

MICHIGAN'S LGBTQ+ NEWS SOURCE SINCE 1993

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PLUS:
*The Wedding
Issue*

POWER, PUTIN AND, YES, THE TIGER KING

John Cameron Mitchell on What We Can Learn About
Abusing Authority From Joe Exotic

By Chris Azzopardi

UP CLOSE AND PERSONAL
A Bigender Ukrainian
on the Russian
Invasion

LET'S TALK ABOUT SEX
This Org Seeks to
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Photo: Peacock

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VOL. 3012 • MARCH 17, 2022

ISSUE 1196

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5 Queer Things You Can Do Right Now-ish

BY JACKIE JONES

March is that time of year when the world seems to come alive again after those long, cold winter months. Not only is spring on the way, but March is designated as Women's History Month and International Transgender Visibility Day, two excellent excuses to shower the women and trans people in your life with lots of love. So, emerge from hibernation and enjoy all that March has to offer. Not sure where to start? Consider our list of five queer things you can do right now-ish:

Get Elevated At Copper House's Revival Week

Looking for something with high vibrations and high expectations? Look no further than Copper House's Revival Week. From March 21-27 the cannabis- and LGBTQ-friendly community space will highlight seven curated events in their newly remodeled basement. In addition, local influencers and leaders will use the space to showcase their expertises. Erada Oleita, a curator and one of the influencers, will be hosting her "Elevated and Melanated Tea Party." "For the tea party this year we are focused on everything black and luxurious," says Oleita. "We will be curating an opulent affair that will not only leave you wanting more but will make the ancestors proud."

Go to [Eventbrite.com](https://www.eventbrite.com) for ticket information.

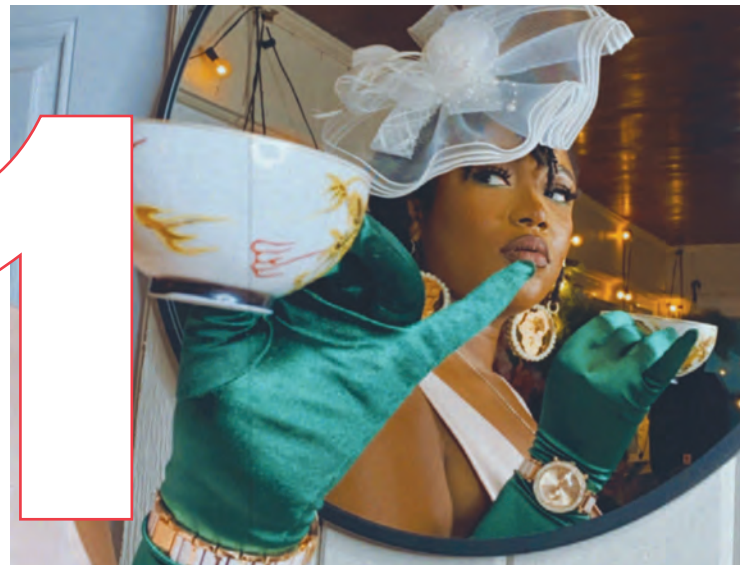


Photo: Erada Oleita



Photo: YouTube

Celebrate Women's History Month With Chucks and Pearls

Who runs the world? Chucks and pearls! Or, Vice President Harris in her Chucks and pearls, if you ask Ferndale's Painting With a Twist. After being inspired by Vice President Harris during her 2020 campaign, Manager Rhonda Lewis said she knew they "had to do a Chucks and pearls"-themed night. Since then, it has evolved into one of their Women's History Month-themed nights. From 7-9 p.m. on March 23, come experience an inspirational evening of painting, socializing and fun. As an added bonus, you're encouraged to bring light snacks, beer and wine.

For more information and to book your spot, visit their website. The studio asks attendees to wear masks.



Recognize Trans Lives and Legends

Sure, International Transgender Visibility Day is March 31, but that doesn't mean you can't start celebrating early. Leading up to Trans Visibility Day, Oakland University's Gender and Sexuality Center will host "Our Transcestors," a discussion focused on transgender history, including an exploration of the influential lives of transgender heroes throughout our history. One notable person is the creator of the international event and Transgender Michigan's co-founder Rachel Crandell. "[Part of the event] will be about the importance of visibility day and why I founded it," she said. "[But also,] why we needed a day where we could celebrate the living rather than focusing on the deaths." The event will take place via Zoom at 12 p.m. on March 21.

Go to [Oakland University's website](https://www.oakland.edu) for more information.



Photo: Amara Vear

Nerd Out with Queer Comics

Pride is a few months away, but no worries: You can get a jump on Pride with queer tales from Queer Comics Peddler. The LGBTQ+ pop-up shop for comics, books, zines and more will be at Bridge Community Cafe from 9 a.m.-3 p.m. on March 19. Amara Vear, the creator, said she has read most of her LGBTQ+ collection and that she's "pretty good at giving recommendations." "I really like sharing the books," she told BTL. "There's so much more representation that exists now than even a decade ago." Beyond queer tales, Bridge Community Cafe provides a safe space for coffee, food, comfort and collaboration.

For more information, visit [Queer Comics Peddler's Facebook page](#).



Photo: Starfrenzy

Get Campy with Poppy

Poppy, the pop sensation who has something of a chokehold over the LGBTQ+ community, is back on stage. During her current "Never Find my Place" tour, she will be delivering all that Poppy camp we love, something she hasn't done since her last trek, in 2020. Expect to hear some of her classics and new releases throughout the night when she comes to St. Andrews at 7 p.m. March 27.

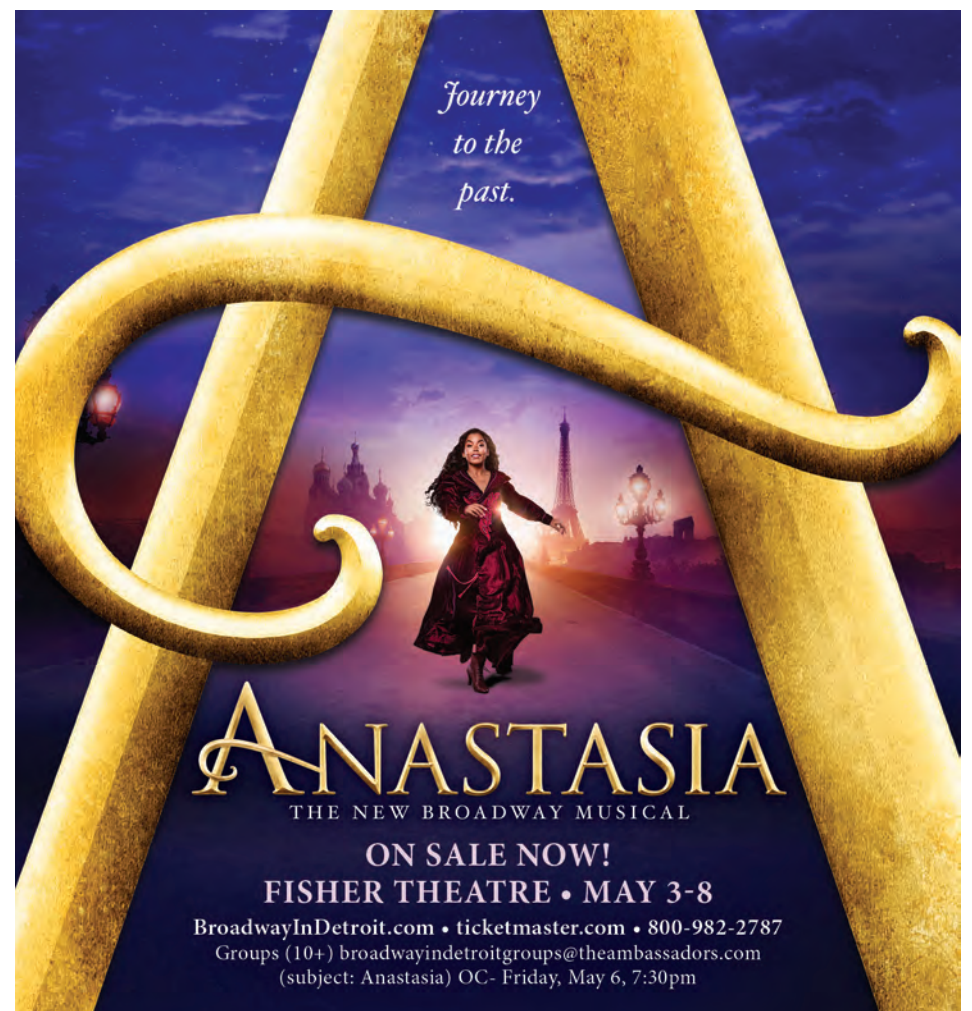
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- Alzheimer's Association 24/7 helpline at helplinegmc@alz.org or 800-272-3900





Xir Oya, one of the hosts of Cold as Hell. Photo: Rhiannon Chester-Bey

How One Michigan Organization Is Working to End Sex Stigma in the Black Queer Community

BY ELLEN SHANNA KNOPPOW

“The Sex, Hooking Up and the Apps” tour dates are as follows:

University of Michigan Dearborn:
Tuesday, March 29

Wayne State University:
Wednesday, March 30

Community tour night at LGBT Detroit’s Marvin Lee Building:
Thursday, March 31

The College for Creative Studies:
Friday, April 1

One of this year’s virtual displays during LGBT Detroit’s Cold as Hell event, which was titled “Dungeons in Detroit,” featured a self-guided pleasure demonstration with helpful tips that popped up on the screen during a film produced by the organization. The film wasn’t shy about its uncensored depictions of bondage, spit and flogging, where a whip is used for sexual arousal.

Held in February, Cold as Hell is the organization’s health-focused, leather kink and fetish Winter Pride event, and it’s another way the Michigan organization has been promoting healthy sexuality and fighting stigma around sex in the Black queer community.

“Providing education on these kinks, fetishes and other ways that we experience pleasure is the first step in destigmatizing it,” says Jerron Totten (he/him), program coordinator and legislative advocacy specialist for LGBT Detroit.

As a demonstrator and panelist at this year’s Cold as Hell, Sir S’ango ONYX (he/they), who identifies as gay and queer, did a demo of primal sexuality and primal play, a form of BDSM practice that displays raw, emotional and sexual feelings. It’s a consensual experience that begins with a discussion of boundaries: what’s OK and what’s not OK.

“As part of our scene, we did a penetration scene around toy play and what that looks like in a healthy way,” S’ango tells BTL. “I tried to make sure that the scene was promoting condom use with toys because there’s a lot of stigma around

sex toys and sex toy use.”

