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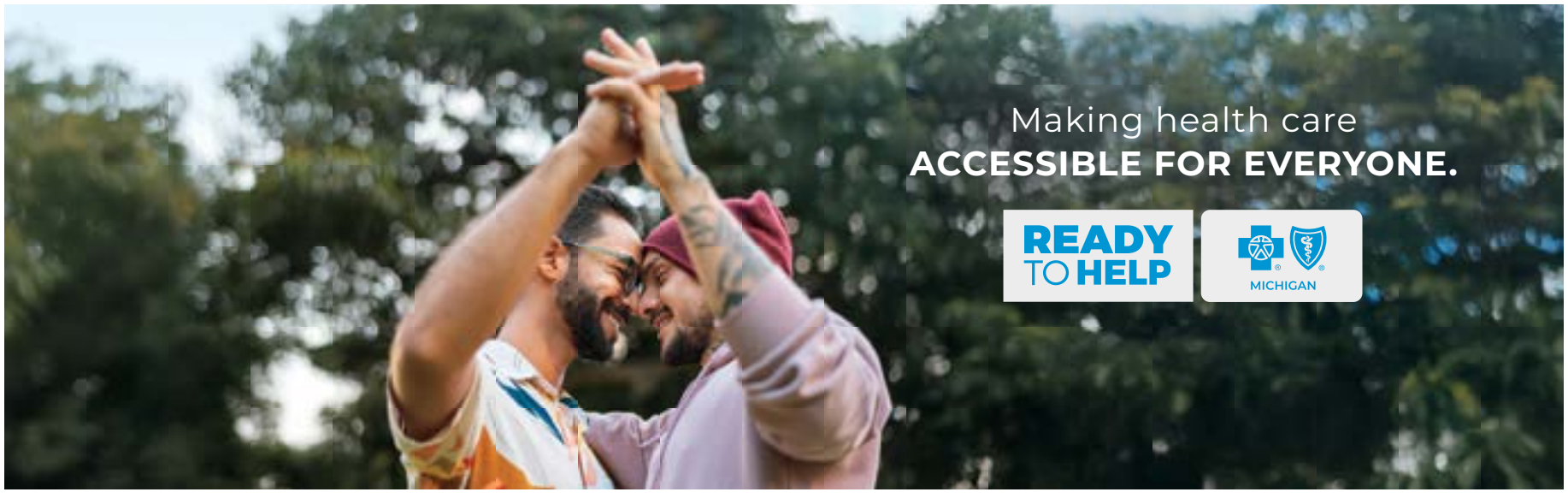

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A 27-year-old undercover officer used this photo of himself to entice Grindr users to communicate with the account, which police claim represented a 15-year-old, though the trial transcript does not show an explicit age acknowledgement. Photo: Newaygo County Sheriff

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5 Queer Things You Can Do Right Now-ish

BY KELLI DUNHAM

It's August, so we're bound by law (the Law of Glitter if not actually the State of Michigan) to remind you how many steaming hot queers will be at these amazing events!

There's comedy that's actually protest, motorcycling that's actually connection and youth Pride that's actually everything we ever wanted as queer kids. Plus, we've got a final nudge for you to take queer health seriously.

Ren Q Dawe. Photo: Instagram/@renqcomedy

1

Crack Up for Change

The celebrated Here to Pee Tour Comedy Tour is finally coming to Michigan, and the tour's hilarious and enthusiastic producer Ren Q Dawe is tickled pink. And blue.

Dawe told BTL, "We are so excited for our Detroit stop — a place with such a long history of protest, resistance and legendary crowds. Which is exactly the kind of energy we're bringing with Here to Pee, to raise funds, raise hell and hopefully raise a few eyebrows in a city we know already knows how to laugh."

Expect a 75–90 minute show bringing together genderqueer artists with bold, brash and bathroom bill–busting comedy.

Aug. 15, 7 p.m., Greenwich Time Pub (130 Cadillac Square, Detroit). Tickets at bit.ly/heretopeedetroit.

Madeleine Kelson. Photo: Instagram/@madeleinekelson

2

Support Small-Town Sparkle

Vermontville Youth Pride is back for the fourth year, and Christine Terpening (president of I'll Be Your Rock, the hosting organization) explains why it's not your average Pride: "Our focus is on queer kids and teens while also being a space for all LGBTQ+ and ally adults to come enjoy and celebrate queer youth," she explains. "We are giving kids the love and admiration of community that many of us wish we had when we were growing up. Every child should come from a community that loves them, supports them and celebrates them."

Entertainment includes Vermontville rocker Ford Faynor and rising trans country songwriter Madeleine Kelson — plus vendors, a queer car show, games and giveaways for kids, including one free meal ticket for every kid under 19. I'll Be Your Rock board member Cassey Tien, educator, teacher of the year and popular TikTok creator, will emcee the event.

Aug. 16, 12-7 p.m, Vermontville Community Center (108 N. Main Street, Vermontville). Information at bit.ly/VYpride.

Queer Moto Ride participants. Photo: Up North Pride

3

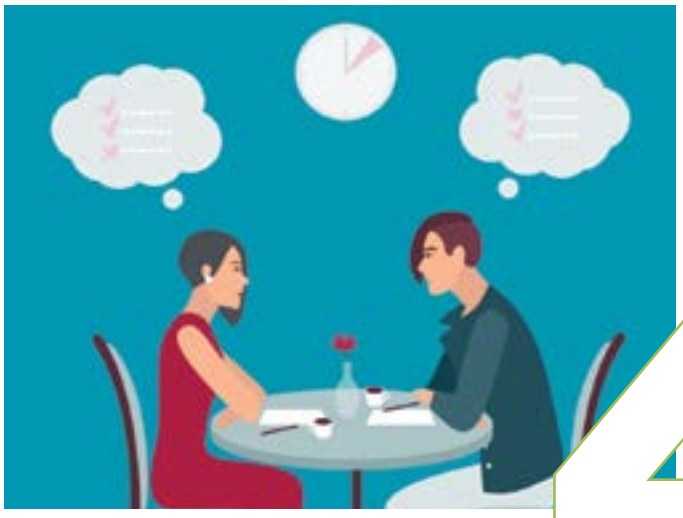
Rev with Riders

If you've ever dreamed of a queer motorcycle ride through the gorgeous Grand Traverse region, this is your sign to pack the saddlebags and make a plan to hit the road for exactly that. The final Queer Moto Ride of the season, hosted by Up North Pride and led by Brendan O'Donnell, brings riders together at Bryant Park and follows a group route through the gorgeous local region with at least one social stop before looping back to the start.

"I have always wanted to foster and experience the social pleasure of motorcycling here," said O'Donnell. "The emphasis is on the ride but also creating space for folks to get to know each other."

Helmet hair, optional. Joy, guaranteed.

Aug. 29, 6 p.m., Bryant Park (1101 Peninsula Drive, Traverse City), bit.ly/upnorthmoto.



4

Flirt Fearlessly

At Vesper's Experiments in Speed Dating: Queer Night, gender doesn't matter, trans and nonbinary folks are affirmed, and you'll meet everyone. Conversations range from scripted to strange to silent, with a vibe that's playful, not performative.

Like the interactions, the snacks and drinks are full of options — though it's a wine bar, you'll find nonalcoholic wine, soda, tea, Casamara Club drinks and cheese plates. Whether you leave with love, friendship or just a good story, it's a win.

Aug. 10, 5 p.m., Vespers Book and Wine (5001 Grand River Ave., Detroit). Learn more at bit.ly/queerspeeddating.

5

Protect Yourself with a Proactive Plan

Look, queer and trans folks in Michigan are dealing with a lot. But one thing we can do right now is start planning for how we take physical care of ourselves and each other, especially with more political chaos looming.

Is your doctor queer-friendly? Do you have an emergency contact who gets it? Got a plan for getting a Pap test without crying? Set aside an hour this week to make a Health To-Do list. Do one thing on it. Then text a friend and help them do the same. Future you (and all your queer parts) will thank you.

Your place, your time, your body, your joy. (But also: It's just one tiny thing. Do it this week.)

Michigan Cop Used Fake Grindr Profile to Arrest Gay Man — But Was It Legal?

Evan Lakatos, convicted in 'GHOST' sting, speaks exclusively to BTL about his upcoming appeal

BY SARAH BRICKER HUNT

Evan Lakatos was just trying to meet someone. Working long hours as a deli operations manager overseeing 64 locations across Michigan, the 34-year-old gay man relied on dating apps to connect with others — especially in rural areas where "there's not anywhere for gay people, lesbians, anybody to go and just sit and hang out and meet," he tells BTL.

During a work trip to Newaygo County in West Michigan in 2021, Lakatos opened Grindr and saw "Taylor Williams" — a profile featuring photos of what appeared to be a fit, muscular adult man. Over the next day and a half, they exchanged more than 100 messages. Lakatos thought he was heading to meet another consenting adult for a casual encounter.

Instead, he walked into a police sting operation that would destroy his career, land him on the sex offender registry and fundamentally alter his understanding of safety and trust.

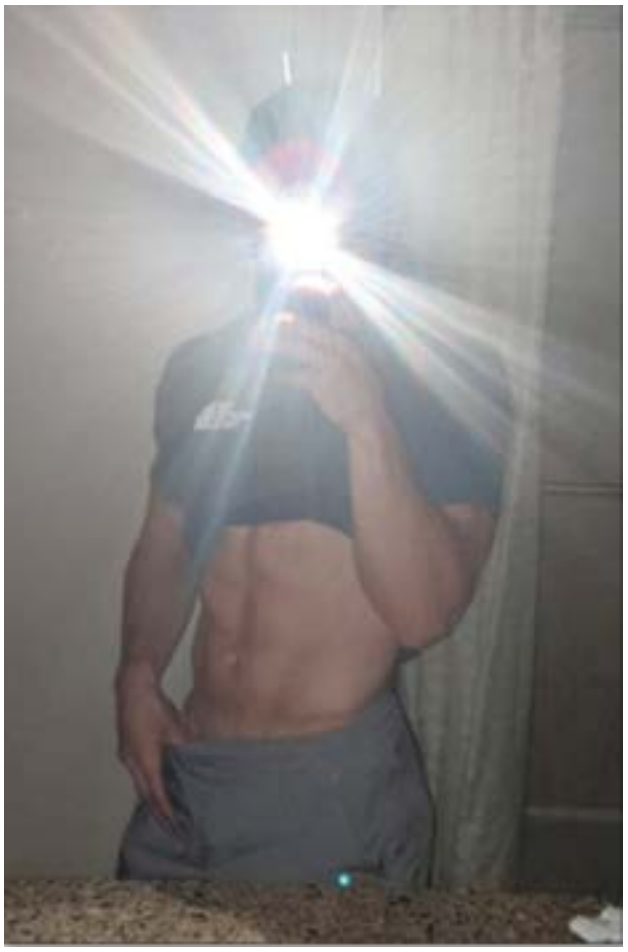
"When everything happened, my best friend and I really recounted stuff, because at first, you think, 'How could you miss something?'" Lakatos recalls. Looking back, he remembers navigating multiple conversations on the app at one time. "I had a very busy job and this was a disconnected conversation. I was answering when I was on a break, on a quick whim when not dealing with employees or customers, just really not paying that much attention."

For many LGBTQ+ people like Lakatos, especially those in smaller communities, dating apps aren't just convenient — they're essential. "The apps are really one of the main ways we communicate with each other," Lakatos explains. "Whether it's pure social media like Facebook or using dating apps just as a way to socialize."

In Muskegon, where Lakatos lives, he says, "we don't have a gay bar anymore and people don't necessarily want to leave their house." The apps provide what feels like a safer alternative to the uncertainties of meeting strangers in person.

But that sense of safety proved illusory for Lakatos. What he didn't know was that "Taylor" was actually a 27-year-old police officer who was working undercover in Fremont, about an hour north of Grand Rapids, as part of a multijurisdictional task force operation targeting people allegedly seeking sex with minors.

To create the Grindr profile for the Taylor account, his birthdate was falsified during the signup process by a member of the task force, as the app requires users to verify they are at least 18 years old. After creating a profile with a fake adult birthdate, Grindr's "ghost mode" feature was used to hide Taylor's age from other users.



A 27-year-old undercover officer used these photos of himself to entice Grindr users to communicate with the account, which police claim represented a 15-year-old, though the trial transcript does not show an explicit age acknowledgement. Photos: Newaygo County Sheriff

When reached for comment, Grindr provided BTL with this statement: "At Grindr, we are committed to upholding high standards of trust and user safety. Grindr has a strict policy prohibiting impersonation in any form. Any activity involving undercover stings, false identities or deception by third parties is in direct violation of this policy."

The undercover sting that Lakatos was caught up in was not unique. Similar task forces are now operating throughout Michigan with minimal apparent oversight. Dominica Convertino, Lakatos' appellate attorney with the State Appellate Defender Office, said they are operating "all over the state. Some are multiple counties working together. Some are a single county, effectuating their own task force." Convertino has been working alongside Katherine Marcuz, managing attorney at the State Appellate Defender Office, who is serving as second chair on the case. The two have worked together to examine the tactics police used both during the sting and throughout Lakatos' arrest, as well as his trial representation.

