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# Between the Lines™



By Jason A. Michael

## FOR UKRAINE

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THE INTERVIEW

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Photo: Andrew Potter

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# 5 Queer Things You Can Do Right Now-ish

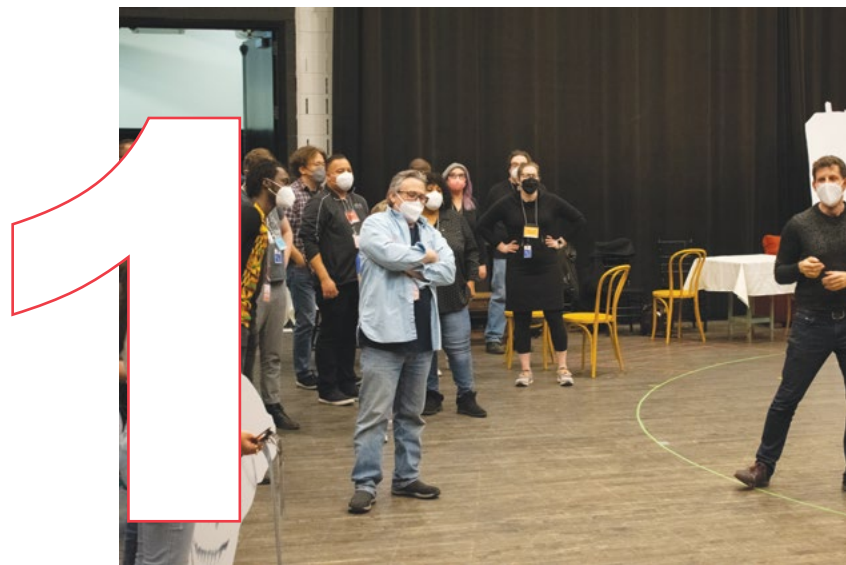
BY JACKIE JONES

During this post-COVID era, take some time out of your busy schedule to experience life again and let down your hair. Take in an in-person opera, network at a mixer or expand your small business — there's so much to choose from.

## Experience (In-Person) Opera, Again

You've heard of "La Bohème," but what about reverse order "La Bohème"? In their first in-person show since the pandemic, Detroit Opera premieres "La Bohème" in reverse order. Director Yuval Sharon has decided to start the play at Act IV and work backward to Act I, with text and music otherwise unchanged. "As we move through the world of memory, we witness a resurrection and a new love blooming," explains Sharon. "When the audience leaves the theater, they won't be left with the heaviness of inevitability. Instead, they'll be left with a notion that the pain was worth the fleeting moments of joy." Performances will be held April 2, April 6 and April 11.

For ticket information, visit [Detroit Opera's website](#).



"La Bohème" rehearsal. Photo: Austin Richey



Creator Terri (Sensei) Stewart at a previous Frequency event. Photo: The Sound Genius

## Live the Good Life at Frequency

Grab the crew because Frequency, the monthly LGBTQ+ mixer for creatives and professionals, is back in full swing after a six-year hiatus. Terri (Sensei) Stewart, the creator, says the event "creates a different atmosphere than the currently available spaces" for the LGBTQ+ community. "We usually have a live painting done with an artist who sets up their work for sale, and we'll have a DJ to keep the vibes going," she says. "It really is about connecting and networking while enjoying good music and good entertainment." Attend the Frequency mixer from 7-10 p.m. on April 15 at Best Western Premier Hotel in Southfield.

Visit [Eventbrite](#) to get your tickets.



## Network at a Business Summit

Ready to take your business to the next level? Consider attending The Detroit Regional LGBT Chamber of Commerce's (DRLCC) Spring LGBT Business Summit. The event will offer attendees techniques on how to scale business as well as the benefits of LGBTBE Certification. In addition, local key-note speakers and influencers will discuss supplier diversity, using social media, small-business marketing and contracting. Kevin Heard, the Chamber's president of the Board of Directors says, "Attendees will walk away with tangible steps to help them scale, shift or self-evaluate where they should go next." The event starts at 10 a.m. April 13 at the Pistons Performance Center.

To register to speak to a buyer, visit [DRLCC's website](#).



### Dine with This Christian Queen and Queer Ally

Christian crossover singer-songwriter Amy Grant is also a proud LGBTQ+ ally, which means all are welcome to her table when she sings and you eat at Andiamo. The six-time Grammy winner, known for pop hits like “Baby, Baby” and “Every Heartbeat,” will perform live at 8 p.m. April 8 at Andiamo Celebrity Showroom in Warren. In 2013, during her first-ever LGBTQ+ interview, Grant told BTL Editorial Director Chris Azzopardi that she’s aware the “religious community has not been very welcoming,” but that faith is “really about one relationship. And everybody is welcome. Everybody.”

Tickets can be purchased at [www.andiamoshowroom.com](http://www.andiamoshowroom.com).



### Support Ukrainian Relief Efforts at Benefit Concert

Enjoy an evening of great music in Ann Arbor at The Ark, a long-time LGBTQ+ supporter, while supporting a great cause — humanitarian relief efforts in Ukraine. For LGBTQ+ Ukrainians, the stakes couldn't be higher, given Russia's infamously cruel and inhumane treatment of its LGBTQ+ citizens. The Ukraine Relief Benefit Ann Arbor (URBAA) will feature several local artists, including Madcat Ruth and the C.A.R.Ma Quartet, Jive Colossus, Jerry Mack and the Terraplanes, The Switchbacks, The Judith Banker Trio and the Andy Adamson Quintet, and more to be announced. Ticket proceeds will benefit World Central Kitchen, which has set up more than 300 meal distribution sites along the Ukraine border.

General admission tickets are \$20 and can be purchased at [theark.org](http://theark.org).

Please check event pages for the most up-to-date scheduling information.

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# Two Russian-American Women Lead Effort in Michigan to Aid Ukrainians

## Group's Focus Includes LGBTQ+ Ukrainian Refugees Facing Unique Risks in War-Torn Region

BY JASON A. MICHAEL

In the weeks since Russia invaded Ukraine in an unprovoked attack, much of the country's architecture sits in smoldering ruins and thousands of citizens and soldiers have died. To date, more than three million people have fled the country, leading to a global humanitarian crisis as countries like Poland and Romania burst at the seams with refugees.

Americans watch and read daily about the latest developments in the country that continues to so desperately cry out for military support. But if there's one thing you take away from the conflict, Maria Petrenko hopes it will be this: "This is not a war of the Russian people," she said. "This is the war of a dictator and regime who has been brainwashing and repeating propaganda for the last 20 years, since Putin came into power. ... The overwhelming majority of Russian citizens do not support this war, and they can't wait for this nightmare to be over."

Petrenko is a Russian-American who immigrated to the U.S. 26 years ago. She is now a United States citizen, as is her partner, Moscow native Jenny Feterovich, in a unique new venture aimed at aiding Ukrainians. Not that it matters in war, but for the record, Petrenko is straight and Feterovich is a lesbian.

Together they are behind Real Help For Ukraine (RHFU). A special project of parent group Luv Without Borders, RHFU allows people to send financial support directly to efforts in and around Ukraine that can have immediate impact. Luv Without Borders was created to bypass the bureaucracy of nonprofits, which is exceptionally onerous when it comes to international distribution.

"If you were to donate to a cause somewhere, between 15 and 30 cents of every dollar you give would make it to the person who actually needs it," said Petrenko. "This war is different and people need help now. So, Jenny gave birth to this idea of having real projects for real people

to expedite the process of getting people help."

On RHFU's website, you can support real projects ranging from helping to provide urgent medical supplies, support shelter efforts in Poland, provide food and bread to those left in Ukraine, build orphanages and educational opportunities for refugee children, and there's also the LGBTQ Community Help Project.

The Ukrainian crisis threatens the LGBTQ+ community, already an oppressed minority in the region. With homophobia ingrained in Russian society, Ukrainians living under Russian occupation are doubly at risk. This project helps find and protect those who need protection from both bombs and the culture at large.

LGBTQ+ rights have slowly developed in Ukraine since the country declared its freedom from Russian when the USSR fell in 1991. Feterovich said she recently spoke to a representative from the group Ukraine Proud. Men over the age of 18 are not allowed to flee Ukraine and are required to stay and fight at

*"The majority of the people are staying and fighting. What I'm seeing is gay boys and these queens have happily picked up arms. And they have a reason to fight."*

this time. Many LGBTQ+ residents of Ukraine, including those with gender marker F, which makes them eligible to leave the country, are staying put and doing what they can to defend their country and their hard-won freedoms.

"They are joining the military; they are not running," said Feterovich. "The majority of the people are staying and fighting. What I'm seeing is gay boys and these queens have happily picked up arms. And they have a reason to fight. They're fighting for their freedom, they're fighting for their rights, and they're fighting hand in hand with everyone else."

See RHFU, page 20



Maria Petrenko and Jenny Feterovich. Photo: Andrew Potter

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# The Lost City of P



Photo: Paramount

## Patti Harrison on Being Trans in Hollywood, Poop, Dildos and Elle Fanning

BY CHRIS AZZOPARDI

There still aren't enough trans actors in Hollywood, but at least there's Patti Harrison. Harrison is currently starring in the big blockbuster rom-com caper "The Lost City," alongside Sandra Bullock and Channing Tatum, as the social media manager of Bullock's character, Loretta Sage, a romance-adventure novelist. In the movie, Harrison's Allison thinks that to help Loretta appeal to a younger demo, it's just a matter of hashtagging Shawn Mendes' name at the end of every tweet.

