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Are the Trans Kids All Right?

The impact of 2023 legislation on transgender youth: a scorecard for Michigan

Story by Ellen Shanna Knoppow | Original artwork by 15-year-old S Loney

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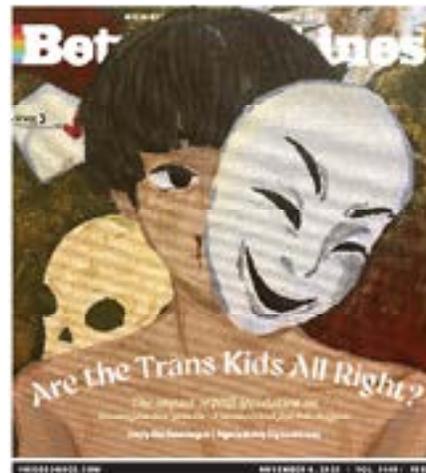
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"Confessions of a Mask" by S Loney, a 15-year-old trans teen

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5 Queer Things You Can Do Right Now-ish

BY SARAH BRICKER HUNT

What will the rest of your rapidly evaporating 2023 feature? Don't sit out the last few weeks of the year — make it worthwhile with a slate of queer events exciting enough to pry you from your cozy home. See "Drag Race" star Jade Jolie perform as Taylor Swift, cheer on roller derby champs as they duke it out in the round, spend an evening at a queer storytelling event, get "messsy" at a hard-to-describe futuristic event at Menjo's or find out what happens when the Out Loud Chorus members let down their hair for a good cause.



Jade Jolie: Photo: Instagram/@missjadejolie

Shake It Off with Some Taylor Swift Drag

Taylor Swift may have been the most popular Halloween costume in 2023, but no one does Taylor better than, well, Taylor, but also the super perky "RuPaul's Drag Race" and "Dragula" star Jade Jolie. The drag artist made headlines when she performed alongside Swift herself at the 2019 MTV Video Music Awards, where presenter John Travolta confused her for Swift and tried to hand her the Video of the Year Award.

Snatch your ticket now for the sure-to-sell-out Drag-tastic Blow Out at Five15 in Royal Oak, set for Nov. 19. Jolie will join the club's house cast for the event, where you can enjoy cocktails and a special show menu while taking in the spectacle. VIP upgrade tickets include a meet-and-greet and preferred seating.

Nov. 19, 2 p.m., Five15 (600 S. Washington Ave., Royal Oak). Tickets at bit.ly/4651Ogo.



Lansing Roller Derby Queen Frogmouth. Photo: Lansing Roller Derby

Get into Roller Derby

If you've yet to experience the roller-coaster level of excitement of roller derby, you're definitely missing out, so don't miss your chance to jump into the busy fall season. You'll find teams throughout Michigan, including the Lansing Roller Derby, which will host its annual Black 'n' Blue tournament Nov. 24-26 at the Ingham County Fairgrounds. Participants are from all over Michigan, including women's, all-gender and junior teams.

Interested in becoming a roller derby champ yourself? The tournament will have elite roller derby coaches on hand to lead curious fans through a clinic. "Skaters from Michigan and the surrounding area flock to Lansing every year to celebrate Thanksgiving with their derby family," Lansing Roller Derby junior liaison Sarah Reimann tells BTL.

Nov. 24-26, Ingham County Fairgrounds (700 E. Ash St., Mason). Tickets at ticketstripe.com/blacknblue2023spectators.



Join a Trans-Led Storytelling Circle

Equality Chelsea, a newer LGBTQ-focused local nonprofit, and Serendipity Books will host a Queer Storyslam storytelling event on Nov. 14 at Chelsea First United Methodist Church. Find out why good storytelling is truly an art from trans musician Joanna Whaley, who has won several story slams sponsored by the famed NYC Moth competition. Whaley will join a select group of guests sharing wide-ranging narratives.

"Queer Storyslam is a storytelling evening that intends to foster empathy and build our community of LGBTQ+ and allies in Chelsea and surrounding areas in Washtenaw County," Equality Chelsea administrator Kate Mehuron tells BTL. The event is free, but advance registration is required.

Nov. 14, 7 p.m., Chelsea First United Methodist Church (128 Park St., Chelsea). Register at bit.ly/491zYze.



Dress for Your 'Messy' Utopia

Be the friend with the mysterious invite. It might go something like this: "Hey, so I have tickets to this art show — no, no, don't wander off, it's more than an art show. They're going to have artifacts from the future of queer nightlife! And dancing and tech and deep discussion about things like our collective utopian desires!" Invites like this are how you find your people — the ones who will happily accompany you to "MESSSY - A Night of Queer Nightlife History and Futures in Detroit," presented by Queer Futures Collective as part of its Orfelia project.

Press materials for the Nov. 18 event at Menjo's read, "MESSSY is an art show, a dance floor, and a gloopyhole into the future of queer nightlife (and the world around it). The Orfelia is a fictional venue where we envision our preferred future, set in 2053 that ecstatically envisions the sloppy, utopian, and queer future. Dress for your utopia."

Nov. 18, 9 p.m., Menjo's (928 W. McNicholas St., Detroit). Reserve your space in the algae bioreactor at ra.co/events/1781520.



Meet Dana Nessel at a Queer Adult Cabaret

The annual Out Loud Chorus (OLC) cabaret fundraiser is one of the hottest tickets in town, so grab yours while they're still available. The adult LGBTQ+ experience includes an open bar, good eats, exciting performances and an extensive silent auction. "This is such an exhilarating, adult performance that has members of the Out Loud Chorus letting their hair down while raising money to spread the choir's message on a worldwide stage," OLC board member Tim Hamann tells BTL.

VIP tickets for Nov. 10 event at Ypsilanti Freighthouse include early entrance, an exclusive performance and the chance to meet queer Michigan Attorney General Dana Nessel, emcee Dayne G., OLC artistic director Saleel Menon and the performers. Funds will support the Washtenaw County-based LGBTQ+ chorus's community programming and its participation in the GALA Choruses quadrennial LGBTQ+ choral festival.

Nov. 10, 7 p.m., Ypsilanti Freighthouse (100 Market Place, Ypsilanti). Reserve tickets at olconline.org/cabaret.

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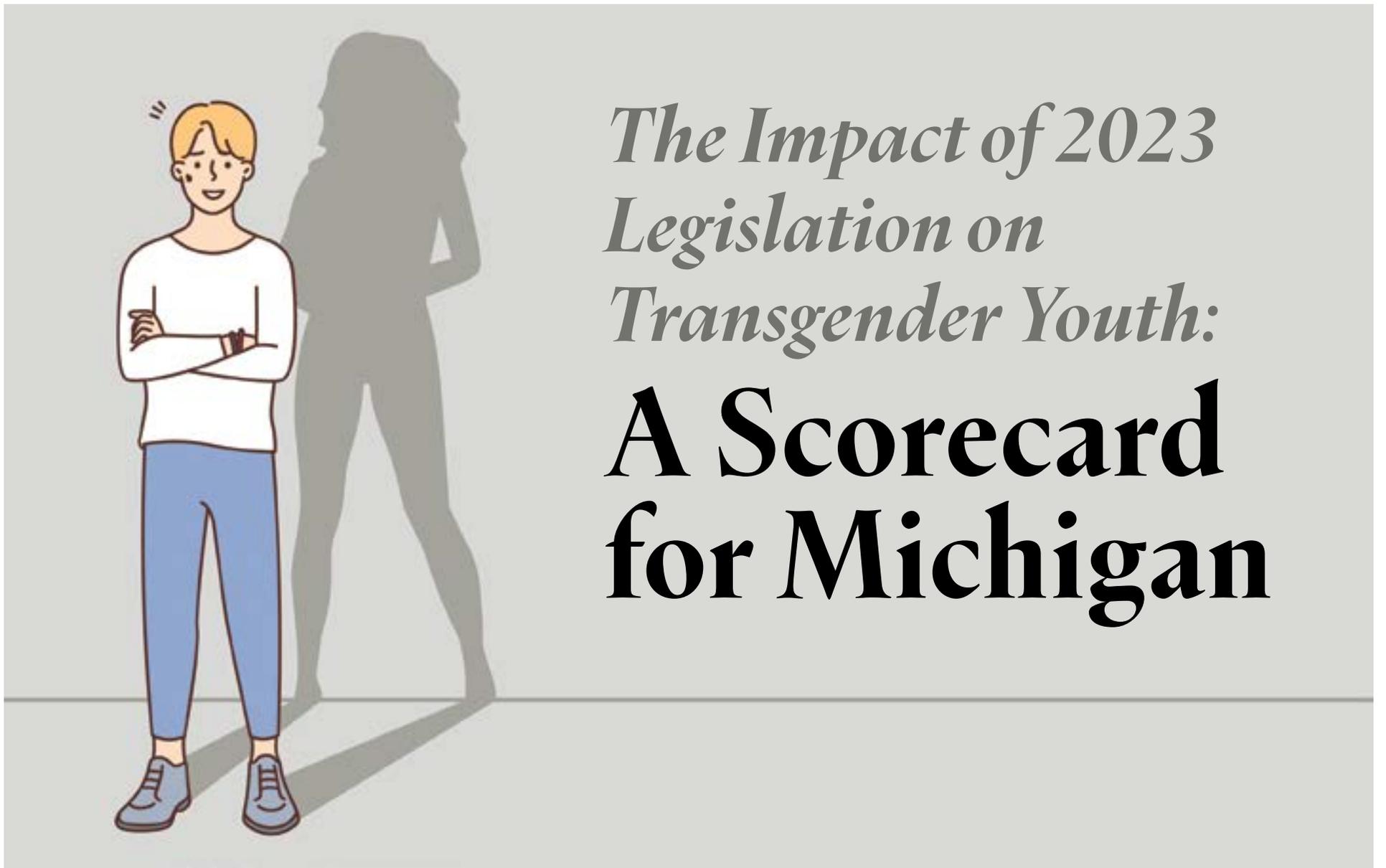
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The Impact of 2023 Legislation on Transgender Youth: **A Scorecard for Michigan**

There are an estimated 8,900 trans Michiganders age 13 to 17

BY ELLEN SHANNA KNOPPOW

When Owen Bondono transitioned 15 years ago, he said in some ways it was safer for him back then than it is for his students who are transitioning today.

“People were much more ignorant about transgender issues 15 years ago, but it meant that in a lot of ways, I got to give them accurate information,” said Bondono, an award-winning Oak Park High School teacher and board member of the transgender youth advocacy org Stand with Trans. “I wasn’t fighting against misinformation or a rising tide of hatred as we’ve seen in the last half a decade or so.” By the same token, Bondono sees positive trends like kids who support the diverse identities of their peers.

Bondono was reflecting on the findings of a recent Williams Institute report, “The Impact of 2023 Legislation on Transgender Youth,” which focuses on five categories of legislation that either restrict or protect the rights of transgender teenagers ages 13 to 17. Gender-affirming care bans, bathroom bans, sports bans, conversion therapy bans and gender-affirming care “shield” laws and policies were evaluated for each state and Washington, D.C.

In all, nearly 500 pieces of new legislation were introduced in 2023 that restricted the rights of LGBTQ+ people. Over half targeted trans youth, and while most proposed bills have not passed, many are still pending and some state legislatures have

enacted laws that have restricted transgender youth and their families from accessing necessary medical care or are actively harming transgender youth in other ways.

Christy Mallory is legal director of the Williams Institute and co-author of the report.

“I think it was interesting, once we kind of pulled it together by type of legislation, to see where the most movement has been over the last year and how the areas of focus have shifted over time,” Mallory said. She noted the proliferation of gender-affirming care bans — 19 out of 22 were introduced in the 2023 legislative session alone.

Mallory noted an increase in proposed bathroom bans but a decrease in introducing sports

bans. Overall, an estimated 96,800 transgender youth live in states that restricted their access to health care, sports or school bathrooms in 2023.