Sex positivity didn’t always come naturally to S’ango, who says he grew up in an atmosphere that didn’t exactly celebrate Black queer sexuality.

“A lot of us were raised that anything outside of missionary sex is deemed disgraceful,” S’ango says. “Growing up in Black households, the premise is always, you don’t ever want to embarrass your family, you don’t ever want word to get out that you aren’t ‘normal.’ Expressing any type of sexual curiosity or asking about [sex] in the home was never really something that was encouraged, at least when I was growing up in the ’80s and ’90s.”

Then, of course, there’s the stigma that exists inherently in the experience of not just being Black but being Black and queer. “In the vanilla Black gay community, anything surrounding kink, fetishes or wanting to experiment outside of sexual norms — it just was something that wasn’t talked about because the stigma would be that you aren’t normal or that there is something wrong with you.”

Ending stigma surrounding Black queer sexuality involves an understanding of the intersection of racism and homophobia, says Totten, who described his own experience with intersectionality.

“As a Black gay man, I have to worry about stigma, microaggressions [and] discrimination amongst our white counterparts because of what our country believes a Black man’s place is in this country, and how Black men are treated,” Totten says. “You see my Blackness before you understand my gayness.”

“

A lot of us were raised that anything outside of missionary sex is deemed disgraceful.

– Sir S’ango ONYX

“Then,” he continues, “I have to worry about homophobia with my Black heterosexual counterparts and the stigma that comes along with maybe some of our straight Black friends not understanding the various ways we choose to experience pleasure and the various ways in which we make attemptst to reduce risk, reduce harm and reduce the spread of HIV infection.”

Totten believes that destigmatizing sex and destigmatizing HIV and AIDS go hand in hand. The well-received Cold as Hell event went a long way toward promoting sex positivity, as both he and S’ango can attest.

“Cold as Hell offers education from leather and kink experts from across the country,” Totten says. “And so you experience Cold as Hell to find out how to experience these kinks and fetishes safely and how to get the most out of [it].”

In the leather community, S’ango has conversations around consent, healthy connection in kink and leather, and kink practice. “Open communication around healthy sexual connection is important,” S’ango says. “Shame is

something that unfortunately, we will have to work through for some time, but we will get to the other side.” In his day-to-day work, S’ango is a sexual health peer navigator for AIDS Action Baltimore.

S’ango is also one of the featured panelists for “The Sex, Hooking Up and the Apps” tour (SHUA), LGBT Detroit’s annual spring anti-HIV stigma educational event. Running March 29 to April 1, the tour will make stops at the



Sir S’ango ONYX. Photo courtesy of Sir S’ango ONYX

University of Michigan Dearborn, Wayne State University and the College for Creative Studies. There will also be a community tour night at LGBT Detroit March 31.

SHUA is part of LGBT Detroit’s project “Togethr,” the tagline for which is “Live openly. Play togethr.” The campaign has been made possible by over \$300,000 in grants from the state and the city of Detroit to combat HIV stigma in the Black and Latinx LGBTQ+ community. “Not only are we dismantling erroneous stigmas about HIV, but we are doing



Dame Sadie during Cold as Hell. Photo: Rhiannon Chester-Bey

this while speaking to a broader audience to circulate a positive, healthier way of living,” said LGBT Detroit executive director Curtis Lipscomb in a statement.

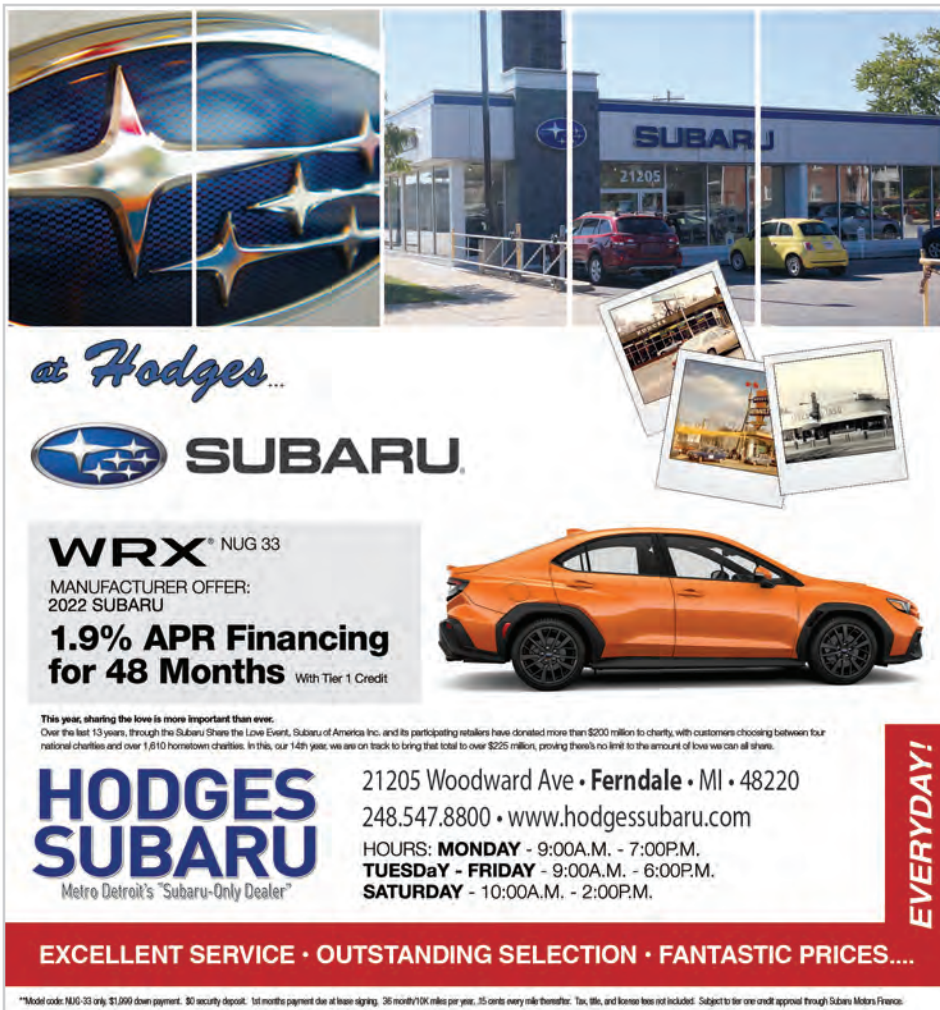
SHUA focuses on HIV education in two ways. First, more broadly — how it’s transmitted, how it’s not transmitted — as well as a lesson on a 2019 update to Michigan’s HIV Criminalization Law. That was an initiative championed by openly gay former state Rep. Jon Hoadley. Before that time, the law didn’t keep pace with scientific evidence that undetectable equals untransmissible, as it pertains to HIV infection.

Previously, individuals living with HIV who had sex without disclosing their status to a partner could be charged with a felony, whether or not the virus was detectable. In Michigan, 19 out of the 21 prosecuted cases were against Black men. Today, Michigan law no longer requires a person to tell their partner they have HIV before having vaginal or anal sex, as long as the HIV is undetectable and they have no intent to spread the virus. This is critical information that LGBT Detroit aims to disseminate to area college students who may

See **Sex Stigma**, page 26

The Detroit Regional LGBT Chamber of Commerce has partnered with the Detroit Pistons to bring you Pistons Equality – Celebrating Pride Night on March 31st. All tickets include a limited edition Pistons Equality - Celebrating Pride Night item. In addition, there will be a specially choreographed Pride Celebration halftime performance by the Pistons Dancers. A \$5 proceed from each ticket sold will benefit a local LGBT charity that includes Stand with Trans, LGBT Detroit, SAGE Detroit, PFLAG Detroit, Ruth Ellis, Affirmations, Motor City Pride, Trans Sista of Color Project, Equality Michigan, Fair Michigan, LGBT Chamber Fund, and Corktown Health. Please place orders quickly because packages are limited!

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Photo: Andrew Potter

At Long Last, Motor City Pride Will Make Its June Pride Month Comeback This Year

BY JASON A. MICHAEL

It's official: Motor City Pride (MCP) is making a June comeback.

This summer, MCP will take place Saturday and Sunday, June 11 and 12, returning to June Pride Month for the first time since 2019. The festival was canceled in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic and last year it was moved to the fall.

"It feels really good to be back in June this year," said Motor City Pride President Dave Wait. "It was nice to be able to do the two events last year. But with June being Pride month, it's where we should be and where all the excitement is."

Wait said there were no COVID-related issues at last September's Motor City Pride and that he expects the same this year. "Since we had a successful event back in the fall, we were optimistic that things would continue to open up and that if we could do it in September we'd be OK this June."

Masks, said Wait, will be available for those who wish to wear them, but they will likely not be required. Attendees are also encouraged to be fully vaccinated for everyone's safety.

Attendance in September was down but Wait

said he expects the numbers to rebound this year.

"The numbers were down probably because it was not Pride month and mostly because some people weren't comfortable being out in groups."

A highlight of this year's MCP, said Wait, will be the commemoration of the 50th year since Detroit's first LGBTQ+ march, which took place in 1972. "We think that's going to build a lot of excitement and support for continuing the LGBTQ+ movement and bring out more people as we recognize the founding forebears of the organization and celebrate the achievements that we've accomplished as we continue to work toward full equality for all individuals," he said.

Details for the celebration are still in the works.

"Our sponsors are excited to be supporting the festival and its coming back in June," said Wait. "We're going to be opening the application for vendors to sign up [this] week and for participants in the parade a couple weeks after that."

The entertainment lineup for MCP will be announced in early May, Wait said, after all the contracts have been completed and returned.

And be sure to include Ferndale Pride in your early summer planning, too! The festival will take place in downtown Ferndale on June 4.

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Haute Twitter Takes

A monumental step back in LGBTQ+ rights is the “Don’t Say Gay” bill, which the Florida House and Senate passed recently. The bill, essentially, will limit what classrooms can teach about sexual orientation and gender identity and cause emotional distress to LGBTQ+ youth. Since its passing, advocates and students who oppose the blatantly homophobic bill have loudly and proudly tweeted their opinions of this absurd and damaging bill:



L.A. Witt, etc. @GallagherWitt
Mar 10 · 1 tweet

If you support [#DontSayGay](#) and the rise of anti-queer censorship, you support making kids more vulnerable to homelessness, depression, isolation, and suicide.

If that offends you, too bad. I care way more about the lives and safety of LGBTQ+ kids than I do about your feelings.