As for Harrison, her name rose to even

greater prominence in 2021 when she voiced Chief of Tale in "Raya and the Dragon," giving her the distinction of being the first openly trans actor to lend their voice to a Disney film. Last year, she also starred in "Together Together," a moving comedy about a single man (Ed Helms) and his surrogate, played by Harrison, that premiered at Sundance. But "The Lost City" could really take her career to the next level given it's a major studio film with major star power, which can only bring more attention to Harrison's signature brand of comedy.

Harrison's wry deadpanning was first introduced on primetime TV, when, in 2017 on "The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon," the

actor-comedian made wisecracks about then-President Donald Trump's ban on trans people in the military. Harrison, who was born in Ohio and whose father is from Detroit, starred in a recurring role on Hulu's "Shrill" in 2020, along with smaller roles in "Bob's Burgers," "Broad City" and "Search Party."

During a recent Zoom interview with the actor, Harrison joked about what the movie might have been about when its working title was "The Lost City of D," chimed in on her own interest in reading romance novels (and reading, period), and discussed how she feels about the "overcorrection" of queer people on TV.

**When you got the script for this movie, originally titled "The Lost City of D," what exactly did you think the D stood for?**

To be honest, I thought it stood for dick. Or dong. Maybe dildo. Probably less likely [it would be] dildo. Well, I guess it would be *dildos*, 'cause then it would be "The Lost City of the D." So I think "Lost City of Dildos," if it's pluralized, is better.

**I appreciate that the movie, even now that it's called simply "The Lost City," did still lean into the D, as there's a couple dick jokes in it.**

Well, there's a lot of cut scenes with a ton of dildos.

**And those are all with just you, or you and Channing?**

Well, there was one with me [that] got cut from the movie, but my character was a master in combat with, like, tonfas. But then there weren't tonfas available, so she wields dildos. And it's really a lot of work. I took about four months of martial arts classes to learn how to use tonfas correctly and they cut it. Because of dildos.

**That's a shame. Our society is just not ready for something as brave as that.**

Doesn't that suck?

**That movie will exist 20 years from now when we've made even more progress than we already have.**

And Elle Fanning's granddaughter is doing flips and throwing dildos, and they're, like, going through people's heads.

**I love that Elle Fanning is your go-to.**

Oh yeah. She's always in my mind.

**I don't know how we're going to be serious now, but I do want to ask if you read any romance novels, queer or not, when you were growing up?**

Not at all. I never read a lot, and I never really read outside of what was required of me for school. I don't think I really... I'm learning. I used to feel really guilty about not reading books, specifically. I think there's a culture around shaming people who don't read books. I just don't absorb information that way. A lot of the stories that I absorb are visual. So I love movies, video games and TV.

Maybe that makes me stupid, but I watched a lot of romantic movies and TV shows. But as far as novels go, I think I remember reading "Tess of the d'Urbervilles" in school. I think that is, like, a rapey book. It opens with a sexual assault. That's probably the only book that comes to mind, actually.

**And then no more books for you after that. You just stopped reading.**

What if the only book I've ever read was "Tess of the d'Urbervilles"? That's the one book. I should be studied by science if that were the case.

**What if there was a romance novel based on your life? What might it be called? And who would be your cover model for it?**

Well, I did get asked this question earlier today, but I think it's probably for a publication that wouldn't use [my answer] and wouldn't care what I said. Because my answer when asked what the title of my romance novel would be [was], "Oh, Is There Poop?" And I don't think I would be on the cover of it, right? It would be my mom and my fourth grade teacher, who's my mentor. And they're just kind of doing a thumbs up through a foggy window. They're standing outside of a window. And then you see the crest of someone's butt.

**That's beautiful, actually.**

There would be more explained in the book. I promise.

**While you were making this movie, playing a social media manager, did it hit you how ironic it is that in real life you might not cut it as a social media manager since you were banned from Twitter?**

I definitely think there's some irony there. I, every day, am waiting for my Instagram account to be deleted against my will. Probably for the best. But now Instagram's terms and conditions have changed and they, like, auto go through and will flag photos. Maybe once a week, I get a new photo flagged. And it's always a post from, like, 2013. And it'll be a photo of me being like, "I love this bitch," and it'll be me and my friend. And then it'll be flagged for bullying and harassment, 'cause I called my friend a bitch. And I was like, "Well, that's my whole Instagram page, me being like, 'Love this stupid, ugly fucking slut.' I guess if that's bullying and harassment, then I'm not fated for Instagram anymore.

I think social media has had a big part in my career success, which has been great. I also think social media has evolved. So the version of it we have now is mainly a shopping platform. So I don't think social media is intrinsically bad, but I think we've made it bad 'cause it's corporatized. But I don't remember exactly why Adam [Nee, who co-directed and co-wrote the screenplay], Aaron [Nee, Adam's brother, who co-directed] or Sandy [Bullock] said they specifically wanted me for the part other than they saw me and thought I was funny. In other things I've been



*“My whole thing when we were filming was, ‘Oh my gosh. Are people going to be staring at my Adam’s apple? Is this something that I’m going to deal with?’”*

cast in, it’s usually ‘cause of stupid videos or something I made on Instagram.

**Or maybe it was “Together Together,” which was one of my favorite movies of last year. How major did it feel to be part of a film where you, a trans actress, is playing a surrogate? There was a lot of conversation around that and how I’m not even sure that that’s ever happened before in a movie. It all felt pretty groundbreakingly important casting-wise.**

Yeah. I mean, I think I definitely thought about what that meant and the optics of it. I had so many conversations with [writer-director] Nikole [Beckwith] about if it was stunt casting or whatever. But it really did feel like something I just never thought I was going to get to do, and I tried not to overload it in playing the role, like bring too much of that into it.

I think what was really nice is that Nikole was so present in making sure I felt prepared and knew what was going on in each scene, like where my character was in her pregnancy. I think it helped me get out of my head and not think about the politics of what it means. You know, my whole thing when we were filming was, “Oh my gosh. Are people going to be staring at my Adam’s apple? Is this something that I’m going to deal with? A level of TERF scrutiny or something that would be really emotionally painful to endure?” But, ultimately, it’s been an incredible gift in my life. The only thing that I’ll ever earnestly talk about is that movie because it just felt so special.

**As a queer person, I try not to overthink the optics. But oftentimes, it’s hard for me not to, just because I’m always looking for us to be represented and be visible.**

Yeah. Speaking of social media, I feel like there is an overcorrection or overemphasis with development and TV, like stumbling over themselves to be inclusive in a way

that I think can sometimes be minimizing to the creator or the artist or writer, whoever’s trying to make a project, if that person is marginalized in any way.

And if that marginalization is queer, then in an ideal world, that person could just make whatever they want. I think what’s stressful about it is that people who aren’t queer, who aren’t marginalized, and who are in these gatekeeping positions, are trying to figure out a way to capitalize on queerness or the more mainstream interest in it and it can feel very minimizing when the only stories they want to tell or they want to see from you as a queer person is stuff about being queer. It’s like, my sense of humor as a comedian has really been not about that, but it has kind of pivoted into that. I’m approached about being trans so much that it’s made me a little resentful. I’m like, “Oh, I see comedians who are peripheral to me who aren’t queer, and they can make a TV show about whatever they want.” But when I take a meeting, it’s like, they don’t want to hear my idea about, you know, Elle Fanning with dildos. They want to hear about a biopic about me coming out to my mom and her struggling with it.

**On that note, it’s nice to see you and Bowen Yang in “The Lost City,” where you can both just be funny.**



Channing Tatum, Patti Harrison and Da'Vine Joy Randolph star in “The Lost City.” Photo: Paramount Pictures

Yeah. Bowen shot the last week I was there pretty much, and it was the perfect little ending to the trip. We had, like, golf carts where we were staying. It was so much fun. I wish he would have been there the whole time. It made me want to work with him on something.

**On the poop book or the dildo movie?**

Yeah. Where we have unsimulated sex. A lot of penetration, me and Bowen. Really close friends just, like, really screwing for art. That’s representation.

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# POLITICAL GIVING:

## Should You “RUSH \$5 NOW!” ... Now?

BY ELLEN SHANNA KNOPPOW

Without looking at the date on the calendar, it wouldn't be hard to know it's election season from the number of solicitations from candidates and related groups cluttering inboxes everywhere. But before deciding whether or not to “Rush \$5!” it's worth evaluating various ways to support a favorite LGBTQ+ candidate with one's hard-earned dollars.

Data from the American National Election

Studies analyzed by the Pew Research Center showed about 12 percent of Americans said they gave to candidates in 2016, 9 percent gave to parties and 5 percent gave to other groups. That might not sound like a lot, but it represents an increasing trend. Further evidence shows — and conventional wisdom suggests — the more politically engaged a person is, the more likely they are to donate. Community advocate Trevor Thomas agrees.

“If they're reading *Between The Lines*, they're already an advocate or engaged,” Thomas said.

“And so I would suggest that they should know how to best use their dollars and [how] to be most effective.”