Michigan is not one of those states. This past July, the Michigan Legislature passed a conversion therapy ban, protecting its estimated 8,900 trans youth ages 13 to 17 from the harmful practice, which also protects cisgender queer youth. There are more than 300,000 total trans youth in that age group in the U.S., an estimate based on a separate report by the Williams Institute that calculated the number of transgender people in the U.S.; those under the age of 13 were not surveyed. Nationwide, about two-thirds of transgender youth in 27 states and D.C. are protected by laws and policies that

ban or limit the use of conversion therapy.

“There are sort of two main benefits that I see to a ban on conversion therapy,” Bondono said. “One of those is the literal harm that trans youth will be spared because they cannot legally be put through conversion therapy, a therapy designed to tell you that you’re wrong and broken and need to be fixed just for being who you are.” The other net positive is that the ban serves as a broader message from the state government that there is nothing wrong with trans youth being who they are.

Rep. Emily Dievendorf (D-Lansing) also applauded the legislation.

See *Trans Youth*, page 18

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Midwest Princess In Her Element

In Detroit recently, Chappell Roan celebrated her own queerness — and everyone else's, too

BY CHRIS AZZOPARDI

Ahead of bringing easily one of the queerest pop shows to a sold-out crowd in Detroit, rising performer Chappell Roan made a request to Michigan fans on her Instagram — wear something rainbow.

At the October St. Andrews Hall show, Roan explained that she wanted to give everyone a chance to go full-on gay; openly queer herself, she acknowledged an understanding that things aren't great for LGBTQ+ people right now, and so to her queer fans, she conveyed a heart-filled message: "You are safe here."

That night, there were so many rainbows that you would be spotted for *not* sporting one. Pride colors were bedazzled on shirts, printed on socks and painted on glitter-speckled faces. October felt like June as Roan turned the Detroit venue into an average day on the streets of West Hollywood. (She returns next year, playing to an arena crowd when she opens for pop megastar Olivia Rodrigo at Little Caesars Arena on March 23.)

Both through her defiant music and her less assured stage banter, which emphasized her completely uncaged pop persona, Roan made affirming statements that a mostly Gen Z crowd ate up. Some of it was about her own journey to self-discovery, some about kissing whoever you want to kiss. The song "Kaleidoscope" was dedicated directly to the queer community. "This is your song," she said about the achingly beautiful slow piece, on which she describes love as multidimensional — "never just a shape alone."

Watching Roan perform for the first time in a small club, I was reminded of Lady Gaga's debut show in Michigan at the Royal Oak Music Theatre in 2009 during The Fame Ball tour. Gaga, at the time, was just a couple more singles away from meat-dress-wearing pop stardom, and her show then was also a love letter to the queer community. Roan and



Chappell Roan. Photo: Ryan Clemens

Gaga share space in a parallel pop universe, and based on how Roan perfectly covered “Bad Romance” at her recent show, Gaga’s sandbox is one Roan is happy to play in. But the Gaganess of Roan’s own pop music — the theatrics, the camp, the unserious messiness of it all — can be heard throughout her promising debut album, “The Rise and Fall of a Midwest Princess.”

Like so many queer pop artists who set their eyes on shinier sights, Roan, whose real name is Kayleigh Rose, outgrew her Midwest roots. Her own small-town queer experience will resonate with anyone who grew up without the kind of visibility that makes it easier to be who you are. But Roan, who has known she was queer since seventh grade and is now being called the “queer pop moment” by Vogue, didn’t know any queer girls in Willard, Missouri, where “gay boys in my school who were out got terrorized, slurred, threatened.”

“It was horrible,” she tells me during a Zoom call before her Detroit stop. “I saw what would happen if you came out, and I knew that it was a sin at the time, and I think that to grow into the queer girl that I am today, I obviously had to stop dating men who were not it. I had to stop settling for losers and start dating women and getting rid of that shame. I have a girlfriend now, and I just struggle with it still, but it’s taken baby steps to get to the confident drag queen version of myself.”

At 18, she left the Midwest and moved to West Hollywood, where she turned the volume up on all things queer. It was there she experienced drag queens, the outwardly queer kind, for the first time, even though the Disney princesses she met as a kid at Disney World

was her first “drag” inspiration. It’s her earliest memory of being in “such awe of the makeup, the hair, the outfits, the dancing, the songs.”

With drag performance as her entry-point into queerness, “The Rise and Fall of a Midwest Princess,” then, was destined to

be proudly rooted in the art form. Roan describes the album as “super obnoxious and very tongue in cheek, and I think that’s exactly what drag queens do.”

One song, “Casual,” features a “mermaid drag girly” in the video; in another, for “My Kink Is Karma,” Roan appears as “literally a drag clown devil situation.” For the video, she learned how to do drag brows by watching makeup tutorials on YouTube by beauty expert Patrick Starr, who appeared as a guest judge on “Drag Race Philippines.”

“I think the songs themselves have drag elements,” she says, “but more so in the visual aspects of how I do my makeup. All the songs are very camp, and I think if you’re taking it seriously, you see it as tasteless, but the reality is that’s just drag; it’s supposed to be tacky.”

Go back even earlier to her biggest single to date, “Pink Pony Club,” released in 2020 but still finding new audiences even now, and you’ll hear Roan envisioning how her mother might react to seeing her dress entirely different. Roan can picture what her mom — melodramatically shocked — would say while she’s dancing at a strip club: “God, what have you done?” The song, which references a club just outside of Willard, was inspired by Roan’s obviously transformative visit to

you can imagine some of those grizzled guys batting an eyelash at what’s about to come — and then, suddenly, Roan lets loose with drag queens Porkchop and Meatball and a posse of harness-clad leather daddies. Midwest princess reborn!

“I think what this project is honoring is that inner child of mine and proving to her that she deserves to be that version and that she does exist,” Roan says.

Outside of immersing herself in the freewheeling L.A. life, it was opening up for U.K. pop-rock artist Declan McKenna, whose spectrum of queer sexuality is ever-changing, in 2018.

“I was so jealous of them, because they had glitter on their face every night, and they threw balloons in the audiences and they were jumping off amps and speakers and everyone was screaming,” she says. “There’s no reason to be doing this job if it doesn’t feel like that.”

“I love seeing other queer artists, of course, and I love talking to them,” she adds. “I feel like there’s a little alliance with all the queer girlies. I was literally talking to Reneé Rapp this morning, and then Hayley Kiyoko and I are friends.”

In regards to her own musical journey, Roan attributes attending summer camp at Interlochen in Michigan, a place that “literally

Trump country. I’m from a heavily church background, and this is not that. There were kids from all over the world there. It was just so inspiring.”

The song she wrote at Interlochen, “Die Young,” ended up being the most significant in her professional career as a recording artist, when “a few

The stage isn’t just her playground, though. Even now at 25, just a few years into her career, Roan knows the power of her platform, and she knows how to use it as a queer artist.

“I know for my project, I am very adamant about giving back to the queer community,” she says, “and I think that is what I encourage



Chappell Roan at St. Andrews in Detroit, Oct. 10. Photo: Lucienne Nghiem

I think that to grow into the queer girl that I am today, I obviously had to stop dating men who were not it. I had to stop settling for losers and start dating women and getting rid of that shame.

months later, I was sought out by record labels and six months later got signed for five years.” She was only 17 and already picked up by a major label (after Atlantic Records dropped her, she released her full-length debut on

Island Records).

“Die Young” was released as the first single from her 2017 EP, “School Nights,” an era in her career that she describes as “dark alt-pop girl vibe.”

“That was really just not fun. Gay clubs are much more fun than straight clubs,” she says.

to other artists, whether they’re queer or not, just giving back to the community that supports them so much, whether that be by lowering ticket prices to what they can, or lowering merch prices to what they can, or donating a portion of every ticket or doing charity events. I think that’s the most important part, because no one’s going to stand up for queer people. It’s got to be us. We have to support each other. We have to do mutual aid funding and mutual safe spaces.”

Proceeds from every ticket sold

See **Chappell Roan**, page 17

STOMPING SPOTS

Queer Feelings for a Bad Bug Heading to Michigan

When an invasive insect gets smashed, what is really going on?

BY DANI LAMORTE

Fall has arrived, but the summer “let’s party” feeling blazes on in the rumbling “unn-cha” of outdoor speakers under a city bridge. My head tilts back, torso swaying with the music, and my eyes fill with the poolside blue of a late summer sky. Then, a little buzzing silhouette rips across the blue, alongside the edge of the bridge platform — a spotted lanternfly. Other lanternflies crawl along the gravel in front of me, scale my pant leg and land on the back of my neck. Here in Pittsburgh, they’re everywhere. Michigan will come to know them soon enough.

The spotted lanternfly — scientific name *Lycorma delicatula* — is a plant-hopping insect. Most are roughly an inch long, with wings that make me think of textiles: rough dots and sparrow-like striations. Underneath these forewings are red hindwings tipped with black and white. The spotted lanternfly flies a little bit, but it’s mostly a jumper — six to nine feet at a leap. Using piercing mouthparts, the spotted lanternfly sucks liquid from the stems of plants, leaving farmers concerned for future crops.

Although spotted lanternfly feeds on plant sap, their feeding rarely results in plant death — though feeding by many lanternflies at once can significantly weaken a plant’s resistance to other problems. Heather Leach, a research technician at Michigan State University’s Wilson Lab for Tree Fruit Entomology, says estimates of damage by spotted lanternflies are “really difficult to obtain” because the insect “feeds on plant sap, and doesn’t directly feed on the fruit/vegetable/etc. For pests that do, we can more easily calculate the damage and economic loss.” Leach explains that, in the landscaping and ornamental plant industries, the primary losses have been economic; for example, the costs of applying pesticide to control spotted lanternfly populations and prevent the transportation of eggs.



There’s so much I could tell you about lanternflies, but I’m forestalling the inevitable:

I don’t want to tell you this, but they’re *invasive*, arriving from China in 2014. Without a dedicated predator on these shores, spotted lanternflies have covered telephone poles, amassed on building walls and dappled trees here in Pittsburgh. It’s a considerable ecological and visual update. Nearly a decade after the lanternfly’s arrival, there’s a hotline for reporting the insect in Pennsylvania: 1-800-4BAD-FLY. Almost uniformly, spotted lanternfly is unpopular in these parts. According to entomologists who study invasive insect species, spotted lanternflies will inevitably become a common sight in Michigan, too.

Stomping is the most popular response.

I’ve seen a queer post-punk go out of their way to put chunky boot to delicate jumping legs. A child almost matched glass to teeth, stumbling toward a restaurant window to crunch a bug. Crushed bugs dot the steps outside the museum of art, as though Yayoi Kusama had gone for direct rather than symbolic violence. Poet Alina Pleskova sums up the popular response:

This summer in Philly, a directive to kill spotted lanternflies

formed citywide camaraderie: an outlet for our dislocated furies.

The ecology of North America is forever changed. It’s hard to make sense of such a big idea, so we stomp.

Catriona Sandilands, a professor of Environmental Arts and Justice at York University, suggests this is the trouble at the center of our climate-changing era: Things like the spotted lanternfly show up, and we do everything we can to “save” a little bit of nature. Then, when the next oil rig bleeds out, the next train jumps the track and the next ba-fuckin’-jillion tons of natural gas burns up, we head off to the next cause, too. It’s a constant consumption of ever-interchangeable near-crises.

Sandilands writes that this parade of causes du jour keeps us from ever settling down with the grief of watching this planet become uninhabitable for us — toxic for others. Spotted lanternfly isn’t a harbinger of climate change per se, but it’s thriving in the midst of other changes that make

“

I relate. I'm not even supposed to be here, according to a wide swath of American voters. According to them, I'm a threat to the family and the nation. You'll catch what I've got — whatever's the sex/gender scare-of-the-day — if you get too close.

trouble for crops and ecosystems. And it's *bad*, we're told. Invasive, a pest. For the good of the planet, we have to stomp the spotted lanternfly. No time to ask how else we might feel: Guilty, perhaps. Regretful. Admiration or aesthetic joy. No, stomp.

