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PRIDE, BUT MAKE IT AUGUST

Ann Arbor Pride timing
has deep roots

HOTTER THAN JULY'S LEGACY

Festival keeps Black
LGBTQ+ joy alive

JUSTICE FOR KARMIN NOW

Murdered Detroit's
story fuels trans advocacy

Uplifting Queer *Liberation*

Muralist Samuel Turner brings Keith Haring's
revolutionary spirit to Ann Arbor mural

By Sarah Bricker Hunt

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Samuel Turner. Photo: Andrew Potter

VOL. 3330 • JULY 24, 2025

ISSUE 1281

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5 Queer Things You Can Do Right Now-ish

BY KELLI DUNHAM

You've had several weeks post-June to recover with AC Pride (chant it with me: "hey hey ho ho, being covered in sweat has got to go") and, hopefully, you're feeling ready to head out into the Big Queer World again.

We've got you covered with a picnic that proves trans joy is real, a meetup for queer BIPOC folks, a celestial nerd-out at the Cranbrook Observatory and a Pride event so full of queens' energy, "royal" is its first name.



Ginger Minj. Photo: Instagram/@gingerminj

Revel in Royalty

Royal Oak's Pride celebration is serving up a full day of festivities on July 26 and fabulous doesn't even begin to describe it. Expect drag, dancing, DJs and the kind of community love that makes your heart (and your eyeliner) stay put all day long.

Entertainment includes "RuPaul's Drag Race All Stars" superstar Ginger Minj (also amazing in the 2018 Netflix movie "Dumplin'") and Midwestern drag megastar and Queen of Kindness Nina West bringing glitter, glamour and more than a few wig changes. Since both Ginger and Nina are authors (queens who write!) Sidetrack Bookshop is curating a Queer Lit Panel, also featuring Lisa Peers, Sarah Miller and Monique Madison.

July 26, 12–11 p.m., Centennial Commons (221 East 3rd St.), prideroyaloak.com.



Stand with Trans Picnic, 2018. Courtesy photo

Picnic with Purpose

Stand with Trans is celebrating a full decade of community joy with their annual family picnic, which is every bit as wholesome and affirming as it sounds. This gathering has been the heart of their work for 10 years, offering a space for trans youth, families and allies from all across Metro Detroit to connect, eat free snacks and remember that joy is a form of resistance, especially when served with popsicles and bingo. Expect food, games, giveaways, laughter and maybe even a little glitter in the grass. All ages welcome but please leave dogs and booze at home (park rules) and register in advance.

Aug. 10, 12–4 p.m., Royal Oak Memorial Park (13 Mile and Coolidge), bit.ly/swtpicnic.



Build BIPOC Bonds

The Queer BIPOC Meetup in Ypsilanti is a chill, monthly gathering for connection, conversation and friend-making among BIPOC folks. No awkward icebreakers required — just low-key, affirming vibes in a space surrounded by books while plotting collective liberation.

The Whittaker Road branch of the Ypsilanti District Library offers a welcoming community space where you can settle in, get comfortable and focus on what matters most: building genuine connections. Come masked (free masks available), come as you are and come ready to find your people.

July 27, 2:30–4:30 p.m. and the last Sunday of each month, Ypsilanti District Library-Whittaker (5577 Whittaker Road), bit.ly/bipocqueeraa.



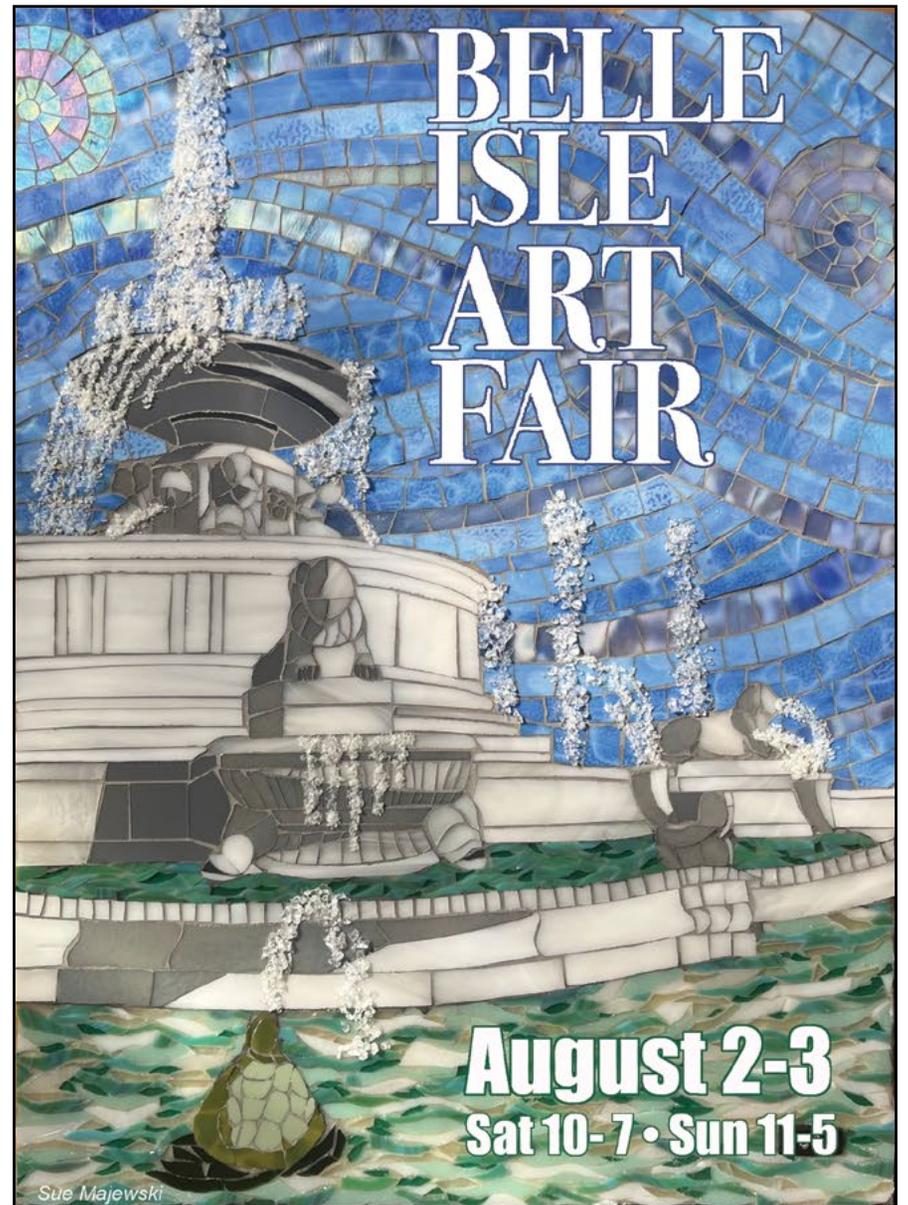
Cranbrook Observatory. Photo: science.cranbrook.edu

Stargaze with Your People

Finally: a queer night out where you won't be asked to name a single Ariana Grande song but will get bonus points for knowing which planet has the most moons. The Nerdy Queer Club of Metro Detroit is heading to Cranbrook Observatory for a night of museum wandering, planetarium gazing and (weather permitting) real-life stargazing through the observatory telescope.

Organizer Finn Gauthier told BTL, "I created the group simply because I realized it would be really fun to just hangout at a museum with a bunch of queer folks once in a while!" Mission accomplished. When you get there, look for Gauthier, who will be near the T. rex statue holding a closed (because being courteous inside) rainbow umbrella. Can't make it this time? Keep your eye on the Nerdy Queer Club Meetup listing for more all-nerd, all-queer fun.

July 25, 7 p.m., Cranbrook Institute of Science (39221 Woodward Ave., Bloomfield Hills). bit.ly/herdyqueerdetroit.



Sue Majewski

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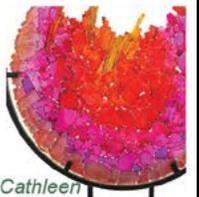
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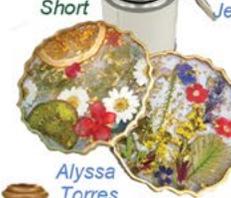


Cathleen Mazur

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Wearable Art: Jewelry; Clothing; Accessories; Unique Fashion...



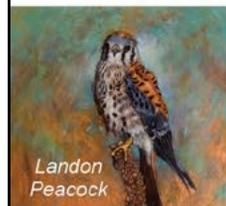
Alyssa Torres



Maureen Abdullah



Raychel Steinbach

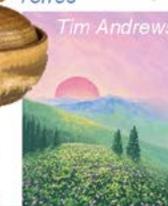


Landon Peacock



Emily Horst

Kelly Civitarese



Tim Andrews



James Holt

BelleIsleArtFair.com



Bolster Back-to-School Support

Look, we all know it's not "too early" to talk about back-to-school. Target has had their bland, greyscale "abandon-the-queers-as-soon-as-it's-no-longer-profitable" notebooks on display since late June. Some of us remember what it felt like to be a baby queer staring down a new school year, hoping for at least one safe grown-up.

Take 20 minutes this week to help queer and trans students feel supported. Donate to local LGBTQ+ orgs serving youth like Affirmations, Ruth Ellis Center or Stand with Trans. Ask a local queer teacher what their classroom actually needs (it's not another apple mug). Check what books are being banned in your district, then donate one to a classroom. Feeling particularly feisty and fed-up? Run for your local school board.

School board information and support: schoolboardintegrityproject.org and HRC's School Boards Matter handbook at bit.ly/guidetoschoolboard.

Hotter Than July 2025

LGBT Detroit's summer Pride celebration runs July 22-27, 2025.

