

MICHIGAN'S LGBTQ+ NEWS SOURCE SINCE 1993

# Between THE Lines™

INSIDE

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Spectrum Center

Bowen Yang on  
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PRIDE 2022

Your Guide to Pride

A Pride Letter From  
the Editor

Meet the Newest Pride  
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*Brian, age 45, California*

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## Meet the Cover Artist



### James Louis O'Toole

James Louis O'Toole has traveled far and wide, but through it all Michigan has always felt like home. He just completed his BFA, and now lives and works in Grand Rapids as a freelance illustrator. His work is character-driven, and above all he seeks to make his audience smile. The cover of this issue was inspired by and seeks to celebrate the diverse LGBTQ+ Detroit community.



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# 5 Queer Things You Can Do Right Now-ish

BY SARAH BRICKER HUNT

Pride Month (or “Queer Christmas” if you prefer) has arrived, and, we’re happy to note, it would be hard to swing a feathered boa and not hit a Pride event somewhere in Michigan this year. So, take full advantage. Bust out those sequined chaps, get your proudest posse together and live it up. It’s your month, after all. Here are five events that will add some variety to your busy Pride Month calendar, from wild nights out to reflective introspection. This June, celebrate you — your way!

## Have a Drink Here, There and Everywhere

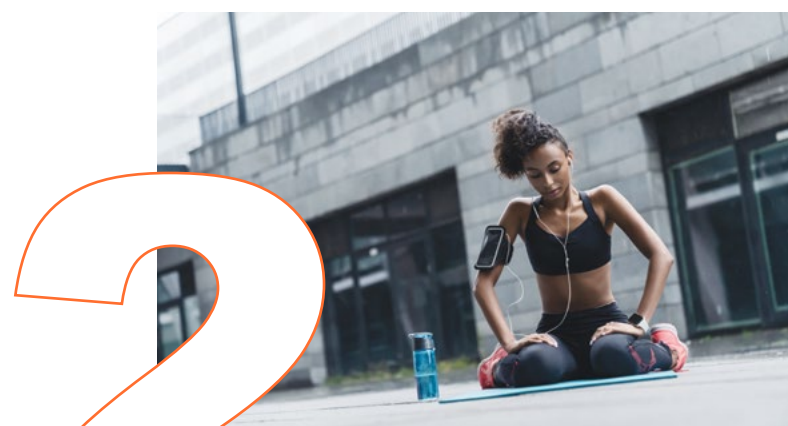
As long as “everywhere” means LGBTQ-friendly bars, restaurants and clubs in Grand Rapids, that is! The Crawl with Us Grand Rapids Pride Bar Crawl on Saturday, June 11 starts at Rumors Nightclub at 4 p.m. and rotates to several GR fun spots, each featuring drink specials. The crawl includes cover-free stops at Flanagan’s Irish Pub, Grand Woods Lounge, Rocky’s, Social House and Tin Can, and a portion of proceeds will benefit The Trevor Project. Come by the afterparty at Flangan’s starting at 10 p.m.

And be safe. Crawl with Us highly recommends using a rideshare service or a designated driver.

*Learn more and register at [crawlwith.us](http://crawlwith.us).*



Photo courtesy of Crawl With Us



## Get Your ‘Om’ On In a Unique Setting

The words “silent,” “disco” and “yoga” may seem like they just don’t go together, but that’s all the more reason to get out and see what this intriguing event is all about, while supporting a long-time LGBTQ+ community resource, the Ruth Ellis Center.

Silent Disco Yoga: Being Human Together is an outdoor yoga event set in Detroit’s Beacon Park on June 19 focused on “immersion in community and the great outdoors,” according to organizers Citizen Yoga. Participants will wear personal headphones and listen to a custom, curated live set by DJ Zoe Talley while holding various yoga poses and breathing in all the positive community vibes. Citizen Yoga predicts a feeling of interconnectedness that “brings us together to create a powerful space to heal and create magic.”

*Tickets are \$12. Register at [citizenyogastudio.com](http://citizenyogastudio.com).*



## Look Good While Honoring Local LGBTQ+ Heroes

Break out those bow ties and heels for a special night out June 9, when the Detroit Regional LGBT Chamber of Commerce hosts the annual COLOURS Pride Awards Gala (themed “Radiant in Red” this year) at Motor City Casino. It’s a special evening dedicated to recognizing local businesses and leaders who have served as outstanding LGBTQ+ advocates over the past year.

Proceeds from the black tie gala will benefit newly certified LGBTQ-owned and operated businesses and support young Metro Detroit entrepreneurs. Jerry Peterman, retired executive director of the Ruth Ellis Center, will provide the keynote address.

*Purchase tickets, starting at \$150 each, at [detroitlgbtchamber.com/coloursawards](http://detroitlgbtchamber.com/coloursawards).*





Original collage work by Derrick Carl Biso. Photo: Derrick Carl Biso (Instagram)

### Get Crafty in Canada

Spend some time with our Canadian neighbors on the other side of the Detroit River on June 26 at the Art Gallery of Windsor. The free Celebrate Pride Collage Workshop, co-sponsored by Art Windsor-Essex and

QLink Windsor-Essex collaborative, celebrates Canada's 2SLGBTQIA+ Pride Month with an artistic flair.

Local artist Derrick Carl Biso will be on hand to guide crafters through the process of creating a collage and briefly present on the cultural history of collage-making. Use provided materials or add a personal touch with your own. Just don't get caught at the border with anything too weird (although there's nothing quite like a good border crossing story...).

Learn more at [agw.ca/event/1959](http://agw.ca/event/1959).



### Be a Good Ally

Allyship should be a priority all year long, but Pride Month is a great time to up your game. Whether you're a hetero ally or identify somewhere along the LGBTQ+ spectrum, there's no time like June to show how much you support and care for the community. Here are a few ideas:

- Reach out to a local organization to find out how you can volunteer to help at-risk LGBTQ+ youth.
- Use your social platforms to amplify stories about missing and murdered trans women.
- Show up to events and for causes your LGBTQ+ loved ones care about.
- Fight against hateful, anti-LGBTQ+ legislation being proposed all over the country and demand that your reps protect marriage equality.
- Express your support for diversity, equity and inclusion at your workplace, and join efforts to promote those initiatives.
- Speak out against LGBTQ+ discrimination and intolerance wherever and whenever you see it, every day of the year.
- Attend a Pride event! **Check out our 2022 Pride Calendar on page 32** to find an event near you.



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Dave Wait. Photo: Andrew Potter

# The Man Behind Motor City Pride

He Fought for Chocolate Milk. Now He Leads the Biggest Pride Event in the State.

BY JASON A. MICHAEL

Dave Wait has always been an activist at heart. In eighth grade, Wait organized a sit-in at school when the cafeteria refused to serve chocolate milk. The group of disgruntled students got hauled down to the principal's office, where they were told the chocolate milk was a no-go. But the following year, as

Wait entered ninth grade, he walked back into the school cafeteria to find chocolate milk on the menu.

"I saw the progress of them eventually giving in, so that led me to a lot of the things I did through school and college," Wait tells BTL. "It was about making avenues for folks."

Wait grew up in the small town of Oxford, Michigan; he wasn't yet out because, in the '70s, when the Pride movement really got going,

there weren't "people that I could see that were gay and lesbian," he says.

So Wait immersed himself in school and his activities there and buried his sexual orientation. He stayed just as busy at Michigan State, where he became involved in student government. Still, he kept thoughts of his attraction to men deeply hidden. He eventually earned a bachelor's degree in distributive education, which allowed him to

teach marketing to high school students for four years.

Today, Wait is the state director for three career and technical student organizations, DECA, SkillsUSA and FCCLA, which provides leadership and career development conferences for over 14,000 Michigan high school students each year.

"I think of myself as someone who provides venues and opportunities to empower people," he says. "Through

the conference plannings, it kind of was a normal transition for me to be where I am with Pride events."

The first few Prides Wait ever attended were actually by accident. He was traveling for work, taking part in different conferences and always seemed to end up in a city where Pride was taking place. He ended up attending Prides in Fort Lauderdale and Denver. He was also in Washington, D.C. for the second



march for gay and lesbian rights in D.C. in 1987.

“The first one I attended, it really was comforting to know that there’s other gay people out there being progressive,” he says. “It was also kind of an emotional feeling knowing where I was in my journey to come out. But it was great to see these kinds of events ... to be part of a community.”

Wait had been attending Prides for years by the time he got involved with Motor City Pride (MCP). He started by doing a single four-hour shift out of curiosity and to help the LGBTQ+ community in Michigan. The next year he got a little more involved.

And then it hit him.

“I realized that what I do in my everyday work — planning conferences and outdoor events — is different from a conference, but the basic skills related quite well together,” he says.

After only a few years, the previous festival leaders at Equality Michigan stepped down and Wait stepped into the role of chairperson for MCP, a role he says he didn’t want.

Still, he took it. Soon after,

MCP became an independent organization and joined the United States Associations of Prides and Wait joined Inner Pride, the International Association of Lesbian and Gay Pride Coordinators, where he serves as treasurer. The position has allowed him to think of Prides on an international scale, and he has attended World Pride in Brussels, Athens and Vancouver.

“It’s allowed me to connect with other Pride organizers and help other Prides to mature and gain strength,” Wait says. “With Inner Pride, we have a solidarity fund. I’m responsible for transferring funds and grants to Pride organizations around the world, such as in the Congo, in Pakistan, and in South America and even in Ukraine, where we help small Prides get seed money and get started.”

The opportunities opened Wait’s eyes to new possibilities for MCP.

“As I saw more what Prides were doing throughout the U.S. and across the globe, I saw that we could do more with Motor City Pride,” he says. “Bring in more people and provide different opportunities for folks.”

Wait has been leading the organization for the last 12 years. Since that time, MCP has moved from Ferndale to downtown Detroit, the festival has increased from just one day to two, a Pride march has been reinstated, and

attendance numbers — except for that little Covid blip — continue to grow.

“The thing that really keeps me going is, even



Dave Wait at the first conference he planned as a high school senior, February in 1978 at Oakland University. Photo courtesy of Dave Wait

in these times, not everyone is comfortable being out every day,” Wait says. “Each year at the festival, I meet people who have not participated as their true, authentic self. But it gives people a safe space to be themselves and be who they authentically are so that hopefully it makes them more comfortable to be that on a daily basis.”

Wait said he sees his greatest accomplishments at MCP as offering four different entertainment stages (one of few Prides to do so), growing the festival’s attendance numbers and bringing back the march. Then there is the LGBTQ+ Pride flag raising in Spirit Plaza. For several years after the move to Detroit, the city kept denying MCP’s request to raise the Pride flag outside the Coleman A. Young City-County Building. Finally, after working with the mayor, MCP was allowed to raise the flag just across the street from the City-County Building in Spirit Plaza.

“We coordinate that each year with the city to be able to raise the Pride flag right there in a prominent spot in Detroit and it’s up all month long,” he says. “Once we started that, it’s been nice to see so many other building and businesses in town putting up their flags and changing their colors.”

MCP is very Detroit-centric. Their offices

See **Dave Wait**, page 64





Mac Diesel. Photo courtesy Mac Diesel

# 7 MOTOR CITY PRIDE ACTS YOU WON'T WANT TO MISS

BY JASON A. MICHAEL

With so many acts to choose from all weekend across four entertainment stages, there's something for everyone at Motor City Pride, from June 11-12. Add these seven not-to-be-missed performances to your short list.

## Jody Watley

7:30 p.m. Saturday, June 11. Pride Stage.

Jody Watley may be inching toward her fifth decade as a performer, but her beats are fresh as ever. Watley's resume includes an impressive list that showcases the star's versatility: Grammy-winning R&B artist, chart-topping pop sensation, songwriter, record producer. Sing along with

Watley as she belts old favorites (who can resist joining in on hits like '80s pop earworms "Real Love" and "Looking for a New Love"?) during what is sure to be a lively, memorable performance for 2022 Pridegoers.

## Wake Up Jamie

1 p.m. Saturday, June 11. Festival Stage.

Wake Up Jamie, described by primary

songwriter and frontwoman Jess Joyce as "glam emo," draws influence from the pop-punk, country, classic rock and '90s alternative she grew up listening to. Joyce is accompanied by co-frontwoman Hailey Christine, whose strong, crisp vocals serve as a contrast to Joyce's characteristic raspy belt. The lineup also includes guitarist Chris James, bassist Pippa Ross and drummer Jerry Heiss.

## Mac Diesel

7 p.m. Saturday, June 11. Riverfront Stage.

On stage, it's not unusual to find Mac Diesel mixing three to four tracks simultaneously with his tongue hanging out as he double drops addictive grooves. Known for uniquely and seamlessly mixing genres like house, techno, funk, jazz and soul, Diesel has been on the scene since 2014, performing across the country. "I'm not afraid to play a throwback R&B hook over a dirty breakfast banger or a Marvin Gaye chorus over a gritty bass line," Diesel said.

## Out Loud Chorus

1 p.m. Sunday, June 12. Pyramid Stage.

Washtenaw County's Out Loud Chorus is a mixed LGBTQ+, non-auditioned choir open to everyone who loves to sing and has an open mind. Out Loud's only requirement to sing with the chorus is that you are able to match pitch. Founded in 1995, the chorus produces two shows a year. They are billed as Washtenaw County's only arts organization for the entire LGBTQ+ community.

## The Band Mint

5 p.m. Sunday, June 12. Festival Stage.

The Band Mint is a local hip-hop outfit out of Oak Park that bills themselves as "A Tribe Called Quest meets The Red Hot Chili Peppers." The group is a regular at various local venues and festival

favorites at Detroit's annual Dally in the Alley. For lovers of not just hip-hop and rap but also R&B and jazz.

## Corry Michaels

7 p.m. Saturday, June 12. Festival Stage.

Corry Michaels comes to us from Cleveland, Ohio. The 25-year-old singer, songwriter and advocate considers himself a pop artist. His album "Give All Yourself" has become a vehicle for breaking down barriers, building bridges and creating safe and brave spaces. He enjoys partnering with various organizations as well playing on stages on his own terms. Expect him to perform his latest single, "Break the Ice."

## Crystal Harding & Friends

4 p.m., 5 p.m. and 6 p.m. Sunday, June 12. Pyramid Stage.

Crystal Harding will host a fabulous drag show featuring such talent as Dante Gabbana, Shauntrelle Blu, Whitney Naomi, Natalie Cole, King Teddy, Deja Van Cartier, Lotiphia Hunter, Lucy Misfit, Sabin, Isis Dupree, Geo Glam, Katrina Monae and DJ Splendah. Come out, enjoy and bring some singles 'cause this cast is going to work hard for you.



Corry Michaels. Photo courtesy Corry Michaels



# A Ferndale Pride Political Lovefest

Michigan AG Dana Nessel Praises Gov. Whitmer for LGBTQ+ Equality Work

BY JASON A. MICHAEL

The 49th governor of Michigan, Gretchen “Big Gretch” Whitmer, made her first-ever appearance at Ferndale Pride Saturday morning. She welcomed everyone at the opening ceremony and then, like the other candidates up for a second term this November, made her case for reelection. Others who spoke included Attorney General Dana Nessel and State Sen. Jeremy Moss.

“This community has been through a lot, and the last few years have been challenging unlike anything any of us could have ever imagined,” Whitmer told the crowd. “But here’s what I know: The greatest strength of our state is our people. I’m talking about every one of our people, no matter who you love, how you identify ... so long as I’m governor we’re going to fight for full rights and equality.”

Whitmer listed a few of her pro-LGBTQ+ accomplishments over the past four years, including extending full civil rights protection to all state employees and banning the appropriation of any funds for anything that targets the trans community.

*“Within her executive control she literally has done everything and anything she possibly can to protect the LGBTQ+ community. And she never stops trying to think of new ways to protect us.”*

— Dana Nessel

“People often ask me, with all the craziness we’ve had to confront, why on earth would I want to keep doing this work?” she said. “And the answer is right here. This is what it’s all about. People.”



AG Dana Nessel praising Gov. Gretchen Whitmer at Ferndale Pride on Saturday, June 4. Photo: Jason A. Michael

Whitmer also mentioned that her oldest daughter is a member of the LGBTQ+ community.

“[She] deserves full civil rights just like every one of you do,” said the governor. “We will not stop until that is our reality.”

“We’ve got work to do, and we’ve all got to be in this fight,” Whitmer continued. “I will take all the heat that comes my way so long as there’s an army behind me. And I can see it. Thank you. I love you.”

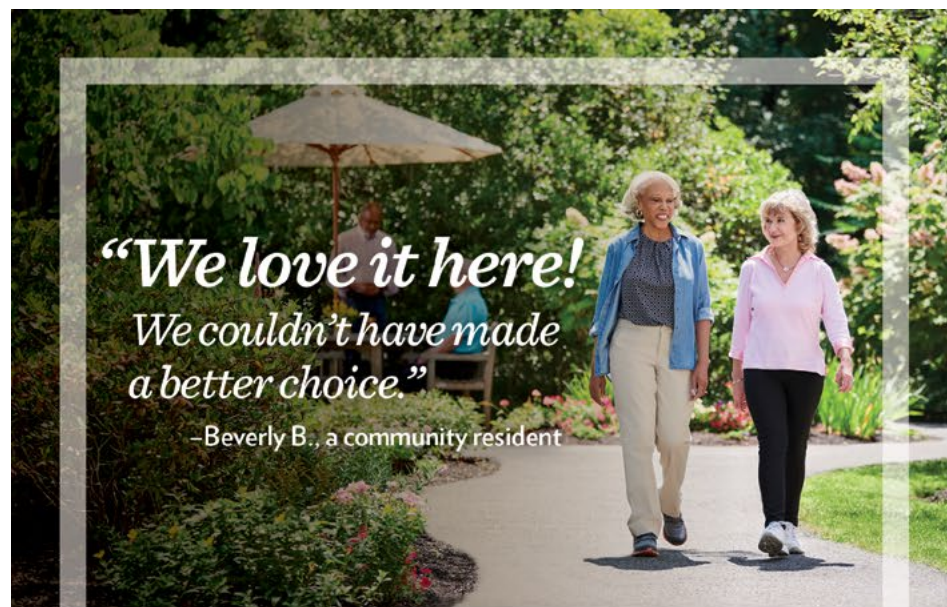
Nessel, who followed the governor, praised Whitmer for all she had done.

“We have a legislature who will not do anything positive for our community,” she said. “But within her executive control she literally has done everything and anything she possibly can to protect the LGBTQ+ community. And she never stops trying to think of new ways to protect us.”

Nessel then went on to recap her greatest pro-LGBTQ+ hits, including making it easier for trans persons to change the gender on their birth certificates, ensuring her department “would never be complicit in misgendering people” and arguing before the state supreme court in the Rouch World case that the Elliott-Larsen Civil Rights Act prohibits discrimination because of an individual’s sexual orientation.

“When I was running for office, knowing that if I won I’d be the first openly gay person ever to hold office in Michigan, I said I wasn’t going to hide who I was. I was going to make sure that people knew we were represented,” she said. “When I vowed to protect the community, I meant it.”

For the full story, visit [www.pridesource.com](http://www.pridesource.com).



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Detroit's regional bus that connects people to jobs, hospitals, school and, most importantly, fabulous fun. For example, Madison Heights Arts & Pride (June 11) can be reached by route #495-John R at Civic Center Park and route #610-Kercheval/Harper reaches Grosse Pointe Pride (June 18).

**DDOT:** Detroit's bus system turns 100 this year and has routes that reach every hot neighborhood and club in the city. Speaking of hot, #4-Woodward and #32-McNichols can move you to Menjo's in Palmer Park, home of Hotter Than July (July 15-17), which launched in the mid-'90s to honor and rejoice in Black LGBTQ+ culture. DDOT uses the same pricing and app as SMART (DART) and your pass is good for 4 hours of unlimited trips and transfers between the two systems.

**Amtrak:** America's passenger rail provider rolls through several cities that host Pride festivals like Grand Rapids Pride (June 18), Battle Creek Pride (July 16), Royal Oak Pride (Aug. 12-13) and Ann Arbor Pride (Sept. 11). Taking the train provides better views than flying, plus legroom, room for your bike and a cafe car that serves adult beverages.

There are several additional Pride events taking place across the state this summer but not all are accessible by transit. If you arrive by car, look up the local transit system. Enjoy getting around and on routes with services like The Rapid in Grand Rapids, Metro in Kalamazoo, MTA in Flint or TheRide in Ann Arbor. Who knows, you might even spot the Buttigieg family in Traverse City during Up North Pride (Sept. 28) while riding Bay Area Transit.

Scan this QR code for transit guides, fare info, maps and schedules of public transit in Detroit.



*Kayce and David Gifford are transit advocates, foster parents and social justice allies who together run Transit Guide: Detroit. David is also a musician, and Kayce is an artist and a board member of the Detroit Scarab Club.*

## Everything You Need to Know to Ditch the Car This Summer Pride Season

BY KAYCE AND DAVID GIFFORD

Have you considered public transit as your ride to Pride this year?

Public transit not only offers safety and fun for you and your queer crew, it can also save you money on high-as-ever gas prices, overpriced city parking and Uber rides. Think about it: Riding transit won't just keep your coterie close and put your pals closer to the celebration destination for just two bucks — you can avoid the drama of navigating overcrowded traffic or frenzied group texts.

But using transit is more than just economically kind to your wallet; it shows you care about the environment. According to the American Public Transportation Administration, one bus or streetcar can take up to 50 cars off the road and reduce the average person's transportation-related carbon emissions by 84%.

