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The Heroes Issue

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5 Queer Things You Can Do Right Now-ish

BY SARAH BRICKER HUNT

Pace yourselves, friends. There’s almost too much to do this time of year and endless ways to contribute to the economy, as your wallet and busy calendar can attest. The good news is that you can mix it up with high-energy functions like a fun holiday-themed drag bingo brunch or a frenetic Europop concert by “Barbie Girl” band Aqua or quieter activities focused on inner peace, like an online Buddhist meditation exercise or a local LGBTQ+ support group. There’s joy to be found around every queer corner.



Aqua. Photo: Gudmund Thai

Come on Barbie, Let’s Go Party

If you’re of a certain age, odds are good that you recall the 1997 “Barbie Girl” phase. Missed it? It’s never too late to add to the 1.3 billion YouTube views of the official video. The campy earworm was produced by Danish-Norwegian Europop group Aqua, who took a multi-decade hiatus from touring the U.S. soon after, only to be lured back into the zeitgeist for a fresh cultural contribution to this summer’s blockbuster “Barbie” movie. “Barbie World,” recorded for the film’s soundtrack by Ice Spice and Nicki Minaj, garnered two Grammy nominations and gained Aqua a whole new fanbase comprised of listeners who weren’t yet alive for “Barbie Girl.” Don’t miss the distinctly queer vibes when the Europop superstars play The Fillmore Detroit on Dec. 10.

Dec. 10, 7 p.m., The Fillmore Detroit (2115 Woodward Ave., Detroit). Find tickets at livemu.sc/3N778Jq.



Caroline Bowman as Elsa in Disney’s “Frozen” touring cast. Photo: Matthew Murphy

See ‘Frozen’ Live

The national Broadway tour of “Frozen” has landed in Detroit with exquisite timing. It’s not a holiday musical, but the wintry sets and special effects and powerful musical performances will enhance your appreciation for a classic snowy Michigan winter. Pride Source Editorial Director Chris Azzopardi recently interviewed queer “Frozen” performer Collin Baja, the body-positive queer Michigander inside the Sven costume, who commented on the level of detail put into the production. “I’m still watching ‘Let It Go’ from Caroline Bowman [who plays Elsa] every single night because Caroline blows me away, just the control,” he said. “It takes a village to put on a show, let alone a touring show. Our crew, our wardrobe, everyone is working so hard, and it shows in the results.” The show runs through Dec. 17 at Detroit Opera House.

Through Dec. 17, Detroit Opera House (1526 Broadway St., Detroit). Find tickets at bit.ly/3Rmzp0T.



Practice Buddhist Meditation Online

Re-center and connect with a kind, welcoming queer community online at the Be Queer Now Buddhist meditation support group. The weekly virtual gatherings focus on meditation, poetry and dharma chats and are available to all LGBTQ+ community members regardless of experience. Those curious about Buddhism are welcome to attend, as are experienced practitioners. The Sunday evening Zoom-based meetups are free, but donations are welcome. Learn more and sign up at bit.ly/3GIhonX.

Sundays, 9:30 p.m., Zoom. Register at bit.ly/3GIhonX.



Mingle and Jingle at a Holiday Drag Brunch

Is it even the holidays if you don't snatch a chance to cheer on drag queens donning their festive best? Nope. So celebrate the season Dec. 17 at Detroit Fleat when local drag artists will host the Holly Jolly Drag Brunch and Bingo, an event where the ladies will "jingle your bells and deck your halls," according to truly delightful press materials, which describe the entertainment as serving more shade than a Douglas fir. Proceeds will support Affirmations, Ferndale's LGBTQ+ community center.

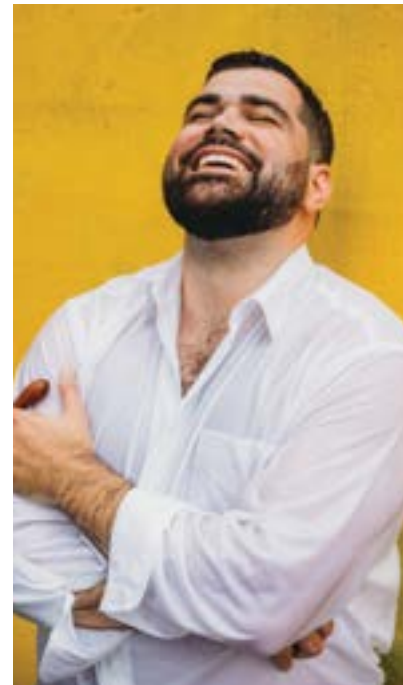
Dec. 17, 12 p.m., Detroit Fleat (1820 E. Nine Mile Road, Ferndale). Tickets at bit.ly/413LTxR.



Find Local Support

For many local LGBTQ+ community members, December can be the toughest time of year, especially when it feels like everyone else is enjoying the season of togetherness. If you find yourself in that mindset, local organizations and advocates want you to know you're not alone. There are resources available to meet a wide range of needs this time of year, including support groups, helplines and opportunities to attend events with your queer local community. Check out resources like Affirmations (goaffirmations.org/support-and-discussion-groups), LGBT Detroit (lgbtdetroit.org/healingandsupport), the Hannan Center's support groups for older LGBTQ+ community members (hannan.org/support-groups) and, for young adults, Ruth Ellis Center (ruthelliscenter.org).

LETTER FROM THE EDITORS



Top row: Rev. Darcy Crain, Grayson Papp and community advocate Bree Rowe.

Bottom row, clockwise: doula Liam Wolf, former secret service agent Cory Allen, conductor Kevin Fitzgerald and dog trainer and community advocate Ash Rose. Courtesy photos

Dear reader,

We've said this before, but it's worth repeating — there is defiance in experiencing the hard-won joy of being queer in a world that constantly seems to want to challenge who we are. As we continue to strike a national anti-queer sentiment and celebrate Michigan as a place where diversity reigns supreme even at the highest levels, right within the Governor's mansion and down through the Democrat-led House and Senate, we kept that in mind as we curated the stories you're about to read.

The people we are spotlighting in the state are

expanding the spectrum of identities, experiences and voices within the LGBTQ+ community — "Queeroes," as we're calling them. This issue serves as a platform to amplify these narratives and celebrate the richness of our community and to acknowledge persistent challenges and the radical changes we can singularly contribute by simply being ourselves.

Within these pages, you'll find a kaleidoscope of stories, perspectives and insights that reflect the wide-ranging beauty of the LGBTQ+ community. Rev. Dr. Darcy Cain, an openly gay Christian, for example,



Meanwhile, Grayson Papp's self-started nonprofit helps trans people in need both locally and nationally, sending care packages to other trans community members with gender-affirming items. Over in conservative Livingston County, a podcast with two trans co-hosts is opening up an important dialogue on trans life. And then there's Liam Wolf, a trans doula who is normalizing the idea that

serves as pastor at The First Congregational Church in Ann Arbor. Crain is changing how religious spaces can be inclusive and loving places for everyone, including queer people.

men give birth.

These stories in this issue and our next, which will be on stands Dec. 21, spotlight remarkable individuals and encapsulate the multifaceted essence of queerness.

Through these issues (and, of course, online at [Pridesource.com](https://pridesource.com)), we strive to shine a spotlight on the many stories that often go untold, a recognition of individual journeys but also a testament to the collective strength that binds us together.

With love this holiday season,

Chris and Sarah



Jace Arledge, Kasey Helton, Ella Nikitin. Photo: Jon King

One of the Queerest Podcasts in Michigan Is Recorded in One of Its Most Conservative Counties

Livingston County podcast spotlights LGBTQ+ voices

BY JON KING

One might think the odds would be against finding a progressive-leaning podcast in conservative Livingston County. Add to that the fact that two of the three co-hosts are trans, and the odds might go higher than even Las Vegas bookies could calculate.

And yet, *The Stir* podcast defies those odds, recording every other week in a home near Howell. Co-hosted by Kasey Helton, a cis woman, along with Jace Arledge, a trans man, and Ella Nikitin, a trans woman, the show seeks to highlight local issues and people who aren't often given a platform in rural mid-Michigan.

Recent shows have included discussions on racist and homophobic graffiti left in a school parking lot in Brighton, content-neutral policies in Fowlerville Community Schools and an

interview with a founding member of the advocacy organization Stand Against Extremism LivCo (SAGE).

For those who might question if there's an audience for a progressive podcast in a very red Republican county, Helton, a 46-year-old who works in the healthcare field, adamantly says there is and insists it has been neglected for too long.

"I think that is a descriptor that is very much in flux right now," she said. "We have the city of Howell and the city of Brighton. Both went for [Democrats] Elissa Slotkin and Gretchen Whitmer. It's definitely

a slow progression where we are going from the red meat county that it's been ever since I moved here in the '80s, to a more pinky purple. So that to me is a major reason why I wanted to do this podcast." She added that they also seek moderate and independent viewpoints for conversations.

Helton has made her own headlines as a progressive provocateur who was reported to the Livingston County Sheriff's Office by a local nurse who Helton wrote about on social media for spreading misinformation about

Covid during the pandemic (no charges were filed by prosecutors). Still, she knew she didn't want to do the podcast alone.

