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By Ellen Shanna Knoppow

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Anti-LGBTQ+ Tide in West  
Michigan Can't Stop It

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| 6:00  | New Comers Drag Show   |
| 6:45  | MOTOR CITY DRAG KINGS PRESENTS<br>Ferndale Drag Extravaganza |
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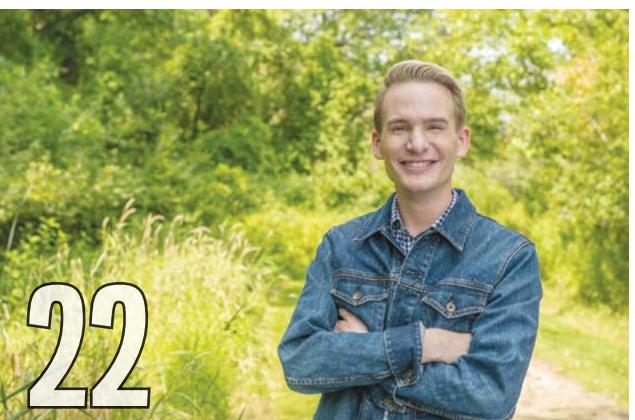




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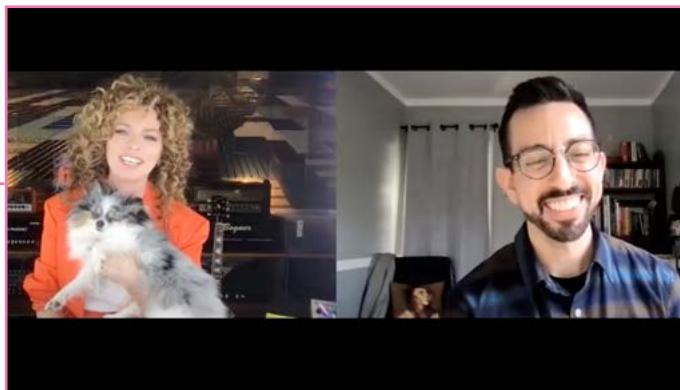
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# 5 Queer Things You Can Do Right Now-ish

BY SARAH BRICKER HUNT

Can you feel that electric buzz in the air? That's right, friends: Pride season is upon us. You'll find rainbow-hued delights around every corner from now until July (and even later — find details in our 2023 Michigan Pride Calendar at [Pridesource.com](http://Pridesource.com)). In addition to early Pride Fests in places like Trenton, Kalamazoo and Ferndale, check out queer-friendly events like the fifth annual Pride Comedy Gala, the inaugural HowDy Fest, a disco-themed PRISM Men's Chorus event and the lively Movement Festival in Detroit's Hart Plaza.



Sam Meier. Courtesy photo

## See Local Comedians for a Good Queer Cause

Lean into queer joy this Pride season at the fifth annual Pride Comedy Gala, a fundraiser supporting Ruth Ellis Center (REC), set for June 11 at Valentine Distilling Co. in Ferndale. Proceeds will help REC in its mission to provide trauma-informed services for LGBTQ+ youth and young adults of color. Local comedian and producer Hailey Zureich told BTL the "very special show" will feature an all-queer lineup of comedians, food and drink and a silent auction. The eclectic mix of local talent includes Sam Meier, Alex Bozinovic, Maxwell Skelly Gonyea-Alexander and Nicole Melnyk.

June 11, 7 p.m., Valentine Distilling Co. (161 Vester Ave., Ferndale). Reserve tickets at [bit.ly/3pRNic6](http://bit.ly/3pRNic6).

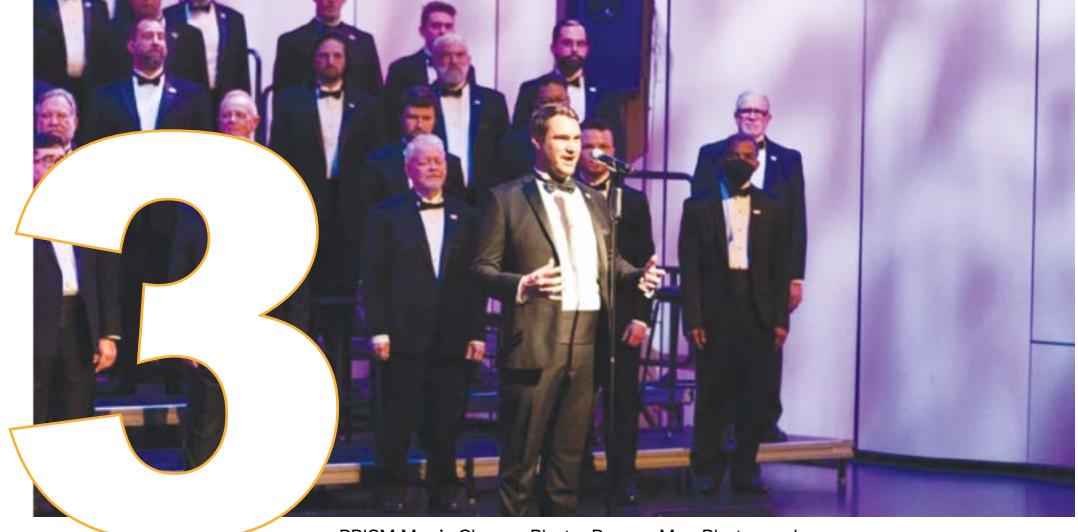


## Put the All in Y'all at HowDy Fest

Practice your best "yee haw" and prepare to channel Dolly for HowDy Fest, "a welcoming and supportive y'allternative space for folks whom the typical honky-tonk environment traditionally doesn't serve," says organizer Savannah Stone. "Bring your rhinestones, fringe, chaps, hats, boots and all your friends!" The family-friendly event, set for June 3 at Kelly's Bar in Hamtramck, runs all day and features live music, carnival games, a lasso performance, mock calf roping, rodeo clowns and, at the center of it all, a mechanical bull. The bravest lassies and lads can even win a prize in the HowDy Fest hobby horse barrel race.

HowDy Saloon Detroit, the group sponsoring the event, bills itself as "a mixed bag of queer and trans folks working together to create inclusive, intersectional, and non-exclusionary honky-tonk events whose collective goal is to uplift the community, prioritize LGBTQIA+, BIPOC, and differently-abled persons, and to rope in others that share that same goal."

June 3, 2-10 p.m., Kelly's Bar (2403 Holbrook Ave., Hamtramck). Presale tickets: [bit.ly/3lkkdMO](http://bit.ly/3lkkdMO).



## Boogie with PRISM Men's Chorus

Tickets are selling fast for the PRISM Men's Chorus annual spring concert. This year, the choir, made up of local queer men and allies, is planning a spectacular, glittery disco-themed event with plenty of the kind of surprises that PRISM is known for. Artistic Director Darin DeWeese told BTL that the "Disco Fever!" show will focus on "one of the most iconic music and dance eras in our musical history, scratching the surface of some of our all-time favorite dance tunes and performing artists."

"I can guarantee this show will leave you begging for more and will have you dusting off those old 33s," he added. "Whether this is your first PRISM show or you're a long-standing patron, we are positive you will enjoy all we have in store for you." Advance tickets are highly recommended — the show is likely to sell out.

June 2, 8 p.m., Macomb Center for the Performing Arts (44575 Garfield Road, Clinton Township). Ticket link at [prism-chorus.org](http://prism-chorus.org).



## Get Moving at Movement

Break out your comfy shoes and grab a water bottle because the three-day Movement Music Festival is going to wear you out (in the best way, of course). The festival, set for Memorial Day weekend, will feature musical performers and producers across six stages set up in Detroit's Hart Plaza. Queer local artists DJ Minx, Beige and Stacey Hotwaxx Hale are among the 115 acts slated to pump out techno, house, electronic music and more. The event, according to a news release, "represents the beating heart of the house and techno music scene, with a rich legacy of pioneering artists and innovators who have pushed the boundaries of electronic music. It's a celebration of its culture, creativity and community." You'll join up with thousands of other festivalgoers, who come from all over the planet to move together.

May 27-29, Hart Plaza (1 Hart Plaza, Detroit riverfront). Ticket link at [movementfestival.com](http://movementfestival.com).



Monica Beverly Hillz. Photo: Instagram



## Snatch Tickets for Pride in the Wild

Grab tickets now for Slay's "Pride in the Wild" event at the Detroit Zoo July 15. The drag fundraiser, which supports Affirmations LGBTQ+ community center in Ferndale, Ruth Ellis Center, Ferndale Pride and other LGBTQ+ nonprofit organizations, will feature "RuPaul's Drag Race All Stars 8" star Monica Beverly Hillz. Local drag performers will also be on hand, alongside DJs, musicians and aerial artists. This event is expected to sell out, so embrace your inner cheetah and move quickly!

July 15, 6-10 p.m., Detroit Zoo (8450 W. 10 Mile Road, Royal Oak). Ticket link at [weslayevents.com](http://weslayevents.com).