Tuesday, July 22

Candlelight Vigil — Palmer Park Blue Spruce Tree, 6 p.m.

Wednesday, July 23

VIP Reception — Detroit Historical Museum, 5:30 p.m.

The Mixer — Griot Music Lounge, 7:30 p.m.

Thursday, July 24

Film Festival — Northwest Activity Center, 6 p.m.

Friday, July 25

Annual Gathering - Mayoral Candidate Forum & State of the Movement — U-M Detroit Center, 8:30 a.m.-4 p.m.

Opening Party with All The Kings Men — Pandora's Boxx, 10 p.m. (21+)

Saturday, July 26

Palmer Park Picnic — Palmer Park, 12 p.m.

Hot Like Fire at Arcenciel hosted by Black Bear Brotherhood — 10 p.m.

Sunday, July 27

Sunday Worship Service — One Church Detroit, 11 a.m.

Sunday Brunch with Billionaire Boys Club — Phoenix of Detroit Fire Station, 1 p.m.



From the 2015 Hotter Than July picnic. Photo: Andrew Potter

How Three Decades of Hotter Than July Built Detroit's Black LGBTQ+ Legacy

And what the annual tradition means for local attendees

BY DAMON "MAGIC" PERCY

This summer, Hotter Than July: Detroit's Black LGBTQ+ Pride celebrates its 30th anniversary as the world's longest-running, uninterrupted Black LGBTQ+ Pride celebration. What began as urgent conversations in a one-bedroom apartment has grown into an annual gathering that draws nearly 20,000 people to Detroit from around the globe.

I have been here since the beginning.

In 1994, when those foundational conversations started in the apartment I shared with my chosen parents, our community was still reeling from the peak years of the AIDS crisis. Black queer

folks needed something that centered our experiences during a time when mainstream Pride events often overlooked us and when our own families and faith communities frequently rejected us. We needed to see ourselves reflected, celebrated and affirmed.

What emerged in 1995 was Hotter Than July, born from LGBT Detroit (which began as KICK Magazine in the early 1990s). KICK was actually the third Black LGBTQ+ media company created in America, serving as a vital source of information and organizing tool during a critical period when the HIV/AIDS pandemic was devastating our community. The magazine gained national distribution, placing Detroit's LGBTQ+

community on the international map and laying the groundwork for what would become a movement.

Hotter Than July represents the purest form of Detroit — a joyful, celebratory grassroots experience taking shape in the nation's blackest city. For three decades, this annual weeklong celebration has dispelled myths about who we are, set standards for what we have become, and given hope and voice to everything in between.

For me, it is family. It is home.

I have grown up within this celebration. I was a young man discovering the world, searching for myself and seeking community. Where would I fit into what I didn't yet see? How would I navigate finding my tribe? HTJ

presented me with a multicultural tapestry of culture and wisdom displayed in all its fullness. This milestone anniversary represents a cumulative celebration of that journey. As a young man finding his way, it helped me begin navigating who I was becoming.

Community, faith and the strength of perseverance have been recurring themes over these last three decades. Combined with hope and resilience, HTJ has pushed through every political climate, survived a pandemic, witnessed the rebuilding of our great city and fought through marginalization to remain visible at every turn. It stands as a cornerstone of Detroit's cultural identity, one that has evolved and grown alongside the full spectrum of our alphabet community.

While many other Black Pride celebrations exist across the country, HTJ holds the distinction of being the second oldest and longest-running Black LGBTQ+ Pride event in the world.

Marcus Pratt, a Detroit native who has attended HTJ events since the mid-1990s, reflects on his years attending various events and what makes them special.



(Left) Hotter Than July 2013. Photo: Andrew Potter. (Right) Damon "Magic" Percy (right) with the late Oddis Mitchell at a HTJ event. Courtesy photo



"The fellowship and interacting with the people have been my favorite part of all the events I have attended over the years," says Pratt. "Seeing the community be unified and feed each other is such a wonderful thing."

To Pratt, HTJ represents

community solidarity and demonstrates "how people express themselves so freely in the way of getting along without any major fights or anything."

The week's numerous events — from the opening candlelight vigil honoring ancestors lost to

AIDS and violence, to events like the 2024 Motown riverboat cruise, educational conferences and film festival — bring out the diversity of our community. They humanize us in ways that counter societal stereotypes while challenging the phobias presented

against our community. In such a faith-based city, we have found ways to persevere. Ironically, the same faith that sometimes pushes against us is often the very faith we

See **Hotter Than July**, page 19



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Ann Arbor Gets a Queer Mural with Bears, Twinks and Apple Blossoms

Muralist Samuel Turner brings Keith Haring's revolutionary spirit to Uplift

BY SARAH BRICKER HUNT

The vibrant mural covering one wall at Uplift, an LGBTQ+ bar in Ann Arbor, pulses with the unmistakable energy of Keith Haring's iconic style. A closer look reveals something distinctly 2025 and very Ann Arbor granola: bears and twinks dancing alongside references to hormone replacement therapy, lesbian carabiner code mixing with apple blossoms adorning a cheerful tree character and queer elders reaching toward divine connection in a nod to Michelangelo's "Creation of Adam."

Those are just a few of the colorfully chaotic yet thoughtfully organized artistic elements at play here. Much like "tree town" itself, the Uplift mural is a lot — in the best way.

For 24-year-old Samuel Turner, the mural represents both an artistic milestone and a deeply personal expression of community. A 2023 graduate of the University of Michigan's Stamps School of Art and Design, Turner landed his first fully independent commission after hearing about the opportunity from a friend who performs drag at Uplift. Turner's project has evolved from a relatively simple proposal to encompass a visual celebration of how far queer visibility has come since Haring's groundbreaking activist art in 1980s New York while capturing an earnest goal of unified queer community in the heart of present-day Ann Arbor.

"The fun thing about looking at Keith Haring's work is that it was very goofy but also direct," Turner says. "The fun part was translating this style and artistic language to be used for a modern-day context with all of these categories that have come to be represented in the community and different types of experiences that are now more clear and open to talk about than [they were in Haring's] 1980s



Muralist Samuel Turner in front of the mural he painted at Uplift. Photo: Andrew Potter

New York."

Uplift co-owner Saharsh Hajela says Turner shared their "intense passion for the mural to explore themes of queer joy and history in a way that still remained uplifting." During their first meeting, Turner even brought in a book of inspiration with pages marked off to explore together. "We've found that oftentimes the exploration of queer themes delves into strife, struggle and loss. However, we wanted to explore the intersection between love, community and history," Hajela explains.

The team mentioned Haring as a potential source of inspiration because of his prolific works exploring queer identity in an

unapologetic manner. "In his works, Haring embraces all aspects of his identity and life fully, without editing out the 'bad' parts or catering to a straight audience," Hajela notes. "We felt that using him as a reference point would evoke that same feeling of unapologetic freedom for those who view the mural, as well."

Turner's journey to this moment began unexpectedly during his university years. Growing up in southeast Michigan, he hadn't initially planned to focus on painting. "I discovered my interest in painting at U-M. It's not what I initially intended to do, but I just had a lot of fun and I found work in painting which helped motivate me to continue along

that direction."

That work came through Brush Monkeys, a local company specializing in window murals, particularly during holiday seasons. The company's owners also run Treetown Murals, where Turner developed his skills through what he describes as an apprenticeship where he assisted on a variety of projects.

The transition from apprentice to independent artist followed the familiar path of many emerging creatives. After graduating, Turner navigated the early career landscape that many artists know well, taking on various projects while building his portfolio and reputation. This past summer

brought the opportunity to work full-time with Treetown. The Uplift commission represents an exciting new chapter for Turner — his first project as a solo artist.

When Uplift mentioned Keith Haring in their call for artists, Turner embraced the opportunity to explore an artist he'd long admired. Though he'd encountered Haring's work throughout art school and popular culture, the commission inspired him to dive deeper into the revolutionary artist's full body of work.

What he discovered surprised him. Turner found layers of

See **Uplift Mural**, page 11

Why Is Ann Arbor Pride in August? The Answer Might Surprise You

How the fest evolved from a potluck to a 'Drag Race'-headlined extravaganza

BY SARAH BRICKER HUNT

When Jadein Black books headliners for Ann Arbor Pride, she's not just thinking about who will draw the biggest crowds. As both a full-time teacher and the annual festival's entertainment director, Black approaches her programming with educational intentionality.

Black, who has performed drag for 18 years, says she chooses headliners whose lived experiences reflect current issues impacting the community. This year, those problems include a sustained attack on transgender Americans from the highest levels of government and controversial hardline immigration policies that have sent ICE agents into public streets to conduct highly visible arrests.

Black and the Ann Arbor Pride planning team spent months putting together this year's star-studded lineup for the Aug. 2 celebration in downtown Ann Arbor, and the intentionality behind these selections is evident. Headlining are Detox, the "RuPaul's Drag Race" veteran who recently came out as transgender, and Lucky Starzzz, who made history as the first queen born in Cuba to compete on the franchise. The festival also features Landon Cider, winner of "The Boulet Brothers' Dragula" and the first drag king to win a televised



University of Michigan law student Wayne McCabe joins in the celebratory mood of a National Coming Out Day rally for gays and lesbians on the U-M diag, October 1995. Photo: Ann Arbor District Library, Ann Arbor News

American drag competition. Miss Trans Michigan Baddie Brooks is also set to appear.

"Pride is all about showing acceptance and helping each other

be our own people and being our best selves," Black explains. "Having people that have come to our nation — especially with immigration being such a contentious issue

right now — I want to make sure they're represented. Every time I see something happening in the world, I'm like, 'OK, if I have the platform, if I have the time and energy to

put into this, I want to make a difference."

