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# Betwween THE Lines <sup>TM</sup>

KATHY KOZACHENKO ON HER LEGACY  
Queer Ann Arbor trailblazer  
on her lasting impact

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Winter Pride fests keep the  
party going year-round

WHEN WILL LAWMAKERS ACT?  
ACLU: Ignoring trans rights puts  
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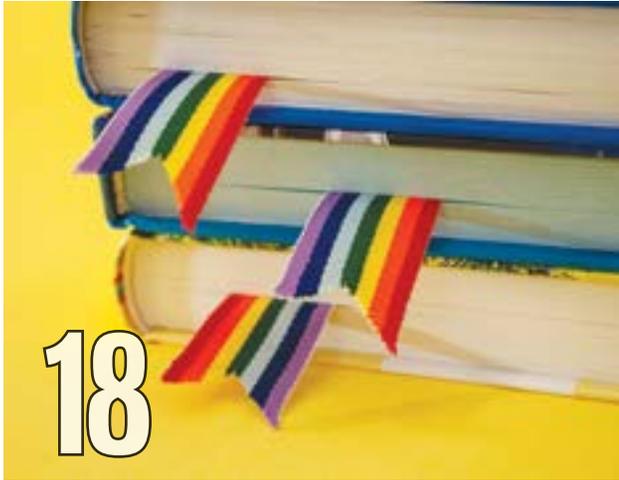
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**PRIDE SOURCE MEDIA GROUP**

www.pridesource.com  
Phone 734-263-1476

**PUBLISHERS**

Benjamin Jenkins  
benjamin@pridesource.com

**Publishers Emeritus:** Jan Stevenson & Susan Horowitz

**EDITORIAL**

**Editorial Director**  
Chris Azzopardi  
chris@pridesource.com

**Managing Editor**

Sarah Bricker Hunt  
sarah@pridesource.com

**CREATIVE**

**Cartoonist**

Paul Berg

**Graphic Designer**

Sarah Wolf

**Contributing Photographer**

Andrew Potter

**ADVERTISING & SALES**

sales@pridesource.com

Carolyn Cardenas

734-263-1476

carolyn@pridesource.com

Tim Powers

734-263-1475

tim@pridesource.com

**National Advertising Representative**

Rivendell Media, 212-242-6863

**MEMBER OF**

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# 5 Queer Things You Can Do Right Now-ish

BY KELLI DUNHAM

It's that time of year in Michigan when the cider mills open, the mosquitoes haven't quite closed shop and your hoodie-to-shorts ratio could change three times in one day. Luckily, queer Michigan doesn't depend on any specific weather pattern to be fabulous.

This week, you can get beamed up by a drag alien, laugh yourself sore with a Wild 'n Out comic, cry-dance with indie pop and wander through journals that might make you rethink your own high school diary. Five fabulous things and five perfect excuses to avoid folding laundry!



Irene the Alien. Photo: irenethealien.com

## Get Galactic with Irene the Alien

If your weekend needs a little more sparkle from the cosmos, "RuPaul's Drag Race" star Irene the Alien is here to beam you up. Expect campy comedy, fierce alien realness and a lineup of local stars including Chanel Hunter, Canary Mirror, Anna Rexia, Lucy Misfit and the unstoppable host Victoria Sanchez. This one-afternoon-only show promises to be so out of this world you'll need NASA clearance. VIP tickets include a meet-and-greet, because if you're going to get abducted, why not do it in style?

September 7, 2 p.m., Pronto!/Five15 (600 S. Washington Ave., Royal Oak). Reserve tickets at [bit.ly/irenethealien](https://bit.ly/irenethealien).



Darren Fleet.  
Photo: Instagram/  
@lovedarrenfleet

## Find the Funny with Darren Fleet

Darren Fleet has been mixing sharp wit with fearless truth-telling since 2014, and now he's bringing that fire to Detroit. Known for his run on MTV's "Nick Cannon Presents: Wild 'n Out," telling hilarious (often puppy-filled) stories on social media and his ability to channel comedic legends like Eddie Murphy and Bernie Mac, Fleet doesn't just tell jokes, he turns the whole room into a party. Layer in his fearless celebration of LGBTQ+ voices (and general fierceness), and you've got a show that could change more than just your mood.

Sept. 13, 7 p.m., The Comedy Bar Detroit (6531 Woodward Ave., Detroit). Get tickets at [bit.ly/darrenfleet](https://bit.ly/darrenfleet).



Artwork by Ruth Crowe

## Journey Through Journals with Ruth Crowe

After winning the Juried Visibility Award at ArtPrize 2024 in Grand Rapids and moving audiences across the country on tour, Ruth Crowe's "The Journal Project" comes home to Michigan for its final exhibition in Douglas. Each piece pairs art and music with quotes from Ruth's journals, weaving together a lifetime of vulnerability and resilience. Crowe told BTL that she's proud the project reached so many people. "I'm so appreciative for the help I received to make that a reality," she noted. "It truly was a creative collaboration."

While some pieces will remain available virtually, if you want to experience the full scope of the project in person — to see raw honesty transformed into beauty — this is your last chance.

Sept. 5, 7 p.m. opening — runs through Sept. 30, Ruth Crowe ARTist Studio (36 Center St., Douglas). Visit [ruthcroweartist.com](https://ruthcroweartist.com) to learn more.



Autoheart. Photo: Instagram/  
@autoheartvision

### Ascend with Autoheart: Cry, Dance, Repeat

Autoheart's 36-date tour is selling out all over, so if you don't want to end up watching blurry Instagram clips while crying into your couch pillow, plan ahead for their Lansing show now. The rising queer alt-pop U.K.-based band is touring their new album "Heartlands," which Hash Tag Magazine describes as "pop for overthinkers: big feelings, bigger choruses and the occasional dissociative episode. A little bit camp. Maybe a lot. It's crying at the disco — with harmonies."

Songs like "Indigo Chateau" respond to a culture increasingly hostile to trans and queer lives by insisting on beauty, defiance and building new worlds. For their fans (the self-proclaimed "Heartheads"), "Heartlands" is more than music: it's a refuge.

Sept. 19, 7 p.m., Grewal Hall (224 Washington Square, Lansing). Find tickets at [bit.ly/autoheartlansing](http://bit.ly/autoheartlansing).



### Amuse Yourself with Awkward, Alt Athletics

Remember the Presidential Fitness Test? That yearly ritual where a sadistic (and not in a good way) gym teacher made us run the mile like our permanent record depended on it? Now imagine if that had been a drag race instead — sequins flying, judges scoring your jazz-hand push-ups. That's the energy we're reclaiming.

Your body still belongs to you, and it deserves fun. Dance terribly, roller-skate slowly, strut through Meijer like it's a runway. Think less CrossFit, more cross-your-heart-and-giggle. The point is joy, not fitness. Best of all, this time you get to hand yourself the trophy.

Places to start: Perhaps Gay Square Dancing, Gay Pickleball or dancing to the Holderness Family's Stupid Mental Health Song at [bit.ly/stupidmentalhealthwalk](http://bit.ly/stupidmentalhealthwalk).

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# UM Health Halts Gender Care in Move Nessel Calls ‘Potentially Illegal’

State officials blast move as advocates mobilize resources

BY SARAH BRICKER HUNT

The University of Michigan Health system announced it will pause gender-affirming hormone therapies and puberty blockers for patients under 19 following a Department of Justice subpoena received in July, a decision Michigan Attorney General Dana Nessel called “shameful, dangerous and potentially illegal.” The move comes amid a broader federal investigation that has prompted statewide advocates to strengthen support networks and expand resources for affected families.

The decision affects the statewide hospital network’s Comprehensive Gender Services Program, which previously served transgender, gender-nonconforming and nonbinary youth seeking medically necessary care. The university received its subpoena July 14 as part of a broader federal investigation targeting more than 20 healthcare providers offering gender-affirming care to minors — and in many cases, 18-year-old adults.

“The University of Michigan, including Michigan Medicine, is one of multiple institutions across the country that has received a federal subpoena as part of a criminal and civil investigation into gender-affirming care for minors,” the health system said in a statement to media outlets. “In light of that investigation, and given escalating external threats and risks, we will no longer provide gender-affirming hormonal therapies and puberty blocker medications for minors.”

The Trump administration’s Department of Justice announced July 9 that it had sent subpoenas to doctors and clinics “involved in performing transgender medical procedures on children.” Other major healthcare institutions receiving subpoenas reportedly include the Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia, University of Pittsburgh Medical Center and UChicago Medicine.

University of Michigan Health acknowledged the impact of its



decision, stating, “We recognize the gravity and impact of this decision for our patients and our community. We are working closely with all those impacted, and we will continuously support the well-being of our patients, their families and our teams.” The health system will continue providing other forms of care to gender-diverse patients and the statement indicates it has increased access to mental health services for those affected by the change.

Erin Knott, executive director of Equality Michigan, called the decision “yet another alarming move by a major healthcare institution to walk away from its responsibility to serve all patients — including some of our most vulnerable young people.”

“It is especially disheartening to see this decision come from an institution within our own state — one long recognized for its leadership in both healthcare and education,” Knott said. “Even in making this harmful decision, the University of Michigan appears to acknowledge the legitimacy and value of gender-affirming care. Yet, it has chosen to retreat.”

In a strongly worded statement

released Aug. 25, Nessel described Michigan Medicine’s decision as “cowardly acquiescence to political pressure from this president and his administration” and warned that her office “will be considering all of our options if they violate Michigan law.”

The attorney general emphasized that gender-affirming treatment remains legal in Michigan and suggested the hospital system’s actions could constitute discrimination under state law. “Refusing healthcare services to a class of individuals based on their protected status, such as withholding the availability of services from transgender individuals based on their gender identity or their diagnosis of gender dysphoria, while offering such services to cisgender individuals, may constitute discrimination under Michigan law,” Nessel wrote in an open letter to healthcare providers and patients.