Choosing transit also pays homage to its history of helping teens and students who had to make a fresh start due to family rejection. Even today, it bolsters access for those in the LGBTQ+ community who can't or choose not to drive. Buses have an established track record of providing safe passage from small-minded towns

to more gregarious opportunities. The local ridership system is a reliable carriage for those who need to reach valuable resource centers like Ruth Ellis Center in Detroit and Affirmations in Ferndale.

So, this Pride season, tap that app. Using the Transit App, pop in the fancied destination and what time you wish to arrive. The app will show the multiple matches awaiting you, including bus, bike, streetcar, scooters, walking and rideshare. What if you don't live near a transit route? You can always drive part of the way, where parking is cheaper, and use transit as a last mile adventure solution.

The following is a comprehensive guide to the transit providers in Southeast Michigan.

**FAST BUS:** You don't need a private party bus to haul your friends to have it all. Frequent Affordable Safe Transit saves time, money and offers an opportunity to sit and relax with your posse. Less money on gas, more funds for your celebration. FAST runs on Gratiot (downtown to Chesterfield), Woodward (downtown to Great Lakes Crossing) and Michigan Ave (downtown to DTW Airport) seven days a week. The tariff is only \$2 for a 4

hours pass (\$0.50 for seniors, students and disabled), payable with cash or electronically by tapping the DART App. Use FAST to reach Royal Oak Pride (Aug. 12-13).

**D2A2:** Step into comfort on a coach bus that will whisk you and your crew across the expressway to Ann Arbor for Ann Arbor Pride (Sept. 11). Departure is at Park and Bagley in Grand Circus Park near a plethora of transit options like the FAST bus, DDOT bus, MoGo, QLINE Detroit and the People Mover. Arrival is at the Blake Transit Center in downtown Ann Arbor, just a few blocks south of Kerrytown. Service is less frequent on weekends and the last return bus on Saturday is at 8 p.m. Amtrak has your back if needed, or there's always pleasure in staying overnight. The cost is \$8 on the bus or \$6 in advance each way.

**QLINE Detroit:** Detroit's 3.3-mile streetcar loop on Woodward is a breeze to board and provides a smooth ride on the rails. It's the sole transit provider that allows e-bikes and has level boarding for wheelchair and scooter users. The best part is that it is free to ride for all of 2022. The QLINE isn't just for Midtown residents either.

From New Center to Midtown, there are plenty of inexpensive spaces to meetup and ride. It's the perfect way to take in the city with a partner or party for Motor City Pride (June 11-12).

**Detroit People Mover:** Built in 1986, the elevated downtown loop is a great way to take in stunning views of the city, especially the riverfront this summer, while fares are free (\$0.75 normally). Hours are limited as service restarts, but it is still a fun tourist attraction and an easy way to get around downtown before or after Motor City Pride (June 11-12).

**MoGo Detroit:** Rock two wheels on MoGo to several Pride festivals this June, including Downtown Berkley Pride (June 26), Royal Oak Pride (Aug. 12-13), Transgender Pride in the Park (Aug. 13) and Hazel Park Pride (Aug. 14). Bikeshare stations can be found from downtown to Midtown, Livernois Avenue of Fashion, Ferndale, Oak Park, Clawson and Royal Oak. Pricing starts at \$1 to unlock, plus \$0.25 a minute. A variety of passes are available through the TransitApp. Keep an eye out on MoGo's social for discount codes.

**SMART Bus:** SMART is Metro





# Advice to Be Well

From Dr. Mark Bornstein and Dr. Paul Benson



Dear Doctors,

I just started a new relationship. My partner just told me that they are intersex. I don't know what that means. I was too embarrassed to ask. We have not had sex. I don't know what to expect or say. What should I do? - J.T.

Dear J.T.

Intersex is a catch-all term used when a newborn's genitalia are atypical and even ambiguous. It's a naturally occurring variation that occurs in about 1 in 2000 births. Importantly, intersex is an identity and not a medical disorder. Intersex may include a small penis, an enlarged clitoris, no vaginal opening, a penis without an opening at the tip (hypospadias), labia that are closed or resemble a scrotum, or a scrotum that is empty and resembles labia.

Most medical centers still practice concealment-centered care. Basically, the sex is assigned by the doctors and/or family right around the time of birth. Multiple surgeries and the use of hormones follow to reinforce the appearance of the gender that was chosen. There is controversy in this approach

of conforming gender for the purpose of looking normal in society. Parents are often told the surgeries will make their child normal and give them a healthy sex life. Often these surgeries are debilitating and traumatizing while not accomplishing what was intended. Sometimes intersexuality is not identified until after puberty, when an assigned female is unable to menstruate, or an assigned male develops pelvic masses that turn out to be ovaries. There are many variations in presentation.

Intersex should not be confused with transgender. A transgender person has typical genitalia at birth and feel like they were born into the wrong body and sex. Children and families of intersex should find trained mental health experts to support them, especially when they are in distress. Intersex families should be connected to peer support groups to help validate their feelings. Newborns can be given sexual assignment, however "normalizing gender assignment surgery" should be delayed until, if and only if, the intersex individual is old enough to make these important decisions for themselves.

J.T., you can enhance and build your relationship with open and honest dialog. Your concern is the "pink elephant" in the room. Talk about it. Start with admitting what you don't know. Stand up against gender stereotypes. Speak up. Be a role

model for others. Respect all people regardless of their gender identity, and come to these conversations knowing that many individuals have experienced trauma from their lived experiences. People will learn from you, and you will be part of the solution of equality for all.

Dear Doctors,

My friend says he never goes to see his doctor, but instead uses the computer to have his doctor visits. I never heard of such a thing. Is this true? - S.F.

Dear S.F.

What your friend is referring to is telemedicine. These online visits have become popular during the COVID-19 pandemic. They usually involve the use of video and audio through the internet, although if the person is unable to do that, it can be done by telephone without video. It is not ideal for all types of visits, including many medical conditions that would require a physical examination to make a diagnosis. Essentially, the most ideal type of medical

care is still in-person.

What telemedicine visits can be beneficial for is to review test results or for the follow-up of a medical condition that has already been evaluated. We also often use telemedical visits for patients suspected of having COVID-19. If indicated, we have them do a drive by rapid COVID-19 test from their car in our parking lot so they don't enter the office and potentially infect others. Most insurance companies pay for telemedicine visits the same as an in person visit.

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Chris, Jim and Alison faking seriousness during a rare girlfriends getaway. (Right) Jim and Chris pausing during a pandemic walk and pretending to be Kate and Leo.



members are having babies and raising families and I am not, I have accepted how different we really are, even just fundamentally. But coming from a big Maltese family, I always felt a cultural pressure to consider blood family my only family.

What does any of this have to do with Pride? Well, this year, the idea of “chosen family” resonates deeply. Like so many of us, I’m weathering a personal storm as a close family member’s harmful behavior of late weighs heavy on my heart. I tell you this because I know my story is a common one, and part of why Pride means so much to me this year: how, more than ever, given a years-long global pandemic that still endures, it’s about the families we create when we don’t feel loved or safe around our own. And my immense gratitude for mine.

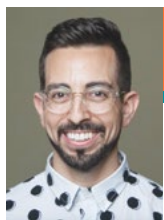
Jim and Aric and Alison and Ross and Lauren and Michael and Mathias and Kris and Mark and Ray, and on and on. These are the people who have allowed me to be something that, around other people, I can’t be: the best version of myself.

These last few years have taken a lot out of us. We may

never know just how much since we’re still living in it and may be for quite some time still. Personally, I unexpectedly moved a couple of times; those transitions were rough. Amid uncomfortable change and turmoil, I started overseeing all the stories you read in these pages in my new position as Editorial Director, a role I don’t take lightly. There was a breakup somewhere in there too. Then what we all dealt with: the everyday anxiety and fear of living in an unnatural state of pandemicity. Shelter in place, wear a mask, wash your Grape Nuts.

Now, I keep a book by my bed. It’s one Jim gave me for Christmas — “Thank You For Being a Pod,” a self-curated book of photos of us from August 2020 to October 2021, our could’ve-been-harder pandemic year. There wasn’t just crying the day he handed it to me — there were crying

## From the Editor: This Pride, Gratitude For Chosen Family Connection



By **Chris Azzopardi**

When I was a closeted kid, the only thing I really liked about church was when the priest asked the congregation to shake a neighbor’s hand and wish them peace. Mass at the church my family attended mostly bored me to the point of frequent nod-offs, and though the Catholic Church has got a lot wrong (so much, really), they got something right with the whole “peace be with you” ritual.

Given these were people I didn’t know, it always seemed like just the right amount of kindness, and it was one of my earliest introductions to a community that wasn’t my own blood family. But it wasn’t until college where I would find *my* people, and around them I could comfortably be myself, entirely.

It was at Eastern Michigan University’s student newspaper, the Eastern Echo, where I fit in so naturally with this diverse group of aspiring

journalists. I felt an ease around these peers of mine, a “found family” before I even truly knew what that meant. Together, we inhaled greasy slices of pizza and guzzled Cokes together in a basement production office, but even better, and having just come out, they were more than OK with me being gay — in fact, I felt celebrated because of it. They didn’t care when I wrote about an EMU alum who graduated and went on to become a hot male model that I described his abs, in the very first sentence (of course), as “chiseled.” (My editor at the time told me, and he was right: “Whoever doesn’t know you’re gay will know now.”)

My mom, who had almost no

relationship with both of her parents (one would wash my mouth out with soap when she didn’t like what I said, one didn’t make much of an effort to see us), knew something about chosen family that she was inadvertently teaching me at the time — you can be closer to your friends than members of your actual family. This is a healthy thing; it’s sustaining. And actually, sometimes it’s all we have.

Queer people know this, perhaps, more than anyone since many of us are disowned by our own families, or just never quite feel like we fit in with our heterosexual blood relatives. Now that most of my own family



“

*We lived together. A community of three. The worst and best year of my life.*

noises. Only a friend like Jim can make you feel a love so deep it can carry you through anything.

During a year of anxiety-inducing uncertainty, I lived with Jim and his husband Aric when I wasn't sure where else I would go. My insensitive landlord came back to live in her condo, failed to give me much notice, and there weren't many rental options then.

So we lived together. A community of three. The worst and best year of my life.

After my breakup, I came home to them on the couch, cried more sloppy tears, talked and watched them watch “Real Housewives” before I saw myself off to a surprisingly sound sleep just knowing they were... there. Then, there they were again when I grieved the death of my 16-year-old family dog, Maddie. I even started calling their home “Hope House” as a joke. The joke, though, was always rooted in something very real because how could it not be. Simply by having them around, by taking long winter walks together, projectile-laughing at dogs doing stupid things on TikTok and toasting to Biden's win and the optimism of what that meant for our country and the LGBTQ+ community, I felt like everything was going to be OK.

And so when I think about Pride now, I think about our time together — as a pandemic pod, as a little loving chosen family — and I cherish it, and I think about all of my queer and ally friends. I think about “Hope House.” How that community of three is just a small part of an ever-expanding “Hope House” of found families keeping each other feeling safe and loved and, in these times, OK enough to keep going.

*Chris Azzopardi is the Editorial Director of Pride Source Media Company and Between The Lines. Reach him at [chris@pridesource.com](mailto:chris@pridesource.com).*



**“WE HAVE THIS AVAILABLE IN MEN'S, WOMEN'S, AND NON-BINARY SIZES.”**

## CREEP OF THE WEEK

### In Wake of Elementary School Massacre, Ohio Republicans Laser-Focused on One Kid's Crotch



**By D'Anne Witkowski**

In the United States the call for meaningful gun violence prevention is louder than ever. People are tired of mass shootings every day and want their kids to go to school and come home alive.

And Republicans are responding to the deadly gun violence epidemic just as you'd expect them to: by demanding to see the genitals of transgender kids.

Ohio House Republicans passed a bill that allows just about anybody to demand a “genital check” of any kid playing girls' sports if said kid is suspected of being transgender. On the first day of Pride Month.

I wish that I was making this up.

Called the “Save Women's Sports Act” (barf), the Republicans were so proud of it that they bravely tacked it onto an unrelated bill at 11 p.m.

The bill now heads to the Senate, except the Senate isn't in session again until November, so it could take awhile for it to actually get to Republican Gov. Mike DeWine's

desk, assuming it passes the Senate.

Now, you might think that this bill is extreme, but according to The Advocate, bill sponsor Rep. Jena Powell says, “Across our country, female athletes are currently losing championships, scholarship opportunities, medals, education and training opportunities, and more to discriminatory policies that allow biological males to compete in girls' sports.”

And as we know, numbers don't lie. Surely this is a serious issue in Ohio that affects a very large number of people, right?

Of course not. The number of transgender girls playing high school sports in Ohio is... one.

Democrats voted against the bill. “There are not scores of girls' dreams being crushed, there is one child trying to play on their high school sports team,” Democratic Rep. Beth Liston, a physician, said on the floor. “This is a made-up controversy, and this amendment is state-sanctioned bullying against one child.”

What a horrible thing to do to this poor kid. Imagine your state legislature passing a bill that targets only YOU and is intended to punish you for being who you are. It's truly sick.

See Creep, page 52



## IMPORTANT FACTS FOR BIKTARVY®

This is only a brief summary of important information about BIKTARVY and does not replace talking to your healthcare provider about your condition and your treatment.

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- ▶ **Severe liver problems,** which in rare cases can lead to death. Tell your healthcare provider right away if you get these symptoms: skin or the white part of your eyes turns yellow, dark “tea-colored” urine, light-colored stools, loss of appetite for several days or longer, nausea, or stomach-area pain.
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Scan to see Chad's story.





Travis Worden and Abby Voss, two queer friends who organized Harbor Country Pride in New Buffalo. Photo: Moguel Photography

# A Plethora of Prides

## How These Five First-Time Organizers Are Breaking New Ground in Their Michigan Communities

BY ELLEN SHANNA KNOPPOW

This summer in Michigan, Prides of all kinds are springing up across the state. From Madison Heights to New Buffalo, BTL checked in with the organizers of some of the newest Michigan Prides.

### A former teacher with a passion for Pride

It all started when Madison Heights resident Jennifer Nagle put out her Pride flag when she was new to the city.

“I had just finished moving in the last of the boxes and was in the process of mounting my American

flag and my Pride flag,” said Nagle, a former teacher, “when one of the neighborhood kids who was riding his bike screeched to a halt and said, ‘Hi! I like your flag!’ And I said, ‘Hi! Me too!’”

As Nagle got to know the kids in her neighborhood, she learned the one who had greeted her was LGBTQ+ and had been bullied at school. She said she has a special place in her heart for the “artsy” or “weird” kids and recognized their need for extra love and support. Nagle had an idea.

“I wrote a couple of my city council members, and said, ‘Hey, are there plans for a community Pride in the works? If not, I’m willing to help organize,’” Nagle said. “And lo and behold, I find myself on one of the community boards to help and

organize Pride.”

The first Arts and Pride was held last year. Nagle described it as a small, community-driven event that came together without city involvement. Still, it attracted over 100 people — and generated a lot of enthusiasm. This year, the Madison Heights Arts Board and the Human Relations and Equity Commission teamed up to put some “organizational muscle” behind it, Nagle said.

Nagle calls herself the “chief cat herder” of the operation. She and her partners in Pride have booked a face painter, food trucks, a DJ and musicians. Mostly, she wants kids in the community as well as their parents, along with adult community members, to know they’re not alone.

“I think it’s important that we let our whole community know that

people and families come in all shapes and sizes,” Nagle said, “and the kids who’ve been suffering a lot of discrimination and hate, that we give them a really loud sign that we love them and that hate is not tolerated in Madison Heights.”

*Madison Heights Arts & Pride: Sat. June 11, 4 p.m.-sundown, Madison Heights Civic Center Park, Pavilion B*

### In a first for Berkley, a block party that coalesces around Pride

Everyone loves a block party, and in Berkley, it shows — the city has been holding these events for years. Mike McGuinness, executive director of the Downtown Development Authority (DDA), said this year’s Pride event is being held in response to resident requests.

“It’s a really big part of the caring and communal vibe that Berkley residents love and have enjoyed for decades,” said McGuinness. “It’s a resident-driven and LGBTQ community member-led initiative where we’re bringing the community together, but in the downtown and coalescing around Pride.”

McGuinness said partygoers can expect community resource booths representing organizations like the Berkley Gay-Straight Alliance and the Ruth Ellis Center. Interactive games, entertainment, music and an art project will also be part of the fun. In addition, many of the downtown Berkley businesses that otherwise would not be open on a Sunday will expand their hours and host Pride-focused activities and promotions.

In the past few years, Berkley has enacted a conversion therapy ban, issued a resolution in support of adopting an updated nondiscrimination policy and they’ve begun introducing a Pride Month declaration each year.

“Southeast Oakland County is obviously a very welcoming, progressive place,” McGuinness said, “and we are excited for downtown Berkley to be emerging as not only a destination during Pride Month, but also all year long, so that way residents and business owners and consumers know that it’s a safe, welcoming and enjoyable place.”

McGuinness noted the presence of out LGBTQ+ business owners and establishments that have become

destinations for the queer community in Berkley. “This is a way of coming out for that community that’s been here all along, but hasn’t been as high profile or as formalized with events or commemorations,” he said.

*Berkley Pride Block Party: June 26, noon-4 p.m., Robina Avenue, north of 12 Mile Road*

### PG-13 fun in Coldwater

Last year’s first-ever Pride festival in Coldwater, Michigan drew around 400 people and was declared a success by organizer Chris Boger. This year, she and her crew are raising the bar.

“We put in for a proclamation for this year,” Boger said. “Hopefully, the second week of September every year, [the city] will proclaim that week Pride Week.”

Three years ago, when Branch County Gay Pride, an LGBTQ+ nonprofit, was launched in Coldwater, a Pride festival seemed to naturally follow. Now, Branch Pride is also a community center where Boger serves as executive director.

Festivalgoers will find a midway area lined with nonprofits and service organization booths, each with games and prizes to keep folks engaged. A pet parade is new this year, along with more activities for kids, speakers, dancing, food trucks and drag performances.

“In our community, our Pride is very family-oriented,” Boger said. She believes that’s key to its success. “A lot of Pride festivals have things about them that are not exactly family-friendly. We’ve tried to provide ours with a family-friendly environment, even the drag show. The entertainers must do PG-13 type of entertainment and music.”

Boger, who is trans, was born and raised in Coldwater and will proudly serve as the first LGBTQ+ grand marshal for her city’s holiday parade. She’s currently a candidate for Branch County Commissioner.

“Since we founded Branch County Gay Pride, there’s been a lot of improvement in people feeling more comfortable to be able to express themselves,” Boger said. “Having an organization they feel like is behind them has truly helped in that, making our community more equitable and equality-based.”

*Branch Pride: Sept. 18, 2-8 p.m., Parkhurst Park*



## Pride comes to North Oakland County

Let it be known the Girl Scout organization is queer-friendly.

When Brandon High School sophomore Abigail Rowe was searching for an idea for her Girl Scout Gold Award, the highest achievement in Girl Scouting, she happened to be watching a YouTube video of a Pride festival while in the car with her mom.

"I said, to my mom, 'I wish someone would throw a Pride festival here that I can go to,'" said Rowe, who is bisexual. "And she said, 'Well, why don't you do it?' And then I got home that night at 11 o'clock and made a binder with a rainbow on the front and started planning it."

The planning took six months. Rowe met with her advisor, who is now her co-director of the event. Among other things, they would need to plan the parade route and where the roads needed to be closed before obtaining permits from the township office. They put together a full roster of activities, entertainment and speakers.

For the most part, Rowe said the community where she lives is supportive of the LGBTQ+ community. "Just in putting myself out there doing this Pride festival, I've met a lot of people who are very supportive," Rowe said. "But there's some issues that I've had at school, and it's mostly kids my age that gave me a problem. There's also been some hate on social media, but it's always combated with a bunch of people who are super supportive."

Abigail's Pride is a 501c3 nonprofit organization dedicated to highlighting diversity and inclusion while bringing awareness to the perspectives of LGBTQ+ youth.

*Abigail's Pride was held June 4 in downtown Ortonville.*

## Harbor Country Pride: A positive outcome from the pandemic

In New Buffalo, a new Pride festival emerged from the darker days of Covid. And two queer friends, Abby Voss and Travis Worden, are responsible. "With the pandemic and both of us in the restaurant industry, we had a little bit more time on our hands last year," Voss said. "So we decided to just go for it."

"That kind of feels like the need right now, to focus on creating a safe and inclusive space in our community for the youth, especially when there's sort of an attack on what they're allowed to be taught or talked about," Voss said.

Festivalgoers enjoyed a showing of "Hedwig and the Angry Inch," plus performances by the queer punk band Bev Rage & the Drinks and Lady Stardust, a David Bowie cover band. The OutCenter of Southwest Michigan, which helped along the way, partnered with Harbor Country Pride on their "grom" (graduation/



Abigail Rowe. Photo courtesy of Abigail's Pride

prom) party for youth in grades six through 12, themed "Dungeons and Drag Queens."

Voss grew up in southern Illinois. As a queer-identifying woman, "I didn't have a space where I could be out and proud or even an avenue to understand what that would look like," she said. Her counterpart in planning the event grew up in Harbor Country and wasn't out in high school.

Voss said she felt honored to do this work. "We've had a huge turnout of donors this year that allowed us to throw all of these wonderful events, and we have wonderful predecessors who sort of paved the way in our community to allow us to do this very openly and honestly. And we're just very grateful for all of the support we received."

*Harbor Country Pride Week was held June 1-6.*

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Photo courtesy of UM

## UM's Spectrum Center: Reflections on 50 Years

Some LGBTQ+ Students Never Stepped Inside. But It Still Changed Their Lives.

