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Between THE Lines TM

A Voice For Trans Justice

How Detroit's Julisa Abad
became a national voice of a
community under siege

By Sarah Bricker Hunt

SCISSORS AND SOLIDARITY

How affirming 'dos
are changing lives

QUEERING THE DEATH CAFÉ

The queer death doula
creating space to talk grief

GEEKING OUT

Gaymers and queer comic
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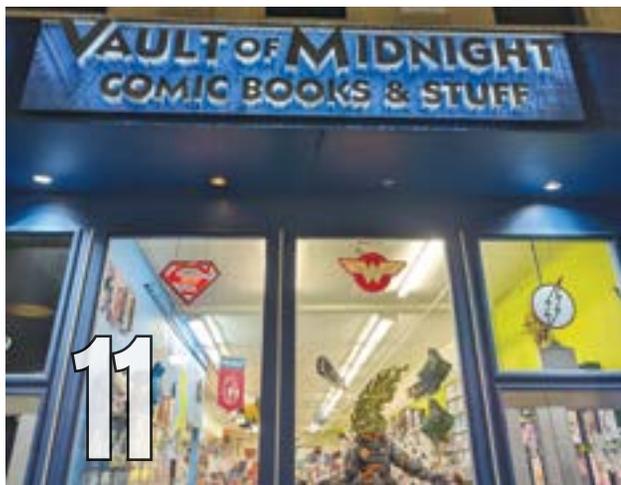
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Julisa Abad. Photo: Andrew Potter

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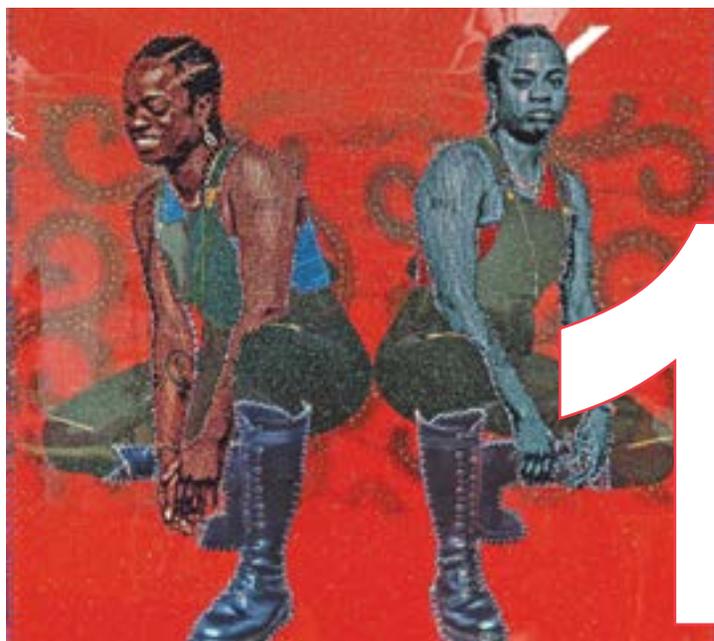
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5 Queer Things You Can Do Right Now-ish

BY KELLI DUNHAM

This calendar edition is less checklist, more all-you-can-eat buffet. Fill your plate with events like the Black queer art waiting for you at Mighty Real/Queer Detroit's latest exhibit. Craving small-town rainbow flavor? Head north for Traverse City Pride. Want to serve up good deeds? Join the Belle Isle cleanup crew.

Come hungry: Southeast Michigan is serving queer joy in family-sized portions.



"I Wouldn't Call It Schizophrenia, but I'll Be at Least Two People Today" by April Bey.

Behold the Defiance of Black Queer Art

Mighty Real/Queer Detroit presents a major survey of Black queer art as a defiant response to the current wave of anti-LGBTQ+ legislation. This rigorously curated exhibition features 13 important contemporary and historic artists including April Bey, John Edmonds, Alanna Fields and LeRoy Foster.

You'll see photography, paintings, drawings and multimedia works that tell stories often left out of mainstream art spaces. These pieces celebrate chosen family, queer love and the memories that bind communities together. The exhibition also includes artist talks, community conversations and a special evening of Black queer films.

This is your chance to see powerful art that connects past and present — and to be part of conversations focused on the future.

Sept. 5 opening ceremony, 6 p.m. Exhibit runs through Oct. 11 at The Carr Center (15 E. Kirby St., Detroit). Visit mightyreal-queerdetroit.org to learn more.



Unleash at Up North Pride

Pack a hoodie, a thermos, and your best road-trip playlist — it's time to pilgrimage well, up north, for Up North Pride. Traverse City throws open its doors with a week of events including storytelling, comedy and the can't-miss Visibility Rally and March.

Saturday's gathering at the Open Space even features a designated calm area, perfect if you love Pride but would prefer it without the side order of strobe lights and human bumper cars. Will you see locals Pete and Chasten? Perhaps!

Sept. 27, 12 p.m., F & M Park (303 E. State St., Traverse City). Other events throughout the week. Plan your adventure at upnorthpride.com.



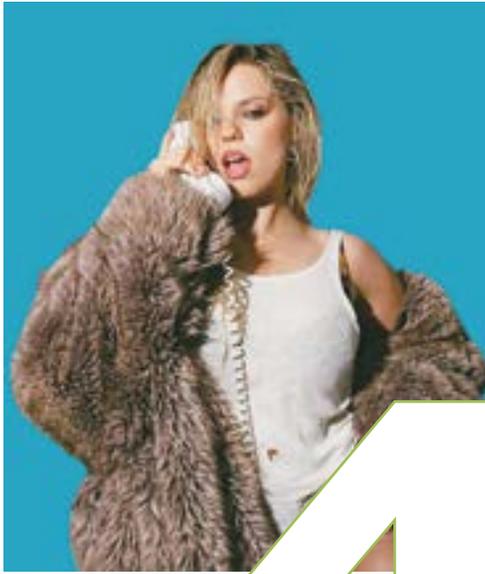
Belle Isle Conservatory. Photo: Getty Images Signature/Canva.com

Beautify Belle Isle

Grab your gloves (provided!) and maybe a fancy trash picker if you're extra prepared: LGBTQ+ Outdoors is hosting a nationwide "Clear the Trail" event, and Detroit's chapter is rolling up its sleeves at Belle Isle.

The outing is a family-friendly cleanup where you'll join with Belle Isle staff to tackle litter and restore the island's beauty. Bonus: the satisfaction of seeing your progress pile up in bags. After the work, head to Atwater Brewing with your new trailmates for a well-earned pint or soda.

Sept. 27, 10 a.m., meet at Belle Isle Casino parking lot (Casino Way, Detroit). Register at bit.ly/queercleanup.



Reneé Rapp. Photo: 313 Presents

Revel in Rapp and Queens

Metro Detroit is dishing up an unbelievable two-course concert menu in a single weekend. On Sept. 27, Reneé Rapp, Broadway breakout turned pop powerhouse, brings her sharp humor and powerhouse vocals to Sterling Heights, fresh off the release of her new album, "Bite Me."

The next night, four living legends — Chaka Khan, Patti LaBelle, Gladys Knight and Stephanie Mills — take the stage together for "The Queens!" Expect a setlist that spans disco anthems, R&B ballads and soul classics, delivered by voices that defined entire generations.

Reneé Rapp: Sept. 27, 8 p.m., Michigan Lottery Amphitheatre (14900 Metro Pkwy., Sterling Heights). Tickets at bit.ly/RRdetroit.

"The Queens": Sept. 28, 7 p.m., Little Caesars Arena (2645 Woodward Ave., Detroit). Tickets at bit.ly/queensdetroit.



Queer Up a Cupboard

Many Southeast Michigan neighborhoods have these little oases of mutual aid in a box, often tucked next to a church, school or community center. Rally your book club, softball team or professional network to adopt one for regular restocking — it's a perfect low-key volunteer activity that builds team connection while serving community.

Consider shelf-stable food, menstrual supplies or hygiene products, and if you can, add a rainbow sticker or affirming note. It's an anonymous way to make sure someone in our community feels seen and fed. A rainbow flag is powerful, but so is a box of mac and cheese when you're hungry.

Find a registered Little Free Pantry near you at mapping.littlefreepantry.org. Consider partnering with Ruth Ellis Center's ongoing efforts to support LGBTQ+ youth experiencing homelessness.



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How Detroit's Julisa Abad Became a National Voice For Trans Justice

And why the Wayne County Prosecutor found a place for her when she lost her job



Julisa Abad. Photo: Andrew Potter

BY SARAH BRICKER HUNT

When a transgender person is murdered in the Detroit Metro area, trans advocate and Wayne County Prosecutor's Office employee Julisa Abad is often among the first to reach out to family members, ensuring the media learns about the victim as a whole person rather than just another statistic. She shows up — and she gets it.

As one of the nation's few expert witnesses on transgender violence, Abad serves as a critical link between communities, translating the lived experiences of marginalized people into testimony that prosecutors and juries can understand. She has also helped hundreds of transgender people navigate legal name changes, ensuring their identities are legally recognized. Whether testifying about social determinants of health or consulting on a case, she ensures that transgender voices — often overlooked by the legal system — are heard and understood by those who hold the power to help them.

In just over a decade, Abad has fundamentally transformed how Michigan's criminal justice system understands and serves transgender people, from training police departments to testifying in high-profile cases to becoming the prosecutor's office's go-to expert on transgender issues. Lately, her influence reaches courtrooms across the country, where her testimony has helped secure justice for victims nationwide.

Yet this powerhouse advocate only arrived in Michigan in 2014, moving here from Florida in search of something that seemed almost impossible to find: a place where she could simply exist as herself. The Latina trans woman had researched LGBTQ-affirming, affordable communities before settling on Detroit's Palmer Park neighborhood.

"When I first moved there, I

was ecstatic because I saw a whole bunch of women like myself and LGBTQ+ people literally being their authentic self and being free," Abad recalls. "Little did I know at that time that that was the concrete jungle where a lot of my community experienced the impacts of disproportionate social determinants of health, including mortality."

The stark existence she discovered could have broken her, like it has broken so many. Instead, the experience forged an unshakeable advocate. "I've never taken no for an answer," Abad says.

A crisis becomes a calling

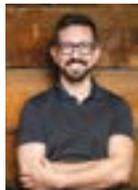
Long a neighborhood that has faced higher than average violent crime, by 2016, Palmer Park was a particularly dangerous place for transgender individuals. Between 2011 and 2016, seven transgender people or gender non-conforming individuals had been killed in Detroit, all of whom were last seen alive in the Palmer Park neighborhood, according to reporting by the Detroit Free Press and Vice. The crisis intensified in 2015 when three people — Ashton O'Hara in July, Amber Monroe in August and a person identified only as Melvin in October — were killed within a three-month period near the neighborhood.

