything she said, and I was like, "I want to be her. I want to be up on stage and be a gay icon." Chucky really sort of accelerated that, that trajectory toward achieving my dreams.

Now with this one, what I love about it is that Jake, played by the lovable Zackary Arthur, and Björgvin [Arnarson], whose character's name is Devon — it's a coming-of-age story, and it's just so matter of fact that the young kid [and] his first love both happen to be male. I think it's really important. It's casual. A revolution not coming with a roar, but just kind of creeping in. It's the world as it is: here's two people, and they're going through puberty, and they're both male. And it's had a tremendous response. I haven't heard any backlash. The kids are really cool now. Everybody just loves the characters. They're just rooting for Jake and Devon to get together.

How much have you thought about what Chucky represents in the series? To me, he's like Jake's id.

He represents the rage of someone who's forced to repress who they are.

That's so interesting. One of the reasons why I think that people really relate to Chucky is because everybody does have that sort of inner rage. And it's weird, the thing I've noticed over the years is people relate to Chucky. They don't relate to the attractive people being chased and killed. [Laughs.] When they're watching the movie, they're not the person running and screaming, looking over their shoulder. They're Chucky. [Laughs.] And Chucky is so gleeful and non-remorseful. Like, when Tiffany kills people she feels really bad afterwards. But Chucky just has a good time with no after-killing hangover.

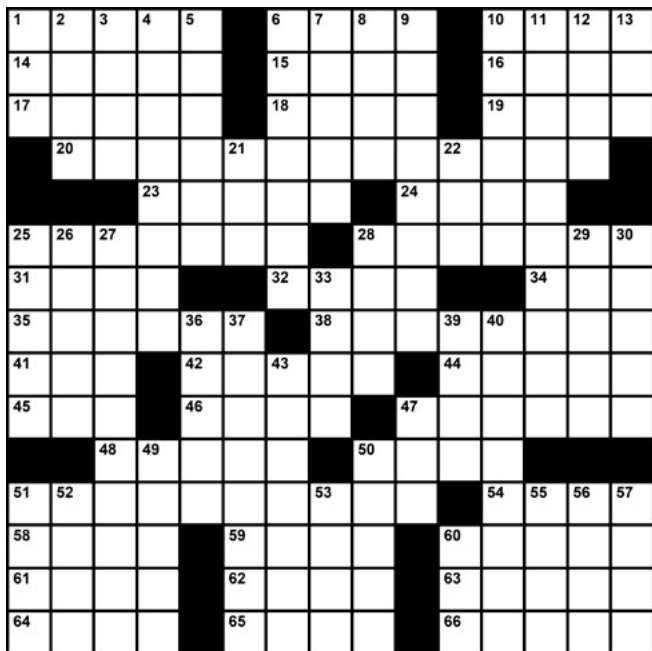
So people love Chucky. There was that scene [in "Chucky"] where Chucky says, "You know, I have a genderfluid kid." And Jake goes, "And you're OK with that?" He goes, "I'm not a monster, Jake." I have to tell you, gay Twitter went crazy. They're like, "Chucky is an LGBTQ+ ally!" I mean, they loved it so much. Now I have these kids following me on Twitter and their handle is @glendafluid [laughs] 'cause they loved the way he said genderfluid: *gendafluid*.

I can't help but think about how you wanted to play Corky in "Bound" and here you are as Tiffany, not playing the butch character yet again. Fiona gets to play the butcher character instead.

I'm just happy that people still consider me sexy and that I get to play the sexy parts. And you know, making out with Fiona was an absolute delight, I have to say. She does all the heavy lifting in the scene because she has to cry and scream and fall on the ground. I'm so camp in this, like I'm always thinking of jokes that I can put in. I just like to make people laugh. But in the last couple episodes there's lots of emoting from Miss Tilly. You'll see that Oscar-caliber acting come to the forefront. [Laughs.]

Since Don has turned Chucky into an LGBTQ+ ally, can we expect to see Chucky in some Pride parades next year?

Well, when "Bride of Chucky" came out, I was the grand marshal of the West Hollywood Pride Parade. Then when "Seed of Chucky" came out, I was the grand marshal — I don't know if that's what they called it — of the gay Pride Parade in Greenwich Village. I was on a float with all these dancing Chuckys. I had a big, orange feather boa. There was so much love for Chucky and Tiffany as I was rolling through town. It was so much fun. But when I was the grand marshal of the gay Pride Parade in West Hollywood, I had all these half-naked dancing men up on the float. We were rolling through West Hollywood; my friends were on the street corners, and I'm like, "Get on. Get on." They all started climbing on the float, and then they all started taking their shirts off too. And of course all my friends have so many abs I can't even begin to count them. [Laughs.]



- 34 Contemporary of Bela
35 More of the line
38 More of the line
41 Brew ending
42 Does without oral gratification
44 Home for Troy Perry
45 Some, on the Somme
46 "Puttin' on the ___"
47 Fused
48 Unlikely male stat posting
50 Bird feeder food
51 End of the line
54 Christmas threesome
58 Beginning of "Rent"
59 Cut
60 Character that said the line
61 Ridge on Melissa's neck
62 "Aida" solo
63 Ryan of "Partners"
64 Top target
65 Belgian border river
66 Brand for cutting leaves of grass
- 7 Start of a legal conclusion
8 Angry in., for example
9 Toni Morrison novel
10 In the thick of
11 Gay-friendly California mecca
12 Patron of people in the navy
13 Get a load of
21 SEP, e.g.
22 It's attractive and a bit of a shock
25 Cut up
26 Toughen up
27 Socrates' Athens, and others
28 Vibrator and plug
29 Model's asset
30 Came to a halt
33 City of Baudelaire's land
36 Zimbalist of "The F.B.I."
37 Save money for it
39 Nemesis of Tinkerbell
40 Ball-busting workplace
43 Salon workers
47 "M-m-m!" to Sappho
49 Head of costume designing
50 Allan once of Minnesota politics
51 Rubber vessel, perhaps
52 Light brown
53 Confession of mendacity
55 Protected, to seamen
56 Its teeth point in all directions
57 Mykonos, for one
60 Head movement

Body Language

Q Puzzle

Across

- 1 Successful cross-dresser's cry?
6 Sissy
10 Fruity drinks
14 Snaky discharge
15 General vicinity
16 Distance of 1760 yards
17 Cause of "bed death"
- 18 Brown quickly
19 "Woe ___!" ("Hamlet")
20 Start of a line from "Frasier"
23 Morally straight kind of badge
24 Amount of AZT, e.g.
25 Large droning bugs
28 Photo in an old album
31 United, to Renee Vivien
32 Med. care groups

Down

- 1 "___ Got You Under You Under My Skin"
2 Word on a Cambodian map
3 A girl named Frank
4 Bourbon blend
5 Used the mouth to express pleasure
6 Short-tempered

See p. 21 for answers

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