BY ELLEN SHANNA KNOPPOW

As a first-year student at the University of Michigan (UM) in the late '70s, Martin Contreras struggled with his attraction to men.

"Didn't have a name for it," Contreras told BTL. Contreras and his husband Keith Orr are former co-owners of Aut Bar in Ann Arbor. "Sexual orientation was not in my

vocabulary at the time." But after he heard legendary LGBTQ+ activist Jim Toy speak on one occasion, Contreras was inspired to take the first steps on what would become a five-year coming out journey.

One of those early steps was a visit to the Human Sexuality Office (HSO), UM's LGBTQ+ student union that would later become the Spectrum Center.

"I remember that his words were very moving," Contreras said. "And it felt like maybe this is where I should be going to get more information to figure out what's going on with me. And so I did find myself locating the Human Sexuality Office, which sounds very clinical and makes it sound like something is wrong."

That office was established in September 1971 following pressure

by UM students and the Gay Liberation Front (GLF). The late '60s and early '70s were a time when student activists were inspired by the emerging queer and trans movement. The university provided a small budget for two quarter-time HSO advocates, Cindy Gair of the Radical Lesbians and Toy. Previously, when asked by the UM Regents what the UM chapter of the GLF hoped to

achieve, Toy famously declared, "We want justice!"

Thus, the HSO became the first staff office for LGBTQ+ students in an institution of higher learning in the country. Notably, that's still not the norm. A Sage Journals survey conducted in 2020 reveals that only 62 percent of 1,953 four-year, not-for-profit colleges and universities in the U.S. have officially recognized



LGBTQ+ student groups, and far fewer have at least one paid staff member or graduate assistant.

"I think some of the pieces that I really connect to about our beginning is that we were an effort that was a collaboration between people on and off campus," said Will Sherry, director of the Spectrum Center for the past 14 years. "Something that we still take very seriously [is] making sure that our programs and the things that we offer are accessible beyond the institution, whenever possible." For example, Sherry said, Toy was a prominent figure involved with establishing an Ann Arbor chapter of the national GLF organization.

Orr made a similar observation.

"Even though it is headquartered in the university, they have a reach beyond the university," he said. "[What] I've always been impressed with [is] that they recognize that part of gay life for [UM] students also means gay life in Ann Arbor."

One of the things that made an impression on Sherry is that both Toy and Gair co-lead the office from the beginning.

"That history of inclusion across multiple identities and what it means to have not a single, male leader, but really to have equity

in that leadership just speaks to the values of the way in which we try to operate our Center," Sherry said. "[We are] really critical in making sure that the types of values that Jim and Cindy and others instilled in the Center continue to live on in the way we do our work."

Perhaps one of the most significant early victories was Toy's successful fight to amend the bylaws of the university to include "sexual orientation" as a category protected from discrimination in employment, educational programs and activities, and admissions. The Regents voted 8-1 to change the bylaws in 1993.

Now celebrating 50 years, the Spectrum Center continues to be a leader in developing student services and programs through an intersectional lens. Part of the anniversary festivities in late 2021 included the now-famous Pride-themed homecoming halftime show, dedicated to the Center's big anniversary. A pink tie gala and a celebration of Toy's life were held last month.

BTL spoke with Kerene Moore, one of the panelists at the gala. Moore attended UM for both undergrad and law school and became involved in the Spectrum Center after graduation as a practicing attorney in the community who was doing LGBTQ+ rights work. For the past several years, she has worked with the Center on initiatives like presentations about legal name changes and training sessions.

"They've given me an honorary Lavender Degree for my work in the community," Moore said. "So they're just always partners. It's always great to go to their events and be available for students who have legal questions or just show up and bring other LGBTQ community members together."

"Often we get youth and their parents who are just coming to learn, and it helps so much for them to see that it gets better," she continued. "That here's a critical mass of people who are LGBTQ who have figured out a way to learn and live and love and be welcome. And I think that's really important for people to see, and it's one of the things I love about the Spectrum Center: They're always up for bringing people together, which we don't do enough."

Included in their community-driven



The Spectrum Center. Photo courtesy of UM

mission is Lavender Graduation, a ceremony celebrating LGBTQ+ students held separately from the university's academic graduations. It was founded by director Ronnie Sanlo in the '90s. By that time, the office's name had expanded to the UM Office of Lesbian Gay Bisexual & Transgender Affairs.

"Every year, they do that lavender graduation, and they bring together community members, and the students are always just so happy and carefree and ready to move forward," Moore said. "They've been given enough support that they're happy and ready to take on the world. And for me, it wasn't like that. For me, even though I went to the University of Michigan, I really wasn't connected to any community in undergrad and law school. I didn't even go to my undergrad graduation."

Moore said had she known about the Center as a student, it would have benefited her.

Sherry called Lavender Graduation one of his favorite times of year. "Watching students be able to celebrate themselves and one another within the community in a way that sort of recognizes that there were likely challenges and hurdles that they may have faced and that what they've accomplished is not in spite of who they are, but really because of the sort

See **Spectrum Center**, page 50



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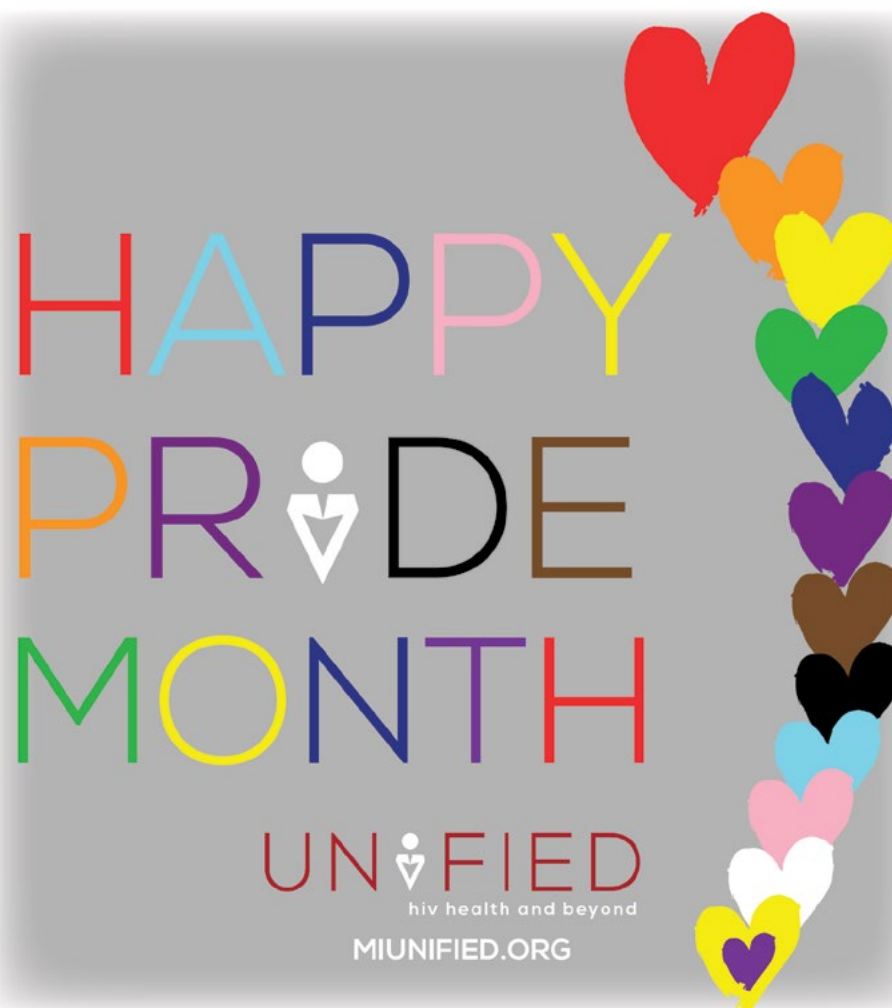
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“Joy Ride,” Mieyoshi Ragernoir.

# ‘Made in Harlem, Based in Detroit’

Painter Mieyoshi Ragernoir Focuses on Black and Brown Joy and Radiance in a Challenging Era

BY SARAH BRICKER HUNT

Of all the joyful Black and Brown faces filling the frames of Mieyoshi Ragernoir’s vibrant paintings, only one is a self-portrait, but then again, she says, “all artwork is a self-portrait.”

Ragernoir’s lone “official” self-portrait stands out in her long list of Instagram posts — she’s radiant there, grinning broadly against a canary yellow background. But as the artist glances through her posts, she notices that unlike her other works, she’s cropped this one down. She considers for a moment, and then, “The one self-portrait I do have, it’s cropped; I don’t know... it probably might be a psychological thing — I just wasn’t comfortable, fully, right?”

It’s hard to believe Ragernoir ever feels less than comfortable in her own skin, chatting with her over Zoom on a quiet Thursday morning. She’s one of those people whose passion for her work — for *life* — is practically contagious. Her art has the same effect.

Lately, she says, she’s getting better at “honing in on joy and art; it really soaks into my psyche.” Still, it’s not as though joy just drips effortlessly from Ragernoir’s paintbrush. Finding (and channeling) her joy has been a deliberate choice, one that requires work and commitment.

Ragernoir describes a childhood touched by

trauma that she’s still working through. She’s learned how to wield her talent in a way that serves as catharsis and connection, borne out of a deep sense of self-love and healing. “It’s really monumental for me to create what I create,” she says, “because I noticed that it just helps me to treat myself kindly, and because I treat myself kindly, I know that I treat everybody around me with kindness and softness and compassion.”

Self-compassion was at the heart of what drove Ragernoir to finish her MFA at Cranbrook Academy of Art in Bloomfield Hills at a time when she wasn’t sure how she might will herself into the studio to complete her capstone project, “Joy Ride.”

The painting is trademark Ragernoir: joyful, alive and so of the moment. And on the surface, that’s completely true. She says the piece reflects a shared moment with two grad school friends, Morgan Bouldes and Deja Milany, though she says the painting is a work of imagination. It’s about the three friends and a real-life, shared moment earlier this year, but it’s not a direct likeness.

“Joy Ride” symbolizes several aspects of Ragernoir’s life, including a nod to her city of birth — as her website proclaims, she was “made in Harlem” and is now “based in Detroit”. Hence, the taxi cabs and NYC-esque cityscape.

It also reflects an everyday slice of life. A shared, electric moment with her friends as they made their way home from picking up takeout from Detroit’s Island Spice Caribbean — a welcome break from finals. “We got excited, and it was just like, ‘Let’s just get like hundreds of dollars of takeout from my favorite place,’ and that’s what we did,” she recalls. “We were just happy. I just remember I was talking about all the food: ‘This plantain’s going to be so good; it’s all going to be so good!’ It was like this eagerness... “...and then boom.”

The car Ragernoir was riding in was involved in a serious crash that propelled her into the front compartment of the vehicle, resulting in painful injuries she’s still recovering from. “For two weeks, I could not paint — I couldn’t really even move — and I was just so emotional, lots of crying... but after the third week, I was just like, ‘I have to paint,’” she remembers.

When she finally made it back to the studio, Ragernoir says she became focused on that moment before the crash, filled with “laughter and joy and excitement in the backseat,” mixed with a feeling of homesickness and the isolation of her recovery. “I was thinking a lot about New York and about how we were feeling before the crash — it was the first thing I sketched after the car crash.”

Ultimately, “Joy Ride” emerged as a piece that seems to be attracting a level of attention Ragernoir didn’t necessarily expect. It may even tie into how she landed in Detroit on a more permanent basis. “I’m very headstrong on what I want to make and what I want to create, but I didn’t get a lot of support or feedback within my school experience,” she explains. “I painted ‘Joy Ride’ when I was in school, and when I had critiques, it was crickets. Like, literally, it was so quiet — it wasn’t smiles in the room. So, this is all new to me.”

Ragernoir’s decision to move to Detroit on a permanent basis after grad school is due in part to Mighty Real Queer Detroit curator Patrick Burton, who approached Ragernoir about getting involved with the project alongside 150 other queer artists (Ragernoir identifies as a “bisexual who dates all humans”). Burton liked her work so much that she is featured at several of the 17 gallery locations taking part in the city-wide queer art project throughout June, Pride Month. “I thought it was just a regular art show — that’s what I came here for, to make art and to show art,” she says. “But when I spoke to Patrick, I didn’t know that it would be so big; I didn’t know how monumental the show was when I signed up for it.”

Now that she’s been able to spend time in the local area in the post-pandemic era, Ragernoir seems to have taken a shine to the city like a local. “It’s a community,” she says. “It’s been a beautiful experience, working with artists every day, biking, meeting new people. It’s why I decided to stay here.” She’s even taking advantage of the renewed local interest in old-school roller skating, “dancing on air” at classic local rinks like Northland and Bonaventure.

Detroit is, of course, not New York City, but for Ragernoir, that’s a plus in some ways. “I’ve been in New York my whole life, and the city has its perks,” she explains. “But I was just so exhausted from it. Detroit is so homey, and it feels like a city, but also there’s this Southern hospitality — you can really feel the Southern migration of its past. That energy is still here.”

This fall, the artist will head back to her native New York to participate in a residency that she says will have her working alongside prominent artists she has admired for years. For now, she’ll keep “riding in the sun and eating good food” — that is, when she’s not creating art, the thing that brings her the most happiness.

“Art, for me, is going through a journey; painting is like alchemy,” she muses. “And in a time where racism, bigotry, anger and pain are everywhere in our society, I highlight joy and radiance. It’s always been a healing journey, a big part of me becoming my real self, a happier version of myself.”

“Art,” she says, “saved my life.”

*Mieyoshi Ragernoir’s Mighty Real Queer Detroit artwork is featured at Anton Art Center, Cass Cafe, Galerie Camille, N’Namdi Center For Contemporary Art, Norwest Gallery and Playground Detroit. Learn more about the artist at [mieyoshiragernoir.com](http://mieyoshiragernoir.com) and on Instagram @Painting2Exhale.*





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Deana Spencer watches the Pride flag raised at Battle Creek City Hall in 2021. Photo courtesy Deana Spencer

## The Dilemmas of Leading a Queer Community Org

Battle Creek Pride Organizer Reflects on the Unnecessary Drama That Made BCP What It Is Today

BY LUCY BLAIR

If you tell Deana Spencer that something she believes in is not possible or unattainable, she will power through, make it happen and disprove you. That's advice she received once related to her role with the LGBTQ+ organization Battle Creek Pride (BCP): "Even when it's ugly and you're being drug through the mud, you get up and you do it anyway. And you just go. And you don't stop, and you just keep going."

I have seen it happen; she single-handedly accomplished the legwork to make the Battle Creek Pride Resource Center a monthly distribution site for fresh food boxes from the South Michigan Food Bank, and she's leading the organization through Pride event planning and fundraising to keep the doors open to the organization's LGBTQ+ Resource Center, where

anyone is welcome.

Spencer serves as co-president of Battle Creek Pride, alongside Kim Langridge, a trans woman who is new to the organization and to a non-profit leadership role such as this. Because Battle Creek Pride operates entirely on volunteer hours, these are our leaders. I joined the board with two younger women from the community in January 2022.

There are a lot of people who make BCP what it is, but Spencer is a lynchpin. Because she's been involved since the beginning and continues to lead, Spencer is the keeper of the organization's history. She lived it, helped shape it and reflects on it, all the while leading Battle Creek Pride into its uncertain future.

Spencer was part of the earliest iterations of Battle Creek Pride's Board in the late 2000s. She was asked by then-president and gatherer of

See **BCP**, page 66

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# Financial Literacy Basics for LGBTQ+ Individuals

In Partnership With Jennifer Barrett, Comerica Bank LGBT Business Resource Group Chair

No matter how much you earn, financial literacy is an essential life skill. Financial issues impact all people, and members of the LGBTQ+ community face disproportionate challenges.

According to a recent survey published by Experian, 62% of LGBTQ+ respondents said they experienced financial problems as a direct result of their gender identity or sexual orientation. From harassment at work to being passed over for a job or facing higher housing costs due to discrimination; LGBTQ+ people are at an acute risk of dealing with financial instability.

There is also evidence of an LGBTQ+ pay gap. The Human Rights Campaign Foundation found that LGBTQ+ workers earn 90 cents for

every dollar the typical worker earns, with trans women earning only 60 cents for every dollar the typical worker earns.

Despite these challenges, making smart decisions can make a big difference. In partnership with Comerica Bank, here are important financial basics for LGBTQ+ individuals.

## Track your spending

One of the first steps in taking care of your personal finances is to make a budget and follow your own spending. Tracking income and costs — like in a banking app or even an (old school) checkbook - can be a powerful way

to understand where your money is going. And don't forget to check your monthly statement to make sure all of those expenses were even yours.

Checking your statement should also include something realer than “just cut back on the coffees” rhetoric: watch for small, recurring expenses. How many subscriptions do you have going? If you're not sure, it might be time to use your newly-made budget to remind yourself of what you're paying for.

Many LGBTQ+ people say they are big spenders. According to research from Experian, 34% of LGBTQ+ people agree that they have bad spending habits, with many gay men aged 25 to 34 admitting to overspending when it comes to clothing, grooming and personal care.

## It's called *personal finance*

There's a couple of ways to improve your personal financial circumstances, including saving, managing your credit and being smart about your debts. Not all debt is bad debt — but it is important to stay on top of it. LGBTQ+ families have an average credit card debt of \$12,085, 16% higher than the average American family. Credit cards cost interest every month when you carry an ongoing balance.

Setting up an emergency savings pot for unexpected costs can help you stay in control of your finances when challenges arise. Cars break down. The air conditioner decides it's



done. Potholes in January... You get the idea. Just as importantly, if you work for an employer that does not provide protections for those who identify as LGBTQ+, it's essential to have a financial cushion to fall back on should the worst happen.

The sooner a plan is put in place to deal with outstanding debt, the sooner it can be dealt with. Failing to pay down credit cards can damage your credit score, which makes it more difficult to obtain low-cost credit in the future. If you're not able to pay off your credit card balance in full each month, try cutting back on unnecessary spending and focus on paying as much as possible to eliminate this expensive form of lending.

## Consolidate and ask for help

If cutting costs immediately is not an option, consider consolidating high-interest debt with a single lower-cost loan or 0% interest offer (if you're eligible). Compare your debt and their interest rates to the cost of consolidation - it might make a lot of sense and can open considerable cash flow to those who have limited income. If you're worried about not being able to keep up with minimum repayments, consider reaching out to a debt counselor who can offer advice on budgeting and ways to repay.

## Review what tax benefits you may be eligible for

Getting married (very obviously) changes things. The landmark Obergefell vs. Hodges Supreme Court decision in 2015 that established that the fundamental right to marry is guaranteed to same-sex couples, opened up many tax benefits to married LGBTQ+ people. From social security spousal benefits

to joint income tax filing, tax advantages that non-LGBTQ+ people took for granted are now available to members of the LGBTQ+ community.

However, inequities still exist in the tax treatment of LGBTQ+ people, which are often complicated by the unique financial goals of many LGBTQ+ individuals. For example, starting a family often works differently than it does for most heterosexual families. As adoption, fostering and surrogacy are three of the main ways LGBTQ+ couples can start a family, building the necessary wealth to afford the often high costs of surrogacy will take time.

## Buying a home

Buying a property is typically the biggest purchase most people will make in their lifetime. LGBTQ+ people are no different in this regard and homeowners usually have a great deal of their wealth stored in their homes. Your mortgage company can provide estimated costs for the loan interest, taxes, insurance, and fees — but don't forget to include maintenance costs in your home ownership budget.

## Hire an advisor

With 86 percent of LGBTQ+ consumers saying they need support managing their wealth portfolio, finding the right financial advisor is vital for LGBTQ+ people who want to find the best plan for their future goals. Making use of the services of a financial advisor who is experienced in socially responsible investing can offer LGBTQ+ people access to investment portfolios that match their values of equality and non-discrimination.

Different parts of the LGBTQ+ community also deal with expensive milestones that can impact building wealth. For example, for trans

people who self-fund their medical care, tens of thousands of dollars can go into the transition plan, making it even more difficult to create long-term wealth.

There is no silver bullet that addresses all of these challenges, but acknowledging the unique circumstances facing LGBTQ+ people when they work to build wealth is key. In practice, wealth managers may offer tailored investment plans that take into account the need to withdraw funds at certain intervals for major expenditures, such as surrogacy or gender-affirming medical surgery.

## Retirement plans

Without traditional family support structures, many LGBTQ+ people face major challenges as they age. According to research from SAGE, 51% of LGBTQ+ elders are concerned they won't have enough money to support themselves as they age, compared to just 36% of non-LGBTQ+ people.

Preparing for retirement doesn't need to be a complex task, and the sooner you start putting money aside, your financial future becomes more secure. The higher the better, but saving around 10% to 15% of your income for retirement is a typical recommendation. If your employer matches retirement, make sure you're contributing enough to gain the maximum benefit from that match.

Even if accessing a 401(k) isn't possible, starting an individual retirement account (IRA) can be a great alternative to save money for retirement at the same time as benefiting from tax advantages.

For many people in their 20s, 30s, 40s and older, thinking about how to afford a comfortable retirement is often an intimidating task. But overcoming this unease is particularly important for the LGBTQ+ community as

while just 42% of non-LGBTQ+ Americans have no money saved for retirement, this figure increases to 55% for LGBTQ+ people.

## Estate planning

A comprehensive estate plan should include considerations for property transfer, health care, and legal protections. As many LGBTQ+ people may not be married or have children, it's especially important for those in the community to set up a clear plan that defines exactly where assets are to go after death. Further, if you are not married and don't want members of your birth family to make major decisions around health or finances on your behalf, an estate plan would be able to give this responsibility to a person you trust.