According to Timothy Doman, the attorney representing Jayneel Jade in a separate, pending Michigan Supreme Court case involving similar police sting tactics, these operations originated with Genesee County Sheriff Chris Swanson's "GHOST" (Genesee Human Oppression Strike Team) initiative. Doman said Genesee deputies have partnered with agencies around the state to teach them how to conduct these stings, claiming to have performed operations in more than 40 counties. The outcome of the People v. Jade case, which is not expected for many months, could fundamentally change the way police are required to operate similar task force operations.

At a press conference following Lakatos' arrest, Swanson described developing "a playbook" for these operations and training other agencies across Michigan. The operation that netted Lakatos was part of a coordinated effort involving multiple counties where six men were arrested over two nights in August 2021. The stings focused on various dating apps including the straight dating app Meet Me, Grindr, Sniffies and an adult escort website, Skip the Games.

The Michigan State Police, which oversees multijurisdictional task forces, has not responded to requests for comment on Lakatos' case or these undercover initiatives in general.

Did police follow their own protocols?

The exchange between Lakatos and the undercover officer reveals the subtle — and problematic — nature of these operations. Over 20 hours of messaging on Grindr and later, via text message, the officer never clearly stated he was underage. The closest reference came buried

in their conversation: "My cousin finally got the room for me I guess you have to be older than 15 to get a room." The age of consent in Michigan is 16.

Lakatos' response was immediate and focused elsewhere, still determined to verify Taylor's identity: "How rude of them. You have other pics?"

"It's a day and a half of conversation fit in little snippets when you may be talking with other individuals at the same time," Lakatos explains. The hotel room comment didn't register as significant — he was multitasking at work and focused on getting more photos to verify he wasn't being catfished since the photo provided by the officer only displayed a shirtless, muscular torso.

What makes the conversation particularly troubling is that the officer, not Lakatos, initiated and escalated the sexual content. The undercover officer wrote: "I want the dominant man to tell me what he wants" and, later, "Tell me more daddy." When Lakatos repeatedly asked for face photos to confirm the person's identity, the officer deflected with sexual offers instead of providing verification.

The officer, posing as Taylor, also persistently pressured Lakatos to bring alcohol — despite Lakatos making no independent mention of it — with messages like "I LOVE white claws" and "are you bringing me the drinks tonight?" This alcohol would later be used against him at trial as evidence he intended to furnish drinks to a minor.

According to testimony from Detective Nicole Loomis, who helped create the decoy profile, the task force was required to follow specific protocols that were "the whole crux of the investigation," including that:

- The chatter must clearly state they are under 16, with examples like "I'm not 16," "I'm 13," "I'm 14"
- The suspect must acknowledge that the chatter is underage
- The suspect must be the first to bring up sex
- Age disclosures should happen via text message, not on the original platform

In Lakatos' case, officers seem to have violated each of these protocols. The ambiguous hotel comment occurred on Grindr, not text. There was no clear age statement. Lakatos never acknowledged speaking with someone underage. And the officer initiated sexual conversation.

Even more problematic, when officers in similar operations worked different cases, they were explicit about age. Convertino points to court transcripts from several Michigan Court of Appeals cases that show officers made direct statements about being underage, including "I'm 15 ... I'm Actually 15" in People v. Jade, "I'm 15 ... Ur cool with me being 15?" in People v. Stepka, and "i'm really only 15" in People v. Newby. The female officer who created the decoy profile in Lakatos' case testified that she also gave explicit age disclosures in her other cases, though not in the specific operation that led to his charges.

"That's very different," Lakatos notes, adding that a similarly clear disclosure from Taylor would have led him to end the conversation immediately.

Was this police entrapment?

Convertino said that when she tells anyone the basic facts of Lakatos' case, "every single person has the same exact response, which is, 'It sounds like entrapment.'" She was surprised to find that Lakatos' trial attorney had never raised this defense — a missed opportunity that is a central tenant of her appellate case.

Michigan's entrapment law offers two theories. The first examines whether police impermissibly induced someone not ready to commit a crime. The second focuses on whether police engaged in "reprehensible conduct" that cannot be tolerated by the court system.

Convertino is arguing on appeal that Lakatos was entrapped and that his trial attorney was ineffective for failing to raise this defense. Under Michigan's "objective test" for entrapment, courts examine whether police conduct would induce a law-abiding person to commit a crime, or whether officers engaged in "reprehensible conduct."

Convertino said the systematic violation of the task force's own protocols, the use of adult photos to lure targets and the ambiguous age reference all point to reprehensible conduct. She described the tactics as essentially "a bait and switch of an innocent man who thought he was talking to an adult man on Grindr."

The appeal will take several months to work through the court system.

Meanwhile, Dr. Robert Sidelinger, a communications expert at Oakland University who specializes in interpersonal communication including online communication and queer identity and relationships, analyzed the conversation between Lakatos and the officer in an expert report supporting the appeal. His conclusion: the exchange was "consistent with that of two consenting adult gay men in online settings."

Convertino said the prosecution used the Grindr messages "to present the use of terms like 'daddy' and 'boy' as being sexually deviant or predatory" without understanding how these terms are used within the gay community to convey meanings unrelated to age.

It's not just the gay community that uses these terms colloquially. Are we really to believe that Kelis was bringing literal underage boys to the yard based on the quality of her milkshake?

Incredulously, the jury seemed to have taken this term literally when it came to Lakatos' conversation with Taylor.

In everyday conversational constructs familiar to many BTL readers, terms like "daddy" and "boy" that prosecutors suggested indicated awareness of youth actually have specific meanings within gay male communication that have nothing to do with age. Sidelinger explained that these terms represent power dynamics between consenting adults rather than references to actual age.

Sidelinger noted that the officer playing Taylor "set the tone of the communication exchange" with lines like "I love mature men" that he initiated, leading Lakatos to adapt his responses accordingly — exactly what would happen between consenting adults online.

The arrest and aftermath

When Lakatos arrived at the hotel expecting to meet an adult, he was arrested. "Before then, I'd never interacted with the police. I had one speeding ticket on my record," he says, adding, "I grew up believing to trust the police, that they're there for you — that they're there to help you. They're not there to make you incriminate yourself or anything like that."

But that night, his understanding of how police operate — and, in many ways, his entire worldview — would shift.

During the interrogation, officers employed tactics that experts identify as increasing the risk of false confessions. They falsely claimed they had clear evidence that the chatter had disclosed his age multiple times. Under pressure and having never been in legal trouble before, Lakatos eventually agreed that the chatter "did say he was under 16." "I've learned since that people tend to 'freeze or fawn,'" he says. "You either freeze up or you fawn, which means you'll do anything people tell you to do. When you're in that moment, and they're sitting there staring at you with a camera in your face and you've just gone through one of the most traumatic things you've ever had to deal with in your life, how can they expect to get anything else other than what they're absolutely wanting. They'll get it out of you no matter what."

> *"It was all about how bad we could make Mr. Lakatos look and get away with it. They don't care. It's all about their numbers and their money and their image."*
>
> — Timothy Doman, an attorney representing Jayneel Jade caught in a similar police sting

A comprehensive digital forensic analysis of Lakatos' phone — containing more than 140,000 pages of data, 219,541 images, 2,453 videos and thousands of messages — revealed zero evidence he had ever sought inappropriate contact with minors.

The consequences began immediately. After more than 12 years in his managerial role, Lakatos was fired under a company policy allowing termination if an employee did "something that would make the company look bad," he says.

"All your information is publicly available for anybody at any time," Lakatos explains about being on the sex offender registry. "It's automatically assumed [to be] bad. They don't list any specifics. People just judge off of you being on it. Period."

Being on the public sex offender registry has made him a target for scammers who call pretending to be police, claiming he's missed a requirement and demanding money to avoid jail time. "They have all of your information off the registry," he says. "The first time I was very close to falling for it."

The scammers' tactics are sophisticated, claiming to be from local sheriff's departments and demanding payment for supposed violations. The first time it happened, Lakatos was so frightened he drove to the sheriff's office, only to learn he'd been targeted for fraud.

While his parents have stood beside him, even sitting in the courtroom as intimate, sexually charged conversations were read aloud, multiple friends abandoned him. "I lost several friends that had been friends for the better part of 15 years," he says. "Most of them have since apologized after watching my court proceedings, after watching everything. But you knew me for 15 years. Why did you decide that you were going to have a snap judgment when you knew me like that?"

Lakatos soon discovered that criminal conviction affects every aspect of daily life. "They call it the 'paper ceiling,'" Lakatos notes. "Whether it's a degree you lack even though you have work experience, or a felony of any kind, you're looked at differently because of this piece of paper."

At sentencing, even the trial judge expressed concerns. Having presided over a few cases from the same task force, the judge noted that "the undercover agents [in this case] could have been a little bit more explicit in terms of the age requirement."

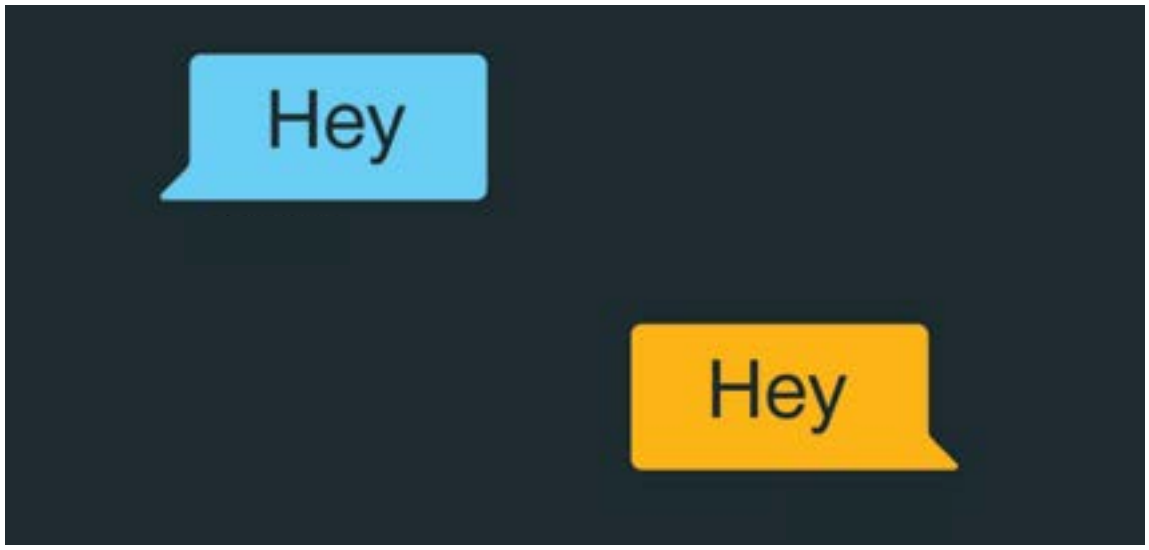
The judge compared Lakatos' case unfavorably to others where officers said things like "I'm 15 years old, I

See **People v. Lakatos**, page 9

Staying Safe on Queer Dating Apps

What to know when law enforcement enters the chat

BY CHRIS AZZOPARDI



In light of a controversial Michigan case now under appeal — where a gay man was convicted after engaging with a decoy profile on Grindr — the alarm has been raised: What does safety look like on dating and hookup apps when the risks aren't just about personal harm, but potential entrapment by law enforcement?

Our story beginning on page six details the case of Evan Lakatos, who was caught up in a police sting targeting gay men on Grindr in Newaygo County. The controversial conviction has triggered concerns about potential law enforcement entrapment on dating apps and the misinterpretation of LGBTQ+ cultural language by officers.

Local attorney Rudy Serra — a former judge with 41 years of legal experience — has represented several clients in cases similar to Lakatos's, where he believes no actual crime was committed. According to Serra, similar undercover operations likely happen more frequently than most people realize.

"It was distressing to hear about this case," he tells BTL. "I do get calls still from people who are threatened with prosecution or the prosecution process has started. It costs money to hire an attorney to represent you, and it costs even more money to appeal. So a lot of the time, people will take a guilty plea offer that gives them some sort of advantage, like a lower sentence when, in my opinion, they didn't do anything that was illegal."

LGBTQ+ legal experts and historians like Serra argue that sting operations without clear safeguards risk a return to a time when police commonly sought to criminalize queerness versus taking authentic steps to protect minors. Undercover stings like the one that Lakatos was caught up in represent a perfect storm of law enforcement overreach, cultural misunderstanding and the disproportionate targeting of LGBTQ+ spaces.

Whether you're swiping, chatting or planning a meetup, it's essential to follow expert-informed, culturally aware safety guidelines — especially within a legal system that often fails to recognize the nuances of queer communication.