Roz Keith, executive director of Stand with Trans, said “gender-affirming care, which includes prescribing HRT, is legal in the state of Michigan. The care is life-saving and backed by evidence-based research.”

Speaking as both an advocate and a parent, Keith shared her

personal experience: “As a parent, I know how hard it was to find care a dozen years ago for my child. It was an immense relief to be able to go to Michigan Medicine for his gender dysphoria and associated, requisite care. Right now, if the rug was pulled out from under us, I cannot even imagine the distress that my child would be experiencing. His mental health was already in question. Not having access to care might have been the difference between life and death.”

Multiple organizations across Michigan have mobilized to provide support for transgender youth and families navigating these healthcare challenges, including Stand with Trans for referrals (standwithtrans@gmail.com), Equality Michigan for advocacy, Transgender Michigan for community support and the ACLU of Michigan for legal advocacy. These organizations emphasize that while individual healthcare systems may change their policies, the legal landscape

in Michigan continues to support access to gender-affirming care.

The University of Michigan’s decision comes amid what advocates describe as an unprecedented federal campaign targeting gender-affirming care providers. The Washington Post reported that legal experts consider the Justice Department subpoenas to be unprecedented.

As BTL reported in August, Nessel joined a coalition of 16 states filing a lawsuit challenging the Trump administration’s executive orders targeting transgender healthcare. The attorney general noted that “the

*Michigan Attorney General Dana Nessel described Michigan Medicine’s decision as “cowardly acquiescence to political pressure from this president and his administration.”*

availability of federal funding has no bearing on Michiganders’ right to seek and receive healthcare services without discrimination.”

The pressure campaign has shown results nationwide, with providers in multiple states reducing or eliminating services. The disruption has reached progressive areas including Los Angeles, Chicago and Washington, D.C., though Michigan healthcare system Corewell Health reversed a similar decision earlier this year after facing public backlash.

Despite federal pressures, advocates emphasize that Michigan’s legal protections remain intact. The decision by one health system, while significant, does not eliminate access to gender-affirming care throughout the state.

# Michigan Leaders Must Defend All Rights or Risk Losing Them for Everyone

Elected officials' silence on Michigan Medicine's trans care decision threatens constitutional protections for all



BY LOREN  
KHOALI

A president should not bully health care providers at the expense of the people they exist to serve.

Amid silence from all but a few of our state and federal political leaders about Michigan Medicine's disheartening decision to end gender-affirming care for patients under the age of 19, Michigan's attorney general issued a strong admonition, a reminder that our state civil rights law protects against "refusing health care services to a class of individuals based on their protected status."

Why has Michigan Medicine's dismaying decision been met largely with silence by our elected leaders? Maybe they have interpreted political polling to say that they should talk less about the rights of transgender people. Maybe they aren't particularly knowledgeable or comfortable with gender-affirming care. Maybe they have absorbed the rampant and constant misinformation about gender-affirming care. But none of those things should matter when their role is to serve the people of Michigan, consistent with our state laws.



Michigan state Capitol building in Lansing.

Gender-affirming care is legal in Michigan. Our state civil rights law provides protections for people based on gender identity. Most fundamentally, health care is a decision between a doctor, a patient and a patient's family if the patient is a minor. The government does not and should not enter into highly personal and individual decisions about medical treatment made by doctors, patients and families.

As we look toward 2026

elections in Michigan, it's important that those elected to the role of governor, attorney general, secretary of state and the state legislature recognize and are willing to use the power that they have to protect the rights and liberties of the people of Michigan against unrelenting attacks from the federal administration. Our right to vote empowers us to ensure that whoever is elected to those important seats is committed to a

vision for our state that embraces the promises of our state and federal constitutions and where everyone lives fully and safely.

The Trump administration's attacks — and echoing attacks from the Michigan House of Representatives — are purposefully targeted to erode fundamental rights for everyone by focusing on those groups most vulnerable to violations of their civil rights and civil liberties. It is no mistake that the Trump

administration has most explicitly and heavily targeted transgender people and immigrants to narrow the scope of rights that protect us all.

The Trump administration is targeting groups where they know people are more likely to carve out exceptions to justify their silence. But here's the thing: Our unwillingness to stand up for people out of discomfort, misunderstanding, fear or a sense of false security about our own rights or the rights of people whose experiences we are more familiar with fuels the erosion of fundamental rights for all of us. Our struggles for justice, equality and democracy are connected. The loss of fundamental rights such as due process, privacy or bodily autonomy for any person will impact every person in this country.

We are not powerless — we are powerful together. We can band together in defense of our collective rights at the foundation of our democracy. But we cannot afford to carve out exceptions for who deserves the protection of the rights in our constitution. The promise of our constitution must be for everyone or it is for no one.

*Loren Khogali is the executive director of the ACLU of Michigan.*

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# Fall Into Washtenaw County's Best Seasonal Experiences

From mindful forest hikes to cozy downtown cafés, there's something for everyone

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After an eventful summer season, fall is a perfect time to slow down and reclaim your peace of mind. Soak up the sensation of crisp autumn air, admire the ever-changing

foliage and reconnect with nature in the heart of harvest season.

Ann Arbor has rightfully earned the nickname "Tree Town," and that's even more meaningful when the colors start to shift. West Huron River Drive between downtown and Dexter lights up in fiery fall

hues. The trails at Bird Hills Nature Area — Ann Arbor's largest natural area — are the perfect place to bring a pair of binoculars, and Cherry Hill Nature Preserve has an easy 1.6-mile loop. All 42 accessible miles of the Border to Border (B2B) Trail link up some of the most scenic sights throughout

Washtenaw County.

Take it a step further with a mindfulness hike! Every month, Washtenaw County Parks and Recreation hosts these immersive hikes, inspired by the concept of forest bathing, with naturalist Elle Bogle and mindfulness instructor Julie Woodward.



*Whether you're solo, part of a couple or a family of any size, it's really not officially fall until you go apple picking or cider tasting.*

More tranquil retreats await in private spaces. At the University of Michigan, Nichols Arboretum, aka The Arb, is a sought-after destination for nature lovers from all over. Miles of trails, carefully cultivated gardens, peaceful woodlands and vibrant wildflowers make up this educational and inspirational attraction. Wander among 11 seasonal gardens at the Matthaei Botanical Gardens — including ornamentals and ever-evolving perennials — and walk or bike among the many trails laced throughout the property.

If high energy is more your style, fall is a great time to blow off steam. Join the weekly Olson Park gravel ride, an 18-mile excursion hosted by the Ann Arbor Bicycle Touring Society. Just north of Chelsea, the DTE Energy Foundation Trail was a labor of love that now features four bike loops spanning 22 miles in the Waterloo Recreation Area.

Whether you're solo, part of a couple or a family of any size, it's really not officially fall until you go apple picking or cider tasting. In Ypsilanti, Wiard's Orchards and Country Fair has 80 acres of U-Pick apple orchards and pumpkin patches, as well as fresh cider.

The Dexter Cider Mill, Michigan's oldest continuously operating cider mill, has been a local favorite since 1886. Mix up your classic cider tasting with a cider slushie or pair a hard cider with a sweet baked treat.

And speaking of treating yourself, now is the time to lean into your cravings for pumpkin spice and everything nice. Bakehouse 46 in Ann Arbor is known for its seasonal flavors in collaboration with Blake's Farm — run, don't walk, to grab a pumpkin cupcake frosted with maple white chocolate cream cheese or a caramel cupcake stuffed with whiskey apple filling. It's also the season to cozy up in charming cafés like Joe and Rosie Coffee and Tea in Dexter, or Zou Zou's Cafe and Coffee Bar in Chelsea.

With farmers markets bursting with fresh produce, fall is the season to explore the area's farm-to-table scene. We also love our local purveyors for sustainable meats, seafood and dairy, so the spotlight is on

Michigan-made cuisine. Bellflower in Ypsilanti showcases the best of community and collaboration with a seasonally inspired menu. Reserve ahead to get a table at Spencer, a gem in Ann Arbor that presents a creative, seasonally rotating set menu. Gather around a table with other like-minded diners when you join Washtenaw Meats for a farm-to-table community dinner at Jolly Pumpkin Artisan Ales + Kitchen in Dexter, held on the last Tuesday of every month.

What's your favorite fall activity in the area? Come enjoy the bounty of countywide experiences this season.

*This content is made possible through our partnership with Destination Ann Arbor. For more information about LGBTQ-friendly accommodations, events and attractions in the Ann Arbor area, visit [annarbor.org](http://annarbor.org).*

## Washtenaw County's Best Fall Destinations

### Outdoor adventures

- **Bird Hills Nature Area**  
1850 Newport Road, Ann Arbor
- **Cherry Hill Nature Preserve**  
6375 Cherry Hill Road, Superior Charter Township
- **Matthaei Botanical Gardens**  
1800 N. Dixboro Road, Ann Arbor
- **Nichols Arboretum**  
1610 Washington Heights, Ann Arbor
- **Waterloo Recreation Area**  
16345 McClure Road, Chelsea
- **Wiard's Orchards and Country Fair**  
5565 Merritt Road, Ypsilanti

### Indoor treats and retreats

- **Bakehouse 46**  
116 E Liberty St., Ann Arbor
- **Bellflower**  
209 Pearl St., Ypsilanti
- **The Dexter Cider Mill**  
3685 Central St., Dexter
- **Joe and Rosie Coffee and Tea**  
8074 Main St., Dexter
- **Jolly Pumpkin Artisan Ales + Kitchen**  
2319 Bishop Circle East, Dexter
- **Spencer**  
113 E. Liberty St., Ann Arbor
- **Zou Zou's Cafe and Coffee Bar**  
101 N. Main St., Chelsea

# What If Pride Never Hibernated?

Amid political backlash, a Winter Pride event in Florida emerges as a bold, off-season celebration of queer resilience and community

BY CHRIS AZZOPARDI

The party doesn't have to stop when the last Pride float rolls away in late summer. From Florida's winter paradise to New York's frozen lakes, queer communities are claiming new territory on the calendar, creating Winter Pride celebrations that feel both rebellious and inevitable in the current political era.

