

MICHIGAN'S LGBTQ+ NEWS SOURCE SINCE 1993

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THE TAKEDOWN

What Are We
to Make of
Lana Theis?

LOCAL HERO RETIRES

Why Jerry Peterson
Would've Made Ruth
Ellis Herself Proud

LOOKING BACK

Did Our LGBTQ+
Community Fail
Jeffrey Montgomery?

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By Jason A. Michael

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Due to an editing error in a story in our April 14 edition, the story "16 Michigan Orgs Receive \$2 Million HIV Prevention Grant From CDC" incorrectly reported that 16 Michigan organizations received a portion of the grant money from the CDC. Only CHAG received \$2 million from the CDC.



20 COVER STORY

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5 Queer Things You Can Do Right Now-ish

BY SARAH BRICKER HUNT

It's hard to believe we're nearing the end of April and rounding the corner for May already, but here we are! As you fill in your busy spring calendar, be sure to include our suggested mix of fantastic, fabulous and important upcoming events and observances happening over the next few weeks.

Join an LGBTQ+ Softball League

Spend some time in the great outdoors this spring enjoying a great American pastime. The Metro Detroit LGBT Softball League (MDSL), based in Ferndale, invites players and spectators to join the in-progress 2022 season. Cheer on the players at the league's May 1 game or sign up to play all season. The league holds parties for players and fans all season long — be sure to check out upcoming events.

Find out more at leaguelineup.com/welcome.asp?url=mdsl.



Photo: Steve MC



Shake Your Booty at the Ringwald's Latest Show

Shake, shake, shake; shake, shake shake... you get the picture. Ringwald Theatre's triumphant return to live, in-person theater gets off to a raucous start with "Bootycandy," set for May 6-30 at Affirmations in Ferndale. Ringwald describes the show as "a kaleidoscopic portrayal of growing up gay and Black. Uproarious satire crashes headlong into the murky terrain of plain and pleasure and... Bootycandy."

Proof of vaccination and masks required. Reserve your tickets at theringwald.com.



Support Crime Victims

Becoming a target of crime is difficult enough, but the trauma is compounded when that crime goes unpunished. Crime Victim's Rights Week focuses on helping crime survivors find justice. Geneva Maze, lead victim advocate at Equality Michigan, which is spearheading the observance, said, "We believe that building community partnerships will assist mainstream organizations with understanding LGBTQIA+ victims and how to effectively work with us." Join Equality Michigan and other local organizations like Stand with Trans at two upcoming resource fairs featuring local resources about victimization, networking opportunities and refreshments.

Tuesday, April 26 at Unity Church in Bay City and Friday, April 29 at Affirmations in Ferndale. Both events take place from 5-7 p.m. and are free to attend. No prior reservation needed.



BenDeLaCreme.
Photo: Eric Paguio

Bask in the Glory That Is BenDeLaCreme

"RuPaul's Drag Race" Season 6 and "All Stars" Season 3 wouldn't have been the same without the veritable force that is BenDeLaCreme, and now you can feel that electricity up close and in person when the drag star hits the stage April 30 at the Majestic Theatre in Detroit. When BTL Editorial Director Chris Azzopardi interviewed BenDeLaCreme alongside Jinx Monsoon ahead of their holiday show in December, their first live performances since the pandemic, the performer talked about valuing the relationship she shares with audiences. She said she loves "the live, energetic exchange that we get to have with each other as like a threeway with the audience... I can't wait to live life as a performer again." And we can't wait to see her perform yet again in 2022!

Buy tickets at majesticdetroit.com.

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Relive (or Reinvent!) Your Prom Experience

Whether you loved your high school prom, skipped it or had a not-so-great experience, Pride Prom is your chance for a redo. Central Michigan University's LGBTQ+ alliance, Spectrum, will host a "free opportunity to have the prom experience you might not have gotten in high school" on April 30 as part of the CMU Pride Celebration. Enjoy dancing, free food and a chance to explore queer history at this no-dress-code event that is student-led and open to the public. And, obviously, don't miss the lip-sync battle.

Pride Prom will be held in the Rotunda on the main level of the Bovee University Center in Mt. Pleasant from 6-9 p.m. April 30. While the event is open to the public, attendees must have a reserved ticket and an ID. Reserve your ticket at eventbrite.com.

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

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Making Ruth Ellis Proud

Former ED Jerry Peterson Retires, Leaves Behind a 'Transformative' Legacy



BY JASON A. MICHAEL

As Jerry Peterson resigns his position as executive director of the Ruth Ellis Center (REC) after nearly a decade, he speaks of leaving Detroit, the city he has called home for the past nine years, with regret.

"I love Detroit," Peterson, 65, told BTL in a phone interview from his new condo in Mesa, Arizona. "I'm a community development junkie. I moved here in 2013, right around the time of the bankruptcy. Bought a home in the University District that needed a lot of work."

Peterson finished the home, as well as two additional renovation projects, over the next few years. His time in the city was an education of sorts for Peterson and, as a white man, he appreciated not being in the majority for once.

"I always, always was aware of that and what it means for a white man to show up among Black and brown people," he said. "That was a constant learning and growth for me that I loved. So, hands down, Detroit will always be my favorite place to both live and work."

Peterson, originally from Indiana, spent 14 years with the United Way in Ft. Wayne, focusing on community building, development and partnerships. Peterson credits his position there, along with the three years he spent with the Contra Costa LGBTQI2-S Youth Advocacy Collaborative in California's Bay Area, as the experiences that best qualified him to lead REC.

When he saw the executive director position open up at the agency, Peterson said he was immediately intrigued. "I knew I had one last career in me before I retired and the mission of REC just captured my heart on both a personal and professional level," he said. "I really wanted to bring resources together to serve the young people of Ruth Ellis."

Personally, thoughts of the position took him back to even before he'd started working in the non-profit sector, to when he was married to a woman and pastor of a church in Fort Wayne. Peterson came out late, not until he was 40 and a father of three. In 1994, Peterson said he saw no way to be his authentic self.

"I was very suicidal. When I turned 40, I finally decided that coming out was better than dying," he said. "That experience of coming out so late in life and hating myself for so long, it was the experience that really captured me when I saw the posting."

Taking the big leap

As excited as he was about the position, Peterson said it took him a week to accept it once it was offered to him. He worried whether a white man should hold the position at the helm of a predominantly Black workplace where it was mostly Black youth that were being served.

"That was a personal concern to me," he said. "Because as much as my lived experience gave me a lot of compassion for people at REC, I had a lot to learn from them about their lived experience, and that process was a joy, and it will always be a really important part of my life."

Ultimately, Peterson decided to take a leap and accepted the position and moved to the Motor City. There, Peterson racked up an impressive list of accomplishments during his nine years, including dramatic increases in grants and fundraising, as well as building partnerships with Henry Ford Health that resulted in the creation of the first integrated health center and the soon to be completed Clairmont Center, a mixed-use 43-unit building that will also house a second health center. Peterson also oversaw the purchase and renovation of a new building that doubled the



center's space in Highland Park.

Peterson said managing the pace of change has been his greatest challenge.

"The budget the first year I was at REC was about \$960,000," said Peterson. "This year, it's in the neighborhood of \$4.5 million. We grew from 16 staff members to around 50. There seemed to be a never-ending pace of change."

But such growth comes with a unique set of challenges.

"How do you keep up with systems and growth and really be able to keep a culture that

Photos courtesy of Ruth Ellis Center



is really attuned to equity and core principles at work that REC stands for — restorative justice principles and so on?” asked Peterson.

Leaving a mark

Peterson’s legacy at REC is sure to shine bright in the years to come. Kofi Adoma, a founding board member and founding board co-chair of REC, said Peterson’s role in the center’s history was “transformative. ... I admire him for his persistence, having put in his time, efforts, energies, sweat, tears, and I’m sure sacrifices in order to grow the services that REC offers. I wish everybody had whatever it was that kept him going.”

As someone who sat around the table from the very first meeting in June 1999 where the name Ruth Ellis Center was decided upon, Adoma said she is proud of the work Peterson has done and the growth of the center since his arrival.

“Our founding board could not have dreamt this far,” she said. “I appreciate that he humbly took on what was already built from the previous directors and put his own hallmark on it. I’m absolutely sure that Miss Ruth, herself, would give him a big hug and maybe a few kisses, too.”

Adoma’s fellow founding board member and founding board co-chair John Allen said much of the same, calling Peterson’s commitment to the young people REC serves “absolute.”

“It’s tempting to measure his legacy in annual budgets grown or brick and mortar put in place,” said Allen. “You could look at it that way and conclude that Jerry was a very successful E.D. But the real measure of Jerry’s success at REC is in the countless young lives he changed for the better over the past nine years.”

Peterson said he first spoke to the board early last year about his plans to leave later this summer. “I was very well aware that I had accomplished everything I had set out to do and a little more,” he said. “I also knew that for the nature of the organization as it is now, they needed a new kind of leadership and it was time for that leadership change.”

A health concern with his daughter pushed up his retirement by a few months; Peterson’s last day was March 1. He said he feels good with the shape

he’s leaving REC in. “The organization is really strong — strong staff, strong board,” he said. “The plans are in place. The core funding is now in place. And they have the resources they need to be successful.”