"I felt like a partner is really important to have and I got very lucky because I got two partners and I wasn't expecting that," she said.

Arledge, a 57-year-old school bus driver from Fowlerville, says he and Helton hit it off when they met at a Pride event in Howell in 2021,

See [Fowlerville Podcast](#), page 24

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

Lawsuit filed against Michigan franchise owner who fired three queer employees in one day

BY SARAH BRICKER HUNT

Michigan's expanded Elliott-Larsen Civil Rights Act (ELCRA) will take center stage in an upcoming civil case brought by two queer employees fired in a single day by an overtly religious Biggby Coffee shop franchise owner in Mount Pleasant. A third LGBTQ+ employee not named in the suit was also fired on the same day.

The three workers — a transgender man, a bisexual woman and a lesbian — had worked at the store for months with no apparent performance issues, but in June, one of the employees put up a Pride Month display that the shop's 32-year-old co-owner, Landon Palmer, deemed "too political." The next

day, he fired them all.

Now, Palmer is being sued in Isabella County Circuit Court under Michigan's freshly revised civil rights law, which specifically addresses discrimination against LGBTQ+ individuals in the workplace. REALS-Palmer, an LLC owned by Rodney and Eileen Palmer, who own the Biggby located at 4445 E. Bluegrass Road in Mount Pleasant, is also named in the suit. The suit alleges that Palmer wrongfully terminated the employees because of who they love and how they identify — the ELCRA bars discrimination related to sexual orientation and gender identity or expression.

Jay Kaplan, staff attorney for the ACLU of Michigan's LGBTQ+ Project, notes that if Palmer fired the employees because he doesn't

approve of their orientation, he could be running afoul of not only Michigan's ELCRA, but Federal Title VII, as well, which prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex in employment. Kaplan pointed to the U.S. Supreme Court decision in the 2020 *Bostock vs. Clayton County* case, which found that LGBTQ+ employees were protected against discrimination by employers with 15 or more employees under Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act.

The plaintiffs in the case against Palmer allege that his personal beliefs are at the heart of why they were let go and that he put his religious beliefs above their civil rights. After the firings, the employees were replaced with heterosexuals.

The lawsuit includes a detailed

account of what the former employees say happened at the coffee shop and a depiction of Palmer's openly expressed religious and anti-LGBTQ+ beliefs. According to the lawsuit, Palmer belongs to a church that espouses the scientifically inaccurate belief that the only genders are male and female. The church also preaches that marriage is a union exclusive only to one man and one woman. Nonheterosexual romantic relationships are sinful, according to the church. Palmer, the plaintiffs allege, frequently posted flyers promoting the church around the shop, hosted church-related events onsite and frequently talked about the church.

On June 11, Palmer removed a Pride Month-themed "trivia chalkboard." The chalkboard space featured holidays and events throughout the year like Black History Month and Women's History Month. The Pride Month theme included questions like "What geographical location has the most rainbows each year?" and "What year was the first Pride parade?"

Two days later, the suit alleges, Palmer was sitting in the customer dining room when one of the plaintiffs came in to buy a cup of coffee. She chatted with a coworker about deciding on a gift for her girlfriend's upcoming birthday. The owner overheard the conversation and, according to the lawsuit, "noticeably reacted to hearing this."

The next day, Palmer fired the three employees, including 23-year-old trans man Edwin Williamson, 25-year-old lesbian Mikaila Brown and a bisexual woman who is not named in the lawsuit. The employees allege that Palmer refused to give a reason for firing them.

Williamson reached out to Biggby's communications coordinator by email. The Detroit Free Press, which reviewed the emails, reports that Williamson wrote: "We feel our terminations were unjust and discriminatory. ... Of the employees terminated, three of us are openly queer. Given that we were not given a legitimate reason behind our terminations, we are concerned about the legality

of our terminations and would like to speak with a human resources representative for Biggby Coffee to further explain and understand our situation."

A communication coordinator wrote back with this response: "We are very sorry to hear about the trouble at this location. Biggby Coffee is committed to embracing diversity, celebrating individuality, and supporting equality for all. We believe that by creating an inclusive environment, we can provide a warm and welcoming experience for all individuals who work in or visit our stores. At Biggby Coffee we strive to foster an atmosphere where everyone feels accepted, valued, and free to be themselves."

The coordinator indicated that the corporate office is not involved in store-level decisions and encouraged Williamson to reach out to the store owner. Williamson

On June 11, Palmer removed a Pride Month-themed "trivia chalkboard." The chalkboard space featured holidays and events throughout the year like Black History Month and Women's History Month.

The Pride Month theme included questions like "What geographical location has the most rainbows each year?"

replied that the store owner was the person who fired him. In response, the coordinator wrote, "We are very sorry to hear about how this has been received and appreciate you taking the time to bring it to our attention! While we are unable to guarantee the follow-up action taken by the store owner as a result of this feedback, we will send it directly to Landon so that he has the opportunity to follow up accordingly. This incident is also being reviewed internally. ... I hope you have a beautiful weekend!"

Hearings for the suit have yet to be scheduled, according to publicly available Isabella County Courthouse records.

Meet the Appointees to the First Statewide LGBTQ+ Commission

Gov. Whitmer announces diverse group of 13 Michigan community members to lead the advisory board

BY SARAH BRICKER HUNT

When Michigan Democrats flipped both chambers of the Michigan House and won the governorship and attorney general roles in 2022, the party ran on a platform that included intentional LGBTQ+ advocacy. Gov. Whitmer and the legislature have stayed true to that promise in several ways, including the creation of the first-ever statewide LGBTQ+ commission. On Nov. 30, the governor announced her first appointments to the commission, which will advise lawmakers on issues impacting the queer Michigan community.

In a news release, the governor's office writes that the commission is an example of Michigan taking "another bold step towards inclusivity," noting that the appointees are "pioneers and leaders in advocacy, activism and education in the LGBTQ+ community" who reflect the "socioeconomic, racial, ethnic, cultural, gender identity, sexual orientation, occupational, political and geographic diversity" of the state.

Gov. Whitmer's first appointments to the Michigan LGBTQ+ Commission include several members who will be familiar to Pride Source readers as well as a few up-and-coming leaders we'll be keeping a close eye on:

Brandon Shamoun, Assistant Dean of Students for Student Involvement, Activities and Organizations at Wayne State University. Shamoun is the chair of Stonewall Sports Detroit and co-chair of Queer Employee Organization.

Dr. Renee McLaughlin, National Medical Director at CIGNA Healthcare. McLaughlin previously served as the founding member of the Chattanooga LGBT Chamber of Commerce and serves on the Board of Directors of the Human Rights Campaign.

Lacey Mandoka, a Saginaw Chippewa Indian Tribal member who works at Elijah Elk Cultural Center as a leadership intern. Mandoka is a student at Central Michigan University.

Audra Wilson, a Clinical Workflow Specialist at Great Lakes Bay Health Center. Wilson serves as a Great Lakes Bay Pride board member and as a facilitator for a local support group for underserved, at-risk minorities.

Erin Knott, Executive Director at Equality Michigan. Knott is frequently at the center of legislative efforts related to LGBTQ+ issues across the state and nationally.

Anthony Williams, Chief Executive Officer at LGBTQ-focused Corktown Health.

Al Gray, an LLMSW at Suunta Integrative Health. Gray is a program coordinator for Trace Holistic Inc. in Marquette and a volunteer co-facilitator with the Upper Peninsula's Stand with Trans teen support group.

Diane Kreger, a psychotherapist with the Arbor Wellness Center.

Angela Gabridge, Executive Director of MiGen - Michigan's LGBTQ+ Elders Network.

Kevin Nguyen, a graduate student at the University of Michigan. Nguyen serves as an intern with an Ann Arbor City Council member.

Dr. Tonya Griffith, a clinical trauma therapist at Limitless Possibilities Counseling Services. Griffith is also a Special Services Program Manager at the Development Center in Detroit.

Bishop Bonnie A. Perry, a Bishop for the Episcopal Diocese of Michigan. Perry is the co-founder and serves as co-chair for End Gun Violence in Michigan.

Danielle (Dani) Woods, the LGBTQ+ Liaison Officer of the Detroit Police Department and the chairperson for the LGBTQ+ community council there.



Corporal Dani Woods. Courtesy photo

"We are thrilled to learn of the diverse individuals who make up Michigan's historic LGBTQ+ Commission, which includes necessary perspectives from young people and mental health expert voices," said Gabby Doyle (she/her), Advocacy Campaign Manager at The Trevor Project, in the press release. "This group will play a critical role in ensuring the health and well-being of LGBTQ+ Michiganders at an equally critical time. Even as we end a record-breaking year for anti-LGBTQ policies across the country — and anticipate another challenging year ahead — we remain hopeful about the impact this commission will have toward creating a safe, supportive state for all who call Michigan home."