Earlier this year, St. Petersburg's inaugural Winter Pride flipped the script on Florida's increasingly hostile political climate, delivering a full week of unapologetic queer joy in February — smack in the middle of snowbird season. More than 57,000 attendees showed up for everything from trans-led dance parties to street parades and a literal drag race, all while reclaiming space in a state where rainbow crosswalks have literally been erased. I attended many of the St. Pete Winter Pride events in February and can personally attest that it wasn't just a celebration; in this current political era of queer erasure, it felt like a defiant, love-filled act of protest just by its mere existence.

In March, that same energy drifted north — on skis. Adirondack Winter Pride Weekend, a brand-new three-day celebration in Lake Placid, New York, spanned the iconic Olympic venues and charming alpine village. It brought LGBTQ+ travelers and allies together for a weekend of winter sports, dancing, community — and, yes, après-ski vibes. Organizers invited the LGBTQ+ and ally community to what promised to be a “spectacular” time in the winter sports destination, home of the 1932 and 1980 Winter Olympics.

Meanwhile, since 2018, OUT Central Oregon has hosted Winter PrideFest to celebrate inclusivity and the outdoors, offering a full weekend of fun and activities that take advantage of the winter weather. It has grown from 150 participants in 2018 to over 2,400 in 2025.

In 2026, Winter Pride is returning to St. Pete, from Feb. 15-22 — events, including the opening five-block street festival featuring trans author and activist Dylan Mulvaney and the elegant Pelican Ball with emcee Nina



Festival attendees celebrate Winter Pride in St. Pete during the street festival. Photo: Winter Pride

*“Winter Pride emphasizes the power of the queer community — that we deserve to be visible and active members of the community year-round.”*

— Evelyn Long, St. Petersburg Winter Pride organizer

West, have already been announced.

For Rob Hall, executive director of St. Pete's Winter Pride, the experience of putting on St. Pete's first Pride event outside of the traditional summertime celebration was nothing short of transformative.

“I've never been more tired or more filled with joy by the end of something in my entire life,” Hall says, speaking recently from the ZaZoo'd store in downtown St. Pete where much of Winter Pride's planning happens. “It was such a unique experience, and to have

the turnout and support we did, not just from the LGBTQ+ community but from the city of St. Petersburg, set a really strong foundation for what's to come.”

Hall's journey to this role is deeply personal. After coming out later in life — he had been married to a woman for 28 years — he moved from Ohio to St. Pete in 2022 and began volunteering for St. Pete Pride.

From there, connections with people like David Fischer, owner of ZaZoo'd and a core member of the Winter Pride team, helped lay the groundwork for something new: a second Pride celebration during Florida's winter season, when balmy weather draws in snowbirds from the north.

Now, Hall is preparing for what he says will be an even bigger celebration in 2026, with over 100,000 attendees expected. It won't just be a party but a protest wrapped in celebration, especially in an era of increasing political attacks against the LGBTQ+

community across Florida and the nation.

“Protests can come in many forms,” he says. “We choose to take the celebratory format. We want people to feel accepted and welcome no matter who you are, no matter your background.”

That sense of safety and community was echoed by Evelyn Long, a 24-year-old member of the Winter Pride team who calls the experience of planning the event “a serious privilege.”

“At a time when people feel powerless, I have the privilege of having a sense of agency and making a difference,” Long says. “Winter Pride emphasizes the power of the queer community in our area — that we deserve to be visible and active members of the community year-round.”

Long recalls the Trans-n-Dance event, described as a “liberating dance for the trans community and their loved ones,” as a defining moment for her personally. She

See **Winter Pride**, page 21

# Taking Flight On Your Own Terms

Queer travelers are discovering that going it alone offers unexpected rewards and profound self-discovery

BY SARAH BRICKER HUNT

Mandy was sitting alone under a vast New Mexico sky, stars scattered like diamonds across the darkness, when she realized something profound had shifted. Just months after coming out as a queer woman, she'd driven solo from her conservative home state of Utah to Santa Fe — a journey that required careful planning, location sharing with friends and strategic stops only at crowded, well-connected gas stations. (Note: Our travel subjects have opted to use first names only in this story to help ensure their safety.)

“Solo travel allows me to slow down and see the beauty of new places and learn amazing new things,” she reflects. “It also reminded me that I am a learner, an investigator and someone who enjoys diving deep into new and old things.”

For LGBTQ+ travelers, solo adventures require more preparation than the average vacation. But a growing number of queer people are discovering that the extra planning pays off in unexpected ways — from challenging preconceived notions about hostile territories to experiencing profound personal growth in the freedom of traveling entirely on their own terms.

Ruby, a transgender woman from Metro Detroit, crosses the U.S.-Canada border weekly to visit her girlfriend and has developed what she calls a “mental checklist” for interactions with authorities.

“Keep your answers as brief as possible. Wait for them to tell you to do something before you do it,” Ruby advises. She's also become an expert at vetting destinations through local Reddit communities. “A lot of cities and areas have subreddit, so Reddit is a big source of information for me.”

The research pays off. Ruby has discovered welcoming pockets in unexpected places, including areas where tourism creates a buffer of tolerance even in otherwise conservative regions. “Where you see tourism, people tend to be — even if not more accepting in their own minds — less likely to say something or do something because they're used to just working with so many different people,” she observes.

Lucas Abromowitz, an independent agent with Once Upon a Trip agency based in Marquette, has made it his mission to help LGBTQ+ travelers discover Michigan's surprising diversity of welcoming destinations. Beyond well-known queer havens like Saugatuck, he champions the Upper Peninsula as an ideal solo destination.

“If you're looking for small-town charm, lake life and access to the outdoors, then put our city on your list,” Abromowitz says about Marquette. “With Northern Michigan University's presence, we also have the infusion of youthful energy.” He particularly recommends Cartier Mansion and Ludington House B&B in Ludington, whose owners are “incredible allies of the LGBTQ+ community” and “promote a safe and welcoming environment.”

For Mandy's April road trip to Santa Fe, the planning became



intensely detailed. She researched sunrise and sunset times for every stop, avoided driving in darkness and implemented location sharing with a trusted friend.

“It was only my most recent solo road trip in April where I felt more of a need to create a safety plan to travel,” Mandy explains. “Which is very telling.”

Ruby has learned to read visual cues that signal safety or potential hostility. “If there's a lot of MAGA-forward signage and whatnot, that makes me kind of want to put the pedal to the metal a little bit faster,” she explains. These political indicators have become part of her decision-making process when choosing where to stop.

When it comes to accommodations, Ruby consistently chooses hotels over Airbnbs when venturing beyond familiar territory. “I've always felt the safest in hotels right because there's proper security,” she explains. She also avoids first-floor rooms whenever possible.

Perhaps the most surprising discovery for solo queer travelers is how often their fears prove unfounded. Ruby's extensive travels have taught her valuable lessons about the gap between perception and reality.

“You get out and you kind of talk to people and they're not as fanatical as you might think based on your social media,” she reflects. “I'm a big believer in treating people how you want to be treated. So I try to be — unless somebody gives me a reason to not be — polite and kind towards them. That's what I try to lean in with. And I feel like I usually get that back.”

She's discovered she's felt comfortable in unexpected places. “It's kind of helped me see that there are pockets of good in places you might think are just all bad.”

This doesn't mean dropping all caution. Ruby describes becoming more vigilant when her instincts signal potential problems. “If it's an area where I'm not fully comfortable in or something feels off, you need to trust the gut feeling that something doesn't feel right.”

See **Solo Travel**, page 26

## Have You Negotiated Your Monogamy?

BY JOE KORT, PH.D.

Director of The Center for Relationship and Sexual Health in Royal Oak



In today's complex relationship landscape, the concept of monogamy often comes with a myriad of unstated assumptions. As sex therapist Marty Klein aptly notes, “Couples often fight over contracts they've never made.” This highlights the importance of negotiating the terms of monogamy or any relationship structure openly and explicitly. When working with couples, I always begin by asking about their relationship status: Are they monogamous, in an open relationship, polyamorous or perhaps “monogamish,” a term popularized by sex advice columnist Dan Savage?

Understanding what these terms mean to each partner is crucial. For instance, I once worked with a gay male couple who identified as monogamous, yet they engaged in a three-way during a vacation. Their definition of monogamy included playing together on trips, which underscores the necessity of discussing and defining relationship boundaries. This conversation is not only relevant for those in open relationships but also for monogamous couples. Questions such as whether partners can flirt with others, have dinner with an ex or watch porn privately can reveal differing expectations and assumptions.

Interestingly, gay male couples tend to be more open about discussing these boundaries compared to straight and even some lesbian couples. This openness might stem from cultural norms within the gay community, where explicit communication about sexual and romantic desires is more common. For example, gay men often use dating apps to clearly state their preferences and boundaries before even meeting in person. In contrast, heterosexual singles might face scrutiny for such transparency.

The emergence of “micro-cheating,” a term that reflects the hyper-vigilance in modern relationships, further complicates these discussions. Micro-cheating includes behaviors like casually flirting with someone other than one's partner, having online conversations without disclosure or repeatedly liking someone's social media posts. While some view these actions as precursors to more serious infidelity, others see them as benign. The key is whether these behaviors have been discussed and agreed upon within the relationship.

In therapy, I often encounter couples grappling with issues stemming from unspoken agreements. For instance, a partner might feel threatened by her partner's porn-watching habits, fearing it signals potential infidelity. However, without a prior agreement on such behaviors, labeling him a sex addict or demanding he stop might be unreasonable. Forbidding a partner from certain actions can lead to secrecy and power struggles. The question then becomes about the extent of control one partner should have over the other's actions and thoughts.

Ultimately, the concept of micro-cheating and the negotiation of monogamy raise more questions than answers. Each couple must navigate these waters based on their unique dynamics and values. The critical takeaway is the importance of open communication and explicit agreements to prevent misunderstandings and conflicts. So, have you negotiated your monogamy? This question is essential for fostering healthy and fulfilling relationships.