Though she managed to stay relatively safe, Abad found herself unable to secure employment due to the stigma and stereotypes surrounding both her identity and her address.

Rather than accept defeat, Abad did something that would define her entire advocacy career, guided by a lesson her grandmother had taught her from a young age: "Always ask for what you want

See **Julisa Abad**, page 16

What the Future of Queer News Looks Like — and Why We Need to Hear from You



BY CHRIS AZZOPARDI

I just got back from the NLGJA: The Association of LGBTQ+ Journalists national annual convention in Atlanta, and my head is still spinning — in the best way. If you've ever been in a room full of journalists who care deeply about queer stories and the future of our media ecosystem, you know what I mean. The conversations were urgent, honest and brimming with ideas. I walked away with pages of notes and one overwhelming takeaway:

We're at a crossroads — and what happens next depends on you.

This isn't about reinventing Between The Lines overnight. It's about evolving in ways that truly serve our readers, reflect our community and future-proof our work in a media landscape that's changing by the day. It's also about reconnecting — or maybe connecting for the first time — with you, our audience.

So, here's what I learned. Here's what I'm thinking. And here's how you can help us shape the future of local queer independent media.

It's time to listen more — and better.

One of the strongest themes at the convention was reader-first journalism. The best outlets are no longer just broadcasting content — they're building real relationships with their audiences.

I deeply relate to Queer Kentucky's challenge of covering everything important to our community while navigating limited resources. Like them and other small newsrooms, we must be strategic about what's achievable with the tools and capacity we have. Rick Todd, publisher of Watermark in Florida, said something about coverage that's stayed with me: "We're not going to be the first, but we're going to be the best." That thoughtful approach has guided me since becoming editorial director in 2021.

On the national level, The Advocate is embracing a membership model that helps them truly understand their readers' interests through genuine engagement, not assumptions. Meanwhile, Queer Kentucky's team leverages every tool available — including AI — to maximize their small staff's impact and prioritize meaningful connection over chasing clicks.

What does that look like for us at Between The Lines? It starts with asking better questions.

- What kind of news and storytelling do you want from us?
- How do you prefer to engage: print, social media, online, newsletter, podcast?
- What's missing in our coverage?
- What would make you share a story with your group chat or your chosen family?

We'll be rolling out more ways to ask: surveys, polls, maybe even some in-person forums. But you don't have to wait. Our inbox is open.

Social media isn't optional. It's the newsroom.

Like many other queer outlets, we're thinking hard about how to connect on the platforms where people actually are. The way we write, speak and show up on TikTok, Instagram or YouTube can't be one-size-fits-all.

Some of the best advice I heard in Atlanta was brutally simple: "If no one sees it, it doesn't matter how good it is." That hit me.

We can write beautiful, important 1,500-word stories, but if people don't see them — or don't connect with them in the first three seconds of a scroll — we've missed the opportunity.

Journalism with a pulse and a purpose.

One panel that stuck with me framed the content created by queer publications as "service journalism that allows people to participate in democracy." That's what we aim to do at BTL every day — especially at a time when so much of our community is under attack.

Truth-telling is not neutral work. If being honest about systemic injustice, queerphobia, racism or fascism makes us "biased," then fine — we'll wear that label proudly. As Errin Haines from The 19th put it, "If I'm biased for human dignity, call me biased."

Our mission is to create journalism that:

- **Uplifts voices** — especially those on the margins, especially trans and nonbinary folks
- **Builds community**, not just comments

- **Speaks plainly** when things are wrong
- **Thinks locally** even when issues are national
- **Is fun sometimes too** — because we need breaks, joy, art and drag queen bingo coverage as much as we need politics and policy

Collaboration is the future.

There are 18 states without a single local queer outlet. National coverage matters, but it can't tell your neighborhood's story. That's why collaboration is critical.

We're looking at everything from syndication refreshes and co-publishing with other LGBTQ+ outlets — including independent trans journalist Erin Reed of Erin in the Morning — to podcast partnerships and social media collabs. I was especially inspired by what Watermark and The Qube in Chicago are doing, from sponsorship-based podcast models to outside-the-box ideas like vinyl releases. There's room for camp, creativity and community in all of it. That's where queer media shines.

Supporting LGBTQ+ media is more important than ever. Subscribe to Between The Lines at pridesource.com/subscribe, or subscribe to our Substack at pridesource.substack.com.

So what comes next?

More stories, more formats, more platforms — yes. But also: more listening. More conversations. More co-creation. Journalism doesn't just live in a newsroom anymore; it lives in the community.

So tell us — really, tell us:

- What do you want to see more of?
- What do you wish we'd cover differently?
- What's the best story you've read from BTL — and what made it matter to you?

This is a two-way relationship. And we're all ears. Whether you're a reader or you would love to collaborate, you can reach us at editor@pridesource.com, drop a comment on our socials, or say hi the next time we're out in the community.

Let's keep building on something that truly reflects who we are — and where we're going.

We Are Everywhere, But Our LGBTQ+ Media Are Not

Despite a proud history and rising need, local LGBTQ+ media struggle to survive amid financial challenges, limited support and increasing political pressure



BY TRACY BAIM

A popular 1980s slogan in the LGBTQ+ community was "We are everywhere." We truly are part of every profession, every race, gender, class, religion, and more.

Just as other communities have media outlets that take a "by us, for us" approach to news and information, there has been

a gay press in fits and starts going all the way back to 1924, when a U.S. postal worker named Henry Gerber and his pals launched Friendship & Freedom in Chicago. The police arrested Gerber and shut the newsletter down.

More than 100 years later, the state of LGBTQ+ media might be better than what Gerber experienced, but due to discrimination and political

headwinds — including corporate backsliding on diversity marketing — there is a struggle to serve the community with strong local LGBTQ+ journalism.

Which is why I set out in late 2024 to start to document the current state of local LGBTQ+ media in the U.S. Thanks to a grant from the MacArthur Foundation, The LGBTQ+ Media Mapping Project, hubbed at the News is Out collaborative sponsored by the Local Media Foundation, is now available. With a map developed by City University of New York's Craig Newmark Graduate School of Journalism Center for Community Media, we have a better sense of the strengths and weaknesses facing this niche within the media world.

During focus groups, we asked the publishers and editors just what needs they have, beyond an obvious infusion of cash. They are seeking to diversify their revenues, to adapt to new technologies, grow their audiences, and to better serve neighboring communities. There are a wide range of recommendations in the report, things the outlets themselves see could be valuable.

Philanthropy has barely stepped into this part of the media universe in part because

See **Queer Media**, page 23

Breaking Barriers to Mental Health Support — Take Action This Suicide Prevention Month

Affirming care helps LGBTQ+ community members find path to recovery

BROUGHT TO YOU BY CNS HEALTHCARE

Trigger Warning: This article discusses suicide, suicidal thoughts and mental health crises. If you're experiencing thoughts of suicide, please see crisis resources at the end of this article.

September marks National Suicide Prevention Month, a time when communities across the country focus on raising awareness about suicide prevention and supporting those who struggle with suicidal thoughts. For LGBTQ+ individuals, particularly transgender and nonbinary people, this awareness takes on urgent significance — but it also brings an important message of hope and healing.

While the statistics around LGBTQ+ mental health reveal significant disparities, organizations like CNS Healthcare in Michigan are proving that with the right support and affirming care, recovery is not only possible but achievable.

According to The Trevor Project's 2024 U.S. National Survey, nearly two out of five LGBTQ+ young people seriously considered suicide in the past year, with transgender and nonbinary youth facing even higher rates. For transgender adults, research from UCLA's Williams Institute found they were seven times more likely to contemplate suicide compared to their peers.

Recent political developments have added another layer of stress. The overwhelming majority of LGBTQ+ young people report that their well-being has been negatively impacted by anti-LGBTQ+ politics and laws. A study conducted by The Trevor Project found a direct causal link between anti-transgender laws and increased suicide attempts among young people in those states.

"These findings demonstrate that, regardless of a person's political

beliefs, if you live in a state that has passed an anti-transgender law, transgender, nonbinary young people in your home state are significantly more likely to attempt to take their own life," Dr. Ronita Nath, vice president of research at The Trevor Project, said in a statement about the survey.

Importantly, Nath added, "Trans and nonbinary young people are not inherently prone to increased suicide risk because of their gender identity." The elevated risks stem from societal mistreatment, stigma and discrimination — factors that can be addressed through affirming care, supportive policies and community acceptance.

Despite the overwhelming need, access remains challenging for many. About half of LGBTQ+ community members who needed mental health care in the past year couldn't access it, according to The Trevor Project. The barriers often go beyond logistics to include fears about acceptance and understanding.

Joshua Black Longstreet, chair of the CNS Healthcare LGBTQIA+ Committee, explains that stigma is always a barrier to mental health services, but LGBTQ+ people face additional challenges.

"For LGBTQ+ people, there are additional barriers, like being unsure if they will be accepted by their care team," Longstreet said. The most effective approaches, he explained, center people's comfort. "We want to do everything we can to make people feel comfortable in their own skin and their own identity."

At CNS, this focus includes extensive staff training and updating records to reflect preferred names and pronouns. The practice is also dedicated to removing barriers to service. "We provide care to everyone who needs help," Longstreet stressed, "regardless of insurance, residency status or living situation."

CNS Healthcare Program

Manager Amy Stern emphasizes the unique considerations for LGBTQ+ mental health care. "Our LGBTQ+ clients often carry trauma from years of rejection or invalidation, which can complicate their healing journey. Creating genuinely affirming spaces means more than just hanging a rainbow flag — it requires ongoing education, self-reflection from our staff and a commitment to seeing each person's full humanity."

The Zero Suicide model is an evidence-based approach that operates on the belief that all suicide deaths are preventable when it comes to individuals receiving care from health and behavioral health care systems. Organizations applying these core components see suicide rates for those in their care drop by 60% to 80%.

This systematic approach helps healthcare providers identify suicide risk, provide safer suicide care and improve overall care quality through risk assessment, safety planning tools and data tracking.

The Zero Suicide model extends beyond individual treatment to community collaboration. At CNS Healthcare, providers partner with schools, businesses and community organizations to create suicide-safe communities.

"CNS has always taken our role and responsibility in the community very seriously," Stern said about the practice's approach to the Zero Suicide model. "It's a significant part of our mission to make our communities more understanding of individuals who are experiencing mental health challenges and to make our communities a safer place for individuals that we serve."