1. Be aware of vague or ambiguous age references.

Law enforcement stings often hinge on unclear age cues. If someone mentions being under 18 — even indirectly — exit the conversation immediately. Legal experts advise:

- **Don't guess.** If age is hinted at — "just a kid," "still in high school" or "barely legal" — assume risk and disengage.
- **Ask directly or don't proceed.** You are within your rights to ask someone's age before continuing. If the answer is under 18, block and report.

"Make a clear statement: I will not be meeting you if you're under age 18. I'm not interested in a minor. Clear, unequivocal language," recommends Jay Kaplan, staff attorney for the ACLU of Michigan's LGBTQ+ Project. "Make it clear in that conversation, even if it's not with undercover cops."

Even if you're not talking to law enforcement, your conversations can still be reviewed later — for example, if a minor's parent discovers the exchange and turns it over to police as part of a legal investigation. Screenshot and document conversations if something feels off, especially if you disengage due to an age concern.

2. Understand that LGBTQ+ language can be misconstrued.

Terms like "daddy," "boy" or "son" are part of queer adult vernacular — not literal references. But outside the community and especially in legal contexts like People v. Lakatos, these terms can be dangerously misinterpreted.

In an expert report written in support of Lakatos's appeal, Dr. Robert Sidelinger, a communications expert at Oakland University who specializes in interpersonal communication including online communication and queer identity and relationships, concluded that comments such as "Tell me more daddy" — sent by the decoy, who also baited Lakatos by saying "I hope you like younger boys," to which he replied "I like younger" — are "not out of the ordinary in communicative exchanges between two gay men — especially exchanges that are flirtatious and sexually suggestive."

"Understanding these communication nuances is essential to accurately interpret the communication thread between Mr. Lakatos and the decoy," he wrote in his report.

Without cultural competency and clear protocols that officers actually adhere to, these stings don't prevent the exploitation of minors — they just recreate the policing of queer desire. To that end, Kaplan says, "It just points out that you have to be so incredibly careful with online communications. It's very unfortunate."

To reduce the risk of misunderstanding, consider avoiding coded language when speaking with new or anonymous profiles — at least until age is clearly established and trust is built. Still, as Serra points out, using terms like "boy" or "daddy" isn't inherently illegal.

"I haven't really heard recently about anyone who was arrested because they called a police officer daddy or a police officer called them daddy," Serra says. "I'm sure it goes on. And they arrest people based on conversations, based on words that are exchanged between two people that are absolutely not illegal."

3. Watch for inconsistencies in profiles.

Decoy profiles created by law enforcement are often inconsistent — claiming to be 15 but using adult photos, or listing age over 18 while implying otherwise.

Red flags include conflicting age indicators and dodging your questions.

"If there's any question in your mind, bring that question up," Kaplan urges. "Make it absolutely clear that you're not going to engage with a minor."

Serra emphasizes Kaplan's suggestion if there's any question someone may be a minor: "Volunteer that [information:] 'I am not interested in hooking up with someone under the age of 16,' and 'I am not interested in anyone who wants to receive or send money or anything else of value in return for sex. This is totally voluntary.' It's got to be consensual: 'I'm going to request your consent for everything I do, and if you consent, then we can go ahead and assume that it's legal.' But consent is the key, really."

4. Understand your rights if arrested.

If you're approached by law enforcement, whether online or in person, remember:

- You do not have to speak without a lawyer.
- Ask: "Am I free to go?" If yes, leave. If no, ask for a lawyer immediately.
- Don't consent to searches of your phone or home without a warrant.
- Save messages and document everything.

Serra emphasizes that police sometimes misinterpret online conversations, leading to wrongful arrests. Often, people are targeted not for illegal actions, he says, but for lawful speech or interactions that officers mistakenly assume are criminal.

"They arrest people based on conversations, based on words that are exchanged between two people

See **Grindr Safety**, page 11

People v. Lakatos
Continued from page 7

turn 16 in 3 weeks," calling Lakatos' case "a passing comment that maybe could have been construed as a joke." The judge also acknowledged that "it didn't help that they had this full-grown male that was very muscular."

The broader pattern

Jay Kaplan, staff attorney for the ACLU of Michigan's LGBTQ+ Project, emphasized that these operations reflect a systemic problem that has persisted for decades. Kaplan pointed to the Rouge Park undercover sting as a prime example. In that operation, officers posing as civilians would approach or follow men they assumed were gay, make eye contact and try to provoke a response. If the man responded in any way that officers deemed suggestive — even a glance or a comment — he would be arrested under vague ordinances such as "Annoying Persons" or "Solicitation and Accosting." The City of Detroit agreed to pay $170,000 in damages and attorneys fees in the settlement of the lawsuit filed by the ACLU on behalf of six men and the Triangle Foundation (now Equality Michigan).

"You have to question the whole operation, this kind of entrapment," Kaplan tells BTL regarding the People v. Lakatos case. "Why are you putting photos of a 27 year old [online]?" he asks. "Obviously, if you're trying to catch people who want to engage in sex with people who are underage, you probably would want to show pictures of somebody who is definitely underage, right?"

Kaplan argues that the ambiguous age reference doesn't meet legal standards. "The person did not say 'I'm a minor,' did not say 'I'm under age 18,' or any of that. It was an offhand comment," he says. "I think we do assume if we go on an app like Grindr, these are going to be people 18 years and older, unless someone makes it very clear to you that they're not."

Doman sees a troubling pattern in these operations statewide. He said the tactics "run the gamut from very straightforward revelations of 'I'm actually 15' versus trying to almost sneak it in so the target doesn't notice." He said this "certainly tees up the inference that police are simply interested in arresting people for the sake of charging them." And, while the sting related to Lakatos' case involved official law enforcement, that's not always the case.

According to Lakatos' research, someone can "literally take a class online and watch a video and you're certified to [go undercover to] do this." Indeed, through programs like Perverted-Justice, the civilian organization behind the "To Catch a Predator" TV series, non-police volunteers often pose as minor decoys online. According to reports about their operations, prospective volunteers undergo background checks and training including learning how to set up a profile, chat online and gather evidence. The organization has "65 volunteers trained as chatroom decoys" among thousands of registered users, suggesting relatively accessible entry requirements for those assisting with online sting operations.

> *"You have to question the whole operation, this kind of entrapment. Why are you putting photos of a 27 year old [online]? Obviously, if you're trying to catch people who want to engage in sex with people who are underage, you probably would want to show pictures of somebody who is definitely underage, right?"*
>
> — Jay Kaplan, staff attorney for the ACLU of Michigan's LGBTQ+ Project

Even when age disclosures are more explicit, Doman argues the fundamental problem remains: "Police are not investigating crimes; they are creating crimes and trolling for people to commit them. They're doing nothing to actually combat child sex trafficking. I think these stings are more virtue-testing ploys than a bona fide effort to catch actual predators."

Swanson has framed these operations differently, claiming in the press conference following Lakatos' arrest that "anybody who comes to have sex with an underage boy or girl is engaged in human trafficking" and that most arrestees "have no criminal history. Nine out of 10 of them have never had any brush with the law." But this admission that most targets have no criminal background raises questions about whether these operations are actually identifying dangerous predators or simply creating crimes where none previously existed.

The systematic violation of the task force's own protocols, the use of adult photos to lure targets and the ambiguous age reference all point to operations that may be more about generating arrests than protecting actual children.

"It was all about how bad we could make Mr. Lakatos look and get away with it," Doman reflects. "They don't care. It's all about their numbers and their money and their image."

This numbers-focused approach aligns with the public messaging from these operations. At the press conference announcing Lakatos' arrest, Swanson claimed that "one predator identified saves the lives of 25 future victims," stating that "arresting six has potentially protected 150 victims." But such statistics mask the reality that operations like the one that got Lakatos arrested may be ensnaring people with no predatory intent while police resources aren't being leveraged against confirmed child sex predators.

Lakatos spent 71 days in jail, an experience that illuminated broader systemic problems. Overcrowded cells meant sleeping on the floor in a room where 15 men shared a 12-bed room. He suspects that poor food was intentionally inadequate to force inmates to spend money at the commissary, which he says is owned by the same company that provides meals. Perhaps more troubling: "Every day in jail is $30. So when you get out, you have a giant bill that you're now responsible for."

"You exit with this big bill," he explains, describing a system designed to profit from incarceration. Phone calls cost $3.50 for 15 minutes. Medications require payment from the incarcerated person. Even basic necessities like cups must be purchased from the commissary. Because he had support from the outside, he was able to stay well supplied and shared as much as he could with other prisoners who lacked outside help.

The psychological impact of his arrest and incarceration has been severe. "It took me a long time afterwards and I did seek out therapy and professional help because it was such a jarring change to my life," he says. His therapist helped him understand: "You thought you were being [safe] and so many things happened because you thought you were safe but you weren't."

During the trial, any illusion that Lakatos retained any right to privacy all but vanished. Newaygo County streams court proceedings on YouTube, meaning Lakatos' most intimate conversations were broadcast publicly. "You have zero privacy afterwards," he says. "It's

See **People v. Lakatos**, page 22

Michigander Pete Buttigieg Adds Compassionate Perspective to Trans Youth Sports Debate

Former transportation secretary calls for thoughtful, community-level approach to 'fairness'

BY SARAH BRICKER HUNT

Former U.S. Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg offered nuanced comments on transgender youth participation in sports during an NPR interview on July 28, emphasizing compassion while acknowledging concerns about fairness.

"The approach starts with compassion," Buttigieg told "Morning Edition" host Steve Inskeep. "Compassion for transgender people, compassion for families, especially of young people who are going through this, and also empathy for people who are not sure what all of this means for them."

Pete Buttigieg at the 2024 Democratic National Convention. Photo: Michael Key/Washington Blade

When asked whether a parent concerned about their child facing a trans kid in girls' sports "has a case," Buttigieg said, "Sure." However, he rejected blanket federal policies like those being enacted by the Trump administration.

"These decisions should be in the hands of sports leagues and school boards and not politicians, least of all politicians in Washington trying to use this as a political pawn," Buttigieg told NPR.

The former mayor's comments come amid heightened political tensions over transgender rights. Recent polling shows public opinion has shifted against inclusion of trans athletes, with a June 2025 Gallup poll finding 69% of U.S. adults believe trans athletes should only play on teams matching their gender assigned at birth.

Buttigieg acknowledged the complexity of the issue, noting different sports and age levels require different considerations. "I think that chess is different from weightlifting, and weightlifting is different from volleyball, and middle school is different from the Olympics," he told NPR. "So that's exactly why I think that we shouldn't be grandstanding on this as politicians. We should be empowering communities, organizations and schools to make the right decisions."

Since returning to office in January, President Donald Trump has signed executive orders banning transgender girls and women from playing on female sports teams, among other restrictions on LGBTQ+ rights.

The Supreme Court is set to weigh in on the legalities of transgender sports bans, having agreed to hear two related cases in its upcoming term beginning in October.

The debate has reached Michigan, where GOP lawmakers recently called on the Michigan High School Athletic Association to adopt policies complying with Trump's executive order banning transgender girls from female sports teams. In March 2025, the Michigan House of Representatives passed a non-binding resolution urging the MHSAA to ban transgender girls from participating in girls' sports and adhere to Trump's executive order. However, the small scale of the issue is evident in the numbers: the MHSAA reports just two transgender athletes currently play on high school teams statewide out of about 180,000 total athletes.

LGBTQ+ advocacy groups have warned that such bans affect far more than the small number of trans student-athletes. According to GLAAD, fewer than 10 transgender student-athletes compete among the NCAA's 510,000 athletes, but bans have led to documented cases of cisgender girls being falsely accused of being trans and subjected to harassment or invasive screening.

In the same NPR interview, Buttigieg addressed broader Democratic Party strategy following the 2024 election losses. He warned that Democrats shouldn't try to restore everything that Trump has dismantled, arguing the party has been "too attached to a status quo that has been failing us for a long time."

"It is wrong to burn down the Department of Education, but I actually think it's also wrong to suppose that the Department of Education was just right in 2024," Buttigieg said, suggesting Democrats need to embrace change rather than simply returning to pre-Trump policies.

Buttigieg also discussed what he called "the politics of fear," saying the fear of political retribution or violence "is more real than at any point in my lifetime." He advocated for "a politics of courage" as the only antidote to fear-based politics.

The former transportation secretary, who has grown a beard since leaving office, avoided questions about whether he would run for president in 2028 or whether he would shave the facial hair for a potential campaign.

Rep. Josh Schriver. Photo: Michigan Advance

Rep. Josh Schriver Targets Elliott-Larsen LGBTQ+ Protections in Latest Attack

Does this on-the-record racist MAGA rep even have a job?

BY SARAH BRICKER HUNT

He's baaaack. And as per usual, wow, he's messy.

Just months after getting publicly humiliated by State Sen. Jeremy Moss (D-Southfield) for his failed anti-marriage resolution, State Rep. Josh Schriver (R-Oxford) is taking another swing at Michigan's LGBTQ+ community.