 The Center for Relationship Health

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This content is made possible through our partnership with The Center for Relationship Health.

## Gov. Ron DeFascist Rids Florida of Menacing Road Rainbows



BY D'ANNE WITKOWSKI

Since 2017, the crosswalk near Pulse nightclub in Orlando has been painted with rainbow colors to recognize and honor the 49 people killed and 53 people wounded there in 2016 in a

mass shooting.

Recently, that rainbow crosswalk was painted over in the middle of the night by order of Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis. This understandably upset some people who saw it as a politically motivated swipe at LGBTQ+ people because DeSantis has gone out of his way over the years to let LGBTQ+ people know that he does not like us and does not see our humanity.

“What I’m taken aback by is that of all the rainbow crosswalks in Florida, Gov. DeSantis decided the crosswalk attached to the Pulse nightclub memorial was the example he wanted to make,” Florida Sen. Carlos Guillermo Smith, Florida’s first out Latine lawmaker, told The Advocate.

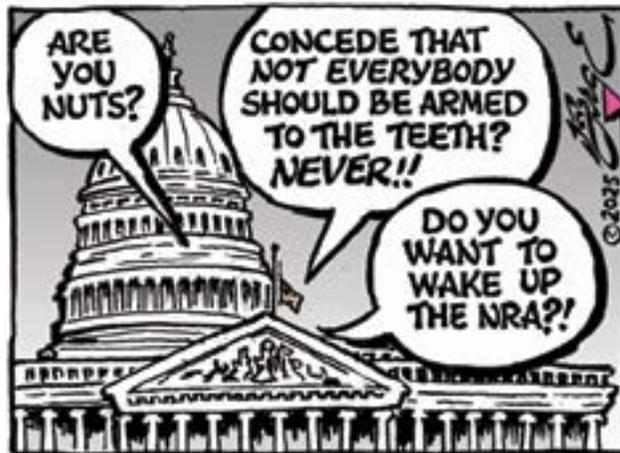
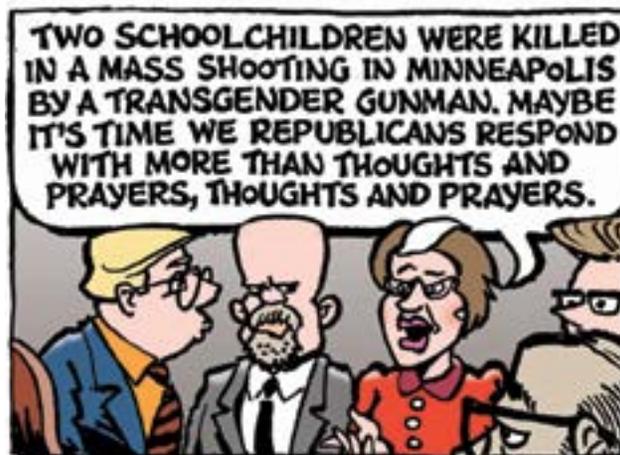
And so a group of people decided to protest by coloring in the crosswalk with sidewalk chalk, restoring the rainbow. At least temporarily.

Chalk, as many are aware, is ephemeral. Rainfall, a bucket of water, or even blood from 102 people shot with an assault rifle while trying to enjoy Latin Night at a club

**“We know that Republicans do not care about facts and data. Nor do they care about people’s lives, as much as they claim otherwise.”**

could easily wash chalk away.

But as I write this, four people have been arrested in connection with the chalking of the crosswalk, charged with “defacing a traffic device,” according to the Orlando Sentinel. According to The Advocate, “the state has now deployed as many as six police squad cars to guard



asphalt, their sole mission to prevent the reemergence of rainbow colors at the site of one of the worst anti-LGBTQ+ massacres in U.S. history.”

DeSantis, of course, insists that the painting of the crosswalk is in no way political. It turns out ALL street art in Florida is to be eradicated. The DeSantis administration insists, without evidence, that such art is distracting, “jeopardizing both driver and pedestrian safety,” according to the Orlando Sentinel.

The Sentinel has found otherwise, however, by looking at city traffic data. According to their data “the eye-catching swans, citrus wedges and rainbows made the city a safer place to walk, reducing incidents where drivers slammed on the brakes, swerved or crashed as pedestrians crossed.”

The paper cited the crosswalk near Pulse as an example, reporting “that there were just four crashes in the eight years since the colors were put down.” It also pointed to “bright

murals and decorative crosswalks at four intersections on Orange Avenue” where “foot traffic nearly tripled at those sections of the busy road, yet the rate of conflicts with vehicles plunged about 65%.”

That seems significant. But we know that Republicans do not care about facts and data. Nor do they care about

people’s lives, as much as they claim otherwise. Don’t listen to what they say; listen to what they do. Republican policies have a knack for endangering people, worsening public health and increasing death.

“I don’t know of a single rainbow crosswalk that has ever killed a child. Yet I can name countless bus stops across this state without traffic lights,” a Florida resident told The Advocate, “real dangers where tax dollars could be used to protect lives, rather than being wasted on erasing LGBTQ+ visibility.”

And yet, here we are.

This fits, given that Florida is the home of the “Don’t Say Gay” bill that sought to strengthen the parental rights of cis het kids and parents at the expense of kids and parents who are not cis het by restricting instruction or discussion regarding sexual orientation or gender identity in schools.

DeSantis also tried to ban lighting bridges in rainbow colors during Pride, co-opting June as part of “Freedom Summer” and declaring that the only color lights that could be used to light up bridges were red, white and blue.

Florida state Rep. Anna V. Eskamani (D-Orlando), said the rainbow crosswalk near Pulse “sparked joy and showed our love for all people.”

Which is, of course, the problem.

The U.S. is squarely in our fascist era. And joy and love for all people have no place in a fascist nation. In fact, fascism depends upon the exact opposite. It also depends on our silence.

I am not a fan of Florida, but maybe it’s time for all of the LGBTQ+ people in the United States to take a field trip. I’ll bring the chalk and the sunscreen. You bring the megaphone and the bail money.

# THE SCROLL

## QUICK HITS & CAN'T MISSES

### Antoni Porowski's New Boyfriend Is a Michigan Man

Looks like "Queer Eye" star Antoni Porowski has a new reason to love the Midwest, and it's not just the cherry pie. Porowski, 41, is dating personal trainer and Michigan native Zacharias Niedzwiecki, 33. The couple went Instagram-official with a dreamy Mediterranean yacht photo in June, both dressed in matching white linen. Recently, the pair traded European glamour for Michigan, spending cozy time in Traverse City with Porowski's rescue dog, Neon.

They hit the beach and snapped pictures, including one Porowski captioned, "pro-tip: find a local to show u around Traverse City." Niedzwiecki followed up with a selfie captioned "my guy." Pure Michigan gave Antoni a proper Mitten State welcome, posting "Cheers to your first time in TC, Antoni. Come visit us again soon." For Niedzwiecki, the visit was a return to his roots. The fitness coach and opera singer studied vocal performance at Michigan State University. No word on whether the couple caught up with Traverse City's most famous power couple, Pete and Chasten Buttigieg, but surely a double date is on the horizon?



Antoni Porowski places a kiss on boyfriend Zacharias Niedzwiecki's cheek. Photo: Instagram/ @zacharias

### Lenawee Pride Set to Bring Queer Joy to Rural Michigan

For six years, Lenawee Pride has been creating queer joy in Adrian, about 70 miles southwest of Detroit. Socorro Sevilla, president of The M Society serving Lenawee County's LGBTQ+ community, said the event addresses crucial visibility needs in rural areas. "Having Pride in a smaller rural community like Adrian often provides the first place queer adults and kids get to witness and experience queer joy," adds organizer Kristina Henning.

This year's Sept. 6 celebration spreads throughout downtown Adrian thanks to its "Shop and Strut" program, partnering with more than 20 local businesses as safe spaces. The main event runs from 3 to 8 p.m. at Adrian City Market, featuring more than 30 vendors, drag story time and food trucks.

Sept. 6, 3-8 p.m. at Adrian City Market (115 Toledo St., Adrian). Free and family-friendly.

### Queer 'Gilligan's Island' Parody 'Seven Castaways' Drops Anchor at Planet Ant

Get ready to set sail with a queer twist on a classic sitcom in a production that director Cassandra Svacha told BTL is a beacon of empowerment

during challenging times for the LGBTQ+ community. Sean Paraventi spent six years writing and developing the uproarious musical parody "Seven Castaways." Inspired by his childhood obsession with "Gilligan's Island" and the cheeky humor of "Avenue Q," this adult-oriented show promises a raunchy and fun-filled reimagining that'll leave you laughing all the way to the beach. The show =boasts a cast of well-known local

LGBTQ+ theater icons, including Joe Bailey, Bailey Boudreau, Dave Dunham, Maureen Paraventi, Allison Megroet, Dez Walker alongside rising newcomer Alexia Allagreen. With an original score spanning multiple genres and musical direction by the talented Jeremy St. Martin, this goofy, joyful escape is sure to be the perfect antidote to your island fever. Sept. 5-14, Planet Ant Theatre (2320 Caniff St., Hamtramck).

### OutFront Kalamazoo Launches Gender-Affirming Care Fund

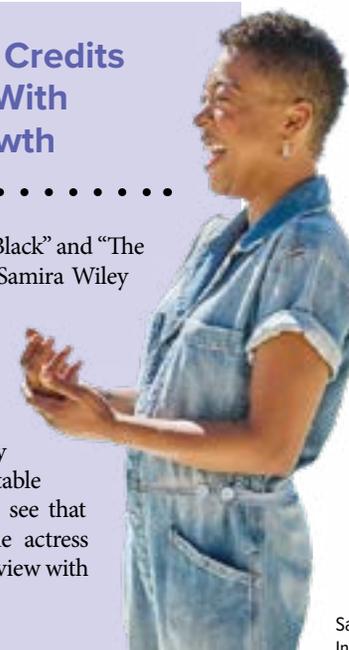
OutFront Kalamazoo announced a new Gender-Affirming Care Fund which will provide financial aid to Kalamazoo County residents seeking gender-affirming medical interventions. Thanks to local donors, the organization guarantees dollar-for-dollar matching for all donations up to \$10,000. The fund-matching campaign aims to increase accessibility to essential healthcare services for the local trans community. Visit [outfrontkzoo.org](http://outfrontkzoo.org) for more information.