What to do if you or someone you know needs help

Sara Beckett, CNS Healthcare's Clinical Training Specialist, emphasizes that for someone



experiencing crisis, "the most important first step they can take is to tell someone and ask for help. For a lot of people that's easier said than done, but it's crucial. All of us operate differently and that includes the way we show people we are in crisis and the way we recognize crisis in others. Never assume that someone knows."

CNS Healthcare offers same-day services at all offices, meaning people can walk in and get help immediately, from medication reviews to peer support.

Recovery and healing for LGBTQ+ individuals who've struggled with suicidal thoughts is deeply personal and individual. Beckett explains "Recovery and healing are possible. Your path will be unique — try not to measure yourself against anyone else's timeline. The aim isn't to 'cure' suicidal thoughts — those thoughts are more common than people realize and aren't something to be ashamed of. The goal is to learn tools that help you through a crisis, build reliable supports, and feel confident asking for help when you need it."

She adds "Work toward creating a life that feels worth living for you. Progress rarely moves in a straight line, and that's OK."

Research supports the importance of affirmation and acceptance in recovery. LGBTQ+ individuals report lower rates of attempting suicide when they have access to LGBTQ-affirming spaces, with family support proving particularly crucial.

This Suicide Prevention Month, the message is clear: No one has to face mental health challenges alone. With affirming care, community support and evidence-based approaches like the Zero Suicide model, recovery and healing are not just possible — they're happening every day.

If you're struggling with suicidal thoughts, remember that help is available and recovery is possible. Your story matters, your life has value and there are people ready to support you on your journey toward healing.

Crisis Resources: If you're experiencing thoughts of suicide, help is available 24/7. Call or text 988 for the Suicide & Crisis Lifeline, or contact CNS Healthcare's crisis lines: Oakland County (800-231-1127), Wayne County (800-242-4949), or Macomb County (855-927-4747).

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To Gen Con... and Beyond!

Queer visibility reaches new heights during gaming convention's 10th year

BY BRIDGETTE M. REDMAN

Zach Lones watched the line snake around Community Row, each person clutching convention badges already adorned with rainbow ribbons. As president of Tabletop Gaymers, he'd seen this group grow from a handful of friends distributing Pride flags to a thriving community celebrating its 10th anniversary at Gen Con 2025.

"I probably cry at least once a convention," Lones admitted, watching attendees transition from wearing "ally" ribbons one year to proudly sporting "gaymer" badges the next.

The emotional weight behind those tears reflects a profound shift in tabletop gaming. Recent research from GLAAD shows that 17% of active gamers identify as LGBTQ+, a 70% increase from 10% in 2020. Among younger gamers, the numbers climb even higher, with 23% to 28% of gamers under 35 identifying as LGBTQ+.

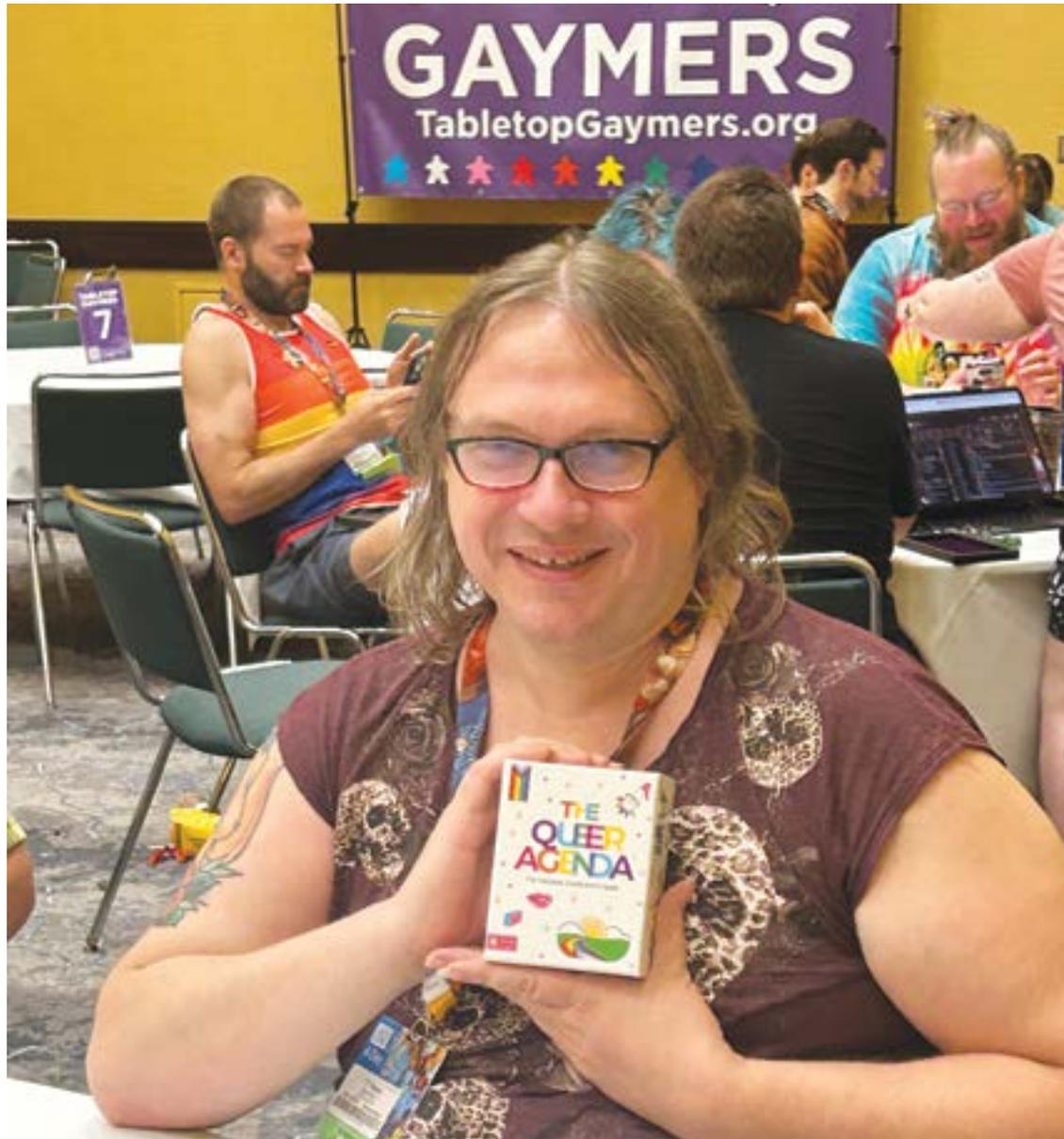
At Gen Con 2025, which drew record-breaking attendance to Indianapolis from July 31 to Aug. 3, that representation was impossible to ignore. Over four days, queer joy was evident at nearly every table.

Tabletop Gaymers' origin story reads like a quest narrative with real-world stakes. Founded in 2015 after then-Gov. Mike Pence signed a "religious freedom" law widely seen as targeting LGBTQ+ people, the organization emerged as Gen Con was threatening to leave Indiana in protest.

Gen Con CEO Adrian Swartout wrote a letter to Pence hours after the legislation landed on his desk: "Gen Con proudly welcomes a diverse attendee base, made up of different ethnicities, cultures, beliefs, sexual orientations, gender identities, abilities and socio-economic backgrounds."

Back then, Tabletop Gaymers were a handful of friends handing out rainbow ribbons for gamers to attach to their convention badge. Now their designated room is a hub for connection and a symbol of how far queer gaming has come.

The transformation isn't just



"C" Heaps, a trans gamer, ran several LGBTQ+ games during Gen Con, including "The Queer Agenda," a party game similar to Apples to Apples and Cards Against Humanity. Photo: Bridgette Redman

symbolic. "We started out really small back then, just giving out badge items," said Lones, one of the founders. "We've grown from doing just that to having events. We work with community centers across the country, and we work with retailers to create safe spaces."

That mission resonates across the Midwest — and matters more than convention politics might suggest. As Ben Lippi, co-owner of Opal Grove Games in Detroit, explained in our May 2024 story about the inclusive gaming space they created with partner Aisha Blake, "A lot

of stores I've been in previously, I haven't always felt comfortable in or like I can be myself. Even though I read as pretty masc to a lot of folks, I still don't feel comfortable or like I always fit in. A lot of places, there's a blatant hostility towards people who are outside a certain assumed demographic."

As Blake noted about opening Opal Grove Games, "A big part of why we opened the store in the first place was that we didn't feel like there was a place where we could have a real gaming community that was welcoming of anyone. In particular,

I had plenty of experiences where I'd go to a hobby shop with Ben, and I'd get ignored or people would be rude."

The need for these spaces becomes clear when examining gaming demographics alongside representation gaps. While 17% of gamers identify as LGBTQ+, less than 2% of console video games include LGBTQ+ characters or storylines. Tabletop gaming offers something different — the freedom to create inclusive narratives.

One of the featured games at Gen Con, *The Excellents* by 9th Level Games, exemplifies this approach.

The game about being a Saturday morning cartoon princess includes a section on gender: "Gender is a complicated subject that is a bit outside of the scope of this game; that said, we want you to know that who you are is important. You are valuable. How you express your gender is awesome."

The game goes on to say that everyone is a princess: "There are girl princesses, boy princesses and nonbinary princesses. Some princesses are trans, some princesses are cisgendered... What is important is that everyone is a princess."

At Gen Con, this philosophy extended beyond individual games. "C" Heaps, a trans gamer from Kalamazoo, ran a session of *The Queer Agenda*, a party game similar to *Apples to Apples*. They observed that there are now so many queer vendors at the convention that they can't all make it into the Gaymer Quest (the quest is limited to 10).

Games like *Stonewall Rising*, "a two-player deck building game in which players are either 'The Man' or 'Pride,' fighting for or against equal rights" and which "covers multiple different decades of queer history," demonstrated how tabletop gaming can educate while entertaining.

Perhaps most powerfully, Yazeba's *Bed and Breakfast* told the story of "trans youth who have been kicked out of their homes and go into the forest and find an elderly trans couple running a bed and breakfast. They have encounters with various forest animals and things that help them process that."

Heaps pointed out that representation matters because queer designers create games that normalize queer existence without making it the sole focus and where the problems characters face aren't rooted in homophobia or transphobia.