On July 29, the chaos goblin introduced HB 4751, which would strip sexual orientation and gender identity protections from the Elliott-Larsen Civil Rights Act — essentially trying to erase the hard-won anti-discrimination protections that were expanded to include LGBTQ+ Michiganders in 2023.

Apparently, someone forgot to tell Schriver that his last performance left him publicly humiliated, nationally shamed and literally running from the room.

The legislation, which has been referred to the House Government Operations Committee, has attracted five Republican co-sponsors including Matt Maddock (R-Milford), Joseph Fox (R-Wyoming), Cameron Cavitt (R-Cheboygan), Gregory Markkanen (R-Hancock) and Steve Carra (R-Three Rivers). Because apparently misery loves company.

This latest attack on LGBTQ+ rights follows Schriver's February attempt to urge the Supreme Court to overturn same-sex marriage. That effort spectacularly backfired when Moss, the out state senator who announced his candidacy for U.S. Congress in May, confronted Schriver at his own press conference, delivering a passionate defense of marriage equality that left the Oxford representative fleeing without taking questions.

During that February press conference, perennial main character

See **Schriver**, page 20

Continued from page 8

that are absolutely not illegal," he tells BTL. "It is not a crime for a grownup to approach another grownup in public and ask that person if they are interested in going somewhere private and having sex. And yet people get arrested for that because the police don't know the law. They think that that's a crime. It never has been. We have a First Amendment, after all."

His warning underscores the importance of knowing your rights and being cautious — especially in digital spaces where misunderstandings can escalate quickly into legal trouble.

5. Know the risk of talking to someone who ghosts their age.

Some dating and hookup apps, including Grindr, allow users to hide certain profile information — such as age — through features like "ghost mode." But according to Serra, this lack of transparency can put users at risk.

"I didn't even know that they had a way to hide your age," he says, "but when word of that is more widely known, people are going to stop using it because they can't be sure that the other people on the app are grownups."

In the Lakatos case, court documents from the appeal noted that the 27-year-old police officer used Grindr to lure the defendant, but had enabled the ghost mode setting to conceal his age. As we noted in the Lakatos story on page six, Grindr explicitly states it does not verify the date of birth beyond self-reporting.

Still, should apps like Grindr require age to be visible in order to protect users?

"If they're allowing people to hide their age, they would have to somehow strengthen the disclaimer at the beginning of the app or do something so that everyone is making a clear statement that they are over the age of consent," Serra says. "And if they're not doing that, that's a real disservice to the people who use the app."

6. If you've been targeted, you're not alone.

People v. Lakatos is far from an isolated case — similar incidents have been happening for decades. LGBTQ+ individuals are frequently misunderstood in legal settings, and laws surrounding digital communication still haven't caught up with queer realities.

In Serra's report on the "Bag a Fag" operation — a slang phrase police were using in a series of undercover operations in the late '90s, according to the former Triangle Foundation (now Equality Michigan) — he highlighted the systemic problems behind these tactics. In the report, titled "Police Misconduct, Entrapment and Crimes Against Gay Men," Serra makes a point that remains relevant in today's political climate: "A clear ongoing pattern of activity is evident in Michigan. This reflects a nationwide pattern. The number of undercover projects now operating tends to confirm an election year 'tough on crime' political motivation as well. This constitutes political persecution of gay men."

"Sometimes there would be cops trying to catch people," Kaplan recalls. "They knew they could make money from it. This person could [get] on the sex offender list, which we've been challenging over the years."

Regarding Equality Michigan, Michigan's LGBTQ+ political advocacy group, Serra said, "one person told me that they had called and they were told we don't do that kind of stuff anymore. So I wonder exactly what they're doing when they get calls from gay men in particular who are being unfairly targeted and prosecuted."

According to Serra, the organization — when it operated as the Triangle Foundation — had once been more directly involved in supporting LGBTQ+ individuals facing police entrapment and similar forms of discrimination.

BTL reached out to Executive Director Erin Knott, who said, "Police entrapment and the broader pattern of targeting LGBTQ+ people remain serious concerns — and they're not just issues of the past."

"At Equality Michigan, we hear from individuals who have been impacted by law enforcement bias, and our Advocates for Community Empowerment (ACE) team works to connect them with the resources they need, including referrals to affirming defense attorneys. While police entrapment is not a central focus of our organization's work, we take every inquiry seriously and strive to ensure people are supported."

If you feel you've been entrapped or unfairly targeted:

- Contact the ACLU and other LGBTQ+ legal advocacy groups like Equality Michigan
- Seek therapy or peer support through Affirmations to process trauma
- Know that you are not alone — and that support is available through lawyers like Serra

The reality is that being queer online comes with risks that straight people rarely have to think about. It's frustrating, and it's unfair. But the truth is, anyone who's used a dating app — queer or not — has probably sent a message they wouldn't want displayed on a giant screen in a courtroom. That kind of scrutiny can twist even innocent flirtation into something that looks very different.

Knowledge is power — and community is protection. Keep these tips in mind, trust your instincts, and remember that there are people fighting to make these spaces safer for all of us.

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CREEP OF THE WEEK

Democratic Attorneys General Take on Trump Over Trans Healthcare. Finally.

BY D'ANNE WITKOWSKI

As I write this, the President of the United States of America is busy posting about how hot he thinks Sydney Sweeney is and that Taylor Swift is "NO LONGER HOT." Just a reminder that these are very normal times.

Speaking of social media, I was put in Bluesky jail for 24 hours for a post about RFK Jr. in which I may have reacted badly to the news that RFK Jr. thought cancer screenings were like, woke, or something. I've had cancer twice. My twin sister has had cancer twice. Cancer killed my father. (Between the three of us, by the way, there are four different kinds of cancer. Cancérmon GO! champs, over here.) So, yeah, I may have taken that a little personally. Also I think it's morally neutral at worst for a person who has had cancer to wish cancer upon another person if said person actually has a tremendous amount of power over cancer screening recommendations.

I also called him "an absolute piece of shit" and I stand by that. To appoint and confirm someone with his ignorance and hubris to head the Department of Health and Human Services is tantamount to declaring war on the entire country. An outside enemy could only wish to wield that much harm. And we have Republicans to thank for that.

> *When we're arguing over the definition of "healthcare," we aren't just arguing about semantics. Narrowly defining healthcare is another way to dehumanize people.*

Kennedy's Make America Healthy Again agenda so far has netted us beef tallow fries and Mexican Coke, anti-vax conspiracies, HIV/AIDS denialism and the erasure of transgender people. Oh, and the great idea to roll back preventative cancer screenings. So, yeah, fuck this guy.

The fact is, the United States is in a health care crisis. We have been for a very long time. Forever, really. We are a very sick country in every sense of the word.

For one thing, we don't have universal health care even though we could afford it (remember, government budgets are moral documents, not just a string of numbers. What we value, which is supposed to be reflected by the people we represent, is what we decide to pay for). Instead, we let people go bankrupt and/or die for the crime of getting a disease. And that system works A-OK for the people in D.C. (who all have very good health care coverage that we pay for, by the way).

In the United States, who gets health care and what kind of health care they get is an indicator of who is valued. Who deserves to live, essentially. And the majority of Americans do not fall under the category of "valued."

Women? No. Undocumented immigrants? No. Incarcerated people? No. Transgender people? No. Poor people? Hell, no.

That's why we have nationwide debates about health care for these specific groups of people. Granted those debates aren't usually framed as "Who deserves to live and who should fuck off and die," but that's exactly what they are. And you will never guess which side the "pro-ilfe" party is on.

Obviously a major target of the FOAD party (aka the GOP) is transgender people. That is why healthcare for transgender people is the focus of so much debate right now. The arguments over transgender healthcare are disingenuous at best, diabolical at worst. When someone is arguing that gender-affirming care is not healthcare and thus transgender people do not need it, they are arguing that transgender people should not exist. It is wild to me how easy it is to see this whole debate as a rhetorical exercise and not about who is actually human.

Think about it. When we're arguing over the definition of "healthcare," we aren't just arguing about semantics. Narrowly defining healthcare is another way to dehumanize people. So let me be clear: Gender-affirming care is healthcare. Abortion is healthcare. Addiction treatment is healthcare. Mental health treatment is healthcare. HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment is healthcare.

Recently attorneys general from across the country filed a lawsuit challenging the Trump Administration's anti-trans healthcare orders, according to independent journalist Erin Reed, who heads up the "Erin in the Morning" Substack channel.

The complaint points out that no federal law exists to ban transgender healthcare and that the orders "create "an atmosphere of fear and intimidation experienced by transgender individuals, their families and caregivers and the medical professionals who seek only to provide necessary, lawful care to their patients."

The complaint continues, "No federal law prohibits, much less criminalizes, the provision or receipt of gender-affirming care for transgender adolescents. In fact, federal healthcare programs have reimbursed the provision of such care for years."

What the result of this lawsuit will be I do not know. But I do know that it's about damn time Democrats in power stood up for transgender people. I want to see more of it. A lot more. You can read the full complaint and see the list of states involved at on.ny.gov/46DrX9V.

THE SCROLL

QUICK HITS & CAN'T MISSES

Jake Wesley Rogers Joins Cyndi Lauper for Emotional 'True Colors' Finale at Pine Knob

Cyndi Lauper lit up Pine Knob Music Theatre on Aug. 1 during her second Michigan stop on the Girls Just Wanna Have Fun Farewell Tour, delivering a night full of color, emotion and iconic anthems. With a setlist that included "Time After Time" and "Girls Just Want to Have Fun," Lauper gave fans a show to remember — but it was her performance of "True Colors" that turned the night into something unforgettable.

During her encore, Lauper invited tour opener Jake Wesley Rogers — a rising queer pop artist — back to the stage for a powerful duet of the LGBTQ+ anthem. Together, they raised a Pride flag before thousands of fans.

"'True Colors' is one of the first songs I learned on guitar," Rogers told BTL earlier this year. "In high school I went to my local record store… and the guy was like, 'I'll give you ['She's So Unusual'] for free if you sing one of the songs to me.' So I sang 'Time After Time' to him and he gave it to me." He also joked about the possibility of joining Lauper onstage: "I can't talk about that. That freaks me out. I'm going to start crying already. I better start practicing that harmony."

For Rogers, singing "True Colors" with Lauper was the kind of full-circle moment queer artists dream about, made real under the Michigan night sky.

Jake Wesley Rogers and Cyndi Lauper at Pine Knob. Photo: Chris Azzopardi

The Ringwald Stages 'Hair' in One-Week Production

Let the sunshine in and get ready for the age of Aquarius! The Ringwald Theatre presents the iconic musical "Hair" as part of its wild Ringwald Reprise series Aug. 8-11 at Affirmations in Ferndale.

A cast of 22 local performers will tackle this groovy ensemble piece with just one week of rehearsal before four performances. The cast includes Shannon Christine, Garett Michael Harris and Jeff McMahon among other area talent ready to spread some flower power.

In a news release, Ringwald's artistic director Joe Bailey calls it perfect timing to celebrate peaceful dissent in today's climate. The Reprise Series launched last year with "Applause," allowing The Ringwald to produce lesser-seen musicals with minimal rehearsal time and maximum energy.

Directed by Bailey with assistance from Gretchen Schock and music direction by Rachael L. Rose, the production will include nudity as part of its authentic presentation. Tickets are available at theRingwald.com.

Michigan House Republicans Move to Restore Conversion Therapy for Minors

Several House Republicans introduced legislation this week seeking to overturn Michigan's 2023 ban on conversion therapy targeting LGBTQ+ youth.

House Bill 4752 would reinstate the harmful practice as a legal option for parents and guardians to impose on children in their custody. Conversion therapy involves discredited methods aimed at forcing changes to a person's sexual orientation or gender identity.

State Rep. Josh Schriver (R-Oxford), a bill sponsor, wrote in a newsletter that the current protective ban is an "anti-Christ law" that violates constitutional and religious rights. He claims the legislation protects individual conscience and opposes medical coercion.

Mental health professionals strongly oppose the move, citing extensive research showing conversion therapy causes significant harm including depression, self-hatred and suicidal ideation. Michigan joined at least 20 other states in banning the dangerous practice under Gov. Gretchen Whitmer's administration, protecting vulnerable LGBTQ+ minors from psychological abuse.

Katy Perry Gives Pronto! Shoutout

During Katy Perry's Aug. 3 performance at Little Caesars Arena as part of The Lifetimes Tour, her first major tour in seven years, the pop superstar gave an unexpected shoutout to Royal Oak's Pronto! The venue later shared on Instagram: "When Katy Perry asked her dancers where they partied before the Detroit show and they said Pronto!, she shouted us out on stage and asked WHY she wasn't invited. Katy, next time you're in town — the drink's on us. Every diva ends up with Pronto's name in her mouth."