Being "invasive" is a matter of context. According to the National Invasive Species Information Center, an invasive species is non-native to the ecosystem in question and "likely to cause economic or environmental harm or harm to human health." In other words, the species did not arrive in its present location without hitching a human ride, and now it's doing something humans don't like. Spotted lanternfly is native to China and feeds on agriculturally significant plants like grapes, fitting NISIC's criteria. That second criterion distinguishes invasive species from North American non-natives, like house cats, dairy cows, honeybees and earthworms. (All of whom have caused harm at some point.)

Fluffy, fuzzy tamarisk trees are considered invasive in the English city of Brighton. Lining a seaside tract known as "Duke's Mound," tamarisks obscured little nooks that became suites for gay cruising and public sex. The sex wasn't a secret, and AIDS-phobic attitudes kept some locals off the Mound for fear of a virus in the trees.

In recent years, local authorities have replaced non-native tamarisks with native plants because the tamarisks were "limiting all other species and discouraging people from accessing the area." That is to say: The species present isn't the right species; the people accessing the area aren't the right people. As Harrie Neal writes, "Though not explicit, the subtext of the [...] remarks seems to be that if tamarisks are a threat to native species, then so are the people who visit them."

I relate. I'm not even supposed to be here, according to a wide swath of American voters. According to them, I'm a threat to the family and the nation. You'll catch what I've got — whatever's the sex/gender scare-of-the-day — if you get too close. I should be violently changed or destroyed, according to them. Now, I'm being asked to smash a stunning, curious creature because it poses a potential, spreading threat. No time to catch my breath and think: This continent is forever changed. This planet is forever changed. Are you angry? I'm angry. An expression of fury, like poet Pleskova describes, is maybe a better reason to stomp than "saving nature" from spotted lanternfly.

You can stomp, or you can fold. You can draw and wax it over. You can ask what you can't see when you hide a spotted lanternfly under your shoe. That's what Imin Yeh, associate professor of art at Carnegie Mellon University, is asking. Yeh makes paper sculptures that look like the everyday objects we speed past — table salt, saltines, pencil shavings, lucky pennies. She makes paper-spotted lanternflies, too. "I was first attracted to spotted lanternflies because their wings look like etchings." Her sculptures help us ask questions that sound something like: If we could slow down, so slow that the word "invasive" becomes a low hum, what else might we notice about the spotted lanternfly? What would 'invasive' sound like when we returned to the speed of everyday life?

Leaving my meeting with Imin, I walk past a library entrance where two columns rest on stone plinths. A student is undertaking a difficult maneuver: lifting her leg more than 90 degrees to smash a spotted lanternfly on one of the plinths. She almost falls over, almost wrenches her leg from its joint.

You can't tell me that's just about a bug.

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CREEP OF THE WEEK

Buttigieg Threatens to Invite Speaker Johnson Over to Watch the Buttigiegs Be a Loving Family



BY D'ANNE WITKOWSKI

Once upon a time there was a very, very, very boring day in a very, very boring world full of very, very, very boring people.

And it was absolutely the best day ever.

I am old enough to remember when people actually used the term “slow news day,” as in, “Oh, look at this seemingly inconsequential news story on the front page of the paper. Must be a slow news day.”

Granted, back then the news came once a day in the form of a paper brick hurled at your front door and twice a day in the form of TV news broadcasts on the major networks. Shit would happen and you wouldn't hear about it for hours, sometimes even a full day. Wild times, man. Wild times.

Now, of course, the news is on 24/7. And so much of what is called “news” is actually people talking about their opinions about the news. No wonder we're all so tired all of the time.

I got to thinking about all of this when I went to put something scheduled in January

Donald Trump.

I'm sure it'll be a very civilized, very normal affair. Boring, even!

Oh, how I wish.

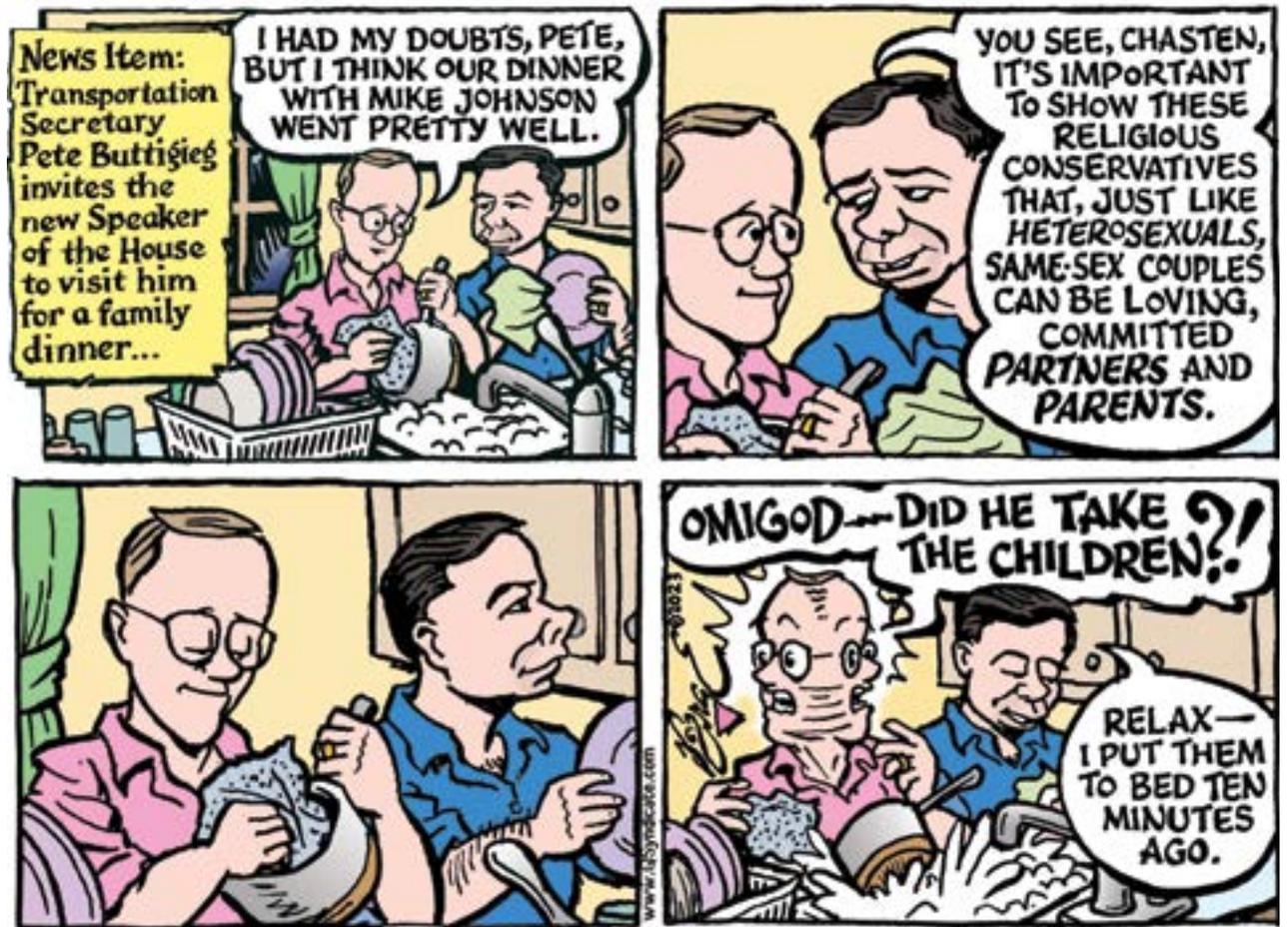
Now would Johnson actually ever set foot in the home of a gay member of the Deep State (at least I think Buttigieg is a member of the Deep State? Aren't all Democrats? Or at least all men named Pete? It's so hard to keep track of since the whole Deep State thing is such utter right-wing bullshit)?

on my calendar and was faced with the four most terrifying numbers I could possibly conceive of: 2024.

I'll admit. I've been dreading it. Hell, I am still dreading it. Has anyone fully recovered from the political nightmare that was 2016? How about 2020? And yet here it is, folks, right around the corner. Another presidential election with, it seems increasingly likely, another head-to-head between President Joe Biden and disgraced former President

I considered writing this column about Trump this week, because he's sure in the news a lot lately for all (checks notes) really bad reasons! But I suspect that Trump will get enough coverage in the coming year.

So, instead, did I ever tell you about the time I met Pete Buttigieg? It was 2022 and I was working on a state Senate campaign in Michigan. Buttigieg came to a campaign event at a park to meet a bunch of candidates for statewide office and their supporters. He



spoke briefly, encouraged everyone to keep working hard and shortly afterward I left to go knock doors.

I shook his hand and was introduced to him, but there is no way he would remember me if we bumped into one another again (an unlikely prospect). What I remember was that he was handsome, kind and well-spoken. He was also shorter than I had expected. Anyway, it was a cool moment. Though I think his run for the presidency was premature, I actually do think there could well be a President Buttigieg someday.

During a recent appearance on “The Late Show” on CBS, host Stephen Colbert said to Secretary Buttigieg, “When we last talked, Mike Johnson was not Speaker of the House. Now, Mike Johnson is Speaker of the House. His record on LGBTQ+ issues is, what's the word? Awful. So, how do you work with a guy who argued that same-sex relations are ‘the dark harbinger of chaos and sexual anarchy that could doom even the strongest Republic?’”

Colbert was referring to a 2004 op-ed that Johnson wrote while in the role of spokesperson and lawyer for the Alliance Defending Freedom, a group with a long history of defining freedom as “life where everyone is heterosexual and Christian.”

“Look, I'll work with anybody who can help us get good transportation available to the American people, but I don't know.

Maybe we'll just have him over, 'cause our little house is not far from the Capitol,” Buttigieg responded to Colbert.

Now would Johnson actually ever set foot in the home of a gay member of the Deep State (at least I think Buttigieg is a member of the Deep State? Aren't all Democrats? Or at least all men named Pete? It's so hard to keep track of since the whole Deep State thing is such utter right-wing bullshit)?

“If you can see what it's like when I come home from work, Chasten's bringing the kids home from daycare or vice versa, and one of us is getting the kids ready,” Buttigieg continued. “And the other one's microwaving those little freezer meatballs that are a great cheat code if you've got toddlers and you've got to feed them quickly and they won't take their shoes off and one of them needs a diaper change.”

I do not know what Buttigieg is talking about re: microwave freezer meatballs, but I do know that toddlers are A LOT and so if this is a form of self-care for the Buttigiegs then I'm all for it.

“Everything about that is chaos,” Buttigieg said, “but nothing about that is dark.”

Indeed, it isn't. Having kids is hella hard, but raising them with a loving partner is pretty awesome. So, anyway, may Buttigieg's depiction of domestic bliss remind us that not everything is bad.

Most things, mind you. But not all.

THE SCROLL

QUICK HITS & CAN'T MISSES

Detroit LGBT Chamber Awards \$45K in Grants to Local Businesses

The Detroit Regional LGBT Chamber of Commerce is set to distribute \$45,000 in grants to local businesses in honor of LGBTQ+ and ally business resilience. The grant recipients were announced at an event held at Salt + Ko, a Black-, LGBTQ-owned restaurant in Southfield. The grants, made possible through the Grubhub Community Fund and a partnership with the National LGBT Chamber of Commerce (NGLCC), aim to help LGBTQ-owned businesses continue recovering from the pandemic and

strengthen their operations.

Local grant recipients include Backbone Hospitality, Browndog at the Shuffle, Browndog Barlor & Restaurant, Common Pub, Detroit Vegan Soul, Five15 Media, Mojo, & More, La Feria Spanish Tapas and Pietrzyk Pierogi.

Kevin Heard, founder and board president of the Detroit Regional LGBT Chamber of Commerce, expressed excitement about the opportunity to support local businesses and foster growth. "We look forward to continuously providing opportunities for our members to scale their businesses and uplift community," Heard said in a news release. "We hope these grants serve as a springboard for innovative ideas, business growth and even more great food!" Learn more at nlgcc.org/ghgrant.



