



The city's jolliest (and jiggliest) mile turns up the holiday heat for year 10

WHEN TRUTH HAS A COST

Fired CBS anchor exposes workplace discrimination

CAMP CHAOS UNLEASHED

Amanda Seyfried talks 'The Housemaid'

SHOP LOCAL, SHOP QUEER

Support LGBTQ+ business owners this holiday

BEYOND THE SCALE:

Important Guidance for Patients Using GLP-1 Medications

(Ozempic, Wegovy, Zepbound, Semaglutide, Tirzepatide)

A Personal Note

Take it from me—when I first started using GLP-1 medications, we didn't know as much about their long-term effects as we do now. They were very effective for weight loss, but I also lost muscle mass. That experience is why I emphasize protein intake, strength preservation, and healthy habits for every patient using these medications today.

GLP-1 medications can be very helpful for weight management. Many people find that these treatments reduce "food noise" or the constant urge to eat. While this can support weight loss, it also can make it easy to eat too little and feel tired.

To stay healthy & strong while using GLP-1s, please keep the following in mind:

Prioritize protein.

Aim for about half your body weight (in pounds) in grams of protein each day. For example, a 200-pound person should consume about 100 grams of protein daily.

Good sources include eggs, meat, chicken, cottage cheese, and beans. Beans also add valuable fiber.

Increase fiber.

A high-fiber diet supports digestion, fullness, and overall nutrition while on GLP-1 therapy.

Stay hydrated.

Drink plenty of water throughout the day to support wellness and digestion.



Plan your meals.

Experts recommend planning meals in advance. Start slowly—perhaps by planning just one meal a day—and try new foods and recipes. Good nutrition is a journey, and small steps make a big difference.

Make wise choices when eating out or at home.

Choose protein and fiber-rich foods first to support your long-term success.

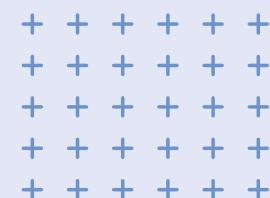
Build habits for when the medication plateaus.

GLP-1 medications may become less effective over time. Establishing strong habits now helps you maintain progress later. Remember: people who regain

weight often gain back fat, not the muscle they lost.

GLP-1s are generally safe, although complications can occur, and some may be serious. Our office protocol is to evaluate you monthly at the start of therapy to determine proper dose escalation or reduction. Once a maintenance dose is established, visits occur every three months.

We also recommend visiting www.NutritionforWeightLoss.com as a valuable resource on GLP-1 medications and nutrition.



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Warm regards,

Dr. Benson

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Dr. Benson and Dr. Bornstein

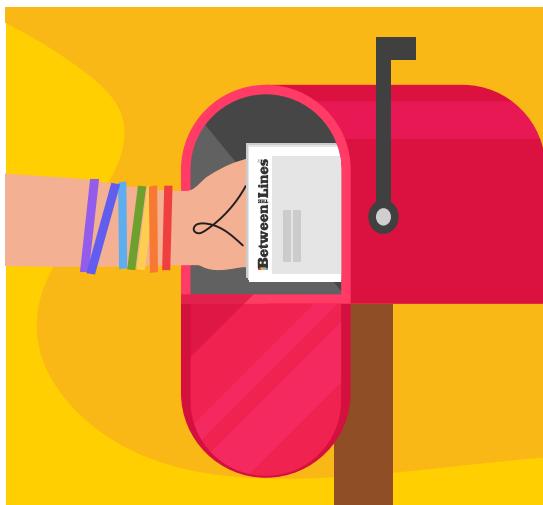


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Photo: Andrew Potter



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VOL. 3350 • DECEMBER 11, 2025

ISSUE 1291

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

Michigan Press Association
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5 Queer Things You Can Do Right Now-ish

BY KELLI DUNHAM

As the year winds down (or perhaps skids into the curb like a minivan in February), LGBTQ+ Southeast Michigan is still showing up for joy, art, harmony, dancing, pets in costumes and the kind of community that actually feels, well, like community. Start 2026 surrounded by people, projects and practices that help you feel more like yourself. And possibly the tiniest bit more hopeful about the world.



Sniff Out Gifts at the Paws & Pride Winter Bazaar

Affirmations is doubling down on queer joy with its inaugural Paws & Pride Winter Bazaar, bringing together LGBTQ+ makers, cozy treats and ridiculously adorable floof-themed merch. "Affirmations is thrilled to host [the bazaar] as a way to uplift Southeast Michigan's queer artists and makers...offering vendors a free space to share their work, connect with neighbors and shine. The Bazaar will also feature pet photography with Santa, hot chocolate, pup cups and plenty of festive vibes!" Development Director Ryn Moravec told BTL.

Dec. 13, 12-3 p.m., Affirmations LGBTQ+ Community Center (290 W. Nine Mile Road, Ferndale). bit.ly/pawspride.



Sing Out Detroit. Photo: Instagram / @singoutdet

Soak Up Stardust at Sing Out Detroit's 'New Constellations'

Sing Out Detroit — one of the region's most beloved LGBTQ+ choruses and a Pride-season staple — invites you to a cosmic celebration of harmony, connection and new beginnings. With singers from all over Southeast Michigan and vocal placement that meets people where their voices actually live, the choir builds joy from the inside out.