BTL sat down with Thomas, a former chair of Equality Michigan Action Network, a 501(c)(4) nonprofit, to get his take on the various ways you can donate to political candidates and causes — LGBTQ+ ones in particular. He said it all depends on strategy. “Your entire approach is gonna depend on your goals and overall strategy,” Thomas said. “If you are the donor, what are you trying to accomplish? What

is your level of exposure to risk?”

Establishing a strategy for political giving isn't just for big donors. Education is key, and that's not only true when it comes to a candidate's platform. Not everyone knows the limits — or that there are limits — depending on where, how, and to what political office.

In Michigan, for example, an individual can donate up to \$1,050 per election cycle to a candidate for state representative, \$2,100 to a candidate for state Senate and \$7,150 to a state level candidate. Donating in other ways, like

via a political action committee (PAC), can have limits, too. For example, on the federal level, an individual can donate up to \$2,900 to a candidate per election cycle, and up to \$5,000 to a political action committee for 2021-2022.

In cases where donations are public information, one's "risk level" is part of the equation. Thomas emphasized what's important here is "your personal risk level with the affiliation of a candidate or organization that you might be supporting — and that does matter in many instances to the donor, but it also could matter to the candidate receiving funds." This could arise in terms of professional reputation depending on where one's money is going and who knows about it.

Thomas pointed out the public perception of candidate support, in terms of dollars, is often skewed because the entire picture isn't presented at once.

"When we think about fundraising, because this is publicly reported, you'll see this in kind of the media horse race of who has raised more than the other," Thomas said. "The truth of the matter is that's only one indicator, because...in the c4 space [nonprofits classified under the federal code 501(c)(4)], you do not have publicly available numbers, and so without limits in the c4 space too, there can be a lot of activity happening there, quite frankly, significantly dwarfing the activity happening in the space with the political action committee."

For the donor, there are caps and limits to think about, too, Thomas said. But what he really emphasized was when to donate.

"[If] your goal would be, 'I want the candidate to win,' you're going to want to donate the most amount you're comfortable donating to the candidate committee as early as possible," Thomas said. "So a dollar donated now to someone running in 2022 is significant, but a dollar donated last year is even more significant." One reason is that campaigns today are about resources and momentum, he said.

The other reason? "Rare is the day that someone makes an independent decision about a candidate," Thomas said. "Most individuals making decisions follow the leader, and so for the candidate, you need to show a great number of followers early."

Donating early, especially monthly, can help a campaign plan more effectively. And when it comes to donations very late in the game, "I really won't comment that it's not effective, but you're most likely paying for staff salaries after the election day," Thomas said.

Thomas also addressed whether those small dollar donations matter. Certainly, donations



of all sizes further the cause. But they're also important because candidates can then show a greater number of individuals supporting the campaign. He had a few things to add about strategy.

"In the individual space, on deciding to donate, you can choose that you're at the table to change the world, you can have a goal of raising your visibility and influence, you can have a goal of impacting policy," Thomas said. "Most people gravitate to candidate activity, but there's a lot of things you can choose to do. Most donor advisors will advise to potentially engage in multiple avenues, if it's about making an impact. Think of your different options — c3, c4 PAC, Super PAC [and] candidate committee as tools."



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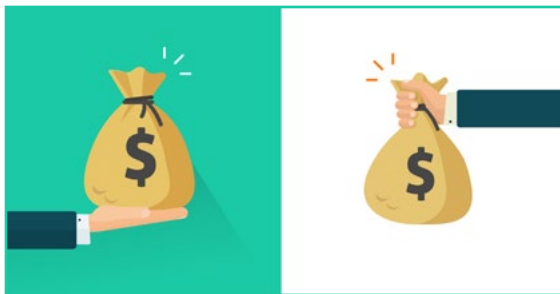
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## Ruth Ellis Center to Boost LGBTQ+ Youth Housing Program with \$250K Grant

BY JASON A. MICHAEL

**T**D Charitable Foundation (TDCF), the charitable giving arm of TD Bank, has awarded the Ruth Ellis Center (REC) a \$250,000 Housing for Everyone grant to help support the Center's continuum of affordable supportive housing options and services for LGBTQ+ youth.

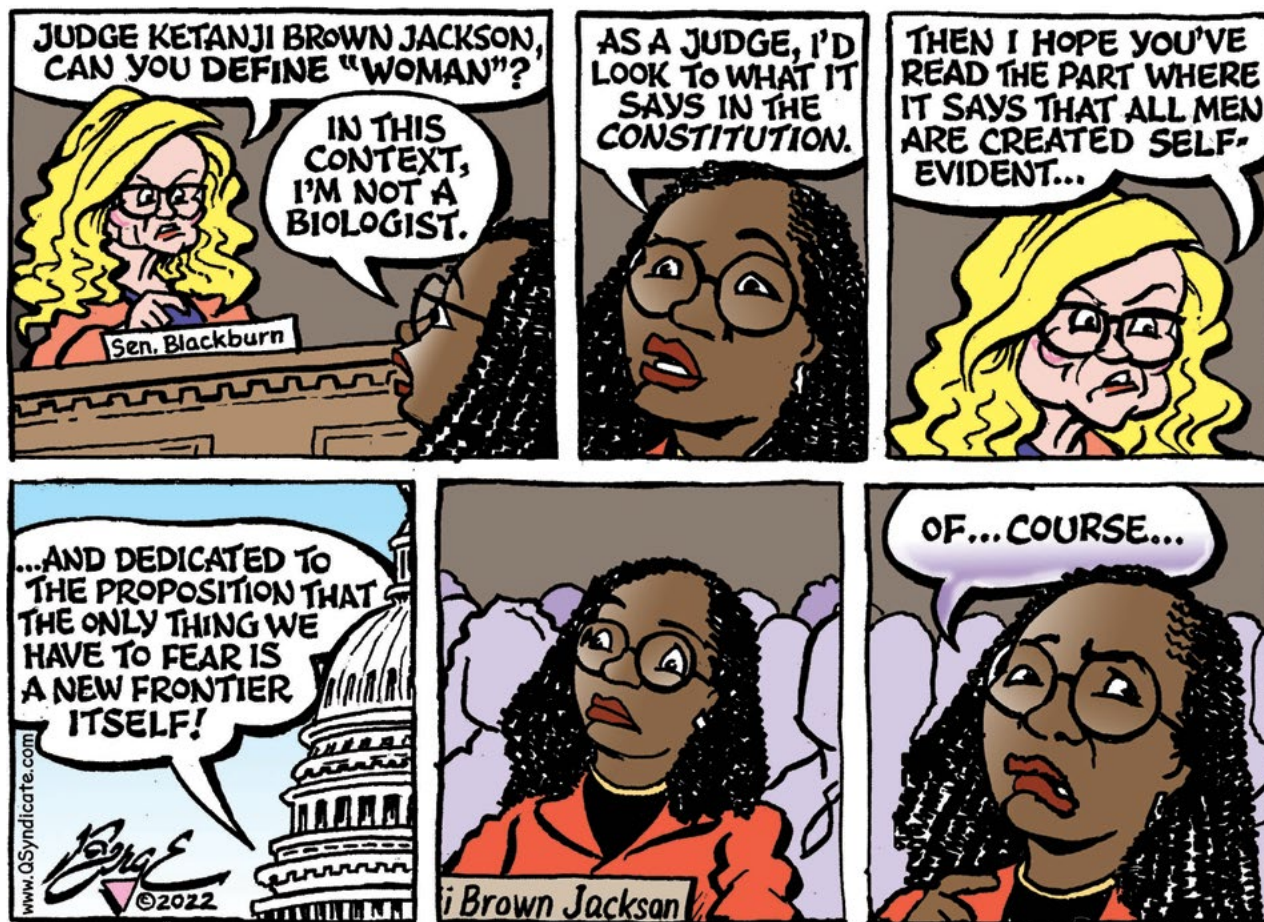
"As LGBTQ+ young people continue to be disproportionately affected by homelessness nationwide, it is imperative that organizations and funders alike prioritize the health, safety and well-being of this underserved population," said REC Director of Development and Advancement Mark Erwin.

From case management to healthcare and basic needs to systems navigation, funding from the TD Charitable Foundation's Housing for Everyone grant program will ensure young people served by REC have the resources necessary to stabilize and thrive.

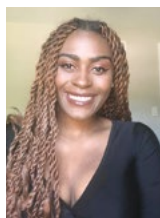
"Congratulations to the Ruth Ellis Center on this amazing accomplishment," said Andrew Stuart, president and CEO of TD Auto Finance. "Over the past seven years, all of us at TD Auto Finance have witnessed the incredible work Ruth Ellis Center does for LGBTQ+ youth in our community. We are confident the support from the TD Charitable Foundation will provide much needed funding so the Center can continue to meet the growing need among LGBTQ+ youth for housing assistance and other critical resources."

The Ruth Ellis Center grant is part of \$5.8 million donated to 33 organizations across TD Bank's Maine-to-Florida footprint. The TDCF has, to date, given more than \$42 million to more than 500 affordable housing projects and initiatives.

*"It is imperative that organizations and funders alike prioritize the health, safety and well-being of this underserved population."*



## Transgender Day of Visibility: Remembering My Sister



By Jackie Jones

*If you or someone you know is experiencing suicidal thoughts or a crisis, please reach out immediately to the Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 800-273-8255.*

**M**arch 31 is Transgender Day of Visibility. A day dedicated to celebrating the accomplishments of transgender and gender-nonconforming people while raising awareness. And as with any trans holiday, I've been deeply reflecting on my older sister Joz, who came out as trans in 2018, before she passed away later that year.