See [Ann Arbor Pride](#), page 16

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Karmin Wells' Murder Sparks Calls for Justice and Safety for Black Trans Women

Two months after her murder, ballroom mother Monica Hudson reflects on Karmin's resilience, fierce love and unfulfilled dreams

BY SARAH BRICKER HUNT

Ballroom mother Monica Hudson called her “the walking wonder” — a trans woman who could “set fire” to any runway and light up any room. She should be cheering on Karmin Wells as the ballroom legend worked toward icon status in the Iconic International House of Revlon. Instead, Hudson is seeking justice for the beloved performer who was shot and killed in her Detroit home on May 25, just days before turning 38, in a case that investigators say bears striking resemblance to other homicides targeting Black trans women.

“Unfortunately, as we know, a trans woman of color, Karmin Wells, was murdered in her house by someone that she let in,” said Julisa Abad, community engagement liaison with the Wayne County Prosecutor's Office. Abad formerly served as director of transgender outreach at the Fair Michigan Justice Project, a non-profit organization founded in 2016 by Wayne County Prosecutor Kym Worthy and now-Attorney General Dana Nessel that partnered with Michigan law enforcement and prosecutors to investigate and prosecute dozens of crimes against the LGBTQ+ community with a 100% conviction rate. As of this writing, Fair Michigan's website is no longer in operation. “I'm very, very grateful for the prosecutor's office in Wayne County, specifically Kym Worthy, for keeping our trans-inclusion policy in place,” Abad told BTL.

Police reports indicate the suspect ransacked Wells' belongings and took her phone before leaving the scene. “I want the community to reach out and let us know whatever they know,” Abad added. “If anybody was out there, if anybody knows anything, if they've heard anything, if they were with her that day or that week, come forward, call the number, call DPD.” Anyone with information is asked to contact Detroit Police at 313-596-2212, and Crime Stoppers has announced a cash reward of up to \$2,500 for information leading to an arrest.

For those who knew and loved Wells, her story is about far more than how it ended.

“Karmin would walk in and just light up the whole room with her sense of humor, her smile, her laugh,” said Hudson, who served as Karmin's chosen mother both in the ballroom scene and in life. “Karmin was an amazing individual. Karmin was funny, Karmin was



Karmin Wells. Courtesy photo

resilient.”

Hudson, who works as a certified HIV prevention specialist, funeral director and ballroom performer (as Monica Devereaux), first met Wells when she was just 15 years old during outreach work at Palmer Park. “I am a prevention specialist. So I was always doing outreach at the park, assisting the youth and helping them get the resources and things that they needed,” Hudson explained. “So me and Karmin was drawn together, and from that point she had become my daughter.”

What began as mentorship evolved into a profound mother-daughter bond that transcended typical ballroom family structures. While Hudson has a designated role within the ballroom community as a “mother,” often her mentorship has extended beyond that framework. “There's people not in ballroom that I mother,” she explained. “Our community tends to just focus and think about the ballroom culture, but being

Karmin's mother was so much beyond that culture.”

Their relationship was tested and deepened when Hudson decided to move to Atlanta. Wells wouldn't let her go alone. “She told me I couldn't go alone. And she was like, ‘Girl, you think you about to leave me here? I'm going too.’ I said, ‘I'm leaving tomorrow.’ She was like, ‘OK. We'll see.’ And by the next couple of hours, Karmin was at my door with her bags asking, ‘So, what time we leaving?’”

In Atlanta, their roles reversed as Wells took care of Hudson while she searched for work. “Karmin took over. She said, ‘Until you get that together, I'm the mama. I got this,’” Hudson recalled. “Karmin took care of me. And when she did it, she said, ‘Ma, you took care of me all these years. In some way, somehow I have to take care of you. And I refuse to have to take care of you when I have to put you away.’ And I said absolutely nothing, but just looked at her and cried

because I never received that from anyone, not even my own mother.” While the pair ultimately decided to return to Detroit, the experience strengthened their bond.

For Wells, ballroom culture provided a space where her dreams could flourish. “Karmin felt like by her being trans, she wasn't the ideology of the perception of what a model is,” Hudson explained. “So, this is where ballroom came into place. I introduced Karmin to ballroom and let her know that this is a space where you can do and be whoever you choose to be.”

Once she found her stage, Wells transformed into a force of nature. “Karmin would hit that runway and set fire to that runway. Naomi Campbell, Tyra Banks would have absolutely nothing on Karmin when Karmin was on that runway,” Hudson said. The community nicknamed her “the walking wonder,” and in 2018, Karmin achieved legend status in the Iconic International House of Revlon — a significant milestone in ballroom culture.

“That was the happiest moment because she felt like all the things that she went through and all the things that she did have paid off,” Hudson remembered. “And from that moment she said, ‘Ma, we're legends. So let's become icons.’ I said, ‘You become an icon because I only partook in this for y'all.’ So, she said, ‘I'm going to become your icon and I'm going to make you proud.’”

Wells' death is part of a devastating pattern affecting trans women of color nationwide. Abad, who has become a nationally recognized expert witness on transgender violence and social determinants of health, emphasizes that these cases often involve perpetrators who were already familiar with their victims.

“When we look at statistics, data and numbers of the 68 capital cases that Fair Michigan was able to do with a 100% conviction rate, all of those defendants had had sexual contact with our victim on more than one occasion,” Abad explained. “That means that they weren't tricked. It's not like they didn't know. They were comfortable enough to come back.”

The violence, Abad said, often stems from shame rather than deception. “Where the problem lies and where, unfortunately, a lot of trans women experience murder is when

See **Karmin**, page 26

Uplift Mural

Continued from page 8

Haring's art that mainstream culture had overlooked or sanitized. "It's very interesting to see the difference of what I'd seen and what the majority of his stuff is, because a lot of it is less sanitized than the stuff I would see on clothing," he explains. He went to the library to find books explaining the meanings behind Haring's characters, uncovering a rich vocabulary of symbols and references.

His primary inspiration came from Haring's "Tuttomondo" mural in Pisa, Italy. "I just liked the colors and there were enough of them that it kind of looked like a rainbow." The research revealed not just technique but an approach that married Haring's ability to be "very goofy but also direct" to spotlighting social issues of his time.

Turner's creative process involved extensive collaboration with friends

symbols. A tree with a robin and apple blossoms represents Ann Arbor's "tree town" nickname, while other elements pay homage to both Haring's original iconography and contemporary queer culture.

Some of the most powerful imagery carries deeper meaning. An angel touching the hand of God "ended up being about queer elders that were lost and are not here right now." The

movement and celebration, with a flag bearer leading the charge. "It's almost as if everybody's following this one character and the rhythm leads towards the left where people are marching. It's not like it's a literal Pride parade, but I kind of had that idea in the back of my mind."

Hajela says Turner's mural is "a colorful, bright representation of how unique our community is while also



Close-up of the Uplift mural. Photo: Andrew Potter

"We've found that oftentimes the exploration of queer themes delves into strife, struggle and loss. However, we wanted to explore the intersection between love, community and history."

— Saharsh Hajela, Uplift co-owner

in the queer community. "I started brainstorming and making a list of things that I thought would appeal to the clientele or the workers there. Eventually I started running out of ideas and I went to my friends who are also in the community," he says.

The resulting characters blend universal queer experiences with local Ann Arbor references. Bears, twinkles and otters dance across the wall alongside more obscure community

inclusion of HRT imagery reflects Turner's commitment to representing the full spectrum of queer experience, particularly transgender voices that he feels are underrepresented in many venues.

"I felt it was important to codify that this is a largely cis gay male space, but also don't forget that [trans people are] an integral part of the community that's under attack right now," Turner notes.

The mural's composition suggests

paying homage to history and those who came before us. The whole team fell in love with the design at first sight."

Turner says he feels the mural is currently limited in scope, particularly in terms of representation. "I feel like I need more femme representation because that wasn't initially in my mind. Whenever I've gone to Uplift before, it's largely millennial gay men that go there. I kind of started with what would be the funniest thing for millennial gay men to see."

Fortunately, Uplift may be interested in expansion. "I think they might be wanting me to expand the mural, which I really like, because I had such a fun time making this," Turner shares. His vision is to create a more expansive piece where everyone can see themselves reflected in his vibrant patchwork.

While working on the Uplift project, Turner has continued building his artistic practice. He's currently creating another mural at Ann Arbor Drugs, a new pharmacy on West Stadium Boulevard, and has an exhibit at Vacancy. He continues collaborating with Treetown Murals while pursuing independent commissions.

SPONSORED EDITORIAL

Loneliness — the Silent Epidemic!



BY CHARLA DAVIS

LLMSW, therapist with The Center for Relationship Health in Royal Oak

The loneliness epidemic isn't slowing; in fact, the rates are alarmingly increasing, particularly in Black and LGBTQ+ folks.

Tragically, the progress our country has made over the past several decades seems to be quickly sliding backwards. Black and LGBTQ+ communities are living with greater stress as their identity, ethnicity and sexual orientation come under attack again. They are facing renewed and endorsed harassment, alienation, discrimination, shame and family rejection — societal pressures we hoped we had left in our rearview.

It's not surprising, then, that extensive research shows that Black and LGBTQ+ communities are isolating more to protect themselves. Subsequently, they have fewer close friendships, they live in loneliness, and it takes a toll on their mental health.

If this sounds familiar to you, I encourage you to start rebuilding the best version of you — the person you want to be — without guilt, shame or fear. The best way to begin this journey is by taking inventory of who you are right now. What does a typical day look like? Does it reflect the kind of day (and life) you want? If your life were the way you want it, how would you spend your time?

Start by creating the love-filled life you deserve by taking one tiny step today!