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

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Performers at Holland Pride 2022. Photo: Facebook

# Planning Pride in Unfriendly Places

## Ottawa County Withdrew Funding for Pride After Series of Anti-LGBTQ+ Moves

BY JON KING

Pride festivals in Ottawa County this year will take place under an umbrella of concern — but also in defiance of an openly hostile message emanating from county officials.

When the newly elected Ottawa County Board of Commissioners met for the first time on Jan. 3, one of their first orders of business was to change the county's vision statement from "Where you belong" to "Where freedom rings" and to

dissolve their Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) Office.

The moves were a clarion call from the board's right-wing extremist majority that not everyone, and certainly not those from the queer community, were welcome.

The board's anti-LGBTQ+ agenda was in plain sight for anyone willing to see it. After all, eight out of the 11 commissioners were endorsed by Ottawa Impact, the same group that backed so-called "parent-approved" candidates for seats on

the Patmos Library board. That's the same library defunded by voters after officials refused to remove their small collection of LGBTQ+ material.

Further, Ottawa Impact's website claims public schools have become "indoctrination centers for sexual pleasure, sexual violence, and child sexuality" and takes broad swipes against LGBTQ+ material being made available to students. The site also attacks the trans community, targeting gender-affirming care.

It's unsurprising, given the

current climate, that local Pride festival organizers say this year has been especially difficult to navigate.

Kate Leighton-Colburn is executive director of Out On The Lakeshore, organizers of the Holland Pride Festival, set this year for June 24 at Centennial Park.

"It's hard to quantify, which makes it tough to give a statement on it," she told BTL. "I will say that what's happening at the county level is challenging. It's created a culture of fear and mistrust and distrust, especially for folks in

marginalized communities, which include LGBTQ+ folks."

But the actions of the board have extended beyond just the atmosphere of anxiety it has created. It has translated into dollars and cents — or more specifically, a lack thereof.

Leighton-Colburn said that while Ottawa County has in the past provided financial assistance to the festival through sponsorships, this year, under this new board, that has been withdrawn.

"They did not say why, so I can't

speak to that, but there is a difference that's noticeable," she said. "There's been some delays in fund disbursement for grants that we were awarded, and again, they have not said why. But those kind of delays, plus the lack of financial sponsorship for the festival, are concerning."

Leighton-Colburn said she can't say what impact that loss of financial support will have, as they are still in the process of solidifying all of their sponsorships for the festival, but the timing isn't helpful.

"I'm still working on that, but it sucks to lose any money, especially with the look of the economy right now," she said. "And also just the national rhetoric surrounding LGBTQ+ identity. We need the support, and it sucks to not get it."

The lone vote of opposition to the board's decision to change its vision statement was Commissioner Doug Zylstra, whose district represents the City of Holland.

"That was completely out of the blue," Zylstra said. "Many people in Ottawa County had really come to appreciate our vision statement of 'Where you belong,' and the fact that it was changed within a 10-minute period was pretty shocking. They [the board] were very intentional about certain messages that they want to talk about and wanted to indicate to the community that they were supportive of, and also I think that they wanted to indicate to the community what they weren't supportive of."

Zylstra said that while he is disappointed in the changes the board's majority has made, he still wants to find a path forward to try and work together. However, he can't help but recognize the difference.

"I think before we had a very strong relationship with a lot of groups, including Out On The Lakeshore, that were pursuing equity work that we don't anymore," he said. "In fact, just the word equity has become a very difficult word around the board."

When asked if he thought the board's decision not to provide funding would have a negative effect on the festival, Zylstra said

he couldn't be sure, though he planned to participate as he has in the past.

"I'll be there," he said. "I have a booth; I've had a booth for the last three or four years, just an informational booth... what's going on in the county, what's going on the board? So I'll definitely be there and I'm looking forward to seeing the crowds that are there."

In fact, Ottawa County will have a new Pride event this year with the Grand Haven Pride Festival, set for June 10.

The mere fact that the event will take place stands as evidence that while the commissioners with anti-LGBTQ+ sentiments hold a majority on the board, they don't necessarily represent a majority of local residents' points of view.

Sponsored by St. John's Episcopal Church in Grand Haven, organizers told MLive that it grew out of a Pride worship service two years ago when they expected several

*“It’s a celebration of identity, but it’s also a celebration specific to our community here in West Michigan and on the Lakeshore.”*

— Kate Leighton-Colburn,  
executive director, Out on the Lakeshore

dozen attendees and, instead, almost 200 turned out.

"We realized it needed to be something bigger than just something my church does," MLive reported Cramer telling the city council.

As for Holland's Pride Festival, Leighton-Colburn says one silver lining of the commission's actions has been the noticeable support from others in the county.

"I've been very impressed actually with

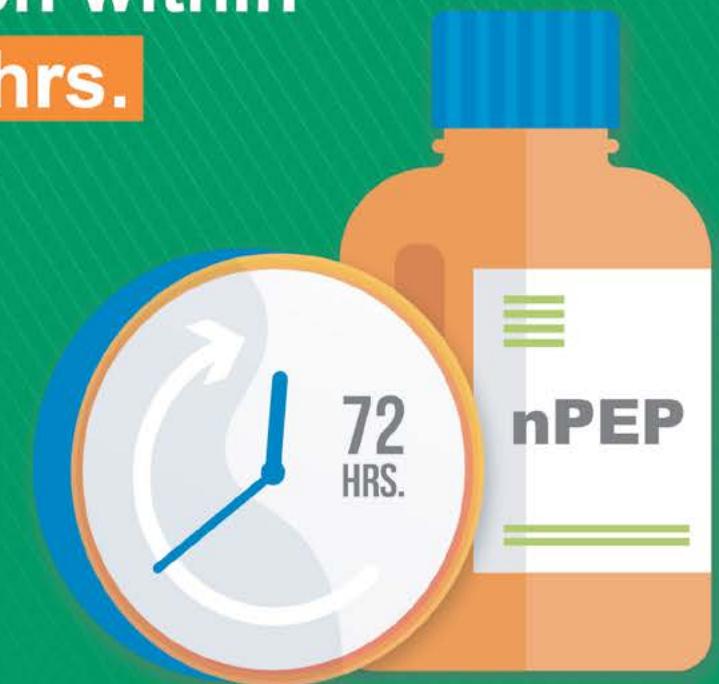
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# Bills to End Conversion Therapy For Minors Introduced in Michigan House, Senate

BY JASON A. MICHAEL

Both the Michigan House of Representatives and the Michigan Senate introduced bills on May 18 aimed at banning conversion therapy for minors across the state. The package of bills would ensure that no minor is subjected to the harmful practice in the state and that any state-licensed provider who is found to continue the practice could risk losing their credentials.

If the bills pass, Gov. Gretchen Whitmer, a strong queer ally, has pledged to sign it into law.

Equality Michigan has been advocating to end the misguided and much maligned “treatment” for years. “I am optimistic and ready

to get to work, as this is the year that Michigan finally puts an end to conversion therapy,” Equality Michigan Executive Director Erin Knott told BTL. “These bills are essential, and they represent a moment in time where we are facing numerous anti-LGBTQ+ attacks that are disproportionately targeting our youth all across this country.”

The package of bills — SB 348, SB 349, HB 4616 and HB 4617 — was introduced by Sen. Mallory McMorrow, Rep. Felicia Brabec and Rep. Jason Hoskins. If they pass, Michigan would become the 21st state, along with the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico, to ban the fraudulent and dangerous practice.

There is no credible research that

indicates conversion therapy, or so-called reparative therapy, can actually change a person’s inherent sexuality.

Instead, research shows that youth subjected to conversion therapy are more than twice as likely to report having attempted suicide and more than 2.5 times likely to have made multiple attempts. What’s more, youth who undergo conversion therapy were more likely to experience serious psychological distress or depression and more likely to engage in illicit drug use according to the Human Rights Campaign.

Conversion therapy entails a range of dangerous and discredited practices. These methods have been rejected by the mainstream medical community at large.

“The research on conversion therapy is that there’s 100 percent relapse and recidivism,” said Joe Kort, a psychotherapist located in Royal Oak. “In other words, it doesn’t work. In fact, the harm it causes, especially in children and adolescents, is suicidality. Sadly, conversion therapy is done mostly by religious organizations and clergy who do not have licenses.”

Rev. Dr. Selma Massey, pastor of Whosoever Ministry United Church of Christ in Grosse Pointe Farms, said that homophobic clergy who exercise the practice are misguided. “This move by the state legislature is important and long overdue,” she said. “Please don’t change, you are part of us and beloved. Equality Michigan is fighting for you and will not stop until this barbaric, torturous practice ends once and for all in Michigan.”

The American Psychiatric Association issued a position paper in 1998 denouncing the practice of conversion therapy. Two years ago, Whitmer signed an executive order prohibiting the use of state funds for the practice of conversion therapy on minors.

Knott said she is excited about what the passage of these bills could mean for queer youth in the state.

“To Michigan’s LGBTQ+ youth, please know that you are perfect, you are who you are meant to be,” she said. “Please don’t change, you are part of us and beloved. Equality Michigan is fighting for you and will not stop until this barbaric, torturous practice ends once and for all in Michigan.”