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We Are All One
Puzzle can be found on page 25

U.S. Conservatives Point to Russia and Declare ‘We’ll Have What They’re Having’ Regarding LGBTQ+ Repression

BY D’ANNE WITKOWSKI



Well, they did it. They expelled George Santos from Congress. I honestly didn’t think it would happen. Let’s pour one out

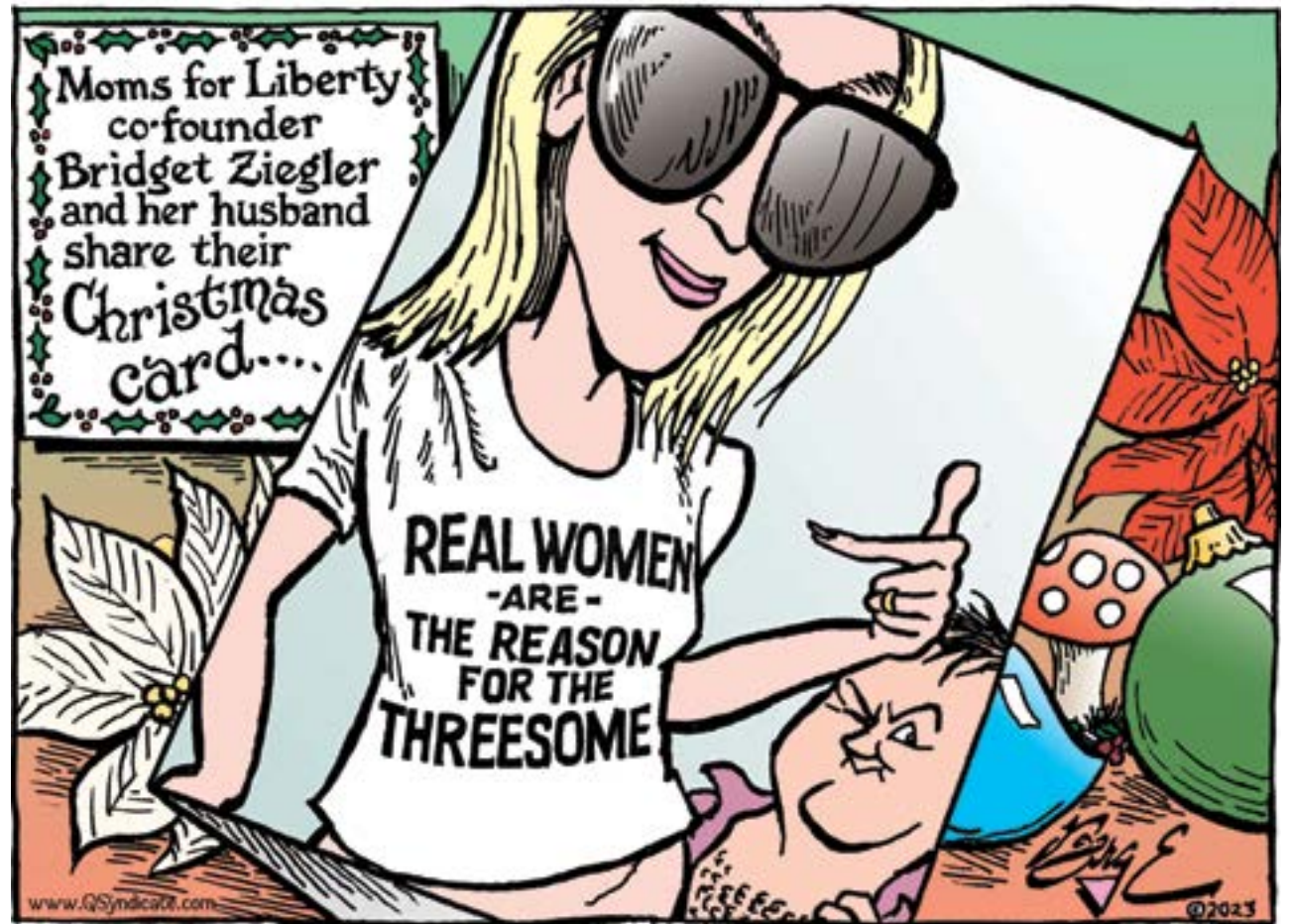
for George “Proud Gay Thief” Santos, as “Saturday Night Live” called him.

I have to admit, I did not follow the Santos saga very closely. There’s just a lot going on in the world, and I only have so much time for Congressional nonsense (and let’s face it, a whole lot of nonsense happens in Congress).

Pretty wild that most of the Republicans who decided that enough was enough with Santos and his felony counts still back disgraced former President Donald Trump. I guess they figure that while they do need Trump to make their fascist dreams come true, they don’t need Santos. So boy, bye.

Speaking of Trump, Russian President and Trump friend Vladimir Putin is in the news for something other than his

declared what it calls ‘the international LGBT public movement’ an extremist organization and banned its activities across the country,” according to the BBC. Less than 48 hours later, according to The Advocate, police “raided at least four LGBTQ+ establishments in Moscow.”



way, because wow things are messed up worldwide.

The ruling is expected to have dire consequences for LGBTQ+ people in Russia.

“I think this will mean that anyone whom the state considers an LGBT activist could receive a long prison sentence for ‘participating in an extremist organization.’ For the organizer of such a group, the prison term will be even longer,” Sergei Troshin, a gay municipal deputy in St. Petersburg, told the BBC. “This is real repression. There is panic in Russia’s LGBT community. People are emigrating urgently. The actual word we’re using is evacuation. We’re having to evacuate from our own country. It’s terrible.”

Others concur.

“There is little if any doubt that [this decision] will lead to the persecution of LGBTI activists, undoing decades of their brave and dedicated work, while threatening to inspire and legitimize whole new levels of violence against LGBTI persons across Russia,” Marie Struthers, director for Eastern Europe and Central Asia at Amnesty International, said in a statement. “We call on the Russian authorities to immediately review this ruling. The international community must stand in solidarity

with the Russian LGBTI community, demanding an end to these oppressive actions and safeguarding the principles of equality, freedom, and justice for all.”

U.S. LGBTQ+ activists have long been fighting for “equality, freedom and justice for all,” but we are also having our setbacks. And what’s happening in Russia is no doubt inspiration for those who want to see us disappear here.

Make no mistake, what’s happening in Russia is exactly what extremists want to have happen in the United States. Florida is a good example of a state that is really going hard to make life as miserable as possible for LGBTQ+ people there and back allies into a corner so that they’re too afraid to do things like challenge book bans or let trans kids play sports, lest they lose their jobs.

Is Trump or Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis as smart and cunning as Putin? No, no they are not. But the infrastructure has already been put in place for a fascist takeover of the U.S. government. As you have doubtless heard before, Jan. 6, 2021 was a dress rehearsal. Since then, support for Trump has hardly wavered. And should he become the president again, you can bet that it’ll make his first term look totally chill in comparison to what he will do next.

disgusting war against Ukraine. Last year, you may remember, Putin “described the West and an alleged global LGBTQ+ movement as existential threats to Russian cultural values and traditions,” according to The Advocate.

Well, Russia’s Supreme Court “has

On Bluesky (which I have switched to after dumping Twitter/X) someone posted about the Russian Supreme Court ruling and the raids declaring, “It’s a shame to see Russia turning into Florida.” This made me laugh, but in a very much “if you don’t laugh, you’ll cry” kind of

Pretty wild that most of the Republicans who decided that enough was enough with Santos and his felony counts still back disgraced former President Donald Trump.

THE SCROLL

QUICK HITS & CAN'T MISSES

Michigan Scores Big in HRC Equality Index

.....

Michigan has steadily emerged as one of the safest, most affirming places to live for LGBTQ+ community members, and the latest Human Rights Campaign (HRC) Municipal Equality Index (MEI), released Nov. 14, underscores some of the reasons why. Of the 11 Michigan cities included in the index, four — Ann Arbor, Detroit, Ferndale and Grand Rapids — earned perfect scores in five categories: non-discrimination laws, municipality as employer, services and programs, law enforcement, and leadership on LGBTQ+ equality.

In a news release, Detroit Mayor Mike Duggan said the city “protects and supports its LGBTQ+ community” every day. The latest ranking is the eighth straight year Detroit has achieved the top score, but in the past, the city received bonus points for efforts made beyond the base criteria. This year marks the first time Detroit has achieved the top rank from the base point system alone.

Close behind the four perfect-scoring cities were Sterling Heights (99), East Lansing (98), Lansing (89), Kalamazoo and Traverse City (86 each). Pleasant Ridge scored a 64 and Warren scored a 59. Nationally, the average state score was 71 — Michigan emerged well ahead of the pack with an 89 average.



Bye, Bitch: George Santos Gets the Boot

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George Santos, the married, gay Congressman from New York who has spoken out against gay marriage, was expelled from Congress on Dec. 1. The historic ousting, only the second since the Civil War, was a rare example of bipartisanship from the deeply divided legislative body, with 311 for and 114 against kicking the con artist to the curb.