Go outside and feel the sun on your face, wave at a neighbor, or reach out to one person in your sphere, someone you admire or you think might feel the way you do — hesitant but looking to connect. What about attending or volunteering at events like Hotter Than July where you can meet others? Look for these kinds of activities in your community and get involved.

I want to emphasize how critical it is to begin cultivating a strong home base — mine is my wife and my therapist. When I — a Black, queer woman — venture out and explore new connections and it doesn't go well, what a gift it is to have my home base to return to for strength and support.

I know this firsthand — the family who raised me had a hard time accepting my sexual orientation. I struggled to imagine "family" as a place where I could be my authentic self without guilt or shame.

Today, I am happy to say I can be completely who I am with my partner and my community and to unveil the parts of me that I was afraid to reveal for fear of rejection. I am my true self and the version of me that I respect and admire.

You are a very integral part of this world! Do not let anyone take that away from you. Your first steps can be uncomfortable, and you may feel rejected, but there are people in your corner. Debrief, dust off the ugliness, re-energize and step back into the world again. You can face what is out there because you are resilient, brave, valuable and worthy. With each new connection, you are building confidence and an authentic you, one step at a time. Working together, we can create a community of connection, acceptance, love and support.



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Can Anti-Trans Crusader Ken Paxton Cheat His Way to Victory?



BY D'ANNE WITKOWSKI

Once upon a time there was a guy named Ken Paxton who, as the attorney general of Texas, waged war on LGBTQ+ people, inflicting harm every chance he could in the name of Christianity. Then he cheated on his wife and was reverse-raptured, never to be heard from again. The end.

Alas, some stories have happy endings. This isn't one of them.

For those of you outside of Texas and/or practicing self-care, Ken Paxton, a Republican, has been a fixture of Texas politics for a long time. He's served in both the Texas House and Senate, and has been their Attorney General since 2015. He's currently running to be Texas's next U.S. senator.

Earlier in July, Paxton's wife of 39 years, Angela Paxton, filed for divorce on "Biblical grounds."

Long story short, he cheated. For years. But that's not a new revelation. Paxton admitted to an affair with a woman named Laura Olson as far back as 2018. He claimed it was done, but it seems like Olson never actually left the picture.

Why did it take his wife until 2025 to file for divorce? I don't know. Maybe more sleazy things will come out about Paxton in the meantime.

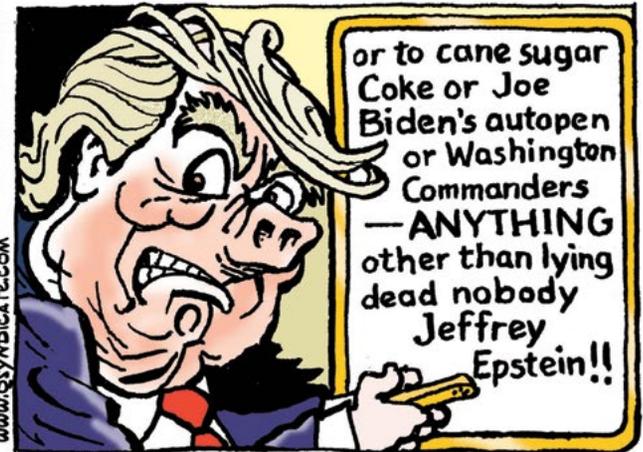
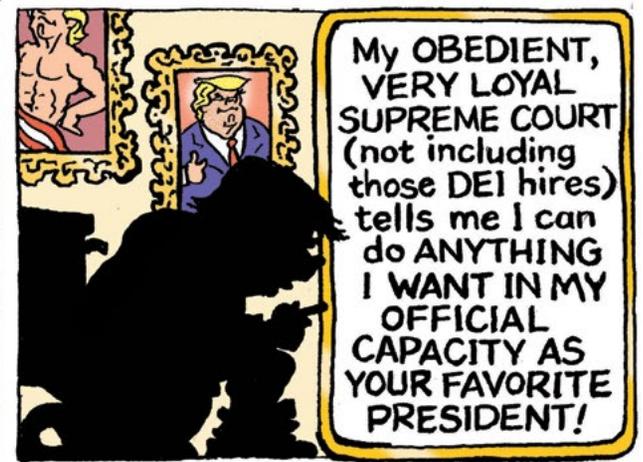
Paxton responded to the divorce on social media writing, "After facing the pressures of countless political attacks and public scrutiny, Angela and I have decided to start a new chapter in our lives. I could not be any more proud or grateful for the incredible family that God has blessed us with, and I remain committed to supporting our amazing children and grandchildren. I ask for your prayers and privacy at this time." A new chapter. Cute.

Notice how he begins by blaming "countless political attacks and public scrutiny." Now that's what I call accountability.

It is true that Paxton has been subject to extra public scrutiny these past few years, having been embroiled in a corruption scandal and all. In 2023, he was even impeached by the Texas House, which has a Republican majority. He was acquitted by the Senate.

Paxton has a very long anti-LGBTQ+ rap sheet. Here are some highlights:

Just this month, Paxton sued an adult swimming organization that allowed trans women to compete in a Texas competition.



In March 2025, Paxton prohibited transgender Texans from changing the sex listed on their driver's licenses and birth certificates, going as far as to demand that any changes that had already been made were "unlawful" and had to be changed back.

In June 2024, Paxton sued the Biden Administration over Medicaid being used to cover gender-affirming care.

In February 2024, Paxton demanded that PFLAG turn over "documents, communications and other information related to its work" with families seeking gender-affirming care for transgender youth in Texas, according to The Advocate.

In 2022, Paxton issued an opinion that providing gender-affirming care was child abuse and supported Gov. Greg Abbot in his crusade to investigate the parents of trans kids.

In 2015, Paxton called the Obergefell v. Hodges Supreme Court ruling, which made marriage equality the law of the land, a "lawless ruling" and told Texas clerks they didn't have to abide by the law.

In 2003, Paxton "was one of several lawmakers who signed an amicus brief asking the Supreme Court to decide in favor of Texas's sodomy ban in Lawrence v. Texas," reports LGBTQ Nation. Sodomy laws, Paxton claimed, were needed to protect "public health" and "discourage sexual activity outside of marriage."

If only Lawrence v. Texas had gone the other way, Paxton and his wife may have lived happily ever after.

And in case you were wondering, Paxton is taking

his anti-LGBTQ+ obsession nation with his Senate campaign. In fact, his platform is a right-wing greatest hits album. On his campaign website, Paxton promises to "stand with President Trump to protect our gun rights, defend the unborn, and defeat the radical transgender movement that's desperate to put men in girls' sports and woke indoctrination in our classrooms."

It's possible, though, that this whole divorce thing could tank his campaign.

On July 10, Joanna Rodriguez, the National Republican Senatorial Committee (NRSC) communications director posted on X, "What Ken Paxton has put his family through is truly repulsive and disgusting. No one should have to endure what Angela Paxton has, and we pray for her as she chooses to stand up for herself and her family during this difficult time."

Seems bad for a Republican candidate for Senate to piss off the NRSC. And keep in mind, they have very low standards! They have helped a lot of creeps get into office over the years. This seems especially bad for Paxton since he's running against incumbent Republican Sen. John Cornyn. Paxton has apparently challenged Cornyn for not being conservative enough. Cornyn, mind you, is not exactly a champion of LGBTQ+ rights.

Will the conservative Christians bolstering Paxton's campaign turn on him? Maybe.

Then again, we had a three-time presidential candidate who said, "My hobby is sexual assault!" and evangelicals screamed, "Praise be! He's been sent to us by Jesus!" So who the hell knows?

Openly LGBTQ+ Candidate Olivia Vaden on Her Lansing City Council Run

Olivia Vaden is running for Lansing City Council in the Aug. 5 primary, part of a growing trend of openly LGBTQ+ candidates seeking office across Michigan.

"I'm running for Lansing City Council because our neighborhoods across every ward deserve leadership that listens, leads with empathy and takes action," Vaden told BTL. "I know how it feels to navigate systems that weren't built for all of us."

Vaden highlighted the importance of LGBTQ+ representation in local government. "Every challenge we face at the local level disproportionately impacts the LGBTQIA+ community, and those effects are even more

severe for Black, indigenous and other people of color," she explained.

Her platform focuses on affordable housing, infrastructure improvements and public safety through community investment rather than just law enforcement. "Real safety comes not just from law enforcement, it comes from thriving communities, well-lit streets, trusted public services and violence prevention programs rooted in community relationships."

Vaden expressed particular concern for transgender community members while acknowledging that "targeting of trans folks wasn't non-existent under the Biden and Obama administrations."

A win in the primary would advance Vaden to November's general election, when several LGBTQ+ candidates are running statewide. Visit vote411.org to find out more about the August primary and November election.



Olivia Vaden. Courtesy photo

Beloved Queer Poet Andrea Gibson Dies at 49

Andrea Gibson, Colorado's poet laureate and internationally acclaimed spoken-word artist, died on July 14 after a four-year battle with ovarian cancer. They were 49. Gibson's verse explored gender identity, politics and social justice, with many LGBTQ+ fans crediting their poetry with helping them learn to love themselves.

Identifying as genderqueer, Gibson once wrote "I am happiest on the road/ When I'm not here or there — but in-between," capturing the essence of their lived experience between traditional gender boundaries. In their final poem "Love Letter from the Afterlife," Gibson wrote "Dying is the opposite of leaving."

Gibson's documentary "Come See Me in the Good Light," exploring their marriage and cancer journey, won the Festival Favorite Award at Sundance 2025.

Cyndi Lauper Brings Farewell Tour to Pine Knob

Cyndi Lauper's "Girls Just Wanna Have Fun Farewell Tour" arrives at Pine Knob Music Theatre in Clarkston on Aug. 1, marking

one of the final opportunities to see the two-time Grammy winner perform her iconic hits including "Time After Time" and "True Colors." Queer performer Jake Wesley Rogers is set to open.