Former BTL Publishers Join Parkinson's Foundation HERO Walk

Susan Horowitz and Jan Stevenson, former publishers of Between The Lines, are seeking community support for the Michigan Parkinson's Foundation HERO Walk on Sept. 13. The couple faces a new challenge after Horowitz's recent Parkinson's diagnosis, following her previous cancer battle where Stevenson provided unwavering support. They praise the foundation as "an incredible resource" offering support groups, exercise classes and educational seminars. Parkinson's affects approximately 30,000 Michiganders. Donations accepted at bit.ly/4m5m4am.

Mariah Carey Rocks 'Protect The Dolls' Jacket

Mariah Carey dazzled at Brighton Pride on Aug. 2 wearing a trans flag-inspired mini dress and custom pink jacket emblazoned with "Protect the Dolls" across the back. The rhinestone-covered look joins her with celebrities like Pedro Pascal, Troye Sivan and Charli XCX supporting designer Conner Ives' viral slogan tee, which has raised over $70,000 for Trans Lifeline.

Mariah Carey. Photo: Instagram

Celebrating 50-Plus Years of Menjo's

How Detroit's iconic LGBTQ+ bar has embraced both renewal and remembrance

BY JASON A. MICHAEL

As Menjo's — one of Detroit's longest-running gay bars — celebrates over half a century in operation, it stands as a rare survivor and a testament to queer resilience. Located near Palmer Park, once considered the city's unofficial gay playground, Menjo's didn't just benefit from the neighborhood's queer emergence — it helped define it.

Gay bars had existed for years in the area between Six and Seven Mile Roads, but Menjo's brought something new: a dedicated dance floor. Palmer Park was already a known gathering spot for the LGBTQ+ community when the club opened its doors in 1974.

"Its proximity to bars, and its distance from suburban families we weren't out to, made it a great place to live," said Michael Conboy, who both lived in Palmer Park and worked at Menjo's starting in 1980.

Menjo's was opened by Michael Crawford, a bartender at The Woodward in Midtown; Henry Trent, a businessman and owner of the Prudential Health Club, one of a few gay bathhouses in the city; and Joe LaRosa, who had studied business and served as host for Lillian's Down Under, a small club in the basement of Bookie's Club 870.

When it opened in December 1974, Menjo's was an instant hit. It was the first club in the city where the DJ mixed records live. With assorted equipment rigged up, DJs could cue, overlay and blend tracks — drawing a crowd of predominantly men who loved to pack the bar's small dance floor.

Its location in Palmer Park was key to the relocation of Detroit's gay district, which had previously been downtown. That shift began in 1967, after Detroit police raided an unlicensed after-hours bar at 12th Street and Clairmount Avenue, where more than 80 people were celebrating the return of two Black Vietnam War veterans. Tensions escalated quickly, and by morning, looting and arson had spread across the neighborhood.

In the aftermath, many businesses relocated, and the area north of Detroit, including Palmer Park, soon became a hub of gay establishments, making it an ideal place for a young gay man to settle.

The current Menjo's management team includes, from left, Cliff Cunningham, general manager; Lewis Rhinehart, co-owner; Archie "Lee" Shepard, co-owner; and John Dhoest, operations manager. Photo: Jason A. Michael

Menjo's proximity to several other gay bars was a social advantage. "The gay bars in the area made 'tricking' easy and a lot of jokes were made about how many buildings we had woken up in," Conboy said. He also recalled that, at times, the area wasn't immune to anti-queer violence.

There were occasional gay bashings in the neighborhood, but they were often seen as inevitable. "Sadly, we seemed to accept those things," said Conboy. "Being gay meant it came with the territory."

'Best fuckin' sound in town'

Inside Menjo's, patrons found a high-tech safe haven. The owners continually reinvested in the sound system, helping the crowds keep coming. By 1980, it featured custom tweeter arrays mounted across the ceiling, booming sub-bass speakers and a professional light show. The dance floor was expanded and a first-class DJ booth was installed. Staffers wore black T-shirts with the bars name and logo on the front and "Best Fuckin' Sound in Town" on the back.

This led to a war with Backstreet, a new dance bar on the west side of the city that opened in 1979. Each bar continued to enhance their sound system. The two bars also engaged in a price war. "It started with two-for-one drinks and escalated to a ridiculous eight-for-one," recalled Conboy, who admitted the strategy did have its setbacks. "Things got pretty messy with customers getting plastered."

At this point, though the two clubs were on opposite sides of town, "it wasn't uncommon for someone who hadn't gotten "lucky" by 1:15 a.m. to hop in their car at one place and race down Oakman Boulevard in time for last call at the other," said Conboy.

"I enjoyed going to Menjo's often in the '70s," said Tom Hubbard, who made the drive in from Ann Arbor just to visit the bar. "It was friendly and well-kept, with fine DJs."

Chris Hauck, who was a regular at Menjo's at that time, agreed. "My god, Friday nights were packed," he said. "You had to park like two blocks away on the side streets back by those big synagogues. Now they're Black churches. Friday nights were so packed you were elbow to elbow. It was jam-packed."

Menjo's low ceiling did not make the bar optimal for bringing in live performers. But a few did appear, including disco queen Thelma Houston, known for her 1975 disco hit "Don't Leave Me This Way."

Another woman made her way into the club in the bar's early years too: a young high school student from Rochester Hills named Madonna Louise Ciccone. According to biographer Mary Gabriel, who touched on the pop icon's history with the bar in "Madonna: A Rebel Life," Madonna walked into Menjo's and knew she had found her tribe.

"Men were doing poppers and going crazy," Madonna said, according to the book. "They were all dressed really well and were more free about themselves than all the blockhead football players I met in high school."

A decade shy of becoming the Material Girl, Madonna would sometimes get into trouble at the club. "There would be boys off in the corner doing, well, everything, and she would just walk right up and stare," said Christopher Flynn, Madonna's first mentor and dance teacher, in the book. It was he who took Madonna to Menjo's for the first time. A naughty Madge would find herself in trouble from time to time and she even managed to get herself barred from the club. According to former manager Tim McKee, Madonna "got kicked out ... for pulling her vagina out. She was a rowdy teenager at the time."

The '80s ushered in a golden era for Menjo's. "Menjo's was always an underground club," said DJ Chad Novak, Menjo's resident DJ from 1982 to 2004. "We were making the hits before they were hits." Menjo's, said Novak, was known across the country. "Menjo's had a thumpin' sound system. Menjo's was always a trendsetter."

But success came with exclusivity. "Menjo's had a really strict door policy as far as women and Black and Latino patrons were concerned," said Novak. "It was a white club." This discrimination reflected broader patterns common in Detroit's entertainment scene at the time, but it would not last forever.

The dark days

By the mid-'80s, AIDS hit. Crawford succumbed to the disease in 1988. "They just started dying like flies," legendary drag performer Torchy recalled at a panel discussion on queer culture in Detroit that took place at Menjo's Olympus Theater in 2018. "I know over 350 people alone who have died from AIDS. I have the

names written down."

The Lady "T" Tempest also spoke about the crisis at the same panel discussion. "When your phone rings and you're afraid to answer it because you couldn't take one more friend, family member, LGBT person dying of AIDS ... it's scary," she said. "It scared the living hell out of us."

LaRosa eventually retired to Phoenix and Trent left the business as well. Menjo's persevered. The bar did what it could to support the community during the crisis. They held fundraisers and Menjo's, like many other queer establishments, did put on shows where owners and staff would perform in drag. Novak recalled performing Shirley Bassey's "Big Spender" at one such show and earning over $700 in tips for the cause.

Halloween partygoers at Menjo's in 1980, as featured in Metra magazine.

The crowds continued to come to the bar. Novak said that he did not recall the crowds dwindling even during the worst of the AIDS crisis. Though he lost friends to AIDS, he said people came out to celebrate still being alive and to support the gay community.

Doors wide open

The AIDS crisis changed more than just the size of the community at Menjo's — it transformed who was welcome in. By the late '80s, the tragedy influenced a unifying effect that broke down many of the barriers that had previously existed. Menjo's relaxed their requirements for entry and women and men of all colors were welcome in the bar. The exclusive "white club" of the early years evolved into something more inclusive.

This transformation would continue over the decades. Today, that evolution is complete. "I'm still trying to put everybody in this bar," said current co-owner Archie "Lee" Shepard. "Not just gay people. We have straight people come in and they mesh just as well as anyone in the bar."

The current clientele reflects that openness. "We have twinks here, we have punks here, we have people who come because they want to go to the bar and have a good time," said Shepard. What began as an exclusive space for white gay men has become a truly diverse community gathering place — a transformation born from tragedy but resulting in something stronger and more welcoming.

Regardless of crowd demographics, "Menjo's was always very supportive of our efforts in the community, be it raising funds for the first Pride marches that began in 1986 in Detroit and HIV/AIDS programming beginning in 1988 through the 2000s to actual outreach programs in the club," said Craig Covey, former director of Midwest AIDS Prevention Project.

MAPP did HIV counseling and testing for many years at the bar and collected sexual behavior surveys from patrons on knowledge, attitudes and beliefs. Menjo's also supported the annual Gay Pride banquets that were held from 1988 to 2008. And Crawford won the MAPP Award for his support to myriad gay and AIDS causes before he died.

James Patrick "Jimmy" Dowdle, known to many in the queer community as Poodles, was a longtime waiter, manager and ultimately co-owner of the bar for several years. He was a regular fixture at the bar during a difficult time. In an Out Post obit, one customer described Dowdle as someone who "always made me feel safe and made sure I had a good time. He for sure let me know it was OK to be me, gay and proud."

In 2002, Menjo's hosted a memorial show for the late DJ Cecil Gibbs, with all proceeds going to his family.

New owners, new changes

Throughout the years, Menjo's has undergone several ownership and management changes. Looking back through the paper's archives, I found I wrote more than a few stories interviewing new owners or revealing new plans for the bar. In 2008, BTL reported that Jeff Stedman bought the bar and changed the name to the New Menjo's Complex, incorporating the two buildings next to Menjo's, the former Chosen Books spot and the former Glass House bar. Initial plans included turning the old Glass House into a sports bar named Baskets and the old Chosen into the Legends Theater, a hall complete with a stage perfect for drag performances.

Around this time, Menjo's began curating pieces of local queer history to display in a quasi-museum setting. "We're trying to preserve our history so that we can help

See **Menjo's**, page 17

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Even in Trans-Friendlier Michigan, Democratic Allies Are Failing Us

How party leaders are ducking for cover on trans rights, choosing political expediency over protecting vulnerable community

BY ANNI ARBOUR

It is exhausting trying to keep up with the anti-transgender news, particularly when it's not just coming from the usual suspects. Living in Michigan, we're supposed to be in one of the more welcoming states for transgender residents, yet even our Democratic representatives are finding ways to dodge supporting us when the stakes are high. While the Trump administration drives most of these attacks, recent national developments reveal how the anti-transgender tide is rising everywhere — including right here in Michigan.

A national story grabbing recent headlines centers on the U.S. Olympic & Paralympic Committee, which has publicly acquiesced to Trump's executive order, "Keeping Men Out of Women's Sports," banning trans women from women's sports.

On one hand, their decision isn't surprising. As noted in a press release from the USOPC leadership, "As a federally chartered organization, we have an obligation to comply with federal expectations." Whether that is totally true, it gives the USOPC cover for their transphobic decision.

What is more discouraging, though, is the quiet acquiescence from supposed allies of ours.

Rahm Emanuel, former Obama chief-of-staff, former Chicago mayor and possible Democratic presidential candidate in 2028, appeared on conservative podcaster Megyn Kelly's show recently.

As reported on The Daily Beast, Kelly asked Emanuel his feelings on various transgender issues.

"Can a man become a woman?" Kelly asked Emanuel.

"Can a man become a woman? No," the former chief of staff to President Barack Obama replied.

"Thank you," Kelly said, adding that Emanuel's answer was "'so easy.'" But it didn't stop there. Kelly pressed him a bit more:

"Why don't more people in your party say that?" she asked.

"Because we're — I'm now going to go into a witness protection plan," he joked.

"Do you believe that boys should be able to play in girls' sports?"

"No," Emanuel answered immediately.

"Do you believe that kids under the age of 18 should be able to be put on puberty blockers and cross sex hormones?"

"I think that parents have to make that decision themselves," he said. "I think that child is too young at 18 to make that decision, it has to be made with a family."

"Should we be putting men in female prisons? Men claiming they're women."

"No," he said."

Now, this wasn't JD Vance or Stephen Miller making these comments. This is a man who openly called for the legalization of same-sex marriage back in 2011, even before his former boss in the White House supported it. So, what changed?

Simple answer: It isn't politically expedient to support trans rights.

Don't believe for a second that Emanuel's transphobic views make him an outlier in the Democratic party. It was only this past March when Gov. Gavin Newsom of California, another potential Democratic presidential hopeful, stated on his own podcast that he felt trans girls participating in women's sports was, "an issue of fairness, I completely agree with you on that. It is an issue of fairness — it's deeply unfair."