To this day, I remember how nervous she was. We were sitting outside on my mom's patio watching our family dog Arthur run around the backyard, and her legs were shaking. Even her speech was fast, which indicated that something was off. I didn't say anything for a while, and finally, as the day was turning

into dusk, she turned to me and said, "Jackie, I have to tell you something." I said, "OK," and she responded, "I want to start transitioning."

"Go for it," I said quickly. "The family is going to have your back." As soon as the words left my mouth, I regretted them. Joz looked uncomfortable, like a kid whose security blanket was taken away. It wasn't a proud point in my life, and I wish I could go back, hug her and say "thank you for trusting me" or "how do you feel right now?" But I can't. However, she did

“

*The sad part of this story is that Joz never had a chance to come out to anyone else.*

See **Sister**, next page

## CREEP OF THE WEEK

### Florida Gov. Signs Law Targeting LGBTQ+ People in Effort to Make State Unhappiest Place On Earth'



By D'Anne Witkowski

The audience erupts into laughter at the thought of Florida's First Lady saying things so vile they couldn't even be repeated at a press conference celebrating LGBTQ+ hatred.

Well, he signed it. Just like everyone expected. Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis signed the "Don't Say Gay" bill. And not only did he sign it, but he signed it at Classical Preparatory School, a charter school in Florida, surrounded by little kids in school uniforms. He even gave each of them a pen to remember the occasion by.

On a video posted to Twitter by CBS12, DeSantis signs the bill, using what looks like nine different blue Sharpies. He then holds the document up to "show it off" to a round of applause by people holding signs that read "Protect Children, Support Parents."

He then moves behind a podium with that same dumb sign on it to take questions from reporters. The first reporter, whose voice is quiet and hard to hear, says that LGBTQ+ people and allies fear that this bill "might chill speech in the classroom about people like them and teachers who maybe are gay and when those topics come up about what your family looks like, they're afraid. Can you talk to them and just assuage their fears?"

DeSantis insists that the bill is just about curriculum. "There are different issues that will come up in the course, kids will have questions on as they get older. I think these kids," he says gesturing to the little kids clutching his blue hate pens, "probably aren't at that stage yet."

His answer starts to ramble, referencing the press conference's earlier displays of LGBTQ+ affirming books that had been found in Florida schools and January Littlejohn, a parent upset that her child's school discussed gender identity issues with them without inviting her to be there.

"But as you do, and so it's focused on the type of curriculum that we've shown here, which is not appropriate for these young kids, and it also says all grades it needs to be age appropriate, which I think most people agree with, and then the protections for parents so that they're involved in what is going on with their kids, and when you listen to January tell her story about what they did with her child without her knowledge or consent, I don't think there's very many parents in the state of Florida that think that's okay," he says. "I can tell ya, I don't think that's OK. First Lady? You don't even want to know what she would say."

"So that's what it's about, it's about protecting parents' ability to be involved and it's making sure that the classroom instruction, particularly of these very young kids," he says, and I swear it sounds like he says "idiots" rather than "young kids" (I've listened to it over and over and that's what I hear, but that can't be right, right?), "are focused on math, science, reading. And what's not on the page is not what's gonna be done. We are uh, uh, textualists, so we follow the law and I know [Education Commissioner] Richard [Corcoran] will make sure that the Department of Education is gonna follow the letter of the law. And that's how it should be."

That is all, of course, bullshit. Parents already have the ability to be involved in their children's education if they want to. What these parents want is to dictate what is taught to ALL kids based on what they find personally objectionable. Never mind the fact that it ignores the fact that LGBTQ+ parents exist and their kids go to these schools.

And no one is being protected here. Explicitly teaching about sexual orientation or gender identity in kindergarten through third grade is banned. After that, it must be addressed in an "age appropriate" manner, which is a nice broad way to say "don't talk about it at all." What this does is teach kids that LGBTQ+ people are awful/wrong/gross/dangerous, and that kids need to be protected from them.

I find this offensive on all levels. I'm a parent and my son has two moms. We are good parents, and we are giving every bit of ourselves to raising a good human being. He's been able to not only talk about his two moms, but also be in classrooms that affirmed his family with teachers who were accepting and libraries with books that had families that looked like his.

Representation matters. Representation saves lives. This is an anti-representation bill. So many young people are struggling right now and LGBTQ+ young people especially so. This bill seeks to force them to suffer in silence.

It's hurtful and it's hateful. Exactly like it was intended.



Jackie Jones' sister, Joz. Photo courtesy of Jackie Jones

#### → Sister

Continued from previous page

open up after some time: she shared her thoughts about her body dysmorphia, how she saw herself and her fears about coming out to our family.

Joz's fears were completely valid — especially regarding our mom. I love her to death, but according to my therapist, she is a narcissist. She loves her children, but we are simply extensions of herself to her. She never really, and still doesn't, see us as separate beings with unique identities. On top of that, when my mom suspected my sister was a lesbian as a kid, instead of asking her compassionately, she almost interrogated her until she finally broke. My mom's motto for our life choices is "as long as you're happy," but her actions and negligence about our community say otherwise.

The sad part of this story is that Joz never had a chance to come out to anyone else. About two months after she came out, she went missing. On October 21, 2018, we eventually found out where she was after

two police officers came to my mom's house. I wasn't there, but they notified my mom that my sister had taken her life in her ex-partner's basement. It was a shock. After 29 years, she was gone. I couldn't believe it.

I remember screaming until my throat hurt alongside at least 10 family members in my mom's bedroom as we all cried. It was the most heartbreaking day of my life. Joz was my best friend, my older sister and the only person I felt myself around.

Fast forward to 2021, and I learned that Joz also came out to our younger brother Jay. After sharing and exchanging stories about Joz, we acknowledged her bravery to come out, her pioneering spirit and her courage to be vulnerable. We discussed how our mom and family refuse to acknowledge Joz's transness — even after we told them — and how we don't know which pronouns to use when mentioning her.

In the end, we decided to continue to use she/her pronouns because that's what she was comfortable with at the time of her passing. To assign her different pronouns didn't seem right. That would've been a part of her trans journey. But we do remind everyone that Joz was trans at any and every chance.



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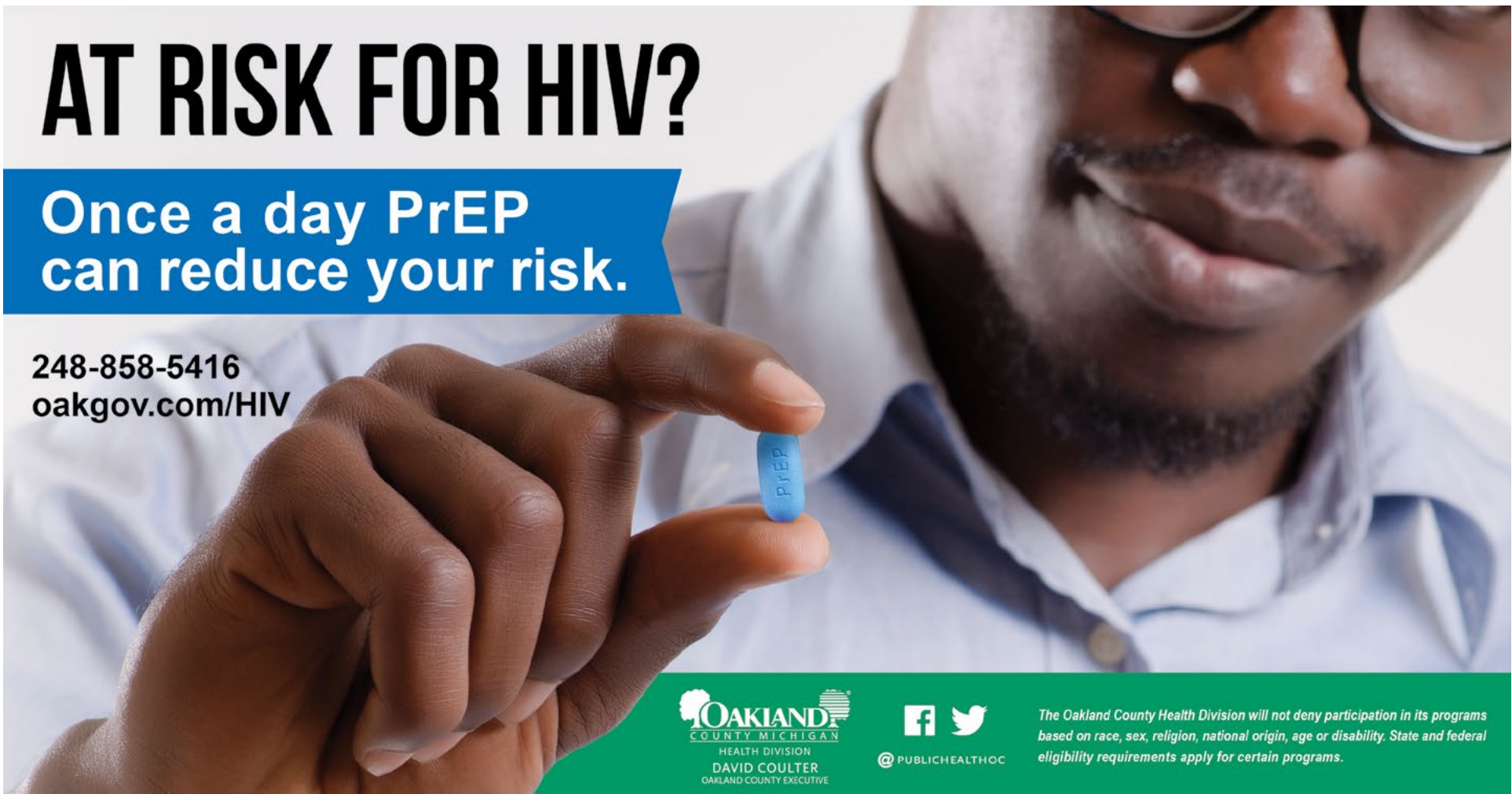
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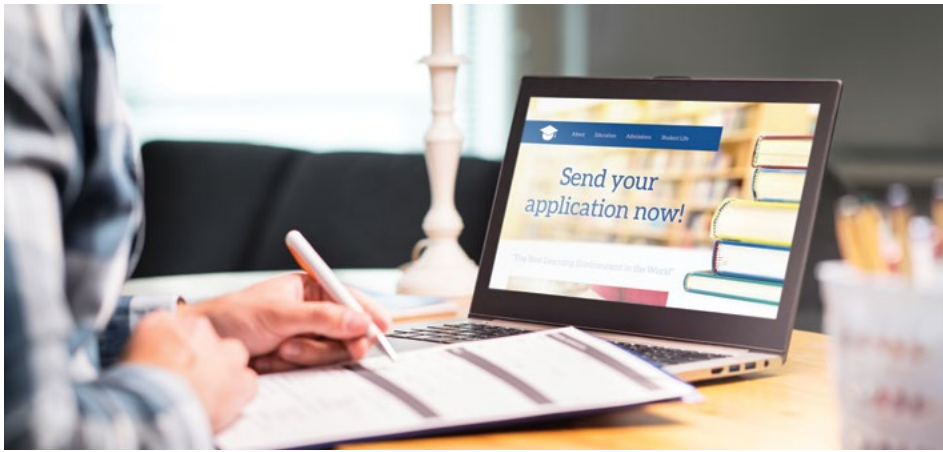
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## College Application Tips for LGBTQ+ Families