### Salus Center Launches Monthly Queer Movie Nights

Lansing's Salus Center is partnering with the downtown Lansing library for monthly queer movie nights. The series launches Sept. 24, with "But I'm a Cheerleader" at 6 p.m., followed by discussion at Salus Center from 8-9 p.m. Upcoming films include "Rocky Horror Picture Show," "Pariah" and "The Incredibly True Adventure of Two Girls in Love." Doors open at 5:50 p.m. Visit [facebook.com/SalusCenterMI](https://facebook.com/SalusCenterMI) for details.

### Samira Wiley Credits Queer Roles With Personal Growth

"Orange Is the New Black" and "The Handmaid's Tale" star Samira Wiley recently reflected on how portraying queer characters transformed her personal journey. "'Orange' definitely made me more comfortable with myself, made me see that it's OK to be me," the actress shared in a recent interview with Yahoo UK.



Samira Wiley. Photo: Instagram/@whododatikedat

## WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

# Catching Up with Kathy Kozachenko, the Ann Arbor Trailblazer Who Became America's First Openly Lesbian Elected Official

BY DREW SAUNDERS

Ann Arbor made history in 1974 when Kathy Kozachenko became the first openly lesbian candidate elected to any city council in the United States. Now living in Pittsburgh and working on her memoir, this pioneering figure in Michigan's LGBTQ+ heritage recently shared her groundbreaking story with Pride Source — from her early activism through her historic

election and her perspective on today's political challenges facing the queer community.

Ann Arbor will unveil a historical marker honoring Kozachenko and fellow LGBTQ+ trailblazers Nancy Wechsler and Jerry DeGriek at 11 a.m. Sept. 4 on the south side of Larcom City Hall. The marker will also recognize the city's pioneering Human Rights Ordinance that protected LGBTQ+ residents from housing discrimination.

**Can you share a bit about your early life, coming out and how you came to terms with your identity?**

My mother died when I was 9 and her death changed who I was and shaped who I became. I looked around and saw that life wasn't fair — other kids still had their mothers, and my brother and I did not. I didn't connect the dots until many years later, but I think in those early years, I decided that what can be fair should be fair. Everyone should have a decent education; it shouldn't depend on what kind of neighborhood you lived in. Everyone should be treated the same and have opportunity, no matter the color of your skin. A lifelong commitment to justice began when I was young.

I was a serious kid, more interested in politics than popular music. I didn't date much, and I had no idea that lesbianism or homosexuality even existed! When I went to college at the University of Michigan, I found my people, so to speak and realized at once that I was a lesbian. I was not close to my father or stepmother so my only concern was how my grandmother, Stella, would react. I went out to lunch with her and it took an appetizer, a meal, a dessert and many cups of coffee before I finally said, "Gram, I'm gay." She replied, "Is that it?" I was lucky.

**You were the first openly lesbian candidate to win office to any city council in the country when you got onto the Ann Arbor City Council. What**

**motivated you to run?**

When I got to UM, I looked for an organization on campus that aligned with my beliefs. I found that organization in the Human Rights Party. They believed in structural change, redistribution of wealth and the elimination of gender roles. We believed in all people being able to reach their full potential — people coming before corporate profits and greed. HRP believed in using electoral politics to [affect] whatever change was possible within government and as a vehicle to spread our ideas.

I ran for office because I believed in what we stood for and wanted to continue to build a movement for social change. I agreed to become a candidate, and my campaign manager suggested I run as an open lesbian. I thought this was a great idea and the rest of the organization agreed. We made our decisions collectively and took our platforms and policies seriously.

**Once elected, what were your biggest challenges?**

My first year, the Republicans had a majority. The second year, neither the Republicans nor the Democrats had a majority; I was the swing vote. It was a challenge to be taken seriously, to have an influence. The Democrats assumed I would vote with them, and I was never consulted on legislation or issues. But I was able to give voice to issues that were going on throughout the country and throughout the world, like support of Palestine.

I overcame the challenges by being serious, being respectful,

working outside the box and insisting that I represented the Human Rights Party and my vote could not be taken for granted.

I was able to negotiate a city budget that provided more funding for social service programs. I hosted a weekly radio show that gave voice to issues, concerns and organizations that did not get mainstream publicity. I spoke for justice and equity.

**What advice would you give to young queer people right now?**

My advice for the young in our community is to hold on to hope. If you have support in your life from family and/or friends seek out that support, build those relationships. If you are lacking support, there are many organizations that you can reach out to, even if you are only able to do so over the phone. Martin Luther King Jr. said, "The arc of history bends towards justice." We are living through a dark time, we are resisting, and we will come through this time.

It helps to connect and work with others. Work not just for our rights but show up to support others being attacked as well. Remember that there are millions of us — queer folk as well as allies — working to defend our rights and our ability to live fully and openly. You may feel alone, but you are not alone. The majority of Americans support us. If you are old enough, be sure to vote. Be mindful of your physical safety and take care of your mental health. And most importantly, don't let the current situation paralyze and defeat you. Hold onto your joy.

**Where are you now?**

After city council, I moved to New York City and lived in Brooklyn for two years. Then, I moved to Pittsburgh and have lived in Pittsburgh for over 40 years. This past summer, I had a booth at Pride events in Western Pennsylvania and Northwest New York advocating for the release of Andry Hernandez Romero, the gay makeup artist who sought asylum in the U.S. and was sent to CECOT prison in El Salvador. Pride attendees were interested in learning about Andry and concerned about his situation. The vast majority of immigrants the Trump administration sent to CECOT had no criminal background. These young men were released in July and returned to Venezuela, but now cope with the psychological and physical effects of their kidnapping and torture. For more about them, visit the-disappeared.com.

I have also worked to defend a woman's right to choose and to have control over her own body. I am active in support of transgender rights, including the right to health care, which is currently being denied by many institutions. I contact legislators demanding support for Ukraine and for an end to the genocide in Gaza. I will be working to elect judges in Pennsylvania who will defend our democracy and the rights of LGBTQ+ folks. And I continue to work with others to build the broadest coalition possible to resist the rollbacks to our freedom.

Visit [pridesource.com](https://pridesource.com) to read an expanded version of this interview.





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**special health care needs.** For parents and caregivers of children with chronic or severe medical conditions, public health workers connect them to resources and help. There is so much more public health does to help protect the people, communities and the environment in which we live.

*To learn more or connect with your local public health department, visit [Michigan.gov/PublicHealth](https://www.michigan.gov/PublicHealth).*

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# A Bromance Goes Dark

Dylan O'Brien and James Sweeney on queer grief in 'Twinless' — and that leaked sex scene

BY CHRIS AZZOPARDI

By the time my conversation with Dylan O'Brien and James Sweeney wrapped, I was still trying to figure out how to categorize "Twinless" — and whether I even wanted to. The film, out Sept. 5 after premiering to buzzy acclaim at Sundance (and not without controversy, thanks to a leaked sex scene that derailed its digital run), is one of those rare cinematic experiences that hits like a jolt: unsettling, hilarious, devastating and tender, sometimes all at once.

That emotional rollercoaster is very much intentional, as I discovered while speaking with lead actor Dylan O'Brien ("Teen Wolf") and writer-director-star James Sweeney. Sweeney explained, "there's a support group" for all those feelings — perfectly in tune with the film's tone. Even offering a brief summary feels like revealing too much. In fact, this interview contains some light spoilers, so consider yourself warned. Here's what we can openly share: Sweeney plays Dennis, who meets Roman (O'Brien) at a grief support group. Both are coping with the loss of a twin — and O'Brien also portrays Rocky, Roman's late gay brother.

What began as Sweeney's personal rumination on identity, loss and the unique grief of twinhood evolved into a bold, genre-blurring narrative that avoids easy labels — both in plot and in tone.

But how do you promote a film that's better left unspoiled? As it turns out, that question is one of many the duo navigated with humor, honesty and surprising vulnerability. Over the course of our interview, they opened up about everything from the film's intimate emotional core to their unexpected off-screen bond — and yes, even their mutual failure to watch "Steel Magnolias."

**I've been thinking about how hard it is to talk about this film without giving too much away — even just writing about it feels tricky. How are you navigating that line during this press tour?**

**Sweeney:** It has been a... oh, what's the idiom I'm looking for? A tight needle to thread? [Laughs.]

**O'Brien:** A hard line to straddle?



Dylan O'Brien and James Sweeney in "Twinless." Photo: Lionsgate

**Sweeney:** Gosh, we're both having a Roman moment. [Both laugh.] One thing that we discovered at Sundance was how wonderful it is for people to go in completely blind and we're trying as much as we can to preserve that experience for audiences.

**O'Brien:** But there's also a wide appeal that we obviously want to net from this. We really want as many people as [possible] to go see it. But then we're also begging them to ask for no other information than that. [Laughs.]

**Sweeney:** Just trust.

**O'Brien:** A real tough sell.

**If we're trying to sell this story for wide appeal, we should talk about**

**the sex scene, right?**

**Sweeney:** I mean, that's kind of what happened in January.

**O'Brien:** Yeah, it's already out there. So that one we don't have control over.

**When a sex scene from the film was leaked online, causing Sundance to quickly remove the entire film from its digital roster, what did that feel like to go through in real time?**

**Sweeney:** I think [Dylan] got more respect out of the situation than I did. [Laughs.] I wasn't even getting named half the time.