# Book Bans Skyrocket

## But There's Something You Can Do to Help

BY DANA RUDOLPH

The number of books being banned or facing attempted bans in schools and libraries increased dramatically in 2022, with books that have LGBTQ+ and/or Black, Indigenous and people of color (BIPOC) characters predominant among them, as two new reports show. While these trends are not new, the reports find disturbing shifts in the forces behind them.

"Gender Queer," by Maia Kobabe, a memoir about growing up nonbinary and asexual, has topped the American Library Association's annual list of the Top 10 Most Challenged Books for the second year in a row. Of the 13 books on the list (more than 10 because of ties), seven were targeted because of LGBTQIA+ content.

The list was released April 24 as part of the American Library Association's (ALA's) annual "State of America's Libraries Report," which found a record 1,269 challenges (demands for censorship) to library, school and university materials and services in 2022, targeting a record 2,571 unique titles, up from 729 challenges and 1,858 unique titles in 2021. Both years chart a hockey-stick rise from 2020 and earlier.

Of the challenged titles, the ALA said, "the vast majority" were by or about LGBTQIA+ and/or BIPOC people. That's unfortunately no different from many past years. The record numbers of challenges now, however, "are evidence of a growing, well-organized, conservative political movement whose goals include removing books addressing race, history, gender identity, sexuality, and reproductive health" from public and school libraries.

The ALA's findings complement those from a recent PEN America report, "Banned in the USA: State Laws Supercharge Book Suppression in Schools," which found that between July and December, 2022, there were 1,477 instances of individual books banned in schools (both libraries and classrooms), affecting 874 unique titles from picture books through young adult books, an increase of 28 percent over the prior six months. "Gender Queer" also topped this list. Over 4,000 bans, affecting 2,253 unique titles, have been recorded since PEN America started tracking them in July 2021, impacting 182 school districts in 37 states and millions of students.

Both the ALA and PEN America note an increase in multiple books being targeted simultaneously. The ALA pointed to "lists of books compiled by organized censorship

groups" as the main reason the recent numbers are so high. "90% of the overall number of books challenged were part of attempts to censor multiple titles," it said. Of those attempts, 40% sought to remove or restrict over 100 titles at once.

PEN America added that while parent-led groups in 2021-22 coordinated many of the book bans, state legislation in 2022-23 is "supercharging" them. School districts "respond to vague legislation by removing large numbers of books prior to any formal review." Many books are "banned pending investigation" and "removed from student access before due process of any kind is carried out; in many cases, books are removed before they are even read, or before objections to books are checked for basic accuracy."

The 874 books, across all ages, contained a range of content: themes or instances of violence and physical abuse (44%); health and well-being (38%, including mental health, bullying, suicide, substance abuse, sexual well-being and puberty); grief and death (30%); race, racism, or characters of color (30%); LGBTQ+ characters or themes (26%); sexual experiences between characters (24%); and teen pregnancy, abortion or sexual assault (17%). Many books included content in multiple categories. The first three categories are more common than in the previous school year, "largely due to the removal of long lists of books, often covering a wide swath of topics."

Looking just at banned picture books, however, nearly three-quarters (74%) featured LGBTQ+ characters and almost half (46%) featured characters of color or discussed race and racism. (Specific percentages were not given for other age ranges.)

Most instances of bans tracked by PEN America were in Texas, Florida, Missouri, Utah and South Carolina, "driven by a confluence of local actors and state-level policy." Yet the influence of these bans goes further, "as policies and practices are modeled and replicated across the country."

The ALA noted, too, that book bans are only part of the problem. School and public librarians themselves are "subject to defamatory name-calling, online harassment, social media attacks and doxxing, as well as direct threats to their safety, their employment and their very liberty," wrote Deborah Caldwell-Stone, director of ALA's Office for Intellectual Freedom, in the

See Book Banning, page 18



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Holland Pride 2022. Photo: Facebook

### ◀ **Pride Persists**

Continued from page 7

the collaborative spirit of the area," she said. "Folks have been quite supportive in whatever way they can. Folks want to know if there are ways that they can support us. The vendors we have attracted over the last couple of years have stayed pretty steady, so that's pretty great, honestly. And no matter what's happening with governance at the county level, folks are still on the ground doing the good, hard work."

But ultimately, Leighton-Colburn says while they can't ignore what's happening at the county level, it is important to not lose sight of the fact of what the Pride festival is really about.

"It's a celebration of identity, but it's also a celebration specific to our community here in West Michigan and on the Lakeshore," she said. "It's a blast. It's family-friendly. There's a lot of really cool stuff to do: activities, food, music and you get to meet a lot of really neat people. So I just hope people come."

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## School Officials Mistake Graduation Ceremony for Gender Reveal Party



BY D'ANNE WITKOWSKI

It's graduation time! Kids across the country will be donning caps and gowns and walking across stages to get their diplomas.

It's a weird ritual, really. From the shape of the hats on down. It can also be an extremely gendered ritual, which isn't great for trans or non-binary graduates. Some schools have strict dress codes for graduation and any deviation is not tolerated. I remember when I graduated from high school there was a zero tolerance policy for messages on the top of hats. I also remember that I had chosen not to wear the academic awards I'd received. I think they were medals made to wear around your neck? I don't remember. I do remember feeling kind of stupid when I saw other people wearing theirs and realized that there would never be another occasion to wear or display them. Oh, well.

What I did not have to worry about, however, was what I was wearing under my robe. Spoiler alert: It was a dress. As a cisgender teenage girl, it made sense. I do not remember anyone making me wear a dress, nor did I mind wearing one. It was a non-issue. Which is how it should be.

Unfortunately for at least two graduates in Harrison County, Mississippi, the Harrison Central High School graduation ceremony dress code left them out. Literally and figuratively.

A trans student identified only as L.B. was told by the principal that she could not wear a dress to graduation even though she identifies as female and lives every day presenting as female. In fact, she'd already gone shopping and bought the dress she wanted to wear at the graduation ceremony when she was told that she had to wear "a button down white shirt, tie, black pants and black shoes," according to WLOX.

And so she and her mother sued. And the Trump-appointed judge who oversaw the case ruled against the student. And so instead of dressing as a "biological male," as the school district required, L.B. did not go to graduation.



PRIDE 2023

"Me going to graduation in what they asked me to wear would be me telling them that it's OK, and it's not. It would just feel like I was shadowed and tainted by bigotry, hate," L.B. told WLOX. "My graduation, it's the start of a new life, a better life."

Unfortunately, L.B. wasn't the only student who lost out on a once in a lifetime rite of passage at the Harrison Central graduation. Moments before Jai Dallas was to walk across the stage and get her diploma, she was pulled out of line. For wearing pants. She was told that she could take her pants off and walk in her underwear, however.

"I don't understand how this, a moment this important, can be taken away from a child that's worked 12 years to get here," Jai's grandmother, Michelle Faison, who traveled 800 miles to attend the graduation, told WLOX.

That Harrison High School officials thought it was more important to police gender than it was to honor all of their students at the graduation ceremony was made clear in the testimony by Harrison County School District Superintendent Mitchell King at the hearing over L.B.'s attire.

According to WLOX, "King said at an earlier event, he saw a young man wearing a dress and that led him to look at the [dress code] policy. He then called the principals at [district] high schools and

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*Four students. In the entire district. Which King made it his job to ferret out. And then went to court to defend his right to be the gender police. Sounds like targeted harassment to me.*

asked them to identify students who might be suspected of breaking the dress code." Four students, including L.B., were identified.

Four students. In the entire district. Which King made it his job to ferret out. And then went to court to defend his right to be the gender police. Sounds like

targeted harassment to me.

"It's really emotional for me, you know, because this is an experience that we'll never be able to get back, ever," Samantha Brown, L.B.'s mother, said.

King, and every adult involved in denying these kids their graduation experience, should be ashamed.

# Coming Out as Mentally Ill



BY JASON A. MICHAEL

I was 17 in 1989 when I came out to my mother, or rather when she found my collection of Playgirl and

Blueboy magazines. I moved out of my parents' house, got a day job and graduated from night school on time. There were a few bumps in the road. When I came out to my biological father, he threatened to kill me if he ever saw me again and ordered me to change my name. I can't say that it didn't fuck me up and result in some very high therapy bills, but coming out for me was still a relief.

I felt a certain freedom, a certain confidence even. I accepted and embraced my sexual identity. There were so many firsts and so many new experiences. It was thrilling.

Coming out as mentally ill is more challenging. I was diagnosed with bipolar disorder and treatment resistant bipolar depression 16 years ago, when I was 35. Though, honestly, looking back, I can see how my mental illness impacted and affected me throughout much of my life. I was what my pediatrician called "a nervous kid." I bit my fingernails, had a couple of odd little twitches and "nervous habits" and, as an only child until the age of 13, I had few friends and spent much of my time alone.

As an adult, I continued to suffer from the depression that had plagued me since childhood.