BY DANA RUDOLPH

Ah, spring! Time of flowers, birdsong and, for many of us parents and our children, college visits. My own son went through the college admissions process a couple of years ago. While I am in no way an expert on the topic, I thought I'd share a few things we found helpful.

**Visit widely and virtually.** Most campuses are now open again for in-person tours, so take advantage of them if you can — but supplement them with virtual ones if you can't, or to get an initial sense of a place. Also, take notes during the visits, virtual or not; after you've seen a few places, they can start to blur. I tried to write down a lot so that my son could focus simply on the experience of being there, although he took some of his own notes as well.

**Know that you're not the first.** The media often makes it seem as if LGBTQ+ parents are a newfangled thing — but there have been out LGBTQ+ parents since the mid-20th century, with several generations of our children growing to adulthood and many applying to college. You may still be one of few LGBTQ+ families on a college tour — but you're hardly the first to be going through this process. Your kid is just as worthy of being there as anyone else's.

Let your child lead — and know that having LGBTQ+ parents may not be the part of themselves they want to lead with, either when they meet people on college tours or in their admissions essays. That doesn't necessarily mean they are ashamed of their family; it may, in fact, mean they take it so for granted that it doesn't feel worthy of special note, or that they want to define themselves first by another aspect of their identity. Alternatively, maybe they'll want to show up wearing a "Queerspawn" button and ask for a tour of the campus LGBTQ+ center. Either way, it's their call, and we parents need to respect that.

**Take advantage of free tools.** Many high schools offer their students free access to one of several online college planning platforms. These are invaluable for finding colleges that fit specific characteristics (including how much financial need is typically awarded), finding scholarship opportunities and much more. They can also help students manage application-related documents like teacher

references, depending on how the school has chosen to use the service. Whether or not your child intends to take standardized tests (more colleges are making them optional), another good starting resource is the College Board website ([collegeboard.org](http://collegeboard.org)), especially its BigFuture college-finding section.

**Track things yourself.** While many of the above services allow students to make lists of the colleges they're interested in, along with deadlines and such, it may also be a good idea for your child to keep their own separate records, especially if there are specific details they want to track beyond what the platforms allow. My family used a shared Google Sheet, but a paper notebook could do as well.

If your child is interested in finding LGBTQ-friendly colleges, the annual Campus Pride Index ([campusprideindex.org](http://campusprideindex.org)) is useful, although as with any college rankings, should be supplemented by what you learn yourself from college visits. You may also want to look at HRC's Scholarship Database ([hrc.org/resources/scholarships](http://hrc.org/resources/scholarships)), which lists scholarships for LGBTQ+ students as well as for others who are interested in studying or advocating for LGBTQ+ equality (though obviously not all children of LGBTQ+ parents fall into these categories).

**Start working on essays early.** It's helpful for students to start drafting admissions essays in the summer before their senior year. Once school starts in the fall, it can be harder to find the time, especially if they are interested in applying through early action or early decision options, which are often due Nov. 1 — that deadline creeps up quickly.

Evaluating and applying to colleges can be stressful. This is also a time, however, to celebrate how much your child has grown, who they've become, and the new possibilities that are opening to them. Keep that in mind if the process starts to become wearisome for either you or your child.

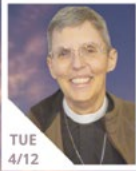
Congratulations on reaching this milestone!

*Dana Rudolph is the founder and publisher of Mombian ([mombian.com](http://mombian.com)), a GLAAD Media Award-winning blog and resource directory, with a searchable database of 900+ LGBTQ family books, media, and more.*



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# #DoSayGay With These 6 Non-Disney Animated Films and Shorts

## You Don't Have to Feel Bad About Watching These Movies

BY JACKIE JONES

Disney's donations to anti-LGBTQ+ candidates supporting the "Don't Say Gay" law in Florida and their botched response to the law have sparked protest and outrage among their supporters and workers. Also concerning? The company's historical portrayal of perceived LGBTQ+ characters as villains has created negative, harmful LGBTQ+ representation in animated films.

In short: Disney has not done enough to represent and protect the LGBTQ+ community.

Thankfully, other animated projects believe in #DoSayGay. Here are six kid-friendly animated films and shorts you and your family should watch right now that don't belong to Disney:

### 1 "Coraline," 2009 (Laika Pandemonium Films)

Coraline, the American stop-motion animated fantasy that takes the viewer into a parallel world, was adapted to film in 2009. Neil Gaiman, author of the 2002 novel "Coraline" and the screenwriter of the adaptation, stated via Twitter that characters April Spink, a retired burlesque dancer, and Miriam Forcible, a former burlesque singer, are a couple.

### 2 "Superman: Red Son," 2020 (Warner Bros. Animation and DC Entertainment Inc.)



A still from the 2009 animated feature "Coraline." Photo: Focus Features



Wonder Woman in "Superman: Red Son." Photo: Warner Bros./DC Entertainment

Is Wonder Woman a lesbian? In the 2020 "Superman: Red Son" comic book adaptation, DC Comics and Warner Bros. share a different perspective on the beloved story we all know.

Instead of landing in the United States, Superman lands in the Soviet Union as a boy, hence the title's name.

At one point in the film, Superman grows close to Wonder Woman. She rejects a kiss from the

superhero, explaining "I come from an island of all women" and "work it out for yourself."

### 3 "The Mitchells vs. the Machines," 2021 (Netflix)

In this 2021 sci-fi comedy, the lovably dysfunctional Mitchell family must work together to save Earth from a global robot uprising while on a road trip. Outside of the robot uprising, most of the storyline centers around the main character Katie Mitchell and her relationship with her father, Rick Mitchell. They come from two different worlds and never see eye-to-eye. However, as the story goes on, they both begin to see each other in a new light. By the end, the two understand and accept each other. This acceptance also includes Katie's sexuality. While her sexual orientation is not

blatantly discussed until the movie's end, there are definitely hints about her crush Jade, a girl from school, along the way.

### 4 "Star Fallen," 2018 (Created by Alex Tagali)

Two men meet and fall in love under the stars in this short, silent film. The pair hold hands while star-gazing, huddle under an umbrella while it's raining, buy a home and live their lives together. They even grow old together. In just over two minutes, the short shares a story that positively represents LGBTQ+ love in its many stages.

See #DoSayGay, page 24





# About That 'Don't Say Gay' Law

## A Michigan Student and Professor on Why It Matters to All and How to Talk About It

BY AMY BRAINER AND NAJA NILE

*Naja Nile is a sophomore at the University of Michigan-Dearborn majoring in Women's & Gender Studies with a certificate in LGBTQ+ Studies. Amy Brainer is an associate professor at UM-Dearborn where she directs the Women's & Gender Studies and LGBTQ+ Studies programs. We write this op-ed as a teacher and a university student who share in common a deep concern about Florida's HB 1557 and similar bills.*

Descriptions of the "Parental Rights in Education" law recently passed by the Florida Governor differ based on where you look.

From opponents, we learn about a law that stops teachers and schools from acknowledging LGBTQ+ people and gives parents the ability to opt their kids out of health services in potentially all grade levels. Meanwhile, supporters present the law as a measure that protects the youngest children from sexual content and predation.