Guess that’s what happens when one’s political approach is to lie, cheat and steal one’s way into office. The disgraced ex-official has been charged with conspiracy, wire fraud, falsifying records, obstruction, identity theft, access device fraud, money laundering, theft of public funds and generally being a bad human and an embarrassing representation of the queer community. If you’re imagining Santos texting “Look what you made me do!” to former President and current criminal defendant Trump on his way out the door, you’re certainly not the only one.



Sandra Day O'Connor. Photo: Library of Congress

Sandra Day O'Connor Dies

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Sandra Day O'Connor, who served as America’s first female Supreme Court Justice, died on Nov. 30. In 2013, O'Connor officiated the first same-sex marriage conducted at the Supreme Court, a heartwarming moment that was a continuation of an increasingly progressive path she’d taken during

her final years on the court. Over her tenure, the legal icon evolved from a Reagan-appointed conservative to a gay rights advocate.

President Ronald Reagan appointed O'Connor in 1981 when Justice Potter Stewart retired, fulfilling a campaign promise to appoint a woman to the bench. O'Connor, he remarked, was a “person for all seasons.” She went on to serve 24 years in the role, retiring in 2006 to care for her ailing husband. The former justice died from advanced dementia.

New Doc About Queer Midwesterners

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A new documentary, “We Live Here: The Midwest,” explores life in Midwestern places where the culture is not as immediately queer-affirming as the blue coastal cities often cited as the best in America for queer folks. The film shatters the perception that some places are inherently better than others for queer people — in reality, both acceptance and hostility exist everywhere. The film, out now on Hulu, follows five queer families who live in Iowa, Nebraska, Kansas, Ohio and Minnesota.



Photo: Hulu

Happy Hanukkah!

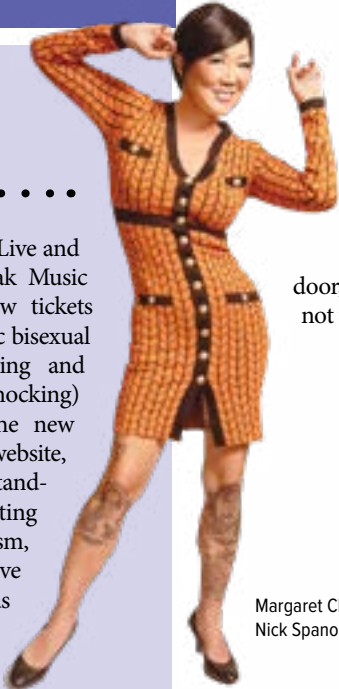
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Celebrate Hanukkah, which will take place Dec. 7-15, with a local queer-affirming congregation or community resource. There are several options throughout Southeast Michigan, including the Ann Arbor Reconstructionist Congregation, the Detroit and Ann Arbor Jewish Community Centers (JCC) and Beth Israel Congregation in Ann Arbor, which hosts monthly LGBTQ+ Shabbat dinners.

Snag Margaret Cho Tix

.....

Margaret Cho will bring her “Live and Livid!” tour to the Royal Oak Music Theatre Dec. 15. Only a few tickets remain, so act fast! The acerbic bisexual comedian has been delighting and shocking (and delightfully shocking) audiences since the ’90s. The new tour, Cho writes on her website, celebrates her 40 years as a stand-up comedian. “I will be radiating rage about homophobia, sexism, racism and the fight to stay alive in a culture that is killing us daily,” she writes.



Margaret Cho. Photo: Nick Spanos



Rev. Darcy Crain. Courtesy photo

An Unexpected Pastor

How the Rev. Dr. Darcy Crain ushered in an era of inclusivity at an Ann Arbor church

BY ELLEN SHANNA KNOPPOW

Sometimes a spiritual journey begins in an unlikely place. For the Rev. Dr. Darcy Crain, head minister of the First Congregational Church of Ann Arbor, that place was in the basement of the original Affirmations LGBTQ+ community center in Ferndale.

“I was going to a Presbyterian church at the time, and it was a big part of my life,” Crain said of her experience 25 years ago. However, her youth minister didn’t welcome

the idea that one could be both Christian and LGBTQ+. “He would just throw a Bible verse at me.”

As a teen, Crain proved to be an early activist. After she created an uproar with her efforts to launch the first Gay-Straight Alliance at her high school in Plymouth-Canton, Crain found a queer haven at Affirmations some 30 miles away.

Crain called Affirmations “a huge lifesaver.” There, she learned of Metropolitan Community Church, where a small but lively group of LGBTQ+ folks including

Pentecostals, Catholics, Baptists and “boring Presbyterians like me” all worshiped together. And even if they lacked the proper terms at the time, a trans group member who showed up in her Sunday best one day was embraced and treated as an equal.

“It was a really sweet experience of God’s grace,” Crain said, “regardless of what identity you came from.”

“You can be all these different denominations and get along, and I [didn’t] have to give up part of myself,” she added. “Especially in the ’90s, it was like, you can either

leave your Christianity at the door and join the gay community, or you can leave your gay at the door and join the Christian community.”

From the beginning, Crain wanted nothing to do with being a pastor. As a gay Christian, she struggled with her identity. Though she enjoyed the time she “preached a little message” to her college church group, she couldn’t envision being a gay church leader. Who would hire her? Crain’s chaplain helpfully informed her that his denomination, the United Church of Christ (UCC), had

been ordaining LGBTQ+ people since the 1970s.

The First Congregational Church, affiliated with the UCC church, is a member-driven body based on the Congregationalist belief in the freedom and right of each person to have their own individual and personal relationship with God. A core value is inclusivity.

“I prayed to God for a sign,” Crain said, who was then 21. “I

See **Darcy Crain**, page 18

Christmas AT



CHRIST CHURCH
CRANBROOK

Christmas Eve Services

Music begins a half hour before each service.

Jazz Service

Dec. 24 | 1 PM

Family Service

Dec. 24 | 4 PM

Chorale Service

Dec. 24 | 7 PM

Orchestral Service

Dec. 24 | 10 PM

Christmas Day Service

December. 25 | 10 AM

CHRISTMAS
Carols and
Chocolate

Featuring.
PRISM
MEN'S CHORUS

CHRISTMAS CAROLS & CHOCOLATE

Dec. 23 | 5 PM

Grab your friends and family to carol together before Christmas Eve with PRISM Gay Men and Allies Chorus of Metro Detroit! This interactive event includes a reading of The Gift of the Magi. Make your own spirited drink at our hot chocolate bar and grab sweets to enjoy!

ALL are welcome, bring your family & friends!



How Mariah Carey in Detroit Was the Energy We Need Heading into 2024

The Queen of Christmas brought much more than holiday cheer to the Motown city



Mariah Carey performs during her "Merry Christmas One and All!" tour in Detroit on Friday, Dec. 1. Photo: Andrew Potter

BY CHRIS AZZOPARDI

On the first day of December, as it should be every year, Mariah Carey gave one of the most Mariah Carey shows I've ever seen in front of a sold-out crowd at Little Caesars Arena, which was part of her "Merry Christmas One and All!" tour. Of course the gay icon, a GLAAD Ally Award winner, performed a mix of Christmas songs — culminating in "All I Want for Christmas Is You," the encore closer — and some of her No. 1 hits. She even blessed us with more obscure snippets from her catalog. Updated arrangements on some of her most signature songs gave her room to play vocally, her voice robust and strong. But during the concert, what she really also performed to particularly delicious effect was the art of being Mariah.

There was the side table holding what I imagined to be hot tea, scooted out just minutes before she appeared onstage. There was the very present diva affectation, in full effect on words like "mesmerizing," used while casually referring to the experience of taking her kids for a ride in — what else? — an actual two-horse open sleigh. And unfortunately for Mariah (and the sound guy), but amusingly for the audience, there was an in-ear situation that played out in real-time. That reminiscent-of-NYE snafu came quickly, right after the first full song, a gorgeous, more vocally improvised version of "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing," which she originally sang on her 1994 "Merry Christmas" album.

I almost wish a very real moment like the sound issue was part of every show (she called it "very behind the music"), given the way it seemed to immediately disarm Mariah, who rolled with it, making it hard to tell how bothered she actually was. "This feels like feedback, and we don't want to get feedback like *that*. We like good feedback." Then, with (I think) feigned exasperation and a chuckle, she added, "Ooh, nobody understands what I'm going through!" Maybe after you've had to call out the sound guy in front of 13,000 people just as the show starts, it's easier to go with the flow?

This level of improvisational freedom that Mariah committed to for the 90-plus minute show was even more inspirational than the inspirational numbers, like "Hero" and "Fly Like a Bird," that she belted — seemingly looser than usual (maybe it was the city's

Motown energy?) and hilariously off the cuff, she was giving the greatest hits beyond her actual music hits. She loves a tea-sippin' moment; she loathes an in-ear fail. We got both. Less surprisingly, her "glam squad" came out a couple of times, too, to give her an onstage hair and makeup refresh.

But I've already gotten ahead of myself. All of this, you should know, is coming from someone whose fandom runs so deep there's almost no way to encapsulate it in this brief note about my subjectivity but to say there is nothing except a live Mariah performance that can take me out of myself while also putting me so in touch with myself at the same time. (I also wrote about my relationship to her music for The New York Times, just to give you an idea of how big this feeling is.) My friend Jim attends the show with me whenever she comes to town as much to marvel at me magically aging backwards as he does to see the performance.