**O'Brien:** On behalf of James, I think he shared a lot of feelings with me about it

that I was sensitive to. I'm not really online, but it obviously saddens me. There were so many people too who were like, "Oh, I wanted to see your movie at Sundance, but they pulled it off." I was like, damn, I really wish people understood, even just outside preserving the integrity of our film and the fact that it's a spoiler and that it's the best to go in completely blind. And that was tough. You try to look on the bright side and maybe, at least, it points people in the direction of our film.

**Sweeney:** It creates a liminal awareness.

**O'Brien:** Which we do ultimately want.

**James, this film feels personal, as you wrote and directed it and also star in it. What sparked your**

## creativity here?

**Sweeney:** I feel connected to all the work that I write, and there's not always a role that I could play, but I guess that's just kind of my writing process. It's a combination of pulling from the personal and infusing it with the imaginative. This came from being very interested in twins and their psychology and identity. I think when I first heard about a twin support group, it did strike me as such a profound, deeply tragic loss because it is also about a loss of self, and that just felt like a really robust theme to explore in a film. And my boyfriend, who is an identical twin, had recently broken up with me and that kind of spurred some childhood memories of wishing I had a twin.

## What was it like for you to direct something so emotionally complex, but also be so in the story?

**Sweeney:** The heavier moments are more challenging — they feel like they ask more of me emotionally. I'm particularly thinking of the climax scene in the hotel room. That was one where I did feel the strain between actor and director and being able to compartmentalize those two sides of my responsibilities.

## Dylan, you also have a powerful scene, where you tell Dennis what you wish you could say to your late twin brother. How did you approach that scene emotionally?

**O'Brien:** I had so much connection at this point to the story and to the role and so much investment emotionally to what we were making, and that scene was toward the end. It was also so beautifully written by James and I never wanted to change a word of it from the first time I read it. I don't memorize word for word, but this is one I wanted to memorize and honor verbatim. I just thought it was so human and beautifully written in that way. It was the most in touch I've ever felt as an actor and one of the things I'll forever be most proud of in my entire life, let alone career.

## What kind of process was required of you to play both Roman and Rocky?

**O'Brien:** I think I've been different people at different times in my life, especially when you're growing up and you're figuring out who you are. Most people are

really surprised to hear me describe myself as a really quiet and shy kid. So I have sort of that Roman internalism in me that I know so dearly. But I know very well that that's not how I'm perceived.

I do also have these Rocky qualities, and I thought it was really interesting to sort of apply them to a gay character. We have these effeminate qualities that a lot of straight men don't embrace in themselves or that you're taught not to, but I've always been quite in touch with my femininity, and especially as I got into adulthood. So it felt quite natural to become both of these guys. And then I just had such an implicit trust for James, which was so freeing.

*“We really kind of share such a DNA in so many ways that enabled us to, just through effortless conversation, talk about how we feel about the world and our life and friends and movies.”*

— Dylan O'Brien

## Wait, does that mean that if you have some similarities with these characters that you have not seen “Steel Magnolias” in real life?

**O'Brien:** At least you caught that. I feel like so many people miss that line.

**Sweeney** [ashamedly whispering]: I actually haven't seen “Steel Magnolias.”

**O'Brien:** I haven't either! [Both laugh.]

## I like that Dylan was delaying until James answered.

**O'Brien:** I was sweating. [Laughs.]

**Sweeney:** I got shamed for it once, which is where that line came from.

See *Twinless*, page 24



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# 6 Back-to-School Tips for LGBTQ+ Parents

Supporting our kids means empowering them — and ourselves — for the school year ahead

BY DANA RUDOLPH

For many LGBTQ+ parents, back-to-school time brings worries about whether our children will be harassed or stigmatized because of their families. After seeing my son through college, I can say that the worries never fully disappear, but there are things we can do to lessen them and to prepare our children for whatever they may encounter.

## Inform and empower

Before our children even start school, we can build their self-understanding and self-confidence by explaining to them, in age-appropriate ways, how they and their family came to be. We can teach them about the many types of families and identities that they may encounter. LGBTQ+ and otherwise, and affirm that theirs is equally valid. We can ensure they see representation of themselves and families like theirs in books and media at home. We can build their resilience by encouraging them to respond constructively to adversity, connect with their feelings, and tell us when something goes wrong.

At the same time, our kids should be as inclusive of others as we want others to be of them. We should teach and model good interpersonal behaviors and introduce our children to a wide array of people and viewpoints, whether in person or through books, movies and other media.

It is also vital, I believe, not to let the fears we may have as parents (or the fears we had as children) create worries in our children. Instead, we should ask our children how they feel about school, treat those feelings as valid, and respond accordingly, whether they are excited, apprehensive, apathetic or

combinations thereof.

If our children do have concerns, we may not be able to assuage them all — and it is sometimes better to let children discover solutions on their own — but we can offer insights from our experiences, provide guidance as needed, convey that home is a safe and loving space, and step in for problems that do require adult intervention.

## Connect with teachers as needed

LGBTQ+ parents are often advised to introduce themselves to teachers as an

LGBTQ+ family before the start of the school year. There is wisdom in this, but it is not a one-size-fits-all solution. I'd like to offer a more nuanced approach.

As I see it, there are three basic approaches. First, we can wait until questions or issues may arise before approaching teachers or administrators. This least intrusive method gives children the chance to control how and when to come out about their families, which can be empowering and respectful, particularly for tweens and teens.

Conversely, we can be proactive, meeting with the teacher (or sending an e-mail) to introduce ourselves and answer any questions they may have about our family.

This may help them use the right language, parental titles and pronouns. Depending on the response, too, it could help bring potential issues into the open so we can address them. And if we discover that the teacher is themselves LGBTQ+ or an ally, it may quell our fears and be a chance to share resources and ideas.

A middle-ground approach is to find a way, without a special appointment or missive, to let our children's teachers know we are an LGBTQ+ family — a clear but subtler reminder to be inclusive. We could go to a start-of-year orientation and introduce ourselves as “[Child’s] Mommy and Mama [or Daddy and Papa, or ...],” or



wear a rainbow flag and/or pronoun pin, for example.

There is no one right answer for every family every year. The first year in a school may require a different approach than the third. We may even mix methods in a single year when dealing with both homeroom teachers and specialists. And there may be other aspects of our children and family that are equally (or more) important to communicate as well. We should do what feels right at the moment for our child(ren).

## Get involved

Participating in our children's classes, say, as a guest reader or field trip chaperone, can also make us visible and keep us tuned in to school happenings, as can becoming a member of the parents' association or other committees. At the very least, we should show up for Parent's Night and other school events to whatever extent we can. All of this shows our children that their school experience matters to us and reminds others that our family is part of the community.

## Find community and allies

*LGBTQ+ parents are often advised to introduce themselves to teachers as an LGBTQ+ family before the start of the school year. There is wisdom in this, but it is not a one-size-fits-all solution.*

Other LGBTQ+ parents, particularly with kids older than our own, can be an invaluable source of support. If you don't know any, try one of the many online groups for LGBTQ+ parents or follow other LGBTQ+ parents on social media.

We may also have more allies than we think, potentially including parents of our children's friends, other parents and teachers with LGBTQ+ relatives and friends, and non-LGBTQ+ families who may have similar concerns about equity and inclusion because of other aspects of identity. We can build bonds and take action based on our mutual desire for understanding and representation.

## Educate ourselves and share resources

Many resources exist to help schools be more LGBTQ+ inclusive. Two good places to start are HRC's Welcoming Schools program ([welcomingschools.org](http://welcomingschools.org)) and GLSEN ([glsen.org](http://glsen.org)). COLAGE also offers a useful "Back to School Toolkit" for youth with LGBTQ+ parents ([colage.org/back-to-school-toolkit](http://colage.org/back-to-school-toolkit)).

## Trust our children

Remember that our children are resilient, sometimes surprisingly so. We shouldn't ignore problems if they arise — but nor should we discount our children's ability to handle them.

May this be a year of joy, friendship and learning for all of our children.

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# Drag Icon Murray Hill on His Fight to Put Drag Kings Center Stage

‘Comedy can disarm hate,’ says the nightlife pioneer behind joyfully queer ‘King of Drag’

BY CHRIS AZZOPARDI

If you’ve spent any time around queer performance, alt-cabaret or downtown New York City nightlife over the past few decades, chances are you’ve come across Murray Hill — the iconic drag king, comedian, actor, emcee and now TV host, known for his razor-sharp wit and impeccably tailored suits. A true drag trailblazer, Hill has been commanding stages since the 1990s with his signature mix of old-school vaudeville, gender-bending brilliance and biting satire — in fact, when I called him, I could practically hear the wink as he exclaimed, “Showbiz!”

Audiences might recognize Hill from his scene-stealing role as Fred Rococo in HBO’s tender found-family drama “Somebody Somewhere,” or touring with legends like Le Tigre and “Somebody” co-star Bridget Everett. In 2022, he starred in Amy Schumer’s comedy-drama “Life & Beth,” then hosted the 2023 Hulu comedy competition “Drag Me to Dinner,” which saw teams of successful drag queens go head-to-head to throw the most fabulous, drag-inspired dinner parties of all time. Most recently, he’s the host of Revry’s “The King of Drag,” the first-ever reality competition series focused entirely on drag kings — giving long-overdue visibility to trans masc and nonbinary performers in drag.

In a moment when drag and LGBTQ+ rights are increasingly politicized, Hill is helping carve out spaces where drag kings can be seen and celebrated on their own terms. That includes writing his own memoir, slated for release in 2026 by Simon & Schuster’s Gallery Books imprint.

Recently, Hill opened up about the fight to bring “King of Drag” to TV, embracing trans visibility, rejecting cattiness in drag culture and why, for him, it’s never been about the crown — it’s always been about the community.

**How are you surviving this challenging political era and also, at the same time, killing it?**

I really don’t have a choice, especially as an elder. I’m still recovering from Sunday night, honestly. I just started seeing some of the photos from Sunday night’s finale of “King of Drag,” with most of the kings and the winner’s first performance as the king of drag. It was something I personally needed, but so did all the kings and the community, and I’m telling



Murray Hill. Photo: B Sharp

you, it was a love fest.