The tour celebrates the decades-long career of the beloved pop icon who has championed LGBTQ+ from the start. "I don't know what [an icon] is," Lauper told BTL in 2024. "All I

know is I've always strived to contribute to the world to make it better. Make it better for the kids, make it better for the Earth if we can. The one thing I learned about the 'True Colors' thing was that if you want to have somebody listen to you, you got to listen to them, too. And if you share your personal stories, you might find that you have more in common than you think."

'Hamtramck Is Gay!' Returns to Ghost Light

The monthly "Hamtramck Is Gay!" variety show returns to Ghost Light on Monday, Aug. 4, featuring an all-queer lineup of performers. Hosted by Dahmer's Breakfast, the evening showcases a wide array of talent, including Ferndale-based singer-songwriter Izak and trip-hop artist Warnos.

Aug. 4, 7-11:30 p.m. *Ghost Light*, (2314 Caniff St., Hamtramck), ghostlight.eventbrite.com (21+).

Jeff Montgomery Doc Set to Stream

"America You Kill Me," the documentary about Triangle Foundation co-founder Jeff Montgomery, launches July 29 on Amazon Prime Video, Apple TV, YouTube and cable platforms. The film chronicles Montgomery's militant activism after his lover's murder outside a gay bar led him to co-found what became Equality Michigan in 1993. Director Daniel Land told BTL in 2022 that Montgomery's "legacy is woefully unsung, and that's something I want to change."

Ellen Nopes Out of the U.S.

President Trump is fond of saying, "If you're not happy, you can leave," and Ellen DeGeneres has apparently taken him up on the offer. DeGeneres confirmed she and wife Portia de Rossi permanently moved to England's Cotswolds region because of Trump's election victory. "Everything here is just better," she told a British theater audience on July 20, lamenting America's divisive climate and concerns over LGBTQ+ rights rollbacks.



Ellen DeGeneres. Photo: Instagram/ @ellendegeneres

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Ann Arbor Pride

Continued from page 9

For Black, drag serves as a vehicle for “community-based educating.” “I use my hosting abilities to bring awareness to experiences that people have in my audiences,” she says. “Having these experiences where we have conversations about things is very important, especially as we go through this political climate.”

But why is Ann Arbor Pride in August when most Pride celebrations happen in June?

The answer reveals three decades of community evolution, weather challenges and the determination of local advocates who transformed a small gathering into one of Southeast Michigan’s most vibrant celebrations.

The journey began in 1995 when the Washtenaw Rainbow Action Project — now the Jim Toy Community Center — organized a potluck picnic on National Coming Out Day, which is observed every Oct. 11. What started as a modest celebration on the grounds of Community High School grew over the years, but October’s unpredictable Michigan weather proved problematic.

“October just could be a really pleasant fall evening or it could be a ‘cold winter is almost here’ evening,” recalls Keith Orr, who with his husband Martin Contreras helped shape the celebration for years. The final straw came when freezing rain hit one year’s event.

When Aut Bar and Common Language Bookstore owners Orr and Contreras took over organizing duties in 1999, they gradually moved the celebration to late September, eventually expanding it to take over an entire block of Fourth Avenue and raising about \$25,000 annually for the community center. The event was rebranded as “Outfest” as it was more marketable than “NCOD.”

But scheduling around Ann Arbor’s constraints proved difficult. The city wouldn’t permit street closures during football game Saturdays, often leaving organizers with just one possible weekend.

“There’s a real historical reason for it being in August,” Contreras explains. After organizers moved to August for better weather, they chose not to compete with major Pride celebrations in Chicago, Toronto, Ferndale and Detroit that people traveled to



National Coming Out Day, 1995, on the U-M Diag in Ann Arbor. Photo: Linda Wan/Ann Arbor District Library and Ann Arbor News



An estimated 75 people turned out on June 21, 1986 to celebrate gay and lesbian rights at a rally in front of the Federal Building in downtown Ann Arbor. Keith Orr is pictured in the background with blond hair and sunglasses. Photo: Ann Arbor District Library/Ann Arbor News

attend in June.

The name “Outfest” persisted until organizers struggled to sell national sponsorships because sponsors understood “Pride” but didn’t recognize “Outfest.” The rebrand to Ann Arbor Pride coincided with moving downtown.

This evolution from grassroots gathering to major celebration reflects broader tensions about Pride’s purpose. For the couple, who participated in the 1987 March on Washington, maintaining political relevance remains crucial.

Contreras believes there’s still a place for

celebration, but worries the political edge has been lost. “There’s always a fight and that seems to have taken back seat or got forgotten all together behind the party aspect of it,” he explains. “We continually remind the community that the fight is not over. The first Pride celebration was the year after Stonewall and very much a protest.”

Orr worries that corporate sponsorship and social media activism have created complacency. “It’s easy to get a little complacent if it’s like, IBM is with us and Target is with us,” he observes. “Corporations are only as involved as they feel it is good for

“Pride is all about showing acceptance and helping each other be our own people and being our best selves.”

— Jadein Black, Ann Arbor Pride entertainment director

their bottom line.”

He also fears younger generations “don’t recall the struggle for rights, the struggle for visibility, the struggle for AIDS” and may not realize “how much went before them to get to this point.”

While the landscape has undeniably changed from the grassroots activism of earlier decades, Pride’s political heart continues to beat — just with different rhythms. Black represents a new generation of organizers who honor Pride’s protest origins while adapting to contemporary challenges. She frequently uses the power of representation and storytelling to keep political issues front and center.



Jadein Black. Photo: Facebook

Black, not unlike the organizers before her, sees the importance of highlighting current political issues through her programming choices. Detox's recent coming-out moment happened during a Drag PAC event in Chicago, when she changed lyrics to "Chow Down (at Chick-fil-A)," a song she performs on with Willam Belli and Vicky Vox, from "I'm a top" to "I'm trans now." Lucky Starzzz, born in Havana and raised in Miami, was eliminated early from "RuPaul's Drag Race" Season 17 but represents the immigrant experience.

"Drag kings are not given the time of day as much as drag queens," Black notes about booking Cider, whose out-of-performance name is Kristine Bellaluna. Cider will host an exclusive drag king show on the Necto stage at 4 p.m.

The festival runs from noon to 9 p.m. on the main stage and noon to 6 p.m. on the Necto stage, featuring additional performers including Baddie Brooks, the current Miss Trans Michigan, and longtime Ann Arbor staples like Out Loud Chorus.

Black will also present Drag Queen Story Time, despite political targeting of such events. "People aren't being harsh on Disney stories, but all but one of the princess stories were written by a man," Black notes.

As Ann Arbor Pride marks 30 years of evolution from an October potluck to a blowout August event that brings together tens of thousands of community members, Black's approach honors both celebration and activism. Her programming choices ensure that amid the joy and entertainment, the community remembers why Pride began as protest.

"I stress very heavily in these shows, especially with what we're going through right now, that if you wake up in the morning and you feel like your identity is something else, that is your own business," Black says. "That is nobody else's but yours and you are in control of your own happiness."

Ann Arbor Pride takes place Aug. 2 in downtown Ann Arbor. For more information, visit annarborpride.com.

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WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

Catching Up With Johnny Jenkins, Equality Advocate and Hotter Than July Organizer

BY DREW SAUNDERS

Johnny Jenkins has spent decades at the forefront of LGBTQ+ advocacy, from navigating the early HIV/AIDS crisis as a young Black gay man in Detroit to helping build vital community

resources like Affirmations and LGBT Detroit's Hotter Than July and organizations such as Men of Color. Now pursuing a Ph.D. in gender studies at Arizona State University, Jenkins recently spoke with BTL about his advocacy journey, the current political climate and why building community remains as crucial as ever.

How did you build support for LGBTQ+ rights at Affirmations and LGBT Detroit?

I've worked with great people committed to the work. When I led Hotter Than July, my board and committed individuals supported me in engaging homophobia among Black religious leaders. This led to the successful Homophobia in Detroit town hall at the Wright Museum, raising our profile among Black leaders in Detroit. At Affirmations, we re-established the center as a beacon to the community to make the center a hub of activity and a focal point for LGBTQ+ equality and well-being. Being present, approachable and open to other perspectives, and meeting people where they are and making them feel welcome and part of the work, is essential.

What was it like fighting the HIV/AIDS crisis in the early years?

In 1992, after graduating from college, I had no knowledge of HIV and AIDS. My coming out was an exhilarating yet terrifying experience of sexual and personal freedom, overshadowed by a dark reality. Despite the constant threat of death, I never considered going back into the closet. I found my tribe — Black same-gender-loving men. At the time, Men of Color's (MOC) Motivational Tuesdays was crucial to receiving lifesaving

information and a network of same-gender-loving men. I became involved in the launch of KICK! magazine, Men of Color and Hotter Than July to strengthen Detroit's Black queer community. We formed a circle to practice self-care and build upon the foundation laid by those before us.

How have Black queer spaces in Michigan evolved since you started your advocacy work?

When I became actively involved in Detroit's Black queer community, I discovered a depth of welcoming spaces for Black queer individuals. Support and social groups like Men of Color and SPICE were also accessible to anyone. The brilliance of Hotter Than July is that it provided a platform for collective works and responsibility, creating a beacon of presence, affirmation and solidarity. Now that I'm no longer in Michigan, it's challenging to assess public perception of Black queer spaces. However, cultural institutions like Hotter Than July, the annual Kwanzaa celebration, LGBT Detroit, Full Truth Fellowship of Christ Church and the Ruth Ellis Center persist, offering a uniquely Black and queer Detroit experience. So, while the internet and social media have transformed how we socialize, a solid foundation remains, and the need to continue cultivating

such spaces.