As a gay kid, I drank from Mariah's nourishing fountain of songs to help get me through tough teen years. In a way that sometimes only a connection to an artist through their music can, and desperate for a kind of representation that was lacking when I grew up in 1990s, I always felt like she was rooting me on when, as a child who felt inferior, I didn't feel like I had a lot of people who understood me. So, when I show up to a Mariah concert, I'm cheering her on as much as I think I'm cheering on parts of younger me that are firmly attached to memories I created through her music, which became the soundtrack to my formative gay years. It's deep!

But it's why I lost my mind when, on Friday, she looked toward my section while singing "Make It Happen," a song I used to watch her perform during a Madison Square Garden concert in 1995. The song encapsulates her rags-to-riches story, that feeling of feeling lesser but rising above your circumstances, and it fueled me just as I was entering my teen years. But it's her aside during it that I obsessively watched at that age to just feel, well, seen: "I see you up there!" she tells a portion of the crowd at that show.

When she said those exact words while looking somewhat in my direction at the Detroit show, it was like she was speaking to

See **Mariah**, page 23



**This is Christ's church.
There is a place for you here.**

Share the Joy of Christmas!

Welcome to worship at these Lutheran churches - churches that have made public affirmation of welcome to YOU - members, family and friends of the LGBTQIA+ community.

ANN ARBOR

**Lutheran Campus Ministry
Lord of Light Lutheran Church**
801 S. Forest Ave.
www.lordoflight.org

King of Kings Lutheran Church
2685 Packard Rd.
www.kingofkingslutheran.org

Trinity Lutheran Church
1400 Stadium Blvd.
www.trinityA2.org

Zion Lutheran Church
1501 W. Liberty St
<https://zlc-aa.org>

BATTLE CREEK

Trinity Lutheran Church
2055 Columbia Ave. E.
www.tlcbattlecreek.org

BURTON

Our Risen Lord Lutheran Church
4040 Lapeer Rd.
www.ourrisenlordelca.com

DUNDEE

St. John Lutheran Church
460 Riley St.
www.stjohnsondundee.wordpress.com

EAST LANSING

University Lutheran Church
1020 S. Harrison Rd.
www.ulcel.org

St. Paul Lutheran Church
3383 E. Lake Lansing Rd.
www.stpaul-el.org

FARMINGTON HILLS

Hope Lutheran Church
39200 West Twelve Mile Rd.
www.hope-lutheran-church.com

FERNDALE

Zion Lutheran Church
143 Albany St.
www.zionlutheranmi.org

FREELAND

Zion Lutheran Church
545 7th St.
www.zionfreeland.org

GRAND RAPIDS

Bethlehem Lutheran Church
250 Commerce Ave. SW
www.bethlehemchurchgr.org

KALAMAZOO

Lutheran Church of the Savior
3616 East G Avenue
www.lcoskzoo.com

KENTWOOD

Ascension Lutheran Church
4252 Breton Rd. SE
www.twochurches.org

MONROE

Christ Lutheran Church
225 E. Elm Ave.
www.christmonroe.weebly.com

MOUNT PLEASANT

Immanuel Lutheran Church
320 South Bradley St.
www.immanuelmp.com

OKEMOS

Faith Lutheran Church
4515 Dobie Rd.
www.faithlutheranokemos.org

PORT HURON

St. Martin Lutheran Church
805 Chestnut St.
www.stmartinlutheran.net

ROCHESTER HILLS

**Abiding Presence
Lutheran Church**
1550 Walton Rd.
www.AbidingPresence.org

SAGINAW

Our Saviour Lutheran Church
2525 Hemmeter Rd.
www.oursavioursaginaw.org

SAINT JOSEPH

Saron Lutheran Church
510 Main St
www.saronlutheran.org

SALINE

Holy Faith Church
6299 Saline-Ann Arbor Rd.
www.holy-faith-church.org

TRENTON

St. Philip Lutheran Church
1790 Fort St.
www.stphilipelca.com

TOLEDO, OHIO

St. Lucas Lutheran Church
745 Walbridge Ave.
www.stlucastoledo.org

WATERFORD

Christ Lutheran Church
5987 Williams Lake Rd.
www.christwaterford.org



Richard Payton as Barbra Streisand. Photo: Brandy Joe Plambeck

Why the Ringwald Theatre’s Vince Kelley Wrote a Christmas Show About Barbra Streisand

‘Jingle Babs’ features a surprise at every performance

BY SARAH BRICKER HUNT

When the curtain rises on the Ringwald Theatre’s latest production, “Jingle Babs,” audiences will be transported to 1967 New York City. Amongst the glitz and glitter on Broadway is a highly stressed Barbra Streisand contemplating how she’ll pull off her first Christmas special as a massive blizzard rolls into town.

The play is the brainchild of Ringwald veteran performer Vince Kelley, who tells BTL he decided to set the show in the late ’60s because he loves the decade and because it’s a time where “Barbra and Christmas have a sublime intersection with the release of her first — and best? — Christmas album.” The critically acclaimed quintuple-platinum album, appropriately titled “A Christmas Album,” spent five weeks at No. 1 on the Billboard charts and was the best-selling holiday album of the year.

“Jingle Babs” stars Richard Payton as Barbra, an easy casting decision for Kelley and director Brandy Joe Plambeck. Not only is Payton a talented and beloved mainstay actor at the Ringwald, but, Kelley says, Payton has a “deep-rooted love and respect” for the Broadway

legend and multi-hyphenate superstar.

Kelley says he wrote the play over the summer, starting with the cast list. “It’s so much easier and more fun for me to write for specific people,” he explains. “Melissa Beckwith and Joel Mitchell are local legends I’ve had the honor of working with in the past, so writing for them was a breeze, and the rest just fell into place.”

As the play unfolds, Barbra has to act fast to cover the performances for guest stars who are unable to reach New York because of the snow. This approach allowed Kelley to seamlessly incorporate a surprise element at every single show — rotating guest actors who portray famous celebrities of the time. Even the cast is unaware of who might appear on stage at any given performance.

Kelley says he’s excited to bring a new holiday show to the Ringwald. The last Christmas performance produced by the theater company was 2021’s “Have Yourself a Misery Little Christmas,” the final show performed at Ringwald’s former Woodward Avenue location. “It’s so fun to now have the opportunity to be back for Christmas again at our new home at Affirmations.”

“Jingle Babs” runs through Dec. 18 on Fridays, Saturdays and Mondays at the Ringwald’s space inside Affirmations, Ferndale’s LGBTQ+ community center (290 W. Nine Mile Road). Visit theringwald.com for tickets.

Darcy Crain

Continued from page 14

had no idea what I wanted to do with my life. I got denied from my top Ph.D. program, and I got a full-ride scholarship to my top seminary choice.” At her Methodist seminary, “practicing homosexuals” couldn’t be ordained. But being UCC, she could present her full gay self, not to mention the fact that they were not “practicing” being queer; they were professionals, as the joke goes.

After a brief stint in chaplaincy, Crain longed for the church. She applied to First Congregational Church of Ann Arbor for an associate minister position, certain they wouldn’t accept her but unwilling to conceal her gay identity. Crain’s honesty paid off. Not only were she and her wife at the time embraced by the church community, when they had their babies, the church threw a giant baby shower. And years later, when Crain and her wife divorced, the church community was “incredibly accepting and grace-filled.” Someone even left a care package at her door with wine, pasta and Kleenex.

At the same time, up to about a dozen members left that church when Crain arrived. However, “I had a really strong senior minister who said, ‘If they leave, then this isn’t the church for them, because this is who we are,’” Crain recalled.

Michael Makin, a University of Michigan professor and lifelong Congregationalist, was a deacon at the First Congregational Church of Ann Arbor when there was an opening for senior minister two years ago.

“Almost everyone, I think, voted for Darcy,” Makin said. “She’s a very popular pastor.” Crain would go on to baptize Makin’s youngest, and on Makin’s 25th wedding anniversary, bless the union of Makin and his wife. When their middle son underwent six hours of neurosurgery, Crain knelt by his bedside and offered words of comfort and a prayer. Though he didn’t witness the visit, learning of her compassionate gesture, “Finally

“

“In the ’90s, it was like, you can either leave your Christianity at the door and join the gay community, or you can leave your gay at the door and join the Christian community.”

I was able to cry and relax,” Makin said.

Until 2022, when Crain was called as senior minister, “the church had only had straight white males as the senior minister there,” Crain said. “So I jokingly told them they were checking all the boxes because I’m also not white. I’m half Korean.”

That’s not all that makes Crain a diverse pastor and a diverse human, generally speaking. As Makin told BTL, she can just as expertly deliver a sermon on artificial

intelligence as she can display fluency in what Christians know as the Old Testament.

Crain put her finger on what’s so appealing about Congregationalism and about her church.