These days, Peterson is getting settled into

“I appreciate that he humbly took on what was already built from the previous directors and put his own hallmark on it. I’m absolutely sure that Miss Ruth, herself, would give him a big hug and maybe a few kisses, too.”

his condo in Arizona and enjoying being closer to his daughter and granddaughter. “I had devoted a lot and given up a lot in those nine years, and this is the time in my life that I really decided to switch my focus to family.”

The task at hand now, he said, is learning how to have a life.

“I’ve never done a very good job, frankly, in my life at having a personal life,” he said. “So I am all about learning how to do that.”

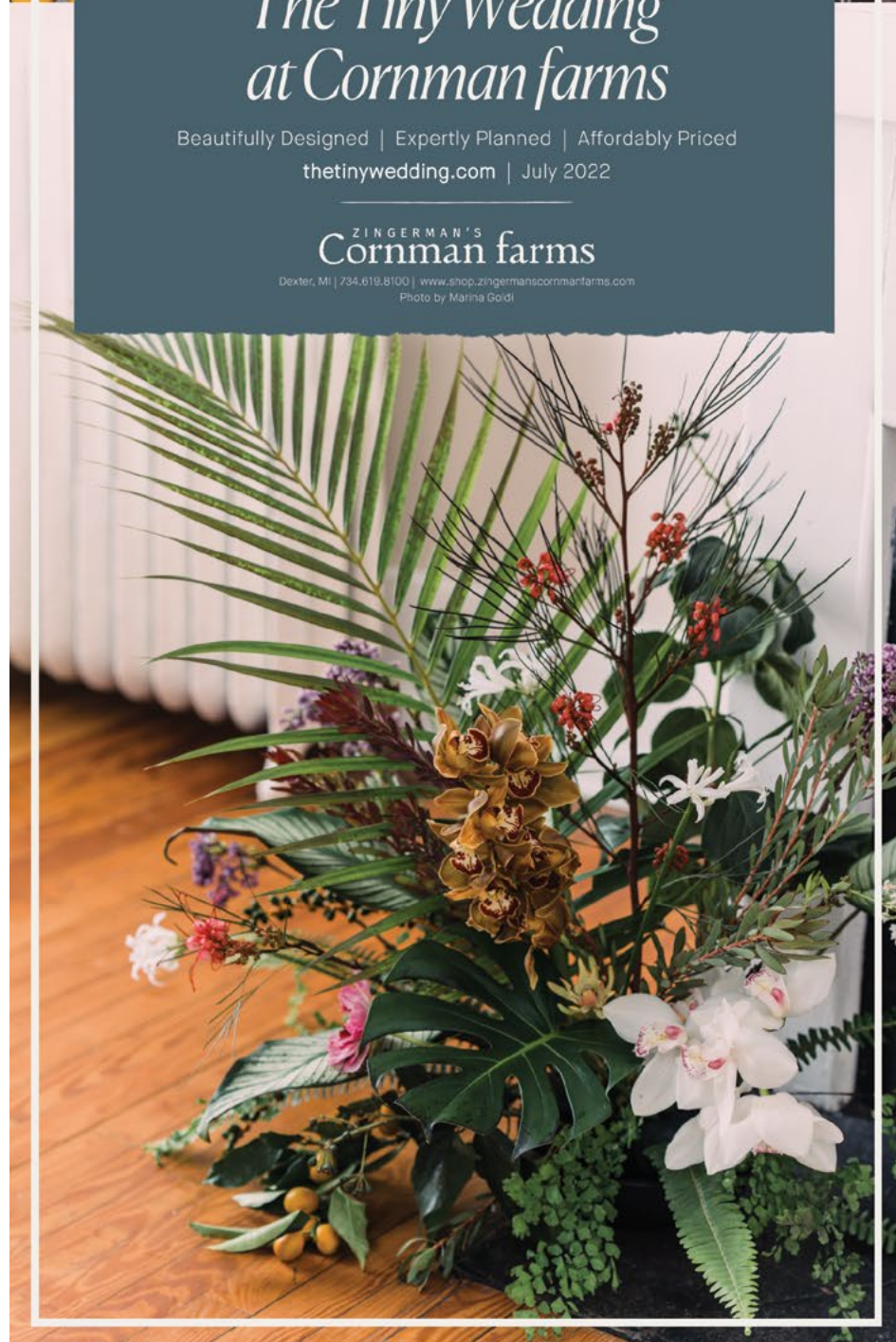


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Addressing Southeast Michigan's HIV Crisis

Why This \$2 Million Grant Benefiting Detroit Is So Important

BY ELLEN SHANNA KNOPPOW

The city of Detroit comprises six percent of Michigan's population, but 31 percent of the state's reported cases of HIV infection, according to 2020 data from the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services. And while 0.4 percent of the population of Detroit is made up of young men of color who have sex with men, they make up 38 percent of new HIV diagnoses. A \$2 million grant awarded to Community Health Awareness Group Detroit (CHAG) by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) will enable the organization, in collaboration with LGBT Detroit, to target high-impact HIV prevention services to address the unique needs of this at-risk demographic.

Barbara Locke, CHAG's director of finance and prevention programs, called securing the grant "a partnership: CHAG in collaboration with LGBT Detroit and our primary care provider, Be Well Medical Center. It [is] just a good opportunity to provide so much needed service targeting a population hardest hit — most impacted — by HIV."

The grant, known as the Comprehensive High-Impact HIV Prevention Project for Young Men of Color Who Have Sex with Men, will be administered over five years and is funded by the CDC Division of HIV/AIDS Prevention. The services are available to young men of color (ages 13 to 34) who have sex with men and their

partners, regardless of age, gender and race/ethnicity, residing in Detroit.

"Receiving direct funding from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is a unique opportunity for an organization to respond to a particular issue directly," Locke said. Direct funding was initially made possible through the efforts of members of Congress and allowed funds to go directly to minority-led or -serving organizations in response to the HIV/AIDS epidemic that was severely impacting communities of color.

Locke explained that with this grant, CHAG would collaborate with LGBT Detroit to focus on many of the core social determinants of health, like access to quality healthcare and education, poverty and racism that put young men of color who have sex with men at increased risk. She also spoke of those core social determinants of health specific to Detroit addressed by this grant, including unstable housing, access to affordable housing, transportation barriers (which make it challenging to keep medical appointments) and a lack of social services.

Social media, direct marketing and direct mail campaigns, avenues LGBT Detroit has found most effective in the past, will be used to promote the program. Their outreach to young men of color who have sex with men is already built into LGBT Detroit's core program offerings: the Brother to Brother podcast; the Sex, Hookups and the Apps Tour, designed for HIV education; and LGBT

Detroit's signature Pride events, Cold as Hell and Hotter Than July.

The outreach and recruitment components are just one example of how the overall program is designed to meet people where they are by people who best understand their needs.

"Cultural competency is something that we've been sensitive about for many years," said Curtis Lipscomb, executive director of LGBT Detroit. "We understand that how people receive treatment is based upon their comfort level." He added that the way a person presents themselves — people of different genders, ages, etc. — often determines what they ask of a service provider and how they are treated.

"We recognize that in the African American community, how people receive health care is unique, like many other types of people," Lipscomb said, "and so we want to reduce that barrier so that you can enter a space [and] get that care knowing that there's no shame: where you can express yourself in a manner that maybe you're not highly educated on the subject matter and still receive adequate care, and therefore your physical well-being is improved, and perhaps your mental health is also."

Funding will be used to increase prioritized rapid HIV testing, status awareness and accessibility to PrEP. Integrated testing and treatment for HIV, sexually transmitted infections and hepatitis C are also available, performed at CHAG's on-site clinic, Livewell Detroit, powered

by Be Well Medical Center. If needed, clients can also get a referral to Life Points, CHAG's syringe services program.

A core component unique to the program is a "status neutral approach" to HIV, part of the National HIV Strategy. "Previously, we would test somebody," Locke said, "and if they came back HIV positive, we had many services available." She named things like medical and non-medical case management.

"But if you were HIV negative, we provided health education," she said. "Back then, we [would] give you condoms and then hope for the best." She compared it to a catch and release approach. Later, PrEP was added as an intervention with the potential to prevent the onset of HIV. "But this time, instead of 'catch and release,' this funding allows us to provide our clients with a higher level of service regardless of their status," Locke said. Ongoing support is available to both HIV positive and HIV negative individuals.

"We are re-engaging those that are HIV positive and out-of-care," Locke said. "In this project, we have navigators in place to provide supportive services and link you with any of those particular needs that are preventing you from accessing PrEP." Once accessed, the goal is to link the individual with services to support medication adherence and help with any other barriers to compliance.

CHAG's philosophy states that collaboration best meets client needs, not competition. "Even though we're funded to address this particular need," Locke said, "the problem is more significant than any one organization can respond to."

"In the partnership on this particular initiative with LGBT Detroit — a nationally recognized advocacy organization — addressing the needs of the LGBTQ+ population is essential," she continued. "And we've partnered with that



Barbara Locke and Curtis Lipscomb. Courtesy photos.

organization on several initiatives, including our COVID vaccine awareness project and other CDC program initiatives over the last five-plus years. No one entity can do it all because the problem is too great."