George Takel @GeorgeTakel
Mar 8 · 1 tweet

A Florida lawmaker got up to say that “gay” isn’t permanent. I’m not sure what she meant by that, since I’ve been gay for more than 84 years, but many of nature’s most beautiful creations, from rainbows to bursts of flower blossoms, don’t last forever. Just long enough to wow.

Dr. Abdul El-Sayed @AbdulElSayed
Mar 9 · 1 tweet

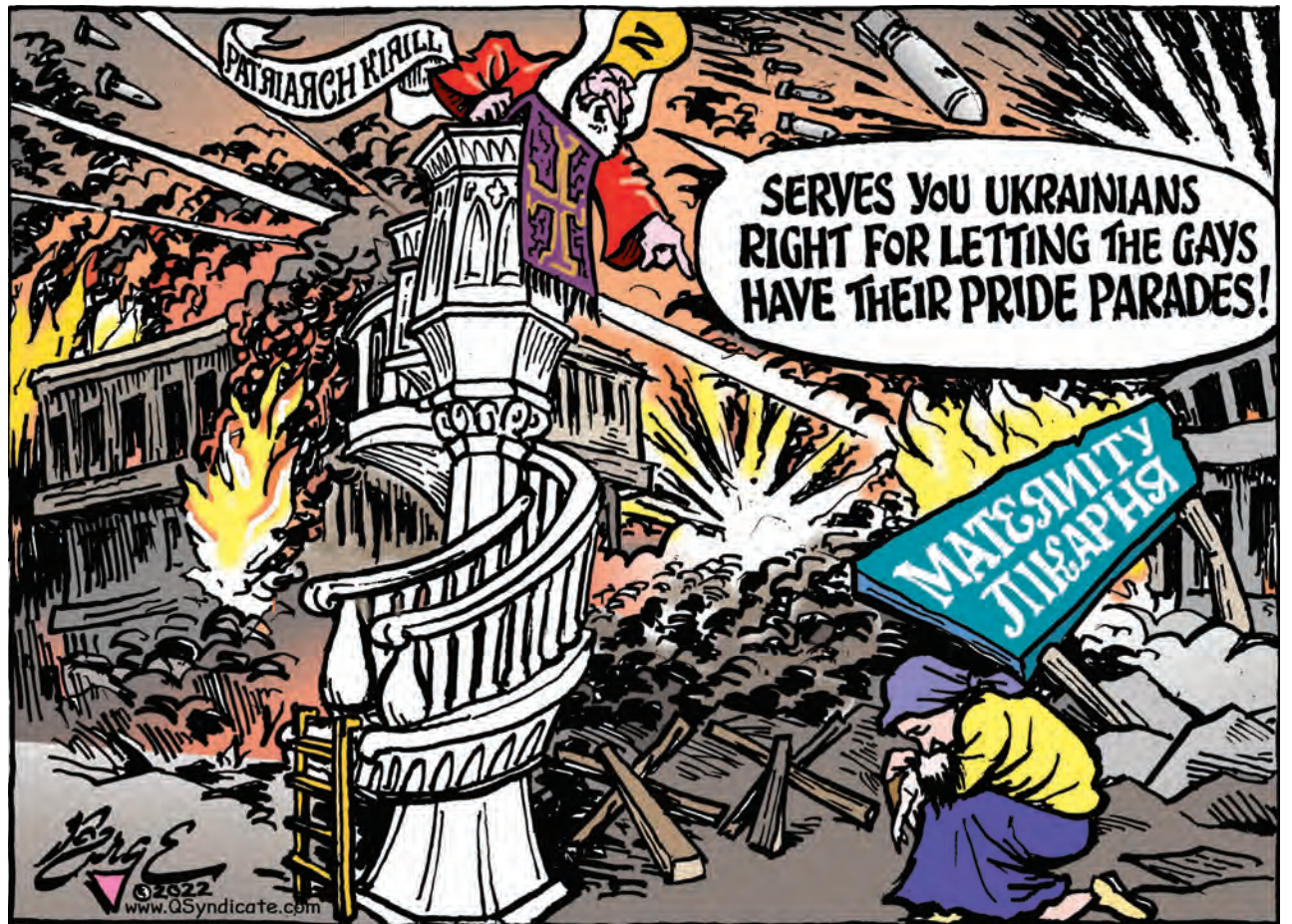
The [#DontSayGay](#) bill is about state-sanctioned stigma. And stigma kills.

Jen Psaki @PressSec
Mar 8 · 1 tweet

[@POTUS](#) and his Administration stand with LGBTQI+ students everywhere, including in Florida where they have passed hateful legislation targeting vulnerable students.

Jayoncé @TheJayBlades
Mar 9 · 1 tweet

Idk who in Florida needs to hear this but like... not talking about gay or trans people isn't going to stop kids from being gay or trans. Instead it's going to increase the rates of depression, anxiety, isolation, and suicidality.
[#DontSayGayBill](#)



‘Don’t Say Gay’ and Other Gag Bills Are a Plague That Will Harm Children



By Dana Rudolph

When my son was little, he did something at school that could soon be banned in Florida and numerous other states: he talked about his two moms. A bill that is speeding through the Florida legislature and was recently passed by the Florida Senate could soon squash all discussion of LGBTQ+ identities in schools — but Florida is not the only state pushing for such legislation. The attempt to remove content and discussion about LGBTQ+ and other marginalized identities from classrooms is a nationwide epidemic that must be stopped.

There are currently 156 “educational gag order” bills that have been introduced or prefiled in 39 different states since January 2021, according to PEN America, a nonprofit organization that champions free expression. These bills mostly seek to block discussions of race, racism and gender in K-12 schools, public universities and workplaces. Of the 156 bills, 12 have become law in 10 states and 113 are currently live in 35 different states. For example, a pending Minnesota bill says that school districts and public schools may not require curricular instruction relating to critical race theory, defined as “a practice of examining the role of race and racism

in society, the social construction of race and institutionalized racism, and how race intersects with identity, systems, and policies.” To my mind, that eviscerates an unconscionable amount of U.S. history and literature. It tells children of color that their identities and experiences as children of color don’t matter, and tells white children that children of color don’t matter.

Fifteen of the bills in nine states would silence speech about LGBTQ+ identities. Florida’s Parental Rights in Education bill, known by opponents as the “Don’t Say Gay” bill, is a good example, as the bill is moving quickly and has Gov. Ron DeSantis’ (R) support. The Senate version of the bill says that “A school district may not encourage classroom discussion about sexual orientation or gender identity in primary grade levels or in a manner that is not age-appropriate or developmentally appropriate for students.” (The House version would ban classroom instruction on these topics before grade three, or if it is not age or developmentally appropriate.) What is “developmentally appropriate”? My son has known he has two moms since well before he was in school. What does it mean to “encourage” such discussion? The bill doesn’t say.

“Don’t Say Gay” laws get fuzzy (and ugly) really fast. What if a kid with queer parents starts talking about their family vacation and another kid asks how they can have two moms or two dads? Or asks why the kid refers to mom as “they”? Could the teacher

See Gag Bills, next page

“

As the parent of a child now grown, I am grateful that my son read things in school that exposed him to experiences and identities not his own and that showed him how different aspects of identity may impact (for better or worse) how he and his peers move through the world.

→ Gag Bills

Continued from previous page

help explain? Could they recommend an LGBTQ-inclusive kids' book to assist? How might the child with queer parents feel if the teacher just shuts down conversation? What if a child is themselves queer, especially if they are socially transitioning and changing names and/or pronouns? Can the teacher help other children understand this or must the child in question try to hide their identity? There's a fragile line between banning discussion and banning people with those identities. When we encounter the former, the desire — and the effect — is often really for the latter.

Florida State Rep. Joe Harding (R-Williston), one of the bill's lead sponsors, has said that the bill would not prevent children from talking about their families — but the bill's language is, in fact, dangerously vague. And even if Harding were right, banning any other discussion of LGBTQ+ topics (which could include teacher responses to kids' questions, as above) still conveys that there is something wrong with such identities.

In addition to the pending bills, five states already have “Don't Say Gay” laws (Alabama, Louisiana, Mississippi, Oklahoma and Texas), according to the Movement Advancement Project. Another five have laws requiring parental notification and the opportunity to opt out of LGBTQ-inclusive curricula (Arkansas, Arizona, Florida, Montana and Tennessee). Several of these states, among others, have additional bills pending that would further restrict LGBTQ-inclusive materials in schools. In contrast, though, six states actually require inclusion of LGBTQ+ people in the curriculum

(California, Colorado, Illinois, Maryland, New Jersey and Oregon).

Legislation blocking discussion of LGBTQ+ identities and of the impact of race and racism may not be surprising in conservative states like Florida, Indiana, Kansas, Oklahoma, Missouri, Tennessee and South Carolina (among others), but there are also pending bills in more moderate and liberal states like New Jersey, New York and Washington. Even in my home state of Massachusetts, long a leader in LGBTQ+ equality, there are candidates running for local school boards on platforms promoting “parent choice” in whether their children participate in curriculum that focuses on social justice. These bills and candidates might have a better chance of success in more conservative locales, but that shouldn't lull us into overlooking them wherever they pop up.

As the parent of a child now grown, I am grateful that my son read things in school that exposed him to experiences and identities not his own and that showed him how different aspects of identity may impact (for better or worse) how he and his peers move through the world. I am glad he never felt he couldn't talk about who was in his family. Teaching children that gender is a spectrum and that people may be attracted to others of any gender isn't inappropriate. Learning that society has treated people of different identities differently (and often unfairly) in both past and present isn't indoctrination. It's education. And it's the kind of education our children need to thrive in today's world.

Dana Rudolph is the founder and publisher of Mombian (mombian.com), a GLAAD Media Award-winning blog and resource directory, with a searchable database of 850+ LGBTQ+ family books, media, and more.

CREEP OF THE WEEK

Hate Gays? Hate Abortions? Hate Women? You Might Be a Republican



By D'Anne Witkowski

A lot of really terrible shit in the news these days, so how about I start with a joke?

A guy walks into a bar, the bartender says, “What can I get ya?”

Guy says, “The 1965 Supreme court case *Griswold v. Connecticut* was wrongly decided.”

Bartender says, “The case that ruled that people have a right to use contraception?”

Guy, “That's the one!”

Bartender, “What are you, some kind of radicalized extremist?”

Guy, “Yes, and I'm one of three radicalized extremists running for the Republican nomination for Attorney General in Michigan.”

Look, I never said it was going to be a FUNNY joke.

And I wish I could just write off these three Republicans who ALL believe that there is no legal right to contraception as jokes, but it's actually deadly serious.