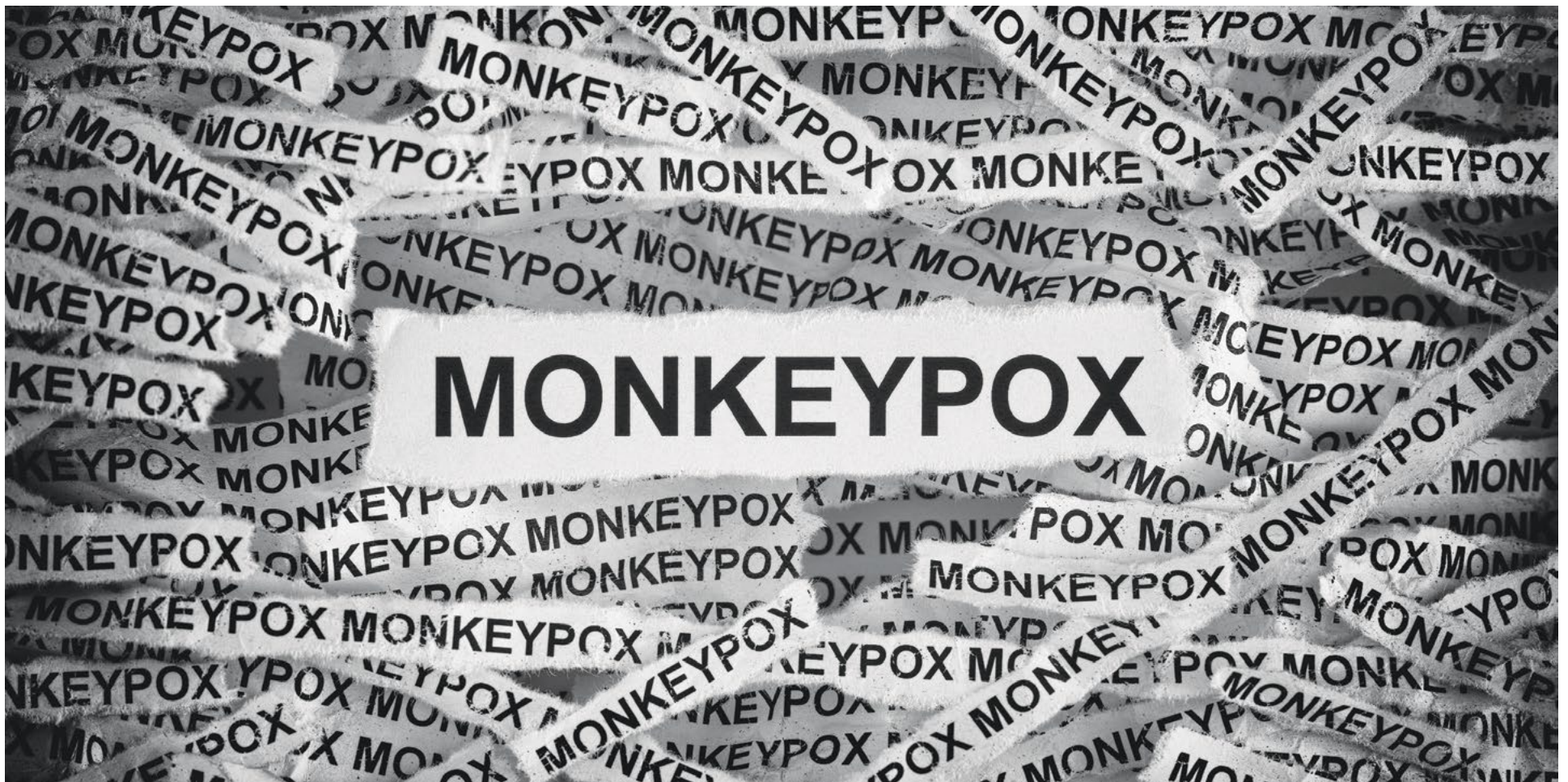
A typical estate plan is made up of four separate components; a will, a revocable trust, an advance health care directive and a power of attorney. Each person will have their own circumstances, and different states have a range of separate estate and inheritance taxes. Speaking with a financial advisor can be a good way to navigate the best method of estate planning, especially to manage wealth and to ensure a straightforward estate.

Despite the unique challenges LGBTQ+ people contend with when it comes to finances, understanding the basics can make a genuine difference to improving your financial security and go a long way to ensure you miss out on common pitfalls that people often fall into.

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# Monkeypox, a ‘Gay Disease’?

Michigan Health Experts on Why Making That Claim Could ‘Cause More Harm in the End’

BY JASON A. MICHAEL

While anyone can get monkeypox, the mainstream media — and some very right of mainstream media — have been reporting that the disease is showing up in larger than average numbers in gay men. This news, local HIV/AIDS advocates say, needs to be presented to the public carefully. Basically, no, monkeypox is not a “gay disease.”

Leon Golson is the prevention manager for Unified – HIV Health and Beyond’s Ypsilanti office. When he first heard on the news that monkeypox was affecting gay men disproportionately, alarm bells went off. He said his immediate thought was, “Here we go again. More ammunition for certain religious factions to say this is another punishment from God because gay men should not be gay. It just brought up all those feelings from when HIV first came on the scene.”

Golson said the media needs to handle the story with caution and think about how they share information about the monkeypox virus.

“This is very new,” he said. “There are things

we don’t know yet. So, proactively, some prudence, I’d say, would be helpful. We don’t want to cause more sensation or controversy.”

Golson had a little advice for the media, and the public in general: “It would really go a long way if we could just take a breath, a beat, and make sure we are straight on our facts and deliberate on how we’re educating people and the words we are using so that we don’t cause more harm in the end,” he said.

Media outlets first picked up on the “gay disease” angle after the CDC announced Monday, May 23 that the virus is of particular risk to gay men. Dr. John Brooks, chief medical officer of the CDC’s Division of HIV/AIDS Prevention, said the CDC was making the announcement now, just ahead of LGBTQ+ Pride Month, with a goal of reducing transmissions.

“Some groups may have a greater chance of exposure right now, but by no means is the current risk of exposure to monkeypox exclusively to the gay and bisexual community in the U.S.,” Brooks said, stressing that while “anyone, anyone” can contract monkeypox,

“many of those affected in the current global outbreak identified as gay and bisexual men.”

The United Nations’ AIDS Agency (UNAID) said in a statement released the same day as the telebriefing that homophobic news coverage of the monkeypox outbreak is hurting the LGBTQ+ community.

“Lessons from the AIDS response show that stigma and blame directed at certain groups of people can rapidly undermine outbreak response,” the statement read in part.

In the U.S., the Infectious Diseases Society of America and the HIV Medicine Association issued a joint statement Thursday condemning the “use of racist and homophobic language” with regard to the monkeypox outbreak.

“As we have repeatedly learned with HIV, substance use disorders, COVID-19 and other diseases, stigmatizing language that casts blame on specific communities undermines disease response and discourages those who need treatment from seeking it,” the statement reads. “Monkeypox is spread through close physical contact, and no one community is biologically more at risk than another. Viruses

do not recognize global borders or social networks. Stigma has no place in medicine or public health.”

Local psychotherapist Joe Kort, who heads the Royal Oak-based Center for Relationship and Sexual Health, said he has a problem with the coverage of monkeypox and the mention of gay men alongside it.

“I don’t know why they don’t say in the story that, while this is spreading amongst gay men, it’s incidental and correlated because of their activities, not causation,” Kort said. “That’s what should be said in each story to ensure we are not stigmatized again as we were in the ‘80s and ‘90s.”

Kort went on to say that although he is HIV negative, he lived through the AIDS crisis and the monkeypox coverage is bringing back some painful memories.

“I definitely do see echoes of the HIV crisis,” he said. “It is very upsetting to me. I did not contract HIV, but I went through the crisis, so when I read that information, I feel afraid, ashamed and infuriated. And I know that’s happening to other gay men as well.”



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## United as Coworkers, United in LGBTQ+ Pride at United Wholesale Mortgage

### Diversity a Core Focus at This Large Southeast Michigan Company

Many LGBTQ+ workers seem to live double lives. Off the clock, they might feel comfortable to relax and express themselves freely, but once the workday begins, they seem to embody different people, completely separate from who they really are. For some LGBTQ+ workers, this can mean masking their gender or identity to sidestep the very real prospect of harassment, ostracization or stunting their career growth.

United Wholesale Mortgage (UWM) in Pontiac, wants to erase the line between work and “real life” identity. Here, diversity and inclusion are more than buzzwords or bullet points in a job posting. The company has

poured resources into developing a vibrant, comprehensive diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) program that is deeply connected to each individual employee, across all business areas.

UWM is a workplace that not only promotes diversity, it values it as a core focus.

### United Pride: connecting and affirming UWM LGBTQ+ team members and allies

Adam Smock, Underwriting Trainer, leads UWM’s United Pride group, one of the company’s resource groups, (known elsewhere as employee resource groups or ERG’s). He says the group was initially founded to provide a safe, friendly way for employees to connect with other members and allies of the LGBTQ+

community at UWM.

While the United Pride group is still in its early stages, the group plans to make it a resource for news, information and resources specific to the LGBTQ+ community. “We are building a forum for unity, safety, partnership and personal, as well as professional, growth,” he says.

The group hosts periodic social events and other activities that bring people together to build relationships and enhance understanding of the LGBTQ+ community at UWM. During Pride Month, United Pride will ramp up its efforts by putting together internal charity events, partnering with Affirmations, hosting a Pride Walk and providing opportunities for education across the company’s campus.

Rhyan Frost, Senior Underwriter, considers United Pride a “safe, inclusive space for individuals to come together in pride and love.” The group’s outreach efforts, she says, “celebrate the different cultural communities at UWM.”

United Pride plays an integral role in increasing representation among all team members. For example, Frost says a recent meeting focused on ways the community can increase the representation of trans team members. “It warms my heart that leadership from our Diversity, Equity and Inclusion team were already working on getting with some team members from this community just to check in with them, to see if there is anything UWM could be doing better, or more of, in this regard,” she says.





Photos: United Wholesale Mortgage

## UWM Resource Groups provide links to larger community, deliver valuable business insights and promote career growth

UWM team members have several resource groups available to them on a daily basis, all of which serve as forums for education, celebrating diversity and act as bridges between team members from different backgrounds.

Aaron Sims, Diversity and Inclusion Coach says one of the main goals for these groups is to provide networks where people who are part of different communities can network and see representation of their community across different areas of the business. “We want all of our team members to be put in a position where they can excel and grow in the workplace,” he says. “We hope these groups not only serve as educational and acceptance tools, but also foster professional growth and leadership opportunities for folks at any stage in their careers.”

Sims mentioned they also want to provide spaces for team members who aren’t part of a specific community to join and learn more about the people around them. “Most people are open to learning about other communities,” he says. “Our resource groups are like open invitations to start these conversations and dialogues around the workplace, further fostering the goal of true inclusion at UWM.”

UWM resource groups also provide valuable business insights for the company. “There are things about our business, both internally and externally, that can be learned by getting feedback from these communities,” he explains.

“Our company is truly dedicated to getting better every day, so having collective feedback and perspective from these communities allows us to learn more about supporting our team members better, as well as how we can better serve our clients.”

Sims says UWM’s involvement in the community sends a positive message that the company is an advocate for its people. “I truly believe the most impactful way to make a difference is by growing the people in the company by expanding their perspectives and challenging mindsets,” he says. “We’re a large company and our reach extends not just to UWM team members, but to the people they interact with on a day-to-day basis. The awareness and lessons you learn in our workplace will spill into your everyday life and impact others around you.”

Sims notes that the biggest connecting factor between millions of people in the U.S. is that most people spend a significant part of their lives at work. “It just makes sense that the workplace is the best, most impactful place to grow people,” he says.

### ‘I am safe to stand strong’

For Smock, “Be You Here” encompasses who he is, inside and outside of work. “It’s about my ability to be a proud gay man, father, colleague, friend and teacher all in one place, without the need to hide or make excuses,” he explains. “‘Be You Here’ gives me the feeling that I am safe to bring my full self to work.” At UWM, he says, people are encouraged to seek out coaching and

education about acceptance and unity — a stark contrast to the way many companies approach issues in the workplace around diversity.

Frost considers UWM’s “Be You Here” motto something she feels on a deeply personal level. “As someone who has dealt with discrimination in the workplace, this effort is huge to me,” she says. “For me, it means I can come into work with my locs down, in my boots, button-up, and wooden bowtie, and talk to my coworkers about what my wife and I did over the weekend.”

Frost recalls one of the first moments when she realized she was working somewhere special — a true example of “Be You Here” in action. “There were about 3,000 of us at my first All Underwriting meeting, and at one point, a VP at UWM took the stage,” she says. “This was the first time in my life that I had the privilege to listen to someone in leadership — a VP at this new company I’d joined — get up in front of thousands of team members and tell a story about him and his husband.” Frost considers this experience the most empowering moment she has had as a gay woman.

Anthony Dunkley, Operations Specialist, says that to him, “Be You Here” means he can be himself, especially as a Jamaican transgender man. “We have a wide variety of opportunities to experience different cultures, from food in our UCafe to different events like our dance parties, where we often celebrate different heritages such as Diwali and Hispanic Heritage Month,” he says.

### Diversity and inclusion are at the heart of what makes UWM unique

Frost says that UWM’s culture is set apart from other workplaces in large part because the

company actually follows through on its promise to protect diversity and inclusion. “Many places I’ve worked for in the past have claimed to have a ‘family mentality’ or ‘promote diversity,’ but shortly after becoming employed, the façade begins to fade,” she recalls. “You realize soon that you are right back in the same boat. At UWM, we burn the boats and help each other on a path to success, professionally and personally. Not every day is easy, but it’s the people around me that help support me and get me through it, and ultimately make UWM a great place to work.”

Dunkley says UWM is unique in the way it celebrates diversity in various ways, with a focus on celebrating people. “My team lead once told me that when you invest more into people, success will follow,” he says.

“Our differences make us unique and should be embraced,” Frost adds. “We want to know what holidays you celebrate, what food you make, why you sing the songs that you do, what your childhood was like... We want you to dress in the clothes you like, we want you to be called what you want to be called.”

“Our people are our greatest asset, and you can’t be the best ‘you’ if you aren’t given room to be yourself.”

*This article is a sponsored editorial produced in collaboration with United Wholesale Mortgage. Between The Lines’s journalism is made possible with the support and partnership of advertisers like UWM. Learn more at [www.uwm.com](http://www.uwm.com).*



# Your 2022 Michigan LGBTQ+ Pride Calendar

Compiled by Sarah Bricker Hunt and Jason A. Michael

It's that time of year again — and let's just hope that this summer there's no surge and the only masks we see are feathered and bedazzled.

For the first time since 2020, the state's Pride schedule will basically return to normal as all events, many held virtually during the pandemic, will once again head outside.

As of now, there will be over 30 Pride celebrations taking place across



the state. This is a record number and no small feat. Most celebrations will return in person this year. But not all events take place during Pride Month in June. Check out our schedule below, and visit [Pridesource.com](https://pridesource.com) for updates.

## June

### Saturday, June 11

**Jackson Pride Family Picnic.** 11 a.m.-2 p.m. Meet up at Horace Blackman Park in downtown Jackson for a family-friendly picnic featuring activities, music and games. Bring your own blankets and chairs and enjoy a provided meal (\$3 per person) or pack your own. [facebook.com/events/2808113452825984/](https://facebook.com/events/2808113452825984/)



### Saturday, June 18

**Grand Rapids Pride.** The Grand Rapids Pride Festival, billed as "Together Again," celebrates its 34th anniversary. The festival has grown to become one of the largest single-day events in Grand Rapids. [grpride.org](https://grpride.org)

**Grosse Pointe Pride.** Grosse Pointe's annual family-friendly LGBTQA Pride March hosted by WeGP. [facebook.com/gppride/](https://facebook.com/gppride/)

**St. Johns Pride Fest.** Noon-4 p.m. Expect live entertainment, resource tables, food trucks and more at the second installment of this annual downtown event.

### Sunday, June 19

**Rochester Pride.** 1-4 p.m. Rochester Municipal Park, Kiwanis Pavilion, 400 6th St., Rochester.

### Saturday, June 25

**Benton Harbor Pride Fest in the Park and After Party.** 3-6 p.m. This year's fest will be bigger than ever, taking place on Main Street at the Dwight P. Mitchell City Center Park. The event will feature food trucks, music, sponsors, local

artisans and family activities. The adults-only After Party at the Livery runs from 8-10 p.m. [outcenter.org/pridefest-2022/](https://outcenter.org/pridefest-2022/)

**Flint Pride.** 2-8 p.m. This annual festival features live music, entertainment, food, educational information, merchandise booths, a pin-up contest and children's activities. [facebook.com/flintgaypride](https://facebook.com/flintgaypride)

**Great Lakes Bay Pride.** Billed as a family-friendly festival, Great Lakes Bay Pride takes place in Bay City and will include a health screening area, live entertainment, a children's activity area, LGBTQ+ resources and food and beverage vendors. [greatlakesbaypride.org](https://greatlakesbaypride.org)

**Holland Pride Festival.**

Noon-5 p.m. The "Stronger Together" festival will be held in Holland's Centennial Park. [outonthelakeshore.org/holland-pride/](https://outonthelakeshore.org/holland-pride/)

### Sunday, June 26

**Downtown Berkley Pride Block Party.** Noon-4 p.m. The first annual Berkley Pride Block Party is a free, family-friendly event that will feature a DJ, food trucks, entertainment, games, kids' crafts and more. [downtownberkley.com/berkeleypride](https://downtownberkley.com/berkeleypride)

**Macomb County Pride Picnic.** Noon-4 p.m. at Dodge Park (Pavilion #2) in Sterling Heights. BYOB(lanquet) and picnic basket, and enjoy music and yard games. \$5 suggested donation. [macombcountypride.com](https://macombcountypride.com)

**Lansing Pride Rally at the Capitol.** Noon-2 p.m. Speakers, entertainment and more. [facebook.com/MichiganPride](https://facebook.com/MichiganPride)



longest-running Black LGBTQ+ Pride event. The 2022 celebration will feature live music (including headlining rapper Da Brat), vendors and LGBTQ+ resources. [lgbtdetroit.org/hotterthanjuly](https://lgbtdetroit.org/hotterthanjuly)

## July

### Saturday, July 9

**South Lyon LGBT+ Pride Event.** Noon-4 p.m. at McHattie Park in downtown South Lyon and hosted by South Lyon Pride and Free Mom Hugs of MI, this event will feature vendors, music and entertainment, food trucks, face painting, art activities, drag queen story time and more. [facebook.com/SouthLyonPride/](https://facebook.com/SouthLyonPride/)

### Friday, July 15

**Battle Creek Pride.** 1-7 p.m. Following a parade in downtown Battle Creek, the festival will take place at Leila Arboretum and feature vendors, food trucks, music, and a drag show hosted by Sasha Banks. [battlecreekpride.org](https://battlecreekpride.org)

**Hotter Than July.** Through July 17. This wildly popular LGBT Detroit event is the world's

## August

### Friday, August 12

**Royal Oak PRIDE.** Through Aug. 13. 20,000 attendees are expected at this large Pride event in downtown Royal Oak along Washington Street. The event will feature live music (including national and local acts), vendors and artists. Organizers say Royal Oak PRIDE will "create a space for all people of the LGBTQ+ community and celebrate unity and the many things that make us similar." [facebook.com/RoyalOakPride](https://facebook.com/RoyalOakPride)

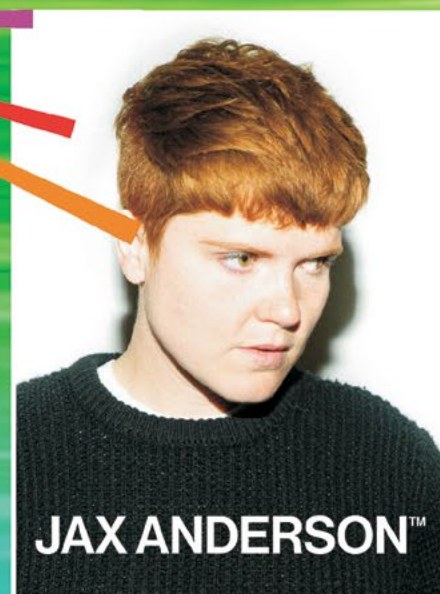
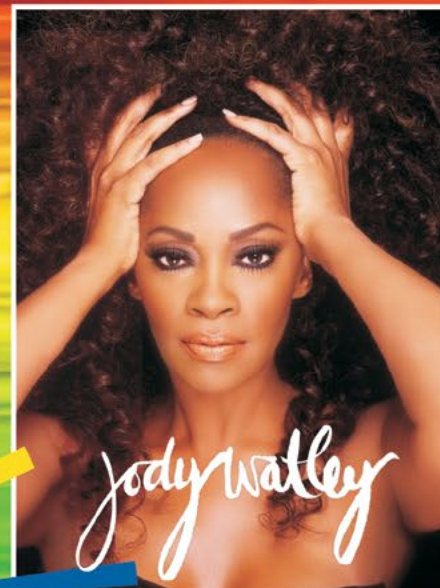
### Saturday, August 13

**Lansing Pride.** 1-10 p.m. Lansing Pride will take place in Old Town

See [Pride Calendar](#), page 38



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# Pride Stage

Sponsored by MGM Grand Detroit

## Saturday, June 11, 2022

Time	Act
1:00 p.m.	Sing Out
2:00 p.m.	JonPaul Wallace
3:00 p.m.	TYLR_
4:00 p.m.	Alizabeth Von Presley
5:00 p.m.	Sabin
7:30 p.m.	Jody Watley
8:00 p.m.	DJ JOHNB
<b>9:00 p.m.</b>	<b>Closes</b>

## Sunday, June 12, 2022

Noon	Loading...
2:00 p.m.	PRISM
3:00 p.m.	Miss Bouvée
4:00 p.m.	Otto
5:00 p.m.	Jax Anderson
6:30 p.m.	DJ named Loading...
<b>7:00 p.m.</b>	<b>Closes</b>

# Riverfront Dance Stage

## Saturday, June 11, 2022

Time	Act
1:00 p.m.	xtrMayo
2:30 p.m.	DJ JOHNB
4:00 p.m.	Cooper Crank
5:30 p.m.	Metawav
7:00 p.m.	Mac Diesel
<b>9:00 p.m.</b>	<b>Closes</b>

## Sunday, June 12, 2022

Noon	MONiCO
1:30 p.m.	Garrison XR
3:00 p.m.	REEM
5:00 p.m.	Wreckno
<b>7:00 p.m.</b>	<b>Closes</b>

Schedules are

## 2022 SPONSORS





# Pyramid Stage

Saturday, June 11, 2022

Time	Act
1:30 p.m.	HIM HIM
3:00 p.m.	Julie H.
4:00 p.m.	Kendra Baker
5:00 p.m.	Cullen Blue
6:00 p.m.	Darvon
7:00 p.m.	Destiny S
8:00 p.m.	Closes

Sunday, June 12, 2022

1:00 p.m.	Out Loud Chorus
2:30 p.m.	Versace James
3:30 p.m.	Crystal Harding
6:00 p.m.	Closes

# Festival Stage

Saturday, June 11, 2022

Time	Act
1:00 p.m.	Wake Up Jamie
2:00 p.m.	Anthony J Fink
3:00 p.m.	Katie Stanley
4:00 p.m.	Rodeo Boys
5:00 p.m.	Nuke & the Nightshift
6:00 p.m.	The Doozers
7:00 p.m.	Corry Michaels
8:00 p.m.	Closes

Sunday, June 12, 2022

1:00 p.m.	Grand Circus
2:00 p.m.	Summer Like The Season
3:00 p.m.	Urban Muse
4:00 p.m.	Drew Schultz
5:00 p.m.	The Band Mint
6:00 p.m.	Closes



**SATURDAY**  
Welcome Gates Open at 1 p.m.

**FESTIVAL EVENTS 1 - 9 p.m.**

**Four Stages of Entertainment Featuring over 50 Artists!**  
Over 120 Sponsors, Vendors, Non-Profits & Food Booths, plus thousands of LGBTQ+ people coming together for Equality!