U-M Launches Trans Belonging Fund

The University of Michigan's Spectrum Center has launched a new fund to support transgender and nonbinary students. The Trans Belonging Fund, inspired by a generous \$50,000 gift from Marchell and Jeffrey Willian, aims to enhance programming, education and support services for these students.

The Willians are parents to a trans child. "Family is so important, but it's not enough," said Marchell in a news release. "Students need community and support on campus to feel they belong. They need understanding. They need role models. They need resources for their mental health and navigating shame and toxic politics."

Supporters are encouraged to contribute during November, which is Trans Awareness Month, at giving.umich.edu/basket/fund/702704.



Jase and Stevie Mathers. Photo: Instagram/stevielainee

Eminem's Queer Kid Stevie Mathers Casually Drops Relationship Details

Detroit rapper Eminem's child Stevie Mathers, who came out as genderfluid and bisexual in 2021, has gone public with their "serious" relationship. The 21-year-old recently dished on sister Hailie

Jade Scott's podcast *Just a Little Shady*, revealing the pair have been together for two years. "My boyfriend, his name is Jase," Mathers said. "He moved in with me like last year in December. It's going really well."

"I love who you're dating," Scott replied.

As BTL reported in 2021, Mathers came out on TikTok. "Watch me become more comfortable with myself," the post began. Mathers and Eminem were recently spotted at a Detroit Lions game.

Queer Holiday Movie with Michigan Ties

A new holiday movie featuring queer themes and a focus on the Mitten State is sure to get you in the festive spirit. "A Holiday I Do," playing now on queer women film streamer Tello (tellofilms.com), was written by Detroit screenwriter Melinda Bryce and is set in rural Michigan. The sweet romcom centers on a small-town, single mom who falls for her ex-husband's sophisticated wedding planner. Cozy Christmas chaos (and a sweet lesbian romance) await.

LGBT Detroit Turns 30!

LGBT Detroit, North America's largest Black-founded LGBTQ+ nonprofit, is celebrating its remarkable 30-year journey with the "LGBT Detroit | 30" project. LGBT Detroit President Antonio Johnson-Seals says in a news release, "This is our time to celebrate, appreciate and pave the way for a brighter, more inclusive future." Take part in the org's "In 30 Seconds" campaign by submitting a 30-second video about the value of community. Join in at lgbtdetroit.org/thirty.

Steamy Showtime Hit Gets Gay Sex Right

Showtime's "Fellow Travelers" explores the secret relationship between a closeted bureaucrat (Matt Bomer) and an assistant to Sen. Joseph McCarthy (Jonathan Bailey), set against the backdrop of the 1950s "Lavender Scare." The show is being lauded for explicit, realistic gay sex scenes including elements like oral sex and foot fetishes. "For me, when I came out in the '70s, those were the celebratory days of the gay experience," creator Ron Nyswaner told *Gay Times*. "We wanted the sex to be powerful... because I believe it is a really powerful part of the gay experience."



Jonathan Bailey and Matt Bomer. Photo: Showtime

Unhoused Trans Community in Lansing Faces Hostility At Local Shelters

Advocate Luna Willow Brown is working to create a place for them

BY BRIDGETTE M. REDMAN

While she has managed to avoid homelessness, its specter has haunted Luna Willow Brown — she has seen many of her friends and peers experience it.

When they do, they have found an often-hostile environment in Lansing-area homeless shelters, in no small part because all Greater Lansing shelters are faith-based. Even when they try to be affirming, they are not always prepared to meet the needs of the trans community.

This is why Brown is committed to seeing change happen in the shelter community. She has formed “A Place for Us,” a coalition exploring solutions ranging from opening a trans-friendly shelter to demanding change in existing shelters.

Brown describes herself as a person with an increased risk for homelessness. A 35-year-old trans woman, Brown is on disability, is autistic and has other mental illnesses and physical health issues. The challenges she faces have inspired her to work for many local and state causes related to autism, mental illness and the LGBTQ+ community.

Born in Lansing, Brown has lived most of her life in the area, including tenures in East Lansing, Okemos, Webberville and Dansville. Coming to terms with her identity was a long journey, she said. In high school, she figured out she wasn’t attracted to girls and thought perhaps she was gay, but then realized she wasn’t attracted to guys either.

“I explored the trans stuff for years before I really started to come out and transition,” Brown said. “I’ve been on hormones for about two and a half years now and didn’t really start dressing feminine in public until rather recently.”

She said, though, that as someone who suffered mental



health issues her entire life and even found herself in adult foster care situations twice, once she started dressing feminine in public, her mental health underwent a huge boost.

Quest for safe spaces

Brown has witnessed the horror stories of those who have been homeless.

“I’ve taken in a total of four people in the last two years, all of them trans and unhoused,” Brown said. “I got tired of hearing the same things over and over again — there’s no safe place for us. I know other trans friends who have

taken in people as well because there’s really not many options for us other than going to Grand Rapids where they have affirming shelters. I could no longer stand by and watch our systems fail our people.”

The City Rescue Mission announced in August that it has been running at full capacity and their Executive Director Mark Criss said they were planning a \$10 million expansion that would double their capacity, a plan that required and received the support of the Lansing City Council for zoning changes and a special use permit.

Brown was one of several people who spoke to the council, objecting to this expansion, in

part because of what she calls the Mission’s discriminatory policies. Staff and volunteers must sign a statement of faith that condemns homosexuality. Anyone found to be a member of the LGBTQ+ community can be fired. Criss has emphasized in public statements that they don’t ask people to identify their sexuality and that the Mission’s primary goal is to share the gospel of Christ, which is why anyone attending the shelter is required to attend their church services. BTL reached out to City Rescue Mission but has not received a response.

Birth of a coalition

As Brown reached out to other

local leaders for support, she realized that to instigate real change, it would take more than just speaking to city council members. It would take a coalition: “A Place for Us,” which now meets biweekly at The Fledge. They held their first meeting on Oct. 24 and people shared stories about their shelter experiences.

Some meeting participants pointed out that there are volunteers at City Rescue Mission who are committed to being inclusive despite the official policies of the organization, but they have little influence. Others suggested reaching out to

See **A Place for Us**, page 16

Why Do All My GOP State Reps Support the Gay Panic Defense?

They won't say why they support dehumanizing LGBTQ+ people



BY JAMES FINN

Before I write about the trans/gay panic defense and how U.S. states

are gradually passing laws against its use in court, and before I write about how Michigan Republicans just voted unanimously to keep the practice legal, I have to tell you a story about my own life. I won't take long, but I'll tell you what ... it's hard to appreciate some issues without empathy, which in my opinion thrives best with personal storytelling.

I pushed away from Ken's sour beer breath and BO. We were sitting on my bed in my Air Force training school dorm room, both of us in our early 20s. He wiggled in closer. And closer. Pretty soon, his lips were almost brushing mine, again. I felt nauseated. I liked Ken, but he was seriously drunk, and I was seriously not attracted to him even when he smelled good and could string words together into actual sentences.

"Stop it!" I said. "You need to go home, OK? Just because I'm gay doesn't mean I want to make out with every man in the universe." I politely walked him to the door and watched him bounce off walls toward his own room, keeping watch until I was sure he wasn't headed outside into traffic or whatever.

Flash back a couple weeks, and Ken (not his real name) was one of four or five people sitting around my best friend Mark's dorm room — drinking, listening to music, solving all the problems of the world together like only young people can do. That room and those people would soon become very special to me, because I could be free to be me.

I had already come out as gay to Mark, alone. Telling him opened up our friendship to a new, deeper meaning, and I craved more of that genuine honesty and trust. I was so

tired of hiding. So, I decided that with Mark's help, I would come out to our closest friends. That was a big deal then, and I was scared.

When the big night came, we lounged in Mark's room passing around a bottle of single-malt scotch. He waggled his eyebrows at me a couple different times when the conversation lagged, and finally I cleared my throat and said, "Guys, I've got something really personal to talk about."

I'll spare you the boring details of my halting early-1980s coming-out speech, but I want to share reactions. Mark's girlfriend jumped up and hugged me, whispering into my ear, "Nice job! And about time."

A couple guys looked uncomfortable but stuttered out vaguely kind words, which I took as a win. Then an avalanche of questions started, the bottle started getting passed around again, and we all lightened up and had a good time.

Except for Ken, who had all but stopped talking. He stood up at one point to change the music, and when the room went silent for a second, he said, "I don't mind at all that you're gay. Just don't hit on me. I'd hate to have to beat the shit out of you."

He laughed, hit a button, and AC/DC crashed into the gash he'd ripped in the air. I turned to see Mark laughing too. His girlfriend shook her head almost imperceptibly at me, like she was saying, "I hear you, but leave it alone for now."

She and I argued with Mark after everybody else left. "Come on, guys," he said. "Ken wasn't serious about beating anybody up, obviously, and you have to admit, a gay guy hitting on a straight guy is gross. You never know what might happen."

Well.

I loved Mark like a brother for many years, but that was not his finest moment. It was the zeitgeist, though. Saying, "I'm fine that you're gay as long as you don't hit on me" was like some mandatory thing guys said. All. The. Time.

Did it make me feel as low as gum stuck to the bottom of somebody's shoe? Betcher ass. Like, being gay makes me presumptively unable to respect personal space and/or

flirt appropriately? Being gay is so disgusting that if some dude asks you out by mistake, you reserve the right to get violent? What even is that?

Mark apologized a few days later after he'd had time to process because he was (is) a very thoughtful person. Not long after

up or kills an LGBTQ+ person, then their lawyer argues to a jury that they deserve a lighter sentence because of their supposed shock learning a potential sex partner was queer.

"That gay guy came onto me, and I was so freaked out I snapped. I'm sorry I lost it, but please take

thought that trans and LGBTQ folks are less human than other victims..."

She says the problem is a lot bigger than many people realize because it's used a lot more than people realize. She adds that the general public often doesn't understand how vulnerable many



that was when Ken tried to kiss me.

According to Movement Advancement Project, 33 states, including Michigan, allow criminal defendants to argue for lighter sentences because their victims were trans or gay, a practice known as the gay/trans "panic defense."

Haven't heard of it? According to UpNorthLive, "The 'gay/trans panic' legal defense allows a victim's sexual orientation or gender identity to be used as a justification for why a defendant violently attacked their victim."

That's a pretty succinct definition of a phenomenon I've been hearing about all my life. Somebody beats

those mitigating circumstances into account." Or, "When I realized she was a really a he, I was so disgusted I lost control of myself. I should not be held fully legally responsible for my actions."

According to bisexual Michigan House Speaker Pro Tempore Laurie Pohutsky, the defense is "usually used in conjunction with other defenses as a way to play on unfortunate prejudices in an effort to lead to lighter sentences."

Pohutsky told the outlet that the practice treats LGBTQ+ victims as fundamentally less deserving of justice: "The root of the matter, the whole defense is based in the

queer people are. To illustrate, she says the defense is most common in Michigan in cases where Black trans women have been assaulted or killed.

Julisa Abad agrees. The director of Transgender Outreach and Advocacy at the nonprofit Fair Michigan, Abad identifies as Black, Hispanic and transgender. She's been fighting for genuine justice in this area for many years.

Abad tells UpNorthLive, "African-American men rather love us in private and kill us in public than have anyone know

See [Gay Panic Defense](#), page 18

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◀ A Place for Us
 Continued from page 14

progressive churches that financially support the Rescue Mission and encouraging them to apply pressure for policy and practice changes.

Brown feels the best solution would be to build a shelter that ensures the safety of LGBTQ+ unhoused community members, protecting them from discrimination and shielding them from forced religious services. However, because it could take as much as \$1 million just to launch a shelter, the current plan is to focus their limited resources on advocating with and offering training to existing shelters.