**You all leaned so hard into creating such a joyful experience during a traumatic political era.**

That’s what gay people have done to survive forever. We can wallow or we could just show each other what community means and take care of each other, have a safe space, and then go out and keep fighting.

**Tell me about a moment from the show that truly embodies that spirit of perseverance for you.**

I’ve always believed that there will be the “hate voices.” The only thing that’s different is that they’re louder. And I think when this administration tries to isolate us, tries to erase us, tries to divide us, it’s very easy to get in that frame of mind because if you’re only looking at social media, if you’re only looking at the news, all you hear is hate, hate, hate,

hate. And I really do believe that there’s more good than hate and that hate’s the loudest.

So when I see the “King of Drag” show, the actual TV show, the six episodes, and then the show from Sunday night, with 500 people in there — so loud with joy and love — it felt like everyone in that audience, including the kings and me, were so desperate to feel safe. So because of social media and the way our society is right now, we’re not always gathering in such strong numbers. And the only time that we do is for a protest. So this wasn’t a protest, it was a celebration. It kind of recharged my hope, which I needed, and I know a lot of the kings and the audience felt seen and accepted, and they were desperate for that.

**This is a great reminder to gather not just to protest, but also to be together and show love to each other.**

Well, and also the C word: Community. There’s been a lot of feedback about the show

saying it’s not catty. The contestants weren’t bringing each other down, trash talking; they liked each other.

**It almost felt British, honestly.**

Well, I wanted “The Great British Bake Off” version of a drag king show.

**Did you want it to feel more lighthearted and warm than “RuPaul’s Drag Race”?**

Well, first of all, the drag queen and the drag king scene, it’s apples and oranges, right? It’s not a catty environment; it’s just different. I think my philosophy, which is not everybody’s, is that things are hard enough. This community is already disenfranchised and underrepresented. So, they’re not going to battle each other because they’re just trying

See **Murray Hill**, page 22



(Top) Attendees celebrate Winter Pride in St. Pete at the Snow Bunnies: A Snowy Sapphic Celebration event. (Right) A performer at Trans-n-Dance. Photos: Winter Pride

## ◀ Winter Pride

Continued from page 10

says the full Winter Pride team, which includes mostly cisgender members, intentionally engages the local trans community in designing the event to avoid falling into performative allyship.

“We didn’t want it to feel pandering or sterilized,” she says. “We wanted it to feel fun, vibrant and authentically led by and for the trans community.”

Trans-n-Dance also left a mark on Fischer “as an emotional and all-around great time,” he says.

The idea for Winter Pride took root following the popularity of St. Pete’s Pride celebration in June — and as a response to the notion that LGBTQ+ Pride should only be recognized during the summer. Many Floridians expressed interest in a Pride event during the cooler months, which, for Fischer, brought back memories of themed events in queer destinations like Provincetown, Key West and Fire Island.

“There’s themed weeks that they have throughout the summer to keep people interested in tourism there,” Fischer says. “I don’t think Pride is about just celebrating Pride and gay people one time a year.”

## City support and cautious optimism

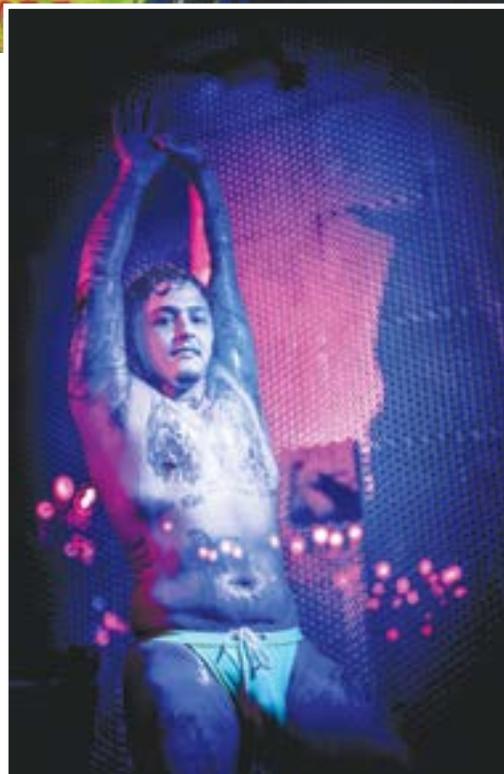
In Florida, Winter Pride stands

as a bold reclaiming of space where something as simple as a rainbow crosswalk can spark controversy. These joyful symbols of inclusion have become battlegrounds, including the crosswalk near Pulse nightclub, long a memorial to the 49 victims killed there in 2016, which was recently painted over by city officials in accordance with a state order from Gov. DeSantis.

St. Pete hasn’t been spared either. At a recent news briefing, Mayor Kenneth Welch said he saw no legal path to saving the city’s own rainbow crosswalks, but promised they’d be replaced with “new, even more powerful expressions of who we are, expressions that cannot be erased.”

Still, Hall says Winter Pride continues to feel supported by city officials in St. Pete. “I’ve spoken with City Council members and the mayor’s chief of staff,” he says. “We’re cautiously optimistic — we know the political landscape is tricky, but we’ve received nothing but encouragement.”

Even if those rainbow crosswalks eventually fade, Hall is confident the



community won’t. You can count on a chalk-wielding army ready to redraw them by hand. Because it’s never really been about paint on pavement — it’s about that first step onto Central Avenue and, for once, not having to brace yourself thanks to a welcoming community of queer people and allies alike. Hall knows that feeling well: air that’s easier to breathe, joy that doesn’t need permission. And through Winter Pride, he’s watched that same feeling settle over others too.

“This work,” Hall says, “finally feels like what I was supposed to do my entire life.”

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Bold Ballads from Barbra  
Puzzle can be found on page 25

to fight to survive and to fight for representation. So it's not like, "I'm going to win. I'm the best." It's like, we need this. I think everybody understood that the competition aspect of the show is entertainment.

**I noticed there wasn't a strong sense of one being pitted against the other.**

Because why do that? There's plenty of that in the world. And I think when I read comments — and they were very similar comments on Reddit and socials regarding "Somebody Somewhere" — they were about showing authenticity, kindness and three-dimensional characters. It wasn't just the artifice of drag. It was, you really learned about the whole person.

**The casting was open to trans masc people, cis women, drag of all kinds. How does that reflect how drag has evolved and where drag might be heading?**

I think that's something that's unique to our show too — that we really did, and I was part of the casting, to make a point to try to represent as many different types of drag as possible. I am an old timer, so I started in the '90s. And to watch the show and see, first of all, anybody, any drag person, talking about their art, their history and how it impacted them, and the vulnerability that the kings showed and the trans men, I was blown away as an old timer. This is going to sound crazy, but people didn't say transgender when I was starting for the first 15 years. So to see these guys embracing their transness, and we all accepted them, it was beautiful.

Lisa Rinna was one of the guest [judges] in the final episode. I don't think they put this in the edit, but she is obviously from a very different world in many ways, to put it nicely. And after the episode, she was flabbergasted by how much joy was in this community and acceptance because all everyone is hearing is hate. "These people are degenerate, groomers" — all this negative shit. She'd never seen a drag show before. So she walks into this community that she knows nothing about and has preconceived notions because

there's no visibility. And then she was like, this is what everybody's scared of?

**Comedy can be disarming, and drag is often rooted in humor. How do you think that humor helped bridge the divide — especially in Lisa's case, where experiencing it for the first time felt like a breakthrough?**

You said disarming. I talk about this a lot in my book: When I was a kid, I grew up in a religious-right, Catholic household. I can't even say people were homophobic and transphobic. They were just phobic of anyone who was different. So back then, I would say around sixth grade, I was made fun of a lot. I looked like a boy and I've always had a big personality, but I had developed a sense of humor to survive elementary school, junior high school and high school. I say in my act, you can't hate and laugh at the same time. It's physically impossible. So, to me, comedy and camp have always been a specific choice to disarm people and let everyone know that we're all the same. And I always lead with the heart, and with Fred on "Somebody Somewhere," that was the same thing. I really led with that. And people see that first, rather than saying, "Oh, there's the trans person. I'm scared. I hate you." So I think for me, it's just been a huge part of my career and my life strategy. And I think I tried to bring that to "King of Drag" too. It makes everything accessible to everybody.

**That makes me think of what you said when you opened the show: "Ladies and gentlemen... and I can say that again, since there are only two genders now, and I'm both of them." Why did that feel like the perfect opening?**

Well, because it's saying we know what's going on. We know it's absurd and baseless and divisive. Queer people from the beginning of time have used humor to deal with really difficult stuff. A joke like that everyone gets. It points out the ludicrousness of it, and then we all come together and laugh at how stupid it is.

**Is it true that you had the idea for "King of Drag" for a**

**long time, but it was a really hard show to get made?**

Oh, absolutely. I've been doing this for a long time, and the term "gatekeepers" is disintegrating very fast because of people making their own content for social media, like TikTok. But before that, even two years ago when I was pitching this, TV networks didn't know what drag kings were. Everything's about money and numbers. "It's too niche." I've heard that about me for my entire career. So from an economic standpoint, TV people, producers and networks are like, how can I make money off this? It's never been about community or any of that kind of stuff.

And then they see "Drag Race," which is a completely different world, but "Drag Race" started the same way. Nobody knew what it was. They didn't know what the show was going to be. It was on Logo. It was low budget like our first season, but somebody gave them a chance. But we didn't get that. I feel like I had to get to a certain place in my career for people to listen and be like, "Oh, wait a minute. Maybe there is an audience here." I think it's just a matter of time before it bubbles up a little more.

**You mentioned Fred on "Somebody Somewhere," which just ended with its third season. I'm going to miss it. With Fred, was it refreshing to play a character who wasn't really performing gender, but just living it?**

Well, it's pretty much the first time ever that a trans guy got to be, first of all, a regular character and did get to just be himself. I think the character is based on me because I've been friends with Bridget [Everett] for 20-plus years, and I think she's always known my struggle: I never want people to say, "Murray Hill, trans, queer... blah, blah." I just want to be Murray Hill.