This normalization extends to Gen Con's programming. Every night, the Tabletop Gaymers hosted sold-out Gaymer Gatherings, social events in which people met, played games and made plans. They provided comfort clips to indicate whether the wearers

See **Gen Con**, page 26

From Banned to Beloved: How Queer Comics Found Their Voice at Michigan's Vault of Midnight

Local comic shop champions LGBTQ+ creators and characters while navigating a complex history of censorship

BY HANK KENNEDY

When Jacki Van Tuyle started working at Vault of Midnight, she knew the Ann Arbor-based comic shop was different. Unlike the “dusty, kind of quiet places with lots of boxes” that dominate the industry, the Vault’s three locations — Grand Rapids, Detroit and the Ann Arbor flagship location — deliberately cultivate a welcoming space for everyone, including a dedicated section for queer comics.

The Vault’s commitment to LGBTQ+ representation reflects broader changes in comics culture, but it also represents something more intentional: a business model that prioritizes diversity over tradition, community over exclusivity.

The Vault of Midnight aligns itself with progressive stores like Chicago’s Quimby’s Bookstore, Philadelphia’s Partner, and Son and San Francisco’s Silver Sprocket rather than traditional comic shops. This approach attracts a more diverse clientele, something Van Tuyle sees as essential to the medium’s future.

The store’s commitment to supporting queer creators and readers goes beyond tokenism — it’s reflected in a thoughtfully curated queer section. Van Tuyle enthusiastically offers recommendations tailored to different audiences. For middle schoolers, she suggests Mariko Tamaki and Jillian Tamaki’s slice-of-life graphic novels “This One Summer” and “Roaming.” Older

“I want more people to read comics made by queer people and I want more opportunities for queer people to make comics.”

— Jacki Van Tuyle, Vault of Midnight staff member

readers might enjoy Carolyn Cash’s debut “Girl in the World” and Sam Szabo’s “Enlightened Transsexual Comix.”

For superhero fans seeking queer representation, she recommends Grant Morrison



Jacki Van Tuyle and Kienuwa Davis at Vault of Midnight. Courtesy photo

and Rachel Pollack’s run on “Doom Patrol,” where Pollack, a trans woman, created the first mainstream trans superhero.

The Vault’s inclusive approach

hasn’t come without challenges. Van Tuyle notes that complaints about the queer section typically come from longtime superhero fans who resist change in general.

“We’ve had people come in saying things like ‘Oh do you

See **Vault of Midnight**, page 19

An advertisement for 'bg studios Hair + Skin'. It features a central logo with the text 'bg studios' in a large, bold, green font, with 'Hair + Skin' in a smaller font below it. To the left of the logo is a QR code. To the right is a box containing contact information: 'CALL/TEXT 734.678.6652', '@bgstudiosypsi', and 'bgstudios.online'. The entire advertisement is framed by a decorative green border with floral and leaf patterns.

Two Things True at Once: Charlie Kirk Was Hardly Mr. Civility. He Didn't Deserve to Die.



BY D'ANNE WITKOWSKI

In the wake of Turning Point USA founder and white supremacist Charlie Kirk's murder, a lot of people are calling for civility. Specifically, civility from "the left."

And look, I prefer it when people are civil to each other. It makes life easier for everyone involved. For example, I am very grateful that in the years following their divorce, my parents were, by and large, civil to each other. They still had kids to raise together, after all. It was definitely a preferable situation to some of the divorce horror stories I've heard.

But all too often and for far too many people, "civility" is a costume. It's used to disguise messages of hatred and dehumanization — the very messages that Kirk made his living disseminating. He spent his career demonizing people he saw as inferior. LGBTQ+ people (especially transgender people), women and Black and brown people were favorite targets.

So when people reverently praise Charlie Kirk's civility, what they're really praising is his ability to dress up hate mongering and make it look respectable — mainstream, even.

When people reverently praise Charlie Kirk's civility, what they're really praising is his ability to dress up hate mongering and make it look respectable.

A man with a bullhorn at a Pride event screaming that gays are going to hell? Uncivil. Charlie Kirk saying on his podcast that stoning gays is "God's perfect plan"? Civil.

A man wearing a white hood calling Black women stupid? Uncivil. Charlie Kirk saying that Black women "do not have the brain processing power" to be taken seriously? Civil.

Holding a sign at a March for Our Lives event that says,



"My guns are more important than your kids?" Uncivil. Charlie Kirk saying that "gun deaths every single year" are "worth it" so we can have the Second Amendment? Civil.

Did Kirk have a right to his opinions? Yes. Did he have a right to express them? Yes.

But to claim that Kirk was some kind of paragon of free speech devoted to the free exchange of ideas is simply false. Sure, he invited debate. He was, in fact, under a tent that said "debate me" when he was killed.

But he did not invite a dialog. He did not listen. Not in a meaningful way. He did not seek to understand where other people were coming from. Debate, for Kirk, was a game of one-upsmanship. He was exceptionally good at interjecting and interrupting to dominate any and all exchanges. It was, in fact, the very thing he was doing when he was killed. He was interrupting the person "debating" him to control the narrative.

It was something that a lot of people liked about Kirk. He was very alpha in his approach to "debate." It's something that a lot of people like about Trump, too. The posturing, the belittling, the proud lack of empathy with an emphasis on cruelty. It's a type of masculinity that is, sadly, highly valued in American culture.

It's often called "toxic" masculinity. I, personally, find it

abhorrent. In a culture where toxic masculinity rules — and in this moment, it absolutely does — there's a winner-take-all attitude toward the things we all need to participate in that whole "Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness" thing. Under toxic masculinity rule, there is no need to take care of the most vulnerable among us. Because they are getting exactly what they deserve. Which is nothing.

Many of the calls for civility on the left were in response to schadenfreude on the internet. Like I said, his life's work was dedicated to the misery of others. A lot of jokes were made about Kirk's death because, frankly, a lot of people weren't sad to see him gone. That said, Kirk had the ear of the president not to mention a platform that could reach millions of people. The people making jokes on the internet had, well, jokes.

I love to make jokes. Have made many a joke in this very column at the expense of people who have way more power and reach than I ever will.

But I don't find anything funny about someone being shot and killed in front of a huge group of mostly college kids. I have no love for Kirk and he's no doubt been the subject of this column over the years, but what happened to him was sick and unjustifiable.

As I write this, I don't know much about the person who murdered Kirk. All I know is that we live in a country where guns are plentiful and easily obtainable and violence is glorified (I mean, the Trump Administration wanting to change the name of the Defense Department the Department of War is but one recent example). It sucks for the majority of people.

This is not a sustainable way of life. It certainly doesn't bode well for the future. As a country we must, to borrow the words of the late David Lynch, fix our hearts or die.

Corewell Health Ends Gender-Affirming Care for Trans Youth

Corewell Health announced it will no longer provide gender-affirming hormonal therapies and puberty blockers to patients under 19, citing “the evolving legal and regulatory landscape” and concerns about “potential legal liability.” The decision makes Corewell the second major Michigan healthcare institution to restrict transgender healthcare access this year, following the University of Michigan Health’s similar pause in August.

“Like many health systems across the country, our decision reflects our responsibility to protect our providers from potential legal consequences,” Corewell wrote in a letter to patients, while promising to continue offering mental health services

and other essential care.

The policy represents a significant reversal for Corewell, which briefly restricted new patients in February before quickly reversing course following advocacy from more than 40 Michigan LGBTQ+ organizations.

Erin Knott, executive director of Equality Michigan, called the move a “disturbing pattern” among Michigan healthcare institutions. “Institutions that should be at the forefront of providing compassionate, evidence-based care are instead retreating under political pressure,” she said.

Both decisions follow federal investigations targeting more than 20 healthcare providers offering gender-affirming care. However, Knott emphasized that “gender-affirming care remains legal in Michigan.”

Organizations including Stand with Trans, Equality Michigan and Transgender Michigan will continue providing support and connecting families with alternative providers.



LGBTQ+ Leaders and Reproductive Justice Pioneers Converge for Detroit Summit

The Michigan Chamber for Reproductive Justice will host its inaugural Equity in Bloom Summit from Sept. 19-21, bringing together thought leaders, activists and healthcare professionals to advance reproductive justice conversations.

“Equity in Bloom is a love letter to community,” said Cassy Jones-McBryde, founder and executive director of the Michigan Chamber for Reproductive Justice. “We are creating a space where every voice, every identity and every story is honored.”

Featured speakers include TS Madison, the groundbreaking entertainer and “RuPaul’s Drag Race” judge; Dr. Toni Bond, one of 12 Black women who coined the term “reproductive justice” in 1994; and Able Mable Thomas, the Georgia state representative who convened the original reproductive justice framework meeting.

Jeynce Poindexter will join TS Madison for “Unapologetically Seen: A Fireside Chat on Power, Presence, and Possibility,” sponsored by Trans Sistas of Color Project.

Sept. 19-21 at the Atheneum Suite Hotel, 1000 Brush St., Detroit. Registration at miforj.org.

Republicans Focus On Bathrooms as Government Shutdown Looms

Michigan House Republicans passed legislation Sept. 5 restricting students’ access to school restrooms and locker rooms based on their sex assigned at birth, but the measure is unlikely to

become law as budget negotiations stalled with less than a month before a potential government shutdown.

The bill, which would require K-12 schools and universities to restrict multi-occupancy facilities by original birth certificates, passed with six House Democrats absent or abstaining.

“I believe that the all-wise creator has created two biological sexes, male and female, equally dignified in his eyes, but distinctly different,” said Rep. Joseph Fox (R-Fremont), a bill sponsor.

Senate Majority Leader Winnie Brinks (D-Grand Rapids) declared the bill “dead on arrival,” stating, “We will not be taking this legislation up and we wish that the Republicans in the House of Representatives were as obsessed with passing the state budget as they are with kids using the bathroom.”

Democrats criticized Republicans for prioritizing culture war issues while Michigan faced a potential Oct. 1 shutdown without a completed budget.

Don’t Miss Gottmik and Violet at the Majestic

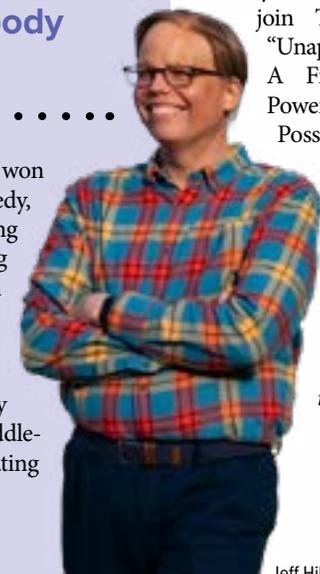
When Gottmik and Violet Chachki share a stage, it’s like a family reunion — if your family showed up in couture and threw shade instead of potato salad. The duo promises 90 minutes of beauty, fantasy and general fierceness. As Chachki told us last month: “We are intimidating, strong, queer people, and we’re not going anywhere.” Expect high drama, jaw-dropping looks and perfect chosen family vibes. Sept. 28, 6 p.m., Majestic Theatre, majesticdetroit.com.