Brown said her roommate, a trans man, stayed at Loaves and Fishes, which has a non-discrimination policy. However, they roomed him with a cis woman, which was awkward for both of them. At the group's first meeting, individuals shared experiences of being assigned to shelters based on their birth sex rather than their actual gender, a policy that led to them being threatened by other residents.

A representative from the Lansing Area AIDS network pointed out that the issues at the shelter go beyond just LGBTQ+ and trans issues.

"These shelters are not equipped to [handle] — and are not educated on — mental health and substance abuse," said Ligia Romero-Balcarcel, a care program manager and community liaison. "They lack knowledge on these areas. A lot of our individuals go into the shelters and have mental health issues but have not been given services because community mental health is just overwhelmed."

She said they met with staff at the City Rescue Mission and emphasized the need for staff training and education.

"We were vocal about how they

were treating our clients," Romero-Balcarcel said. "Just because my client is gay doesn't mean they are going to be going after someone who is heterosexual."

have. They need to have policies in place to protect trans individuals and actually follow them — what to do if someone's being discriminated against and actually take action against that."



Luna Willow Brown. Courtesy photo

Brown listed several things that shelters need to do to become safe places for LGBTQ+ people, particularly for people in the trans community.

It starts, she said, with having non-discriminatory policies for staff, volunteers and residents. From there, shelters need to have policies in place to ensure they can accommodate transgender individuals.

"They need to have gender-neutral bathrooms available," Brown said. "They need to have single showers available and not only gender-based group showers like a lot of shelters

"A Place for Us," under the leadership of Brown, has embarked on its mission to ensure that Lansing's LGBTQ+ unhoused community finds refuge and support in shelters that embrace inclusivity. October marked the beginning of their efforts to make certain that everyone, regardless of their gender identity or sexual orientation, has access to safe shelter and assistance in the Lansing area.

Meetings for "A Place for Us" are held on the 2nd and 4th Tuesday of each month at 7 p.m. Email aplaceforuscoalition@gmail.com for more information, including the location.



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◀ **Chappell Roan**
Continued from page 9

on her tour are going to For The Gwols, a Black- and trans-led charity based in New York. As for her openers, she's sharing the stage with those who have inspired her — drag queens. Three Detroit queens, ANTI, Perry Dox and Aphrodite, opened for her at St. Andrews. At the show, Roan pointed people to their Venmos so they could tip them.

Whether that's the drag queens onstage or queer pop peers like Kiyoko and Fletcher, Roan is one with the "little pop girlies" now — a phrase it's hard to imagine her even thinking about using when "Die Young" came out.

But in Detroit, freer to be herself in all her aspirational queer glory, a different artist emerged. It was clear that night Roan hadn't just accomplished what she was inspired by McKenna to do — "I feel like I was put on this earth to throw fun parties" — but she made that party seem like a homecoming for anyone who also knows the feeling of wanting to break free.

"I feel really at peace, which is something that I didn't really know I would feel," Roan says. "But I just feel gratitude and peace. I'm proud that I kept going through all of the part-time jobs, through being dropped by a label, through all the breakups, through all the times my bank account was nearly empty. I think as long as I'm literally putting on shows that make people happy, or playing music that makes people feel seen and heard, I can't ask for anything else."



Chappell Roan at St. Andrews in Detroit, Oct. 10. Photo: Lucienne Nghiem

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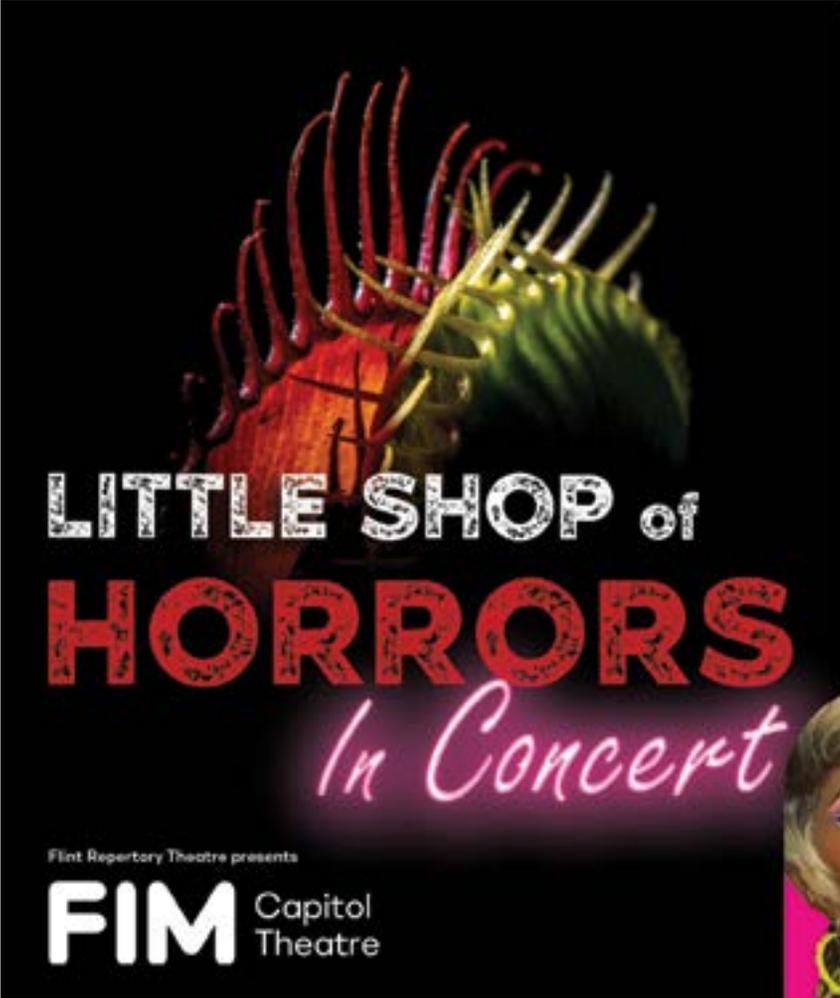
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◀ Trans Youth

Continued from page 6

“This is a win for mental health,” Dievendorf said. “It’s a win for overall stability. It’s a win for being able to function better at school. What we need most is for our parents and our teachers and everybody involved in our youth’s lives to validate their experience, not to suggest that our youth don’t understand who they themselves are.”

A second category of positive legislation, gender-affirming “shield” laws or executive orders, protect trans youth in 14 states, covering about half of all trans youth in the U.S. age 13 to 17. “Shield laws basically support access to care for transgender youth by protecting doctors and parents who either treat youth or seek access to treatment for youth,” Mallory said. Provisions vary by state, though some include additional protections through licensing boards or protection for parents who seek care for their children outside their home state.

“I very much am interested in sponsoring a shield law,” Dievendorf said, “and [I] am really just waiting for the green light, letting me know that it is the time and that I’m going to have the support of my colleagues on both my side of the aisle and the other side of the aisle.”

Those protections would be a game changer for medical professionals and others, says Bondono. “It’s a team effort whenever a trans youth is receiving care, and everyone has to feel comfortable as a part of that conversation for that care to really be the best thing for that child.”

Beyond the scope of the Williams Institute report, Michigan has made other strides in protecting trans youth. Most notably,

amending the Elliott-Larsen Civil Rights Act to include LGBTQ+ people means that the civil rights of those 8,900 trans youth in Michigan are assured. And for this, the state has been nationally recognized.

“It was a big deal that Michigan amended its nondiscrimination laws to prohibit discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity,” Mallory said. “So obviously another good development in this state, in this year.”

Further, the gay/trans panic defense ban that’s currently making its way through the state Legislature is another potential layer of protection. Bondono said by and large his students can’t believe it’s currently a valid legal defense.

“When they learn that that exists, they’re so flabbergasted,” Bondono said. “They can’t believe that there was ever a time when someone could justify violence and murder just because somebody was trans.” Transphobia on a personal level is bad enough, but trans and cis students alike find it shocking that it is codified into law. However, the disbelief expressed by his students gives Bondono hope that attitudes truly are changing.

Dievendorf would also like to see the passage of updates to Michigan’s hate crime laws. And they believe trans youth in Michigan must be fully protected in their schools, too, in terms of access to bathrooms that correspond to their gender identity and access to all school activities.

“Certainly everything we’re working on impacts and is progress for LGBT people because the LGBTQIA plus community is disproportionately impacted by all of these overlapping disparities and the oppressions that cause them,” Dievendorf said. That includes but is not limited to gun safety and access to equitable medical and mental



Owen Bondono. Courtesy photo

health care.

“The list really goes on and on because we know that helping people to access their basic needs is just inherently going to especially help our most vulnerable, including and especially Black, Brown and LGBT people,” Dievendorf added.

When Bondono thinks about the safety of all of his students, he is also concerned about homelessness and the foster care system, particularly because queer youth represent 40 percent of all homeless young people.

“I’ve experienced students of mine who are trans contacting me to say, ‘My mom said if I’m going to live as a boy, I can’t live in her

house,’” Bondono said. “And I have a 16-year-old who is wandering the streets in Detroit with nowhere to go, and there aren’t that many legal steps that I can take to help them.”

Bondono noted some progress, too. Two cisgender girls at his school recently ran for the title of Duke for their homecoming court because they felt that best suited their gender expression. They won in a landslide.

“So it’s an interesting moment in history where we live, where it can feel bleak,” Bondono said. “But it seems, at least from my perspective, that overall the world is getting better for trans people and especially trans youth.”

◀ Gay Panic Defense

Continued from page 15

of their association with trans women. It happens all the time, but it also happens because of the lack of education and how we villainize people as a community for being enamored with trans women.” She adds that the defense is most often used when Black trans sex workers are attacked.

The Michigan House voted recently to approve a bill banning the defense outright, and with a Democratic majority in the Senate and a Democratic governor, the bill is seen as likely to become law this year. Still — I’m puzzled and saddened by total Republican opposition.

When the bill passed on Oct. 19, every Democrat in the House voted for it, and every Republican voted against it. Most puzzling is that the Michigan GOP hasn’t released a statement explaining why and

neither has any individual Republican lawmaker. In fact, Speaker Pohutsky says “several” Republican lawmakers have told her privately they support the bill’s aims, but they still wouldn’t vote for it.

Does that make me feel less than human, as Pohutsky suggests? Sure it does. I think back to that night with Ken. He didn’t touch me. He didn’t assault me, sexually or otherwise. He was an obnoxious, sloppy drunk who had obviously been repressing his own gay or bisexual attractions, and his unwanted advances repulsed me.

What if I’d punched him? I’d have had no excuse for violence, right? I think that’s obvious. But what if he really HAD kissed me against my will or groped me? What if I’d punched him under those circumstances? What kind of legal defense should I have used? Would a gay panic defense have been appropriate?

Not only would that defense have been dehumanizing, I wouldn’t have needed it!

I could have just told a jury the truth: Ken sexually assaulted me and I was defending myself. “Please take the sexual assault he committed into consideration when assessing my guilt or deciding how to sentence me.”

Any defendant can make an argument like that when the facts support them. After the Michigan panic defense ban passes (if it does), any defendant could STILL make an argument that they deserve mitigation because they were assaulted, if they were assaulted.

What they won’t be able to do is say they should be treated extra leniently because their victim is transgender or gay. Doesn’t that seem entirely fair? Shouldn’t all criminal defendants be judged by the same standard, regardless of their victim’s gender identity or sexual orientation? Shouldn’t all victims be afforded equal protection under the law?

To me, Laurie Pohutsky, Julisa Abad and

every Democrat in the Michigan House, that just seems obvious. I guess it’s not obvious to the Michigan GOP, and I wish I knew why.

I’d like to think it’s not because of the reflexive opposition to LGBTQ+ equality that’s been exploding around the U.S. since Donald Trump was elected in 2016. Honestly, though, I can’t think of any other reason that defendants convicted of violent assaults should be able to argue for a lighter sentence because their victim is queer.

Can you? Asking for a friend.

This article was reprinted from Medium.com with permission from the author.