Lipscomb said he was "on cloud nine" about LGBT Detroit's continuing relationship with CHAG.

"I've known their leadership since 1992," Lipscomb said. "We've worked on AIDS Walk Michigan through the city of Detroit intimately for years, so I'm proud that they believe that we are a solution. It's always good to know that when sister organizations believe that by working together, they succeed. And so I'm happy they chose us. Community Health Awareness Group is a true friend."

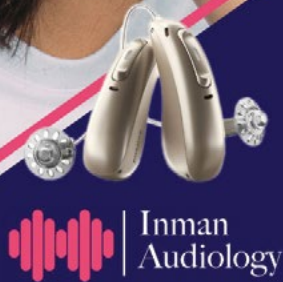
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Did a Homophobic Michigan Senate Block This Openly Gay Whitmer Appointee?

Equality Michigan Exec. Director: Former State Rep. Jon Hoadley a 'Victim of Partisan Politics'

BY JASON A. MICHAEL

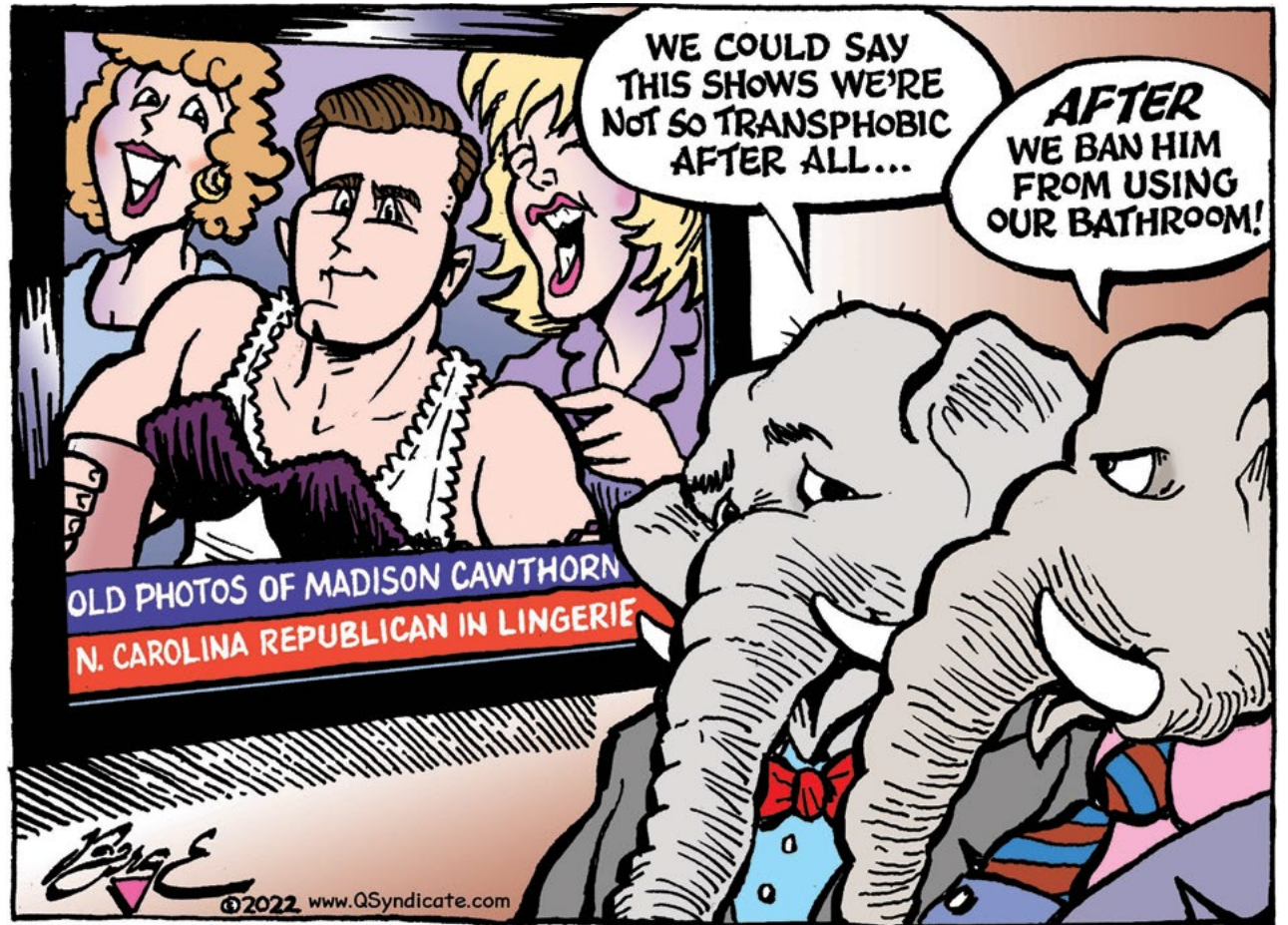
Former State Rep. Jon Hoadley, appointed by Gov. Gretchen Whitmer to serve on the board of Western Michigan University, was denied that opportunity by the Republican-controlled Michigan Senate in what opponents say amounts to homophobia.

"I'm extremely disappointed the Michigan Senate disapproved of my appointment to the WSU Board of Trustees," Hoadley tweeted after the vote. "The faculty, staff and students at WSU are doing important work which I have spent years supporting in my community and in the Michigan Legislature." He lost out on the appointment in a vote of 20-18.

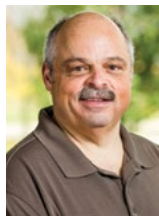
Hoadley, who is openly gay, was a state representative from 2015-2020. Hoadley was one of two Whitmer appointments — the second being Michael Ryan at Ferris State University — who failed to make it through the Senate. In 2021, Senate Republicans also rejected Jason Morgan, an openly gay Whitmer appointee, for the Northern Michigan University Board of Trustees.

Jeremy Moss, an openly gay state senator since 2019, had this to say about Republicans rejecting LGBTQ+ appointees: "The most prominent Republican core value is to prevent #LGBTQ people from fully participating in our educational institutions — not as students, teachers, &

See [Jon Hoadley](#), next page



What Are We to Make of Lana Theis and Her Low-Blow Molestation Accusations?



By Jon King

What are we to make of State Sen. Lana Theis (R-Brighton)?

To say she has promoted transphobic legislation is a fact. To say she has been an ardent opponent of LGBTQ+ rights is a fact.

And to that list we can now add that she is willing and able to compare her political opponents to child molesters in the name of raising money for a tough re-election fight.

This latest low began recently when she gave an invocation to a Senate session in which she said children are "under attack" from "forces that desire things for them other than what their parents would have them see and hear and know."

That prompted three Democratic senators to walk out of the session in protest: Mallory McMorrow (D-Royal Oak), Dayna Polehanki (D-Livonia) and Rosemary Bayer (D-Beverly Hills).

McMorrow later tweeted: "Without sharing or repeating closed-minded harmful words from a sitting Senator under the guise of a 'prayer,' to every child in Michigan — you are perfect and welcome and loved for being exactly who you are."

In response to that plea for tolerance, Sen. Theis decided to double down on the rhetoric with a fundraising email freely

advancing a point of view in line with the far-right QAnon conspiracy theory.

"These are the people we are up against," the email says. "Progressive social media trolls like Senator Mallory McMorrow (D-Snowflake) who are outraged they can't ... groom and sexualize kindergarteners or that 8-year-olds are responsible for slavery."

The ridiculousness of the language makes it almost laughable. However, someone who was most definitely not laughing was Sen. McMorrow, who last week took to the Senate dais to wonder why Theis had accused her by name of grooming and sexualizing children.

"Then I realized," stated McMorrow, "I'm the biggest threat to your hollow, hateful scheme. Because you can't claim that you're targeting marginalized kids in the name of 'parental rights' if another parent is standing up and saying no."

McMorrow then went on to say that her mother taught her at a young age that, "Christianity and faith was about being a part of a community" and that "service was far more important than performative nonsense like being seen in the same pew every Sunday or writing 'Christian' in your Twitter bio and using it as a shield to target and marginalize already-marginalized people."

She concluded by saying "hate will only win if people like

See [Lana Theis](#), next page

→ Jon Hoadley

Continued from previous page

apparently now university board members as MI Senate GOP rejected @jonhoadley's appointment to @WesternMichU," he tweeted.

Equality Michigan Executive Director Erin Knott released a statement in response to the Senate vote. "It seems as if this is a

Republican ruse to deny the appointment, simply because Jon is an openly gay man," the statement read in part. "What's even more egregious is the fact that many of these senators served with Jon during his tenure in the Michigan Legislature and can attest to his ability to serve."

"Jon is an extremely qualified Kalamazoo leader and important member of the LGBTQ+ community," the statement went on. "It's unfortunate that he is the victim of partisan politics."

“

McMorrow knew in that moment that the only way to respond to hateful bullies like Theis is to look them square in the eye and call them out for what they are.