Saying “I told you so” doesn't feel great in this instance, but I have been saying for years, decades actually, that the religious right agenda was never going to stop with LGBTQ+ people. That these right-wing, radicalized extremists would come after birth control eventually. And it goes without saying that the anti-LGBTQ+ agenda is carbon copied from the anti-abortion agenda. So none of this should be a surprise.

Granted, the three Republicans claim that their problem isn't so much with birth control; it's that the ruling infringed on “states' rights.” Meaning that states should have the right to ban birth control if they damn well please. But if you consider that arguments against marriage equality and interracial marriage and arguments in favor of segregation and slavery also claimed to be about “states' rights,” well you can see how that's not really reassuring coming from someone running to be Michigan's chief law enforcement officer.

Part of the problem is Republicans have swung so far to the right that stuff like this doesn't get roundly condemned. It becomes the party line.

And it didn't just come out of nowhere. Republicans have been building up to this level of extreme for decades, starting most acutely with President Ronald Reagan's

embrace of the Christian right in the '80s. But to people who don't really follow politics closely — which, let's be honest, is the majority of Americans

— this kind of extremism looks like it's an outlier. But it isn't.

Just look at all of the extreme abortion bans Republicans are rolling out across the country. They're in a mad frenzy to see who can be the most anti-choice. Texas, Florida, Idaho, West Virginia, Kentucky, Missouri (which as of this writing has a bill under consideration that would even ban abortions in the case of ectopic pregnancies which is not a viable pregnancy and will kill a pregnant person if they're forced to just let God sort it out. Oh, and they also want to stop Missourians from leaving the state to get an abortion). These are just some of the states that have passed laws seeking a complete ban on abortion or have bills pending to do just that.

For now, *Roe v. Wade* still exists, so they can't ban abortion outright. But they can pass bills that make it nearly impossible to find abortion services that are essentially banned. It's kind of like if you wanted to ban chewing gum but weren't allowed to ban it outright, so you decide that gum can only be purchased by someone 18 years and older, can only be paid for in cash, can only be sold between the hours of 2 a.m. and 3 a.m. on every third Monday, and in order to retrieve your purchase you had to reach your arm into a bear trap. Probably a lot less gum chewing is going to be happening in your neck of the woods.

Except abortion isn't gum — it's healthcare. Essential healthcare that politicians have no business getting in the middle of. Pregnant people have died and will continue to die wherever and whenever abortion isn't an option. And the “pro-life” party has no problem with that.

It all feels like a bad dream. For many of us our mothers and grandmothers already fought this battle. Unfortunately, while they won the right to an abortion via *Roe v. Wade*, they did not win the battle against sexism and misogyny in the United States. Think about it. We hate women so much in this country that we elected Donald Trump. Also we're really racist and have really unhealthy ideas about wealth in this country. Just an all around horror show.

One thing you can do? Vote for people who aren't hateful idiots. And until hateful idiots aren't the ones running their party, don't vote for Republicans. And, yeah, that could be a very long while.

In Conversation with KyivPride

What LGBTQ+ People Need to Know Right Now About the Russian Invasion of Ukraine



KyivPride protest in Kyiv, Ukraine, February 2022. Photo: Facebook

BY ELLEN SHANNA KNOPPOW

Right now, in Ukraine, transgender people are forced to go without their prescribed hormones. “Pharmacies are out of stock of pretty much everything,” said Lenny Emson, executive director of KyivPride, a non-governmental organization in Ukraine’s capital city.

Emson is bigender and uses she/he and him/his pronouns. On Saturday, March 6, day 10 of the Russian invasion, this reporter spoke with Emson via Zoom. For security reasons, Emson did not disclose his location. “I’m in a safe place,” s/he said.

The following interview has been condensed and edited.

What do LGBTQ+ people in Ukraine fear most about the Russian invasion?

First of all, we are in solidarity with the people of Ukraine, so we feel about [the] Russian invasion that it never should happen, and we will fight to the last drop of our blood. We will not ever live under Russian laws. We will never obey Russia. We will never be occupied and live as Russians do, without human rights, without any rights, and standing on [our] knees, literally.

Conditions for LGBTQ+ people in Russia are much

harsher than in Ukraine. Do you see that as a coming threat right now?

I think it’s not right for us. It’s a big threat that they will really introduce some repressions towards LGBTQI people and human rights activists. That is our fear.

For now, as LGBTQI activists, we’re not thinking of “What are we going to do when Russia is going to occupy us?” Our line of thinking is different: What can we do to prevent this from happening? So our work is kind of divided in two directions. One is to evacuate the most vulnerable population. We evacuate trans people, we have evacuated people with children from [the] LGBTQI community. And those who can fight, those who can be in territorial defense or in the Army, they join... and they fight. I know, personally, trans people who are joining the military to fight against Russia, and queer people now who are joining territorial defense units to help. I just want the world to understand that LGBT people in Ukraine [are] joining the fight. We’re not running from Russia.

How can we help? There is a post on the KyivPride Facebook page with a list of organizations providing direct aid.

I would be very grateful if you could spread it and you can spread the word. These organizations right now, they are concentrating

their efforts in different parts of Ukraine. So KyivPride, we work nationally. We help all people all over Ukraine. We help people with money for food and relocation, and we have transportation means organized by different organizations.

What are the conditions like for LGBTQ+ people in Ukraine right now? For example, I understand transgender people are finding that hormones are impossible to come by.

Pharmacies are out of stock of pretty much everything. We are working with our partners from abroad, and we are trying to get some medications from there and to get them to Kyiv and to other cities where people need them. It’s kind of at the very beginning; this happened within a week.

What would you like LGBTQ+ people outside Ukraine to know about the LGBTQ+ community there?

We would like you to know that we have like 30 years of fight for LGBTQ rights behind our backs. We’re fighting for these rights and freedoms for [the] LGBTQI community, and we’re not going to just let it go. Last year, in 2021, KyivPride gathered 7,000 people on the streets of Kyiv. We were marching together for LGBTQI rights, for human rights. So unlike Russia, we are really big and we really value our freedom. We are very different from Russia, and we are not going to obey Russian laws and Russian oppression towards human rights, [like] we see right now happening in Russia for the last many, many years.

Many of us here feel helpless. What can individuals do? How can our government help?

How can government help and how can individuals help, this is very much connected, ‘cause we would like individuals to go to the government and to ask people that have power to use this power for good.

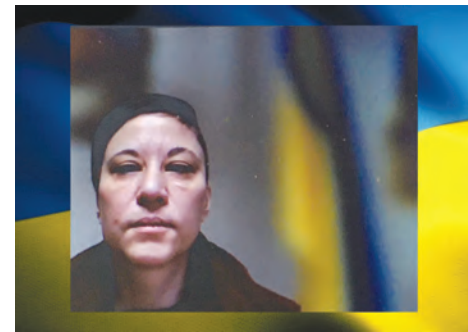
We need our sky closed. “Close the sky,” this is a narrative that has been around from the very beginning of the war. So “close the sky “ is literally to ban all [Russian forces] from flying

above the Ukrainian territory. That means that Russia would stop bombing. And this is what we need right now...because we need to live. In order to fight for human rights, we need to be alive. This is number one. That’s why “close the sky” is a very broad LGBT demand to the American government. We need to be alive in order to be LGBT and be a community.

As well, we’re asking all individuals not only just to donate to us...but be on our side. When you go on social media, and when you see posts in support of Russian propaganda, for example, posts denying that there is a war in Ukraine, posts denying that people are dying, posts supporting Putin or supporting Russia, please report. Please complain. There must be no place for Russian propaganda in social media; there must be no place for Russian lies on the internet. Please. You can do this. This could be your big input in the fight against Russia.

Any final thoughts?

It’s hard to say anything because nobody has expected this. I know all the warnings from [the] American government...all these reports from the intelligence services...but who could believe this could happen in the 21st century — a ground war, really? Who could believe that this man would go and bomb Ukrainian cities? Who could believe? This is not real. When you look at all this footage from bombed cities, your brain does not want to recognize it as a reality, your brain tries to switch it off. It’s such a big stress to realize that this is happening in real time, so that’s why... no words here. What can we say?



Lenny Emson, KyivPride executive director, via Zoom on March 6.

KyivPride is a Ukrainian non-governmental organization that aims to contribute to full respect for human rights for LGBTQ+ people in Ukraine and encourages an appreciation for these rights by raising LGBTQ+ visibility and participation in social processes.

KyivPride accepts donations via 24 Pay, Google Pay and credit card. Visit PrideSource.com for more ways to provide direct aid to the LGBTQ+ community in Ukraine.



Racial, Gender Representation Missing From Top Michigan HIV Policy Department

BY TODD HEYWOOD

Staffing at the Michigan Department of Health and Human Service Division on HIV and STIs is woefully unrepresentative of those living with or at risk for HIV, new data reveals.

While Black men who have sex with men and transgender women of color continue to shoulder the brunt of the ongoing HIV crisis, data released by the Department in June 2021 shows that the staff running a program set up to administer prevention and intervention programs with federal dollars does not represent the very people the program is intended to help.

This data divulges an immense racial and gender gap between those at risk for or living with HIV and those charged with doling out state and federal cash to organizations and groups that are working on medical care, prevention and intervention activities.

Women were overwhelmingly represented in the state's HIV workforce, according to the data. Black or African American women represent over 30 percent of the workforce, as do white women, while Hispanic, multiracial and Asian women barely register in the data set.

"The question I think we need to ask, is the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services aware of this disparity?" said Curtis

Lipscomb, executive director at LGBT Detroit. "If they are aware, what are they doing to address it? If they are not aware, then we have to raise that awareness and make changes."

Of the 131 positions in the Division on HIV and STIs:

- 17 are white cisgender men
- 10 are Black cisgender men
- 44 are white women
- 49 are Black women
- Three are Hispanic women
- Three are Asian women
- Two women identify as more than two races

All 131 employees hold at least a bachelor's degree. State officials said many have additional higher education attainment, from master's degrees to Ph.D.s. In response to questions sent late last year, MDHSS spokeswoman Lynn Sutfin said State Civil Service rules prohibit them from advertising for entry-level positions using the phrase "or comparable experience and skills." (That's a common employee recruitment tactic used to encourage those without college educations to apply and broaden the diversity of employees in a workplace.)

Two positions in the Michigan HIV/AIDS Drug Assistance Program (ADAP), which

connects the uninsured and underinsured with federal dollars to pay for HIV medications and co-pays, are currently filled by women. One is a white woman; the other is an Hispanic woman.