James Finn is an LGBTQ+ columnist, a former Air Force intelligence analyst, an alumnus of Queer Nation and Act Up NY, and an agented but unpublished novelist. He lives in rural Michigan with a small cat who rules the household. Read more LGBTQ+ content written by James at jfinn6511.medium.com.



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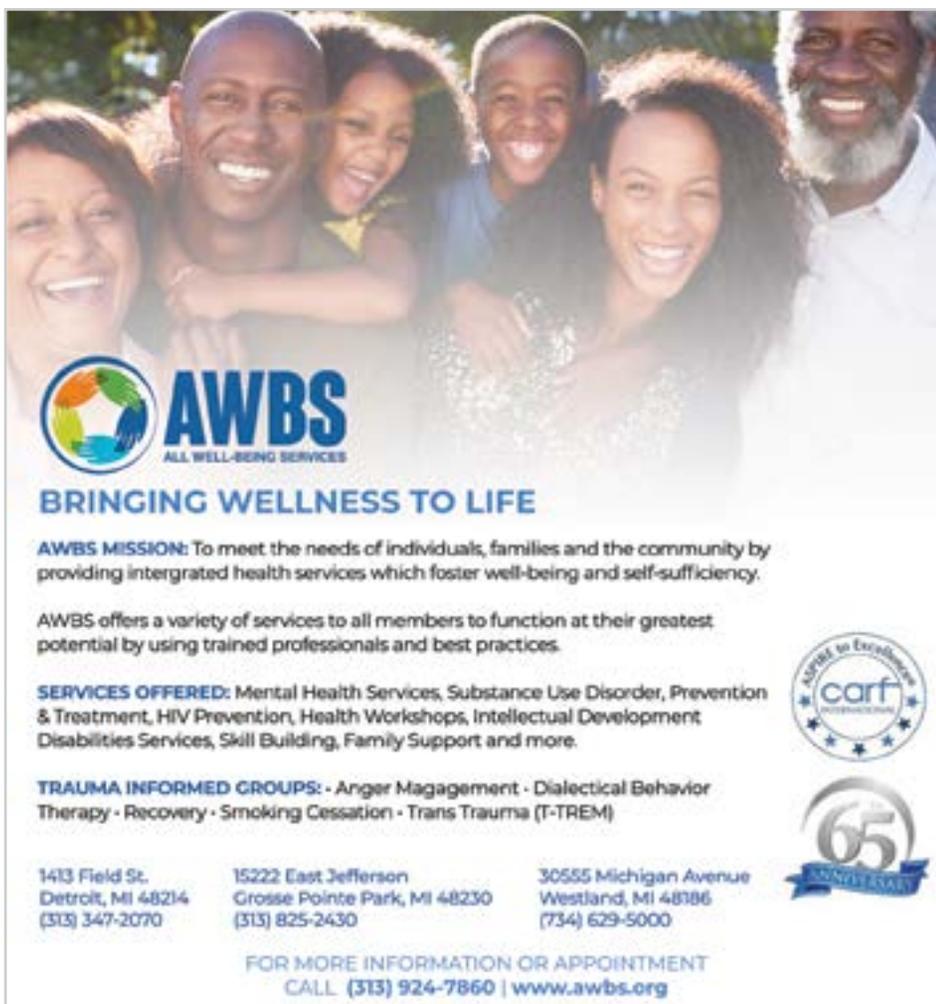
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The Risks Raquel Willis Took to Bloom

The Black trans activist on why stories like hers need to be heard

BY SARAH BRICKER HUNT

When Raquel Willis took the stage at the National Women's March in Washington, D.C. the day after Trump's inauguration in January 2017, with beaming defiance and fierce resolve, she didn't sidestep the controversial way trans women had been sidelined from the planning of the momentous occasion. "Although I'm glad to be here now, it's disheartening that women like me were an afterthought in the initial planning of this march," she remarked. "Many of us had to stand a little taller to be heard, and that exclusion is nothing new."

Willis has yet to let up the pressure on trans-exclusionary spaces and people since that cold winter day almost seven years ago. The Augusta, Georgia native details her life story and her ceaseless passion for advocacy in a candid new memoir, "The Risk It Takes to Bloom," out Nov. 14. Raised Catholic in a Black Southern family, Willis explains how the death of her father when she was 19 contributed to years of grief, and ultimately, epiphanies about what she was meant to do with her life — how she began to truly bloom as a whole person.

Willis worked as a journalist during the early part of the Black Lives Matter movement, hiding her identity while working as a news reporter. Over time, she would publicly come out as transgender and become a powerful advocate. She served as director of communications for the Ms. Foundation for Women; as executive editor of Out magazine, where she started the award-winning Trans Obituaries Project, and as a national organizer for the Transgender Law Center. She writes about the reality of working in those "lofty" positions as a Black trans woman — experiences she says cast light on how progressive spaces can still contain systems of oppression. Willis is currently an executive producer for iHeartMedia's LGBTQ+ Outspoken Podcast Network.

The activist sat down with BTL recently to discuss the new book, her continued advocacy and her thoughts about the current state of trans discrimination.

You write about your advocacy work during a pivotal time, where you started down this path during the Obama era, and then along came Trump and an abrupt anti-LGBTQ+ shift, politically and socially.

I would say things have certainly required us to have a bit more grace and nuance. And I don't necessarily mean that for our political figures — they are who they are; that is what that is. But I think living through the Trump era and being in the space where we are now, there's a lot of grace that I've had to have for myself around being able to hold those things that I have anxieties or insecurities about and then also being able to kind of push forward and also draw on my power.

We're living in a time of anti-trans discrimination, where being known makes us a target. I think many in the trans community want to be seen, but I think at this time, it's also at what cost? What are we willing to give up? What kind of risk, speaking to the title of the book, are we willing to take to be seen or to be heard?

We often have these kind of black and white ideas about which spaces are conservative and which spaces are progressive. And one thing that you will quickly realize, if you're on the margins within the margins, is that some of the spaces that we think may be the most progressive also have systems of oppression.

You touched on this in your speech at the Women's March, before it was cut short.

Yes, this was seen as this kind of tent-pole feminist moment, but what did that mean for me as someone expecting that space to value my transness, to value my queerness in the same way that it



Raquel Willis. Photo: Texas Isaiah

was valuing this kind of feminist element of my activism?

And then later, for instance, I write about working at the Transgender Law Center. Working at this nonprofit that in many ways was the Holy Grail of where you would want to work as an empowered trans person. But again, still dealing with systems of oppression around anti-Blackness or dealing with misogyny and maybe not hearing or maybe not experiencing being heard because of how hierarchy, and even capitalism, still kind of rips apart these progressive spaces on the margins at Out magazine.

I don't think that we have enough stories where it's a Black trans woman talking about her experience with her career, navigating the workplace in this way and also trying to maintain her values and dignity in those places. I also think about so many of the folks who had their first major social justice awakening during that summer of 2020 in the aftermath of the murders of George Floyd or Breonna Taylor and so many others. We're in this time where we're holding all of these truths and yearnings and desires and embodiments at once.

It's hard to understand that your perspective may just be one perspective. Usually, it's just one perspective and not the only one, and unfortunately, no matter how we come to our perspective, we still have to reckon with the fact that there are any number of them out there, especially if we're trying to work with others to create some kind of pathway to collective liberation.

No one wants to feel uncomfortable, but sometimes that's what it takes, basically?

I think so much of the experience of folks on the margins is about that discomfort around being a trans person. My whole life has been about discomfort and not necessarily in the way that I think the average person may think.

So many folks paint the experience of being non-conforming or queer as some kind of internal discomfort. It's often, in my experience, not been so much about that internal discomfort. I think I've always had a feeling that I will be able to tease out whatever's happening internally in due time if I'm given the space and grace to, but it's that external discomfort that has often eaten up so much of my energy.

I dealt with peers at a young age who didn't understand why I was so feminine or the discomfort externally that I felt for my dad, who didn't understand who I was in

so many different ways, or the discomfort I felt working, or when I was a student at the University of Georgia. Luckily, I found some LGBTQ+ community there, but I was still a Black student at a predominantly white institution and I was still the only openly trans woman student in that context in 2012, 2013.

So it's that discomfort in those spaces or the discomfort of going to Out magazine and being the first trans woman to hold a leadership position at that publication. It has been a series of discomforts in this life of mine, but I think what I've learned from that is that those are opportunities to evolve not only for me but for the environment to evolve for the folks around me who are invested in something tangible and different.

Have you ever needed to compartmentalize some of this

“ We have the opportunity to not just wallow in the grief and the mourning but to actually use whatever lane we're in to try and make things better so that doesn't happen again. ”

external pressure where people are constantly pointing out that you're the first “this” or “that” when you're really just trying to do your job some days?

I think at this point in my career, it can be comforting to understand the history, particularly trans history, and to know that there have been others who came before me. Maybe not exactly the same with the exact same credentials, but there have been trans storytellers before me. There have been trans folks trying to carve out a space in media before me. And so I can take comfort in knowing that wittingly or unwittingly, they did leave some bit of a broken pathway for me.

My hope is that whatever space I enter, I am carving out a container for the next

See **Raquel Willis**, page 24

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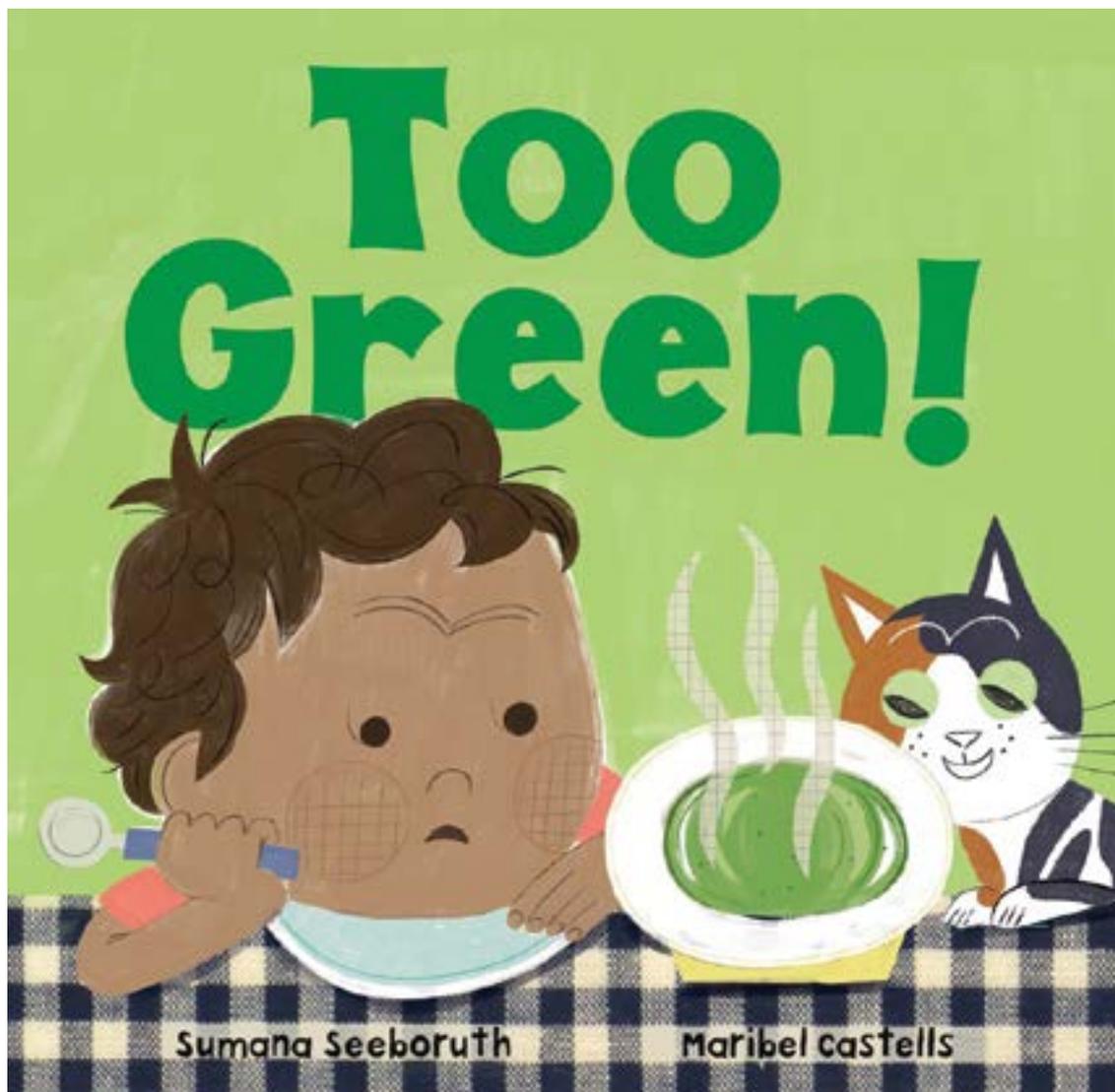
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10 LGBTQ-Inclusive Picture Books For Kids You May Have Missed

BY DANA RUDOLPH

I love that more and more LGBTQ-inclusive kids' books are not just about being LGBTQ+, but instead show LGBTQ+ people in the fullness of our lives. The downside is that sometimes these books can be hard to find. Here are 10 picture books you may have missed because the queer inclusion isn't evident from the cover or title, and I haven't seen them on many lists of LGBTQ-inclusive books. These are all tales of daily life and gentle emotional lessons — but just

happen to have queer protagonists or families!