### How can we talk to one another across this gulf?

**Amy Brainer:** A few years ago, a student opened up to me about her discomfort with "In a Heartbeat," an animated short film that shows a first crush between two boys. My student, a young mother, said that she had gay friends and supported them but worried about the impact of the film on kids.

As a result of her candor, we were able

to talk about what happens when children see — or don't see — gay and trans people around them. Isolation from LGBTQ+ people does not make gay children straight or trans children cis. But we know from study after study, it does make them feel less hopeful about the future, less worthy of love, and more likely to harm themselves.

Isolation from LGBTQ+ people does not make straight, cis children more straight or more cis. But it does increase their risk of developing biases and condoning or even participating in bullying. Most parents, including those who identify as conservative, do not want their children to bully or harm others. I respected my student enough to have this conversation with her, and she respected me enough to do the same. In the end she changed her mind about the film. That won't always happen. But I think it's worth the effort.

With Florida's HB 1557 and other bills like it winding their way through state legislatures, we must find a way to communicate with people who think they need to protect their kids from LGBTQ+ content. Many LGBTQ+ kids (and siblings, cousins, and friends of LGBTQ+ kids) live with those parents and guardians, some of whom hold anti-LGBTQ+ biases, and we owe it to them to believe the adults in their lives can change.

**Naja Nile:** We also need to help people

See VP, page 21

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# This Candidate For Oakland County Judge Believes Inclusive Justice Matters

## Plus, an Update on a Michigan Supreme Court Case That Just Might Affect Your LGBTQ+ Family

BY ELLEN SHANNA KNOPPOW

Twenty-two years ago, Amanda and Kay Shelton faced discrimination when they were shopping for a venue for their commitment ceremony. Then they traveled over 700 miles to see the one retired judge in South Carolina who would do a second parent adoption to ensure both of them would have full legal parenting rights to their two children. That was nine years ago.

Amanda said she didn't think the day would come when her relationship with her wife would be legal. Nor did she believe that she would see in her lifetime that her kids would have two legal parents in the state of Michigan and have equal standing with other families.

"All of those things have come to fruition," Shelton said, "and I think it's very important for us to look back and see whose shoulders we stand on and how far our community has come on civil rights issues for the LGBTQ+ community."

An attorney with 18 years of litigating experience, Shelton said her current law practice of 11 years, Shelton and Deon Law Group, has been a success in part because "we were able to do a lot that we were really passionate about, and a lot of that came from helping families in the LGBTQ+ community who are breaking up, and the laws weren't out there to support them."

As a candidate for an open seat on the Oakland County Circuit Court in the civil-criminal division, Shelton believes her broad perspective and experience uniquely qualify her for the role.

"LGBTQ+ people need to be every place decisions are being made," Shelton

said. "We have 1.3 million people in our county, and there is not a single openly lesbian judge [here]. And we only have three statewide. That's important because our lived experience matters, and we have a lot to bring to the practice of law: our view of the world and our place in it."

That's not to say Shelton is only well-versed in legal issues that pertain to the LGBTQ+ community. She's litigated everything from complex commercial disputes involving international companies to probate matters, and from landlord-tenant disputes to family law, including adoption, divorce and custody.

"There's not that many cases that I have not touched or handled in some way," Shelton said. "So I have a very broad perspective to bring to the bench, and a lot of years of experience. To be frank, I have the credentials."

Shortly after graduating Wayne State University Law School, Shelton helped found the Stonewall Bar Association, an informal bar association for LGBTQ+ attorneys. Today, she's a frequent speaker on LGBTQ+ issues including training judges and their staff on access to justice issues for the LGBTQ+ community. Among other distinctions, Shelton was named among the Top Women Attorneys in Michigan, 2021. As a candidate for judge, Shelton is proud to have the endorsement of Michigan Attorney General Dana Nessel.

If elected, Shelton will be the first openly lesbian judge on the Oakland County Circuit Court, and the second openly LGBTQ+ judge on that court after Jake Cunningham, elected in 2018. For nine years, Shelton served on the Ruth Ellis Center board of directors and continues to be involved with the organization.

BTL asked Shelton about the status of a currently pending case that the Michigan Supreme Court was recently requested



to take up. *Pueblo v. Haas* has the potential to affect parenting rights for nonbiological children of LGBTQ+ couples in Michigan. As a prospective Circuit Court judge and a member of the LGBTQ+ community, it holds particular relevance for Shelton.

“The reason that *Pueblo v. Haas* is incredibly important to our community is because of the inability for [all] our families to be legally recognized,” Shelton said, “and by that I mean the following: We have a legal doctrine called the equitable parent doctrine — a case law-made doctrine — which, in various certain circumstances, a nonbiological parent can be considered the legal parent of a child.”

Michigan is the only state in the U.S. with a law on the books, its equitable parent doctrine, that applies solely to heterosexual married parents. This can adversely affect an LGBTQ+ couple, for example, in the case of a married lesbian couple in which the parenting rights of the nonbiological parent would be at risk in the event of divorce if they became parents before they could legally marry.

Because Democrats hold a majority on the Michigan Supreme Court for the first time in recent years, many are hopeful that the Court will hear the case and ultimately, with a favorable ruling, Michigan will join the rest

of the country in its definition of “equitable parent.” A favorable outcome would mean the state’s equitable parent doctrine would apply to all couples, not just heterosexual ones.

“LGBTQ+ families have to go through all of these hoops — we still do,” Shelton said. “And that’s what’s so frustrating. People think, ‘Well, gosh, we have marriage equality. Everything is good for the LGBTQ+ community.’ No, not true.”

It’s critical that voters are educated about judicial candidates, Shelton said, for a couple reasons. First, circuit court roles can lead to other judicial positions and it’s important that progressive people who are inclusive are in places where inclusive justice matters.

Further, Shelton said, “It’s important for judges to have a broad perspective of the world because courts are supposed to be community spaces, but the court doors are not always open to the entire community.”

*A kick-off event for Shelton’s campaign will be held from 5:30-7:30 p.m. April 13, with special guest Attorney General Dana Nessel, at Zeoli’s Modern Italian, at 110 E. 14 Mile Road in Clawson. Visit shelton2022.com to learn more.*

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## → RHFU

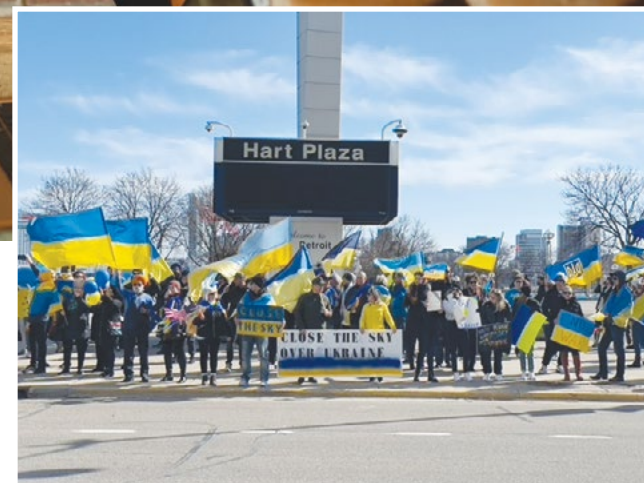
Continued from page 6

Lesbians are staying and fighting, too. “The majority of lesbians I’m seeing across the networks have certainly picked up the guns; it would play into some of the stereotypes here actually,” said Feterovich.

Feterovich’s wife is from Kyiv in Ukraine, a city and country she has come to embrace. Now she’s calling on the Biden administration to embrace Ukraine and do more, including opening the U.S. borders to Ukrainian refugees. Biden on Thursday, March 24 announced that the U.S. would allow some 100,000 Ukrainian refugees to seek asylum here. That number is not large though, when you consider that a reported 3.7 million people have already fled the country, and are right now straining the resources of nearby countries such as Poland and Romania.

“We are a country that has resources,” said Feterovich, “and we’re the country that has a Statue of Liberty that says, ‘Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free.’ Are we welcoming them as a country right now? We certainly are not.”

The situation continues to escalate and grow more chaotic by the day, as Russian forces continue their attack on Ukraine. Feterovich said it’s the kind of thing most Americans can’t imagine. “They’ve never really experienced war, they’ve never experienced going into a store and there’s nothing there. So it’s hard for a lot of people to even grasp the reality of this.” The important thing, said Feterovich, is to not get what she calls “frozen” but rather to do something — anything — to help.



“If you want to give money, give money,” she said. “If not, advocate for refugees to come to this country. Do something. Do not just sit there and do nothing.”

Petrenko agreed. As far as what Americans can do to aid Ukrainians, Petrenko said it’s OK to “half-ass” it. Give a little. Volunteer a little. But do something. “You don’t need to sell your house, buy a pair of Birkenstocks and move to Poland to help refugees,” she said. “Literally, take \$10 out of your monthly budget and find a project you’re passionate about.”

The list of projects you can help fund via RHFU continues to grow.

“I think they’re all equally important,” said Feterovich. “We vetted a few projects because certainly people feel strongly about certain things. ... If it’s a project that we feel fits and we’ve vetted the project, that’s going to go on our website.”

“Give that money or your time or effort to this,” Petrenko added. “It might take five minutes of your day, it might take half an hour. One thing you cannot do is ignore. I’ve lived here for 26 years. We’re so programmed as Americans to ignore other pain because we just don’t know how to deal with it.”