And don't forget Massachusetts Congressman Seth Mouton's comments after last year's elections, when he told The New York Times that Democrats had spent "too much time trying not to offend anyone."

"I have two little girls. I don't want them getting run over on a playing field by a male or formerly male athlete," he said. "But as a Democrat, I'm supposed to be afraid to say that."

Sen. Elissa Slotkin, Fmr. Ambassador Rahm Emanuel, Gov. Gavin Newsom. Official government portraits

Even here in Michigan, one of the more transgender-friendly states according to Erin Reed's "Anti-Trans Risk Assessment Map," Sen. Elissa Slotkin has skirted supporting the concerns of her transgender constituents.

In her appearance on "Meet The Press" in early March, Slotkin was asked by host Kristen Welker for her take on Newsom's anti-trans women in sports views. Slotkin declined to respond directly to Newsom's words, and instead offered this advice:

"Let the local community figure this out, right? In Michigan, we have a process in place where if someone who is born a boy wants to play in women's sports, you have to get a waiver. We've had it happen two times in our entire state. So let the local communities, just like everything with schools, handle that issue. For me, though, I think, you know, this issue is being sort of brought up in order to make sparks and see sparks fly."

Slotkin's take wasn't just dismissive, it was terrifying. As has been shown, states and local communities have been quite willing to discriminate against trans people via legislation and biased regulations in the absence of federal government involvement. The very same argument was used in the early half of the 20th century to permit Jim Crow laws to proliferate in the southern United States.

Basically, Slotkin would rather avoid dealing with transgender issues and leave our rights to the whims of local communities beneath her purview.

Rest assured that many others in the Democrat party share these views but haven't the nerve to voice them publicly.

Sure, as a group, they will engage in hand-waving support for transgender rights by voting against Republican legislation targeting the trans community. That is something. But as Democrats are in the Congressional minority right now, such inconsequential voting is merely virtue signaling. What actual legislation is being passed to assure our rights?

Democrats, our supposed political allies, are riding the prevailing wave of transphobia. They either make these meaningless gestures of support for us, or in most cases, ignore us completely.

Where is our voice? Who is our voice? It was hoped that Rep. Sarah McBride, the transgender congressperson from Delaware, would be, but she has so far followed the path of least resistance and refrained from speaking out on trans issues.

Which is why it is so important as a community for us to draw together, to speak and act as one. Engagement with our elected officials is definitely a part of this plan, as laws need to be passed to ensure our equal rights.

But we also have to bring our concerns to the general public ourselves. Draw attention to specific issues affecting our community. Marcy Rheintgen's singular act of civil disobedience by using a woman's restroom in Florida in open defiance of that state's anti-transgender ban did exactly that. As of now, 19 states have similar restroom bans. Where are the other Marcy Rheintgen's protesting those anti-trans laws?

As a marginalized, small minority, we are easily overlooked and discriminated against. But together, we can speak with an outsized voice and act with outsized visibility.

Our existence depends upon it.

Anni Arbour, a transgender professional writer from Ann Arbor, moderates the Reddit subreddit, MI_Transgender_Friend.

Menjo's
Continued from page 15

the younger generation," said Peter Hendrickson, whom BTL reported had purchased the bar with his partner Murray Hodgson in 2012. "I'm 50 — there's a generation between Generation X and me that died from the AIDS epidemic. All those historians and all those mentors are gone. Now it's my age group; we have to become the mentors."

Celebrating Menjo's seventh anniversary, as featured in Cruise magazine.

An ad for Menjo's printed in Cruise magazine in the '80s.

BTL reported at this time that the bar was receiving a $100,000 overhaul, just in time to celebrate the first anniversary of its collaboration with AW Entertainment, formerly Strongarm Productions, the promoter in charge of the successful Club One X downtown that did huge numbers in an old warehouse until it caught fire. Anthony Winn revived the name a decade later and began hosting One X Saturday Nights at Menjo's, attracting a predominantly Black crowd.

"One X played an instrumental role in the club history here in Detroit," said Winn. "I didn't believe that we could duplicate what took place back then, but I did want to create something now that, at the very least, brought back a sense of that same vibe."

Unfortunately, the One X party didn't last for long. A 21-and-over bar, it kept the new kids — and the crowds — away.

Hendrickson and Hodgson announced plans to transform the bar. "Menjo's has been the same for so many years," Hendrickson said. "I always say that Menjo's needed a cosmetic enema. It needed more of a modern look. It was stale."

Bathrooms were redone, the look of the club elevated and turned into more of an ultra lounge.

"You'll see they kind of brought it into the 21st century and gave it an entirely new look and feel, from the countertops to the walls and everything," said Hendrickson.

Hendrickson and Hodgson, now known for their Murray & Peter Present production company, did not stick around for long. Menjo's current owners, Lewis Rhinehart and Shepard, began managing the club in 2012 and officially took the club over in December 2014. For years they relied on Tim McKee to manage it.

McKee took the idea of combining the three businesses under one umbrella a step further. Shepard owned the rights to the name The Eagle so that's what the old Glass House became. And the old Chosen, the site of what was to become the Legends Theater, became the Olympus Theater instead. McKee hosted events in the Olympus that focused on the history of queer Detroit as well as the leather and drag communities.

COVID-19, of course, affected the bar. It remained open during limited hours and kept social distancing in effect. They also provided a helping hand to the local community during this time. "Tim McKee was instrumental in feeding the neighborhood for over two years," said Rhinehart. "We gave away about 6,000 pounds of food a week."

Today, tomorrow, forever?

McKee eventually left Menjo's and owners Rhinehart and Shepard stepped up, with the help of Cliff Cunningham as general manager and John Dhoest as operations manager. Today, the group is in the middle of revamping the whole bar.

The essential ingredient to producing a successful night is simple, said Shepard. "Get the right DJ, you can get a crowd. Techno is big in the city. You get a techno night, you can get a crowd. ... They don't come in just to come in anymore."

Dating and hookup apps like Grindr and Tinder have changed the way community members meet, reducing the reliance on traditional gathering spaces like queer bars. As a result, Menjo's, which is in the middle of a revamp, is finding new ways to stay relevant and appealing, evolving beyond just a nightlife spot into a more dynamic community hub. These days, it takes DJs and theme parties to get the crowds out to the dance floor.

As Menjo's celebrates just over a half-century as a safe haven for the LGBTQ+ community and prepares its latest revamp, Conboy looks back at the bar's illustrious history and reflects on the days of drinking and drugging. "On one hand, I'm sure that straight clubs had no shortage of over-indulging — the clientele is in their 20s, recently independent from their parents, alive with insecurities and sexual longing," he said. "But I do wonder sometimes if the more destructive qualities associated with that behavior weren't caused by an underlying sense of homophobia — a term we didn't have and certainly would not have understood — and shame."

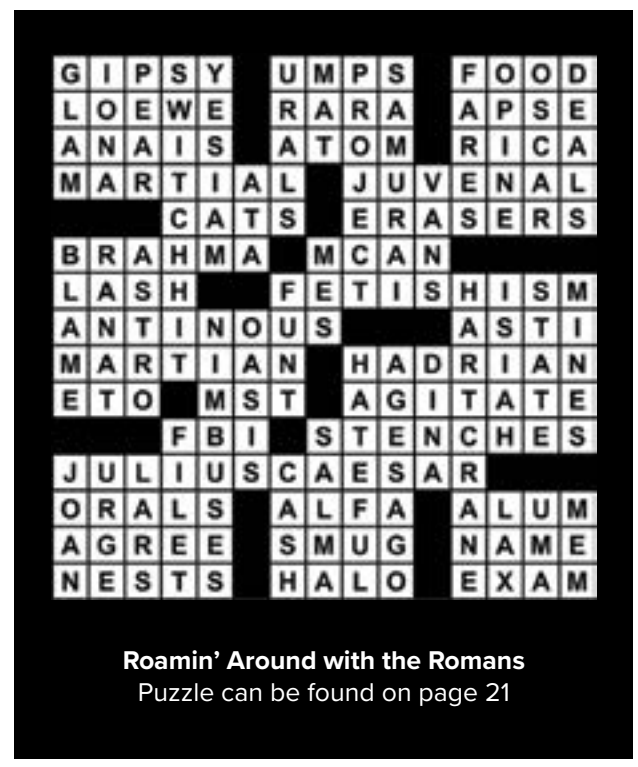
Today, with some stigma gone, the party, albeit slightly altered, carries on. Menjo's is open seven days a week from 4 p.m. to 2 a.m. The Eagle is open on Saturdays from 10 p.m. to 4 a.m., where they serve as an after-hours venue and the Olympus Theater is open for rentals and special events.

"Menjo's has been special to so many people throughout the years and it will continue to be special to people for years to come, including the next generation," said local performer Simon Black, who hosts karaoke at the bar. "With this new revamp, Menjo's will continue to bring Detroit's nightlife back to what it truly used to be."

Looking back over the last half century, Conboy said, "We had a lot of fun. I have friendships that exist today on the strength of our bonding during those closeted times when the thrill of transgression was very real."

We've come a long way, but bars like Menjo's remain a vital thread in the fabric of queer culture. For many, crossing that threshold for the first time is more than just a night out — it's a rite of passage, a moment of recognition, a first breath of true belonging. These spaces offer not just drinks and dancing, but the rare freedom to be fully seen.

Whatever shape the revamp takes, one thing is certain: Menjo's, even beyond 50, will hold onto its spark. As long as there's someone stepping into the queer world for the first time — wide-eyed, nervous, hopeful — Menjo's will be there, pulsing with life, ready to welcome them home.



Roamin' Around with the Romans
Puzzle can be found on page 21

Maren Morris *Reclaims* Herself

Morris opens up about coming out, standing up to anti-LGBTQ+ legislation and how fully embracing herself changed her music

BY CHRIS AZZOPARDI

When Maren Morris headlined OutLoud Music Festival during West Hollywood Pride in May, she reveled in the "very ceremonial" moment. It had been a year since she came out publicly as bisexual, and taking the stage — this time as someone embraced from within the LGBTQ+ community — brought a new emotional weight.

"Doing it in West Hollywood was perfect," she says. "It felt very official, but really just so beautiful."

That performance was one of many markers in what has been a deeply personal and creative shift for Morris over the past few years. She's released the cathartic and emotionally rich album "Dreamsicle"; she's opened up about her queerness, motherhood and healing; and she's fielded an endless stream of questions from journalists about whether or not she's "left" country music.

Her publicist even gently suggested we avoid the topic altogether — and honestly, it's easy to understand why. The conversation around Morris's place in the genre has often missed the point. "Leaving country music" and doing country music your own way are not the same thing. Morris hasn't turned her back on anything — she's simply refusing to shrink inside a system that doesn't always make space for the full complexity of who she is and what she has to say. Her current tour, which stops at Frederik Meijer Gardens in Grand Rapids on Aug. 21, showcases the full range of the sound she's developed throughout her career.

In our conversation, Morris reflects on the support she's received from the queer community, her ever-evolving identity, and how "Dreamsicle" became a kind of coming out record — one that captures her voice at its most unfiltered. She also revisits her headline-making moment at the 2023 Love Rising benefit in Nashville, where she said, "I introduced my son to some drag queens today, so Tennessee, fucking arrest me," in protest of anti-drag and anti-trans legislation. Two years later, that spark remains — but it's been sharpened by lived experience and a clearer sense of who she's always been.

At WeHo Pride this summer, what did it feel like to receive that kind of love and support from a community you're now officially a part of?