I was in and out of talk therapy and in and out of work, often getting fired or quitting based on some imaginary principle my mind had concocted. I tried anti-depressants and, initially, they helped somewhat. Then I experienced what I call "the year of darkness."

I hate to even think back on it now. It was 12 months of blurry bleakness encapsulated in a pool of misery. It was a suffocating pressure on my chest that kept me confined to my bed for

much of the day. And when I could manage to climb out of it, I'd stand in the middle of my kitchen unsure what to do.

There was nothing I wanted to eat, nowhere I wanted to go, not a damn thing I could think of that I wanted to do or that might bring me a bit of joy or at least relief from the pain. I felt hopeless.

Finally, I sought help and received a diagnosis that made total sense to me. I started medication, but antidepressants, mood stabilizers and the like work differently in everybody. Finding the right combination for my unique makeup was a challenge and a painful process of trial and error. Over the years I've tried well over a dozen different medications and combinations thereof.

Side effects varied. Some made me practically comatose, some had me bouncing off the walls. Some did nothing noticeable at all. Finally, I found a combo of three different meds that seemed to work.

But they only worked for so long. After another few years I began experimenting with other meds.

Today, I take four different meds, including two mood stabilizers, an antipsychotic and an antidepressant.

It's enough to keep me basically functional. I stay employed thanks to the gift for words I've been blessed with and a boss with the patience of Job. Most people don't know about my mental health struggles. But like my sexual



orientation, it's not something that I find compelled to keep to myself. If I had kidney disease or heart disease, I'd talk about it. My disease is just as dangerous and just as potentially fatal.

It is estimated that 20-60 percent of patients with bipolar disorder attempt suicide at least once in their life. Nearly 20 percent succeed. I deal with what's called suicidal ideation, meaning thoughts of suicide wander into my head frequently. I find myself planning my death, working on my obit, imagining making final arrangements. Most of the time, it's manageable. Sometimes, however, it's terrifying and difficult to block the thoughts and quiet my mind.

My close circle of friends don't like it when I say I'm mentally ill. They think it sounds tragically dramatic. But that's really the long and short of it. I live with mental illness. I battle it every day. Most folks don't know about it. It's not as easy to come out as mentally ill as it is to shout, "I'm a

great big homo!"

The diagnosis makes it difficult to date and harder, even, to find love. There's no good time to come out as mentally ill. It's not appropriate first date talk. "Hi, handsome. Nice to meet you. I'm a Capricorn and bipolar as hell" is surely not a suitable pickup line.

So, you tread along lightly. Trying to stay calm and not let any potential new boyfriend see that you have issues. Trying to show that your good outweighs your bad. That you're worth the effort. That it's not such a big deal.

Gay men of my age, we're expected to deal with HIV. But mental illness carries a stigma that I'd argue is even more challenging. As someone who is HIV negative, I dated someone who is positive for some time. I thought that our individual issues would balance us out. It did not work out that way. Once he knew of my illness, he liked to poke and provoke me. And once I acted out at his prompting, he felt compelled to punish me.

I dealt with that for a time. Now, I basically deal with being alone. The pandemic basically stopped me from going out and from engaging with others. I'm still stuck in that mode. I focus on work. I dream of a brighter future. Of a partner who will accept me as I am. And I try to focus on my stories and turning them in on time.

I have mixed emotions about sharing all these personal details with the world. Like with my sexual orientation, I am not ashamed of who I am. Yet I can't help but worry that this revelation could somehow be used against me. But maybe somebody out there needs to hear my testimony. I hope so.

*Jason A. Michael is senior staff writer for Between The Lines and Pride Source Media Group. He has been writing for the paper since 1999. Jason is also an Essence bestselling author. He may be reached at jason@pridesource.com.*

**May is National Mental Health Awareness Month.**  
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# Will Michigan Become the Next Safe Haven for Trans Folks Under Attack Across the Nation?

## What Our State Gets Right (and Wrong) with Gender-Affirming Healthcare

BY ELLEN SHANNA KNOPPOW

Gender-affirming healthcare has come a long way in Michigan. Just this past March, Gov. Whitmer signed legislation to amend the Elliott-Larsen Civil Rights Act (ELCRA) to include LGBTQ+ people, which will ensure transgender Michiganders won't suffer discrimination when seeking gender-affirming care, which is oftentimes lifesaving. Not only that, Medicaid in Michigan covers hormone

replacement therapy (HRT) and gender-confirmation surgery, something not true for every state. Between The Lines examined other ways Michigan is meeting the healthcare needs of its trans citizens — and how the state can do better.

Kalamazoo County is taking the lead when it comes to gender-affirming healthcare. YWCA Kalamazoo recently asked the county commission to allocate \$100,000 for its Reproductive Health Fund. This fund

covers things like childcare services and travel expenses for clients needing HRT, abortion care, PEP, doula services and the like.

"The Reproductive Health Fund was an idea that kind of launched a little over two years ago," said Daniel Hamilton, director of public policy for YWCA Kalamazoo. "We really kind of wanted to survey women and reproductive folks who were experiencing gaps in accessing reproductive health care in Kalamazoo." One in three of those surveyed

said they were impacted.

"I think that that particular service that the YWCA has with the reproductive fund is so important," said Tracy Hall, a Kalamazoo County commissioner from 2017 to 2022 and current executive director of OutFront Kalamazoo. "I know it's gonna be a challenge, but OutFront and other community organizations have directly benefited. Part of it is gender-affirming products, and the

See **Gender-Affirming Healthcare**, page 18

# Affirmations Executive Director Dave Garcia to Step Down

## Deputy ED Cheryl Czach Chosen to Replace Garcia

BY JASON A. MICHAEL

Affirmations LGBTQ+ community center Executive Director Antonio Dave Garcia has announced his intention to step down at the end of the year. Newly hired Deputy Executive Director Cheryl Czach will take over Jan. 1. For the next six months, Garcia said he will work closely with Czach and that he expects a smooth transition. The decision to leave, Garcia said, had been made some time ago.

Garcia, who first served as ED from 2012-2015, spent five years in California before returning to Michigan and the ED post in 2019. His first contract was only for three years.

"But Covid happened, and then when three years came I was ready to step down then but we didn't have a good transition plan," he said. "So, I didn't want to see what's happened in the past happen again."

What happened before is that the center's board did a massive, costly national search in 2015, which ended with the hiring of Darrious D. Hilmon as ED. But Hilmon left the center after less than a year. Czach, who previously served on the center's board, including as president for a time, was brought on as deputy ED in April. And a plan was set in motion.

"When I joined it was with the idea that there was a transition coming," said Czach. "But I didn't know it was going to be me. The board decided that they didn't want to spend the time and money on a search. Historically, searches have not worked out well for Affirmations. Some of them have cost, like, \$50,000."

With that in mind, Garcia began looking in-house.

"I wanted to develop a strong



(Above) Antonio Dave Garcia speaking at the ELCRA signing celebration on May 20. Photo: Steven Koss



internal candidate and then it would be up to the board whether to accept that candidate or do a search," Garcia said. "The board made the decision to forgo the search. We all believe Cheryl is going to do a great job."

Czach, who first started with the center as a volunteer in 2014, was an obvious choice, according to Garcia.

"I trust Cheryl," he said. "I've known Cheryl for a long time now. She worked very closely with me as board president. She's a passionate, intelligent leader."

Garcia said he looks forward to having Czach "by his side" for the next six months as he prepares her to take over. Filling Garcia's shoes, she said, will not be easy.

"It's daunting, of course," said Czach. "These are big shoes to fill with Dave. Not only has he done an amazing job turning the center around, but he is very loved in the community. What makes me feel comfortable about it is

that I have a lot of faith in the staff."

The board, too.

"Our board is pretty phenomenal," she said. "It's more diverse than it's ever been. They're very involved and they're very engaged. And because I was on the board, I have strong relationships with them and we have a lot of mutual trust."

For his part, Garcia said that stepping down from the ED post does not mean he is totally leaving Affirmations. Instead, he's going to stay on contract as a consultant.

"I'm going to do arts and culture, and advocacy and certain projects Cheryl might need help with," he said, adding that he also wants to do contract work with other centers across the country. "I feel I'm at the point that I want to do something bigger. Heading into the 2024 election, I think my talents can best be used to help us in 2024."

"I just felt it was time to do more policy and advocacy," he continued. "We've done some. But I haven't been able to do as much as I'd like."



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Just Because You're Gay...  
Puzzle on page 27

# The Hottest Beach Bodies Are Vaxxed

MiGen Ad Campaign  
Encourages Older LGBTQ+  
Adults to Get Vaccinated  
Before Summer Fun

BY JASON A. MICHAEL

**M**iGen, formerly Sage Metro Detroit, is partnering with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to get the word out about flu vaccines and Covid boosters for older LGBTQ+ adults this summer. The organization's new campaign, "The Hottest Bodies on the Beach Are Vaccinated," or "Hottest Bodies" for short, will work in partnerships with other local organizations to host pop-up vaccination events, publish eye-catching marketing materials and employ on-the-ground navigators to motivate the community to participate.