Overall, the Division spent nearly \$103 million dollars in 2021. Most of that comes from the federal government, which is then distributed to local HIV/AIDS service organizations and health departments under federal funding distributions of Ryan White CARES Act dollars. In 2021, the state received just under \$19.5 million in general Ryan White CARES Act funding. It also received just over \$8.3 million in federal HIV prevention dollars. MDHHS provides a match in cash for federal dollars. In 2021, that match was just under \$5 million.

The city of Detroit receives its own Ryan White CARES Act and prevention funding dollars, as most larger cities in the U.S. do.

According to data released by the state in January 2021, the racial and gender makeup of the employees of the Division are not representative of the demographics most likely to be at risk for or living with HIV:

- Black or African American men have a prevalence rate of 1043.3 cases per 100,000 Black or African American men.

- White men have a prevalence of 138.6 cases per 100,000 white men.
- Black or African American women have a prevalence of 316.9 per 100,000 Black or African American women in the state.

Alfredo Hernandez is the Michigan Department of Civil Rights Equity Officer. He works with various departments in the state, local governments and private entities to develop more inclusive equity driven policies and decision making. He declined to discuss the specifics of the MDHHS racial inequities in the HIV Division, but he did talk in general about the importance of representation in policy making by those impacted by such decisions.

"It is important for organizations that provide services for a community to have representation of that community in the decision-making process," he said. "Unconscious bias can lead to an unfortunate imbalance in representation in paid positions. Often, policies do not support the hiring of people based on their lived experiences, which can eliminate many more options, perhaps better suited for the position. But that kind of work is long, exhaustive, important work that requires a commitment to being deliberately anti-racist in policy construction and applications."

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About That Time Jim Obergefell Wrote My Gay Son a Note



BY SARAH BRICKER HUNT

When my (then) 12-year-old son told me he was gay, I was shocked by my reaction. As someone who has

always claimed to be a staunch ally to countless LGBTQ+ friends and a fierce, lifelong protector of my gay baby brother, I'd always assured both of my kids that whatever path their lives took, I would support them.

But there he was, standing in front of me with tears in his big blue eyes, scared about what I would think, anyway. And there I was, crying and frozen. Not my proudest moment.

My overwhelming feeling, in the moment,

was *fear*. I didn't want life to be harder for him. I didn't want him to be the target of the bigotry that has become so outspoken, or worse. In that moment — the one that wasn't very surprising, but rocked my world; the one that I had anticipated and rehearsed for — I felt like a failure.

It didn't take long for me to get myself collected and to focus on the fact that my kid was feeling serious relief after opening up to

the family. That he was whole. That he was still the same incredibly sweet, self-possessed pre-teen he was before he confirmed what we'd suspected. My worries didn't vanish (I'm a mom, worrying is what we do). But they soon took a backseat to how proud I felt to even know this person, let alone be his mom.

A few months later, his "big news" was in the rearview mirror, and being gay became just one part of who he is.

And then, along came NPR.

We often listened to the news on the way to school, and one particular morning, they were covering a story about threats to marriage equality at the hands of Trump and Co. I could instantly see a shift in my son's demeanor. He stiffened, stared out the window. It was like watching it dawn on him, in real time, that there really are people out there who don't think he deserves to be equal.

I steeled myself and asked him if he was OK. "Yeah! This won't happen... right? Can they do that? Why would they do that?"

All at once, his dreams of the future, which always included a husband and a gaggle of kids of his own, seemed in jeopardy. I did what I could to reassure him, and off he went to school.

In true mom fashion, I lamented about this scene on my Facebook. "I can't even believe marriage equality is in question — my 12-year-old shouldn't have to worry about this..." and so on. I tend to overshare with my carefully selected group of Facebook friends. This time, it was the right move.

Turns out, one friend, my son's teacher, went to college with none other than marriage equality trailblazer Jim Obergefell (yes, that Jim Obergefell, as in the 2015 landmark Supreme Court case Obergefell v. Hodges, which established that there is a federally protected fundamental right to marriage for same-sex couples). She reached out and asked if she could share my message with him (YES, PLEASE). Soon, he wrote a note directly to my son — a kind of "Yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus" for the modern era:

From Jim—

I'm sorry to hear you're worried about losing the right to one day marry the person you love, and I absolutely understand why you feel that way.

I wish I could look into the future and tell you (tell all of us, really) that everything is going to be ok, that our ability to say "I do" won't be taken away, but I don't have that power.

What I can tell you is that there are millions of people out there, and countless organizations devoted to equality and civil rights, who will be doing everything they can to ensure we don't lose our right to marry the person we love.

Even more specifically, I'll be out there doing everything in my power to fight for marriage. To fight for you. Because I didn't go to the Supreme Court just for my marriage to John, I went to the Supreme Court so that kids like you could grow up in a better world than the one I grew up in. That's what so many others have done, people like Harvey Milk, Frank Kameny, Edie Windsor, Marsha P. Johnson, and so many others. We stood up to say this isn't right, and we're not going to take it anymore. We stood up to create a better world, better lives, for those who come after us.

You have my promise I'll keep fighting, and whenever I feel discouraged, I'll think of you and find the strength and will to keep going because I want you to experience the unbelievable joy of creating a life together with the love of your life, just like I did with John.

I wish I could deliver a hug with these words, but know that I'm sending one virtually. And know that it's ok to be scared, to be worried, but don't give up hope. I — and so many others — are out there doing everything we can on behalf of people just like you.

Amazing, right?? My son was floored when I shared Jim's letter with him, and he promptly printed it and hung it in a coveted spot near his computer.

A few months later, we were in the thick of the first days of the pandemic, locked in, locked away from family and friends. In time, that letter seemed even more precious than it did at first. It was a reminder that there was still a world out there, one full of possibilities, one that held promises for all of us, including for my son and his big brother, also a member of the LGBTQ+ community.

Even if the worst happens and marriage equality becomes less than a given, he has a second family out there. People who will fight for him, and who he will fight beside. People who will understand him in a way I can't. It's a beautiful, reassuring thought for this eternally worried mom and sister.

It turns out allyship is about a lot more than flying a flag or even giving out hugs at a Pride fest. It's not about us. It's not even totally about whose ass we'd gladly kick on behalf of our loved ones, if need be.

Good allyship is making sure the LGBTQ+ people we love feel fully supported and connected to the kind of support Jim mentioned in his letter. It's one of the reasons I treasure my role here at BTL as an editor and sometimes writer. It's a small way I can contribute behind the scenes.

I don't know what the future will hold for my son, but I do know he'll be OK on this front, thanks to the community of support available to him. And for that, I am an eternally grateful ally and mom.

Jim Obergefell is running for the Ohio State House. Consider donating to his candidacy or supporting him on social media. We can change the trajectory, one seat at a time.

Sarah Bricker Hunt, a proud Eastern Michigan University alum, is a freelance writer and editor who dabbles in a little of everything.

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23-year-old Wynn Roney (right) of Macomb got married in February of this year to their partner Oliver Fici. Photo courtesy of Wynn Roney

Before You Say ‘I Do’

Tips for Finding the Best Wedding Officiant for Your Special Day

BY NAYANIKA GUHA

Finding the right officiant for your wedding, one who understands and respects your beliefs and traditions can be difficult — even more so for queer couples.

Whether it's a religious leader, a family member or a close friend, it's essential to make sure everyone is on the same page: Is it going to be a quick and easy wedding, or a more traditional affair?

The officiant sets the tone for the ceremony, so it's important you feel comfortable and

respected. It's essential that the officiant respects and supports the relationship and can be trusted to use the right language — including pronouns. Keep these four considerations in mind when choosing your officiant:

Consider choosing someone from the LGBTQ+ community

Choosing someone from the LGBTQ+ community can be key to ensuring that the ceremony is a judgment-free zone and that the officiant truly understands that love

can be shared among people of any gender identity or sexuality. They should understand the considerations that a couple may need to make and be prepared to deal with less than understanding friends and family. Mercedes Allenbaugh, 27, from Ypsilanti, said she would prefer an officiant who is a member of the LGBTQ+ community. “Doesn't matter sex or gender identity, as long as they love love as much as us,” she said.

Still, finding an LGBTQ+ officiant can prove to be a challenge, especially when most websites for wedding officiants don't advertise to queer couples and are flooded with heteronormative

imagery. For many couples, this can be off-putting, and they seek officiants who are open and inviting to LGBTQ+ couples. Wynn Roney, a 23-year-old from Macomb, struggled with this. They said, “I tried looking online for an inclusive minister for a while but had a lot of trouble finding one in our area. There aren't many out there that advertise to couples like us.”

Ro FitzCrane, 25, from Ypsilanti, also emphasizes the need for an officiant's acceptance to be loud and clear. “It would need to be advertised on their website that they are accepting of all marriages and supportive of the LGBTQ+ community,” FitzCrane said.

For queer couples, many of whom deal with microaggressions on a daily basis, having their wedding be as comfortable as possible is essential. Having a queer or allied officiant, one who isn't ashamed of celebrating the love between LGBTQ+ couples, helps put them at ease.

Will the officiant's process vibe with your couple needs?

Different officiants have different ways in which they prepare for the ceremony. Some have a more set script, while others work with the couple to plan the ceremony. Some only meet the couple once, while others have regular sessions to understand the couple and even offer marriage counseling. For many queer couples, officiants who refuse to deviate from a pre-written script may not be the right fit.

Stacey Swickerath, a queer, ordained officiant from Chelsea, believes that planning a ceremony has to be a completely collaborative process with the couple. "On my website I have a list of questions to help couples share their story with me," she said. "I ask things like how they met, what they appreciate about each other, and what they'd like to share with friends and family about their relationship — or not."

By giving couples the option of either writing out and sending responses or setting up a video call to talk, Swickerath believes that they can choose to go with either a more thought-out or spontaneous approach, both of which have their benefits.

"We gave feedback to our officiant on the script before our ceremony so we were certain it's what we wanted," shared Grand Rapids-based Janelle LeBlanc, a 29-year-old who got married in October 2021. "She crafted a really beautiful questionnaire for us to complete, before she wrote the script, with logistical questions and personal reflection questions for us."

LeBlanc believes that it was a special moment in their engagement to have this beautiful conversation about what they are most proud of in their relationship and what they loved most about one another. The officiant used the responses for the ceremony, adding a personal touch that would have been missing in a generic script.

Having pre-wedding meetings with the officiant can also ensure that they use the correct language and make time for what is important to the couple. LeBlanc, for example, incorporated a moment of silence dedicated to the queer elders who came before them and to acknowledge that true marriage equality doesn't exist in the U.S.

Ensure that the officiant knows your pronouns

"Language was very important for us. My wife did not want the wording of 'bride' to be used to describe her, so we wanted to remove gendered traditional language," LeBlanc said.