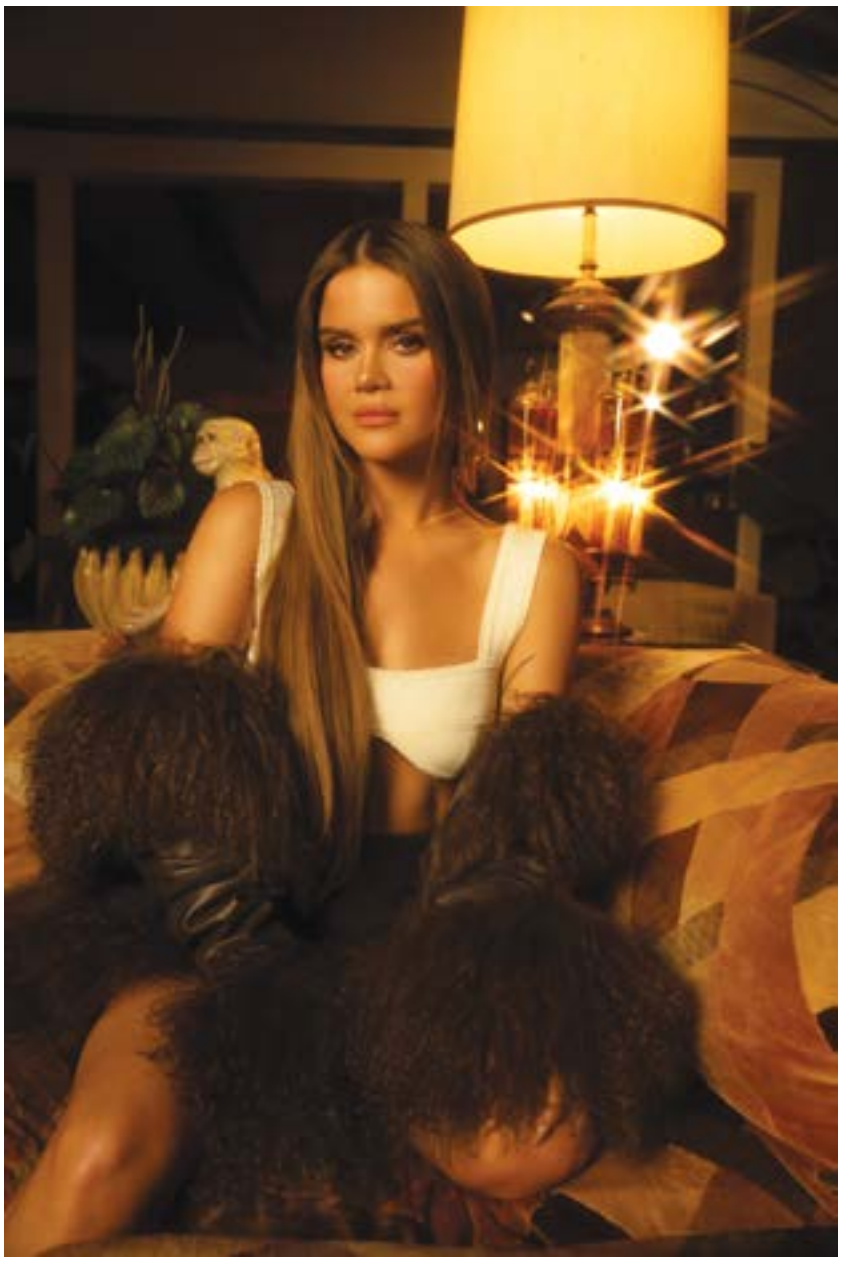
It was just such a beautiful night. Since a year ago, the support has meant so much to me, and I was at the GLAAD Awards in L.A. a couple months back. But yeah, it just feels like I've always felt the love and acceptance and support from that community, but then once you sort of enter it and aren't just an ally, it does feel like a shift. It just makes it easier, I guess, knowing that there's open arms awaiting. So yeah, that meant a lot to me.

Was the experience of coming out what you expected it to be? So many of us wonder what it will actually feel like when the moment comes — especially in an industry like country music, where there's more fear of potential backlash. Did it unfold the way you had imagined, or did it take a different shape?

I was pleasantly surprised by the positivity that came from it. There's always a risk of backlash or negativity, but I was really bowled over by the response being so light. So yeah, that was a relief. But no, I think, it is hard to visualize what it would look like once you do come out, but it kind of exceeded any expectation I had because I think there was just already such a groundwork, especially in my crowd at shows — of acceptance and love and non-judgment. So having that backdrop of a fan base that is just so open-hearted and kind made it easier. It's probably more difficult for those who don't have a platform the way that I do or who are growing up in the South and don't feel like they have a community to welcome them into or it's harder to find. That has to be just excruciatingly difficult. So I feel like I was a lucky one.

And you are now that representation for young people in smaller communities who might not have someone to look up to. I'm not in your shoes, so I can't fully understand what that feels like — but as someone who loved country music growing up, I remember how little representation there was for people like me. That must feel pretty meaningful to you, I imagine?

Yeah, I think as a woman, I always had these idols that I looked up to in country music. I think about Dolly Parton. She's been a gay icon for decades, and [she] just feels so intrinsically gay. So drag. You're an amplified version of yourself. You're the most confident version of yourself. Nothing defines that more than the queer community and these flashes of it that I've seen in country music. In recent years, there's been a little more representation. Not enough, but it gives me hope, for sure.



Maren Morris. Photo: Kirt Barnett

What were some specific cultural moments in country music that allowed you to really come into yourself?

I think about the women that I idolized, especially in the early 2000s and late '90s. It was The Chicks. They were just so ballsy. I loved that they were also from Texas and wrote all their songs, played all the instruments. Natalie Maines is just one of the greatest vocalists on earth, still, and they were so brash and unapologetic and funny, and also style icons. Also, Shania was this country superstar, but also this pop star. I loved that she was subverting [expectations of country women performers]. It was also a time during which we were getting out of the era of long hair, hairspray, bangs, prairie skirt and denim vest. We were culturally shifting in fashion too, but seeing just these sexy, funny women breaking boundaries made me feel like, wow, someday I would love to do that in my own way. In country music, those people made me feel like, OK, these are rock stars and I am so inspired and I can't wait to be just like them.

And now you are among them.

Now I've toured with both of them.

Full circle!

I'd love to talk about "Dreamsicle." It feels like such a healing piece of work — not just for you, but for listeners. What was it like putting something out into the world that still felt so fresh and close to what you were experiencing at the time?

It's crazy. It's been out for [only a few months], but I've lived with some of these songs for years; it's the first album I've put out that the most recent song added was six months prior to the record dropping. It was that closely aligned with the headspace I was still in. But I wanted to put this record out as I was still in the heart and headspace of it, and healing from it. Sometimes you write a body of work and then the album comes out a year later, then you tour it six months later, after you've processed a lot of that emotion.

With this record, you want to be in the emotion still?

Yeah, I still want to be sitting in it while it's fresh. A really exciting element of this whole album release is the fact that, with these songs, I'm still inside them.

Fans have been calling this your coming out album. Do you see it that way?

Yeah, in all the ways. I think it was such a leaf turn from my previous album and work and, just personally, everything in my life is different from the first record. I've got a 5-year-old son, I'm divorced, I'm in this new chapter of dating, and also creating in step with that and then just working on, still… there's no linear or end point to healing from past grief, there's just never a period. So I'm processing, and it has been really wonderful for me.

I'm a more secure person than I was just a few short years ago. I don't take myself as seriously. But then, also, this is the most producers I've had on any given project, just because I wrote it over three years. I was working with Jack Antonoff, Greg Kurstin, Naomi McPherson from Muna, Evan Blair, Joel Little. There's a lot of people I was having sessions with over the years. But each song that came out of those sessions felt like a really important intentional chapter of the bigger picture. So I didn't need it to all be under one umbrella. I just needed the songs to feel true.

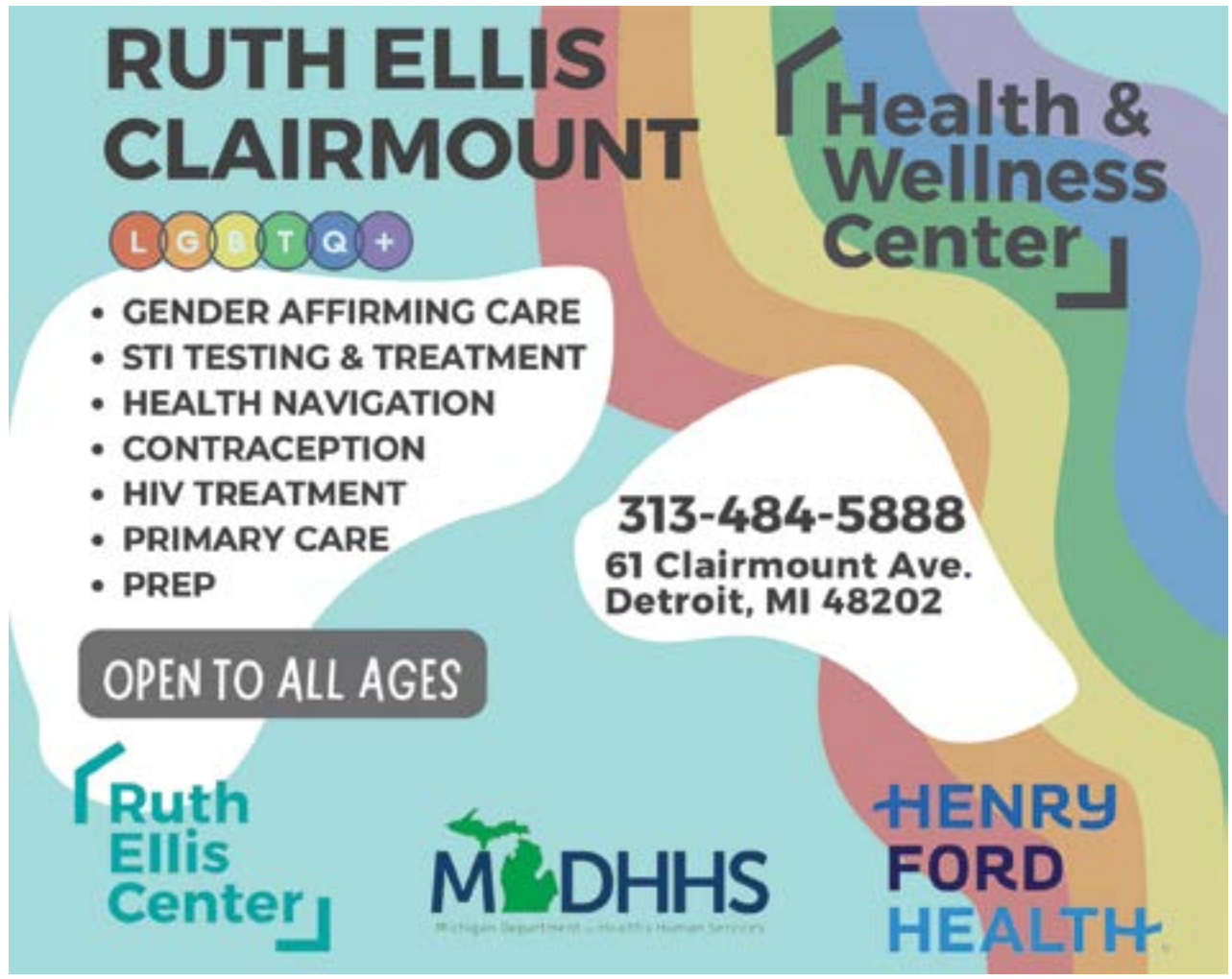
I love that there's a massive diversity of creative brains on this, but it's still very much me at the end of the day. And yeah, I think coming out, literally and figuratively, is the album in a lot of different ways — of stepping forward into the light.

Is there one song that feels especially personal to you coming out?

The one that comes to mind in that way, of just self-acceptance, is "Carry Me Through," for sure. It's sort of the story of coming out in any person's life. You can have friends and family, sometimes you don't, sometimes people aren't even your loved ones, aren't going to be on your side — sadly, it's the worst thing in the world to hear about. But whether you have that community backdrop or not, no one's going to come out for you.

When I was playing at WeHo Pride, I was chatting with the crowd before my song, "Because, Of Course." I wrote that song a couple years back about my son from a motherly standpoint; he's getting older and I'm still touring, and sometimes he can come out with me and sometimes he has to stay back. But that was my promise of, wherever I am in the world, I'm always going to love you because of course, duh. But then as I was speaking to the crowd at Pride. That song, for some reason that night, was hitting me in a way that felt like the chorus lyrics were

See **Marren Morris**, page 22



Schriver

Continued from page 10

Schriver made inflammatory remarks targeting "gays, queers, transsexuals, polygamists and other perverts," claiming they were advancing "attacks on our children." Because of course he did. Moss, positioning himself defiantly in the front row, later took the podium after Schriver's abrupt departure, calling the resolution "buffoonish" and emphasizing that same-sex marriages "contribute to family security and economic security."

Schriver's attempted civil rights rollback represents another escalation in his ongoing attacks on marginalized communities. In May, House Democrats introduced a resolution to censure him after he made what they characterized as "racist statements" on the House floor, specifically targeting people from "all the races in Asia, Africa, Latin America" and claiming they were "not acclimating" to American life. Because apparently Schriver's discrimination doesn't discriminate.

During his May 1 floor speech on anti-sanctuary city legislation, Schriver quoted from former Presidential Advisor Patrick Buchanan's book "The Death of the West," telling lawmakers "The chasm in our country is not one of income, ideology or faith, but of ethnicity and loyalty."

The censure resolution, introduced by Rep. Sharon MacDonell (D-Troy), emphasized that Schriver's hate "opposes every U.S. citizen's 14th Amendment rights to equal protection under the law, the Michigan Constitution and the Standing Rules of the House."

Schriver's pattern of controversial behavior dates back to last year when he was stripped of his committee assignments and staff by then-House Speaker Joe Tate (D-Detroit) for promoting the "Great Replacement Theory" on social media. This racist conspiracy theory falsely claims that white people are being systematically replaced through immigration and low birth rates.

Despite this history, current House Speaker Matt Hall (R-Richland Township) has defended Schriver, restoring his committee assignments and praising his work. "What I really appreciate about representative Schriver is that he's, you see a difference, I think, between him last year and this year and, you know, we gave him his staff back," Hall said at a May press conference.