→ Lana Theis

Continued from previous page

me stand by and let it happen," and that Theis could call her whatever she wanted, but "I know who I am. I know what faith and service means, and what it calls for in this moment. We will not let hate win."

McMorrow knew in that moment that the only way to respond to hateful bullies like Theis is to look them square in the eye and call them out for what they are.

But here's the real kicker: Do I think Lana Theis is losing any sleep worrying about trans athletes or LGBTQ+ rights?

I do not. This is now politics as usual in the GOP.

Theis is facing a primary challenge this year from Mike Detmer of Howell, someone who runs to the right of Genghis Khan. Detmer has been highly critical of Theis for accepting the results of a Senate Oversight report last year that found no evidence of widespread fraud in the 2020 presidential election.

That's an unpardonable sin in the GOP, which continues to push the lie that Donald Trump won the election. In February, Detmer told supporters they should "be prepared to lock and load" at the polls, which brought condemnation for promoting violence, although none from Republican

leaders.

Sen. Theis, with her homophobic, transphobic, bigoted accusations, is also promoting violence.

As Judy Daubenmier, chair of the Livingston County Democratic Party, said, Theis' comments are "rhetoric designed to encourage political violence" by using "language that accuses your political opponents of actions so vile that it makes them unworthy of even existing so eliminating them is justified."

But just like with Detmer, no Republican leader has dared to condemn the remarks, including Meghan Reckling, head of the Livingston County Republican Party.

Fun fact: Reckling is also Sen. Theis' Chief of Staff.

Joseph Welch said it best in 1954 while speaking to Wisconsin Sen. Eugene McCarthy, another politician unflinching in their willingness to place ambition above all else.

"Until this moment, Senator, I think I never really gauged your cruelty or your recklessness," said Welch.

"You have done enough. Have you no sense of decency?"

While Welch asked that question earnestly, I ask it rhetorically of Sen. Theis. Because I think we know the answer.

CREEP OF THE WEEK

Ariana Grande's Pagan Vagina Is After Your Children



By D'Anne Witkowski

The Michigan Republican Party recently held its endorsement convention in Grand Rapids, a process that many observers are calling a "a shit show, free and fair election that was totally well organized and showed Republican unity."

They tapped Trump-backed Q-Anon aficionado Kristina Karamo to run against Democratic incumbent Jocelyn Benson for Secretary of State. Benson just received a JFK Profile in Courage award for her work in the 2020 election. An election Karamo still insists was stolen from the disgraced former president.

That would be enough to raise eyebrows, but Karamo has a history of really wild theories. She used to be a podcast host, and in a rational world has said many a thing that should make a run for public office a no go. But we're talking about today's Republican Party, where the fringe is celebrated and elevated.

On Aug. 6, 2020, Karamo took issue with Ariana Grande's song "God Is a Woman," according to Media Matters. She said Grande, along with Billie Eilish and Beyoncé, perpetuates the rise of "paganism and witchcraft."

"At the MTV video awards [Grande's] performance involved recreating the Last Supper of Christ as a lesbian orgy," Karamo says. "Then she had the Shiva, which is the Hindu goddess of death, above the supposed lesbian orgy that was the Last Supper."

For some reason I had never heard of this performance, and so I looked it up. And, though calling it a "lesbian orgy" is a stretch, Karamo is not lying about this like she is lying about the 2020 election.

"Just total blasphemy," Karamo continues. And then she says something about the backdrop depicting Shiva "the Hindu goddess of death" and "a portal that was a vagina."

"Because that's part of paganism, this female worship," she says. "And so that's the people who are entertaining your kids."

Grande has said before that the song is about female empowerment. At the end of the MTV performance she brings her mom, grandma, and cousin on stage, which I guess means they a family of lesbian pagans? You know what they say, the family that lesbian pagans together lesbian staygans together.

In a video she posted in 2018, Karamo rails

against sex before marriage, and you'll never guess what else. "When we start to say, 'Oh well, if you want to have sex with somebody of the same sex,

that's okay too.' And now, it has morphed into something worse," she says.

Spoiler alert: the majority of the video is about pedophilia.

"It used to be a time when it was like 'Let me live my life and leave me alone.' Now many of us became empathetic to that cause," she continues. "Not that we necessarily agreed with people's sexual lifestyles, but we said, 'I mean, it's not my life. I don't necessarily agree with you, but this is your life and I'm going to leave you alone.' But it's not about that. It's morphed into something so much darker than that. That even people who identify as one of those letters sometimes don't even see it themselves. It has morphed into something that, 'Either you agree with me, or you're an evil, hateful bigot and a homophobe and I'm going to ruin your life.'"

Interesting that she thinks "evil hateful bigots and homophobes" have their lives ruined. In the circles in which she runs, bigots and homophobes often get to become serious candidates for offices like Secretary of State.

So who is to blame for all of this?

"It started back when we made it OK to engage in premarital sex," she says.

OK, so this goes WAY back. Because sex, and for that matter homosexuality, existed long before marriage ever did. If only we could go back in time and show the world's earliest humans footage from today's Pride parades, perhaps everything would be different. Maybe prehistoric man would be absolutely fabulous.

This is the person the Michigan Republican Party believes should be in charge of the state's elections. If we ever want to have another free and fair election, she cannot win. We must reelect Jocelyn Benson, a true champion of democracy. Go to her website (at votebenson.com), and throw a few bucks her way. She is a true public servant and Michigan is beyond lucky to have her.



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Sophie Hawley-Weld and Tucker Halpern. Photo: Elizabeth Miranda

A JUICY EMERGENCE

Sofi Tukker Talks Inclusivity and Dancing Together Again

BY CHRIS AZZOPARDI

For Sophie Hawley-Weld and Tucker Halpern, collectively known as Sofi Tukker, it doesn't need to be Pride for it to feel like a Pride show. The duo has been promoting and practicing the values of inclusivity and self-empowerment in their music and during their concerts since the release of their 2018 debut album, "Treehouse."

Same goes for the band's shimmering followup, "Wet Tennis" (out April 29), a playfully invigorating collection of electro-pop that, after so much sheltering in place, feels like a much-welcome, good-vibes-only, clothing-optional invitation to get back on the dancefloor. In addition to their original bangers, Hawley-Weld and Halpern have remixed songs by mega pop stars like Billie Eilish, Lady Gaga and Katy Perry. They're also passionate activists and have raised funds for The Ally Coalition, Planned Parenthood, The Trevor Project and March for Our Lives. For their latest North American tour, including a stop in Detroit at The Majestic Theatre on June 2, \$1 per ticket will go toward PLUS1 Mental Health Access Fund, which supports direct service organizations delivering mental health treatment and access to care.

Here, Hawley-Weld and Halpern talk about their mission to celebrate individuality, what they really mean by "Wet Tennis," and their sexual take on the *other* peach.

Thanks to your "Kakee" video, I'll never think of a persimmon the same way. It's like when I saw "Call Me By Your Name" and a peach became so much more than a peach. What's your phallic go-to fruit or veggie emoji when you're texting?

Sophie Hawley-Weld: I mean, I think we're eggplant people.
Tucker Halpern: Yeah. But you got me thinking now.
Hawley-Weld: Because persimmon doesn't have an emoji.
Halpern: I think I could get a little creative using the pear. Maybe do pear and then nuts. I prefer a pear to a persimmon all day. *All day.* I don't even really like persimmons to eat them, but I love songs about them.

Can you talk about how you came to use the persimmon in the "Kakee" video?

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See **Sofi Tukker**, page 14



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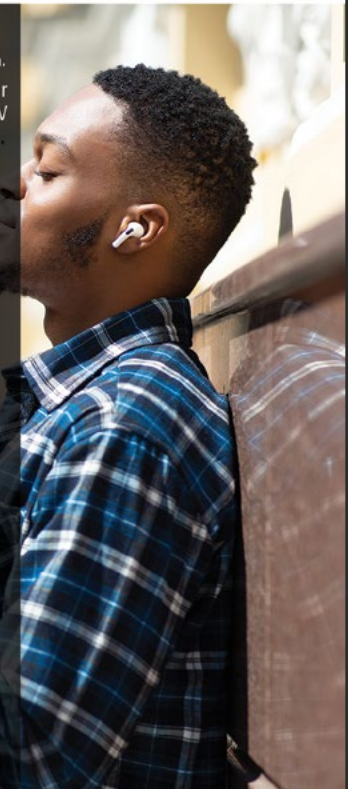
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→ Sofi Tukker

Continued from page 12

Hawley-Weld: Yeah. I mean, in the song, basically, I'm obsessed with them. I just think they're so delicious. And also, they're super seasonal. So it's not always easy to find, which makes it this really fun game that when you do find one, it's very exciting. And so I was talking to our long-time collaborator, Chacal, the Brazilian poet, and I was like, "Can we please write a poem about the persimmon? Because we need a song about a persimmon." And so he wrote that poem and it's the weirdest, sexiest poem ever. True to form, that's his vibe. So obviously, we knew that the video had to be as weird and sexy as the song and the lyrics, and that's that. I just love it.

How did "Wet Tennis" come to be?