“Too Green!” By Sumana Seeboruth, illustrated by Maribel Castells (Barefoot Books). A young child declares his dislike of the green vegetables his mama brings home. He'd rather have the bread his mum is making. But after his mama involves him in making soup from the vegetables and persuades him to try a sip, he discovers he actually likes it and joyously asks for more. Also available in a bilingual English/Spanish edition.

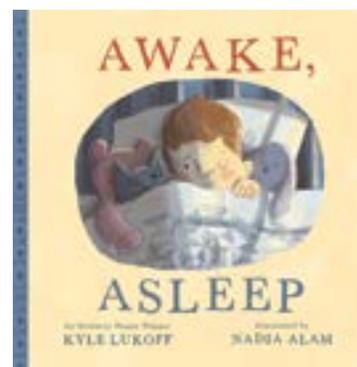
“Awake, Asleep,” by Kyle Lukoff, illustrated by Nadia Alam (Orchard Books). Lukoff, a two-time Stonewall Award winner and National Book Award finalist, in his first volume for the very youngest children, leans into his poetic skills with spare, gently rhyming text as we follow three families through daily family moments. There's also the occasional stumble or bump, quickly followed by a comforting touch — a subtle lesson on resilience. One family has two dads, one has a mom and dad and

in the third, the burly, tattooed dad happily pulls on pink hi-top sneakers to match his daughter's.

“This Is the First Book I Will Read to You,” by Francesco Sedita, illustrated by Magenta Fox (Viking). A father expresses his nurturing, vulnerable thoughts as he gets ready to read to his new child for the first time. A photo on the wall in one illustration shows him and another man with their arms around each other; elsewhere, their photos are paired side by side. They could be brothers, but given that author Francesco Sedita is himself married to a man, it seems likely that the father here is, too. The other dad is not shown elsewhere, but solo moments between parent and child happen even in couples. Those who want to see queerness here can easily do so.

“Firsts and Lasts: The Changing Seasons,” by Leda Schubert, illustrated by Clover Robin (Candlewick). A child talks about the different activities that start — and end — in each season for her, her sister and her moms. This is a book not only about the seasons, but about the intertwining harmonies of nature and family life and finding the new even as we bid farewell to the old.

“Miguel's Community Garden,” by JaNay Brown-Wood, illustrated by Samara Hardy (Peachtree). A young boy with two dads wants sunflowers for his garden party and sets off with his pet turtle to find them, encountering other plants along the way. A delightful book for early STEM learning, showing readers how to be careful observers of nature.



“A Home Again,” by Colleen Rowan Kosinski, illustrated by Valeria Docampo (Two Lions). Told from the first-person perspective of a red house, this lyrical story begins as the building welcomes its first family, a mom, dad and two (soon three) children. When they leave, the house

falls into disrepair until a new family — two men and (soon) their child — moves in and makes the house once more a home.

“Forever Home: A Dog and Boy Love Story,” written and illustrated by Henry Cole (Scholastic). A moving, wordless tale about a boy who has two dads and wants a puppy — and an abandoned dog who needs a home. Cole, illustrator of the classic “And Tango Makes Three,” brings his usual skill and warmth to bear here. The book offers a touching model of how to care for a dog but also conveys that many are in need of homes. Truly a delight.

“Hold That Thought,” by Bree Galbraith, illustrated by Lynn Scurfield (Owlkids). A nonbinary child named Finn gets an exciting idea, depicted as swirls of thought above their head. Friends help shape the idea, and it continues to expand. When a bully disparages it, however, Finn begins to doubt, until they realize they need to share it even further. Eventually, even the bully contributes, and the idea soars. The idea is never specified, which makes the story widely applicable and offers much opportunity for discussion.

“My Friend, Loonie,” by Nina LaCour, illustrated by Ashling Lindsay (Candlewick). A girl's two moms give her a yellow balloon that becomes her constant companion — until one day, it floats away, leaving her bereft. Her moms try to comfort her, and after time passes, the girl finds a way to engage positively with her memories and even find brightness in the world again. A soothing book about connection, loss and memory.

“How Are You, Verity?” by Meghan Wilson Duff, illustrated by Taylor Barron (Magination). Verity, a neurodivergent, nonbinary child, often replies with a slew of information when people ask, “How are you?” When their brother suggests that the question is just a social greeting, Verity decides to test this for themselves — but also learns when it's OK to share more about how they're really feeling.

If you want more books like this, visit my Database of LGBTQ+ Family Books (mombian.com/database) and filter by the “Incidental queerness” tag — or use other tags to find books specifically about LGBTQ+ identities, history and culture, if that's what you seek.

How Matt Rogers Is Ho, Ho, Ho-ing His Way to the Top

With his debut album, the actor-comedian captures the spirit of the season in a way that only he can

BY CHRIS AZZOPARDI

Come get cozy around the fire with your chestnuts and hear the soon-to-be classic tale of how Santa got all the toys into his big bag. That tale, as written by actor-musician-podcaster Matt Rogers, involves what else but Gun Oil. Rogers sings about the lubricant on “Lube for the Sleigh,” the second song on his first album that is like a Lonely Island release, just gayer and by someone who is actually gay. This is “not your grandma’s Christmas album,” Rogers says.

“I kind of hacked the system with this one,” he goes on, just days before promoting the album on “The Kelly Clarkson Show.” “I’m on ‘Kelly Clarkson’ and selling this album to a bunch of people that are watching at home, who are going to be a little shook when they find out what this really is, and I kind of love that.”

It’s true that you won’t hear Queen of Christmas Mariah Carey singing about one of the horniest times of the year; leave that to Rogers. The album’s sexy (can you even say that about a Christmas song?) lead single is a club banger about banging. Called “Also It’s Christmas,” the song is real life for a lot of queer men — you go home to visit the parents and also get a fresh grid of Grindr torsos. Merry Christmas one and all, but especially to you! And to Rogers, whose childhood dream was always to record a comedy album.

Best known for his supporting roles on the Showtime comedy series “I Love That For You” and in the Hulu film “Fire Island,” the 35-year-old aspiring Christmas prince is also the co-host of the podcast *Las Culturistas*, alongside friend Bowen Yang. In December 2022, Rogers hosted his own Showtime musical-comedy special, “Have You Heard of Christmas?”

Now that the album has slipped out of Santa’s slippery bag and into our hands, I caught up with Rogers to chat about why it made sense for his first album to be Christmas-themed



Matt Rogers. Photo: Jen Rosenstein

(#capitalism), finding success when he decided to lean into who he is and why he thinks it might be “dumb” to release this album.

How are you feeling about the album coming out?

It’s pretty surreal. I think that the most exciting thing will be when I get to hold my vinyl in my hands. A couple of my friends have reached out and... oh my god, I get emotional. I think sometimes I get a little in my head and insecure about the fact that I haven’t seen anything like this. It’s a comedy album that’s also a Christmas album, that’s also a full pop record. But I just say to myself, “You know what, so I did something new.” So I’m just trying my best to have a sense of humor about it because it’s so fucking funny that this is happening.

Here you are laughing and nearly crying.

It’s a weird mix of emotions. It’s my music, but also it’s my comedy. So it’s this odd fork in the road I find myself at where I’m being vulnerable in sharing and asking people to listen to me, in terms of what I create musically, but also as a comedian, my self-awareness is what arms me. So it’s this very bizarre hybrid product I have right now, and I’m having a very weird hybrid experience with it: One, I worked really hard and it’s vulnerable, and two, LOL, this is so dumb!

Both of those things can be true.

I guess that’s like Christmas. Yay, we’re celebrating; also, it’s pretty stupid. Like, “Look at this. What is

this, tinsel?” What does it have to do with anything? I just hope people get it, and if they don’t, I hope they have a good time not getting it.

You mentioned that this is pop and Christmas, but it’s also unabashedly queer.

I didn’t try to make a gay album. I don’t think of this as a gay Christmas album or a gay comedy album. It’s my album. I never once thought, “We need more gay shit or less gay shit on this,” or, “We already have a gay song, so we can’t do another gay song.” I’m pretty fucking gay. It’s a pretty intrinsic part of my personality, and therefore my comedy. So I don’t think of it as I’m a representative of the queer community, even though I obviously am. I’m representing myself. This is what I think is funny. The same way when Dane Cook didn’t think,

“I’m making an incredible straight comedy album right now.”

Do you recognize that the Christmas genre has been dominated by a heterosexual narrative and that you get to do something really special and different just because you are queer?

Yeah, I think that because I’m queer, I get to say some truths about the whole Christmas thing, and one of the truths is that no one does this because they love Christmas. No artist is making a Christmas album because they’re super excited about making a Christmas album. They’re super excited about participating in the capitalist moment that is the

See **Matt Rogers**, page 26

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◀ Raquel Willis

Continued from page 21

folks to not have to check off as many boxes. My hope is to make it smoother for the next people. But also, everyone is carrying some kind of anxiety. It may seem more obvious about what mine may be, as a Black trans woman, but it doesn't do me any favors to forget that this white woman next to me has some anxieties, too, and probably some very similar ones. This dude over here has some anxieties, the straight person and the cisgender person. We have opportunities for connection by naming the insecurities, the anxieties and the awkwardnesses that exists, so we can be on the same page.

Are you noticing upcoming generations and their parents embracing topics like gender diversity and intersectionality?

It's so interesting for me to see more and more parents who have young trans or nonconforming or queer or nonbinary people in their lives. And it's a beautiful thing that these shifts are happening, which is exactly why we see such dogged political attacks in this moment.