What was your reaction to the Trump administration cutting PEPFAR funding?

My initial reaction was sheer disbelief and dismay. Just when many frontline workers believed they were on the brink of defeating this deadly disease, their efforts are sabotaged. It saddens me to think that 75 million Americans felt this was the direction our country needed to take. This immoral action serves as a stark reminder of the deep-seated hatred that permeates our society. We should never let our guard down, even after achieving victories.

Note: Recent reporting indicates the administration may restore global PEPFAR funding, but this has not been made official at the time of this writing.

What tactics do you recommend for fighting back against rising homophobia?

Circle the wagons and push back. Our transgender brothers and sisters are the more vulnerable in this moment. Unfortunately, they've always been on the margins in the equality movement. There's no muting their voices for the sake of a broader marriage campaign. We're at a critical point where transphobia could be pushed aside because gay marriage is now in the crosshairs as well.

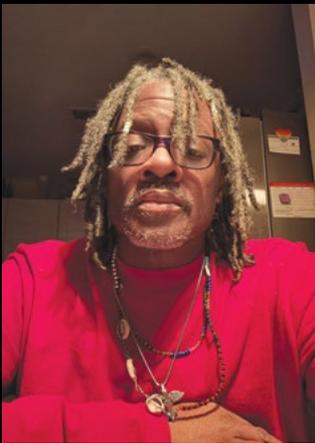
My prescription would be for LGBTQ+ cultural institutions to increase or strengthen opportunities to be in dialogue about self-care and support.

How did you cope with setbacks during your advocacy work?

You have to refine your ability to adapt, improvise and overcome in every situation. In all Black social movements, there has been a consistent moment of retrenchment after rights were achieved. It's reasonable to expect the same with the advancement of LGBTQ+ rights and equality. We have to avoid complacency and start being proactive about mitigating the inevitable. Quite honestly, progressive activists and policymakers are horrible to this end. We tend to take a "Pollyanna-ish" perspective after rights are won, thinking the debate and fight are over. The hits kept coming during the effort to achieve equality and gay marriage in Michigan.

Where are you now?

Since moving to Arizona, my advocacy has grown to include animal welfare, centering racial equity in both human and animal well-being. This fall, I begin my Ph.D. in gender studies at Arizona State University, where I'll focus on dismantling anti-Blackness through Black queer theory. Detroit will always ground and guide my identity and scholarship.



Hotter Than July

Continued from page 7

use to push forward.

One of HTJ's most unique elements is its intergenerational presence. I have been mentored by the community leaders of this movement while growing into leadership on my own terms. Being able to break bread with elders and help usher in the next generation in safe spaces with strong foundations feels monumental.

Christopher Ross, a registered nurse and longtime attendee, said that attending HTJ over the years has shown him "you don't have to be afraid of who you really are and the love you have for yourself. You can be who you are and not be fearful and worried about loving

more than ever."

The celebration traditionally begins each week with honoring our ancestors — an emotional release that reminds me of the shoulders I stand on and legacies I carry. It pushes me to continue the work I am charged to do. Over these three decades, I have become a respected mentor and community leader myself.

I've watched the Palmer Park picnic grow into a source of joy, standing at the heart of HTJ. It represents all the elements of what the celebration means. As a family-friendly gathering, people travel from around the world for this beautiful found family reunion. The love felt here is unmatched. It is home.

Pratt notes that "the picnic has been the highlight of all the events over the years. People of all ages feed each other, fellowship, dance, laughter and just have fun together. That is what

community is about. Many of us have grown up in it," he adds.

For me, I am elated to watch families — both chosen and biological — continue to grow and find each other in spaces created especially for them. I am excited when we are supported in ways that only true community can provide. I am proud to see young people discover who they are and flourish in safe spaces, then face the world ready. In a current climate of confusion and political attacks on LGBTQ+ rights, we remain steadfast and focused.

As I reflect on 30 years of HTJ, I have watched a conversation turn into a community movement, a magazine evolve into an organizational empire, and the legacy of our Black LGBTQ+ community be upheld by a continuing hallmark of unity and fellowship. This full-circle moment of celebration is a powerful thing to witness and be part of.

Today, LGBT Detroit operates 15 programs serving thousands of community members annually, while Hotter Than July continues to host nearly 20,000 people each summer. What started as conversations about

visibility and community has grown into North America's leading Black LGBTQ+ organization, proving that when we create space for ourselves, we create space for generations to come.

LGBT Detroit is located at 20025 Greenfield Road in Detroit's Murray Hill neighborhood. For more information about Hotter Than July and year-round programming, visit lgbtdetroit.org.



(Top) Damon "Magic" Percy, Marvin K White, Kalimah "Iocmama" Johnson and Charles Stephens at a Hotter Than July event. Courtesy photo (Bottom) Hotter Than July 2012. Photo: Andrew Potter

and accepting you. You don't have to deal with adversaries who cannot accept the truth. I learned that you be yourself in all your truth and not back down."

HTJ provides safe space where the next generation can see examples and envision who they can become. Ross notes that "people coming out are getting younger, and they need that safe space. There aren't a lot of positive role models and examples in the media, but here at home we have them and need them

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Kyle Neal, Star of ‘The Ultimatum: Queer Love,’ Talks Queer Representation and Reality TV Fame

Neal reflects on growing up in West Michigan and finding authentic LGBTQ+ visibility

BY ELLE WARREN

This year’s Pride Month was fittingly capped off with the long-awaited Season 2 of “The Ultimatum: Queer Love.” As a lesbian prone to watching the most heteronormative reality dating shows (which, to be fair, is most of them), I relish a relatable dynamic.

The reality TV series tests queer couples’ commitment by forcing them to make the ultimate choice: marry or move on. Over eight weeks, couples temporarily split up, enter trial marriages with someone else, then reunite to decide their future. Season 2, which aired earlier this summer, brought six new queer couples to Miami for the experiment and generated buzz around dramatic moments including leaked Spotify playlists, matching tattoos between trial partners and explosive reunion confrontations.

Among the Season 2 couples, Kyle Neal and Bridget Matloff initially found themselves at a crossroads when Kyle issued the ultimatum, ready to take the next step in marriage while Bridget admitted she didn’t “understand the point.” On Ultimatum Day, Bridget surprised everyone by proposing to Kyle, who accepted. At the reunion, the couple revealed they’ve been living together and are happily engaged.

For Neal, offering queer representation that doesn’t adhere to heteronormative ideals was paramount to their interest in being on the show. We chatted about what representation means to them, the realities of being on reality TV and growing up in West Michigan.

Tell me about what your experience growing up queer in West Michigan was like.

Yeah, it’s interesting because I really didn’t know I was queer until I went to college, so I wasn’t in the closet or anything. I think that kind of maybe even speaks to what it was like in West Michigan, meaning I didn’t know any lesbians.

Definitely not in person. Even in the media, I probably knew who Ellen [DeGeneres] was, but I didn’t see myself anywhere.

I was really lucky that the community I had and my family were very accepting of who I was. I was kind of a little quirky and weird, so I never felt like I had to hide who I was. I just never explored sexuality very much until I went to college, and I met queer people who were my age and who were cool and I felt like I could relate to. And that’s when I kind of opened my eyes.

I haven’t really lived in the Midwest as queer, and I hope that people now don’t have that same experience where they don’t see themselves in any queer people.

We got to see on the show your parents being very supportive and loving. So was that your experience from the beginning of coming out?

Yeah, I would say so. I struggled to even talk to them or tell them, because I didn’t really talk to them about relationships in general. So I was kind of wishy-washy a bit. I was like, “Yeah, I’m dating someone. It’s a girl, but I’m not like ‘coming out.’” But they were always supportive of me. And I think they’re just like, “Whatever you want, it’s good with us, as long as you’re happy.” Which is nice.

I’m curious if this being a queer-focused show informed your interest or willingness to be on it?

Yeah, I think it definitely was the main reason I wanted to be on the show, because there’s so few reality shows with queer people, and so I was excited to have the chance to be on one. Especially because I feel like even the queer shows we have, I don’t see a wide range of queer representation within the community.

I feel like there’s still certain stereotypes that you see on shows, and I haven’t seen someone like me



Kyle Neal. Photo: Netflix

who's more non-binary, or even like my relationship. So I think that really informed me to be like, "Oh, I want to be a part of that."

Did you watch Season 1 when it came out?

Yes.

Was there anything that scared you about going on or made you want to go on even more than you already did?

I don't think anything about it made me want to go on, which makes it interesting that I ended up on it. But I think watching Season 1, I don't know if "scared" is the right word, but I wouldn't know how I would connect with any of these people. Even though they were also lesbians and queer, I didn't really see myself in them, interestingly enough. And I also think watching the whole process, it was really scary. It was like, you have to live with someone you just met for three weeks, and it seemed really intense. Which scared me, but I also like a challenge, so it intrigued me too.

I've seen a lot of conversation online of people appreciating the kind of representation that you and Bridget brought to the show. I think there's culturally queer and then there's sexually queer. And I think people are really appreciating, myself included, the gap that you and Bridget filled there. How did you and Bridget prepare to have this experience? What were those conversations like?

I think we probably didn't prepare. I have trouble really trying to prepare for something that feels so unknown, but I will say, I think before we went in, both of us prepared to delve into relationships and know that we would have to be doing a lot of reflection internally.

I would journal a lot to practice getting my feelings out. And meditate. But in terms of preparing, like, "This is what it might look like, and this is what we're going to be doing." I don't think we prepared that much — we probably should have more, maybe. But also because of the process of going on the show, everything is pretty last minute, so you're not even sure if it's a sure thing

until it's pretty close to when you start filming.