Halpern: So the acronym of "Wet Tennis" means: When Everyone Tries to Evolve, Nothing Negative Is Safe. And that is basically the thesis statement and the idea that we wanted to say from the beginning, and how we were inspired by the community that built around our live streams during the pandemic called "The Freak Fam." And how people chose to build something to be positive, even in really shitty times. And that was really just so inspiring and exciting to us that we wanted to make sure we paid homage to it and dedicated the album to that idea. But at the same time, we didn't want the whole album to be a reminder of the pandemic. So we wanted it to be fun and sexy, and if you want it to be surface level and just fun, that's fine. If you really want to look into the deeper meaning, that's there too.

Everything me and Sofi do is back and forth. All the music we write, all the ideas, all the visuals, everything, really, is us knocking ideas back and forth like in tennis. We love the history of the fashion of tennis, and really saw an opportunity to sort of make it colorful and fun.

You'll be touring and playing Prides this summer. What do you think it'll feel like to bring people together with this new music?

Hawley-Weld: It's already been feeling so good. We've been emerging slowly, and

so we're kind of preparing for a bigger emergence. Starting in May, we're going to be on the road nonstop. We start our world tour. I think that everybody feels like this is just really, really precious; we know this could be taken away from us. So we have a much bigger appreciation for hanging out, dancing in groups, sweating on each other and just the

freedom of being with other humans enjoying movement [together], which is something that is so, so, so, so precious. And we realize also how much life is worse when we don't have it.

In 2020, you released "Spa," which features you, Icona Pop and Jordan Firstman, gay comedian and Instagram sensation. What was it like to make that video during the height of the pandemic?

Halpern: That was so fun. I mean, what a cast of incredible people. We sadly did our part from our house at our pool in our backyard. Jordan was in LA, and Icona Pop were in Sweden. We tried to make it look like we were all together the best we could. And it was so fun. Then how did Jordan come about? I mean, we were watching Jordan early in the pandemic. He emerged with his impressions, and we'd watch them and we'd die. We were like, "We need this guy. He is the funniest guy in the world. We need him in this video."

Hawley-Weld: We just DM'd him and he said yes.

I got the impression that you guys had been friends for years based on the video.

Halpern: That's what it felt like.

When I think of that video, obviously Jordan brings a queer element to the video, but the video is just kind of queer, period. And I think aesthetically, some of what you do is queer. But both of you are allies. Is that right? You don't identify as LGBTQ+?

Halpern: Sophie's a little bit of everything. I'm an ally. And I feel so grateful and connected to that community. It's really a special place for us, honestly. I think it's an interesting question, and I think we've kind of even thought about it before where it's just natural. It's kind of how we are and how we express ourselves. And color is one of the most inspiring things to me personally, and combinations of color and being bright. I think [we have] a lot in common with the LGBTQ+ community, aesthetically.

Hawley-Weld: I'm thinking of the "Spa" video and just naked butts. I think that there's a

See **Sofi Tukker**, page 16

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→ Sofi Tukker

Continued from page 14

certain freedom and playfulness, and just free to be yourself and erotic and colorful. Even talking as a hetero dude, [Tucker] dresses super fem and colorful. But I think that none of it has to do with a queer aesthetic. It feels more like what we naturally are drawn to.

It sounds like for both of you, it's an extension of who you are.

Hawley-Weld: Yeah. And we have a team and some people on the team are queer. The language for me hasn't... I'm still exploring. I don't really know what language I would like to use for myself. But it's nice. I mean, I think that the next generation really is just like, "Hey, no one's straight or gay anymore." Defining it is deeply confusing and also, for some people, not for others obviously, largely potentially unnecessary. Again, most of our friends are queer. It just makes sense to us with who we are, who we surround ourselves with, the type of values that we have around being yourself, and inclusivity.

Halpern: It's kind of the world we live in. That's kind of where our social world is.

If that's your social world, Tucker, how many men have you had to turn down?

Hawley-Weld: Oh my god. Too many. I have personally had to let a lot of queer men down because they ask me like, "So Tucker, would he be interested?" I'm like, "Sorry."

What is the vibe like for you at a Pride show versus a more traditional Sofi Tukker concert?

Halpern: I think there's something really special about Pride events that we feel really lucky to not replicate at our Sofi Tukker shows in general. It's definitely not the right word, but I do think there's a similarity of freedom to just be yourself and be joyful and feel safe. I think that we are really grateful that that's what the Sofi Tukker experience has become. And it wasn't necessarily intentional. It's just kind of the values that I think are shared in the room, and it does just feel really good and we're grateful. And going to Pride shows are the most fun, also.

Hawley-Weld: At first, when we started playing shows, I think maybe some people would gather that those are our values. People know that they come dressed in the most fabulous outfits. Any show we go to, we can look out to the audience and be like, "Yep. Those are Sofi Tukker fans," because it's wild and colorful and happy and open.

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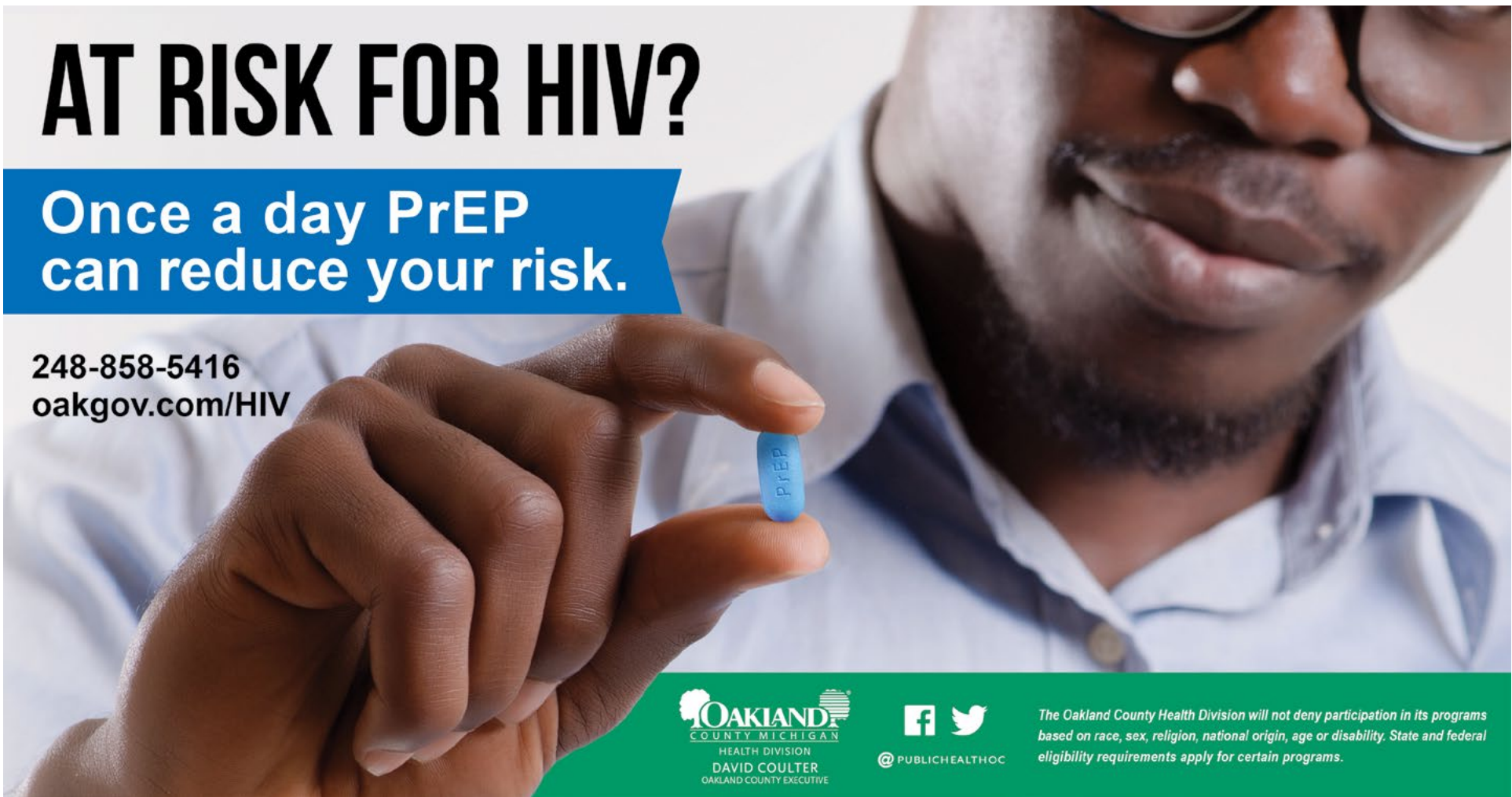
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Where Cannabis and Community Meet

Photo: Aysha Boston

It's Not Just Their Detroit Home — It's Also a Bud-and-Breakfast for Femmes and Friends

BY JASON A. MICHAEL

You've heard of a bed-and-breakfast. But have you ever heard of a bud-and-breakfast?

Copper House is, holistically speaking, an oasis in the middle of northwest Detroit for the conscious cannabis consumer. And if you need a translation, try this: It's a bed-and-breakfast and emerging event space where you can get blitzed.