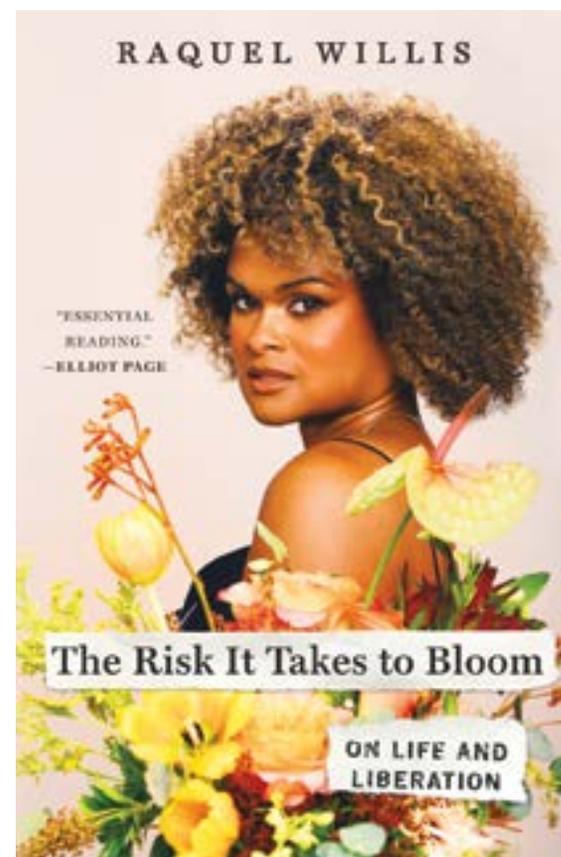
One of the throughlines for me and my activism work has been paying close attention to deaths that have happened, particularly in the trans community, and trying to turn the feelings those moments have elicited into activation. It was the suicide of 17-year-old Leelah Alcorn back in 2015 that really inspired me to speak up publicly for the first time about my transness because in my first role as a newspaper reporter in small-town Georgia, I was in the closet as a trans woman. I was not out professionally, and that was out of fear of losing my chance at a livelihood or a chance at starting a career.

And so when I was in my second job in Atlanta, Leelah's death really pushed me to speak up, and I made this YouTube video, just talking about how it had impacted me. [After the BBC picked up the story], I had to come out to my co-workers, and luckily I was in a workplace that found that to be an empowering thing for me to do, but that was a shift.

You went on to focus much of your activism on the issue of violence against trans women of color. Why did you start the Trans Obituaries Project?

The Trans Obituaries project that I created in Out magazine was an opportunity for

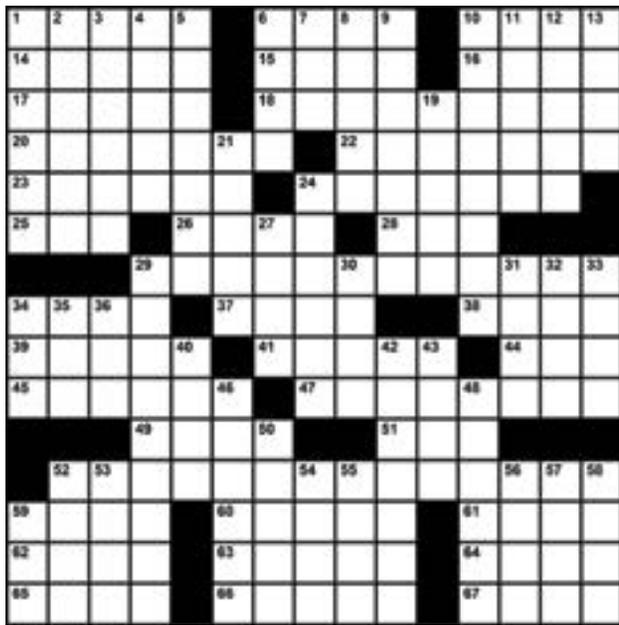
me to not only talk about this epidemic of violence but to also bring in a more investigative element, like delving into the story of a 27-year-old Afro-Latina woman who died in Riker's custody named Layleen Polanco in 2019. Her story brought a different dynamic around someone who died in state custody and who was a sex worker who dealt with mental illness, who had epilepsy and was in ballroom culture in the House of Extravaganza. And so, she had all of these elements related to her whole life. I think that's been at the heart of talking about this epidemic of violence for me — to get folks to remember that these



people lived before they were taken.

I think we all kind of carry the lives of folks who have been taken, whether we were related to them, whether they were just in our community, or whether they shared some element of our identity or our experience. And I do feel like we have the opportunity to not just wallow in the grief and the mourning but to actually use whatever lane we're in to try and make things better so that doesn't happen again.

If you're in storytelling, you have the opportunity to uncover those stories or the dynamics that make those stories occur. If we're talking about education, you're in the educational system. You have to find a way to make sure that students don't feel the isolation that maybe someone like Leelah felt. There's so many opportunities here for that radical change. But we have to be endlessly curious and endlessly creative about how we can make those radical changes in our lives.



- 38 S&M souvenir
 39 Go down on a hill
 41 "The evil that ____" (Shakespeare)
 44 "Scram!," once
 45 Top partner
 47 "Not that there's anything wrong with that!" source
 49 Makes hot
 51 Govt. broadcaster
 52 See 29-Across
 59 Verdi work adapted by John
 60 Em and Mame
 61 Was active in B&D
 62 Icy pellets
 63 You get pricks from them
 64 River of Wilde's land
 65 "My Cup Runneth Over" singer Ed
 66 "The Wizard of Oz" dropout Buddy
 67 Colors hair

Down

- 1 Spider-Man's green nemesis
 2 Behaving properly
 3 Rough house
 4 Music of the the Village People
 5 Banderas of "Evita"
 6 Use hands instead of mouth
 7 Hagen of "The Boys from Brazil"
 8 Philippines island
 9 "The Name of the Rose" novelist Eco
 10 Those removed to safety
 11 Operetta composer Franz ____

- 12 Like a hisser shaped like a pisser
 13 Melissa Etheridge's "Don't Look ____"
 19 Soapbox derby entrant
 21 Stop working so hard
 24 Where soldiers eat together
 27 Fedora feature
 29 Atlanta Pride and others
 30 Peppermint sweet you can lick
 31 Dull discomfort
 32 Polished surface, for a drag queen
 33 Lincoln-Douglas debates subject Scott
 34 Chem. pollutant
 35 "____-hoo! Fellas!"
 36 Caesar's lang.
 40 Went lickety-split
 42 Forges ahead, like Louganis?
 43 ____ about (roughly)
 46 One getting ready to shoot off a gun, e.g.
 48 Had nothing
 50 Young pigeon
 52 "The King and I's" setting
 53 "Nurse Jackie" portrayer
 54 Dad's bros
 55 Cigar butt?
 56 Open to the breeze
 57 Drag queen ____ Pool
 58 Sapphic poems
 59 You might say it when you get it

Promiscuous President

Across

- 1 Jewelle Gomez's " ____ Stories"
 6 Takei's "Star Trek" role
 10 "Frozen" queen
 14 ____ Ten (LGBT support group)
 15 Ted Casablanca bit
 16 Blowhole
 17 Blow-out

- 18 With 20-Across, nickname for the 16th president?
 20 See 18-Across
 22 Afternoon snack in Britten's land
 23 Chant
 24 Freddie of Queen
 25 Keanu's role in "The Matrix"
 26 End of a Beatles song title
 28 Supporter of Spencer-Devlin
 29 With 52-Across, how long ago the president came out?
 34 "Gomer ____ , U.S.M.C."
 37 Leaning erection site

See p. 16 for answers

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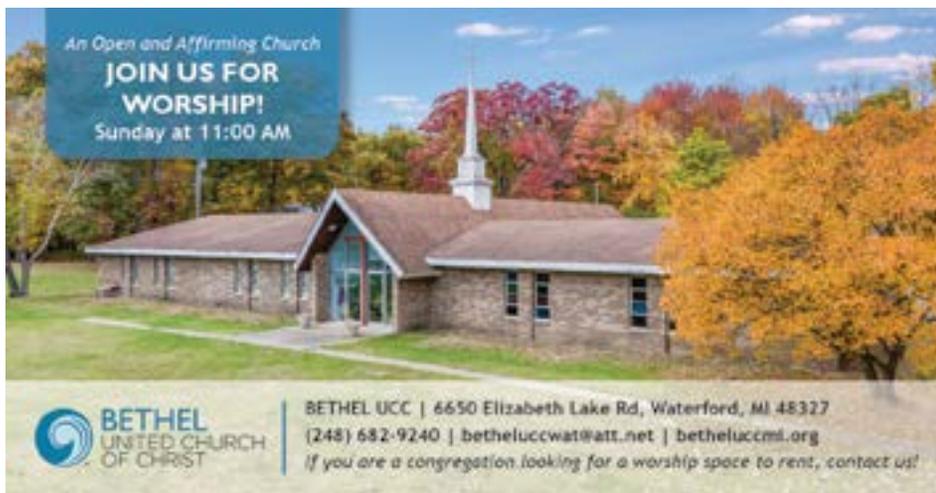
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◀ Matt Rogers

Continued from page 23

Christmas season and that's funny. There's a lot of comedy in that.

You also get to say things about Christmas that Mariah and Cher can't, like acknowledging hookup culture during the holidays.

This album coming through a queer lens, yeah, part of it is that Christmas is one of the horniest times of the year for gays on the apps. We're back at home. There's no one around. I actually have several years in a row over the Christmas holiday realized that someone I was into was into me too, because they also were at home, horny and on their phone, and we started sending nudes back and forth. I've hooked up with those people, and it's because there is such a heightened sense of horniness when you're isolated on Christmas with just your family and you're just going stir-crazy. So that's kind of where "Also It's Christmas" was born.

Also, just to be totally honest, I just wanted a banger as the lead single, and I thought, "What's an environment I could place this in?" Obviously the club, and also, it's just so funny to me to think about the holiday and the cold and the family of it all surrounding what is a horny atmosphere.

How much did Mariah's own influence on Christmas become your inspiration for your music launch with a Christmas album?

Pretty much a hundred percent. It was 2017, and I was looking for a new show to put up, and I really was just trying to figure out what the angle was going to be for my next one-man show back when I was just doing comedy in New York, and I thought I had seen an interview with Mariah Carey and the interviewer was complimenting her on, basically, her owning Christmas.

I thought to myself, "Oh, maybe that's a funny angle for a comedy show: I'm releasing a Christmas album." So it all started as a bit like, "Please come to The Duplex and see me perform my Christmas album, which is definitely real for sure. Absolutely one-hundred definitely coming out for the very first time." And it was a hit just amongst my friends and family that came to the show, and then every year it grew and grew and grew till now, in 2023, I literally have a Christmas album coming out on Capitol Records, so I'm happy, one, as a person who always wanted to release an album as a kid; that was always my dream. And, two, as a comedian, because I stuck the bit.

Best of both worlds coming together for you. I mean, obviously, neither are an easy pursuit, and somehow you have made them both come together at the same time.

You just have to fake it.

You have to fake it till you make it. And you made it.

I guess. I keep faking it. So many things have gone so amazingly well in my career, but it never feels like it's enough sometimes. There's always that next thing. So the other day I found myself in a situation where I was just like, hold on, just stop for a second and pull yourself out of this and tell your little 12-year-old self that you're releasing an album. I can buy a vinyl with my face on it. That's insane.

I don't even want to ask you what's next. Let's not even talk about it.

OK, good. Don't ask because I literally don't know. As the industry collapses all around us, what a horrifying question too. "What's next?" Literally, every single person in the entertainment industry is so horrified by that question nowadays.

I want to unpack something that you said about overachieving.

The best little boy in the world.

It sounds like there's a big part of your drive that is still that kid.

Yeah, I mean, absolutely. For me, it changed when I was in my 20s. To me, success meant that I was just solid as a rock and that I looked like everyone else and did what everyone else was doing. Individuality was not prized when I was growing up or just in the culture at that time. Suddenly I moved to New York to go to college, and it became really clear to me that that was not true anymore. We were moving into a new era. I don't know whether it was the Obama election or just people catching on about gay rights throughout the country, or just diversity even becoming a topic. Suddenly it was like, no, in order to be successful, you have to have a strong point of view. You have to get your individuality across, you have to stand out.

Even when I started doing comedy. I did the acceptable kind of comedy, which was sketch and improv comedy. I could connect that to "Saturday Night Live" and so therefore, everyone at home would understand why I was doing it, because "SNL" was cool. When I came out of the closet, I started to finally turn more into myself. And I think it really crystallized when Bowen and I started doing the podcast and we literally thought no one else was going to listen or that it was going to be a thing. And so we really just talked to each other as ourselves in a vacuum, and without any thought about whether or not people would like it or want to keep listening to it or think it was cool. Things really changed for me once I leaned into myself and leaned into the things that make me different.

Read the full interview at pridesource.com.



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