Was there anything about being on, either as you were filming or now that it's been released, that really surprised you?

I think with filming, not necessarily anything was surprising, because I kind of knew that reality TV is an interesting thing to be a part of, so I wasn't shocked by anything. I think watching it come out, it's really wild how little they show,

That I'm not sure about, but I will say after I watched, I was like, "This feels like it's been edited by mostly straight people." So I'm curious about if there are queer people editing. I'm not sure.

As queer people, most of us have probably had the experience of feeling like we have to learn to not let other people's judgments or opinions matter. Did you feel like you had to go through that process again in being an openly



Kyle Neal (left) and Bridget Matloff. Photo: Netflix

just because we filmed so much.

And so watching it and thinking about what it was like filming, I was like, "They could make like 10 different shows based on the footage they have." And so that was surprising to me. I knew that it was nine episodes, so obviously it's not going to be that much, but it's just still surprising how little footage they end up showing.

Was there anything that you really wish had been shown that wasn't?

I really wish more of my original relationship with Bridget was shown. I think all of us probably feel that way. I guess that's just not what the show is, wanting to show the original couples that much. So that was kind of disappointing. We didn't really get to see a good date with Bridget and I or the growth [we experienced]. I think just lighter moments weren't shown that much, which is too bad.

Just out of curiosity, speaking of the drama and lack of lighter, joyful moments, are there queer folks involved on the production or editing side of things that you know of?

queer person on this huge platform?

Yeah, I think I did. I had to reinforce that I can't let people's judgment of me stop me from being myself or living how I want to live. And I have to kind of just put it out of my head and not let it affect me. I think going on the show and filming it was good practice for that because in order to even participate, you kind of have to just ignore the cameras and ignore your mind racing about potential judgment and what people see, and I think I wouldn't have been able to even do that if I let that affect me a lot.

You mentioned you haven't really lived in the Midwest since being out as queer. During or after filming, did you at all think, "Oh, man, people back from home who I haven't talked to since I've been out as queer are going to see this..."? Were you nervous of how people who knew a previous version of you might perceive you?

Yeah. I didn't really put much thought into that until it was released, and I

See Kyle Neal, page 24



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Enigma

Puzzle can be found on page 25



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Jon Paul Higgins. Courtesy photo

Doctor Jon Paul Is Here to Help You Love Yourself in ‘Black. Fat. Femme.’

How the educator-turned-author became ‘that bitch’

BY DANA PICCOLI

Jon Paul Higgins, Ed.D, is an educator, cultural critic, social justice leader — and, now, an author. If you’ve spent any time on queer social media in the last few years, you’re likely already familiar with Higgins, also known as Doctor Jon Paul. But if not, the release of their debut book, “Black. Fat. Femme: Revealing the Power of Visibly Queer Voices in Media and Learning to Love Yourself,” will be the perfect introduction.

In “Black. Fat. Femme.,” Doctor Jon Paul delivers a powerful and personal exploration of what it means to live at the intersection of Black, fat, femme and queer

identity. Through sharp media critique and vulnerable storytelling, they spotlight how authentic representation — and the lack of it — shapes how we see ourselves and each other.

The power of queer kinship

During a particularly weary political moment — about two years into Donald Trump’s presidency — Doctor Jon Paul came across drag star Latrice Royale on X. The two soon struck up a kinship.

“She ends up following me on social

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media, and we're going back and forth, just sharing love with one another — and you know, again, still in this really weary, rocky place," said Doctor Jon Paul.

After meeting in person at DragCon, the connection only deepened.

"So I meet her, and like I said, it was very much just immediate — both of us. Like, I didn't expect her to cry," said Doctor Jon Paul. "I'm crying, she's crying, we're hugging each other. And it very much just kind of became: Latrice Royale is now my sister. She's my family."

When Doctor Jon Paul was writing "Black. Fat. Femme.," it was clear that Latrice needed to be a part of it. After reading the chapter about her in the book, Latrice said yes — and penned the introduction.

Who the book is for

"Black. Fat. Femme." is, in some ways, a memoir. Stories and lessons from Doctor Jon Paul's upbringing in rural Compton, California, find the right inroads to connect to the heart — no matter who you are or where you come from.

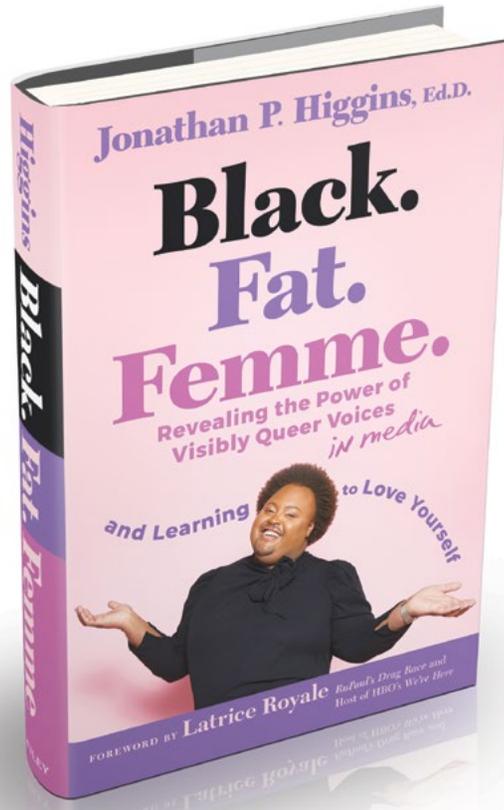
"I wrote this book for the 16-year-old Black kid in the South who is also struggling with finding themselves," said Doctor Jon Paul. "I was living in a very rural part of Southern California at the time I was growing up, and so as much as I don't know the South, I know what it's like to feel like you're looking around and you don't see yourself. I wrote this book for not only that kid who doesn't see themselves and who's scared to be themselves, but I also wrote this book for the dreamer — for the kid who believes in themselves more than the world does."

For Doctor Jon Paul, it's about the exploration of loving — and believing — in yourself.

"We all know what it feels like to not be it," they said. "You know — the world's telling you to be thin. The world is telling you to starve yourself. The world is telling you to be less this and more that. A lot of the voices we have in our head are not ours, and I want folks to read this book and say, 'Wow, it helps me find my voice. The voice that's talking to me in my head, the voice I love hearing. The voice that

is telling me, No, girl, eat the donut. You're OK. You'll be fine. The voice in my head that tells me your Blackness is fine."

"This book really is for everyone,"



they added, "because we all know what it feels like to be the other."

'Becoming that b*tch'

In the chapter called "Becoming That B*tch," Doctor Jon Paul reflects on the journey they've been on — not just of self-love, but of taking up space and creating the life they deserve.

"I used to feel very guilty about liking myself or loving myself," they said. "I used to feel guilty about the femininity I had. I used to feel guilty about wanting to celebrate my Blackness the way that I celebrated. I used to feel guilty about being 'a big mouth,' right? The world used to make me feel like I was the problem. And I think, in a way, becoming that bitch — in the joking way — I walk into rooms and I'm like, 'Move, bitch. Get out my way. I'm in here, and if you don't like it, then leave.' That's the kind of energy."

Promoting yourself as a queer author

Doctor Jon Paul has been working

hard to get the word out about their book — and has some real talk for other queer writers doing the same.

"I think it is imperative that if you are a queer author, regardless of how else you identify, there has to be this element of having the same energy of a white cis het man, who just kind of knows that they're important," they said. "You kind of have to embody that energy."

In other words: "You have to have audacity."

But that constant self-advocacy can be exhausting.

"I've always had to advocate for myself, and I hate it. I hate that I'm always having to be my biggest cheerleader and having to push my own boulder up the hill, while also trying to help other people push theirs."

Lessons learned

Writing a book is a lesson in self-discovery all on its own. So, what did Doctor Jon Paul learn about themselves while writing "Black. Fat. Femme.?"

"I'm just moving different, you know," they said. "I think every day — she's behind me," they added, referring to a poster of the book on the wall opposite their desk. "I come into my office and I look at her... I wrote the book in four months, and I fought like hell to get it published. I don't feel like it's a masterpiece. There are so many things that I could critique, but I feel like, goddammit, I did it. I mean, against the grain."

"I don't get the support... people don't hold Dr. Jon Paul up the way that some other folks do. But I still show up every day, and I still keep doing it. I think this book really taught me how proud of myself I should be."

This article appears courtesy of the News Is Out, the national collaborative of the leading local queer news publishers, including independently owned Between The Lines. Support the advancement of LGBTQ+ equality through solutions-oriented journalism at local and queer-owned publishers across the nation by visiting News Is Out and the media collaborative's partners.

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◀ Kyle Neal

Continued from page 21

had some people from high school reach out. And they're super supportive, but yeah, that was interesting. It didn't really cross my mind. I haven't really kept in touch with people from high school, partly because I did feel so different once I left for college from who I was in high school, and I didn't really know how to navigate that.

How have you been handling this onslaught of attention and people knowing who you are? And just being perceived in general? I ask this in the context of knowing that you and Bridget seem to be amongst the most beloved from the cast — I haven't seen a single bad thing about either of you online — but still, I'm sure that's kind of a big life change.

Yeah, definitely. It feels very new. And I'm mostly happy with the feedback, especially for Bridget. I'm really happy that people see her and love her as much as I do. That's been really nice. We live in L.A. mostly, and I feel like people in public don't really come up to anyone just because there's famous people here. But we were in Virginia for a wedding and these queer people would come up to us, and it was really exciting to just talk to them.

In terms of online stuff, it has been kind of weird to have people know who you are and reaching out to you. I've enjoyed it, though. There's been negative stuff, too, but I really don't let it affect me that much because it was an edited version of me. So if someone thinks a certain thing about me, I can see where they're coming from, but also I can know if it's not true or if it is true.