They really adopted that with Fred and how he's written, because that's how trans people live. I just talk with the person at the coffee shop, and I have two little nephews



Murray Hill on "King of Drag." Photo: B Sharp

I play with and babysit. I'm living in the world, and my whole life isn't about being trans.

I just want to live just the way you do. That's my thing. So I think Fred had his own problems. He was part of that community. Nobody questioned him or asked him what he was. He had the same treatment as everybody else. And that went for Jeff [Hiller] too. Jeff wasn't like, "I'm gay. People are discriminating against me." It was just a snapshot of people's regular lives. I think that's what made people respond to it so much. We're going to try to do a movie or something. We're trying to figure it out.

**Can we still expect your memoir this year?**

No one's to blame but myself, but it's coming out next year. I finally finished the draft a month ago, and then I just got my notes. So

I've got three weeks to get that in. It takes a long time for all the copy editing and the legal and all that fun stuff. So it'll probably be out in spring of next year.

**What would East Village-era Murray — fresh into drag, still building something out of nothing — say if he saw where you are now?**

Well, I would've said, I'm glad you didn't give up. And that's what I tell the young kids. I think a lot of people just see what's on social media. It's the optics, right? But believe me when I tell you, I have been rejected and shut out for 25 years, still today. So what people see is the resilience to that. They don't see the hardship, but they see what happens when you stay the course. You keep getting out there in mainstream spaces and in the face of hate and discrimination.

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Dylan O'Brien and James Sweeney in "Twinless." Photo: Lionsgate

## ◀ Twinless

Continued from page 17

**O'Brien:** We should watch it one night.

**Where did the bond between you two start?**

**O'Brien:** It hasn't yet. [Laughs.]

**Sweeney:** Still waiting.

**O'Brien:** Any fucking day now. [Laughs.]

**Sweeney:** I'm just going through the chronology.

**O'Brien:** We want to give you a more interesting answer than one that we've been giving. We're very different in so many ways, but we also have a lot of similarities in terms of experiences. We've both experienced loneliness in our childhood before. We've both experienced having to adapt to a new environment and being uprooted. We both value very similar things in our relationships and our friendships. I think we really kind of share such a DNA in so many ways that enabled us to, just through effortless conversation, talk about how we feel about the world and our life and friends and movies, whatever. We can talk to each other for a long time.

**As a queer boy, hearing a straight guy speak so openly and tenderly about his queer friend feels like it would have been the dream. James, what makes your bond with Dylan feel special to you?**

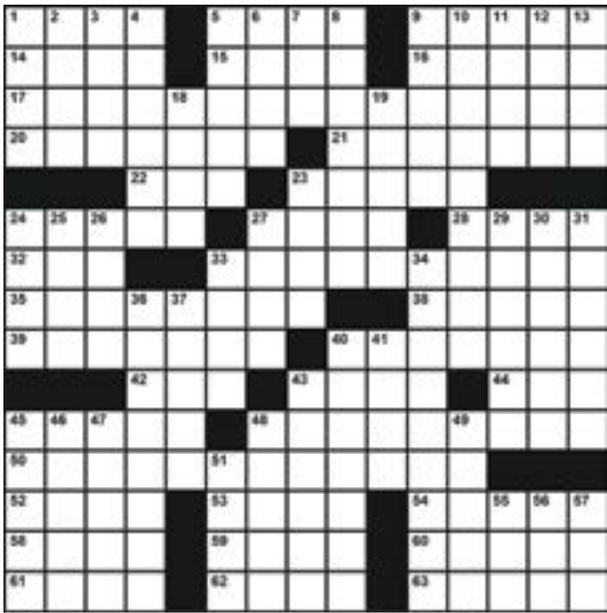
**O'Brien:** Growing up, I did gravitate toward more female friendships, but it's been interesting how I've now grown into

so many straight male friendships. As you were saying, it's like when you're young and you're fearing rejection, from elementary through high school, a fear of exclusion, a fear of being identified as being gay or being called out for not fitting in the group or being one of the boys. I never felt like one of the boys and I've always felt more comfortable one on one. And it's been interesting how that has evolved.

One thing I love about this movie is that it's a friendship movie. I love bromance movies and comedies about friendship. And obviously this goes in different directions, but it's something that I don't think we see enough of. And I wouldn't necessarily pinpoint Roman and Dennis as the ideal role models of male friendship, but I do think there are a lot of qualities that their friendship portrays that I hope people can think about and hopefully find in their personal lives.

**Dylan, with "Twinless" coming out not long after "Ponyboi," I'm curious — what draws you to work that is queer and is led by queer filmmakers?**

**O'Brien:** I think it might follow a DNA of what I'm drawn to in the qualities of people in my friendships. River [Gallo, the writer of "Ponyboi"] became family to me. And again, they're someone I can just gab with for hours. They are blood to me. I guess these friendships oftentimes exist in spaces I feel safe in. But both of these films are also two scripts I read and instantly was like, this is unbelievable regardless. I follow what my heart's drawn to and spaces that I feel safe in and people that I feel inspired by, and if I can have any hand in going on that ride and empowering [people], that's just a bonus.



## Bold Ballads from Barbra

### Across

- 1 Hole entered by a Minuteman
- 5 "Spamalot" writer Eric
- 9 Looks tickled pink
- 14 Cry of mock horror
- 15 Witty Coward
- 16 Lennox of the Eurythmics
- 17 Streisand's 2018 truth bomb

- 20 Sitcom with John Mahoney
- 21 "A League of Their Own" actress
- 22 Airline to Oslo
- 23 Streep, who had the title role in "Silkwood"
- 24 Religion of Allah
- 27 \_The Birdcage\_ star Nathan
- 28 The Orient, to Colette
- 32 \_\_\_-Z
- 33 With 35-Across, Fanny's fearless forecast
- 35 See 33-Across
- 38 Bisected

- 39 Direct path to a queen
- 40 Ann-\_\_\_ of "Grease"
- 42 Get behind
- 43 Big donors to office seekers
- 44 Preposition for Byron
- 45 German Surrealist Max
- 48 State of being ready
- 50 Babs' wistful Oscar winner
- 52 Cathedral of \_\_\_
- 53 Kotter portrayer Kaplan
- 54 "If only!"
- 58 Like a meticulous bottom?
- 59 Unrefined metals
- 60 Strategy coming first
- 61 Foster role
- 62 Silence for Bernstein
- 63 Ecclesiastical gathering

### Down

- 1 Part of SCUBA
- 2 "Firebird" composer Stravinsky
- 3 It's hot and gets shot off
- 4 Black Sea city
- 5 Laura of "ER"
- 6 Active one
- 7 OT book after Exodus
- 8 Krypton, for one
- 9 Like Shakespeare's "Twelfth Night"
- 10 Signing up
- 11 At once, to Byron
- 12 Neighbor of Wis.
- 13 Video game name
- 18 Thailand, formerly
- 19 Pinker, to meat-eaters
- 23 Hair of a stallion
- 24 One foot of poetry

- 25 Lid problem
- 26 Bound along
- 27 Locale of valuable stones
- 29 Rubicon Restaurant main dish
- 30 They scatter their seed afar
- 31 Some U.S. bonds
- 33 Mild oath
- 34 Places for Amelia Earhart to land
- 36 Start of a Shakespearean title
- 37 Cowboy's rope
- 40 Life jacket named for an actress
- 41 160 rods
- 43 They get initiated at West Point
- 45 Patriot Allen
- 46 River of Cocteau's country
- 47 Mt. Everest locale
- 48 Gay-friendly, perhaps
- 49 Of late
- 51 Role for Bela
- 55 Magneto portrayer McKellen
- 56 Winter product prefix, in ads
- 57 Went to bed with

See p. 21 for answers



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## ◀ Solo Travel

Continued from page 11

For many queer solo travelers, the journey becomes as much about internal discovery as external exploration. Mandy's Santa Fe adventure proved particularly meaningful as her first major trip after coming out.

"For me, coming out as a queer woman happened just before this trip. And I am so grateful that Santa Fe was my first stop," she says. The city's progressive politics created an ideal environment for her first solo queer adventure. Solo travel experiences reveal aspects of herself that had been buried. "When I travel solo I read more, journal more and give myself time to enjoy the little things that I miss in my day to day at home," Mandy explains.

Ruby describes a similar transformation through travel. Her solo adventures have helped her discover those "pockets of good" that challenge assumptions about different communities. "It's OK to be hesitant and anxious, but try not to let the anxiety prevent you from experiencing the world and people."

For nervous first-time solo travelers, both Ruby and Abromowitz recommend starting close to home. Ruby suggests the greater Metro Detroit area, including Ann Arbor, Ferndale, Royal Oak and Dearborn, as a safe testing ground. "I've had a lot of just great

fun experiences," she says of the region's inclusive atmosphere.

Abromowitz believes solo adventures are absolutely achievable for LGBTQ+ people anywhere in Michigan. "You don't need a buddy, partner or group to explore Michigan and have fun. Day trips, overnights and long vacations all bring something rewarding for a solo traveler and let you travel the way just you want to."

Mandy recommends reaching out to queer groups or businesses in destination cities and signing up for LGBTQ-focused events early in the trip.

"If you don't have a pal in the city you are interested in visiting, I would suggest doing your research on more accommodating areas, queer groups or businesses you could reach out to and possibly signing up for a class or attending an event that is queer focused early in your travel. You can meet some amazing humans who would love to guide you through your trip."

For solo queer travelers like Mandy and Ruby, the journey often becomes more than just a vacation; it becomes a homecoming to yourself. Every mile driven alone, every conversation with a stranger who treats you with kindness, every sunset watched from your own chosen spot adds up to something profound: the realization that the world, despite its challenges, still holds space for your authentic self. And sometimes, that's the most important destination of all.

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Detroit, MI 48226  
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