**1 - 5 p.m.** Family Area with youth activities and games (See page 19)

**8 p.m.** Festival Entrance Closes (No Admission or Re-Entry after 8pm)

**9 p.m.** Festival Closes

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**SUNDAY**  
Welcome Gates Open at 12:30 p.m.

**FESTIVAL EVENTS 12:30 - 7 p.m.**

**Four Stages of Entertainment Featuring over 50 Artists!**  
Over 120 Sponsors, Vendors, Non-Profits & Food Booths, plus thousands of LGBTQ+ people coming together for Equality!

**Noon** 2022 Motor City Pride Parade Sponsored by Jeep (See page 27)

**1 - 5 p.m.** Family Area with youth activities and games (See page 19)

**6 p.m.** Festival Entrance Closes (No Admission or Re-Entry after 8pm)

**7 p.m.** Festival Closes

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# PARADE

Presented by



# Sunday, June 12 Starts at Noon

Starts at the corner of Fort and Griswald

Join us in celebrating Pride and, honoring Jaye Spiro who will be leading the parade as this years Grand Marshal.

subject to change. Check the website [www.motorcitypride.org](http://www.motorcitypride.org) for any last minute updates.







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- CNS Healthcare
- Come Out! In Detroit
- Community Health Awareness Group
- COR Counseling, Community Services
- Crystalline Dream
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- MI Organization on Adolescent Health
- MI State Police Recruiting
- Michigan HIV/AIDS Council
- Mo Pop Festival
- Moosejaw Mountaineering
- Mr. Hyde's Leather Masks
- Nayetaye Visuals
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- Northshore University HealthSystem
- Ollie Onyx
- One Church Detroit
- Outdoor Adventures Resort
- Paparazzi Accessories
- PRISM Men's Chorus
- Quality Roots
- Queerest Gear
- Rainbow Love
- Rebels Rainbow Store
- Revival Threads
- SAGE Metro Detroit
- Samaritas Foster Care
- SEMHAC Planning Council
- Sing Out Detroit Chorus
- Six Feet Over
- Stewie's Got Pride
- Sui Gen Skin and Blends
- Summit Street A Capella
- Sunday Assembly Detroit
- Sunset Toys
- Support the T TextNow
- The 1701 Kid Brand
- The Inner Edge
- The Pride State
- To Write Love on Her Arm
- Together We Can
- Tri-County Foster Care Coalition
- Twisted Willow Soap Company
- Unified - HIV Health and Beyond
- Unite Here! Local 24
- Vibe Media
- Vicious Fruit
- WSU Prevention Team



# Family Activities



**Saturday**  
June 11th  
1:00-5:00 p.m.

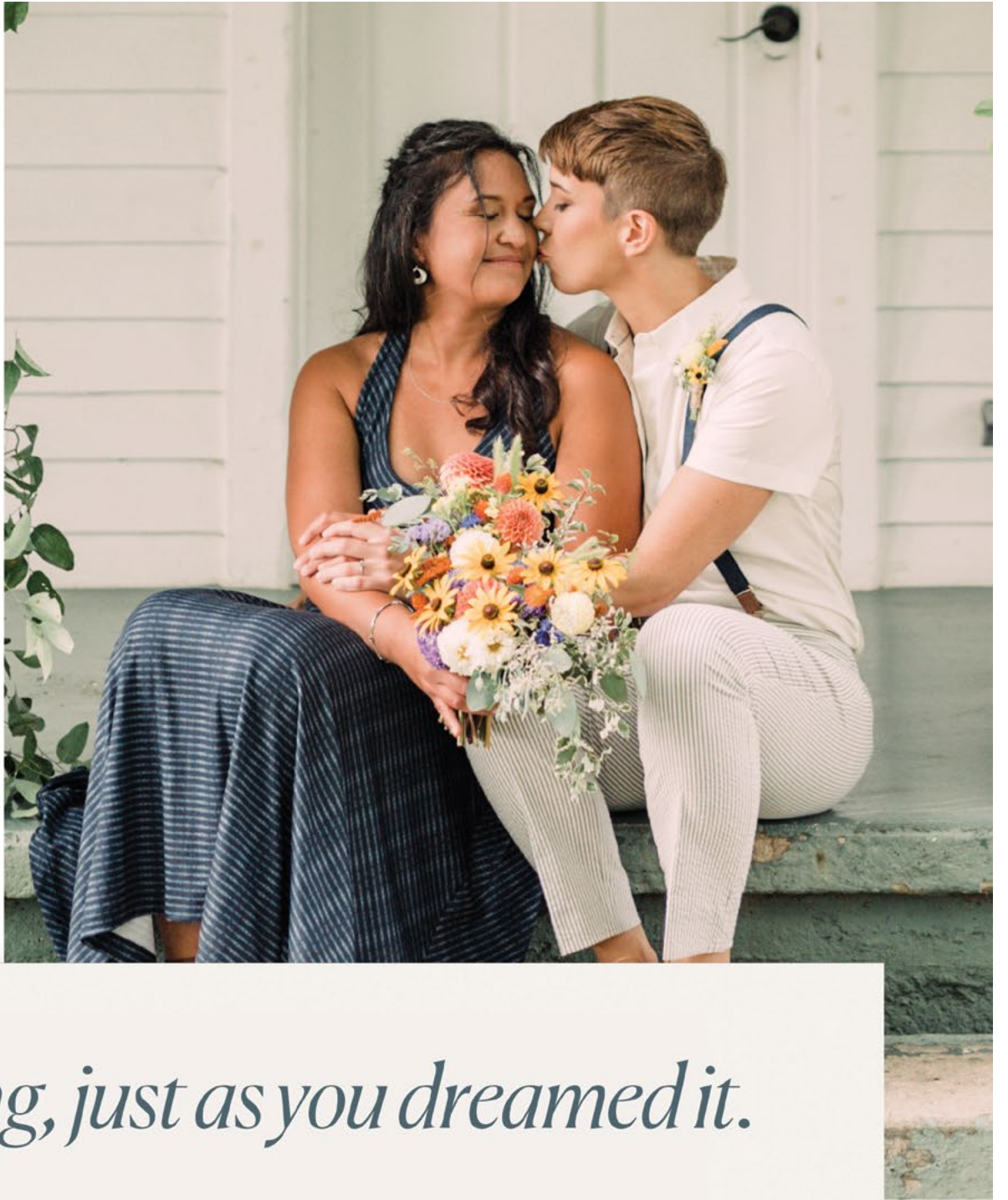
**Sunday**  
June 12th  
1:00-5:00 p.m.

Join other families as they participate in face painting, arts and crafts, plus much more!

## PARADE MAP SUNDAY AT NOON!







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Photo by Lola Grace Photography





# LGBTQ+ Teens Create Pride Shirt to Represent Their Queer Chosen Family

## Sales Benefit Their Affirmations' Youth Group

BY JASON A. MICHAEL

The youth group at Affirmations LGBTQ+ community center in Ferndale has, for the second year in a row, designed a T-shirt for sale. All proceeds from the tee, priced at \$35-40, goes back into the youth group.

Justin Bettcher, Affirmation's community engagement manager, said the group worked to design something fun, colorful and non-traditional. "The youth were very vocal about wanting the design to be inclusive," Bettcher said. "So I just kind of sat back and let them give all of their ideas."

After brainstorming over Zoom calls, the group incorporated several ideas into the final design. "I enjoyed that we got to create it together and come up with ideas," said 15-year-old Tia



Finn Sasha.

Campbell. "I really wanted the tree on it. I thought that was cute."

The tree concept is 15-year-old Anthony Pete's creation. "I said, 'What if we do a tree design?' and the rest of the group really went with it," Pete said. "A close second was we were going to do a cat with a Band-Aid on it, but the Band-Aid didn't end up looking right. So we went with the tree."

Bettcher said the tree has many meanings. "Tia said it shows growth," he said. "Someone else said, 'It's a family tree since we are all chosen family.' It was great just to see all the youth come together and see everyone respond favorably to the design."

Pete says responses to the design outside the group have been favorable too. "I don't regret anything about the design in general," he said. "I'm very proud to wear it around the house or outside. People have been giving me compliments about it — I love it."

Campbell adds that the black fabric is "extremely comfortable" and "breathable." "Honestly, I love it," she said. "It's perfect for summer."

Finn Sasha, 16, only joined the program recently and wasn't around for the design process. Still, he said he is pleased with the results. "When I got it and looked at the colors, I loved it," he said.

All three youth say that the center's youth program is a blessing and beneficial to them.

"I am coming up on two years now," Campbell said. "I love the community, and I love learning different stuff ... things that are actually helpful, that will impact me at some point."

Sasha, the newbie, agreed. "It's only been a few weeks so far but, honestly, I feel more welcome than I have anywhere else," he said. "Before going there, I didn't really know any people my age who were on testosterone or had the experience that I did. But I met people, and I just felt so safe, like I was a part of something."

*The Affirmations youth group T-shirt is available for purchase at the center, which is located at 290 West Nine Mile Road in Ferndale. For hours and more information, visit [goaffirmations.org](http://goaffirmations.org).*



## → Pride Calendar

Continued from page 32

Lansing along Turner Street, featuring music, food, kids activities, Story Time with a Drag Queen and much more. [lansingpride.org](http://lansingpride.org)

### Sunday, August 14

**Hazel Park Pride.** Noon-8 p.m. The second annual family-friendly Hazel Park Pride, billed as a "Star-Studded Show Under the Big Pavilion," will take place in Green Acres Park and feature three pavilions offering drinks, entertainment, family-friendly activities, carnival-style games and more. [facebook.com/events/1091408841722825/](https://facebook.com/events/1091408841722825/)

### Saturday, August 20

**Jackson Pride Festival.** 3-8 p.m. Jackson Pride returns to Horace Blackman Park in downtown Jackson following a parade down W. Michigan Avenue starting at Consumers Energy Plaza. Stick around after the parade for food booths, live entertainment, family-friendly activities and more. [facebook.com/jxnmpride/](https://facebook.com/jxnmpride/)

## September

### Saturday, Sept. 10

**Branch County Pride Festival.** 2-8 p.m. Attendees will enjoy food booths, live entertainment, a pet parade, performances by MI

Startz Cheer Team and LaFemme Dance, a drag show and more at this family-friendly event in Parkhurst Park. [branchpride.com](http://branchpride.com)

### Sunday, Sept. 11

**Ann Arbor Pride in the Park.** Noon-5 p.m. Vendors, entertainment, food, and more. [facebook.com/AnnArborPride/](https://facebook.com/AnnArborPride/)

### Wednesday, Sept. 28

**UP North Pride.** Through Oct. 2. Held each year in Traverse City, UP North Pride Week features a comedy night at the City Opera House, the Visibility March, drag performances, Sunday brunch and more. [upnorthpride.com](http://upnorthpride.com)



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SCAN ME





# Bowen (Island) on fire

Photo: Mary Ellen Matthews/NBC

## He's Here, He's Queer, and Now the 'SNL' Juggernaut Leads His Very First (Very Gay) Film

BY CHRIS AZZOPARDI

Maybe Bowen Yang will just forever live the Fire Island fantasy wherever he is. Is that what happens when you make a movie in what many consider gay paradise? Who knows, but based on Yang's attire on Zoom — a beaded, rainbow-colored flower necklace and a casual white-and-blue checkered shirt, his white undershirt exposed — the Australian-born Chinese American actor looks ready to challenge the rich, white gays known for essentially claiming the queer party town, just off the southern shore of Long Island, New York, as their own.

But not in Hulu's "Fire Island," a movie that can make us believe it isn't exclusive to any group as a boatload of intersectional queers — the main friend group is refreshingly Asian American and Black — sail away to the island for more than just wild nights and romantic seashore walks. They know what they're getting into — drugs, drinking, and all those white gays — and they're the kind of besties who know exactly what's on everyone's Fire Island agenda.

For some, obviously, that's a little more than a snuggle. For Howie, though, that *is* a snuggle. Yang plays Howie, and his very good friend Noah (Joel Kim Booster, who wrote the script as a modern retelling of "Pride and Prejudice") knows that Howie won't ever be the slut he wants him to be. That, of course, doesn't stop him from trying to whore out Howie. After all, that's just what good friends do! "You're cute, you're funny, you're consistently the least repellent of men out of all of us," he tells Howie, earnestly.

The same could be said of Yang, who's gained an avid following since he started writing for "Saturday Night Live" in 2018. Just a year later, when he was promoted to featured cast member, he made history as the first-ever Chinese American cast member (and third openly gay male cast member after Terry Sweeney and John Milhiser).

In a recent conversation, Yang chatted about being a leading man for the first time, not being recognized in

a West Hollywood gay bar recently, and infusing his own signature queer flavor into "Saturday Night Live."

**Every time I watch a queer movie, I just wish it existed sooner.**

Is that like our lot in audience life? I think we're just gonna think that for everything. For me, and I don't mean to undermine this thought, but even if it's a perfectly fine-to-bad queer movie — not saying that our movie is those things — but add it to the pile!

**So the whole time I was watching "Fire Island," I wanted to know how you got cast as Howie, the non-slutty character? Specifically the non-slutty part.**

I think Joel was doing this great thing, which is to map it onto our friendship a bit while also mapping it onto the source material of "Pride and Prejudice" and having it be like Jane and Liz. But then also just outlining the ways that a lot of queer people, and maybe specifically gay men, might not share an organizing principle in that way. Like, there are some people who really go for it and just catch as many Pokémon as they can, so to speak, and there are some who choose not to.

**I mean, in my 20s I was definitely a Howie.**

Oh, and then that shifted?

**It did shift. And it feels good.**

Great. I think maybe that's in store for me.

**In 105 minutes, this film takes on body positivity, prejudiced gays, horny gays, non-horny gays, infighting... Was there a lot of conversation about what this movie would cover?**

I mean, if you create a liberated space for people, then their thoughts might kind of reach just a bit beyond the pale in a setting outside of that. And so I think Joel's whole thesis for the movie is "what happens when gay people go to an all-gay space, and then gay people

See **Bowen Yang**, page 46

[www.PrideSource.com](http://www.PrideSource.com)



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Davison Sarai. Photo: John McEvers

# Certified Badass

## On and Off the Mat, Davison Sarai Is Advocating For Trans Kids

BY NAYANIKA GUHA

For Davison Sarai, a 46-year old queer transwoman from Michigan, wrestling was a way to escape what was happening at home. An alcoholic father and a home life marked by domestic violence did not make for an easy childhood. So she used wrestling, skateboarding and video games as a way to get out of her own head, even if only for a little while.

Sarai's journey to becoming a professional wrestler wasn't straightforward. In 1999, when she was in college, before she transitioned, she

visited a wrestling school with a friend, but it didn't quite work out back then. "It was so hard. And, you know, we were both in college. We couldn't drop our real lives to do this thing. We were not tough enough to do that," she says.

"But I just have a big mouth. And I started doing a podcast about wrestling," she adds.

This is where her journey in the wrestling world officially began, in 2019. Her friend Mark Frankhouse introduced her to a radio station to do the podcast. Later, he introduced Sarai to the person who owns Independence Pro Wrestling (IPW), which invited the pair to do commentary for his company. Meanwhile,

the pandemic was happening. Locked down, bored, and feeling like she was getting out of shape, she decided to start training to get fit.

"I had no plans to wrestle. I just wanted to work out," she says.

But within two practices, her affinity for wrestling was clear. And she picked up on it quickly. Sarai has been training for about 18 months and debuted as a professional wrestler last October.

Right away, Sarai started racking up wins. She beat a well known women's wrestler from the Midwest in her debut match and won the Women's Championship. She was also named

Rookie of the Year for 2021.

Today, she serves as chairwoman of IPW's Mental Wellness Taskforce. "I became like an authority figure in the wrestling company, where if wrestlers needed a psych evaluation, that was me," says Sarai, a licensed professional counselor. "If somebody needed to be disqualified and put in the hospital for the weekend, that was me."

However, being a transwoman in the wrestling world has come with unique challenges. Sarai says that she knows certain promoters have refused to work with her. "I have been told there are certain promoters who will not — absolutely will not — give me a job because they don't want me wrestling. In their opinion, I'm not a 'real woman,'" she says. "It's pretty clear. It's just an opportunity for people to be nasty and transphobic openly."

Sarai says she does feel scared attending wrestling events in areas farther from home, especially in the South. Being away from the support system that she has built in West Michigan is challenging; she says not knowing how an audience might react is "spooky."

Sarai has also faced mixed responses on social media. Some people have been overwhelmingly supportive, others not so much. Sarai has found creative ways to combat online harassment. When an article about her went up on the website of a local media station, she could already anticipate what she'd read in the comment section. It was good for her career, to get noticed, and so she decided to do the piece, but she also recruited a team of people to respond to the negative comments, "to completely change the narrative," she says. "A lot of us went to 'Facebook Jail,' because you're not allowed to be bullies. That's the narrative, right? That you're discriminating against the people who are leaving hateful comments."

Sarai has also had to deal with a double standard, wherein people say "I like you as a person, but I think it's unfair. I don't think trans women should be able to compete." When these critics are looking her in the face, she says they're not only saying that generally speaking trans women should not be able to compete, they are also directing their comment at her. "You can't be theoretical, right in my face. If you're going to ask me, you're being personal," she says.

It's not all been bad, though. Sarai has found a lot of support among the wrestling community, especially the women. Her identity has also been crucial in how she relates to her patients as a licensed professional counselor, which is her day job. "There is a marketability to be a transgender therapist who can work with the transgender community and actually understand what people are going through," she says.