Kesha Teams with Orville Peck for LGBTQ+ Benefit Album

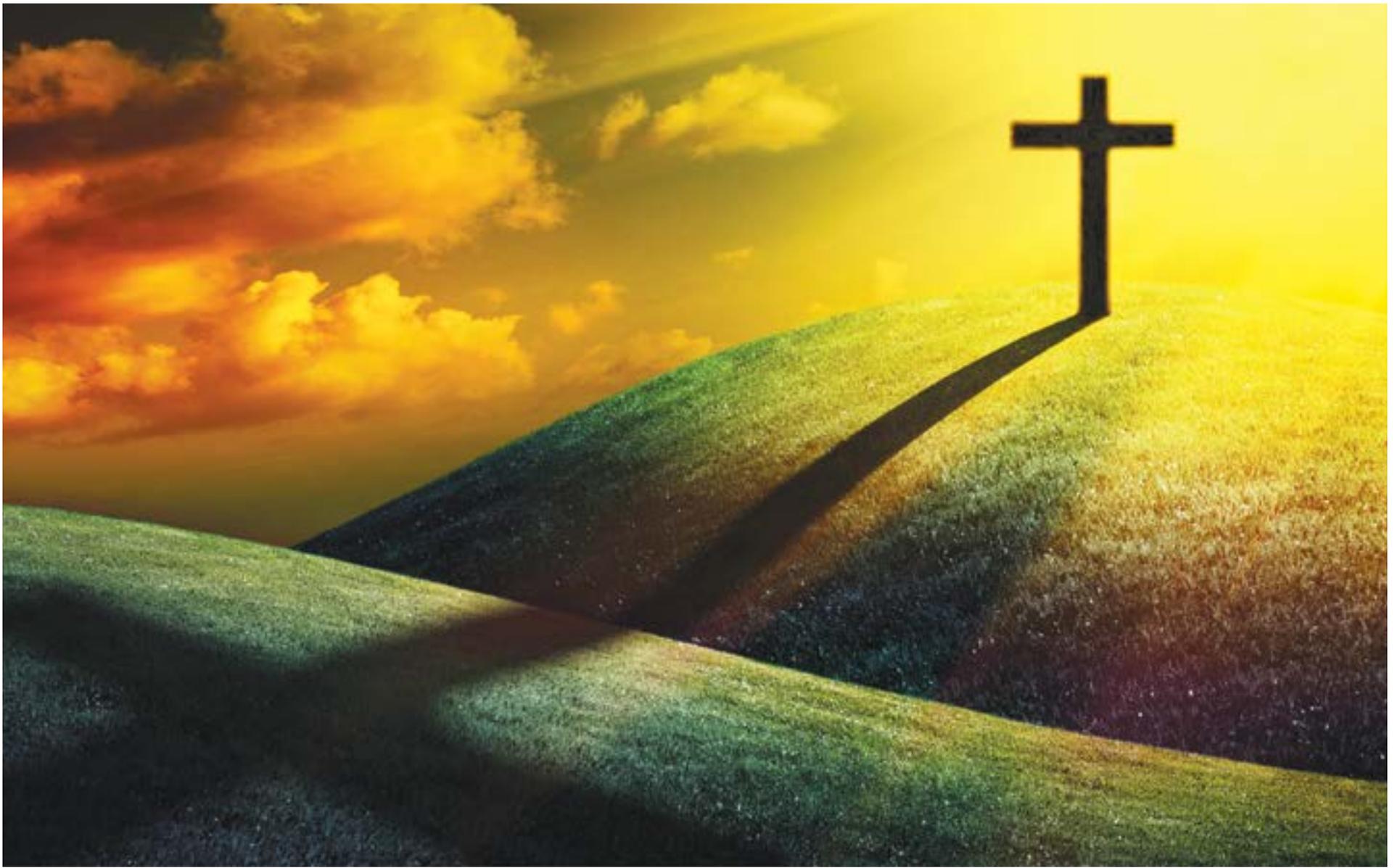
The pop icon collaborates with the country star on “Tennessee” for All Things Go’s charity compilation supporting The Ally Coalition. The 10th anniversary album features artists like Maren Morris, Jack Antonoff and Joy Oladokun, with proceeds benefiting LGBTQ+ youth organizations. The compilation arrives this fall alongside limited edition vinyl, celebrating a decade of the inclusive All Things Go music festival.

Jeff Hiller Takes First Emmy for ‘Somebody Somewhere’

The queer comedian won supporting actor in a comedy, thanking writers for penning a show “about connecting and love in this time when compassion is seen as a weakness.” Hiller beat out Harrison Ford, Bowen Yang and others in a surprise victory for the HBO series about middle-aged Midwesterners navigating grief and chosen family.



Jeff Hiller. Photo: HBO



How an Evangelical Pastor Became an Unlikely Ally to His Trans Kid

‘If someone has a crack of curiosity, there’s hope that love can prevail.’

BY EMMA PAIDRA

This story was originally published in Uncloseted Media, an LGBTQ-focused investigative news outlet.

“Why can’t you fucking talk to me?” Beatrice Cox screamed at her father. “Why can’t you look me in the eye? Why can’t you call me by my name?”

It was 2021, and Danny Cox remembers looking at his child, then 22, and feeling a profound

confusion. Growing up in the Catholic church and eventually becoming an Evangelical pastor, he remembered what he had been encouraged by different faith communities to believe about transgender people: mentally disordered, sinful and not made in the design of God.

It had been six months since his daughter, Beatrice, had come out as a trans woman. In that time, Danny had failed to accept her identity, refusing to call her by her name or use her pronouns.

As lead pastor of an Evangelical church in Troy, Michigan, he had long harbored doubts toward the mistreatment of queer people in Evangelical spaces. But when Beatrice came out to him as trans, he wasn’t ready to confront the tension between his faith and his family.

Though Danny, now 58, remembers reminding Beatrice that he loved her, he felt perplexed by her trans identity. “I looked at my wife, and I’m like, ‘What do I do? Because I don’t understand

this,’” he says.

This dynamic is pervasive in conservative Christianity, especially among Evangelicals. A 2022 analysis found that 87% of white Evangelicals believe gender is determined by sex at birth. And according to a 2023-2024 survey from the Pew Research Center, 61% of Evangelicals believe homosexuality should be discouraged by society. These numbers may explain why nearly half of LGBTQ+ people are estranged from their families.

Coming out was terrifying for Beatrice, now 26, who remembers being told in school that “gay people were the enemies of God.” Beatrice also worried about the cost of coming out in a religious community. “To be uncloseted was to lose access to everything that mattered to me,” she tells Uncloseted Media and ‘Gender Newsroom.

But Beatrice was also afraid

See **Evangelical Pastor**, page 23



What Does Public Health Do for Communities Across the State?

How local and state public health workers help protect communities across Michigan

BROUGHT TO YOU BY THE MICHIGAN DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES

You care about your health and the health of your family. But how often do you think about the health of your community? That's important, too. And it's the responsibility of local and state public health workers to help protect the well-being of our communities.

Here are some of the ways public health workers safeguard our communities:

They check food facilities for safety. We all enjoy going out to eat. And that experience is made safer due to public health workers inspecting food facilities for safety.

They inspect body art facilities. Body art facilities are everywhere across our state and our public health team is keeping up with

them, ensuring they are safe.

They safeguard vital records. For important milestone moments, public health preserves those records forever. Next time you need a birth certificate or marriage certificate, you can thank a public health worker.

They prepare for emergencies. Disasters unfortunately happen, including health emergencies and natural disasters like tornadoes or floods. The public health team

makes plans and strategies for these events, so Michigan can be prepared for whatever happens.

They provide help in times of crisis. During the pandemic, we saw how public health rose to the occasion with education, vaccination clinics and mental health hotlines. When a health crisis happens, public health workers answer the call with supplies, information and solutions.

There is so much more public health does to help protect our community, environment and Michiganders. To learn more or connect with your local public health department, visit [Michigan.gov/PublicHealth](https://www.michigan.gov/PublicHealth).

This content is made possible through our partnership with MDHHS.

◀ Julisa Abad

Continued from page 6

because either you'll be blessed and they'll say yes, or they will say no, and that just means you asked the wrong person."

So, Abad started asking questions, and she started at the top. Why not? She was determined to change the trajectory, and that meant appealing to the people who had the power to help her do just that.

In 2015, she reached out to Wayne County Prosecutor Kym Worthy and future Michigan Attorney General Dana Nessel, who were assembling a task force to combat crimes against the LGBTQ+ community. Through tears, Abad told them about the challenges her community faced and asked for just two minutes of their time — and for someone to believe in her enough to give her a job so she could make "astronomical change."

The conversation led to the birth of the Fair Michigan Justice Project in 2016, with Abad at its helm as director of transgender outreach and advocacy. Starting originally with Wayne County and expanding to four counties, from 2016 until earlier this year, Abad worked on more than 60 capital cases with a 100% conviction rate.

"I hate the stereotypes that come with being trans. I hate the statistics and the mortality rates that go on," Abad says. "With being a trans woman of color, I wanted to make a change."

Lt. Dani Woods of the Detroit Police Department, who serves as the force's LGBTQ+ liaison, first met Abad in August 2015 at Palmer Park after someone Abad was with was murdered — one of several friends she had lost to violence in the area. That traumatic introduction marked the beginning of what Woods describes as an unbreakable bond.

"Her passion and genuine care for people were — and still are — her fuel to make a difference," Woods tells BTL. "She was one of the first people to sign up to be on [DPD's] first LGBTQ+ Advisory Board and has been about real conversations while focusing on making it happen. I have watched her grow from a tough young lady to a tough professional woman."

Woods notes that Abad's advocacy work has contributed to many cases being solved and victims and survivors receiving assistance.

"She was already here, boots on the ground, struggling. She was familiar with surviving without family," observes Jeynce Poindexter, co-executive director of the Trans Sistas of Color Project. "It's one thing for you to be good at what you do and to have a quote-unquote career. It's another thing for what you do to be able to be categorized as not only impactful but also transformative work."

As the first and only trans woman of



Julisa Abad. Photo: Andrew Potter

color to serve as an expert witness on social determinants of health and transgender violence, she has provided training to prosecutor's offices in St. Paul, Minnesota; Nashville, Tennessee and DeKalb County, Georgia.

"A lot of people don't know how monumental that is," Abad notes. "To have somebody that now is able to speak to the social determinants of health and the violence that my community faces, I truly have seen firsthand how it does change people's perspectives."