“People don’t want to be told what to believe,” Crain said. “They also want autonomy. We live in a culture that you can choose from 50 different kinds of potato chips. They don’t want to be given a pastor and told, ‘Deal with it.’ They want to be able to choose a pastor that fits the culture and the personality of their church and their goals.”

There’s also less politics within the church. And they don’t answer to anyone but the divine.



Dr. Rev. Darcy Crain. Courtesy photo

Yet for all the talk of inclusivity, Crain admits it’s been a gradual process at her church. Simply hiring a member of the LGBTQ+ community who could pass was not the grand gesture of queer-friendliness that some thought. Crain encouraged them to do more, beyond slapping a rainbow on the church website. Among other things, there is now a literal rainbow on their property: Church youth painted reclaimed doors in rainbow colors with the words, “God’s doors are open to all,” which can be seen from State Street.


Crain said now it’s not just that LGBTQ+ people are welcome — they are affirmed. And some have told Crain they like how female clergy set an example for their daughters. It’s the church itself, too, that keeps them coming back.

“There’s a lot of big box churches out there,” Crain said. “You’ve got nice seating and coffee shops, and we have old pews from the 1800s and a beautiful old organ. And so we’ve got that kind of traditional feel, but with a very inclusive come-as-you-are feeling. And we’re not big. I think we’re kind of a right-sized church.” About 140 come to worship in person each week.


Each Christmas, an annual tradition returns to the First Congregational Church of Ann Arbor: a parade of live animals where, sometimes, things go a bit awry.

“We have a camel outside named Ophelia, and she comes with a donkey and sheep,” Crain said. “And then the donkey and sheep actually come into the sanctuary. So some of my favorite memories are the ones where the donkey does not want to walk down the aisle or the angels go rogue and run around. We go from that to a candlelight Communion at 8 p.m. And I think that the beauty of both the chaos and the calm are my favorites.”





The AIDS Quilt Panel Returns to All Saints





Sunday December 17th

Service with
Bishop Bonnie Perry

5:00 PM

Reception to follow

All Saints' Episcopal Church
171 West Pike Street
Pontiac, Michigan 48341
248-334-4571





Changing the Narrative Around Queer Childbirth

Trans doula Liam Wolf on the realities of being a white, cisgender-passing male in a traditionally non-male field

BY ELLEN SHANNA KNOPPOW

Liam Wolf wants to normalize the idea that men can, and do, give birth. And at a time when a certain Arkansas governor is banning the terms “pregnant people” and “chestfeeding” from her state’s official documents, it’s more important than ever that folks like Wolf are pushing an affirming rather than regressive narrative when it comes to bearing children.

Known as The Trans Doula, Wolf is at the forefront of a queer-centered doula movement.

“My heart, being a trans man, is with the LGBT community because often people face discrimination,

especially in a hospital setting,” said Wolf, who is willing and able to work with any individual, couple or poly family; nonbinary folks; seahorse dads/parents; marginalized communities; and those with illness or disability. “I’m very passionate about advocating for trans and gender nonconforming people,” he said, whether in the hospital, birth care center or one’s own home.

And even at home, where people would likely hire a midwife, Wolf can assure that not only is the birth plan carried out smoothly, but that pronouns are respected and the pregnant person has all of their needs met at a time when things can happen quickly.

A birth doula is a trained professional who provides physical, emotional and informational support to a pregnant person before, during and shortly after childbirth. Unlike midwives, doulas do not provide medical care.

Wolf said there are a “bazillion” reasons he sought training as a doula. As an EMT in a hospital, Wolf had a particular interest in working in labor and delivery.

“I’m also a survivor of a rare disease,” Wolf said. “So when that happened, I wasn’t able to really work the same way that I used to. I got involved more in social services type things and I worked for a trans health organization. I saw that a

lot of our younger clients needed support around getting pregnant, giving birth, and that they were nervous about navigating the hospital system.”

Wolf was able to secure a scholarship, and recently completed training through an MDHHS program to provide doula care for Medicaid recipients in order to increase healthy birth outcomes.

Wolf’s passion for advocating for the queer community has a long history. As a trans teen, Wolf was not accepted by his family and subsequently kicked out. He faced abuse and the return of a childhood illness.

“And so that journey, experiencing

health disparities because of being underinsured also led me to have an interest and passion in helping folks like me who didn’t have the access to the care they needed,” Wolf said. His heart’s work is making sure that people have the care they need regardless of income, a driving force that stems from experiencing adversity including growing up extremely impoverished in a family “with a lot of issues.”

Addressing health disparities and removing barriers to care are all part of Wolf’s mission as a doula. To do that, he considers things like whether the pregnant person has transportation to their appointments and whether they are

safely housed. Wolf’s services are available in-person in Detroit (expanding soon to other areas) or virtually and include accompanying an individual to doctors appointments to translate medical terminology and providing educational materials. Wolf also supports partners and loved ones, can provide assistance applying for health insurance and food and income assistance offered through federal and state programs, and will give hands-on support during labor and provides baby feeding support. While doulas cannot replace midwives or doctors, Wolf is thinking of applying to medical school in the future.

Although birth doulas of the past may not have had to concern themselves with their clients’ car insurance or applying for government programs, the purpose of doulas remains largely the same.

Doulas have a long and rich history, beginning before industrialization and modern medicine and were common in indigenous and Black communities. “This was a generational practice that was passed down to women and also generally just two spirit people as far as assisting during the birth with physical comfort measures,” Wolf said. Later, when nurse midwifery schools opened, traditional doulas were driven away from practicing due to racism.

With rates of infant mortality and morbidity of birthing persons on the rise, doulas saw a resurgence starting around 50 years ago as pregnant people sought alternatives to what had become traditional hospital births.

“We see that going as far back as when Black and indigenous midwives were researched, they had better birth outcomes than even when births were attended by a male physician,” Wolf said. “Especially when our hospitals now might not have time and ability to give individualized care to each patient that is in labor, doulas are there to provide physical comfort measures as well as emotional support and totally focus on the holistic well-being of the birthing person.”

Angelina DeAngelo, who did not work with Wolf, gave birth to her now-10-year-old twins at home with two doulas. And while she said there were many reasons she felt uncomfortable with a traditional OB/GYN, it didn’t have to do with being gay.

“It was more of their traditional way of medicine and birthing your baby on your back,” she said. “And just listening to my doctor and how it was going to go and [it] just was frightening to me. They want you to be in a nightgown and it’s limited movement. You can’t drink, you can’t eat. It was that whole experience.”

Doctors and most nurses aren’t there for comfort — their role is to get the baby out, DeAngelo said. Her need for a doula was also necessitated by a lack of family support.

DeAngelo shares her story because she says many folks are uninformed. She found the experience with a doula both empowering and spiritual and hopes this knowledge will encourage others if it’s right for them.

“Both of my doulas were queer and that definitely helps as well,” DeAngelo said. “It’s a different mindset. It just seems more accepting whether you are [queer] or not just because they’re in a different type of group.”

Like DeAngelo, Wolf understands the basic needs for acceptance and comfort in the birthing process.

Yet as a “white, cis-passing male,” Wolf is in a unique position. He wants to ensure



Liam Wolf (left) during his doula training. Courtesy photo

his privilege is only used to benefit the client; however, he recognizes that for some, especially trauma survivors, a woman-aligned person may be the better option — and Wolf is fine with that. But it doesn’t sound like the newly minted “Trans Doula” will lack for business.

“I have a couple of people that I know who are trans men that are hoping to give birth in the next year and I look forward to being at their birth when they’re able to get pregnant,” Wolf said.

“Wanting children is a human thing,” he continued. “I’m not speaking for all trans men, just for me. The beauty of having the anatomy that I have is that my partner and I want a family and we’re able to do that without a whole lot of intervention. My body can just do that. I think it’s cool.”

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The Michigan Advocate Delivering Holiday Cheer to Trans Community Members

A good heart (and garage) is at the core of Grayson Papp's DIY nonprofit

BY JASON A. MICHAEL

Grayson Papp has a heart for giving. That's why he created the nonprofit Grayson's Movement back in 2016, with the goal of sending care packages to trans people every December. Last year he sent out 150 packages. This year the goal is 200.

"I try to always exceed my goal from the previous year," Papp said. "People reach out every year, not just from the United States but worldwide."

Papp's packages include a variety of items based on what an individual requests. Hygiene products, clothes and dry food as well as gender-affirming items such as binders, packing tape and gender-affirming clothing are all common items. Papp accepts donations of items all year long and stores them in his garage, which serves as his workshop and headquarters. He also accepts cash donations and uses them to buy materials to send out each year. All donations are utilized and nothing goes to waste.

Papp, a 34-year-old trans man born and raised in Redford, said he was inspired to start the service after so many people helped him financially with his top surgery. "I couldn't personally fund somebody's top surgery. So this was a way to give back. Even if it's just a little way. People are super grateful whether they receive a can of food or a binder. It's something they couldn't afford and, sometimes, it could literally be a life-saving item for them."

Though he accepts donations year-round, Papp only sends them out in December. "I do it for the holidays because a lot of people don't experience that from their family or loved ones... receiving gifts or having the funds to purchase gifts."