Jess and Cara Jackson are the proprietors

of Copper House. The house is actually their home. They opened it up to boarders for the first time when the Creating Change conference came to Detroit in 2019 and the call was put out for affordable housing for conference attendees.

The concept came to Jess years earlier, when she and Cara were in Paris, where the two got engaged. The couple stayed in an Airbnb while in France, as well as on a houseboat on the canal in Amsterdam and a hostel in London.

For a time, the Jacksons, both Michigan natives, moved to St. Louis and then to

Delaware, where they were married in 2014. But something called them home to Detroit, and something also organically led them to the cannabis industry.

"Everything about us has been illegal at some point," said Jess. "We're both biracial. Interracial marriages were not allowed. We're both queer. Queer marriages were not allowed. And now we both work in cannabis and cannabis is federally illegal."

Jess, who studied sociology at the University of Michigan, first began looking into the

cannabis industry while working in student affairs at the University of Delaware. She saw it as a way of building generational wealth so she pursued an MBA. While she was in her MBA program, Jess connected with a sorority sister who moved to California and opened a dispensary following college.

"It's the first dispensary that is centered on Black women," said Jess. "She uses cannabis to treat anxiety. I smoke cannabis for similar reasons. I started to unlearn the stigmas I had learned about weed through her."

“Everything about us has been illegal at some point., We’re both biracial. Interracial marriages were not allowed. We’re both queer. Queer marriages were not allowed. And now we both work in cannabis and cannabis is federally illegal.”

Jess began researching the cannabis industry and “it just all aligned with my ethical, moral compass. I want to be using channels to address inequity. I think of cannabis as an industry [where] we have social equity baked in. I think social equity is something all industries need to pursue. Cannabis at least has the language to start doing the awareness.”

A lucrative industry, cannabis sales now exceed \$1 billion a year in Michigan. “I was very interested in opportunities to not only create generational wealth for myself, but for my community through equity programs,” said Jess.

When recreational marijuana became legal in Michigan in 2020, Cara saw an opportunity.

“I jokingly told my wife, ‘We need to be a part of this green rush they are predicting.’” Soon after, she was offered the opportunity to enter the cannabis industry. Today, Cara, who has a degree in wildlife ecology and conservation from the University of Delaware and considers herself a lover of all kinds of plants, works as an operations manager at a medical marijuana grow facility. The career shift, she said, “allowed us to create a hub for travelers to come and enjoy cannabis right inside our home. Not only that, but to curate high-end cannabis experiences and

networking events.”

From the time the couple bought the house, Jess knew she wanted to open it up to others.

“I want to be a community ambassador,” she said. “Whatever house we got, I wanted to be able to list it on Airbnb, so that planted the seed.”

Copper House, open since 2019, is the first of its kind. “This is the first feminine-

See **Copper House**, page 26



Photo: Aysha Boston



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Photos courtesy of Qynce

Looking After One Another, Co-Op Style

Housing Cooperatives Offer Safe Living Spaces for Queer Folks, Foster Unique Community

BY NAYANIKA GUHA

For Marissa Klee-Peregon, 27, Nimblewill Cooperative in Kalamazoo is a space where she can practice interdependence, instead of independence.

A cooperative home, or “co-op,” which centers the experiences of queer and trans people, Nimblewill, Klee-Peregon says, is a place where “we share power, resources, and decision-making; where the resources and affordable housing we provide can lighten the burden of living within capitalism; where we understand that each individual’s wellbeing is dependent on the wellbeing of the community as a whole.”

Cooperative living is a system that allows members living together in a house to cooperatively create house norms, labor systems and to share food and supplies.

Often, such systems are based on principles of equity and social justice, where each person’s portion of rent may be defined by their economic status. Considering the negative wage gap for gay men, bisexual folks and transgender people, compounded with the housing crisis affecting LGBTQ+ folks, a co-op housing situation can represent a life-saving change and a fresh start for queer

people who have experienced trauma around housing and community.

Housing co-ops for queer people are



one answer to the housing crisis faced by LGBTQ+ people. According to a 2020 study by the Williams Institute, only 49.8% of LGBT adults own their homes, compared to 70.1% of non-LGBT adults. Moreover, among young adults aged 18-25, LGBTQ+ people have a 2.2 times greater risk of homelessness than non-LGBTQ+ people. Housing co-ops are often more affordable and provide community support to help a person get back on their feet and out of homelessness.

Finances are not the only reason why LGBTQ+ members choose to live in a co-op. For those whose families are less than supportive, outright discriminatory, abusive or violent, cooperative living can foster community like no other.

“I love living with other queer people,” says Klee-Peregon. “In my mind, Nimblewill — and all of Kalamazoo Collective Housing (KCH) — exists to create a space that serves as an alternative to the dominant structures of our world.” For her, the choice to live in a co-op was directly related to creating an intentional space committed to queer and trans liberation and a shared understanding of queer and trans liberation as it relates to all other forms of liberation and justice, including racial justice, fat liberation and the abolition of capitalism, prisons and police.

Qynce (who asked that we only refer to them by their first name), a member of the core group that founded Nimblewill Cooperative, also shares this vision. Creating a safe space for all queer and trans people was of utmost importance, and to them, that meant creating a substance-free home.

In Kalamazoo, the local queer organization OutFront organizes Pride, which is primarily sponsored by Bell’s Brewing, so alcohol is a primary focus of the Pride event, explains Qynce, 25. “I’ve heard numerous people say that Kalamazoo Pride is only fun if you’re drunk, which is insidious to me, given queer and trans people are especially vulnerable to addiction.” Seeing a lack of avenues for creating meaningful queer and trans community in the city, they created Nimblewill as one of those alternatives, specifically one where a sense of community can be created while resisting the dominant culture that they say coerces queer and trans people into addiction.

Dequan Gambrell, 27, a member of the cooperative living space Rivera, which is part of the Inter-Cooperative Council at Ann Arbor, also decided to live at a co-op in search of community. “I was looking for community with BIPOC as a University of Michigan senior who hasn’t really known any in my experiences here, and also because I was trying to build a safe space for POC at a predominantly white institution.” Rivera is a house that centers queer and trans people of color, and hence, a perfect choice for Gambrell.

Co-op housing that centers queer voices

See **Co-Op**, page 24

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HOME GUIDE



Photos courtesy of Qynce

→ Co-Op

Continued from page 22

can be a unique place to find community outside the often patriarchal structures of a traditional nuclear family. Questioning the patriarchal norms of the male head of the house, these homes are often non-hierarchical, based on equal participation in decision making and labor, and serve as spaces of acceptance for those whose biological families may not be as

accepting. Some co-op members do not view their housemates as an extension of family, but rather a form of community stronger than what the term "family" can encapsulate.

"I believe in the abolition of the family and am much more concerned with the creation and nurturing of communities than continuing to use the idea of the family, which is a legal structure primarily created to control children and treat them as property," says Qynce. "But my housemates and neighbors are my chosen community, and I love and care deeply

about them."

In housing co-op communities, members support each other whenever someone needs something and hold each other accountable in a refreshingly forthcoming way, according to Gambrell.

Klee-Peregon agrees. For her, the relationships within Nimblewill and KCH are as important as familial relationships. "My housemates and I have sat with each other in the ER and called off work to support each other through crises. We've memorized each other's allergies and we've established shared rituals and traditions," she says. "If something hard is happening within my house, I tell people I've got 'family stuff' going on, again, not because that most accurately describes the nature of our relationship, but because it most clearly communicates the importance of our relationship to the outside world."

Klee-Peregon wants people to understand that her housemates are her community, and that living there has helped her see that community ties are just as essential and just as valuable as traditional family ties.

"I was experiencing my own personal housing crisis when I originally joined a co-op," explains Qynce. "I had been living on my friend's couch, and because of what had happened [with] my previous living situation, I was deeply terrified of the idea of living alone, but had nobody in town who I could move in or find a place with. In that situation, co-ops were a perfect solution for me."

Klee-Peregon says that "living with queer and trans people who are committed to the creative project of collective liberation has been wonderful. Being part of this community has helped me see the incredible possibility in queerness and has helped me approach my own queerness with a sense of play, pleasure and potential. And that has meant a lot."

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→ Copper House

Continued from page 21



focused consumption space in Detroit," Jess said. "All the other consumption spaces are very masculine-focused or gender neutral, which is great. But we wanted to really center on the feminine perspective because we're often overlooked in the industry."

The Jacksons have broken through, quickly managing to make a name for themselves. Their first event made it to the cover of the Detroit Free Press and they've since appeared in popular magazines for cannabis connoisseurs. They've also partnered with big brands to host events at the House. To date, Copper House has hosted a variety of experiences including game nights, writing workshops, collaging workshops, cooking demonstrations, kink conversations, blunt-rolling competitions, yoga and wellness events, vendor shows and the popular Elevated Melanated Tea Party, among others.

"We do all types of events, all types of experiences," said Jess. "And we are an overnight stay so we get a lot of guests who come to get the recreational product and get to know the industry here."