Jay Kaplan, staff attorney for the ACLU of Michigan LGBTQ+ Project, points to this combination of street-level understanding and professional competence as the key to Abad's effectiveness. "She knows the reality for many transgender people, particularly transgender women of color, and what many of them face in life because of who they are," he explains.

Abad's cultural translation ability is perhaps most visible in her work with legal name changes. Working with attorney Heidi Naasko at Dykema Law Firm, Abad has facilitated around 700 name changes for transgender individuals at no cost to them.

The partnership began in December

2019 when she, in true Abad style, cold-called Naasko after learning about the firm's existing name change clinic.

"Julisa has been amazing to work with. She is literally the glue that holds the clinic together," Naasko explains. "She really is multilingual and a cultural translator for everybody."

Many of the clinic's clients are from the most marginalized sections of an already marginalized community — people who may not have stable phone numbers and who require significant support to navigate the legal system.

"Julisa has their trust," observes Kaplan.

Naasko emphasizes that without Abad's community connections, much of their legal work would be impossible. "We just can't be as effective as we are without Julisa being there."

For transgender people, legally changing their name represents far more than updating paperwork — it's often a matter of safety, dignity and mental health. Having identification that doesn't match your presented gender can expose transgender individuals to discrimination and violence in everyday situations.

"Identification that matches helps you

with those things when you are getting housing, when you are getting in a shelter system," Abad explains. "It also puts you in a place where if somebody has an assumption, you don't have to disclose."

However, some transgender individuals cannot change their names because they have low-level, nonviolent offenses on their records. This is where Abad's legal barriers program becomes essential, helping people clear obstacles so they can go through the name change process.

For clients like Bridget, who went through the name change process with Abad's help, the impact is life-changing. "My dead name was just dead. It wasn't a name I picked for myself," Bridget explains. "Legally, it matters. It was the best decision I've made, and it helped me to feel complete."

Bridget was so inspired by her experience that she started her own nonprofit organization, Thee Kyra Jean Collective, which connects trans people with resources. "Julisa inspired me to start this project. She's a true role model," she says. "She has no bias. She does it all so well. I'm extremely grateful for her."

While Abad is unwavering in her commitment to advocacy, the demands

of this work take a toll. In a recent op-ed for BTL, Abad wrote candidly about the personal costs of being constantly visible and available for her community.

“When you’re placed on a pedestal, you’re held to a higher standard. I always have to be ‘on,’” she wrote. “I do not get to go home and turn it off, unlike a lot of my colleagues.”

The work has also meant sacrificing time to grieve personal losses, including her best friend Ashia Davis, who was murdered in 2023. In 2016, Abad lost someone she describes as the first person she was ever in love with to a murder in the Palmer Park area, a loss she wrote was “maybe most difficult of all” in a BTL op-ed.

Despite her professional success and national recognition, Abad remains deeply connected to the personal experiences that shaped her advocacy. When asked about work-life balance, she responds with characteristic honesty.

“I hate when people ask me that,” she says with a laugh. “I understand the importance of self-care and I understand that I cannot be great to anybody if I am not great to myself. But I also know, unfortunately, the disparities that my community faces. So for myself, I feel like if not now, then when? And if not me, then who?”

A new chapter

Earlier this year, Abad faced an unexpected setback when Fair Michigan abruptly ended operations and she found herself without a job. Despite attempts by BTL to understand what led to the organization’s dissolution, no one has been willing to speak on the record about the circumstances. We do know it was an abrupt end.

Wayne County Prosecutor Kym Worthy recognized the value of both the program and Abad’s unique contributions. In a move that validates years of groundbreaking work, Worthy’s office hired Abad as LGBTQ+ community engagement liaison, a position within the Special Victims Unit.

“Prosecutor Worthy has always been committed to this work,” explains Maria Miller from the prosecutor’s office. “She is committed to seeing everyone get justice. As long as she’s the prosecutor, our office is going to be committed to that.”

The transition represents more than just job security. “I’m really grateful. I’m really proud,” Abad says. “I am so grateful that Kym Worthy and the Prosecutor’s Office believed in this work enough to bring me here.”

In her new role, Abad continues many of the programs that made Fair Michigan successful, including name change clinics, police training and victim advocacy. Abad’s cultural competency work has been crucial in building trust between law enforcement and the LGBTQ+ community.

“For a long time, LGBTQ+ people didn’t

feel that anyone was going to even listen to them when they went to a police station to report a crime,” Miller notes.

Thanks to advocates like Abad and allies in law enforcement like Woods, that’s changing. The Wayne County Prosecutor’s Office has also implemented practical changes to support LGBTQ+ crime victims, including a clothing closet where “anybody that is a victim of crime can go through the closet and get anything that they need to be able to go to court and authentically be themselves,” Abad shares.

As she settles into her new role, Abad reflects on a journey that sometimes seems surreal even to her. From arriving in Michigan with little more than hope to becoming a nationally recognized expert and advocate, the transformation is remarkable.

“She’s kind of one of those people who just says, ‘Let’s get it done. What do you need me to do? I’m gonna take care of it,’” Kaplan adds. One of her first direct actions was in 2015, when Abad began organizing an annual coat drive servicing trans women of color — a grassroots effort to provide winter gear to some of Detroit’s most vulnerable residents. Abad ran the drive completely on her own for many years, simply because she saw a need that could be addressed through direct community action.

Poindexter sees Abad’s relentless dedication as key to her effectiveness. “She’s out there providing a level of safety, legalities, advice, consulting — she’s making sure to take notes, making sure to be in court with families, following up,” she explains. “She never gives up, she’s always pushing forward.”

She also always comes prepared, and not just with good notes. As Kaplan observes, Abad is “always impeccably dressed with those incredibly difficult looking high heels that she looks great in, but she’s also just getting it done in a way that looks effortless.”

When she does take stock — around 700 name changes, more than 60 prosecuted cases with 100% conviction rate, training programs across multiple states — the numbers are staggering. In the abstract, it’s almost hard to remember that each number represents a real person she has helped directly to improve their life, but her personal impact has been palpable, and it’s something Abad says she finds humbling.

“I never thought that I would be here and I realize my privilege every day of being able to do this work,” she says through tears.

Perhaps the real privilege belongs to Detroit itself. In Julisa Abad, the region has found a bridge toward a more just future, someone who refuses to let the most vulnerable fall through the cracks and transforms personal pain into collective healing. The challenges aren’t diminishing, but neither is she — tomorrow, and the day after that, Abad will wake up and step right back into those impossibly high heels. She’ll show up, exactly where she’s meant to be.

The logo for The Center for Relationship Health, featuring a stylized figure in a circle above the text "The Center for Relationship Health".

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A QR code located in the bottom right corner of the advertisement.A circular profile picture of Dr. Joe Kort, the Founder/Director of The Center for Relationship Health.

Tackling Life's Biggest Questions, Over Cake



Inside death doula Dain Evans' monthly talks on mortality and grief

BY KELLI DUNHAM

When you hear the phrase “death café,” you might picture something like a Tim Burton-themed Starbucks. Gloomy music, skeleton-shaped cookies, baristas in full Goth drag asking if you want oat milk in your last latte.

But that’s not what happens at Ferndale’s Queer Death Café, founded earlier this year by death doula and former journalist Dain Evans — though like any café worth visiting, there is coffee, tea and, usually, cake.

Cole Impari, thanatologist, founder of the School of American Thanatology and author of “A Guide to Grief” explains why the food matters. “The cake [served at almost all death cafés]

isn’t an accident. It’s actually a truly nonclinical tool to build community.”

While many events in the LGBTQ+ community include food (the lesbian potluck is a cliché for a reason) what happens around these snacks is something much harder to find: queer and trans people gathering to talk openly about death, grief, fear and, perhaps surprisingly, joy.

“I always am so surprised at how many laughs we have,” Evans tells BTL. “It’s a lot of laughter and joy and communion, and sharing the load of grief in a way that really lightens it.”

That mix — cake, tears and laughter — is the whole point.

The death café model originated in the U.K. with a simple premise:

combining food and conversation in a casual setting to facilitate open discussions about death. No agenda, no facilitator steering the conversation, no PowerPoint slides with the five stages of grief. Just people — usually strangers — telling stories, asking questions and being honest about something we all eventually face.

“It’s an unfacilitated space. I only step in as a moderator if things need it,” Evans says. “Otherwise, there are silences, there are flows. It’s just people talking.”

Impari underscores why that loose, human scale matters: “Death cafés are non-clinical spaces where you can access support, social support and conversation in spaces where

it’s safe to talk about this stuff — and you’re not going to be pathologized, you’re not going to be diagnosed or assessed.”

In Ferndale, those conversations take place at Affirmations, the longtime LGBTQ+ community center right off 9 Mile. That location was important to Evans. While many death cafés often pop up in coffee shops or bookstores, he wanted to host his in a space that is explicitly queer.

“I wanted to do mine with Affirmations, because they do a great job with programming,” Evans explains. “For queer and trans people, unless something is explicitly by and for us, it can take a little bit of time to be in a space and feel [like] ‘I’m safe here. I can talk here, I can be myself here.’

Even if we show up, we might not feel comfortable. And also, so much of death stuff happens around churches — and churches have not always done well by us. So creating a queer space for this was crucial.”

Evans had been to death cafés in Ann Arbor and Ypsilanti and had seen his friend Grey Allen run a queer death café in that area. When Evans moved to Ferndale, it felt like a natural step: bring the concept closer to Metro Detroit. Allen was generous with information, advice and support.

Still, starting wasn’t easy. “Facilitating an unfacilitated space is intimidating,” Evans admits.

See **Death Café**, page 22

◀ Vault of Midnight

Continued from page 11

have Thor, but not the woman Thor,” Van Tuyle explains. “People tend to prickle when a beloved or entrenched character is established as a queer character.”

These reactions mirror broader cultural tensions, but the Vault stands firm in its commitment to representation. Van Tuyle sees these complaints as part of a larger pattern of resistance to comics’ evolution beyond its traditional audience.

The store’s approach reflects Van Tuyle’s belief that representation must extend beyond characters to creators themselves. Companies should “give work to trans and queer creators, regardless of what the subject matter of the story is.”

Van Tuyle’s advocacy comes from understanding comics’ complicated history with LGBTQ+ representation. The 1950s “comic-book scare” led by psychiatrist Fredric Wertham’s “Seduction of the Innocent” specifically targeted perceived homosexual subtext in titles like “Batman” and “Wonder Woman.” The resulting Comics Code explicitly banned “sex perversion,” forcing queer stories underground for decades.