It's a morale booster, said Papp, for those who receive the packages. It takes him about a week to put them all together, a remarkable feat in itself. "I start putting them together around Dec. 10. That gives me time to send



Grayson Papp. Courtesy photo

everything out by Christmas or whatever holiday they celebrate."

Papp says that those who receive packages often express gratitude to him personally and also by sharing the gifts they've received on their social media.

"I was born with the gift of wanting to help," he said. "I really have no other way to describe it. I've always been

See **Grayson Papp**, page 26

◀ **Mariah**
 Continued from page 16

my 16-year-old self, who was really the one attending this concert.

I've seen Mariah in concert several times since 1999, but this show just felt even more spectacularly unrestrained. I was worried about how she would sound, nothing that she doesn't already consider herself ("Some days for me I have to be a little bit more experimental and play around on stage because maybe it's not as strong for that minute," she told me during our 2016 interview). I wondered why she seemed more reserved than usual in some new interview clips while doing her usual Christmas press tour.

This performance, though, did what the best Mariah shows do — it excelled in letting fate decide how exactly the show would go, despite "Fame" icon Debbie Allen's rehearsed choreography and Mariah's commitment to, yes, her craft, but also to coming off as splendidly unrehearsed. Mariah sounded divine, particularly on "We Belong Together," which she performed in full, and "Miss You

Most (at Christmas Time)," which, if you're a Mariah fan, you know why it's special. She rarely sings it, even though she should. Watching her perform an extended section of the song (and nailing it) was all I wanted for Christmas, as it turns out.

I m p r o m p t u "tangents," as she calls them, really set this show apart — her divadom was on full display, which is now turned up and as much a part of a Mariah show as the music, oftentimes both performance aspects working terrifically in tandem. This was the case when she ad-libbed after her musical director Daniel Moore began playing "The Roof," from her 1997 album "Butterfly," on the piano. "I don't think we're doing that one tonight," she said, laughing, the "I don't think" part so delightfully diva-ish, you couldn't help but feel



Photo: Andrew Potter

Aretha's presence in her delivery.

Her tone was much like when she talked about the weather: She had heard it was going to snow in Detroit, but "it rained instead, and that's OK." Maybe she really thought it was OK, but she sure didn't sound like she thought it was.

As Moore continued to play "The Roof," she acknowledged that he's from Battle Creek, Michigan, which then turned into its own little ditty as Mariah vocalized "Battle Creek, Michigan" to the tune of the song.

Similar banter occurred elsewhere in the show, like before she did her song "It's a Wrap" and encouraged audience members to do the viral TikTok dance it spurred, but also said, "If you don't wanna do it, then obviously don't do it." When one fan got her attention with whatever they were holding up, she remarked, "I'm not sure what you're showing me, but it looks like something fun."

Friday night, amid the divadom, I caught a sweet moment: Mariah, the mother, was leaving the stage

as her son Roc played her off, except she didn't leave the stage completely. Smiling, she stood off to the side, watching him perform until he was finished, then walking backstage. She also held her daughter Roe's hand during their emotionally resonant collaboration on "Jesus Born on This Day," a Mariah original that, like "All I Want for Christmas Is You," sounds like a classic that has always existed. The timelessness of those songs is a testament to her talent, which author Andrew Chan wrote about at length in his new book "Why Mariah Carey Matters."

"It has always been easier for the casual listener to assume Mariah is an interpreter of material rather than the auteur behind it," he writes.

At her Detroit show, she wasn't necessarily trying to make any points (except maybe to that sound guy) about her voice or her songwriting, but just by being Mariah Carey with a live mic, she demonstrated something all her own, a performance in and of itself that I know I'll be taking with me into 2024 — the aspirational ability to be at least seemingly unbothered. May this next year be one of good feedback *only* for all of us.

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◀ Fowlerville Podcast

Continued from page 7

where she was volunteering at the Free Mom Hugs booth. Helton says she instantly knew Arledge had to be a part of the podcast.

"I have been following Jace on TikTok because Jace's a big talker," she said, laughing. "But Jace has a gift for looking at things from a spiritual perspective, but also as part of his experience as a trans man."

Helton said a mutual friend then suggested they also bring on Nikitin, a 22-year-old IT professional from Hartland. With the lineup set, Helton said she was excited at the opportunity to help present the trans experience to people from firsthand voices.

"That was really important because there's been a lot of vicious and personal attacks of LGBTQ people out in this community," she said. "And there's a lot of reasons for that that have nothing to do with who Ella and Jace or anyone in this community actually is."

Arledge says the representation he and Nikitin provide for the trans community is important in an area that doesn't have a lot of that experience.

"For the middle-of-the-road person, if they watch The Stir, they're going to say, 'Wow, you know, this isn't what I expected with trans people. I expected this weird stuff. I'm not going to say that all trans people are like us, because we're all different. But at least it gives us that platform. I've said this for years: If I don't like you, it's not because of your color, your race or your creed. It's because you're an asshole,'" he said, laughing.

Arledge added that the only measure that anyone should ever be judged by is their behavior, yet his experience has been that many people refuse to do that.

"I've been called a pedophile in Fowlerville, and I've been fighting all that because I'm trans," he said. "It has nothing to do with anything else. They have nothing else on me, but 'You're a pedophile.'"

In fact, Arledge is a married father of five who said that even though he only came out and transitioned four years ago, he's known since he was 4 years old that he was different.

"I have an older brother and, you know, kids back when they're younger, they all look the same except for the down parts," he said. "I figured by the time I hit a certain age, I'll have one of those too, but it never happened. So, I played the role that I was

supposed to play."

He refers to the time before he came out as trans as his pre-self, and isn't at all bothered by references to that part of his life.

"This shows you how different trans people are," he said. "I don't consider it my deadname because that person is still alive. It's just transitioned. It's like a butterfly. I mean, I was well-known. I've sung all over the state, but I did that a lot as a mechanism to hide. It was sort of hiding in plain sight, I guess."

Nikitin, who came out just last year, has a somewhat different story to tell.

"I have autism. I used to be like, 'I don't want to tell people about that.' Now, I'm like, 'Yeah, I have autism.' I'm going to tell you about it. And obviously I'm trans as well. I always knew I had autism. I was diagnosed when I was 3. So I knew I was different, but that was just because I have autism. Well, it turns out that there was a little bit more to

the story than that. It wasn't the end all be all. Turns out that I'm trans. So that's fun," she said, smiling.

Regardless, Arledge says The Stir is not a podcast that focuses on trans issues.

"They think that all we're going to be talking about is trans issues, and that's not it," he said. "That's not what this podcast is."

To emphasize that point, Nikitin

noted that she recently filed paperwork to run for the Livingston County Board of Commissioners.

"My campaign is not about trans issues," she said. "That's not why I'm running for county commissioner. It's about public transportation. Have you ever tried walking down M-59? It is not pleasant. There are cars speeding past you. The sidewalk ends randomly, and it's not safe."

Despite that, Nikitin knows many will just assume that because she is trans, she's running solely to elevate trans issues.

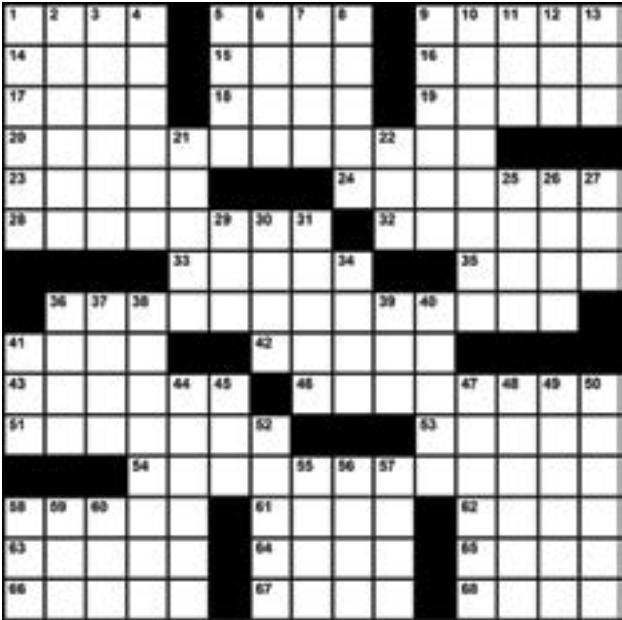
"Probably a lot of people are going to think that, and honestly it's at the bottom of my list, because that's not a county issue," she said. "It might be a school board kind of issue. Sure. Maybe a state or a federal issue? Sure. But I don't see it being a county issue at all."

But for Helton, there is a presumption that trans folks only care about, or are qualified to discuss, trans issues. She hopes The Stir will change that.

"I don't look at Ella or Jace as trans," she said. "To me, Jace is a man, Ella is a woman. And I'm a straight cis woman. But I don't see why this is such difficult math for some people. It's really not that hard to, once you get to know people, just respect them."

“They think that all we’re going to be talking about is trans issues, and that’s not it. That’s not what this podcast is.”