This is a concern for many queer couples, who often fear being misgendered in their wedding ceremonies and falling trap to the heteronormative language they are trying to avoid. Roney, who got married in February 2022, said it was difficult finding someone who would adhere to the language they wanted as someone who presents outside the binary. This left them worried about inadvertent homophobia.

"I was very afraid they would mess up and say the wrong pronouns, which I really didn't want for my own wedding," they added.

Keeping this concern in mind, Swickerath takes input from the couple on the language, too. "I offer some sample text to start with, and then provide as much customization as they want. That includes preferences on whether they'd like to be referred to as married partners, husbands or wives, or any other terms that fit the individuals."

Consider choosing a family member

Many couples choose to ask an ordained friend or family member to conduct the ceremony. It adds a level of ease, and they are assured that the officiant knows the couple well and speaks from a place of love. For those who are not looking for a very religious wedding, this can be a great solution.

It can be useful to choose someone who knows both people well and who is a good public speaker. Roney, for instance, ended up picking their brother to officiate the wedding in part because it was too difficult to find someone who fit their criteria perfectly. "We're not religious people, so we didn't want to have a minister, and we weren't comfortable with the idea of hiring a stranger who didn't know the two of us very well," they said.

At the end of the day, a wedding is something couples remember in the years to come. Looking back on it, there shouldn't be the feeling of regret about choosing the wrong officiant or "what ifs" about whether it would have been better to pick a friend. So it's essential to plan and prepare a list of non-negotiables to go over when interviewing different officiants and then making an informed decision. After all, an officiant's words may just make or break a wedding.



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Photo courtesy of Amari Ice

Playing Cupid

Gay Matchmaker Amari Ice Aims for the Heart

BY MIKEY ROX

Recently or still single? No sweat. Game-changing, history-making queer matchmaker Amari Ice (he recently paired the first successful gay couple on Lifetime's "Married at First Sight") answers our burning questions on love, relationships, and whether we really need either one.

How did you become a professional matchmaker?

Technically, I'm a love coach first — matchmaker and hypnotherapist are tied for second — since the number one reason anyone is single is because they're trying to have a Level 25 relationship with Level

3 skills. We're 200 percent to 300 percent more likely to find love — with or without a matchmaker — if we've gone through some sort of romantic coaching first. I primarily help gay singles develop their dating skills and only consider matching a client once their dating skills are already up to par so they don't sabotage themselves. I think this approach — coaching 100 percent of my clients — is definitely a key component of what's made me successful.

Explore the matchmaking process with me. What's the criteria? How do you know this person is right for that person?

Matchmaking is part science, part art. The art piece is more intuitive and can't necessarily be

taught or described, but anyone can learn the science piece, which includes the criteria you asked about. Here's my easy-to-remember model for assessing whether or not someone is a good match for you.

M: MAJOR LIFE VALUES

This is the most important component of compatibility. Your values pave the growth path of your life. If your highest priority values aren't aligned with your partner, you'll eventually grow apart.

A: ATTRACTION

It doesn't have to be an immediate or intense pull, but sexual interest must exist in order for

romance to exist. The important thing to note here is that chemistry doesn't predict relationship longevity, and knowing how to create and sustain passion is a skill all successful relationship partners must develop since passion naturally levels off around the two-year mark in a relationship.

T: TEMPERAMENT

Temperament is your energetic disposition aka your personality. If you and your partner's energetic temperaments aren't synergistic, you'll likely have a rocky relationship. While any mature individuals who share major life values can form a happy relationship, there are certain temperaments that you'll naturally gel without as much effort. You can find out which type is best for you by taking my gay compatibility quiz at www.lovealchemytest.com.

C: CAPACITY TO MEET NEEDS

Your partner must have certain mental, emotional, spiritual and/or material qualities in order for you to be happy. The only way to guarantee that your partner has the capacity to meet your needs in the future is to verify they have the capacity to meet them now; potential might not be developed in this lifetime. Potential is the icing. Capacity is the cake.

H: HAZARD FREE

This component of compatibility is actually the simplest: To be hazard free means neither of you have any of the other's deal breakers. But the key is to ensure you aren't using preferences as deal breakers. For example, someone's height range is generally a preference, not an indicator of compatibility. But if you're allergic to cigarettes, smoking would be a deal breaker.

You recently made history by pairing Matt and Daniel, the first successful gay couple in the "Married at First Sight" TV franchise. Yours is a risky business, and much of your professional reputation rides on whether or not matches — least of all high-profile matches — work. How do you deal with that?

Matt and Daniel are so adorable together, aren't they?! It was a ton of fun putting that pair together. Running a business in general is risky, but I don't view mine as any more or less risky than any other business. In terms of navigating the pressure, I look at it like this: My job is not to fix people's love lives or save them from singlehood; my job is to give people the tools and help them develop the skills that make their relationship goals inevitable. Recognizing the difference between what's your responsibility and what isn't is the key to navigating any business, but especially one like mine.

You and I — as gay men — know firsthand that queer romance and love, especially

See **Gay Matchmaker**, page 24



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6 ‘Honeymoon’ Ideas For Post-Wedding Romance

Out-of-the-Box Honeymoon Ideas That Are Closer Than You Think

BY JACKIE JONES

It’s easy to assume COVID has wrecked your honeymoon plans. With new strains popping up every other week (it seems) and mask mandates coming, going and coming again, the traditional honeymoon to some place exotic may not look possible. But, contrary to what it may seem like, honeymoons — extraordinary ones, even — are in reach.

A stay-at-home honeymoon, or “honeymoon,” can be a fantastic option for newly married couples. Kimberly Moore, CEO and wedding coordinator at Events and Moore in East Lansing, says couples have many options for stay-at-home honeymoons. A certified travel agent (CTA), Moore recommends couples “look at the conventions and visitors bureau

wherever they’re located” to help with local destinations. Many visitors bureaus will even help with LGBTQ-friendly places to experience or visit near you.

Here are six fabulous honeymoon ideas to consider:

1 Book a private sailing excursion on Lake Michigan

There’s nothing more refreshing than sailing. Throw in some of your favorite beverages and you’ve got an experience you’ll remember for ages. SeaSun Sailing Charters, based in Saugatuck, offers private tours for couples and up to six passengers.

SeaSun offers three- and five-hour sailing experiences. During the three-hour experience, you’ll ride along Lake Michigan up to Holland. The five-hour experience adds a relaxing beach day. Captain and SeaSun Sailing Charters owner Bill Bardelmeire says “most people love it” and that “a lot of customers come back when they come to [Saugatuck] on vacation.” Beverages and food are not provided, but you’re welcome to bring your own aboard.

2 Start a home improvement project

For you HGTV queens, this one will surely appease your design desires. Instead of observing someone else’s interior design

hacks, apply some of your own by taking on a home improvement project. Both you and your partner can decorate or renovate your space as a new couple. Think of it as a positive step in your new journey together.

For example, paint that room you’ve been hoping to make into your den. Or update your kitchen with new stainless steel appliances. Whatever you and your partner choose, take it as an opportunity for you two to explore your creativity as newlyweds. If you need a little help with design ideas, check out some episodes of “Bargain Block” and get inspired by Detroit’s very own Keith Bynum and Evan Thomas, the personal and professional partners of the show.

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Photo courtesy of Amari Ice

→ Gay Matchmaker

Continued from page 20

between gay men, can be difficult. First, we're men — inherently sexually charged — but then there's all this eager and available temptation, only amplified by GPS-based social media. And that's not even considering the constant non-monogamy agenda of influential relationship "experts" like Dan Savage.

In your honest opinion, can gay men find true love or is it all just a pipe dream?

I take a slightly different perspective on this: All people are sexually charged. Gay men aren't more sexual than anyone else.

However, as a result of cultural unacceptance of LGBTQ+ people, gay men tend to only be able to engage with each other in private or secret spaces that tend to only have enough space for sex to occur. Love needs more room to thrive, and one of the primary indicators of relationship success is the level of social support the relationship has access to.

Let's remember that most gay men alive today didn't grow up in a world that immediately accepted who they love or have sex with, so a lot of that cultural conditioning around shame is still present in the subconscious minds of many

of us. The only reason the closet of sexual orientation exists is because the living room wasn't a safe space. Gay men can absolutely find — and sustain — true love, but only if they are committed to developing the skills to do so.

Do you think love and/or

partnership is necessary for a fulfilling queer life?

The longitudinal data on happiness reveals that love and money are the two most important factors in a person's level of life satisfaction. Love is most important, though, as money's influence levels off after we make around \$75,000 to \$85,000 per year. This doesn't mean you have to be in a

“Let's remember that most gay men alive today didn't grow up in a world that immediately accepted who they love or have sex with, so a lot of that cultural conditioning around shame is still present in the subconscious minds of many of us.”

relationship in order to be happy, but it does mean that some form of love is probably necessary for most of us to feel fulfilled at some point in our lives.

Is there virtue in being and/or remaining single?

Singlehood is neutral. It's neither good nor bad. It just is. But if we've been made to believe we are somehow inadequate if we aren't in a relationship — which isn't true — it's easy to see why many of us struggle with our self-esteem when we're single. The only thing is, improving your

self-esteem is one of the secrets to increasing the likelihood that you'll both find love and be able to create a healthy relationship once you're in it.

We're all out here looking for the "perfect" partner. Do they exist? Should we settle for "less"? What expectations are realistic, and should we compromise?

Perfect partners don't exist, but excellent partners do. There are many excellent lovers available for all of us, but if we're looking for perfect, excellence will never be good enough and perfection will never arrive because it isn't real.

We only ever settle when we don't believe what we want is possible. Plus, our true expectations of others almost always reflect our expectations of ourselves. Therefore, the question we must ask ourselves is, What unrealistic expectations am I holding myself to that don't serve me? The only way to have realistic expectations of others is to shift our expectations of ourselves, as our own identities are what form the template of our expectations.

→ Homeymoon

Continued from page 22

3 Order a romantic dinner in

Sure, you can cook dinner together, but why not order in and enjoy one another over candlelight? For this option, choose your favorite restaurant and indulge in whatever you and your partner want on the menu.

This is not the time to worry about calories or that diet you're trying to stay on. No, this is a time for decadence and sensation. So let your inhibitions go and live the fine-dining experience you deserve. Create a romantic ambiance by decorating your dining room, adding some music and, as a bonus, wearing whatever you want. Create the curated romantic dinner of your dreams and let the night unfold.



Kim Collins. GBC also offers their monthly Beer School and private tours upon request.