"This campaign, as with nearly all of the best things happening in and for our community right now, was truly a collaborative effort in terms of funders and partners involved," said MiGen Executive Director Angela Gabridge. "In addition to promoting adult vaccination, it's an effort to build our internal capacity around creating and deploying effective public health campaigns that affect the LGBTQ+ 45-and-over communities with the intent of creating change."

Gabridge went on to say that as the community continues to recover from Covid, the pre-Pride season is a great time to launch the campaign. Older LGBTQ+ people were twice as likely as non-LGBTQ+ people to have been laid off or furloughed during the pandemic, she said. In addition, nearly 35 percent of older LGBTQ+ people of color personally knew someone who died from Covid. For white folks, that number is 30 percent. And according to the Williams Institute, LGBTQ+ people ages 45 and older were more likely to experience the health and economic impacts of the pandemic than any other group.

But the Hottest Bodies campaign, which included a kickoff event featuring Gov. Gretchen Whitmer that took place May 18 at Affirmations, is about more than these sobering statistics. It's about fun and playfulness, as evidenced by the images that accompany the campaign and that were displayed at the Affirmations event. In them, older LGBTQ+ adults are frolicking in colorful, beach-ready outfits. You can't help but smile just seeing the pics.

MiGen board member Michelle Fox-Phillips is one of several LGBTQ+ community members who threw on some beach gear for the campaign.

"I thought it would be fun to pose for it," said Fox-Phillips. "And it was."



Images from MiGen's new vaccine campaign. Photos: MiGen



**“**In addition to promoting adult vaccination, it's an effort to build our internal capacity around creating and deploying effective public health campaigns that affect the LGBTQ+ 45-and-over communities with the intent of creating change. **”**



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## ► Gender-Affirming Healthcare

Continued from page 14

demand — it's incredible." She said items like chest binders, shavers and deodorant are in such high demand that there is a waiting list.

The reproductive health fund does not use public county dollars to pay for direct abortion care. However, the fund does pay for abortion and gender-affirming care — both direct and practical support care — from alternative funding sources. Still, some believe the commission is being forced to take a position on controversial issues. Hall has no problem with that.

"I think the county should declare its support for abortion. It should declare its support for gender-affirming products. We are talking about medical procedures that are lifesaving for not just queer youth, but anyone who has the capacity of having a child. There are consequences and risks, and we should declare our choice and our freedom to our own bodily autonomy."

Hamilton added that of all the reproductive health services YWCA Kalamazoo provides, they've seen the greatest increase in demand for gender-affirming care. He called it "really just a powerful resource that is helping families understand, again, the support that they have for folks

[to] live their most authentic lives."

Just as Hall, Hamilton and others in Kalamazoo County are proclaiming that trans healthcare is healthcare, so too are Democratic lawmakers in Lansing. There, first nonbinary state legislator Rep. Emily Dievendorf (D-Lansing) is at work collaborating with community leaders to craft legislation that would, among other things, designate Michigan as a sanctuary state for transgender individuals and families fleeing states that have passed transphobic public policy.

According to the Trans Legislation Tracker, of 540 anti-trans bills introduced in 49 states so far this year, 66 have passed and 376 are active — only Delaware is unaffected. Last year, California became the first state to pass refuge state legislation; another half dozen or so are now taking steps to explicitly protect access to healthcare for their trans and nonbinary citizens. Provisions in refuge state bills typically include protections for people seeking care from out of state, as well.

"We are in the midst of working on several policies to try to ensure that Michigan can be one of the safest places in the country for our trans and nonbinary communities," Dievendorf said. "Some of this is in great part because we have really strong elders like Grace Bacon, who continue to advocate really strongly for the trans community."

Dievendorf said that trans,

nonbinary and gender non-conforming folks "need to know that there are places that they can go where they are safe and where they and their healthcare can be guaranteed. So, we are planning to introduce trans sanctuary legislation as soon as June, so that we can now catch up with all of those wonderful states that are already leading on this. And I say that with great joy."

Grace Bacon, a longtime transgender activist and pioneering organizer originally from Flint, agrees.

"I do believe that Michigan should become a safe haven state for families who need to escape from the states who are enacting some of the most draconian laws ever seen in this country," Bacon said. "Most of those laws target the most vulnerable part of our community: our children. These families are uprooting their whole lives."

Michigan's sanctuary state legislation is being modeled after California and Minnesota's protections for the trans community, Dievendorf said. In Minnesota, a bill was passed that would prevent state courts or officials from complying with child removal requests, extraditions, arrests or subpoenas related to gender-affirming healthcare that a person receives in Minnesota. It has since been signed into law by Gov. Tim Walz.

"Minnesota," Dievendorf said, "their legislation affirms that

healthcare can include a number of social or medical interventions that affirm gender identity, including puberty blockers, cross sex hormones, permanent hair removal, voice therapy and surgical interventions."

But Dievendorf expects pushback. Last year, Dievendorf's Republican colleagues in Michigan introduced a bill that would classify gender-affirming care for minors as felony child abuse. To be sure, the governor's signing pen will never come near that kind of negative legislation.

Bacon believes that the state of Michigan should go beyond merely guaranteeing safe space for trans individuals of all ages to carry out decisions made regarding their own healthcare. "These displaced people will need temporary housing and some unemployment compensation," Bacon said. "FEMA has temporary housing units and the federal government should ante up some unemployment funding. This is an emergency that may be too big for states to handle by themselves. I feel that Gov. Whitmer should directly contact President Biden for help."

Dievendorf is also looking at evidenced-based medicine for intersex youth. "Corrective" surgeries are often non-consensual and medically unnecessary, according to the American Academy of Pediatrics and many global organizations like Human Rights Watch. In addition, Dievendorf said she and Bacon

are considering ways to protect homeless youth who are trans to ensure they receive the care they need despite lacking the support of their biological families.

"For gender-affirming healthcare, there are some things that need to be done," Bacon said. "But for the most part, Michigan has done a pretty good job of staying out of the way, which is the way it should be. I feel that an adult has a right to transition and to use gender-affirming healthcare. WPATH [World Professional Association for Transgender Health] standards should be the only gatekeeper, and the state of Michigan should have no interest in the matter. Care for minors should also fall under WPATH standards with the permission of one parent or legal guardian."

For their part, Dievendorf is hopeful.

"Within the Democratic Party, we are not allowing trans folks to be used as a bargaining chip or as a way to divide us," Dievendorf said. "There is unification when it comes to the fact that trans folks need to be considered with humanity and should not be discriminated against. And considering the fact that we have a Democratic trifecta in Michigan, I do think it is recognized that we need to move forward with equal rights and equity and humanity for trans folks and nonbinary folks in Michigan at this time."

## ► Book Banning

Continued from page 9

ALA report. In 2022, she added, 12 states introduced legislation "to permit criminal prosecution of librarians and educators for distributing materials falsely claimed to be illegal and inappropriate for minors." Yet librarians, local residents, library trustees, board members, parents and other library advocates have in many cases joined together to fight the bans and have had some wins in court, she observed.

All kids need to see themselves, their families and the world around them reflected in authentic ways. I am heartened by the number of new and upcoming children's and young adult books that

include LGBTQ+ and other marginalized people. Yes, these books will likely face challenges and bans — but I hope that kids will find ways of obtaining them and that enterprising adults (parents, librarians and otherwise) will help make them available.

*If you encounter book censorship attempts in your community, you can confidentially report them to the ALA ([ala.org](http://ala.org)) and/or the National Coalition Against Censorship ([ncac.org](http://ncac.org)). For resources on how to prevent and respond to bans and challenges, visit [uniteagainstbookbans.org](http://uniteagainstbookbans.org) (an ALA-led coalition that includes LGBTQ+ organizations, publishers and others), [pen.org/issue/book-bans](http://pen.org/issue/book-bans) and [ncac.org](http://ncac.org).*





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A promotional poster for a drag queen competition. On the left, a drag queen wearing a crown and sash is laughing. The title "Catfight for the Crown" is written in large, stylized letters across the center. A large gold crown graphic is superimposed on the text. To the right, the date "June 2, 2023" is written in a large, flowing script. Below it, the venue "THE FILLMORE DETROIT" and showtimes "DOORS OPEN 5:30 PM / SHOWTIME 6:30 PM" are listed. A descriptive blurb reads: "IF YOU THINK YOU KNOW OUTRAGEOUS – THINK AGAIN! THIS IS NO ORDINARY BEAUTY PAGEANT – IT'S A NO HOLDS BARRED, UNAPOLOGETIC, HIGHLY INAPPROPRIATE FIGHT TO THE FINISH AS THESE "OUT-OF-CONTROL" DRAG QUEENS BATTLE FOR THE COVETED TITLE OF MISS KITTY." At the bottom, it says "PURCHASE TICKETS AT [RUTHELLISCENTER.ORG](http://RUTHELLISCENTER.ORG)" and features the Ruth Ellis Center logo.

# *My Late-in-Life Lesbian Friend Was the Best Jewish Mother a Baby Dyke Could Have*

BY DEB SINNESS

The nametag stopped me in my tracks. I immediately swung around to talk to the gray-haired woman with a friendly face sitting in the author booth at the March 2023 Tucson Festival of Books.