— Jace Arledge



Across

We Are All One

- 1 Biters of Caesar's girlfriend
- 5 NG: Get wind of
- 9 "Come Back, Little ____"
- 14 French family member
- 15 Aida solo
- 16 Eminem's "____ Mile"

- 17 Achilles' weak spot
- 18 NG: Omar's "Mod Squad" character
- 19 Pester, as Albert to Armand
- 20 More of a Bayard Rustin quote that begins in the title
- 23 Her funeral was in a recent "The Crown" episode
- 24 Queer, nongayly
- 28 Like Robinson Crusoe on the island
- 32 NG: Support group antithesis
- 33 Bottoms, to loafers
- 35 NG: Icy pellets

- 36 More of the quote
- 41 NG: City north of Anaheim
- 42 George, who was Mary Ann
- 43 Queen Elizabeth II portrayal Staunton
- 46 NG: Old Greek jars
- 51 South Beach activity
- 53 "Riverfinger Women" writer Dykewomon
- 54 End of the quote
- 58 Perineum, in slang
- 61 NG: Track shape
- 62 Nuts and bolts
- 63 NG: Poetry muse
- 64 Barneys event
- 65 Pick up
- 66 Transportation for Liberace and Elton
- 67 "Of ____ I Sing"
- 68 NG: Cube designer Rubik
- 21 Saint-Saen's "____ Macabre"
- 22 NG: Unknown degree
- 25 By songwriter Holly?
- 26 Express pleasure orally
- 27 NG: Immigrant's subj.
- 29 NG: Average name
- 30 NG: Peace Nobel Wiesel
- 31 Queer photographer Grace
- 34 Like a Muscle Mary who does sit-ups
- 36 Shirley MacLaine's la Douce role
- 37 Shirts that say "Hate is not a family value," e.g.
- 38 NG: Enter
- 39 Cut
- 40 NG: Anesthesia of old
- 41 NG: Lobster eater's wear
- 44 NG: Says "I agree"
- 45 "Unhappily Ever After" actor
- 47 NG: "Ripe" stage of life
- 48 Tavern with naked dancers?
- 49 Prop for "I have a headache tonight ..."
- 50 NG: Refuses
- 52 Hamlet's father, e.g.
- 55 Cole Porter's "Well, Did You ____"
- 56 Hearty partner
- 57 NG: Toward shelter
- 58 ____ Aviv
- 59 Paul Newman role in "Exodus"
- 60 Helen Reddy's "____ Woman"

Down

- 1 Sap suckers
- 2 NG: Deem appropriate
- 3 Like the beginning of "GWTW"
- 4 NG: One-named Tejano singer
- 5 Prop for "Talking to My Angel"?
- 6 Sinead O'Connor's country
- 7 NG: Isn't informal
- 8 They hold balls in pool halls
- 9 Woman of La Mancha
- 10 Hero of a Longfellow poem
- 11 It gets laid only once
- 12 NG: Dangerous food preservative
- 13 NG: Long distance company, for short

See p. 11 for answers

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that way. I'd give my last shirt to somebody and my last dollar to somebody, if they need it more than me."

When not working on Grayson's Movement, Papp has a couple of day jobs. He works as a landscaper and as a handyman. Plus, he has another enterprise. Papp has his own clothing line called Cuddles & Blunts, named, he said, after his two favorite things.

His clothing line consists of "a lot of open-minded and inclusive designs," Papp said. "A lot them are made up by myself or I may see something and do a little twist to it." Cuddles & Blunts items include T-shirts, hoodies, sweatpants and hats with phrases such as "They call me daddy" and "Bottom bitch energy." Fifteen percent of each sale

"People are super grateful ... It's something they couldn't afford and, sometimes, it could literally be a life-saving item for them."

goes back into the community, "whether that's toward somebody's top surgery or whatever surgery they might be having at the time."

Materials for each piece, which are handmade by Papp, share space in his garage with the items for Grayson's Movement.

Papp would someday like to have a storefront for his clothing line. As far as the future of Grayson's Movement, Papp said he'd like to see it grow. "I envision it getting bigger and better than what it is, whether different forms of donations being sent out, or more people are being helped each year. I just would love to keep expanding and be able to reach more and help more."

For now, Papp is content with doing his part for the LGBTQ+ community. "This is just how I've always been," he said. "I figure if it feels good to me, it feels good to them."

To donate, apply for a package or to learn more about Grayson's Movement, email graysonpapp@gmail.com or visit [graysonsmovement.com](https://www.graysonsmovement.com) on Instagram or Facebook.

SECOND GLANCES

All I Want for Christmas Is Cher



BY JASON A. MICHAEL

It was 1977. I was all of 5. And all I wanted for Christmas was Cher. Well, more specifically, a Cher doll. I'd asked Santa. I'd asked my mom. Yet somehow on Christmas morning, there was no 12-inch Cher doll by Mego in her swooping salmon gown and matching plastic pumps.

Instead, I had to make do with a train set, some Batman games, a slinky and a Stretch Armstrong. He may have been wearing only a speedo, yet Stretch was no substitute for Cher. I continued to beg my mom, but I suspect it was because of my biological father that I never got that Cher doll. Mama tried though. She said I could have a Sonny doll. But not even Cher wanted Sonny (may he rest in peace).

After my parents separated, my mom did buy me a Dolly Parton doll. I loved Dolly even more than Cher. All dressed up in her red, rhinestone-trimmed bell bottom jumpsuit, she was heaven to me. Tragically, I quickly damaged her trying to style her hair with my mom's curling iron. (What did I know of synthetic hair at that age?)

But I digress. Many years ago, I did a story called "Boys Who Play with Dolls." For the story, I spoke to psychotherapist Joe Kort, who at that time kept a display of special Barbies in his office. There was Cher, Farah Fawcett, even Diana Ross. It was seeing this display that caused me to revisit my childhood feelings toward being restricted from playing with dolls.

"I think gay men are more injured about not being able to play with opposite-gendered toys because there's not even an acceptable time frame," said Kort at the time. "At least girls are allowed to be tomboys."

Yes, tomboys are so cute. Little sissy boys who pose for pictures with their hands on their hips are not. Trust me, I'm a witness. So, alas, I made do with Batman action figures and went about my way. Dolly with her burnt hair got lost somewhere throughout the years. But shortly after I started writing for Pride Source and BTL, which coincided with the advent of eBay, I replaced my Dolly doll.

For years, I kept it in a box. Not really sure what to do with it. But more recently I've said screw it. I put Dolly Parton out on display. What's more, I fulfilled my childhood fantasy and bought myself a Cher doll. I went so far as to buy a display case and then positioned them inside it, side by side. I tell myself that Dolly is filming an episode of the "Cher" variety

show and the two are performing a number together.

Still, my two darling dolls can't begin to compete with Kort's massive collection.

"There is a growing acceptance of gay men having and playing with dolls," Kort told me recently. "That said, it seems like there are many younger gay men that don't want to. It seems more prevalent and liberating to the older generation of 40 and up."

And it's not just about "boys" playing with dolls. "I see more nonbinary folks be more open about dolls and playing with dolls and buying them more than the younger gay men," Kort added. As for the boys, Kort said that the times are changing and "more younger gay men have been allowed to play with dolls, which was not the case in older generations."

Still, don't be fooled. The days of insecure dads keeping Barbie and her friends away from their little boys are not gone. My bio father didn't want his son to grow up gay. There are still many such fathers — and even some mothers — out there today who feel the very same way.

In my own family, I don't think my young nephews would be allowed to play with "girl" dolls. At the moment, they're more into dinosaurs and Pokémon, so it's not really an issue. But if they ever were to want to play with dolls and they're not allowed, well, we'll cross that bridge when we come to it. (And I pray it doesn't get burned down in the process.)

Now, as for me, if money were no object, I'd probably grow my collection a bit. Mattel created a line of Cher dolls with outfits designed by Bob Mackie some years ago that I admire greatly. Budgetary issues, however, restrain me from collecting those. I bet Kort has all of them.

"I still buy dolls and have hundreds now and love them," he shared. "Some are from my childhood, and others are from today. I prefer

celebrity dolls."

Kort, a Ph.D., refutes any assertion that it's not OK for grown gay men to have a doll collection. "If it isn't healthy for grown men to have dolls, then I am pathological," he declared with a maniacal laugh. (OK, I jest. Kort is too gay to sound maniacal. OK, I jest again. It was



a very masculine, non-maniacal laugh.)

But I take it as permission to love my dolls. I'm not a psychotherapist like Kort, but I believe in my heart that gay men should collect the toys they were deprived of when they were young. I also bought from eBay a Miss Piggy hand puppet with real (synthetic) hair I'd always wanted. But that's a toy for another story.

For now, Christmas is upon us. And the moral of the story is ... buy me dolls. No, dear readers, I'm only kidding. All you need to do for me this Christmas is read me — and not for filth. But if you happen to know someone, young or old, who tells you they'd like a Cher doll — or Taylor Swift or Beyoncé or just a plain ol' Barbie — this year, then buy it. I'm 51, and yet there's still a little gay boy living somewhere inside me. And I hope that, much like Cher, he never grows old.

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