Copper House is 3,000 square feet, including their new 1,000-square-foot finished basement which was just remodeled courtesy of a \$30,000 grant from Cannabis For Black Lives. There is a one bedroom suite available for rent on the house's third floor. The basement space can sleep up to 10.

Heather Carter is Copper House's first brand ambassador and a regular host of events in the House. "I love this space because it's such

an inclusive space," she said. "It's so warm, so loving, so welcoming. This is a place where you can be yourself and be accepted. No one is turned away unless your energy is not good."

Carter and Jess are business partners in another venture, and Carter said she hopes to become a partner in Copper House someday. "I see myself being motivated to produce more content for myself," said Carter. "I've been a little scared and nervous but I'm out here now with it. I see myself growing with them. Wherever they're going, I'm going with them."

And who would feel most comfortable staying at Copper House?

"I think anybody who is OK with the feminine vibe, because this is a very girly space," said Jess. "I think folks who are OK with conversations around oppression and equity, that's something that naturally comes up with me all the time. And understanding this space is a sacred space for a community who have been marginalized and oppressed."

Cara said Copper House is her future. "We envision multiple properties, a mansion, and a holistic healing retreat with a grow facility where people can tour a grow and learn the ins and outs of growing cannabis. We are really excited for what the future holds."

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Still courtesy of Freep Film Festival

Did Southeast Michigan's LGBTQ+ Community Fail Fallen Leader as New Doc Alleges?

BY JASON A. MICHAEL

There is a lot to be gleaned from the new Jeffrey Montgomery documentary “America, You Kill Me.” Viewers learn of his early days, the death of his lover, the creation of the Detroit-based Triangle Foundation and Montgomery’s many years at the forefront in the fight for LGBTQ+ rights. But the documentary also depicts Montgomery’s fall from grace and talks about when, after being sober for nearly two

decades, he fell off the wagon and left the agency he helped build in disgrace.

In the film, some of Montgomery’s closest friends and associates allege that the LGBTQ+ community abandoned the fallen leader at this time. In the years after his departure from Triangle, Montgomery endured — in addition to his quest to regain sobriety — long term health problems (he had polyarteritis nodosa, a painful necrotizing inflammation of blood vessels), eviction from his home and

the nagging sense that he had been forgotten.

“We had really drained as much out of him as we possibly could, and then we weren’t particularly interested in taking care of him after that,” former Triangle staff member Greg Varnum says in the film. “And, I think, it’s probably the most shameful thing our movement has done.”

James Lessenberry, Montgomery’s friend and longtime Triangle board member, even takes it a step further, accusing Dr. Henry

Messer, Triangle co-founder and a mentor to Montgomery, of turning his back on the man he chose to lead the agency.

“Henry abandoned him, both personally and professionally, and worked very actively to have him removed from the organization,” Lessenberry says.

These are allegations that have hitherto now not been discussed or journalistically examined. Did Michigan’s LGBTQ+ community fail to honor its debt to Montgomery in his final years?

“

Jeff was my boss and my best friend. I didn't know anything about alcoholism. But I did know that this was going to be a big problem. – Sean Kosofsky

Should he have been better taken care of, more looked after or, simply, more revered?

Montgomery, Messer and John Monahan are credited as being the three co-founders of Triangle. Messer was especially important to the creation of the agency. A brain surgeon, Messer had the money and connections to get Triangle off the ground. For many years, Messer was Montgomery's biggest fan. But after 16 years of working together, Messer grew to have no tolerance for Montgomery's drinking.

"Henry didn't understand alcoholism as a disease," John Montgomery, Jeff's brother and a producer of the film, tells BTL. "He thought it more of a weakness. And he didn't want to be involved in any part of that."

Once he was out at Triangle, Montgomery, according to the film, became something of a pariah in the community. "He would reach out to people and often they wouldn't call him back," says Ricci Levy of the Woodhull Freedom Foundation in the film. "And that hurt him. He was a really sensitive person, and he knew it was personal, and he knew he had screwed up and he just couldn't figure out how to get his credibility back."

In 2014, seven years after resigning his post at Triangle, Montgomery said in the film he was invited back to tour the old office, known since 2010 as Equality Michigan. But after being invited, the film says, Montgomery's phone calls to make plans for the visit went unreturned for six months.

Finally, Montgomery announces a visit and sets a time with current agency staff. One minute prior to the time of the meeting, then Equality Michigan Executive Director Emily Dievendorf texts Montgomery to say she won't be in the office. The staff member who

eventually lets Montgomery into the building does not even know who he is.

Sean Kosofsky was Triangle's director of policy and Montgomery's number two man. It was he who confronted Montgomery about his drinking. When Montgomery confirmed he'd been back to drinking for almost the past year, Kosofsky knew the agency had a problem.

"Jeff was my boss and my best friend," Kosofsky tells BTL. "I didn't know anything about alcoholism. But I did know that this was going to be a big problem."

As the depth of Montgomery's issues came to the fore, the agency's board and staff fell into two different camps. There were those who just wanted to get him dried out and to protect him. Then there were those who felt he was damaging Triangle's reputation and had to go.

"I believe Henry was in the camp of 'Jeff needs recovery, not just to be dry,'" says Kosofsky, who actually attended Al-Anon meetings to better understand what had happened with the Montgomery situation. "He was financing a lot of the organization. Henry was a pretty sizable donor and he felt he needed to have confidence in the leadership."

Having diametrically opposed camps at the organization made things difficult, but Montgomery's drinking was always the root of the problem. "One thing I learned from Al-Anon is you can't make an alcoholic not drink," Kosofsky says. "They have to want to. And Jeff's own alcoholic behavior pushed people away."

Kosofsky said that everyone was trying to support Montgomery in any way that they could. Triangle, he said, basically paid Montgomery to try to dry out for two years

See **Jeffrey Montgomery**, page 30

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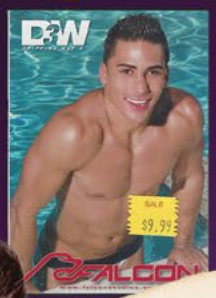
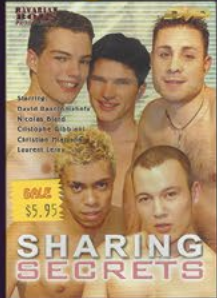


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Photo courtesy of Freep Film Fest

→ **Jeffrey Montgomery**

Continued from page 29

before he ultimately left.

"The movement was willing to walk away from Jeff, but those of us on the inside were trying to help in our way. James, Henry, everyone was trying to do what, within our tools, was the best thing to do to make our hero better. It was very painful."

When Montgomery died in 2016, at age 63, he was regaled at his memorial service,

attended by 150 people, as a pioneer and a legend. Nothing was said of his fall from grace, only of his triumphs. Today, Equality Michigan Executive Director Erin Knott says Montgomery's picture hung in the office until the building was sold last year.

"I think that we wouldn't be here today if it wasn't for his legacy and the work that he did on behalf of the community," Knott says. "He founded Equality Michigan and he put his blood, sweat and tears into helping victims, and today we have a department of victim services that is still doing the work that he started."

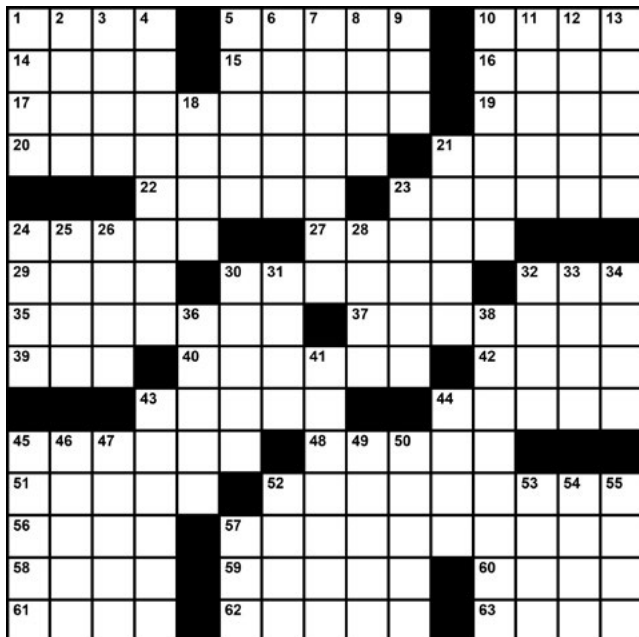
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- 35 She played a certain royal in 2021, with 37-Across
 37 See 35-Across
 39 Sushi selection
 40 Peter, Paul and Mary
 42 Pink and lavender
 43 He's hard ... to find
 44 Movie fish
 45 Everyone can go down on them
 48 Hair color, e.g.
 51 See 21-Across
 52 Women or men of parts
 56 Ejaculation of concern
 57 Royal played by three actresses in this puzzle
 58 Who deserves malice, to Lincoln
 59 Companion of the Lone Ranger
 60 "___ no ideal!"
 61 Will of "The Waltons"
 62 Existential woe
 63 Little biker in a gay pride march
- 11 Circles overhead
 12 You must remember this
 13 Cole Porter's "___ the Beguine"
 18 Men on top, perhaps
 21 Streisand's "Prince of Tides" costar
 23 Stops for pirates
 24 Suffix with beef or fruit
 25 Fairy tale bad guy
 26 Chains around a knight
 28 Knock off
 30 Gives out some queens, maybe
 31 Town in O-o-o-oklahoma
 32 Creature in a Debussy title
 33 Practiced heterosexuality
 34 "___ small world"
 36 Peter the Great, and more
 38 Testy response when interrupted
 41 Zip
 43 Suffer erectile dysfunction
 44 Use a trick towel
 45 Tried to hit a pitch
 46 Lake site of many a gay ski week
 47 Make up
 49 Lets out
 50 "Downton Abbey" neckwear
 52 Disney sci-fi flick
 53 Pale gray
 54 Neighbor of Minn.
 55 "West ___ Story"
 57 Family school org.