“It is the still-lingering effects of ‘Seduction of the Innocent’ [and the] discounting, discrediting and minimizing comics as a valid literary medium,”

Van Tuyle explains when discussing current censorship efforts targeting books like Maia Kobane’s “Gender Queer.”

While the Comics Code disappeared in 2011 and mainstream publishers now release annual Pride issues featuring openly LGBTQ+ characters like Superman’s bisexual son Jonathan Kent, Van Tuyle sees disturbing parallels to past moral panics.

“If Marjorie Taylor Greene ever cared to set foot in a comic book store, there would be some whole uproar about how ‘Superman’s gay now,’” she observes.

The Vault’s mission extends beyond

simply selling comics — it’s about defending readers’ rights in an era of increasing book challenges. Van Tuyle believes much of the current controversy stems from politicians’ and conservative religious groups’ refusal to accept that “children have the right to read and they have the right to read what they like.”

This philosophy shapes how the Vault operates daily. Rather than

staff, the store creates space for stories that might otherwise struggle to find audiences.

Van Tuyle’s vision extends beyond the Vault’s three locations. She wants to see an industry where queer creators have the same opportunities as their straight, cisgender counterparts, where young readers can find characters who reflect their experiences and where comic shops



Jacki Van Tuyle. Courtesy photo

avoiding potentially controversial material, the shop embraces its role as a space where readers can discover stories that reflect their experiences or expand their understanding.

Van Tuyle sees signs of progress in mainstream comics, from DC and Marvel’s annual Pride issues to the elevation of queer creators. But she knows the work isn’t finished.

The Vault of Midnight could be a model for how comic shops can actively shape culture rather than simply reflecting it. By prioritizing small press publications, championing queer artists and employing LGBTQ+

serve as community gathering spaces rather than exclusive clubs.

“Young adult readership loves graphic novels in general,” Van Tuyle notes, pointing to comics’ potential for reaching new audiences hungry for diverse stories.

Van Tuyle sees a bright future for queer comics at the Vault of Midnight. “I’m glad that we, at Vault, carry small press stuff, champion queer artists and employ queer people,” she says. “I want more people to read comics made by queer people, and I want more opportunities for queer people to make comics.”

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Hairstylist Brooke Hale working on Raevynn's new 'do. Courtesy photo

Why Your Hairstylist Might Just Be Your Most Important Ally

A writer's experience reveals how Southeast Michigan professionals hold the power to affirm LGBTQ+ identity

BY ASTER ASEM

Note: The non-public sources in this story have requested BTL use only their first names only as a privacy and safety precaution.

Before my transition, I'd spent decades in barbershops and tolerated barely competent bargain snips for decades, describing exactly what I wanted but leaving with whatever the stylist thought I should have. It was like shopping for a car in the early 1900s: "Do you want a Model T or a Model A?" I could have anything I wanted, as long as it was what they wanted to give me.

But, to paraphrase author John Green, most things that look dichotomous are really spectra. Self-expression is not multiple-choice; it's an essay question.

And to help LGBTQ+ people especially answer that question, there are hairstylists beyond the places offering \$10 specials, stylists who flout uniforms and norms, connecting with each individual client to understand what we want to display and help bring it to show.

LGBTQ+ people have always had flair. Being queer is inherently a rejection of the normative — and perhaps the most accessible way to flout expectations and express your

aesthetic is with your hair.

Known professionally in the Ypsilanti area as "Anna Mopchopper," Anna Parks understands this power. "Seeing people [in my chair] see themselves for the first time is a powerful moment," they say. "When you see yourself present a certain way, especially for the first time — I've seen it change people."

Parks compares it to creating your own "mask" — not for concealing yourself, but sculpting the way you portray your character.

Raevynn, a trans woman in Southeast Michigan, used to present as masculine at work. But "as soon as I would change [at home] and see

myself presenting feminine," she says, "it lifted [a weight] off my shoulder. My wife had helped me out with a wig [and] makeup for the first time. That was when my egg cracked. I said, 'Yep, this is it.'"

"Egg" is an affectionate term for trans people who haven't realized their gender yet. Given downy warmth and time to figure themselves out, they might peck and chip their way into a world of possibilities.

After I "hatched," I began to home in on the person I was. I couldn't alter my body shape (for the moment!), but I could change my aesthetic. However, I had no idea where to start; I'd always been a jeans-and-tee "guy" with a

hands-off hairdo. Clothes aside, I was sure a typical barber would give me the same haircut as ever.

Ren, another trans person in Southeast Michigan, faced similar challenges. "I prefer to have short hair, [but] growing up, it's either like a feminine pixie cut or a 'boy cut.' There's no in-between, so I like that Brooke listens well to what you're looking for and what you're comfortable with. They're very sensitive to what you're looking for and how it makes you feel."

"Brooke" is Brooke Hale of

See **Hair Affirmations**, page 24

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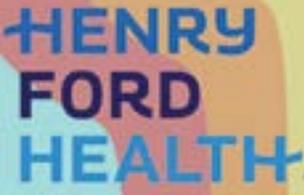
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Giorgio Would Know
Puzzle can be found on page 25

◀ Queer Media

Continued from page 7

almost all LGBTQ+ media, both local and national outlets surveyed, are for-profit. But now that more funders see a need to support local for-profit media, this could open up an opportunity to support more of these outlets. Given the political backlash against the community, now is not the time to push these businesses to become non-profit, as that could be a new single-point failure.

While I had published a book on LGBTQ+ media several years ago called “Gay Press, Gay Power,” I still was not prepared for just how precarious this media ecosystem is today. Our report found 18 states with no LGBTQ+ media, while many city-based media are unable to cover their entire states. Millions of people have no local LGBTQ+ media coverage.

Our report also found that during this time of crisis, there has been a surge in audience, and more willingness to work together. The participants in this research indicated a strong willingness to collaborate across both business and editorial opportunities. But such efforts require an investment of both time and money. Support is needed.

We surveyed both legendary local LGBTQ+ newspapers and newer online

outlets. More research should be done on the creator/influencer world, which includes many LGBTQ+ people. And while local LGBTQ+ media was the primary focus of this research, we did survey national LGBTQ+ media. I was surprised how precarious many of these outlets are as well.

The entire LGBTQ+ media universe could use a strategic plan and an infusion of new resources, which I hope funders will step up to support.

In the meantime, readers can support LGBTQ+ media by signing up for their newsletters, and donating or subscribing if they have those options.

Please see the report for a full slate of recommendations, here: <https://newsisout.com/lgbtq-media-mapping>. The map is hosted on the Craig Newmark Graduate School of Journalism website here: <https://lgbtqmediamap.journalism.cuny.edu>. We will update the map as new outlets are found; indeed, we have already added new dots to the map.

Tracy Baim is the co-author of The LGBTQ+ Media Mapping Project report with Hanna Siemaszko. She is the co-founder of the 40-year-old Windy City Times LGBTQ+ newspaper, and is the executive director of Press Forward Chicago, a journalism pooled fund part of the national Press Forward movement.

◀ Evangelical Pastor

Continued from page 14

for her dad. She knew that as the lead pastor of an Evangelical megachurch, the consequences of having a queer child could be devastating. “I knew that coming out would threaten his whole life and stability,” she says.

Before coming out as trans, Beatrice first came out as a gay man. Though she feared losing her family and community, she was met with a positive reaction from her father. “I couldn’t make eye contact. I was sobbing through it,” Beatrice remembers. “He gave the best possible reaction to that level of tenderness and vulnerability.”

On the surface, Danny was affirming. But on the inside, he struggled. “It might be embarrassing to say, but truthfully, I remember saying, ‘Lord, no problem to have a gay, bi or lesbian kid. I can do the LGB, just please don’t give me the T. Please don’t give me a trans kid, because none of that makes sense to me.’”

But a few years later, Danny’s fears came true when Beatrice came out as trans.

“His response was nothing but confusion,” says Beatrice. She recalls him repeatedly asking her what her new identity meant. The immediate support and validation that was there the first time she came out had disappeared.

For the next year, “we were actively adversarial,” says Beatrice. “For him, my being trans was insurmountable.”

Danny wouldn’t acknowledge Beatrice’s identity as a woman. He worried it was impossible to be LGBTQ+ accepting without violating Biblical principles. “I was struggling theologically,” he says.

But his lack of acceptance was painful for Beatrice. “I took that to be ‘you’re not with me.’ ... I had no idea what was going on with him.”

Though Beatrice and Danny were never completely out of touch during this time, their relationship was deteriorating. Danny describes a feeling of grief over having to say goodbye to the version of Beatrice he had previously known. “There is a deep mourning that happens in parents’ lives when their kids transition and they have to adapt to a new version of their children.”

But just over a year after Beatrice came out, their tensions reached a boiling point. “I was yelling at him,” Beatrice remembers.

After some back and forth, Danny broke down in tears. “I’m sorry Bea. I’m sorry Bea. I’m sorry Bea,” Beatrice remembers her dad repeating over and over again.

“It was the first time he ever said my name,” she says, adding that he struggled to get the words out through his sobs and was speaking just above a whisper. This moment led to a breakthrough, with Danny finally sharing with Beatrice the emotions he had been holding back for the past year.

“I’m so scared for you. This world is not good,” Danny told Beatrice while apologizing for the pain he had put her through. He told Beatrice he associated being queer with having a harder life — something he didn’t want for his daughter. “The top fear was for her safety. And then I had my own fears: What does this really mean?” he remembers thinking. Though his apology didn’t instantly undo the pain he had put Beatrice through after rejecting her identity, it built a foundation to begin repairing the relationship.

“I realized everything he was doing was out of fear and not hate,” Beatrice tells Uncloseted Media and Gender Newsroom, through tears. “In that moment, all the delusions, all the bullshit, just shed away, and we’re just human people, seeing each other for human people. And that’s worth a lot. Not many people get that with their parents.”

“When that moment happened, it was an instant healing because Beatrice could let her guard down, too,” says Danny. “Once I said ‘Bea,’ it’s almost as if the veil was lifted.”

Since that day, Danny and Beatrice have worked to heal their relationship. Danny left his church and is now being ordained as a priest in the Episcopal Church, where gay congregants have had equal standing for almost 50 years. Danny proudly refers to Beatrice as his daughter, uses her correct pronouns and affectionately calls her by the nickname “Bea.”

“I can’t think of a word other than ‘ferocious’ that describes what he’s done,” says Beatrice, referencing his allyship. “It’s extraordinarily brave and extraordinarily beautiful,” she says, adding that she no longer carries any anger toward her dad. “[He’s] a friend, a father, and a co-conspirator.”