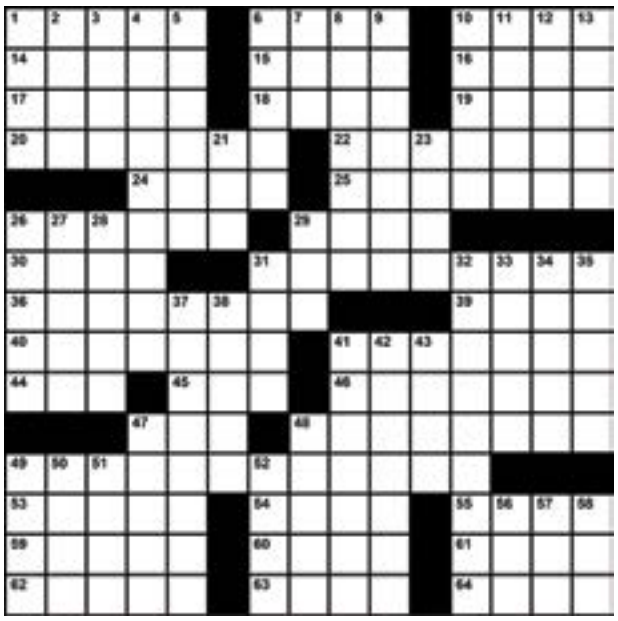
The introduction of HB 4751 comes at a time when LGBTQ+ advocates are already concerned about potential Supreme Court action on marriage equality. Justice Samuel Alito recently renewed criticism of the Obergefell decision, and he was joined by Justices John Roberts and Clarence Thomas in dissenting from the original ruling.

The Elliott-Larsen Civil Rights Act, originally introduced in 1976 and signed into law the next year, prohibits discrimination in employment, housing, education and public accommodations. The 2023 expansion to include sexual orientation and gender identity was hailed as a historic victory for LGBTQ+ rights in Michigan, making it the 22nd state to provide such comprehensive protections.

Apparently, someone forgot to tell Schriver that his last performance left him publicly humiliated, nationally shamed and literally running from the room.

While Republicans control the Michigan House of Representatives, Democrats maintain control of the state Senate and Democratic Gov. Gretchen Whitmer remains a strong ally of the LGBTQ+ community. This makes HB 4751's chances of becoming law virtually nonexistent — it's propaganda designed to energize Schriver's base rather than serious legislation. Think community theater, but the cast forgot their lines, the set collapsed and nobody showed up.

Still, the bill's introduction serves as a reminder to stay vigilant. Hard-won civil rights protections require ongoing defense, and extremist lawmakers like Schriver will continue testing the waters with discriminatory proposals. At least he's consistent in his commitment to being consistently awful?



Roamin' Around with the Romans

Across

1 Nomad that sounds like a broadway musical
6 They call balls
10 It's glorious, in "Oliver!"
14 "Camelot" composer Frederick
15 ___ avis
16 Vaulted area at the Cathedral of Hope
17 Erotic diarist Nin
18 Tiny bit of matter
19 Costa ___
20 Roman poet who wrote about male-on-male desire
22 Roman satirist and lover of 20-Across
24 Lloyd Webber musical
25 Rubbers
26 Mount at a rodeo
29 Big name in footwear
30 S&M unit
31 Being turned on by a belly-button, e.g.
36 He was mourned and deified by a Roman emperor
39 Italian wine center
40 "War of the Worlds" invader
41 Emperor who was the lover of 36-Across
44 Arena of "Saving Ryan's Privates" (abbr.)
45 Aspen hrs.
46 Emulate ACT UP
47 Crime-fighting org.
48 Unpleasant odors
49 He was mocked as the ìQueen of Bithyniaî for romancing the king
53 Face-to-face tests
54 Sports car, briefly
55 Kramer, to Yale
59 Come to terms
60 Cocksure
61 Dick, for one
62 Egg holders
63 Prop for "Talking to My Angel"?
64 Digital-rectal, for example

Down

1 David Bowie genre
2 Island of Barrie's land
3 Fruit homophone of a couple
4 Be bi
5 Album of Etheridge
6 Eurasian range
7 Where wrestlers lie together
8 "The Laramie ___"
9 Saikaku's "Gay Tales of the ___"
10 Amounts left on nightstands
11 Put in two cents worth
12 Kidman's award for "The Hours"
13 Distributes some queens, perhaps
21 One ___ time
23 Moving aids
26 Point the finger at
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People v. Lakatos

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like you're just airing everything to them and stuff you don't necessarily want to air to everybody."

The experience has fundamentally changed how Lakatos and his friends approach online dating. "The biggest thing now, and even [something] my friends have all taken out of it, is to do your homework and do your due diligence. And if it doesn't feel right, it's not right."

At a gay coffee hour in Muskegon, a friend shared that Lakatos' case had made him more cautious. The friend explained that he had recently hooked up with someone who potentially looked "too young," prompting him to check ID at the door. The person turned out to be in his mid-20s, but the friend said Lakatos' experience had made him think twice about taking chances.

"Be cautious because they're using these tactics to try to get you," Lakatos warns. "And it makes you feel like you're talking with another consenting adult."

For anyone facing police questioning, he offers hard-earned advice: "If you ever have to get questioned by the police, you say, 'I want an attorney.' And you repeat [that]. If you can practice saying that in front of a mirror, things can be dramatically different for you."

For LGBTQ+ people using dating apps, these operations create a chilling new reality. The knowledge that police officers may be posing as adults on platforms designed for adult connections fundamentally alters the landscape of queer dating and community connection.

The case highlights fundamental questions about proportionality and justice. As Kaplan frames it: "If there's no mention about age or the photographs look like someone older and you're assuming it's an adult just based on the pictures, and if the age is never mentioned in the conversation, there's no grounds to charge that person."

While some argue that ensnaring people like Lakatos is worth it if it means getting child predators off the street, the high cost of ripping someone out of their life can't be ignored. "It's kind of like how, at least back when I was a kid, everybody was enraged that dolphins would get captured in tuna nets," Lakatos says. "Are you really willing to sacrifice the few for the many? It doesn't matter that you're ruining this person's life?"

Looking ahead: Michigan ruling on dating app stings

The legal landscape may soon shift significantly, as the outcome of People v. Jade will establish the first binding precedent on entrapment law as applied to these online sting operations in Michigan.

The Jade case involves a similar bait-and-switch operation where police posted an ad for a 20-year-old adult escort on Skip the Games, a website for "consenting adults." When Jayneel Jade responded to the adult escort ad, the undercover officer later revealed "I'm 15." After Jade expressed hesitation ("Got to be 16"), the officer insisted she was "Actually 15 like real life lol." When Jade arrived at the hotel expecting to meet an adult, he was arrested and charged with felonies carrying up to 20 years in prison instead of the 93-day misdemeanor he would have faced for soliciting an adult.

The Michigan Supreme Court granted leave to appeal in the Jade case in May 2025, specifically questioning whether the Court of Appeals made errors in three areas of entrapment analysis. Convertino said that "once the Michigan Supreme Court issues an opinion on that, that will be massive in terms of the impact and the implications that it will have on the way that entrapment is litigated in Michigan."

Doman believes the court incorrectly stated that simply providing an opportunity to commit a crime doesn't constitute entrapment, when the law actually protects people who wouldn't have committed the crime without police inducement. The distinction is crucial: True entrapment law protects people who had no intent to commit the charged crime.

Doman said "a favorable ruling in Jade could encourage police to focus their sting operations on people actively looking to solicit sex with minors," rather than ensnaring people who had no such intent.

Convertino will file an amicus brief in the Jade case on behalf of the Criminal Defense Attorneys of Michigan, given the potential impact on all similar cases statewide. The decision could fundamentally change how these operations are conducted — or whether they can continue in their current form.

As for Lakatos, despite everything, he remains optimistic about his appeal. "I'm obviously very hopeful for a good outcome," he says of working with his appellate attorneys. "Everything they say is very heartfelt and I feel like they've really gotten, even if the courts don't get it, how unfair things can be."

More than anything, he's looking forward to closure. "I'm looking forward to stepping away and having this be my past... looking forward to not having to think about it."

But he also recognizes the broader importance of his case. When asked why he agreed to speak publicly, he's clear: "People need to know just what could happen but also the impact — it could impact your friends, your job, your life."

"This is not the thing that defines you," Lakatos reminds himself and others in similar situations. "This is just a thing that happened."

But for too many people caught in these operations, that "thing" becomes a life sentence — one that raises serious questions about justice, proportionality and whether these tactics actually protect anyone at all.

Maren Morris

Continued from page 19

just really resonating with me on stage with that crowd: "If you need a place to land, I'll be the floor. If you need an easy out, I'll be the door. I'm always going to love you because, of course." It just really hit me emotionally, and the crowd emotionally and unintentionally, even though I wrote it about my son. Over the last few weeks, I've seen fans online just take it and share their stories about their coming out experience.

Maren Morris. Photo: Kirt Barnett

Back in 2023, you took the stage at the Love Rising benefit concert in Nashville — a night of resistance in response to Tennessee's anti-LGBTQ+ legislation, including efforts to restrict drag performances. When you said, "Tennessee, fucking arrest me," after introducing your son to some drag queens, it was a bold, defiant stand in support of drag artists and trans rights during a particularly hostile moment. Two years later, with many of these issues still unfolding — now on a federal level — how do you reflect on that moment?

It meant so much to me that we came together so quickly to put that show in place at Bridgestone Arena in Nashville. Bridgestone Arena is on Broadway, so there's tons of foot-traffic tourism, a lot of country music bars, and our state legislator is just acting a fool and trying to rile up division and scare tactics to achieve absolutely nothing. There was no productivity or even a way of enforcing a drag ban, and they knew that they were just trying to fuck around.

I think it was really important to show the state of Tennessee, but also the world, that this is a progressive artistic creative hub that, yes, is a beautiful place to come write songs and make music, but also we pay a lot in taxes. People make music here and live here, and a lot of people have moved here, especially during Covid, and you're going to enforce these ridiculous, homophobic, bigoted, transphobic bills into the legislature that will never pass. Just proving to the town that this isn't what we stand for, that was the most beautiful part of the night. I brought my son and all the local queens that were getting ready in the big dressing room; they've got their wigs, their costume changes, they're like mid-beat, and I went and introduced my son to some of them. So I was just enamored. My son always loves watching when I'm in hair and makeup. So I was like, he will love this. This is that on steroids.

There is such a transformation of self there, but also an exercise and discovery of self there. Drag is the most modern-day form of what that is. And it's beautiful and it's brave, and I just love a Southern drag queen. After I had introduced my son to them and walked away with him from the dressing room, I was like, wow, it's crazy that this is what we're condemning — we're trying to legislate out of a very genuine, pure interaction of just someone being their truest self. What a waste of time to try to outlaw that.

I'm thinking about your influence on aspiring queer artists. What would you say to someone who's trying to break into country music?

Tell your story. What I love about country music is you can be so specific. Some of these traditional country songs were so specific about something that you did not go through personally, but the emotion is ringing true. And through that, you're like, I completely identify with this. So I think expressing whatever makes you feel closer to yourself and your craft. You can't write for an audience. You can't write for public consumption because that's going to be completely out of your control. You have to do this to excite yourself, to feel closer to you, to heal something inside of you. And if that is authentic and true, people are going to hear it and it's going to resonate with them. And that is a gift. It's a superpower. I mean, anything in the public eye, there's going to be downsides. Just criticisms, having to grow a thicker skin; there's not a pill you can take. It is something that has to thicken over time.

Everything you've said feels like what you wished you would've told young Maren.

Oh, girl, yes. I should have written it down. It's true. But I guess I don't give that to just any new artist or child that wants to get into songwriting or get a record deal. But those are ancillary goals. It all just still has to come from the same hub of, I was put here to say this in a different way than any other human being on this planet. I feel like every time I write with someone new, I just went somewhere else. I got to walk through the cobblestone streets of someone else's memories.

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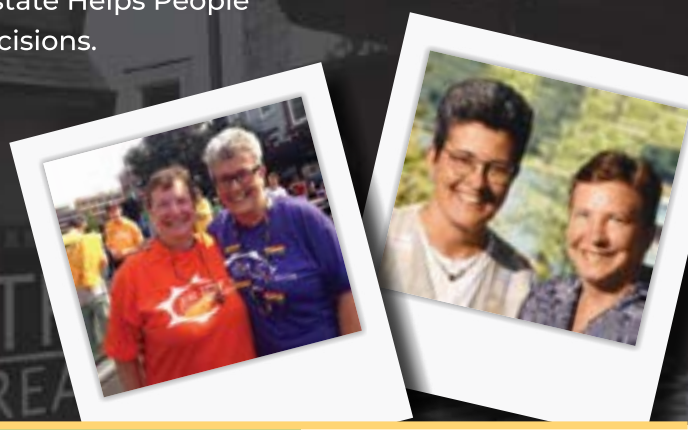

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