4 Turn your backyard into a camping ground

With a bit of imagination and a quick trip to your local outdoor supply store, you can turn your backyard into a cozy camping ground. This option takes the stress out of prepping for an out-of-town camping trip. All you and your partner need to do is pitch a tent, grab some plush pillows and covers, gather all your gadgets and enjoy some nature together. This is also a budget-friendly experience for those trying to save, primarily since most items can be found at home.

5 Visit an LGBTQ-owned brewery

You and your partner will have a lot to be *hoppy* for with this excursion. See what we did there? But, seriously, this homeymoon idea

is for those who want to experience the behind-the-scenes brewery world.

Consider Guardian Brewing Company (GBC), based in Saugatuck, just two miles from Lake Michigan. GBC is 100 percent LGBTQ-owned, women-owned and has 22 taps consisting of year-round, seasonal, one-off and barreled-aged taps that range from classic to modern. Beyond beer, they also offer wine, cider and a full menu. "The whole concept behind the Guardian is we want to make you feel like you can relax and enjoy your time," says owner

6 Curate an at-home film festival

Looking to upgrade the typical Netflix and Chill? How about a curated film festival for you and your partner? First, research movies you and your partner have never seen and create a queue of movies. Next, designate a spot in your home for the screening. It can be as simple as the TV in your living room or an elaborate viewing with a projector in your bedroom. Finally, buy some of your favorite snacks to nosh while screening.

Simply put: make this a full-featured experience. You may even want to include cast interviews in between showings to get a more in-depth understanding of a film's storyline and characters. And to make it more LGBTQ-friendly, look for films that represent our community.



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Cold as Hell was one of LGBT Detroit's events aimed at destigmatizing sex. Photo: Rhiannon Chester-Bey

→ Sex Stigma

Continued from page 7

be affected, now or in the future.

S'ango called Michigan's HIV Criminalization Law "eye opening."

"As a public health worker myself, and somebody that's very interested in policy around LGBTQ individuals, I thought that was something that was groundbreaking and definitely necessary to talk about," he says.

S'ango has the perspective of someone in the leather and kink lifestyle who is equipped to provide guidance to the students on how to hook up on certain apps safely or meet in other ways. "Especially in a post-Covid world, a lot of folks are a little thirsty for time and attention," he says.

Both S'ango and Totten emphasized communication, education and openness as ways to combat sex stigma.

"Whether you want to actually explore or not, curiosity is where things start — just being able to have open conversations and spaces to have these conversations," S'ango says. "I believe LGBT Detroit is definitely spearheading that movement."

For more information, contact jerrontotten@lgbtdetroit.org.



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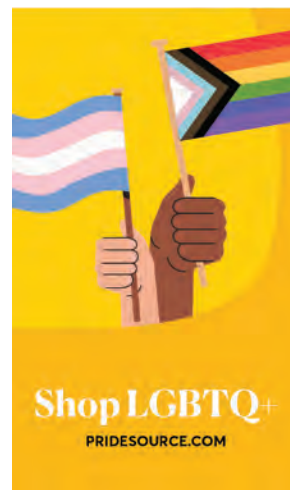
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Photo: Tom Griscom / Big Table Media

These Gay Detroiters Are Rocking the Block in Yet Another HGTV Reality Show Competition

BY JASON A. MICHAEL

Detroiters Keith Bynum and Evan Thomas are back on HGTV! The personal and professional couple and stars of HGTV's "Bargain Block" are featured in the third season of the HGTV series "Rock the Block," which has the stars of four different HGTV series competing to design a newly constructed home in Charleston, S.C. The team that raises the appraisal value the highest wins and will have the block named after them.

Bynum and Thomas are competing against Egypt Sherrod and Mike Jackson from "Married to Real Estate," Leslie Davis and Lyndsay Lamb from "Unsellable Houses," and Dave and Jenny Marrs from "Fixer to Fabulous." The show is hosted by Ty Pennington and features different HGTV stars each episode to play the role of judge.

Each week, the couples compete to design a different space in the house, which is definitely larger than Bynum and Thomas' usual fare. Bynum told HGTV.com that his biggest challenge on the new show is "taking a space this big and creating that

homey vibe that we're known for. With 3,500 square feet to play with, it's serious business."

On "Bargain Block," Bynum and Thomas take homes others have classified as undesirable and rehab and redesign them. They actually live in each house as they work on it. Bynum is the design man, while Thomas is the carpenter. Together, they transform abandoned and boarded-up houses into real homes.

"We love taking on the absolute worst of the worst," Bynum told BTL last year. "The house that no one wants or believes in, that's our jam."

While talking to BTL, Bynum shared how he was disowned by his family when he came out, and how the broken-down homes he brings back to life remind him of himself. "I kind of personify the houses," he said. "I was down and beat up and even my family didn't want me after I came out, but someone believed in me, and I'm in such a better place now. The houses are the same. They just need someone to believe in them again."

"Rock the Block" airs 9 p.m. Monday nights on HGTV.

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Photo: Peacock

Power, Putin and, Yes, the Tiger King

John Cameron Mitchell on What We Can Learn About Abusing Authority from Joe Exotic

BY CHRIS AZZOPARDI

What could Joe “Tiger King” Exotic and fictional genderqueer arthouse punk-rocker Hedwig Robinson possibly have in common? John Cameron Mitchell.

And so, the Farrah Fawcett wig comes off the 58-year-old actor who created Hedwig and brought her Off-Broadway in 1998, before “Hedwig and the Angry Inch” became a cult indie film three years later, in 2001. Instead, to portray the wildly controversial and buzzy gay subject of the Netflix docuseries “Tiger King” for the new Peacock series “Joe vs. Carole,” Mitchell’s rocking a “Bring Me Some Water”-era Melissa Etheridge mullet.

In this eight-episode dramatization of Exotic’s ludicrous run as the Oklahoma zookeeper infamous for his cruel treatment of animals and his plot to kill animal rights activist Carole Baskin (played here by Kate McKinnon), Mitchell slips out of Hedwig’s heels and into Joe’s cowboy boots. (Exotic is currently serving a 21-year prison

sentencing for hiring two men to kill Baskin.) The purely scandalous story told in the Netflix series is still scandalous — how could it not be? — but with a humanizing bent to it. You might even find yourself liking the guy. Which, as we’ve seen with the Trumps and Putins of the world, is a slippery and dangerous slope.

From his apartment in New York, Mitchell, who recently came out as non-binary, spoke about why Joe Exotic is “the real Trump,” a podcast he’s working on that takes on cancel culture, and how this generation’s wokeisms are inadvertently working against the very allies they seek.

I’ve followed your career for a long time, and being this indie art guy, a lead role in a Peacock series must feel like a big moment.

I’m old enough to know that it comes and goes. I was able to buy a house for the first time. I’ve always kept my overhead low. And I was like, well, I’m getting older. And so this came along and it was a dream job. I loved everybody. I had a great time. They took my input. Kate’s amazing.

Etan [Frankel], the showrunner, is amazing. And we shot in Australia, which was very fun and comfortable at the time. I had more fun acting in this on screen than in Hedwig because I had too much responsibility in Hedwig.

Wait, so “Joe vs. Carole” allowed you to buy the house?

Yes. It’s called money, baby. It’s a mainstream thing. I’m considering another job right now, whether I want to commit to a multiyear thing, but we’ll see. Nice to have options. I’m working on another fictional podcast, which is very fun. This one’s more zany and of-the-moment. Kind of on the subject of cancellation. It’s time to bring our wisdom and humor to bear on a somewhat humorless subject. And I’m also working on a TV series. Pitching a musical TV series. And continuing touring here and there with my concerts.

With “Joe vs. Carole,” I think it’s important to acknowledge that you and Kate, two queer icons,

are at the center of this story. There’s something very special about that for me.

I wish we had more to do because we really hit it off and I’m writing her something now I hope she’ll do. Kate and I both obviously have strong opinions about our characters and about humor and about how the characters should be played. Because we’re not really doing the real people; we’re doing an interpretation of them. She’s much funnier than the real Carole. I’m adding my own things to it. It’s maybe 50 percent the real people and 50 percent what we’re bringing to it. Because we’re not doing a “Saturday Night Live” sketch. We’re not doing a karaoke version. We’re wanting to have a full emotional experience. And we’re guessing, also, what these characters might be like when they’re not on camera. And that’s a wonderful thing. We had enough freedom and Etan, the showrunner, was open to that. He cast two queer people in a kind of queer story. And when you see it, it actually feels very queer. The way it’s shot, even. It’s very artificial with hopefully an emotional center. It

feels like it's, perhaps, in that Hedwig model, where you're not stinting on the humor and the camp, but we're also honoring the people as real people who've been through shit.

Did you recognize that the series' queerness would extend to its direction, as well, before you signed on?

I didn't really know about the way it was shooting. Justin Tipping, one of the directors, came up with the way it's shot. It has certain homages to the Coen brothers, to Danny Boyle, to Hedwig even. It's highly artificial until it gets real. And that's how their lives seem. They're sui generis people. They came from trauma, but they triumphed and created their own kingdoms. But then got corrupted by that power, I think. Joe and Carole could have been buddies. Kate and I even had an improv where we just started making out in a dream sequence. It was improvised. They didn't keep it in and they won't let me put it on my Instagram because a lesbian's kissing a gay man and that's wrong. Seems right to me.

Seems very right to me.

Yes. Well, I'll just have to make it happen in another project.

The one that you're writing for Kate?

That's for a podcast. We'll still kiss on the podcast.

I didn't realize that "Joe vs. Carole" was going to humanize these characters in the way that it has. And there's so much about Joe that we learned from the series that I didn't from the docuseries.

Because you know, he's larger than life and, to America, he's a kind of "Duck Dynasty"-meets-"Real Housewives" [personality]. He's not a real person. He's a paper tiger that's entertaining and maybe not necessarily empathetic. I actually think when you watch him, he's so eager to please that you want to hug him and take the gun out of his holster and throw it in the river. And Carole presented a more controlled facade, in a kind of Hillary Clinton way. Which turned people against her, partly because of misogyny. But that's her defense. And that was Hillary's defense — to hold it together.

Joe screams about being tough, but you can tell [he] isn't. He's a megalomaniac, but he's not exactly tough. It's like Trump. If you keep saying you're the best, you know there's a hole in your soul if you have to keep reminding yourself. We all know that people who don't mention it are the strong ones.

So then what do these people do? They exert their power, they become bullies.

They still do. And they can abuse it. Because they have to prop themselves up. That's what Putin is in a more calculated way. Trump is too inept to be a Putin. But he still engenders popularity amongst people who love a dictator, who want a daddy, and they're willing to ignore the facts because they think he's authentic. I don't know how someone who's a Thanksgiving Day balloon can appear authentic. And a man of

the people when he was born with a silver spoon up his ass. And Joe is the real Trump. He's from the dirt. He made himself. Nobody handed him millions.