She has heard horror stories about transgender clients being forced to see therapists who were not accepting and harmful to the client's wellbeing, and she believes her position uniquely allows her to help trans clients. She has managed to make a name for herself, in part

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# NÜTRL™



## SUMMER CONCERT SERIES • WILDWOOD AMPITHEATER

DATE	FEATURED ARTIST	OPENING ACT
June 09-	Jim McCarty's Mystery Train w/sg Pat Smillie	Carl Henry
June 10-	JOVI (Bon Jovi Tribute)	Infinity & Beyond (Journey Tribute)
June 11-	Parrots of the Caribbean (Jimmy Buffet Tribute)	Don Middlebrook
June 14-	North Oakland Concert Band	FREE CONCERT
June 16-	Rock Harley as Johnny Cash	Longneck Allstars
June 17-	Rockstar (Tribute to Rock's Greatest)	Mike Leslie   MTV's Moon Man
June 18-	Red Not Chili Peppers (RHCP Tribute)	Choking Susan
June 21-	Lake Orion High School Band	FREE CONCERT
June 23-	Paz!Man SuperSession (Blues)	Sweet Willie Tea (One-Man-Band)
June 24- TACO FEST:	Moving in Stereo (Cars Tribute)	The MYSTERIANS
June 25- TACO FEST:	Latin Infusion Tributes to Selena   Ricky Martin   Marc Antony   Gloria Estefan and more...	
June 26- TACO FEST:	The SANTANA Project Sean Blackman's "In Transit"   La Corporacion	
June 28-	Shattered (Rolling Stones Tribute)	FREE CONCERT
June 30-	American Ride (Toby Keith Tribute)	Audrey Ray
July 01- RIB FEST:	Mitch Ryder w/sg The Boss (Springsteen Tribute)	Dr Pocket (Chicago Tribute)
July 02- RIB FEST:	Forever 27 - Janis Joplin   Jimi Hendrix	The Detroit Doors
July 03- RIB FEST:	War Machine (Kiss Tribute) Serious Moonlight (Bowie Tribute)	Revival (Allman Brothers Tribute)
July 04- RIB FEST:	Night Moves (Bob Seger Tribute)	The Gambler (Kenny Rogers Tribute)
July 05-	AIR NATIONAL GUARD Band of the Midwest	FREE CONCERT
July 07-	Thornetta Davis - Motor City's Queen of the Blues	Caleb Gutierrez
July 08-	King of Pop (Michael Jackson Tribute)	Super Funk Jen
July 09-	Purple Madness (Prince Tribute)	Melanie Rutherford's Phat Greazy
July 12-	The Look (Motor City Rock Legends)	FREE CONCERT
July 14-	Jennifer Westwood w/sg Hard Luck Pete	Brandon Calhoon
July 15-	Barb Payton's Led Zeppelin Experience	Chit
July 16-	FAME Monster (Madonna   Lady Gaga Tribute)	Lily McPhee
July 19-	Byron Cancelmo's Legacy Show (Vegas Style Revue)	FREE CONCERT
July 21-	Papa Kiszka & the Voortex Blues Band	Maggie's Farm
July 22-	Teddy Petty & the Refugees (Tom Petty Tribute)	RAPUTA (J Geils Tribute)
July 23-	Nivvana (Nirvana Tribute)	Porch (Pearl Jam Tribute)
July 26-	Persuasion (Straight-up PARTY)	FREE CONCERT
July 28-	The Jill Jack Band	Steve Taylor Trio
July 29-31	TOMMYSTOCK @ Camp Agawam	TBA
August 02-	Cast Iron Cornbread (Pop, Rock & Blues)	FREE CONCERT
August 04-	AT LAST - A Salute to Etta James	The Bobby Murray Band
August 05-	ROCK Never Stops - Def Leppard   Poison   Ratt	Armageddon, Rock of Love, RattTrapp
August 09-	Dig A Phony (Beatles Tribute)	FREE CONCERT
August 11-	Ashley Lynn's "Queens Of Country Music +"	Bernadette Kathryn & the Lonely Days Band
August 12-	Boy Band Review	Super Funk Jen
August 18-	The Reefermen (Blues, Rock & Funk)	The Barbeque Sisters
August 19-	ROCKSTAR (Tribute to Rock's Greatest)	The Lyons



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Neil McCaffrey and Jeremiah Porter in "The Fantasticks." Photo courtesy of Flint Repertory Theatre

# A History-Making Play in Michigan, Now with a Queer Twist

## 'The Fantasticks,' Originally with Straight Characters, Played Off-Broadway for 50-Plus Years

BY BRIDGETTE M. REDMAN

Michael Lluberes was in middle school when he first encountered the 1960s musical "The Fantasticks," and he immediately thought of Luisa, the young, idealistic girl who falls in love with the boy next door, as a gay boy.

"Honestly, from the very beginning, I really identified with her," said Lluberes, who serves as the artistic director of Flint Repertory Theatre. "The idea of this odd boy in the middle of nowhere who had these enormous feelings who thought she was really, really special and nobody understood her."

Now, decades later, Lluberes is the catalyst for an updated production of the show. Opening June 3, the Flint Rep will be the first company to produce a new version of "The Fantasticks," one that the original lyricist, Tom Jones, rewrote

so that Luisa is Lewis and the two lovers central to the story are both young men. Jones also replaced the two fathers with two mothers.

The show runs through June 19 at the theater in the Flint Cultural Center building at 1220 East Kearsley St., with tickets starting at \$16. Lluberes directs, Brad Willcuts choreographs, and Brian E. Buckner provides musical direction.

"The Fantasticks" first opened off-Broadway in 1960, centered on a story about two fathers who trick their children, Luisa and Matt, into falling in love with each other by pretending to be enemies. It ran until 2002, reopened in 2006 and ran until 2017, making it the longest-running musical in the world. A perennially popular musical, during non-Covid times it was featured in around 250 new productions annually.

While Lluberes had always wanted to do a gay version of "The

Fantasticks," he thought it would be impossible to get the rights, so he let it go. Then the pandemic happened.

"I thought a lot about the kind of theater I wanted to make when we got back into the space," Lluberes said. "And I kept thinking about 'The Fantasticks' because it was something in my memory that was so pure and innocent and joyful and simple."

So, he decided to contact Jones, 94, and ask permission. Lluberes said Jones told him no one had ever brought the idea up to him. "I wasn't going to do a big thing — just change Luisa to Lewis, change the pronouns and pretty much leave it the same," Lluberes said.

Jones, on the other hand, felt it needed more work than that to be successful and told Lluberes that he would do the rewriting necessary. "I thought it was an interesting idea," Jones said. "I called him back in

a week and said, 'You know, this would be interesting to do, but I would like to do it myself. I really would like to get in and make it in a way that if it works, other people can do it as well.'"

Lluberes said the changes make all the musical's themes come alive in a really exciting way.

"I told Tom that my way into it is when you're gay and you fall in love for the first time, you discover who you are through the person you love," Lluberes said. "It's like you staring back at you to have those feelings, that identity explosion that who you love equals who you are. The play comes to life in such a fresh, exciting way."

Neil McCaffrey will be debuting the part of Lewis, whom he describes as being "super romantic," someone prone to quoting Shakespeare or "The Great Gatsby" in his super-idealized version of what love is.

"He wants something to happen to him," McCaffrey said. "In the first act, he lays out his fantasy, and when it comes to fruition, we have a happy ending. But then, Act Two is all about what a happy ending means."

McCaffrey said there actually aren't that many changes. His character, for example, still says he wants to be a princess, because a boy can say that. But when the lyrics talk about going to town wearing a golden gown, they instead change it to crown.

"It's not like we have to change a whole backstory for Lewis to Luisa," McCaffrey said. "By changing the gender, a lot doesn't change. We can just play the text as it is."

When asked why someone should come see this show, McCaffrey points out that it is Pride Month, but there is also something in the musical for everyone.

"Yes, if you love 'The Fantasticks' and you're also a proponent of LGBT representation, absolutely, come see this," McCaffrey said. "But it's one of our most beautiful musicals about humanity in love. It's such a universal story."

Jeremiah Porter, who plays the part of Matt, said that until Lluberes reached out to him, he didn't know how timeless this piece was or how much a part of musical history it was.

"Tom was really trying to push the narrative of love when he first made the show," Porter said. "Now, with where we are today, there are certain concepts of love that we understand, and there are certain concepts and areas of love that we still need to begin to explore. Using this story that is so well known to so many people gives them an opportunity to not feel out of their element because they know the narrative, but they get just a little bit of seasoning. It's really suited for today because it gives people a safe space to further their boundaries."

Jones said that the leasing agency, Music Theater International, has already been getting a lot of inquiries about this version. Jones' desire is that future productions of this version would have a subtitle: "The Flint Fantasticks."

"I intend that when people perform it, they would call it that," Jones said. "And they would put in the program for each production about me getting that call from Michael and about the whole adventure we've had doing it together."



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(From left to right) Margaret Cho, Tomas Matos, Bowen Yang, Joel Kim Booster and Matt Rogers in "Fire Island." Photo by Jeong Park / Searchlight Pictures

## ➔ Bowen Yang

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start to bring all their societal baggage onto each other and turn it inward."

I think he did a great job of balancing all those things. I think he just recognized that Fire Island is this wonderful stew pot full of different kinds of people, and that you get all these different elements to that when everyone co-mingles in that way.

**I love that there's a group of queer people of color who are just like, "Gonna sail over, and you know? This is also our place."**

Yeah. And in my experience going there — and I go at least once a year, every summer — it is weirdly still a given that you're gonna see that it's a bit dominated by one kind of person.

I'm always really delighted by the people I see there who are there driven by the same sort of mission of just spending time with their queer friends. Going to the beach, just getting away from all the things that sort of bog them down on the mainland.

**Did you see "Wine Country"?**

I did, yes.

**So was this your "Wine Country"?**

Oh my god, I guess so. All "Fire Island" was missing was a Brené

Brown cameo. I think the nice thing about this is that it's like a vacation comedy, obviously, and a rom-com, but I think the way that Joel wanted to map it onto "Pride and Prejudice" is such an ingenious thing. It's about the way people relate to each other. It's about the ways that we stratify each other, or relate to each other based on class, wealth or, in this case, race.

**With "Wine Country," Amy Poehler had said the film was basically a trip those same girls had taken many times before. Had any of you already experienced "Fire Island" together?**

Yes, yes. We have. Me, Joel and Matt Rogers had gone in the past. And the idea came out of Joel and I going the first time together. This was 2015, where he brought a copy of "Pride and Prejudice" to the island. And then he and I were reading by the pool one day, and he just turns to me and goes, "This would make a good movie. The way that people judge each other is similar. The way that there are all these social gatherings that people sort of get worked up about, it's all there."

In some ways, the idea predates the established dynamic that Joel, Matt and I have had there. But I feel like it's [in] a similar vein in that it's loosely based on these trips that we've taken together. It's similar to our experiences going there in terms of like, we would go there when we could barely afford it. We [were] 18 people to a three-bedroom house, those kind of

"roughing it" early experiences.

**Did you, Joel and Matt also meet at a brunch like your characters in the movie did?**

We did not meet at a brunch. It was at a much more boring place, honestly. And it's hard to get more boring than brunch.

**I've never been to Fire Island, but I think I may be more of a P-town gay.**

Listen, I am about to go there for the first time this summer. And part of me is a little scared that I'm gonna be a turncoat and just fully, like, be a P-town gay for the rest of my life.

**What can you say about your part in the upcoming major-studio gay summer rom-com "Bros"?**

I have a really fun part in that. My character, ironically, lives in Provincetown, so not Fire Island. That might be all I can say. But I think they've been showing clips of it at different events, and it's getting a really good reception. I really hope people — I'm sure people will see it. There's such a great team behind it, and Billy [Eichner, co-writer and star] is just so wonderful. He was so great to work with. I was sort of a day player. I just popped in for a day in between shows at "SNL." So I was a little disoriented. But it was just such a lovely experience, and I felt very lucky that I got to do that in addition to "Fire Island," to be a little witness to all these great [LGBTQ+] movies that are being made.

**Was "Fire Island" a loose shoot? You are all so naturally funny, so were there moments of improvisation, and did any of those make the final cut?**

Plenty of moments of improv made it into the final cut. From, like, Matt specifically. From me, from everybody. I think everybody [added] a little sprinkling in there. Overall, what's remarkable about that set was that there wasn't too much breaking. We weren't out to make each other laugh or crack up. I think we were all there to hit our marks and do the job well. Because it was a very intense situation. A lot of us, you know, [this was] one of our early jobs doing a feature. And I think we all just were kind of focused on delivering. So maybe in the future, if we all work together again, it'll be a little bit looser. But it was pretty regimented. We were all very good students, I would say.

**Your film career is really taking off, which is exciting. And you got to really create a character for this.**

I know. This is one of my first experiences doing that.

**What was that like for you?**

Really nice. I learned so much. And I think this is one of those jobs that I think will carry into future projects, if I'm so lucky to have them. I mean, James Scully, who plays Charlie, and I... this is my first time having a love interest in something. And he's someone who is experienced enough as an actor to know how to make that believable onscreen. So we just had a lot of discussions about how to portray that and what these characters would be like after they left the island and what that journey is.

James had the idea to make a playlist. He was like, "Let's make the playlist the character would make for the other character." And that was perfect tone-setting. Like, these are two very sweet people who are sweet despite everything around them telling them there's no place for sweetness. That this is about debauchery only. And even at the end of the movie, there's an open-ended question about whether or not these people will even end up together after they leave the island. And what happens then? But these are two characters who aren't concerned with that, who aren't really worried about what's gonna happen afterwards. Whether it ends badly or well, they just are very present in their connection to each other.

**I'm glad you say that because those trips to me often feel like they're suited for that sort of experience — for a little weekend romance.**

I think the movie does that very well in the end where, again, it's that open-ended thing. And I don't think a lot of rom-coms in general do that. It's a very realistic, authentic sort of representation of that concept. Like, "Maybe this is just a vacation boyfriend. But it's OK. I'll still enjoy it." It's still a love story, you know? There's something really powerful about acknowledging that reality for a lot of people. I think there's a subtextual thing there in the movie where it's like, "This is how gay people live, and this is why they come to the island, to experience that, to have the possibility of experiencing that." And then if they do, then what happens?

**Whose idea was it to sneak in the reference to the "Gays in Space" sketch, which aired on "Saturday Night Live" in 2015?**

That was Joel. I promise it wasn't me. I just never pushed back. It was in every draft of the script, and I never pushed back on it. And I was like, it's so on the nose of me as Bowen saying to a character that he loves "SNL."

But that was a Joel line. And we just kept it in there. But then it got me thinking, like, OK, if Howie and I are similar, in what ways are we similar? Howie doesn't work at "SNL," but if I didn't work at "SNL," I would probably bring that up, too, at a party, if I was getting to know someone. And there was something somewhat authentic about that. I think Joel was going for that sort of authenticity. It was just, What would Bowen say through the lens of this character?

**While we're on the topic of "SNL," I have you to thank, in part, at least, for making a show I grew up with and loved a much queerer experience for me.**

Oh, that's very nice. But yes, there are so many other people to thank. It's people like James Anderson who wrote "Gays in Space," who left somewhat recently. Kate McKinnon, obviously, Chris Kelly, who made "The Other Two." Paula Pell of "Wine Country." There's been this pretty rich lineage of queer people at "SNL." I think now there are more things to index and reference, and I'm just very happy to be a small part of it.



**Historically, yes, there are other skits that were queer. But it definitely feels like it's become much queerer in more recent years.**

I think we talk about how "SNL" has always been this variety show in the truest sense. There's something for everyone, or at least there's something different in every sketch. And certainly, with Kate being there, it's given people a model for how you infuse queerness into a sketch.

Julio Torres working there around the same time I did was just such a fortuitous thing for me because I was able to understand, "Oh, I can write something." When I first started writing there, I was trying to fit into the mold of an "SNL" sketch. I was trying to write a game show sketch or a commercial parody. And then, when Julio and I started working together, he was like, "No, you can do whatever you want. You can make something that's from your point of view. That makes the show better."

**Do you have an example of something you wrote from your own POV because of Julio's influence on you?**

One of the first sketches I wrote for the show was called "Cheques." It was a commercial for checks, like these dramatic, soap operatic women just signing checks for misdeeds. That was something Julio and I co-wrote together. We co-wrote this sketch called "Sara Lee" with Harry Styles, who's this social media manager who writes all these thirsty gay captions for Instagram. That was Julio's idea, and it wouldn't have happened without Julio's assuredness in his own point of view. And it kind of gave me this example to follow, so that by the time he left, I was like, "I guess I can do that on my own, right?"

So yeah, you think all the way back to Terry Sweeney in the '80s who was doing stuff at a time when gay men were completely stigmatized at every level [in] society. I think there's been a queer sort of helix in the show for as long as it's been on.

**What about the "Pride Month Song" sketch from last year? What's the story behind that?**

I co-wrote that with Sudi Green and Celeste Yim. Just really funny

writers. Queer writers. And we just were talking about how there is this pretty widely acknowledged reality now that I just don't think we've seen on TV of how Pride is kind of exhausting. And it's kind of not what you expect it to be: You think it's gonna be this amazing thing and it actually ends up being really stressful and logistically a nightmare and someone has a meltdown at some point. You know, those are the realities of Pride. And there's still something joyful about that, even so. And maybe that's the thing that we kind of look forward to every year. So yeah, that's where it came out of. And I was, like, listening to Charli XCX's "Girls Night Out," and I was like, "Let's just map it onto this beat."

**Well, that's your POV, right?**

My POV! Yeah. She counts.

**It seems you've become a big name in such a short amount of time. How have you processed what I think is a relatively meteoric rise to notoriety these last few years?**

I got really lucky in terms of an incremental, segmented ramp-up,

maybe? For me, so far, it's been manageable at every level. Starting out doing stuff in New York, you kind of are putting yourself out there more and more with every show and every year that you do it. And then Matt and I started this podcast ["Las Culturistas"] together. That kind of got people who didn't live in New York knowing who we were and connecting with what we were doing. And then going on "SNL," obviously, kind of broke that open. But I think I've gotten some sort of training wheel taken off and there's multiple sets of training wheels, I guess, in this metaphor. But I think I've gotten really nicely acculturated to that. And I'm very grateful.

**Can you step into a gay bar in West Hollywood without being conscious of, "I know that there will be eyes on me because I'm Bowen Yang"?**

It occurs to me that that might be the case, but I went to Hi Tops recently in LA, in West Hollywood, and was ignored at the bar. And I was like, "This is great." Not that this was great but I was like, "See, there's something very democratizing about going to a queer space like

that where you're like, "That's why I go: to feel like a part of something." There hasn't been anything fundamentally different about my reality, which I think is really nice, actually.

**What do you want the future of your film career to look like?**

I hope I get to just do a nice variety of things, across different genres probably. I feel like we're about to get hit with a bunch of rom-coms, and I wouldn't mind just staying in that lane for as long as possible.

I'm keeping an open mind because people have been asking me if I expected to be leading a rom-com ever. I was like, "No, no way." And so I think me sort of keeping my expectations pretty sparse is kind of setting myself up for some delightful stuff in the future. I don't really have a vision for what that is yet. And I think that's OK.

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Davison Sarai. Photo: John McEvers

## → Davison

Continued from page 42

because of her inclusive practice. “It seems that with every year that goes by, I don’t have to do a lot of advertising,” she says. “People find me and it’s cool. It feels like a lot of responsibility. And I have to say no to a lot of people.”

Sarai passionately advocates for her patients. There have been times where parents have brought their children to her, seeking conversion therapy or to affirm that their child is “crazy” for being who they are. At times, Sarai has had to argue with these parents. “I’ve chosen to argue with some of them right in front of their kid, knowing that I probably won’t get the case,” she says. “But I want that kid to see that somebody will fight for them and advocate for them. And maybe plant a seed for them to do the same eventually.” About 80% of her caseload is queer and trans people, and she believes her identity is an “absolute plus” in relating to them.

For Sarai, wrestling and being a mental health professional represent two sides of the same coin: “If wrestling was escapism

and had to do with my family, therapy absolutely had to do with my family.” She explains that in alcoholic families, there is a culture of secrecy. Because of that, there’s a lot of denial about how bad things were, which impacted her severely. “I was very depressed. I was very angry. And I would try to discuss that with my family,” she explains. “And they’d just deny the whole thing.” When Sarai fell in love with her psychology classes in college, it opened the door to her therapy career.

At the moment, Sarai is balancing both her job as a mental health professional and wrestler. “I’m doing well. And I’m getting my name out there. It’s realistic that I could start getting offered to work three or four shows a week in the next few months,” she says. But she also carries a full caseload of more than 25 clients each week at her job, and she’s decided that if she starts getting the offers that she hopes to get for wrestling, she would consider moving to a part-time basis with therapy if she can balance the finances.

“The passion is definitely in wrestling,” she says. “I love therapy. I’ll probably always do it. I find it intellectually stimulating. But the passion right now is in wrestling, for sure.”

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Pride on UM's campus, 2019. Photo courtesy of UM

## → Spectrum Center

Continued from page 21

of amazement that is the queer community and is who they are," he said.

Parker Kehrig and Xochi Sanchez are part of the new queer generation doing the work of the Center. They are LGBTQ+ Oral History Project student leads for an oral history project launched by the Spectrum Center in 2019.

Kehrig described his interest in oral history from the time he was "a young gay baby" in high school and naturally turned to historicizing to gain a better understanding of his world. At the time, he felt there wasn't much information available about queerness, including "what queer people's lives are like." Kehrig said they didn't personally know any older queer people, either. "It didn't feel like there was any blueprint for me, so I really turned to the active historicizing to find those blueprints," he said.

Both students felt drawn to seek out the lesser-known voices and the stories that haven't been told.

"Something that we noticed there was a gap in, as we were doing our research for the project and also just conducting the project, was that there just wasn't as much about regular people's experiences who didn't have a couple of lines in fancy queer history journals and seeing what their lives were like and what their experiences were like," Kehrig said.

"When it comes to this oral history project, I felt like there are a lot of voices that we don't know how long they're going to be here, whether that's in this specific space or in this life," Sanchez said. "And it's just very important for me to preserve those stories, especially stories of queer people of color and/or undocumented queer people who are at an even greater chance than a white cis queer person [of being] erased."

In the course of their work, Kehrig and Sanchez found some surprises.

"There was an old photograph of Jim Toy on a wooden placard that clearly had been taken in 1970-something," Sanchez said. "And there were photographs of people who were either part of or were attending a Center event, in either I

think either the late '90s or the 2000s; I think it was a dance."

Kehrig said that as a young student in Ann Arbor, there were things about UM's queer history that he hadn't known before. He spoke of a time before the Center was established that Jim Toy wanted to hold a statewide conference for the GLF, but the university turned him down. It was only because a closeted university official gave Toy a key to the Student Activities Building that the conference was able to happen.

"There is a very rich history of opposition to the university in really beautiful ways that I feel like the University of Michigan really liked to quietly perhaps nod at, which is not a real acknowledgement, but also sort of kept under wraps," Kehrig said. "And that dissonance is really interesting to me."

The students talked about what they'd like to see for the Center in the next 50 years. They would both like to see more people of color. Kehrig said he would like it to be in a space that feels less transient. For a planned renovation, the office had been boxed up and moved elsewhere. Only recently are they back on the

third floor of the Michigan Union.