Have you been doing anything in particular to take care of yourself and your mental health and your boundaries?

Yeah, I think at this point, I have time

where I don't go on my phone because it's constant. You could constantly be checking. And so I think that's been a boundary. It's like, "OK, I'm not going to use my phone for this amount of time or like, at this point, I can check my phone." Other than that, I keep it away.

And I don't go into the comments anymore on TikToks or anything. I just kind of stay back. But the show came out and then we've been traveling, so I feel like there's a lot going on, which has been a good distraction.

What does it mean to you to be a part of this piece of queer, sapphic representation on such a huge platform, especially in the context of our current political moment?

I think it means a lot. I'm really happy to be that representation, especially within the queer community. Like I said, we don't have hardly any reality shows, especially on a platform like Netflix. And then the ones that we have, the representation is still pretty... I don't want to say heteronormative, but it's still like a certain type of lesbian or queer person that I feel like straight people feel more comfortable with.

So I was happy to be a different representation from that, and I'm happy that people are getting to see that, even if it is a small amount. It's still nice we were included in the show in some way, and I think especially with everything that's going on, I'm glad that we have the show.

I know some gay people are like, "I can't watch it. Like, it's too much." And I'm like, that's too bad that it has to be like this because it could have been more joyful, even though there was still so much drama. I think these shows are so interesting, especially with people that were raised as women, because I think we need to be more emotionally intelligent, just to exist. And so our conversations are so much more interesting and nuanced, and I wish you got to see more of that.

But still, I'm glad that we have the show and that it can be a bit of a relief from the hell we're in, to watch the show and to have something we can all be talking about and coming together over.

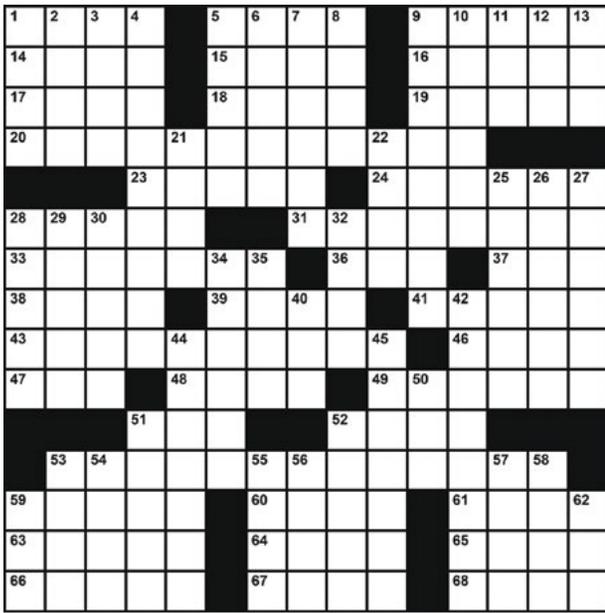
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Enigma

Across

- 1 Cukor's rib donor
- 5 Know, to Frida
- 9 Peter the Great, and more
- 14 "Hi" to Lorca
- 15 Shaft output
- 16 "Gone With the Wind" family name
- 17 "Take a crack ____"
- 18 Home of the NCAA Bruins

- 19 Cut of meat
- 20 Start of a quote from the movie "Enigma"
- 23 "____ Shoes" (Toni Collette movie)
- 24 Defeated, to George Frenn
- 28 Beach of a White Party
- 31 More of the quote
- 33 Confronts boldly
- 36 USPS beat
- 37 k. d. lang's "Big Boned ____"
- 38 Bump off
- 39 Straddled a stallion
- 41 Sows, for example

- 43 More of the quote
- 46 Arab head
- 47 Papers of D.H. Lawrence, e.g.
- 48 Movie theater
- 49 Take stock of
- 51 T. Baldwin's title
- 52 George Michael, for one
- 53 End of the quote
- 59 "Queen of the Hop" singer Bobby
- 60 Marlene Dietrich role in "Blue Angel"
- 61 Come and go
- 63 Valuable strings
- 64 State of fifty million Frenchmen
- 65 Shout at an open call
- 66 Daughter of a gay-friendly prez
- 67 "Screwed again!"
- 68 Like a Muscle Mary who does sit-ups

Down

- 1 Moby Dick chaser
- 2 Love not wisely but too well
- 3 Went down
- 4 It hasn't been available to same-sex couples for long
- 5 "____ Park"
- 6 Prefix with type
- 7 Bat hangout
- 8 Hairy twin
- 9 Does the S in S&M, e.g.
- 10 Makes films in Hollywood
- 11 Org. that comes when you break down
- 12 B&O and Reading

- 13 Posed for Berenice Abbott
- 21 United, to Renee Vivien
- 22 Ill-mannered oaf
- 25 Dictator's control
- 26 She became a minister so she could do gay weddings
- 27 Chicago Bears, e.g.
- 28 Lady's title
- 29 Princess Diana and Diana Ross
- 30 Etching fluids
- 32 Dodgers pitcher Hershiser
- 34 Making straight
- 35 Like spilled seed
- 40 Cube with pips
- 42 Some Rock Hudson movies
- 44 Where to find a Pacific Rim job
- 45 Gay rodeo items
- 50 Caesar's thus
- 51 Bessie of the blues
- 52 A neighbor of Copland?
- 53 Tallulah Bankhead's home st.
- 54 Stats from "A League of Their Own"
- 55 Glenn Burke, formerly
- 56 Tiny amount
- 57 Coward of "The Scoundrel"
- 58 Jodie Foster's "____ Driver"
- 59 Article used by Marlene Dietrich
- 62 "Rhoda" production co.

See p. 21 for answers

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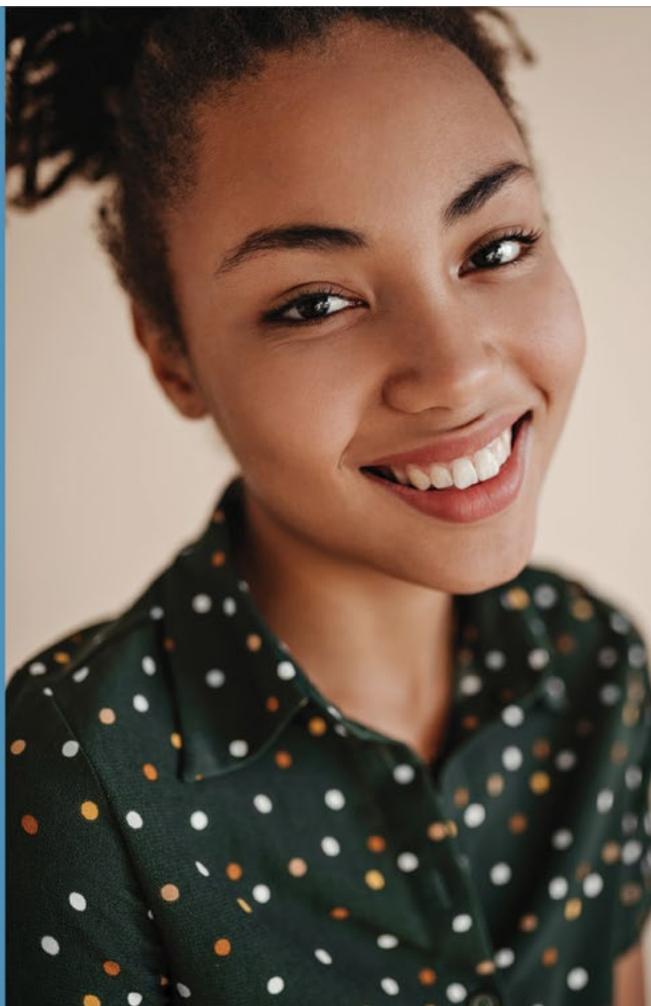
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4 Karmin

Continued from page 10

someone is worried about somebody finding out about their preference — whether it be for religious reasons, because they live in an urban environment, because their family won't be as accepting, maybe if they are in a gang or of a certain culture where this is not something that's acceptable."

She painted a stark picture of the reality facing trans women of color in Michigan: "African American men rather love us in private and kill us in public rather than have anybody know of their association with trans women of color. And that in itself is a powerful statement."

For community members navigating survival sex work or simply meeting new people, Abad offered practical safety advice: "Always be very vigilant of where you're going, look up the area beforehand so you know what to expect. Always send somebody a location, a picture, a screen name, something identifiable about the company that you're going to have or where you're going. So in these cases, unfortunately, if something does happen, we have a starting point to be able to identify how that happened to you and to get you justice."

As the investigation continues, Hudson draws strength from knowing that Wells' case is being taken seriously. "They're taking

this case extremely serious. There's definitely some breakthroughs. A lot of things has been happening. Video, phone records, a lot of things," she said. "We're just sitting and waiting to see what's next."

For Hudson, who has buried many chosen children over the years — to drugs, to HIV/AIDS complications and other early deaths — this loss feels different. "I have never lost a child to any type of violence. And it hits kind of different, especially when it was someone that was super close and dear to you."

Despite her grief, Hudson finds purpose in keeping Wells' memory alive through her work in the community. As both a ballroom mother and someone who extends care beyond the scene, she continues the mission Wells embodied.

"Karmin was a blueprint of what you can overcome. Karmin was a getter. Karmin was resilient. She was determined and she was love. There was nothing that Karmin as an individual could not overcome and do," Hudson said. "She would walk through a wall of fire and come out untouched and unburned because that's how Karmin was."

Information about this case can be shared with Detroit Police at 313-596-2212 or Crime Stoppers at 1-800-SPEAK-UP for those wishing to remain anonymous. Loved ones are accepting donations through GoFundMe at bit.ly/KarminWells to help with Wells' funeral expenses.

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