"What caught your attention?"

I pointed to author Sandra Butler's description of herself: "Old. Jewish. Queer"

"Do you know someone who might enjoy a book about being old?" Butler asked, pointing to her book "The Kitchen Is Closed, and Other Benefits of Being Old."

"I do, but she just passed. I attended her celebration of life in Michigan three days ago." I felt my eyes filling. "She meant the world to me."

"You're still feeling raw," Butler said empathetically as her hand covered her heart. Tears flowed as I told her about my friend Sybil, who my daughter described as "classy, sassy and a little smart ass-y."

When I came out as a lesbian at 56, my married friends didn't understand my "new" life. I needed to find a community and friends. I signed up for MeetUps, searched for resources and started going to Affirmations, the LGBTQ+ community center in Ferndale. In my freshly out lesbian mind, every person I met became a potential friend or maybe a partner.

One Friday night I went to Lesbian Movie Night. The roomful of women seemed to know each other, and I felt alone. The room darkened and the forgettable movie started.

Afterward, a few of the women went to a coffee shop to chat and I was invited to tag along. During the conversation, an older woman with gray hair, glasses and kind eyes mentioned tennis and my ears perked up. I'd played tennis for 20 years and was eager to find players in my new community.

"Where do you play?"

"I play in White Lake and at the Novi Sports Club. She plays too," she said, nodding to a young brunette.

"I play too," I said, excited about the possibility of playing with these new people. "It would be fun to get together to play, if we can find a fourth.



Sybil Offen (left) and the author. Photo: Deb Sinness

My name is Deb."

"I'm Sybil," said the older woman.

It was the beginning of a wonderful friendship. First, we shared our coming out stories. Me, leaving my marriage of 27 years and coming out as a lesbian once I realized feelings I had long hidden and stuffed deep inside. Her, coming out at 72 after a career as a physical education teacher... we laughed about that stereotypical irony.

At 77, Sybil was fit: she walked regularly, loved golf, and still played a wicked game of tennis with the skill of placing the ball exactly where you couldn't reach. Sybil was the one I confided in when I signed up for an online dating app and had my first date.

When I was struggling with the challenge of dating a lesbian, Sybil was the one I called to meet for lunch to vent and get perspective. We commiserated on relationship challenges and when we were leaving, I saw the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) sticker on the rear window of her car.

"I'm curious. Why do you have the NAMI sticker on your car?"

"My son is mentally ill. It's an organization that's helped me a lot. I support them."

As lesbians who came out later

in life, we shared more experiences than having been married and having children... both our lives had been touched by family members with mental illness.

"No wonder we connected," I said. "My mother was mentally ill."

I always felt alone in the world, seemingly the only person having a relative with mental illness. No one talks about it. Hearing her say it factually without emotion was refreshing.

Sybil supported my dream to run a half marathon and was there cheering me on at the final turn to the finish line at the Detroit Free Press International Half. When I trained for the Marine Corps Marathon, she gave generously to the fundraiser. When I began a writing practice, she often was the first person to comment.

Sybil and I also had awesome adventures together. While at the Lesbian Film Festival in the spring of 2014 in London, Ontario, we met a couple who lived near Toronto who invited us to visit and come to World Pride. We couldn't refuse the offer and, in June, we drove to Toronto. We both enjoyed getting to know our new friends and taking part in

the festivities, capped by marching in the Dyke Parade. I took Sybil's photo near a group carrying a Pride flag and a sign that said, "Come on baby, light my menorah."

In December 2014, Sybil planned to spend a month in Florida and asked if I would accompany her on the drive from Michigan. She picked me up and drove the first leg. I drove the rest of the way, and she loved calling me her chauffeur. Before leaving, I suggested renting a two-person kayak to take a tour around the Rookery Bay mangrove forest. Silently, we paddled through the tranquil reserve, gliding among the mangroves, in awe of mother nature.

Sybil was a social justice warrior, having had some grand adventures herself. She was on the steps of the Supreme Court when the epic marriage equality decision was announced. A life-long Democrat, she worked hard in the political trenches in the 1960s to elect Coleman Young, Detroit's first African American mayor. He subsequently appointed her to a trustee position on the Human Rights Commission. As a former Detroit public school teacher, she was a card-carrying union member and defender.

"As an Army civil servant, union

membership isn't required," I once said.

"Who do you think fought for the benefits you enjoy?" was her only response.

After she moved to Plymouth, she was active in the Plymouth Dems and worked to elect the trio of women now running Michigan. Sybil was on a first name basis with Michigan's attorney general, Dana Nessel. From abortion rights to civil and voting rights, Sybil was an activist to her core.

In the summer of 2020, during the height of the pandemic, Sybil was the one who helped my daughter and I prepare for a move out of state. Our relationship transitioned to keeping in touch via texts and phone calls.

The next spring while playing tennis, Sybil started experiencing shortness of breath. A CT scan showed a spot on her lung, so surgery was scheduled for August 2021. I had planned to travel back to Michigan, so I spent a few days with her before retiring. We even went out to hit a few tennis balls with a mutual friend. Sybil still had that special touch.

They removed a seemingly benign nodule from her lung. A week after her surgery, I returned to spend two weeks with her to ease her convalescence. When she mentioned I'd be there during Rosh Hashanah, I asked what traditions she'd like to observe since, as a lapsed Lutheran, I was unfamiliar with Jewish traditions. She spoke of challah and a favorite cake her family used to enjoy. I suggested we take a drive to her favorite Jewish bakery to buy them. Later, we listened to her rabbi's message together on Zoom.

Not long after I hit the retirement road, I learned Sybil's benign tumor had developed into a malignancy. Sybil had blood cancer. In the winter of 2022, she had a severe reaction to chemotherapy and was hospitalized. Not long after, she was under hospice care. Since I hadn't seen her in a year and a half, the news left me bereft. Once in hospice care, they stopped the chemo. Thankfully, Sybil recovered, went home and began the healing process, weakened but alive and

See **Sybil Offen**, page 30

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Casey Hoffman. Courtesy photo

# This Openly Gay Republican Candidate Sees No Conflict Between His Sexuality and Political Beliefs

## Casey Hoffman Vows to Open 'America's Last Closed Closet Door'

BY ELLEN SHANNA KNOPPOW

Casey Hoffman, candidate for mayor of Menominee, stands to become one of the only known openly LGBTQ+ Republican elected officials in Michigan history. It's a distinction Hoffman is proud of. Municipal elections are nonpartisan, so Between The Lines began by exploring what residents of Menominee can expect

under Hoffman's leadership before delving into what makes this gay Republican tick.

For those unfamiliar with the U.P.'s fourth-largest city, Hoffman, a fifth-generation resident of his hometown, said Menominee has some of the kindest folks anywhere.

"Yoopers are like Canadians, but with more firearms," he quipped. "Menominee, Michigan is a retirement community

settled on the bay of Green Bay [which separates Michigan from Wisconsin]. We have stunning views of Lake Michigan that rival anything you could ever see in the Hamptons. The people, the views, the culture and the kindness are what helped raise me and brought me back to Menominee."

Hoffman said he's running "for all the right reasons." He wants to secure funding for the Spies Public

Library, where he is a trustee and where his mother was a librarian. Providing tax breaks and tax incentives so businesses choose Menominee is another priority. And Hoffman has plans to lead the city into the future. At 34, he would become Menominee's youngest mayor.

If elected, Hoffman has a plan to end the marijuana lawsuits that have plagued the city. Voters

approved recreational dispensaries, but city hall "bungled the process" and only granted two licenses. That's inconsistent with Hoffman's free market values. He wishes to uncap the market, allowing for more. At the same time, he believes in treating marijuana the same as tobacco and alcohol: no billboards that might influence kids and the strongest penalties for anyone bringing marijuana into a school

district or polluting their neighbors with unwanted odors.

"I am also running to remove the hinges from America's last closed closet door: the Michigan Republican Party," Hoffman said.

From a young age, Hoffman has been interested in politics. Elected president of the Michigan Association of Student Councils at 17, Hoffman is also proud of his stint with Democratic Congressmember Bart Stupak following Stupak's vote to pass the Affordable Care Act. Stupak was the deciding vote in the House of Representatives after being a hold out for his stance against federal funding for abortion. For that, Stupak wasn't treated well by either party. "Bart Stupak taught me to always work with the other side of the aisle," Hoffman said. "Bart Stupak is a great role model to me because he was willing to sacrifice his career to do what he believed was right."

It was in Stupak's office that Hoffman met friend Jason Morgan, the openly gay Democratic state rep from Ann Arbor. Morgan is currently first vice chair of the Michigan Democratic Party. "I'm so glad to see Casey running for mayor," Morgan said. "He is smart, passionate and dedicated to public service. We need more young people to stay in their hometowns after college to give back to the communities that raised us."