Though, he did build the zoo with his brother's insurance. And he became a very abusive person, but he's also a human being.

It dawned on me while watching this that you were born in Texas and raised in Kansas. How did your own origin story help you understand Joe when it came to an understanding of being gay in the South?

It was not exactly the South. I would call it more rural America. Kansas, Oklahoma, Texas are kind of this lower Midwest thing that's different from the South. East Texas is more Southern. I'm from west Texas, which is more cowboy than Southern gentility. But we did live an hour from where his zoo was before the zoo in Fort Sill. And Saff [Saffery], the trans man whose arm is eaten off [by a tiger], is stationed there, actually.

So I'm conversing with my old friends from Kansas, high school friends, and they're all like, "Johnny, you got it, you got the accent," and I'm like, "I know; I grew up with all you all." And so that makes me feel good that they bought it. Because I hadn't been there in a while. But when I go back I feel that it's in my bones the way I do when I'm in Scotland too. My mother's Scottish, my dad's American. And I've moved around a lot, and I had to feel comfortable in different places. Changed my accent. That's why I became an actor. But I like the "say a few things in a minimal way, kind of Midwestern" thing. Texan is more loquacious. But Oklahoma, Kansas, Nebraska, Missouri — that's all like, just say what you mean, try to mean it, say it in a few words. So there's a warmth and not getting carried away with things. Which I love about it.

And I think that's probably why Joe didn't move. Another queer person would go to the big city. I mean, he went to Dallas for a bit, but it [wasn't] exactly the same as New York or California at that time. So queer people at that time had three options. You either keep your head down and stay in your small community and become the hairdresser or the lesbian gym coach and just keep it quiet and have your wife or husband and maybe just shut up and help people out. That's a valid way of living. Or you leave and go to the big city and find your queer community. Or you do what Joe did, which was make a community. Build a fortress in the rural area called a zoo or a pet shop or a drag parlor. And I identify with that because, though I did leave, I create my communities. My temporary creative communities with movies and shows and podcasts and the unwanted animals, the misfits with skills, come there and have a good time. But I know that it will end at some point before the infighting can begin, unlike the zoo. So I love a temporary community.

And he just dragged that on for too long.

And when you have ex-cons and rehab folks

See JCM, page 32

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→ JCM

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and you're not paying them well, it's going to end in tears. If you seek out lovers who are lost themselves, and there's drugs involved, you know there's going to be trouble. I feel like his first relationship was the most stable. Even though I think his husband had a drug problem and died of AIDS, that was [his] most healthy relationship. He was grounding for Joe and he had as much power as Joe. Later, he sought out people that he could Lord over, but save as well. There's a thin line between savior and cult leader.

I was thinking about the physicality of Joe, because there's a lot going on here. And none of it is really you. And that includes the wig, the facial hair, of which you have none, the jewelry, the tats and the shiny tiger print shirts. What piece really helped you transform into Joe?

A cowboy boot with a heel gives you something, a way of walking. All of it together felt like drag, felt like armor. So when I get into the wig and the makeup and the costumes, it's the same as Hedwig. And in fact, the characters have a lot in common. They're both misfits who create their own world to survive it and lash out at people because of their early trauma. Lord over people. Hedwig breaks that cycle. Joe doesn't.

Watching you I was like, "Oh yeah, this is like dressing up as Hedwig."

I felt like a drag king. I felt like a lesbian identified gay man. The Melissa Etheridge mullet and all.

Switching gears, let's talk about "Shortbus," your 2006 film that has been remastered in 4K and is currently screening across the U.S. before its Blu-ray and streaming release later this year. How do you think "Shortbus" plays to younger generations who are seeing it for the first time?

The screenings I've been to with people who remember it and people who it's new to — young people — is interesting. The older people who saw it in their 20s and 30s were like, "Gosh, that sex is like whatever now, but it's the deeper stuff that really gets me now." And the young people are like, "People have sex like that?" They're all like, "Is there a consent issue?" They're looking for something un-PC about it and they can't quite figure out what it is.

They love it. But they're being taught lately they have to find trouble with most things. One of them who loved the film said, "What would you say if someone" — a very journalist way of saying what they're thinking, "said, 'Is it your right to tell the story of an Asian woman who can't have an orgasm?'" And I said, "Well, to that person, whoever said that, which is not you, I would say, it is my story. We developed this together." There's elements of me, and I'm a Toni Morrison fan. When Toni's students were like, "I'm going to write about my going to Europe," she was like, "You will not. You will write about something you don't know anything about. You, little Black girl, are going to write about that

white frat boy in Houston. And you're going to find out what that world is and you're going to enter it." And that is the beginning of empathy. There's no other purpose for fiction.

If you keep splitting those hairs looking for trouble, you stop the organ called empathy. You clog it with unnecessary wokeisms that have good intentions. They cloud the mind, and they stop you from feeling. And they do Trump's work, and you start lashing out at your natural friends and allies. That's what he wants us to do, kill each other so he can take over.

That seems like your jumping off point for the podcast you're working on.

Exactly. So when someone said, "Have you considered remaking 'Shortbus' with a more diverse cast?" I'm like, "Why not talk to that other woman who said it's not my story to tell?" We made this film with the very few handful of people who were willing to go into that sexual realm. And I wanted it to be as diverse as possible. But I also got who I got and I was very happy with them. I couldn't find a lesbian couple, for example, who wanted to do it. So I recreated it. And I work with people who are in effect playing versions of themselves. "Shortbus" is as authentic as anything I've ever made in terms of the reality of these characters, the reality of the setting, the reality of the extras. No one had a problem on that film. Whereas today I don't think it could be made because of the panic about sex and representation and everything else.

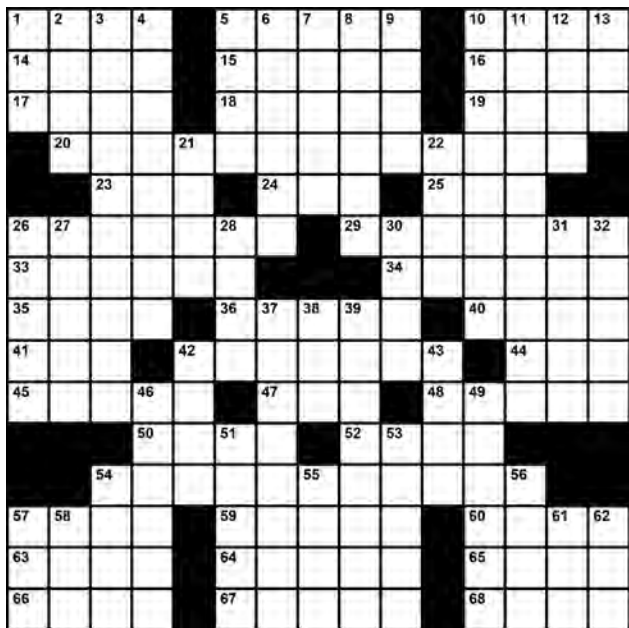
I wondered about the sex in particular, because I know it's not simulated, but we have shows like "Euphoria" where we're seeing a lot more frank sex in content.

It's still grim, though. God. It's still depressing sex. Depression porn.

"Shortbus" was not depressing sex. I remember feeling sexually empowered by watching it.

Good. God knows there are very creative people in the world. I think they're being clogged. A lot of people turn to me, my young friends, and say, "How do I get rid of that feeling?" Because they know that my work embodies following your impulses in a disciplined way and not being afraid of not fitting in, or being famous, or being rich. There was something called art for art's sake. That would be my drag king name — Art for Art's Sake. May be even better than Hell of a Bottom Carter.

You have to play. This is your time to play. Now that COVID is over, it's your time to travel to get out of this hamster wheel of American social media. Go to Latin America, go somewhere you've never been and find out that other people are living in different ways. We're shocked by what's happening in Ukraine. I think what's happening there is a fucking a tragedy and a crime. But at least it's reminding people that we're human.



- 34 Davis played Veronica Rawlings in this 2018 movie
 35 Site of valuable stones
 36 Snail trail
 40 Hissy by a prissy sissy
 41 One, for James M. Barrie
 42 Emily Dickinson, in her day
 44 U-turn from WSW
 45 Like one that comes on the beach
 47 Alternate sp.
 48 Brian of figure skating
 50 Bulldozer, in Bath
 52 ___-tat
 54 Davis film of 2010, with Julia Roberts
 57 Foam at South Beach
 59 "C'est Moi," to Lancelot
 60 "The Unicorn" author Murdoch
 63 Mishima's continent
 64 Babel building
 65 Farm erection
 66 "___ Back Down" (2012 Davis film)
 67 Circuit party, e.g.
 68 Davis movie of 2011, with "The"
- 9 R.E.M.'s "The ___ Love"
 10 Torn to pieces
 11 First gay marriage and such
 12 Words before about
 13 "Cabaret"'s Kit-___ Klub
 21 Go in only partway, at the beach
 22 "You bet!" in Yucat-n
 26 A neighbor of Copland?
 27 Tea of "Spanglish"
 28 Petrol station choice
 30 Comes up short
 31 Wrap it around your package
 32 Fruity-smelling compound
 37 Poet Denise
 38 It changes a seòr's gender
 39 Robin's gay guys
 42 Dreadlocks feature
 43 "And ___ bed"
 46 PLO VIP
 49 Force into sex
 51 Ill will lacking grace
 53 On your toes
 54 Sinead O'Connor's country
 55 "Even ___ speak"
 56 Lake traveled by Ohio ferries
 57 Went out with
 58 Club where you dance with a sailor
 61 Not in the pink
 62 Pacifier

Viola Flicks

Across

- 1 Oz of Israeli lit
 5 Kahlo's cohort
 10 Welcome words after S&M
 14 Cathedral of ___
 15 Strung along
 16 Porn star Hartley
 17 Sherman Hemsley religious sitcom
 18 Rimbaud's room

- 19 Opening in a casino
 20 Viola Davis plays the mom of the title role in this 2002 movie
 23 "Peel ___ grape"
 24 Early preposition
 25 Sender of 1040 forms
 26 Flap on a stallion's bridle
 29 Cockade
 33 Davis movie of 2016, with Denzel Washington

Q Puzzle

Down

- 1 You might say it when you get it
 2 Home of Picasso's Stein portrait
 3 Accepting of alternate life styles
 4 Life, for one
 5 On top of that
 6 More like a bully
 7 One sitting on one's ass
 8 Patty Sheehan, for example

See p. 26 for answers

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