"For me, that was something that made the oral history project feel even more necessary and dear to me: that no matter what they do, we're going to be continuing to record the histories and be honest about people's lived experiences within these spaces, and be honest about criticism of the university," Kehrig said.

"And I hope that in the next 50 years, that that continues to thrive and that the office that we have in the union becomes so obscenely queer and so just ridiculously flamboyant that they would have to demolish our office for no one to tell that we were there," he added. "That's what I would like to see."

Contreras and Orr may not have frequented the center, but as young gay students in the late '70s and early '80s, their interactions with the HSO made an impression. Contreras remembers dialing the HSO hotline.

"It rang into some volunteer's home. I made use of it a number of times. And you know this was long before cell phones, so I was always having to wait till my roommates in the dorm were not in the room so I could pick up the phone," Contreras

said, laughing.

Both Contreras and Orr mentioned that the path to the HSO was not a "straight" one.

"To get to the Human Sexuality Office — it was not well marked, shall we say?" Orr said. "And you are sort of going through a labyrinth of all of these different student offices." Contreras called it a labyrinth as well.

Since the renovation, Sherry said not only are they back on the third floor of the Michigan Union but also in a brand new suite.

"And it's a beautiful location," he was quick to add.

In his 14 years with the Center, Sherry said he's had the privilege of hearing from so many people, alumni in particular, on how the Spectrum Center changed their lives.

"For some people, that change happened because they were really involved in the Center. They maybe knew Jim Toy; they answered crisis lines next to him. They were active in that way. And then, for some people, it really is just the stories of walking by the door and never going in, but knowing that it was there."



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Shea Whitfield, Evan Thomas and Keith Bynum. Photos: HGTV

## Detroit the Real Star of 'Bargain Block' Season 2

BY JASON A. MICHAEL

From the first note, there's no doubt about it: HGTV's "Bargain Block," set for its second season premiere June 8, is Detroit, through and through.

The show starts with a montage featuring MotorCity Casino, Hart Plaza and other Motown landmarks over a driving, soulful beat. That's because this season, D-Town, itself, will play a significant role in the show, especially the city's Northwest side.

The two leads, of course, are the adorable self-proclaimed "partners in life and business" Keith Bynum and Evan Thomas, two obviously ambitious (and keenly talented) men who moved to

Detroit sight unseen five years ago and began renovating and rehabbing some of the most torn down, run down — and, surprisingly often, burnt down — houses in the city.

Recently, Bynum told BTL that viewers responded to what they saw of Detroit in

Season 1 and asked to see more. So it was natural to the show's evolution that the unique city they work in be featured more heavily. Bynum said that this season, he wants to "showcase all of the cool things about the city that people outside of Detroit maybe didn't know about, especially in relation to how we run our business."

In the Season 2 premiere, Bynum and Thomas immediately get to work on a 3-bedroom, 1-bathroom bungalow with a failing roof that's caused significant water damage. They're dealing with disintegrated plaster and hole-ridden floors. Just their style! And still, not enough of a challenge for the dynamic duo. So what they do? They end up buying a similar house next door and fixing up both

at the same time. Like we said: ambitious.

Bynum and Thomas, who could not be any cuter with their matching haircuts, charmingly bicker over budgets, layouts and just about everything else. It's easy to see how much they love each other and how remarkably well they

work together.

In short order, the couple transforms the two houses. The first goes from bleak to "breezy bougie Hamptons beach house" with a "beach luxury" vibe. Yes, Bynum is responsible for the theme of each house. He was criticized on the HGTV special series "Rock the Block" for designing a little too buyer-specific and limiting his properties' mass appeal. But that didn't stop the innovator from naming the second property the "Great Gatsby House," featuring 1920s art deco as his style inspiration.

Bynum isn't afraid of bold choices, and he made his share of them with this house. Clearly he knows his stuff, because everyone at the open house loved it, including an adorable little toddler named Matilda, who lives next door. Neighbors often pass by to visit and see the improvements happening in their 'hood, up close and personal.

And we'd be remiss if we forgot to mention Bynum's and Thomas' partner-in-crime Shea Whitfield, a talented Detroit-based real estate agent who helps the pair find houses to buy and then sells them once they're completed.

If the premiere of Season 2 is an indication of what's to come, it's going to be a season full of miraculous transformations and a Detroit lovefest deliciously overseen by, dare we say, the handsomest home flippers in the biz. Now, that's a bargain!



And to do it on the first day of Pride Month. And to do it so soon after yet another horrific mass shooting in an elementary school. And to do it AT ALL. Shame on everyone who voted for this bill.

Rep. Liston also blasted the legislation in a statement calling it "just plain sick," adding, "No child should be forced to undergo 'genital inspections' so that they can play sports."

Worth pointing out here that the Republican Party claims that Democrats are "groomers" (aka sexual predators who prey on children), and yet Republicans are the ones who demand to know what a kid's genitals look like.

"Our children's sexual development is none of the Ohio House's business," said Rep. Liston. "My Republican colleagues need to keep their hands off our children."

Republicans are claiming that this is actually a women's rights issue, but that's bullshit. They DGAF about women. And if you don't believe me, just look at their votes on reproductive freedom, abortion, violence against women, affordable child care, paid child and family leave and on and on and on.

"The health and safety of our youth are not negotiable," says Equality Ohio Executive Director Alana Jochum in a statement. "This should not be a partisan issue, and we are appalled that our lawmakers are once again causing real harm to LGBTQ+ youth to score political points. All Ohio youth deserve the opportunity to play on a sports team with their peers without having to hide who they are."

The so-called "culture wars" have always worked for Republicans in the past. And right now they literally have nothing else. They are a party that literally stands against democracy and defends insurrectionists, encourages conspiracy theorists and perpetuates racism. In a sane country, they would not be serious contenders in any race. Certainly no one would worry about them taking back the majority in the U.S. House, for example.

But we do not live in a sane country. We live in a country that has more guns than people and more mass shootings than anywhere else in the world, and Republican lawmakers are laser-focused on a kid's crotch.

Vote them all out. But also, be a loud ally of transgender folks right now. Not just because it's Pride Month, but because they are under a laser-focused attack. And if you're trans, know that there are lots of people who support you and think you're pretty great just the way you are.





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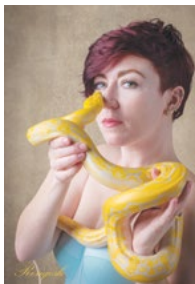




Photo: Netflix

# Never Too Late To Be Yourself

The Hit Netflix Series That Showed This Writer That, With Sexuality, Anything Is Possible



**BY CHELSEA CONVIS**

“I’m having a proper full-on gay crisis.”

So shares Nick, one of the protagonists in Netflix’s beautiful “Heartstopper,”

a tale about Charlie, a gay high schooler, who falls in love with his classmate Nick. I’m 32, and this show is definitely about teenagers but brought me to tears as I clasped my fiancée Jessica’s hand as we cheered together, “It’s so gayyyyyy.”

The delight in “Heartstopper” touched me irrevocably. One reviewer calls the joy in “Heartstopper” “unbridled queer joy at its purest.” Literal sparks fly between Nick and Charlie. When Charlie falls asleep on a couch watching a movie, Nick looks down at Charlie’s hand, grappling with whether to hold it, before reaching to hover his hand

over it. Tiny graphic fireworks shoot between their untouched palms. When Charlie looks at Nick, small graphic hearts dance around them, a throwback to the graphic novel. Nick has no idea what his sexual identity is, and his relationship with Charlie deeply confuses him. Still, through all the confusion, gentle bliss and happiness infuses every moment.

Joy was not part of my early queer experience. Raised in an evangelical Christian home, I was bombarded with the belief that being LGBTQ+ would damn your soul. Being homosexual was a “choice,” and a sinful one at that. When I first began feeling attracted to women, I was stunned and confused: Why was I finding women more attractive than men? Was I somehow *choosing* this? I didn’t think so. It took several years of desperately trying to focus on men before I admitted to myself that, like Nick, “I like boys — but I like girls too.”

I still didn’t know if this queerness that seemed in my bones, like the biblical wheat and chaff, would damn

me to hell or not, but admitting it caused acceptance. It was clearly not a “choice.”

The first time I kissed my best friend, it was precisely the opposite experience that Tara (who comes out as lesbian during “Heartstopper”) tells Nick about their childhood kiss: “Kissing you was one of the things that made me realize I don’t like kissing guys.” Kissing my best friend was one of the things that did make me realize I like kissing girls.

The first queer identity I embraced was bisexuality: I had (and continued) to date men, but now I wanted to date women. Eventually I learned about and deeply identified as demisexual, but only with men. I was attracted to women fairly quickly, but sometimes it took years of friendship with a guy before being attracted to him. In some distinct ways, I definitely preferred women.

It made me wonder: How gay on the Kinsey scale am I? Am I actually a lesbian? Have I been societally conditioned into finding men attractive? Is the fact that my

deminess only happens with men indicative of being more lesbian than straight? At the end of the day, does it actually matter, since, however I may have been born, I find some men attractive (...eventually)?

Watching Nick go through his “proper gay crisis” felt so relatable. He Googled, “Am I gay?,” and when that yielded confusing results emotionally, he Googled, “Am I bisexual?” When he tells his mom that Charlie is his boyfriend but that he still likes girls too, his mom lets him know it’s OK to just like boys, to which Nick says, “No, I definitely still like girls.”

I felt affirmed watching Nick try on and discard different identities to see what makes the most sense. Having began my queer exploration so late, in my 20s — well past the formative sexual and individual identity stages — I, now 32, find myself *still* questioning and being confused. Am I non-binary? Am I pan? Am I trans? Shouldn’t I know by now?

In “Heartstopper,” Charlie absolutely knows he’s gay, and feels very comfortable with it. Nick has

absolutely no idea what he is, but he knows he loves Charlie. That’s all he needs, and he’s OK with discovering the rest of his identity along the way; and so is Charlie, who provides gentle support and affirmation that wherever Nick is right now, that’s where he is, and that’s OK. If he wants to come out as gay, or bisexual, or not at all, or maybe later, all of these things are a valid part of being queer. And through all these unknowns and questions, the joy of Nick’s experience comes through: Maybe he doesn’t know if he’s gay or bi, but he knows he loves this person right here, and whether that love has a label doesn’t change its beautiful existence.

I wish I knew everything about myself now, but I don’t. I only felt safe to start exploring when I was 25, and there’s still so many unknowns in my own identity and gender expression. Would I like to know all the names for all the things I am? Hell yeah. I love labels and lists. But the unknowns, the “here be dragons” and “X marks the spot” discoveries, the fluidity and different paths taken — are these all meant to be part of this journey? Hell yeah. There’s no journey (queer or otherwise) if I just start at the end. And the joy that comes with discovery, and the growth, is contained in every bit of “Heartstopper” right alongside the confusion and trepidation. It inspires me to find joy in the process while the product is still unknown.

So, like Nick, I’m Googling “Am I \_\_\_\_?” while surrounding myself with people who all appreciate that fluidity is part of the journey. I talk to my queer friends about their experiences, and I try on expressions and identities that resonate, and I discard the ones that don’t. Sometimes, like Nick, I think: “I wish I knew then what I know now. I don’t even know what my sexuality is.” And then, like Tara, I think: “I don’t have to come out before I’m ready.” There is joy in the process, in discovering new things, in sharing what I want, when it feels safe. There’s no rush. Even if we’re not high schoolers, we still have the rest of our lives to become ourselves.

*When not working (as a Montessori nanny and tutor), writing (recent Children’s Literature M.A. graduate with three books in the works) or dancing (Lindy Hop, Brazilian Zouk and Fusion), you can find Chelsea gardening with her four pet snakes, reading a novel with a cup of tea or sleeping in the sun.*



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Lea DeLaria. Photo: Tina Turnbow

# Once an Activist, Always an Activist

## 'POTUS' Star Takes a Break From Production to Headline Equality Michigan Event

BY EVE KUCHARSKI

Lea DeLaria is coming to Michigan, and she has a message for the mitten state's LGBTQ+ community: "Be here. Be queer. Get used to it."

On Thursday, June 23, she will headline Equality Michigan's (EQMI) annual Mission Equality event, which celebrates EQMI's statewide LGBTQ+ advocacy efforts. Of course, there was never any question she'd show up for her community, despite a grueling show schedule for the Broadway production of "POTUS: Or, Behind Every Great Dumbass are Seven Women Trying to Keep Him Alive" running now through the end of August. It's

just in her lesbian DNA.

"Look, I decided to do this because I've been doing this my whole fuckin' life. What, am I gonna stop now just because I'm in a hit Broadway play? No. I didn't stop when I was in a hit fuckin' television show. I'm never gonna stop. As long as I see adversity for my community, I'm gonna be out there bitchin' at somebody about it," DeLaria says, laughing. "And being visible and being out there is the biggest thing that I can do."

And visibility is what the comedian and actress is bringing to the Broadway stage in "POTUS." She's also joined by a cast of heavy hitters from both stage and screen like "the

hi-fucking-larious national treasure" Rachel Dratch; Vanessa Williams, with whom DeLaria promises pleasantly surprising onscreen chemistry; "triple threat" Julianne Hough, and many more "stellar" members.

DeLaria feels that perhaps the biggest surprise in "POTUS" is that she plays "the most subtle character of the show," especially since it's a farce that highlights just as much physical as spoken comedy and despite the fact that she is likely the first Broadway cast member to wear a shirt that reads "dyke."

"This is the first time a farce has ever been written for women," she says. "In fact, when women are in a farce, they're usually running

around in their bra and their panties. That's just a fact, so here's a farce that was written that was written completely for women, but it follows all the rules of ... a tragedy that you laugh at."

In a recent Daily Beast interview, playwright Selina Fillinger, for whom "POTUS" is her Broadway debut, confirmed that the production "is a direct response to the historic sexism of the genre and "for any woman who's ever found herself the secondary character in a male farce."

"POTUS" takes place in an alternate universe where "none of this could actually happen." DeLaria describes her character, Bernadette, as Puck from "A Midsummer Night's Dream"



“Look, I decided to do this because I’ve been doing this my whole fuckin’ life. What, am I gonna stop now just because I’m in a hit Broadway play? No. I didn’t stop when I was in a hit fuckin’ television show. I’m never gonna stop.”

or, to put it more plainly, her character “causes up shit just to watch it caused.” Despite the distinctly chaotic energy she brings, DeLaria is clear that this isn’t the type of story where the female characters are pitted against one another in service of a man.

“What happens is they all join forces together to overcome an adversity, so that’s the one thing that you’ll see in this play. I mean, you’ll laugh from the first second the first word of the play is spoken; the very first word in our play is ‘cunt,’” she says. “So, from the very first word, you start laughing, and you never stop laughing. It’s kind of amazing.”

Originally slated for a 2020 release but postponed due to COVID-19, DeLaria has been involved in this production for the greater part of four years. She was first approached by the “POTUS” team to embody Bernadette because Fillinger wrote the character with DeLaria in mind. DeLaria says it’s refreshing to be a part of a story that respects that women are funny.

“As a stand-up comic for the last fuckin’ 50 million years, I can assure you that there is a stigma in relation to women and comedy,” DeLaria says, laughing. “There always has been. I don’t understand it; I’ve never understood it. Look at Lucille Ball, she had the number one show on television for like 10 years, and it was a comedy. So, there’s this total sexist concept.”

However, DeLaria shared that even this production was not free from the effects of sexism when its cast was denied of Tony Award nominations.

“The reason I feel the play wasn’t nominated for a Tony and [director Susan Stroman] wasn’t nominated as director was pure sexism, 100 percent,” she says. “They came at us telling us that we couldn’t nominate anybody in the best actress category, that we all had to be featured actresses, so, by doing that, they basically stole two Tony nominations away from us.”

DeLaria elaborated, adding that she’s categorized as a “featured actress” and so is

Julie White — who plays Harriet — and is therefore ineligible to be nominated for a Tony, despite the fact that White appears in every scene of the production. DeLaria said that the “fucked up” comparison is made worse because there is no category for an ensemble cast unlike in the Screen Actors Guild Awards.

“This is non-stop being talked about on Broadway right now. The word-of-mouth is ridiculous, we’re selling like fucking gangbusters, right?” DeLaria says. “And yet, the powers that be — that are mostly male [and in the LGBTQ+ community] — have decided to do X, Y, Z with us, and there’s only one thing you can call it: It’s sexism, pure and simple.”

And she has a reminder for all the other letters in the LGBTQ+ acronym: “Nobody’s louder than a dyke when it comes to protesting,” she says, laughing. “Nobody. And we’ve always got your back, and you bitches spit in our face all the time.”

In fact, by DeLaria’s estimation, the “L” in the acronym is the “most spit-upon letter of our alphabet,” and “that needs to change.”

“It’s important that we recognize that being a dyke and being a butch and being a lesbian is just as important as any other letter of that alphabet,” she says. “And they need to have our

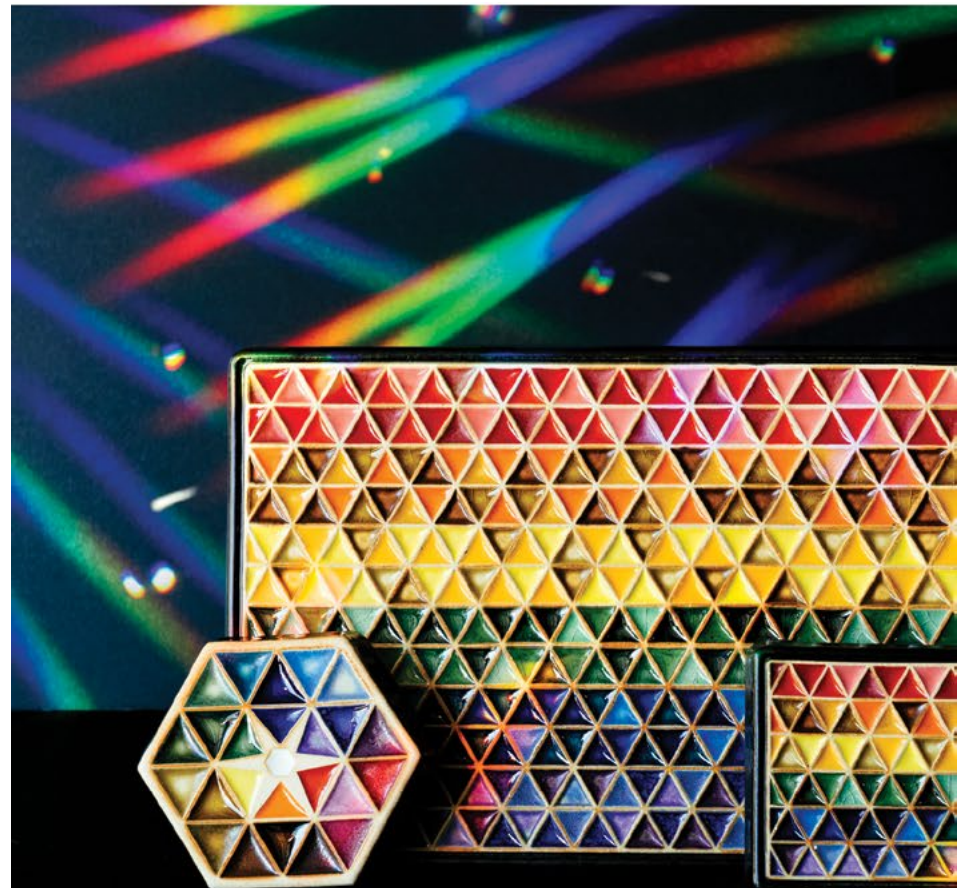


Photo: Tina Turnbow

back the way that we have their back.”

As fans of DeLaria will know, her upcoming appearance at EQMI’s Mission Equality event is far from the first step for advocacy that she has taken in her life. In recent years, she has been one of the most vocal champions of the revival of lesbian safe spaces and produced

See **Lea DeLaria**, page 62



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# A Queer Slate, In Focus

## The Studio That Brought Us 'Brokeback Mountain' Turns 20

BY GEORGE ELKIND

For 20 years now, Focus Features has been distributing and funding queer-focused movies, marketing them successfully to a wide audience even early on. As a specialty distribution and production company responsible for works as disparate as “Beginners,” “Pariah” and “Brokeback Mountain,” Focus has always occupied a unique place in the pre-streaming landscape. Able to bring both star-driven and smaller works to arthouse and multiplex audiences alike, it’s played a key role in pushing queer works (just a portion of its output) into the center of both film and popular culture.

Led in its first decade by co-founder and influential LGBTQ+ ally James Schamus, who departed the company in 2011, Focus owes much of its success to groundwork he laid prior, and often with frequent collaborator and “Brokeback Mountain” director Ang Lee. Schamus, whose producing and writing credits stretch back to 1990 (and included biting queer works like Todd Haynes’ “Safe and Poison,” along with Tom Kalin’s “Swoon”), managed to feature and elevate queer characters and creators early on. But Focus’ brand under his stewardship and after has long skewed less abrasive, closer to the mold of works like his and Lee’s 1993 film “The Wedding Banquet”: a bright comedy of manners about a gay Taiwanese immigrant (Winston Chao) struggling to conceal his identity and relationship from his visiting parents.

By situating queer characters in polished movies like “The Wedding Banquet,” rooted in more familiar film forms, Focus’ output found new ways of making and marketing queer-centric and even queer-adjacent works inviting to a broader audience. Rarely positioning queer people as rebels, deviants or outsiders — as had so often been done before — Focus’ material instead spotlighted what they gave to culture, upending the narratives in which they’ve fought to play a part.