Hoffman is no far-right extremist. But while the mere existence of an LGBTQ+ Republican is a conundrum to many, Hoffman remains sincere in his beliefs. "Casey and I come from different political parties but have always found that there are more common sense policy solutions that we agree on than those that separate us by political party," Morgan said. "Don't get me wrong, a large part of our friendship has included robust friendly banter about who is right about some big political issues and which candidates we support. But we've always found that having the conversation strengthens both of our understanding of how we can work together

and bring people together."

As for Hoffman, he sees no conflict between his sexuality and political beliefs.

"Being a Republican and being a conservative and being gay — those are not contradictory things," Hoffman insisted. "I cannot think of anything more conservative or more Republican than keeping the government out of my personal romantic decisions. Keeping the government out of people's bedrooms and out of people's



*“Being a Republican and being a conservative and being gay — those are not contradictory things.”*

homes and out of people's romantic lives is inherently a limited government Republican position."

Yet when pressed, Hoffman conceded that no one welcomes the government into their bedrooms. A self-proclaimed "Lincoln-style Republican," Hoffman said the Republican party of today does not comport with the Republican values with which he was raised. He named John McCain and Mitt Romney as honorable leaders of his party.

Calling himself a fiscal conservative who likes free markets and choice, "I do not want to limit the rights, privileges or equality of anyone I meet," Hoffman said. "I have

See **Casey Hoffman**, page 26

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# Whatever You Do, DON'T Touch Jeff Hiller's Head

Jeff Hiller. Photo: HBO

## The Actor-Comedian on Bringing a 'Touch of the Fugs' to Queer-Inclusive TV

BY CHRIS AZZOPARDI

It's hard to imagine Jeff Hiller making people mad. But in 2004, that was the 46-year-old comedian and actor's job. It was his responsibility to get folks angry — those people being contestants on MTV's hidden-camera reality show "Boiling Points" — and, as he remembers, "if they didn't stand up for themselves and just took it, you would give them \$100."

The point is, Hiller has moved onto bigger and brighter and less stressful ("I hate conflict") things, from his role as a flight attendant on "30 Rock," which he says still gets him recognized, to parts in "Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt," the Pop TV sitcom "Nightcap" and, more recently, in "American Horror Story: NYC," as a terrifying serial killer.

But it's his role in "Somebody Somewhere,"

as the endearingly playful Joel, the kind of loyal, loving friend who's game for just about anything, that feels like a dream for the actor. Here, he happens to be best friends with Sam, played by cabaret performer and actress Bridget Everett. The HBO show, which is based on Everett's life and just returned for a second season, examines grief through the lens of family, both chosen and blood. Ultimately, it's Joel and Fred Rococo (comedian and NYC drag king performer Murray Hill) who help Sam feel most at home in her small Kansas town.

Recently, Hiller jumped on the phone to chat about Joel's pursuit of love in the latest season of "Somebody Somewhere," his extremely legit concern with sitting on a toilet for an extended amount of time for one particular scene and breaking new ground for queer characters on TV — this time, the kind who have a "touch

of the fugs."

**I just woke up an hour ago. My voice is usually not this low. I'm trying to lubricate with some Throat Coat tea, so we'll see.**

That's something exciting to look forward to. [Laughs.]

**I think that you are as much of a treasure in real life as you are in the show. I just have this feeling. You're not Joel, but there are parts of you that are probably very similar to Joel.**

Yeah. I mean, I think we're both funny in a way that's fun. I do think that he's way more organized than I am. The idea of me organizing a pizza party is overwhelming.

**Well, congratulations on the success of this show. I already feel like the second season's**

**picking up a lot of steam. I remember watching the first season and how it really resonated with me because my own chosen family has been my lifeline. What has your experience been with queer and ally chosen family?**

Well, I should say my exceptionally close nuclear family, I was always very close to because I was so bullied and didn't really have any friends growing up. So I know this is very unusual for a gay man to say, but I was very close with my mother. [Laughs.] I'll say that when I finally came to New York and I was in the comedy world, it was so cis, hetero, male, white, which I know sounds like I fit into a lot of those categories, but I just don't.

I would be on an improv team with all the queer people, all the women. We found each other because we needed each other because we were drowning in a sea of what

we weren't. So I absolutely agree. Chosen family is a lifeline. It's the way that you survive. And I think that's especially true when you're in a red state and you have people who are maybe not nice to you at the grocery store. It helps a lot to have friends to play poker with in their basement.

**How did finding your chosen family help you navigate the comedy world and the industry as a whole?**

They helped me find my voice, but even just logically, if you look at my resume, there are so many roles on my IMDb page that you can directly trace to... It's all women. Just because it's basically any woman who got a show out of Upright Citizens Brigade put me on it because we had a bond.

**Your involvement in "Somebody Somewhere" doesn't stray too far from the trend.**

So true. [Bridget] just wasn't at UCB but other than that.

**In the second season, Joel goes on a romantic journey. What was it like exploring that?**

It was really great. I've never played anything romantic. I mean, don't get me wrong, Chris.

**You know how to light a candle.**

Oh, I have loved and left. You know what I'm saying? [Laughs.] But I haven't ever played that. And so it was a little scary, but it was also obviously thrilling and fun. And I love, love, love working with Tim Bagley. I know this word gets thrown around a lot, but he's a bit of an icon in the queer comedy world. And we kiss. And the intimacy coordinator, who was this really wonderful person, and they were great, but they contacted me and asked, "The kiss is coming up, is there anything that you don't want? You could say, if you don't want him to touch your head." And I was like, "Oh wow. That's fine. I guess don't touch my head. Sure." And then they went to Tim and they were like, "Jeff would like you to not touch his head." So anyway, now Tim thinks I'm just some sort of weirdo who was like, "My head is my erogenous zone. Please leave it alone."

**Outside of that experience, what was it like working with an intimacy coordinator?**

They were actually very helpful in just navigating, even with the poop scene, just being like, "Can you put the camera down when we cut?" Which I hadn't even considered, but I was like, "Yeah, I guess that's better to not have the monitors show me standing up with my butt out."

**Speaking of the bathroom scene, how do you get through a scene like that? You were probably really busting a gut. I guess I shouldn't say that. Not the right turn of phrase.**

I think that was the perfect one. [Laughs.]

Well, before I saw the episode, a couple of people were like, "Wow, that scene was really a lot." And I was like, "It wasn't that bad." And then when I saw it with the sound effects, I was like, "Oh my god." I was like, "Oh, this is very vulnerable."

**How did it feel to strip down and be so raw in that moment?**

Honestly, during the moment I was like, "Don't actually poop. Don't actually poop." You got your bare butt on a real toilet.

**Do you have a gauge on what Joel means to small-town rural queers who don't get this kind of representation?**

I have had some folks reach out, and I feel like we've had a lot of great shows, which by the way, I watched and loved, about sexy gay people, like "Queer as Folk" and "Looking."

**They weren't pooping on camera.**

Exactly. [Laughs.] This is my pioneer moment. Move over Rosa Parks; I had one too. That's terrible. That's such a tacky joke. Anyway, my point is I think it's just nice to see someone who isn't perfect on TV. And I mean that in lots of different ways. I'm not physically perfect. But also, I'm not a saint and, I don't know, not a serial killer in this one. I think people really are moved to see someone who's got a touch of the fugs.

**And then there's also the faith component, and as somebody who grew up Catholic, that resonates. When I was a teenager, I felt like I had to choose between gay or God. And I did ultimately choose and moved away from religion because I just felt like I couldn't live my life and be myself. But Joel has found a way to reconcile both in his life.**

And I know a lot of people who did too. Where did you grow up?

**I grew up in the suburbs of Michigan.**

So that's pretty Midwestern. I grew up in Texas, so it's not quite the same as the Midwest, but it's got some serious overlap. And I think that so much of your social life is lived via the church community. For me, when I was first coming out, it was actually a really progressive pastor who helped me see that it was OK to be both gay and Christian. That was in the '90s. It was rare.

**Was that why you wanted to be a pastor yourself?**

Oh, completely. A hundred percent. And I don't even know if there was anything else.

**In the sense that, "I could also help people"? That was on your mind?**

And also, "Those people are safe." Those people were nice. No one else was. So maybe I'll go there. But a couple of them showed

See Jeff Hiller, page 28

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Casey Hoffman on the campaign trail. Courtesy photo

#### • Casey Hoffman

Continued from page 23

personally experienced what it's like to have my diversity referenced as a negative. I want to make sure

that I am a Republican who is inclusive and kind and socially compassionate."

Because of his sexuality, Hoffman admits he is not accepted by some members of his own party. Regrettably, he said, that may have

been a factor in his primary loss for state rep in the 2022 midterm elections. Hoffman believes the Republican Party is not "yet" welcoming to LGBTQ+ people "but it will be."

And as for whether there is

room in his party for trans women of color, "There is, but the party doesn't know it." The Republican Party's latest obsession with targeting transgender people and drag queens is troubling to Hoffman; he believes his party has been co-opted by individuals who don't hold the true values of the Republican Party at heart.