Though the two of them have come a long way, Danny still carries guilt. “I’m ashamed that I stayed as long as I did, and I’ve repented,” he says. Since Beatrice came out, Danny has founded an organization called The Open Table Collective, which provides a space for people to wrestle with issues of faith. Through the collective, he and Beatrice now tell their story through public speaking events and on their own podcast in hopes of proving that religion doesn’t have to be a barrier to accepting queer identities.

As far as Danny is concerned, parents of queer kids can do one of two things: “They shun the person, or they go, ‘Whoa, this is the person that I love, and I have to start reevaluating my life and the way that I think.’”

To him, the most important thing is not to shut someone out just because of fear or a lack of understanding. “If someone has a crack of curiosity, there’s hope that love can prevail and that our human experience can bring us closer together.”



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◀ Hair Affirmations

Continued from page 20

Spellbound Hair Studio in Livonia. She agrees with Ren's assessment. Clients, she says, "usually have pictures and tell me what they're going for — something a little more femme, a little more masc — and I love some of the things [they] will tell me. One of my trans men was like, 'I want like '90s, surfer-douche fuckboy.' And we nailed it."

This is peak queer: choosing your own adjectives, your own nouns. You create your gender and performance, coloring outside the lines — whether to embellish the original picture or to "do your own thing" until the mass-print cartoon becomes unrecognizable beneath.

Parks tries to affirm every client's gender on their own terms. "I have a lot of clients [who are] cis-straight, but even then, I make sure to ask about little things: 'Would you like it to be more cutesy or more masculine?'"

They use gender-neutral language when possible. "For cute little sideburns, I use the term 'doilies.' 'Swoopy' ... fun little descriptive terms. Based on the vibe of people, I try to feel out how they feel about things."

This intuitive understanding sets affirming stylists apart. Every person I spoke with agreed this sensitivity is rare at most salons. Ren describes the typical experience: "I prefer to have short hair. I don't feel like myself with long hair." Yet at a traditional salon, "the person cutting my hair would say, 'Oh, but you would look so much better with long hair! You'd look so much prettier with your hair like this!' They'd be like, 'Are you sure you want to do this?' and then by the end of it, you'd have this super-hairsprayed, Long Island-looking thing on top of your head, this big bouffant bob. It was so frustrating."

I know this frustration intimately. I've left salons near tears, staring at a reflection that felt like a costume I never asked to wear. The stylist meant well, but they saw what they thought I should want instead of what I actually needed.

Parks says less-affirming stylists "decide they're going to do something masculine or feminine, and they just do what they think is right for you."

It's the "What's in your pants?" question — the assumption that appearance should match perceived gender rather than personal identity.

Beyond poor communication, typical salons can make LGBTQ+ people feel uncomfortable and even unsafe. Samantha Ollis, who works with Hale, speaks of queer clients being stared at as they passed by other customers, of rushing to check out to protect them from "uncomfortable situations" and apologizing for others' conversations.

Hale created her safe space after working at a similar establishment. "My salon owner was conservative and couldn't grasp they/them pronouns. They screwed up on one of my

clients. There would be conversations I didn't support, and I'd have to whisper to my client that I didn't agree. That's why I had to leave, and get my clients out of there too."

I understand why these stylists left conventional salons. When you've experienced the relief of finding someone who truly sees you, it becomes impossible to compromise. The difference between a good haircut and a life-changing one often comes down to whether your stylist understands that you're not just changing your hair — you're expressing your truth.



Anna Mopchopper. Courtesy photo

Love drives stylists like Parks, Hale and Ollis into private practice. Parks recalls working at a barbershop "plastered" with the slogan "The Boys Club" and getting queer women as clients who couldn't find what they wanted at traditional salons.

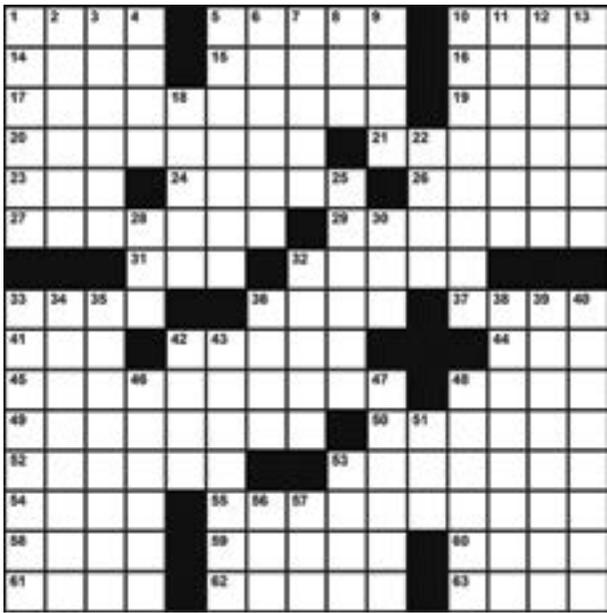
"I got an overwhelming amount of 'Oh my gosh, I'm so glad that I found you. I never know where to get my hair cut.'"

Locating affirming cosmetology appears to be less of a problem for queer folks in Southeast Michigan now. When I asked about local affirming stylists at the Scrambled Eggs trans support group in Dearborn Heights, Raevynn responded immediately about Hale. "Anna Mopchopper" is well-known, too, and resources like Strands for Trans and the Everywhere is Queer phone app exist to help LGBTQ+ folks find businesses that actively support the community.

"I'm happy to see more options being created," Parks says. "I hope the industry continues to break up this mold that's so outdated."

The heart of what makes our community incredible is captured in the image of a queer person draped in a hairdresser's gown, face glowing into a mirror at the first glimmer of the self they want to show the world.

When I think about my own journey with hair and identity, I'm grateful for every stylist who understood that scissors can be tools of liberation. To all the professionals who have opened safe spaces for us, thank you for helping us become ourselves.



Giorgio Would Know

Across

- 1 End of a favorite holiday
- 5 Your gardener's tool
- 10 Superman portrayal Dean
- 14 What "let" means to Mauresmo
- 15 Joan of Arc's "hardware"
- 16 "Rule, Britannia" composer

Thomas

- 17 With 29-Across, what elegance is not, to Armani
- 19 In need of some rays at Laguna Beach
- 20 Convertible shelters
- 21 Beat on eBay
- 23 Hot time for Colette
- 24 "___ Little Bit of Luck"
- 26 Pamphleteer Thomas
- 27 Miley Cyrus' real first name
- 29 See 17-Across
- 31 It changes a señor's gender
- 32 Von Trapp title

- 33 Bubbles on a brew
- 36 Ticks off
- 37 Result of a split in a religious body
- 41 Solidly behind
- 42 "Same here!"
- 44 Charlotte of "Facts of Life"
- 45 With 55-Across, what elegance is, to Armani
- 48 Pull down
- 49 Rio festival
- 50 Stirred up
- 52 Make certain
- 53 The line in 20/20
- 54 They wave their sticks at Citi Field
- 55 See 45-Across
- 58 Protected, to seamen
- 59 One who comes slowly
- 60 Kristy McNichol sitcom "Empty ___"
- 61 Big Apple enforcement org.
- 62 At the crack of dawn
- 63 Big name in pumps

Down

- 1 Lent beauty to, like Will's old roomie?
- 2 Sales incentive
- 3 Is nuts over
- 4 Word on a can in a Warhol work
- 5 Audrey Hepburn role
- 6 "___ in Pink"
- 7 Group that won't pose for nude photos
- 8 "The Opposite of Sex" director Roos

- 9 And so
- 10 Ahab and Nemo
- 11 Like numerals such as 69
- 12 Queued up
- 13 Had an opening for
- 18 Namely
- 22 Capable of performing
- 25 Father of Princess Leia
- 28 Contraction in a carol about gay apparel
- 30 Areas for Dr. Kerry Weaver
- 32 Swelter on South Beach
- 33 Visitor to Uranus, perhaps
- 34 How the Fab Five would do it
- 35 Spot for a welcome mat
- 36 What comes to mind
- 38 What rubbers leave behind
- 39 Like one-night stands without protection
- 40 Took care of
- 42 Direction from Susan Feniger
- 43 Lincoln's side of the penny
- 46 Like a new condom
- 47 In a forbidding way
- 48 "Desire Under the Elms" playwright O'Neill
- 51 Heavenly body
- 53 What either bride may wear
- 56 Aunt in a Disney film
- 57 Put a scuff on

See p. 21 for answers

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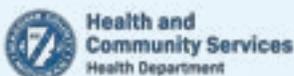
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4 Gen Con

Continued from page 10

considered themselves to be an extrovert, introvert or somewhere in the middle.

Educational programming flourished alongside social events. With less than 10 minutes notice, a seminar called Queer Worldbuilding for All, led by Jaelyn Lewis, ended up joining forces with the seminar

and Divas: A Dragventure Extravaganza. Blending a drag show with role playing, the Dungeon Daddy (aka Daddy's Beard) and his NPCs hosted four Indy-based Queens as they adventured through a story that dragged them through portals into board game worlds where they rolled dice, sang karaoke and interacted with the enthusiastic audience.

The numbers tell their own story about the value of inclusive gaming. GLAAD's research shows that "for LGBTQ+ gamers, a safe and inclusive environment goes beyond the game itself — with nearly 70% indicating they are less likely to buy from a studio with a history of mistreating LGBTQ+ workers."

Gen Con 2025's record-breaking attendance of more than 71,000 attendees generated an estimated \$82 million in economic impact, demonstrating how inclusive spaces drive both community and commerce.

Lones observed that, while a vocal minority still reacts loudly whenever a queer character simply exists in a video game, that kind of hostility is notably absent at tabletop gaming conventions.

"It's becoming a whole lot more welcoming and a really safe space," Lones said. "It's like [you can] come and be yourself at these places, and I feel like we've had a part in helping with that."

The evidence supports his optimism. What started as just a few free ribbons has grown, Lones said, to nearly 30 — one for every Pride flag, along with "Gaymer," "Ally" and pronoun ribbons, including a "write your



own" version. Play Fair: Designing Equitable Games, led by Jesse Anderson, because of a mix-up that scheduled both for the same room at the same time. They bounced back and forth between queer worldbuilding and applying universal design techniques to accommodate people with disabilities as if the two topics were always meant to go together.

Friday night's highlight was Dragons, Dice

These events, gatherings and products are part of a broader shift: Queer gamers are no longer just participants; they're innovators, educators and leaders, reshaping what tabletop spaces look like.

From ribbons and roleplay to history and hospitality, queer gamers aren't just playing the game — they're changing it.

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