Throughout its life, Focus has proved a welcoming environment for so many queer films, with a body of work reflecting shifts in attitudes and concerns. In light of this impact



(Clockwise from top) Heath Ledger and Jake Gyllenhaal in “Brokeback Mountain.” Julianne Moore and Dennis Quaid in “Far From Heaven.” Sean Penn as Milk in “Milk.” Photos: Focus Features

during their 20th anniversary, what follows is a consideration of a portion of their queer-related works.

### ‘Far From Heaven’ (2002)

Reuniting Todd Haynes and Julianne Moore after their stirring work in “Safe,” “Far” made explicit both the

critical and nostalgic 1950s references that colored a wave of works then in both the arthouse and mainstream around its time. But instead of treating them gravely (as in “American Beauty”) or comically (see “Blast from the Past”) — and in both cases from a kind of distance — Haynes raced directly to the waters of one of the period’s deepest wells in his treatments of societally forbidden queer and interracial romance. Embracing both the vibrant, suggestive colors and the

accompanying seasonality of Douglas Sirk’s “All That Heaven Allows,” “Far” is a melodrama like Sirk’s — but one whose acting timbre skewed just slightly more contemporary, giving it a separate sort of bite. But the mode for Haynes offers more than just décor, allowing for both an enduring social portrait and a way of reflecting on the senseless intractability of social ills that’s lost none of its sting now. With Dennis Quaid starring opposite Moore as her repressed-but-caught-

cruising husband, he offsets any air of victimhood on her part for the ways he’s convinced himself he’s sick — a Haynes standby if there ever was one.

### ‘Brokeback Mountain’ (2005)

Few queer works seem to have made so broad an impression on audiences as “Brokeback,” which seems to have been the point. “We really wanted to make a big, gooey, epic love story, Schamus told the Harvard Crimson in 2005, going on to describe its “hot, man-on-man action” as “a slight twist,” even calling the film “conservative.” And in a way he’s right, considering the reassurances it offers viewers through the shape of its two leads. By centering Jake Gyllenhaal and Heath Ledger’s fraught gay romance around cowboys in figure if not fact (technically they tend sheep), the film offers playful reassurances of their manhood in a way that mirrored the positioning of Eric McCormack’s title character in “Will & Grace.” By assuring audiences that its cis gay characters could still present as masculine, and even marry women well, it lampoons the “real men” notion of performative manhood even as it invites viewers in with it — quietly underlining that no activity, affiliation, or mode of presentation prevents a person from being gay. Thanks to this odd seduction, the most skeptical and queer-resistant viewers might be likeliest of all to mourn the unfairness of its end.

### ‘Milk’ (2008)

“In front of a hostile audience or a mostly straight one, I might break the tension with a joke,” says Sean Penn’s Harvey Milk in an onscreen speech. The line’s a pun itself, playing on not only Milk’s candidacy — to be the first gay American man to hold public office — but on the film’s uneasy courtship of mainstream and awards season viewers. Van Sant presents

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(Clockwise, from top) Goran Visnjic (left) and Christopher Plummer in writer/director Mike Mills' "Beginners." Mackenzie Davis as Tully and Charlize Theron as Marlo in Jason Reitman's "Tully." Aasha Davis as Bina (left) and Adepero Oduye as Alike in writer/director Dee Rees' "Pariah." Photos: Focus Features

"Beginners" avoids cloying, performative or histrionic treatments by remaining low-key, honest and fair.

meaning as it surely is, this should have been left in better hands.

## 'Pariah' (2011)

Less about self-acceptance than self-discovery — and then negotiating one's identity with those nearby — "Pariah" feels less frothy than many coming-out tales about young people. Finding Lee (played by Adepero Oduye), a 17-year-old Black teen, caught between the often practically minded, sometimes faltering companionship of a few close peers and the eerie mind games pressed by her suspecting, conservative-minded parents, it's distinct from many such works in that she faces a credible threat of reprisal for acknowledging who she is. As such, "Pariah" finds her negotiating with her surroundings in small, bold steps, and even steps backward. With writer-director Dee Rees' and cinematographer Bradford Young's shared eye for detail and a buoyant range of supporting characters they reliably treat humanely, "Pariah" bubbles with an energy that suggests an autobiographically informed, stubborn core of optimism about Black queer life.

## 'Tully' (2018)

Queerness is mostly a background detail in "Tully" but provides an important framework. Diablo Cody ("Juno," "Jennifer's Body") slips the fact in early that Marlo (Charlize Theron), a pregnant mother expecting her third child, is bisexual and has had relationships to women before her current marriage to a negligent man. This detail calls her current situation — and the postpartum depression from which she suffers — into deeper question, and one that deepens further with the arrival of Tully (Mackenzie Davis). With Davis playing a night nurse meant to relieve Marlo's pressures in caring for her newborn, the bond between them proves more homosocial than homoerotic but is suggestive all the same. By providing an uncanny window into Marlo's past through a figure reminiscent of herself at a prior time, Tully's presence serves as a reminder of the freedoms she had and might have kept. Framing queer ways of living as a freeing opportunity, the film's peripheral introduction of queerness as a lens proves reliably enriching, and easily one of its best parts.

## 'The Danish Girl' (2015)

After limping through development for over 10 years (not uncommon), "The Danish Girl" arrived as an ill-formed work. With a flat depiction of its transgender leading character, director Tom Hooper (coming off Best Picture winner "The King's Speech") dramatizes Danish painter Lili Elbe's pioneering medical transition as a grandly tragic Icarian act, implying that it's necessarily self-destructive for her to affirm herself as the person she is. With this well-meaning valorization, Hooper combs through history to find and treat Lili (played by Eddie Redmayne) as a kind of doomed angel with her identity as basically her sole trait: a well-weathered, nervously supportive trope of queer representation. While its casting of a cis actor has done it no favors (even according to Redmayne), "The Danish Girl" could probably have never escaped Hooper's coy stagings or Lucinda Coxon's poor script. Well-

## 'Dark Waters' (2019)

Absent any explicit allusion to queerness in its characters, the perspective of "Waters" is present solely through its style and thematic concerns. With a legal thriller examining the long-running legal battles over a toxic family of chemicals, director Todd Haynes and cinematographer Ed Lachman present a fearful vision of isolated paranoia fueled by corporate profiteering and governmental neglect. Reflecting a fierce and justified skepticism of institutional actors that many queer works could now use more of, it's a film that holds fast to the lessons of the AIDS crisis. With queerness and its history coloring a justly critical lens, the film's heat comes from precisely that: a perspective accustomed to vulnerability, and a position familiar with being trapped or left outside.

### → Focus

Continued from page 58

Milk in his 40s as an underdog, rookie politician; Penn answers with quips and what we're to take for sparkling wit, sprightly and eager to please. Executed years after "Good Will Hunting," Van Sant and screenwriter Dustin Lance Black color largely within the lines here — many drawn by Rob Epstein's 1984 nonfiction work "The Times of Harvey Milk." Despite this basis, the "Milk" script feels lacking and oddly shapeless, rarely so clever as its actors or its crew. Somewhere in it there's a story focused on the rituals of underdog queer performance in a field of American competition — but maybe that's how its makers saw the movie itself. As it stands, its best features live in its margins. Pete Buttigieg surely took some notes.

## 'The Kids Are All Right' (2010)



"Usually in these movies, they hire two straight women to pretend and the inauthenticity is just unbearable," says Julianne Moore's Jules when her daughter asks about the man-on-man porn she's watching: perhaps a queasy form of comment on its two leads. Starring opposite Moore is Annette Bening as Nic, making for a picturesque if somewhat stereotypic lesbian pair for the time. Their nuclear family life's stirred up early by the entrance of interloper Paul (Mark Ruffalo), the rakish bachelor sperm donor who (biologically) fathered their two children some 18 years back — and who, with growing determination, seeks to become a fixture in their lives. Comically treating the question of whether he has anything to offer them, the film feels uneasily responsive to skeptics of lesbian child-rearing (director and co-writer Lisa Cholodenko herself became pregnant via a donor during the film's development) while offering

a depiction of queer parenthood rarer at its release than now. The result remains an answer to something that shouldn't be a question, and a work that feels today like an issue film meant for its own time.

## 'Beginners' (2011)

With this coming-out movie working outside the usual mode, Mike Mills offered a largely autobiographical take on queer life that still feels refreshing for its lack of prescriptions. Mills treats his queer characters from a close distance as an adult son, Oliver (played by Ewan McGregor), observes his widowed father, Hal (Christopher Plummer), coming out near the end of his life. What's done here feels remarkably settled and peaceful considering the potential drama in play. Never treating Hal's identity as a problem for Oliver to solve, the film acknowledges the tensions and small ironies in supporting Hal through periods of adjustment — both to terminal sickness and to queer life. Premised on calm acceptance and allowing for occasional bemusement,



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Lea DeLaria. Photo: Tina Turnbow

### → Lea DeLaria

Continued from page 57

“The Lesbian Bar Project,” both a campaign and feature film of the same title championing the revival of bars as a key method for fostering organic lesbian connections across the U.S. in spots where generalized visibility is low. Perhaps that’s why DeLaria, who champions both lesbian and women’s rights, called the cast of this production “magical,” despite its setbacks in recognition in the award circuit.

Nearly everyone involved in the process of putting on the production is a woman “except for our production stage manager Johnny Milani who is gay as a box of bird feed, so it just felt like a very different experience from any other showbusiness experience that I’ve had.”

That difference, she says, is as visible on stage as it is palpable in rehearsal, adding that it boils down to a high estrogen level, near total creative freedom and definitely no “verbatim police” — directors and writers who insist upon the script being read as-is with no ad-libbing of any kind. To put it in her words: “It was fuckin’ amazing. ... A lot of males, when they write a script, I can assure you, do not let you do that.”

“There was great camaraderie and nothing was stifled,” DeLaria says. “So when Stro[man] said, ‘No,’ it was a no. But she always listened to what your thought process was. She would say to me, ‘Which one do you think is funnier? This or this, Lea?’ And I’ve never had a male

director say that to me in my life. We all got to be involved in the process that way.”

DeLaria said that her time on “Orange Is the New Black,” as the beloved “Big Boo,” highlighted both sides of that experience as the show went on. When it began, “they were much more chill about people like myself and Natasha Lyonne, who are funny people, ad-libbing,” often resulting in ad-libs appearing directly on screen.

“Then after we got to about season five, and there was a whole new writing room, and they became the verbatim police, then it was a stifling environment in that respect. Especially when you were used to the other thing, used to being able to throw in a joke that would end up being in the script,” she says. “So, yeah, but none of that happened here, and it made for a much, much more interesting and creative process, and, obviously, a much better play. The play is a huge hit.”

Though she is busy as ever, DeLaria says that there is more “coming down the pike.”

“I’m very, very focused on my Broadway show, and then I have to get my next record out, so I’ve got about two years of work lined up right now.”

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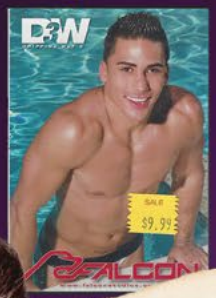
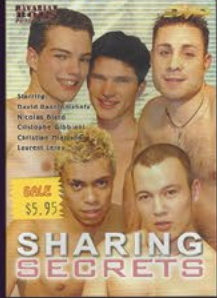


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→ Dave Wait

Continued from page 9

are in the city and their affinity for the Motor City is clear. When MCP first moved downtown, Wait saw an opportunity to improve the appearance of Hart Plaza. He planted flowers throughout the area which he continues to maintain.

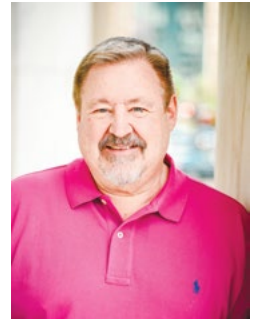
"We moved to Detroit at the height of the city going through bankruptcy and they just didn't have the resources," says Wait. "So it's just showing support for the city and having things look nice not just for Pride but for other festivals. It's how Pride supports the city."

Wait said he could not do it all without the aid of his husband, Chris Pollum. The

two got married 20 years ago in a small ceremony overlooking the ocean in Monterey, California.

"My husband is my greatest supporter," Wait says. "He has helped me all along with this journey with Pride. While I'm out

there talking to a lot of people, he's the one who's behind the scenes helping me, whether it's with marketing or logistics. It's a great partnership that we have."



Dave Wait. Photo: Andrew Potter

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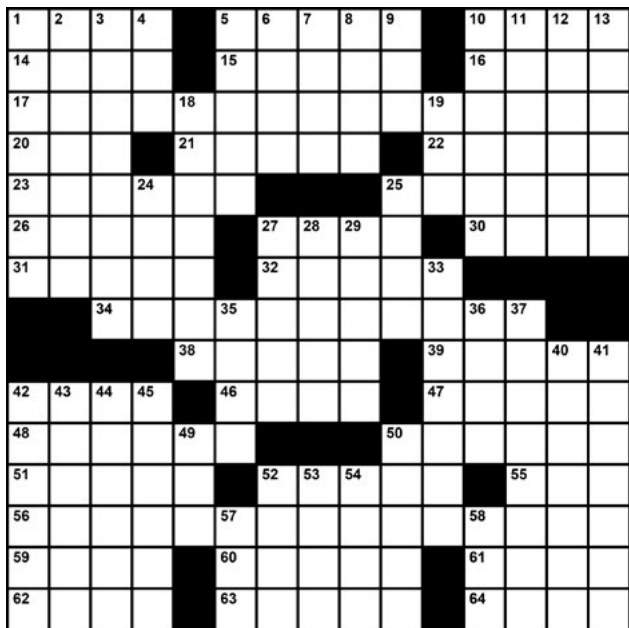


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- 32 Jodie Foster's "\_\_\_ Room"  
 34 More of the quote  
 38 Hindu ascetic  
 39 Michael Musto's tidbits  
 42 Obligation, in court  
 46 Got going  
 47 \_\_\_ T. Lardbottom of "Kudzu"  
 48 Lane of "Modern Family"  
 50 Having a light touch  
 51 Homo sapiens  
 52 Greek god  
 55 "\_\_\_ be my pleasure!"  
 56 End of the quote  
 59 Tale of adventure  
 60 Linney of "Tales of the City"  
 61 If that fails  
 62 Condoms, in slang  
 63 "Lord of the \_\_\_"  
 64 A Scout may do a good one

- 13 "\_\_\_ No Business Like Show Business"  
 18 Pekoe unit  
 19 Button you use to turn down REM  
 24 Ristorante beverage  
 25 Do a nocturnal activity  
 27 Dykes on Bikes radius  
 28 "Alice" star Linda  
 29 Like the gas krypton  
 33 Tongue of Leslie Cheung  
 35 Blades of grass, collectively  
 36 Words before end  
 37 One of a pair of stones  
 40 Falcon-like, to Bogart  
 41 Enjoyed Aspen, perhaps  
 42 In the heavens  
 43 Result of hearing Fred Phelps, perhaps  
 44 At the top  
 45 Members at a bathhouse?  
 49 Aardvark entree  
 50 The Oscars, and others  
 52 Like the end of a bacchanal?  
 53 Poet Kitty  
 54 Lettuce, to a lesbica  
 57 Keebler cookie maker  
 58 Composer Rorem

**Down**

- 1 Put them in your mouth  
 2 Put in a place  
 3 What Kahlo often painted of herself  
 4 Direct ending  
 5 Shakespeare's theatre  
 6 He did Moor good, then harm  
 7 Infamous ldi  
 8 "In the \_\_\_" (Village People hit)  
 9 Poet who inspired "Cats," initially  
 10 Pansies and similar groups  
 11 Hansberry's fruit in the sun  
 12 Get up

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**Across**

- 1 Nickname in Luke Prokop's sport  
 5 Rock Hudson movie with James Dean  
 10 Greek group, for short  
 14 Contemporary Christian  
 15 Teachers in "The King and I"  
 16 S/M unit  
 17 Start of a quote from cartoonist Jaime Hayde

- 20 On the other hand  
 21 Like some of Liberace's keys  
 22 Brian of figure skating  
 23 Future flies  
 25 Broadway star Stritch  
 26 Intercourse while surfing?  
 27 Like a Muscle Mary who does sit-ups  
 30 They may be split  
 31 River of Gay Paree

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Deana Spencer (right) with her partner Kim Haist at a Pride event. Photo courtesy of Kim Langridge

## → BCP

Continued from page 24

the group, Larry Dillon, if she would serve as vice president, somewhat out of the blue. Dillon's home served as the first BCP meeting place, where members planned social events at local restaurants and at the local gay bar, Partners.

In time, the rector of St. Thomas Episcopal Church in Battle Creek, Father Brian Coleman, an out gay man, offered a more stable home for the organization. BCP rented a room from St. Thomas in the early 2010s. Spencer remembers painting every surface of that room, even the ceiling, to make it comfortable, and they decorated it with furniture purchased from a \$5,000 anonymous gift. It became a real home for the regular meetings BCP began holding, including game nights, support groups and social hours for LGBTQ+ people.

While BCP is thriving today in a permanent space on Calhoun Street in Battle Creek, getting to the point where BCP finally had a true home base was not an easy path. The pursuit of a homebase for Battle Creek Pride has caused tension since the organization began.

After St. Thomas, Battle Creek Pride moved to the First Congressional Congregation Church in Battle Creek, which was also specifically inclusive to LGBTQ+ people. But Spencer, and others, believed it was important to find a neutral alternative, not in a church setting or a bar. In 2021, BCP signed an agreement with

a building owned by Neighborhoods, Inc. of Battle Creek, which provides a dedicated space outside of the church.

Until a very dramatic (and public) fallout between members in 2014, Partners Bar was also always a major player in the operation of Battle Creek Pride. After-parties for Pride events were always held at Partners, and Spencer remembers themed nights sponsored by the bar, such as the "Naughtiest Party Under the Rainbow." Spencer reflected that they leaned on the bar for a lot of support in the early years for three reasons — it was the only gay bar, it was incredibly supportive and it was one of few safe places they had.

Mike Madden, a member of the Battle Creek Pride Board of Directors and a bartender at Partners, straddled both worlds, finding himself in the center of the tension in 2014, when he was voted off the Board after a closed session. Madden reflects that the conflict was because the two organizations — BCP and Partners — were too reliant on each other. He said the gay bar was like an older parent to the "teenaged" organization. "That's kind of the way it felt," Madden said. "[The Board vote] probably was handled with way more drama than it needed to have, but it was really important for Pride simply because they had to learn to stand on their own."

As it finds its home, BCP continues to refine its purpose. Charlie Fulbright was asked to join the Board of Directors as it grew in 2012 to become an official non-profit. Fulbright was known in the community for creating

the Gay Straight Alliance at Lakeview High School in Battle Creek as a student. He is an advocate for LGBTQ+ people in Battle Creek but has said he also believes in the importance of advocating for this community in a city that preferred to ignore its LGBTQ+ neighbors. He was influential in shifting BCP into an advocacy organization, as well as providing space for queer folks.

"Social events are great, and they're fun and everything, but if you don't show yourself at a systemic level, then nothing can change," Fulbright told BTL.

Fulbright led the charge in 2013 to compel the Battle Creek City Commission to adopt an anti-discrimination ordinance that would protect LGBTQ+ people from housing and employment discrimination. Chairing a group called One Battle Creek after assisting in a similar initiative in Kalamazoo, Fulbright led trainings and canvassed neighborhoods to collect signatures. On Sept. 3, 2013, Battle Creek became the 26th municipality in Michigan to adopt such an ordinance, and Fulbright held a sign that lauded the 1,129 signers who supported the human rights ordinance in the city.

This isn't the only time BCP has had a direct impact on the City of Battle Creek. In July 2021, Spencer and co-president Langridge led efforts with BCP to get the city to fly a rainbow flag at Battle Creek City Hall during its Pride festival week. Spencer remembers how much pride she felt when that happened and said these are examples of how this city increasingly sees

*"Looking back, I wish that I had been better than about listening and sitting down and having much better conversations than I actually did. Because I didn't handle things well back then."*

LGBTQ+ people. She's being asked to sit on city and community committees, and BCP is being included in diverse community wide events. And, through initiatives like providing fresh food boxes to the community, she prioritizes giving back to the city and being present at community events. For many years, BCP poured cereal at Cereal Fest in downtown Battle Creek.

"We can't just go around asking for things; we have to give back. And if it just means giving our time, then that's what it means," Spencer said. "Just so people would see us, get used to us, take their fears and their ideas and their stereotypes away a little bit and understand we're just regular folks like everybody else. We are not scary, we are not stealing children, we are showing up and pouring cereal in the hot sun," Spencer said.

Spencer has her critics. When I first started volunteering with the organization, folks who sit across the table from her on projects warned me separately about her reputation. She's sharp with people and blunt about her opinions and feelings. As BCP moves forward with stated goals to be more equitable and inclusive, she's being confronted, somewhat directly, by new members of the board about her approach.

This sort of conflict is not new for Spencer, or BCP. Spencer is reflective of how decisions in the past, by the Board and even herself, have shaped the community overall. For instance, she said she's not proud of how she handled the situation with Madden and Partners Bar. She calls the falling out "traumatic for the community" and wishes it hadn't happened the way it did.

"Looking back, I wish that I had been better than about listening and sitting down and having much better conversations than I actually did," she said. "Because I didn't handle things well back then. I didn't give any grace to some of those emotional pieces to it. Do I think we needed to separate [from Partners]? Absolutely. Do I think the drama needed to happen? No, I don't."

Spencer's reflection and the ongoing progress of BCP are linked as much as they're separate. As it has all along, the organization finds itself in the tension of these interpersonal relationships: It figures itself out as it works through the challenges and successes of an eager leader.



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