Down

- 1 Shakespeare's were iambic
 2 "Look ___, I'm Sandra Dee"
 3 Rhett Butler's final word
 4 Accuses of being a pedophile, often
 5 Al Yankovic's "___ on Jeopardy"
 6 Lief's tongue
 7 Police actions at Stonewall
 8 Pray, to Renee Vivien
 9 Number of gay men under a centurian?
 10 Lash out at

See p. 12 for answers

A Role to Die For

Q Puzzle

Across

- 1 Rainbow rings, and such
 5 Not appropriate
 10 Moby Dick chaser
 14 Series ender
 15 Short Peter on the screen
 16 Abercrombie & Fitch event
 17 She played a certain royal in "The Crown"
 19 Refuse in a foundry

- 20 First name in drama
 21 She played a certain royal in 2013, with 51-Across
 22 Spoils, with "on"
 23 "Talk Dirty to Me" band
 24 Has the big O
 27 Online provoker
 29 Food thickening agent
 30 Where Priscilla is queen
 32 Crime-fighting org.

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Photo: Raul Romo

Auli'i Cravalho on Her New Bisexual Role, Her First Pride and Coming Out on TikTok

BY CHRIS AZZOPARDI

It's still open to interpretation whether Moana is on the queer spectrum, but Auli'i Cravalho, who voiced the Disney princess, can assure you of one thing — she's a proud bisexual. The 21-year-old actress portrays her first openly LGBTQ+ character in "Crush," a Hulu Original Film with lesbian love at its center. Cravalho, as track-team runner AJ, plays an instrumental part — saying anything else would give too much away — in the teen rom-com about the unexpected twists and turns in high school romance.

Donning a plaid Coach coat, which she was wearing "proudly for the rest of the day on this couch" since it wasn't hers, Cravalho talked on video about inspiring LGBTQ+ youth to be themselves, her message to major corporations like Disney when it comes to queer issues, and what about her first Pride event she's most looking forward to.

As somebody older than you, I can say how proud it makes me to see people in the queer community be part of these movies. These movies did not exist when I was a teenager, so I can only imagine what it means to queer youth when they see not only themselves in these characters but people who are queer playing them.

Thank you. It felt really important to me, as well. I remember reading the script, and I was, for one, honored because I haven't really played a queer role before. I do identify as bisexual, so it felt important, also, that my character was written in that way. It was really nice to have a rom-com that focused on teens that was positive and sex-positive. And also, not being focused on a coming out story, because we are so much more than just sexuality. It felt really refreshing. I was very happy to play AJ.

You've answered my next question, which was: What appealed to you most about this movie when you got the script?

I was just happy that it was a good script, first and foremost. But also, then I learned that the writers, Kirsten King and Casey Rackham, are also queer. And then, to top it off, our director, Sammi Cohen, is also queer. It felt so good, and after reading the script, it made sense. I was, like, "Oh, see, this is why the jokes land. And

this is why the Gen Z humor is so on the nose, because we're making fun of ourselves, and it's funny!"

Working with so many people from the LGBTQ+ community, did you feel at home?

Yeah. It's really fun. I mean, just to know that we are making something that I've learned affects how people are treated in real life. So, to show films that are more diverse, inclusive, sex-positive — it broadens our audience's minds, and I think we all knew that.

But then, also, we're all young. It's a young cast, and we all got to, somewhat, [hang out] during a pandemic, because this is a pandemic film. I was skateboarding with some people because that's what my character does, and I fell down a lot. It was just fun to be included in a cast that knew the importance of the film.

AJ is into girls, but do we know how she identifies?

Yes, we do. AJ is a proud bisexual just like me.

How do you relate to her?

I, for this role, practiced running, which is strange to say, but I did have to practice how to run. [Laughs.] I also took a few skateboarding lessons and drove myself to the skate park, and I fell down a lot. Like, truthfully, that really bruised my pride. It was important for me to do that, because that connected me more so to AJ, as someone

who is a perfectionist. She wants to be on her A-game, always, in school, as far as grades are concerned, as well as with the track team. She is co-head of the track team.

Then what we come to find out is she has this really strong inclination to art, and she draws. To be a perfectionist in your art is so common, but also so damaging because, at least for myself, when I make art, I'm like, "It's not ready yet. It's not ready to be seen." Sometimes I wonder if it will ever be ready to be seen. These were traits that, suddenly, I understood, because I am also a perfectionist.

In 2020, you came out on TikTok as bisexual. Did you expect that news to make the splash that it did?

It was crazy! It was in the beginning of the pandemic, when no one had anything else to talk about. And I was like, "I'm gonna lip sync this Eminem song on TikTok at 3 a.m. with my mom literally snoring in the

background." It blew up. So, that was strange [laughs].

But I never felt the need to come out. Like, you don't have to make a really big announcement to know who you are. And, for me, that's how it was. I've always known that I like girls. Girls smell good, and they are soft, and I know how to talk to girls; that's just something that comes naturally to me. So, if anyone relates to that, that's your coming out story to yourself. When you have that conversation with yourself, that's all it has to be.

Do your queer fans still come up to you or reach out to you on Twitter and talk about it, and what do they say?

Yeah! They said they're impacted that I did that. I didn't realize the impact, but now I do. Because it's representation, and that's what it comes down to. It's seeing yourself on screen and more than it was important for myself, it was important for others to know that it was OK.

Sometimes we're just in our bubbles. For me, I'm surrounded by queer people all the time. But we have to keep in mind that some 12-year-old boy in small-town Kansas City might not have any queer friends, so the only people he has is someone like you.

Yeah, well said. And it truly is that, and

I forget. I forget I'm 21, you know what I mean? To have an impact like that, it makes my heart swell. I'm truly so grateful.

What did you make of the "Moana is bisexual" headlines after you came out?

I also find that amusing. What is written and how it is portrayed, and then how the public takes it or how one person interprets it, is entirely their own. That's what's super special about it. A lot of movies are queer coded. A lot of characters are camp.

Representation has changed so much in the last few years, and what I love about "Crush" is that it is just casually queer. Are those the sort of queer characters that appeal to you?

I think this ties back into: I am bisexual. I identify as queer. And every character that I play, moving forward, is an extension of

See Auli'i, page 34



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Rowan Blanchard, as Paige, and Auli'i Cravalho, as AJ. Photo: Brett Roedel/Hulu

→ Auli'i

Continued from page 33

me. And so my vibrancy and my experiences shape how I play a certain character. So, in the future, I absolutely want to play characters that are outly queer. But, even if they aren't, I think the way that I interpret scripts will always be my own. And all my characters are gonna be a little bit like this, because I'm a little bit like this. I don't know how to say it in words.

That all your roles get filtered through a queer lens?

Yes! I think filtered through a queer lens

is such a better way of putting it. Beautiful words.

There's been talk about Disney for years and LGBTQ+ representation within Disney films, about them falling behind and not keeping up with the times. What's your take on that as somebody who has worked for Disney?

I think it's really important to stand on the right side of history, now. It's important to support people, regardless of sexuality. And support people for their sexuality, as well. And, in times such as these, when corporations are tied so directly to bills and laws, I think it is imperative that people speak up. And I applaud individuals for standing up for what is right — for walking out, for

striking when it's necessary. Because it is. Because, sometimes, we need to take matters into our own hands in order to be listened to.

So, I believe representation is very important, but also the work on the ground is just as important, and staying up-to-date and staying informed. This is the world that we live in now. And if we're fighting for our diverse and inclusive future, then be inclusive. Put your money where your mouth is.

We're nearing Pride, and I don't know if you've ever gone to a Pride event, but, this year, how do you plan on celebrating?

I'm so excited. I've never been to a Pride event. But I lived in Hell's Kitchen for a while.

So, always Pride there.

Always Pride! [Laughs.] I suppose my first Pride event... I live in Los Angeles, so I'll be there. I'll be taking to the streets. I will find someone to give a little gay flag. One of the great things about wearing a mask is nobody knows who you are. So, I'll be there. I don't know if you'll see me, but I will be there.

It's so joyful to walk around and to scream Lady Gaga at the top of your lungs and to know that your community is surrounding you. And to watch "RuPaul's Drag Race" on a TV in West Hollywood because it's Pride. Like, everyone's just playing things that are gay.

How fun to exist in that world for a period of time. And then to take that energy and throw it everywhere that you can, for the rest of the year. I feel like that's Pride.

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