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understand that this law is *not* about sheltering kids from sexual activity, as many of its supporters claim. Its language is more specific. Sen. Jeff Brandes proposed to replace “gender identity and sexual orientation” with “human sexuality and sexual activity” and this proposal was *rejected* by the full Senate vote.

The bill that Gov. DeSantis signed into law prohibits discussions about sexual orientation or gender identity in kindergarten through third grade *or* when “not age-appropriate or developmentally appropriate for students in accordance with state standards.” It will give parents the right to sue school districts, at the district’s expense, for perceived violations of this vaguely worded clause. Perhaps most devastatingly, it will potentially open the door for parents to force schools to expose kids’ sexual and gender identities to them, even when those are shared in confidence with a teacher or counselor.

Even under a narrow interpretation of the law, Florida’s state standards do not introduce topics to do with gender identity or sexual orientation until the ninth grade. Ninth graders are 13 and 14 years old. That is more than enough time for young people to form relationships with and ideas about their own bodies, and be exposed to

*“Without a law like this one, I went through K-3 without being taught by a teacher about gender, sex, or human sexuality. In fact, I made it to the ninth grade without a single sex-ed class. It is well known that if you aren’t willing to teach kids about things, they will learn it elsewhere.”*

real-world issues around gender and sexuality.

Discussions of these topics are not as common as kids need and as lawmakers imagine. I went through K-3 without being taught by a teacher about gender, sex, or human sexuality. In fact, I made it to the ninth grade without a single sex-ed class. It is well known that if you aren’t willing to teach kids about things, they will learn it elsewhere.

**Brainer:** That’s true, and many of the bill’s supporters think the ‘elsewhere’ will be at home. But it’s not that simple. As a family sociologist, I have interviewed parents, grandparents, and siblings of LGBTQ+ people and have spent a lot of time thinking about the ways that different policies and laws show up in family dynamics. Evidence shows that

bills like HB 1557 hurt the whole family. Our challenge now is to help people understand why.

**Nile:** This bill is about censoring genders and sexual orientations that do not fit the social norm. Public education has always been about more than just math, science, and reading. School curricula *already* teach kids about cultural and social issues. Classrooms ought to be allowed to facilitate conversations around topics that affect students’ lives. Suicide is the second leading cause of death among young people ages 10–24, and 19 percent of LGBTQ+ youth ages 13–18 reported attempting suicide within the last year alone. Young people need to see themselves represented and their humanity affirmed. Their lives depend on it.



Amy Brainer and Naja Nile. Photos courtesy of Amy Brainer and Naja Nile

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"A Very Golden Girls Christmas, Vol. 2." (Left to right) Brandy Joe Plambeck (as Rose), Richard Payton (as Blanche) and Joe Bailey (as Dorothy).  
Photo: Jordan Gagnon

# The Ringwald Announces Its Upcoming Season and, Naturally, It Features The Golden Girls

BY JACKIE JONES

Theater lovers, get out your calendars. Live entertainment is back in full swing at Ferndale's The Ringwald Theatre, which will feature all-new shows, a musical and a holiday performance during its 2022/2023 season.

Since moving their physical location to Affirmations LGBTQ+ community center in the midst of the pandemic last year, The Ringwald's Artistic Director Joe Bailey says the team at Affirmations has been "great" help with the transition.

"The folks at Affirmations have been so welcoming and accommodating," Bailey tells BTL. "It's turning out to be a great partnership that's going to get stronger as we go."

The Ringwald started their renovations for the residency last year, and according to Bailey, although navigating around COVID has been "interesting," he counts the current season as a success.

"It's just a matter of trying to keep everyone safe and comfortable," he says. "Luckily, we've had a pretty smooth transition. We require weekly testing of the cast and crew when we're in show

mode. Currently, the audience must be masked and show proof of vaccination before they can come into the space."

Not much has changed regarding audience size, either. Seats are still filling up and the capacity of the space is still being met, Bailey says.

Bailey says he's "super excited for the next season" and the variety of entertainment that they're offering. "I'm excited to do 'Misery,'" he says. "During the pandemic, we filmed a 'Misery' parody, so it'll be fun to do the OG 'Misery.' I'm excited to do 'Assassins,' the Stephen Sondheim musical as well; I think it's going to work well in our space. And I'm also really excited to do 'The Inheritance,' which is a two-part play that just won the Tony Award for best play."

The Ringwald is also working on "A Wet, Hot Golden Girls Summer," an original play the group plans to premiere in 2023. "'The Golden Girls' have been very good to us over the years," Bailey says with a chuckle. "We just did our 'A Very Golden Girls Christmas, Vol. 2' over this past holiday season, which did extremely well. So, we can't wait to write that 2023 play."

While Bailey is ready and enthusiastic

to share this upcoming season, he says it did take "a lot of leg work" to see it through and organize.

"We have developed a sort of reputation and following over the past 15 years," he says. "Our current slogan is sort of 'theater without restriction,' so [we] like to do things that are unexpected, or have men in dresses every once in a while and, of course, we like to do parodies. The summer shows are reserved for those. We just like to also give people things that they've never seen before."

Bailey tells BTL that his process for considering shows begins in January, when he likes to "see what other people are doing out there."

Auditions for the 2022/2023 season take place Wednesday, June 8 and Saturday, June 11 inside Affirmations at 290 W. 9 Mile Road in Ferndale. A sign-up sheet and more information will be available soon. Follow their social media for more details.

To donate to The Ringwald Theatre's commitment "to creating an inclusive, diverse and equitable environment for any and all," visit [theringwald.com/support](http://theringwald.com/support). For a list of shows, go to [www.theringwald.com](http://www.theringwald.com).

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(Top) "In a Heartbeat." (Bottom) "Rocko's Modern Life: Static Cling." Photos: YouTube and Nickelodeon Animation Studio

→ **#DoSayGay**

Continued from page 16

**5** "In a Heartbeat," 2017  
 (Created by Beth David)

"In a Heartbeat" is a four-minute short about a boy who is at risk of being outed by his own (literal) heart. The heart refuses to stop throughout the short and eventually leaps out of the shy boy's chest to get the crush's attention. Over and over again, the boy races to stop the impulsive nature of his heart, but the heart wins. The boy is ultimately outed, and his crush learns of his adoration, but the result is more beautiful than the boy ever imagined.

**6** "Rocko's Modern Life: Static Cling," 2019 (Nickelodeon Animation Studio)

Nickelodeon's "Rocko's Modern Life" reboot brings today's more accepting and modern world to these early '90s, out-of-touch characters, including a surprise trans storyline. As he's acclimating to modern life after being stuck in space for 20 years, Rocko discovers that his favorite show from the '90s, "The Fatheads," is no longer airing. The movie's entire premise turns into Rocko looking for Ralph Bighead, the creator, who based the series on his parents and Rocko's neighbors Bev and Ed Bighead. When Rocko finds Ralph, he discovers that Ralph transitioned to Rachel and that she is in a happier place in life.





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Photo: Camille Vivier

## Perfume Genius on Band's 'Utopian' Tour and His Unique Approach to Creating Music

BY CHRIS AZZOPARDI

**A** lone in the desert, three men, wearing nothing but thongs, move in cat-cow stretches on a blanket for nearly two minutes. Tour cities, including Detroit, are read in a faint tone that, as the vintage video progresses, grows weirder and more chilling, the rhythm of the voice on beat with their bobbing bodies.

"Tour is only weeks away," Mike Hadreas,

40, better known by his stage name Perfume Genius, writes in the caption under the video on his Instagram page. If that clip seems completely random, that's because it is. It's how Hadreas prefers to operate creatively, he tells me from his home in Los Angeles during a recent interview on Zoom. It is, perhaps, why the singer-songwriter has managed to evolve at a fairly rapid pace artistically, never settling for what is expected of him (though, he admits, he doesn't mind answering to the pressure of his audience's tastes) but mostly for what he expects

from himself. Hadreas' wandering artistic mind has yielded works as sonically disparate as "Put Your Back N 2 It," his intimately produced 2012 sophomore album, a powerfully subdued work, and more recently, 2020's "Set My Heart on Fire Immediately," which, like his 2017 album "No Shape," doesn't just stroll but glides and struts.

His new album, officially announced a couple of weeks after we chatted, is called "Ugly Season," music written as the accompaniment to Perfume Genius and choreographer Kate Wallich's immersive dance piece, "The Sun Still

Burns Here." Hadreas' long-time musical and romantic partner Alan Wyffels had a hand in creating the music, which Pitchfork describes as "the sound of dancefloor euphoria."

As for the tour, "things are gonna happen," Hadreas says. He's referring to his emotions, which he expects to be in full swing on this tour, given it's his first major trek since before the pandemic.

**I've been reflecting on what music has meant to me the last couple of years, and "Set My Heart On Fire Immediately," which came out just months into the pandemic, felt like such a gift during a really hard time. At that time, I listened to a lot of the music I listened to as a kid because nostalgic media of any kind was so comforting — even the nostalgic media that I consumed during some of my worst years as a gay teen.**

I listened to the Alice Boman record that came out around the beginning. Her music is so understated. I don't want to be dismissive of it because it's really beautiful and powerful, but it's understated. And it's not trying to do anything to you. It just... it's existing, and it's really beautiful. I think maybe me and her grew up listening to the same music and being inspired by the same music. I hear a lot of '50s ballads in the things that she makes.