"Free speech is a fundamentally Republican value," Hoffman said. "I do not understand why my party is attacking drag queens and transgender people every time a drag queen puts on a flamboyant outfit or every time a trans [woman] puts on heels and pearls. Those people are sending a message — a nonverbal message of free speech that is challenging the gender binary. I think we need to support the free speech values that drag queens and that transgender people are demonstrating in 2023."

Like many conservatives, Hoffman wants to return to the Republicanism of years past. But he's realistic: He said it will require the efforts of honorable, noble Republicans stepping up at the grassroots level to fight on the front lines of democracy. "Donald Trump will not be around forever," Hoffman said, with hope.

Outside of politics, Hoffman is a research lawyer who earned his juris doctorate from Marquette University Law School. Before that, he studied at Albion College where he was elected student body president and later served on the board of trustees. Today, he works on a contract basis specializing in LGBTQ-related cases such as adoption, divorce and estate planning. Hoffman is also a substitute teacher, which he called "one of the most unexpected loves of my life." Witnessing young people fight for inclusion and for LGBTQ+ rights is something Hoffman called a privilege.

In his spare time, Hoffman enjoys volunteering on the board of directors of the DAR Boys and Girls Club in Menominee. He also cares for "plant babies" and a family dog, but Hoffman sees himself raising kids someday. Previously married to a male partner, today he says "I am in a long-term relationship with the state of Michigan."

If elected, BTL asked whether the LGBTQ+ community can expect to see June declared Pride Month in Menominee.

"Heck, yes," Hoffman replied, then quickly corrected himself in true Yooper form: "You betcha."

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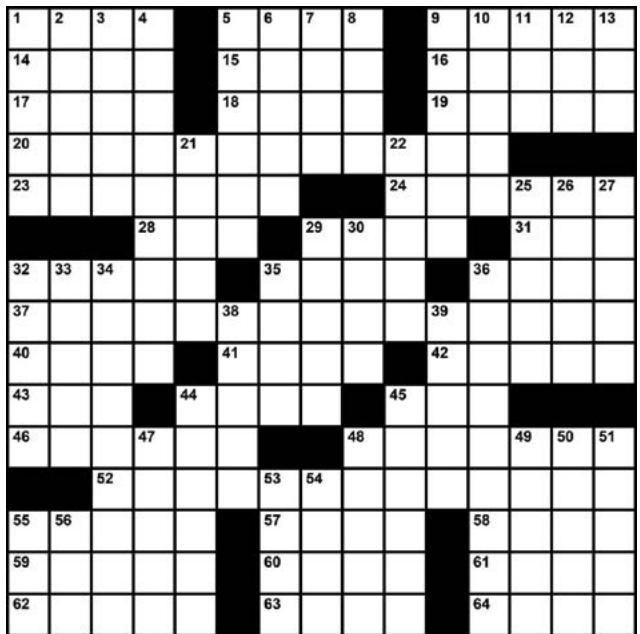
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## Just Because You're Gay...

### Across

- 1 Apple that isn't a fruit
- 5 "Chicago" co-producer Meron
- 9 Poke one's backside
- 14 Emulate Greg Louganis
- 15 Alan of "And the Band Played On"
- 16 "American Idol" judge Paula
- 17 Mishima's continent
- 18 Student on "Glee," e.g.
- 19 Desired responses to come-ons
- 20 Australian comic with an upcoming show on Netflix
- 23 An individual's input
- 24 Female TV role played by males
- 28 Hosp. worker
- 29 Reverse or neutral
- 31 Officer in the navy (abbr.)

### **Q** Puzzle

#### Down

- 1 "My Own Private \_\_\_"
- 2 Galileo, for one
- 3 Like Mary's follower
- 4 Roster of Cain's favorites?
- 5 Lane of "Modern Family"
- 6 Whitman work
- 7 Nonheterosexual conception
- 8 Finish a flight
- 9 Stonewall Inn, e.g.
- 10 Heeds a master
- 11 Takes too much, for short
- 12 Boy in a Johnny Cash song
- 13 Above-ground trains
- 21 Navratilova's winter home
- 22 Like Harvey Milk in 1978
- 25 Capital of Margaret Cho's ancestral home
- 26 Emcee's opening
- 27 City where "gay" is "frohlich"
- 29 Get some left behind
- 30 Zip
- 32 Second name in cross-dressing
- 33 Put out, in a way
- 34 Oldham and Saint Laurent
- 35 What guns shoot off
- 36 Someone who is anal about sex
- 38 Temple text
- 39 Tennessee Williams' "Sweet Bird of \_\_\_"
- 44 Chant
- 45 Easy E of the AIDS Quilt
- 47 The I's of Socrates
- 48 Choreographer Bob
- 49 President born in Hawaii
- 50 Female impersonator, e.g.
- 51 Alfred Kinsey's tool
- 53 Got a little behind
- 54 Part of GWM
- 55 Cold War letters
- 56 Colette made a splash in it

See p. 15 for answers

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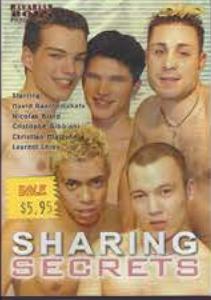
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Jeff Hiller and Bridget Everett in HBO's "Somebody Somewhere." Photo: HBO

#### Jeff Hiller

Continued from page 25

their colors when I actually came out.

**At what point did you realize you wanted to be a comedian and actor instead?**

Well, first I was a social worker. I did have a former pastor who I found out was saying some gross things. And that's what made me think, "Never mind. I don't want to be a pastor." But then I was a social worker and I went to audition for an improv team with my

comprehend that I just got lucky because I have so many friends who are just as talented, if not more talented, than me, who are cater waiters and do shows in Ohio when they can. And so I'm fully aware that I got lucky, and I'm very grateful to be lucky enough to get this role, because this role is not a role that you could really even predict coming up. And yeah, I'm really very happy that I have it.

*This interview has been condensed and edited for clarity.*

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## ↳ Sybil Offen

Continued from page 20

ready to fight. Her mother had lived to 103 and Sybil had been physically fit her whole life; she was determined to get back on the tennis and pickleball courts.

Last spring, knowing we almost lost her, I planned a Michigan trip to introduce Sybil to Kate, my new partner. Although she stayed close to home and was dependent on transfusions, Sybil's "fight like hell" spirit was intact. While we were there, we celebrated my May birthday and our friendship. Later last summer, Sybil got special permission from her community to let us camp in her driveway. The highlight of the trip was taking her to Comerica Park to see her beloved Detroit Tigers come back to beat the Kansas City Royals.

Back at the Tucson Festival of Books, I told Butler, "I'm going to buy this book for me," as I pulled out my wallet. She signed the following on the inside title page: In memory of Sybil's life and legacy.

Caring, compassionate social justice warrior. A life well lived and a beautiful soul. Sybil was a friend, a confidante and the best Jewish mother a baby dyke could have... or as she would say, a mensch.



Sybil Offen (left) at World Pride in London, Ontario in 2014. Photo: Deb Sinnen



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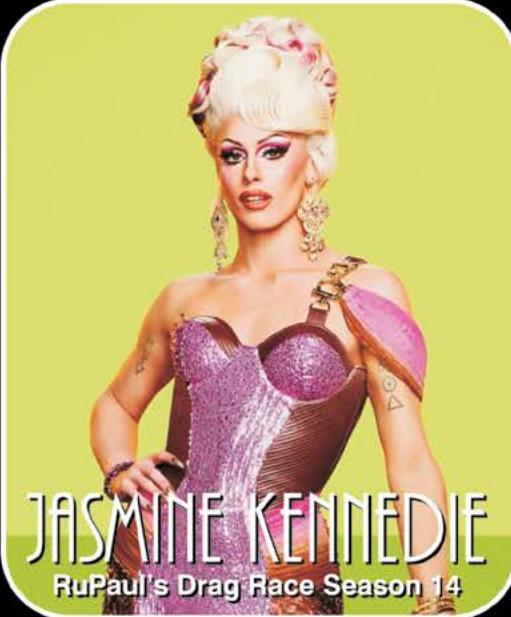
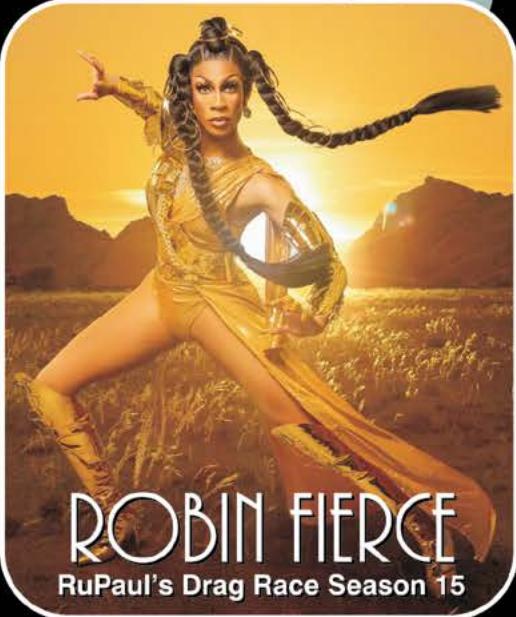
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