What you're talking about reminded me of listening to Cat Power, and when I was listening to Cat Power when I was 15 or 16, I was in a dark place. Like, very dark. [Laughs.] But I kind of like remembering it because I've had a million different incarnations of myself since then. And when I was depressed and a teenager, it felt so permanent. It felt [like] forever. It felt like the worst thing that's ever happened to anyone. I don't feel like that anymore. Maybe I feel a little closer to that the last couple years than I have since then, but it's comforting to think back on those times and listen to the music that brought me comfort then and let me sort of indulge.

**What does that feel like when people tell you that it's your music that brings them that same kind of comfort?**

I mean, that's why I make it. I'm trying to make the kind of music that I had a relationship to in that way. But I also am soundtracking them getting through things. I'm not doing anything, really. You know what I mean? [Laughs.] I'm just sort of a companion while they do all the things that they're doing. So sometimes that can get twisted in your head and sometimes that feels sort of like...

**Like there's pressure to make music for a particular kind of person instead of for yourself?**

I don't mind that. I like that pressure. I like having that as a rule. Just trying to make things that start as things that are helpful to me, but then I think, "How can I frame this, or how can I make this so that other people get how it's making me feel, or what it's

See **Perfume Genius**, page 30

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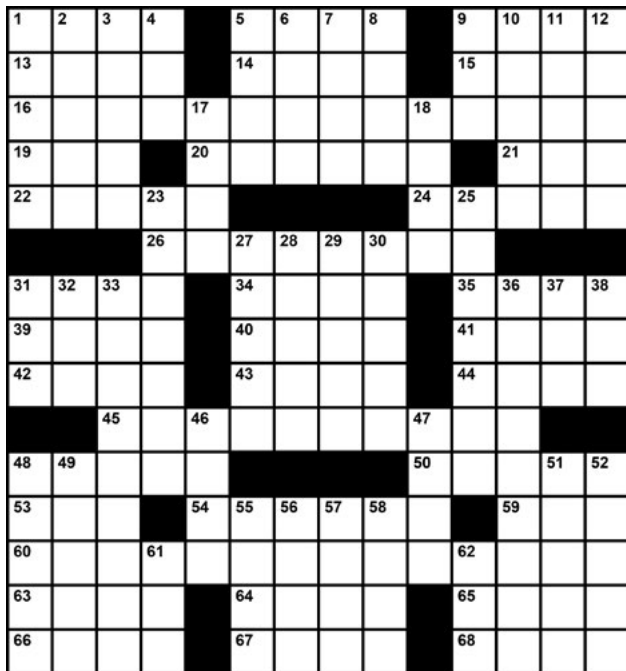
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- 35 Station wagon, e.g.  
 39 Tara portrayer Collette  
 40 Actor Rip  
 41 Chew like a mouse  
 42 Direction from Susan Feniger  
 43 "\_\_\_ you not"  
 44 Beat, but barely  
 45 More of the response  
 48 She had her hand up Lamb Chop  
 50 Elton John's source for "Aida"  
 53 How some like it  
 54 Seaport of Italia  
 59 Son of Abe  
 60 End of the response  
 63 X-rated material  
 64 Steed stopper  
 65 Da Vinci's Lisa  
 66 Big name in pumps  
 67 Nuts  
 68 "The \_\_\_ the limit!"
- 17 Magazine section  
 18 Jodie Foster's role with the King  
 23 Valentine sender  
 25 Place for trinkets  
 27 Try a Rick Rodgers cookbook, e.g.  
 28 Like gay bars that allow cigars  
 29 Hope-Crosby flick, "Road \_\_\_"  
 30 Gandhi, e.g.  
 31 Cause of Venus envy?  
 32 Decimal point  
 33 Some Disney employees  
 36 Saw to  
 37 Touching children's game  
 38 Be in debt to  
 46 "It \_\_\_ Necessarily So"  
 47 Word on a map of Israel  
 48 Triangle, e.g.  
 49 Migratory guys  
 51 Kaye of "Hans Christian Anderson"  
 52 Think tank products  
 55 It can give a drag queen smooth legs  
 56 Hart Crane work  
 57 Birth state of Langston Hughes  
 58 Like young Abe Lincoln  
 61 Game with "Reverse" cards  
 62 Scrabble 3-pointers

**Down**

- 1 Singer Bonnie  
 2 Name on jetliners, once  
 3 Easy putt for Spencer-Devlin  
 4 Type of sucker  
 5 Like a chickenhawk  
 6 Lump of earth  
 7 Six years for a senator Baldwin  
 8 Video game name  
 9 Sound of an inflated doll leak  
 10 "Lawrence of Arabia" ride  
 11 Princess with fins  
 12 Tasteless

**Shortbus**

**Across**

- 1 They may burn lovers on the floor  
 5 Fragments of "The Glass Menagerie"  
 9 "Beat it!"  
 13 Tibet setting  
 14 Fox comedy with Jane Lynch  
 15 Poet Teasdale

- 16 Statement by Sofia in "Shortbus"  
 19 Curry of Rocky Horror fame  
 20 One who's "out"  
 21 Comics cry  
 22 Trick alternative  
 24 Nervous sort  
 26 Start of Jamie's response to Sofia  
 31 Cheesy side trip from Amsterdam  
 34 Mine, to Rimbaud

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Photo: Camille Vivie

## → Perfume Genius

Continued from page 27

bringing me through?”

**I love the eerie, sexy teaser trailer for this that you posted on Instagram recently. It reminded me how much I love the way you connect to queer culture to develop your own artistic persona. So what was it about that clip of those thonged men that fell in line with what you want to do with this tour?**

I mean, I don't know. [Laughs.] I just was doing what I like. I was just playing around, was watching YouTube videos with the sound off, and then I saw that video and was like, “If I slowed this down or I put some intense music over it, it would turn it into something more unsettling.”

So then I started looking for that field recording and found all kinds of weird sounds and stuff like that, and then it just starts building onto it. Sometimes that's my favorite way to make things — when I'm not thinking about what I'm doing. [Laughs.]

**Has that always been your approach? And is that your approach to making music?**

It's this weird combo of being really hyper-analytical and really hyper-research-y. I'm very research-y when I'm writing lyrics or when I'm making things. I just gather a bunch of footage and images and read lots of Wikipedia pages; there'll be some lyric that's

very simple, just like three words that are very normal, but I researched some weird ancient rite [to get there]. Which is pretentious, but it's fun. Then the other side of it is just kind of trying to empty your brain, emptying everything to see what shows up. Those combinations of those two things is how I make everything.

**Do you think that you'll write at all while you're on the road?**

No, I've never really done that. Maybe if I play guitar then I could; I bet people are very glad that I don't do that. But I can tell I'm gearing up to write. I just can feel that I'm ready to make something. I was feeling kind of a void there for a while and I don't feel that anymore.

**Looking ahead to your show, I've been thinking about how, because of the pandemic, I've really missed concerts but, even more so, I've missed sharing a space and moving bodies with a bunch of queers.**

Oh yeah. We've done some shows, some smaller tours the last few months, and it feels completely different to me. I don't know if it's something in the air, or if it's just my relationship to everything has changed, or maybe I feel a lot more vulnerable and maybe more present than I used to. So everything feels more emotional. Even just... not the shows, but just the touring with the band and everything, it just feels like summer camp. It feels very utopian. [Laughs.]

And then the shows: I've been doing rehearsals for them and I'm having to hold

back during rehearsals because I'm going fully — destroying the set and everything like that. But we're building it. I shouldn't be destroying it. [Laughs.] I don't want to, like, wreck my voice by going so hard in rehearsals. But I guess I really need it. The portal's still very open.

**What do you think is putting you in that emotional place?**

Honestly, I just really need it right now. I haven't really figured out a way, fully, to get what writing and making music and performing and all that stuff does for me. I haven't figured out a way to do that otherwise. I mean, I'm not sure that there's any [other] way. The thing that is very key to me is that it's feeling. It's a really physical feeling to me. And I have it when I'm writing. It's just like a charge all around me, and it's physical.

I miss it, not just as an idea, but my body misses it and I miss the feeling. And when I did the dance performance that I did with choreographer Kate Wallich's dance company, I was having that feeling a lot in a really sustained way. And so I can do it. If I make a habit of it, I can turn on music and conjure something up in my body that feels very... not the same, but something. [Laughs.]

For some reason, the last couple years, I haven't been writing. I haven't been doing any self-care, really. It should be really heavy on my mind. But I don't know. But I guess

self-care, I've done enough 'cause I'm, like, here.

**Do you like being on the road?**

I do, especially lately. Maybe it's just because every record we play, [we] kind of up it a little bit. I'm touring with a lighting person, which I've never done before, and so it makes the show feel a lot more cinematic, and I feel like

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it can stay in the dream longer.


The hard thing about touring is that it's hard. [Laughs.] You're tired and hungry, and you have to eat at the gas station. I figured out a way to do it. It feels a bit more sustainable now, and so I don't feel like I have to push myself so hard to get into the space. And shows used to very much feel like I was going on stage, and there's lights on me, and I just have to start slamming my head against the wall until a bunch of feelings come. You know? But now, I walk out and a light will bloom and I'm like, “OK, bitch.”



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