Sing Out President Angela Hollander invites BTL readers to enjoy "our heartfelt, triumphant celebration of coming together — a true feeling of harmony and connection. Be part of our new beginning and help us launch our hopeful, luminous future!"

Dec. 20, 4 p.m., Ferndale High School (881 Pinecrest, Ferndale). singoutdetroit.org.



Fenton Winery. Courtesy photo

Unwind Queerly at Fenton Pride Collective's Monthly Meet-Up

Sometimes, the most healing December event is the one where you don't need a ticket, a new outfit or a complicated backstory, just a place to hang out with other LGBTQ+ folks who get you. Fenton Pride Collective's monthly gathering at the gorgeous Fenton Winery & Brewery offers great food, non-alcoholic beverage options and the very specific thrill of meeting a queer person who lives within 20 minutes of you. Drop in any time after 7 p.m., pull up a chair and settle into a night of conversation, laughter and new connections.

Dec. 18, 7 p.m., Fenton Winery & Brewery (1370 N. Long Lake Road, Fenton Township). fentonpride.org.



Reset Your Spirit at a Sober Ecstatic NYE Gathering

If you've ever wanted a New Year's Eve that felt less "champagne regret" and more "emotional rebirth ritual" facilitated by a licensed therapist and a legendary DJ," this is your night. Called Ritual, the event at Indigo Grace includes intention setting, an indoor dance-journey, potluck and an outdoor effigy ceremony at midnight, all in a safe, affirming space. Led by Michigan's ecstatic dance OG Charity Loring, LMSW, you can expect deep, spiritual, sweaty and grounding connection, without the hangover.

Dec. 31, 8:30 p.m., Indigo Grace (6363 W. Waters Road, Ann Arbor). Check the Facebook event page to make sure you come properly prepared for a great night. bit.ly/ritualsoberNYE.



Change One Tiny Thing for the New Year

New Year's doesn't have to be a grand reinvention or a crash-course in self-improvement. Try something simpler: Change one tiny thing. Truly tiny. The kind of shift so small no one will notice. Well, no one but you. Move a plant closer to the window. Leave a kind note for yourself on your bathroom mirror. Change the lock screen on your phone to something that makes you exhale. Unsubscribe from one (just one!) email list you resent. That's it. One tiny act that whispers, "I'm choosing intention this year."

Any day in early January, anywhere you feel safe and at home. No cost, no deadline, no rules.

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Sing Out Detroit
An LGBTQ+ and Ally Chorus

Ties Like Me: Fostering LGBTQ+ Community Every Third Wednesday for 20 Years

How a simple networking idea became a lifeline for local queer professionals

BY SARAH BRICKER HUNT

When Reid Beyerlein and Robert Lalicki met at a Royal Oak Chamber of Commerce coffee meeting, they clicked instantly. So did the people seated on either side of them. Twenty years later, all four still show up to Ties Like Me, the LGBTQ+ networking organization the duo founded in October 2005.

It started with a simple realization: The Detroit area had plenty of networking opportunities, but none specifically for LGBTQ+ professionals.

"We just thought, wouldn't that be nice if there was something for the LGBTQ+ community," Lalicki told BTL. "Our whole goal was to connect and to refer and to do business with one another to help strengthen our own community first."

In an article BTL ran ahead of this first event in 2005, Beyerlein laid out the vision. "We found that one thing that the gay and lesbian community was lacking was a networking group strictly for gay and lesbian professionals," he said at the time. "The stronger we grow as a community, the better it's going to be for the community as a whole."

That first October meeting at Pronto! in Ferndale, hosted by local attorney Jim Rasor, the group's first sponsor, drew 110 people. The second month brought 130. They'd clearly uncovered a need in the community.

But they'd also outgrown their venue. More importantly, they realized that always meeting at an LGBTQ+ bar was limiting their reach. Twenty years ago, many professionals still weren't out at work. While the group still meets at Pronto! over the course of each year, the venue rotates to spaces throughout the Metro Detroit area and doesn't limit itself to venues geared toward the queer community.

"There were a couple of people

who said, 'I want to join you guys, but I don't want to be seen going into a gay bar,'" Lalicki recalled. "Once we started moving things around, the audience changed. [We started] getting different demographics, people from different areas."

The strategy worked. By rotating venues throughout Metro Detroit, Ties Like Me began attracting people from Grand Blanc to Ann Arbor, from Jackson to Bloomfield Hills. Today, the group still draws close to 100 people monthly, always on the third Wednesday of the month. In two decades, they've changed that date exactly once.

What started as strictly business networking evolved into something richer. Beyerlein and Lalicki watched as attendees fell in love, got married and came back to thank them.

"People say, 'Without Ties Like Me, I never would have met my partner,'" Beyerlein said, laughing. "It wasn't our intention, but Robert and I don't like to get in the way of what the universe is doing."

Dr. Joe Kort, a psychologist who directs The Center for Relationship and Sexual Health in Royal Oak and has been a Ties Like Me member and sponsor throughout the organization's history, understands that evolution. "Ties Like Me has meant more to me than just a business networking group," he said. "I have made countless friends and acquaintances and have felt supported professionally and personally for the entire 20 years."

Joan Warner, a State Farm agent who helped organize the first planning meetings 20 years ago, has watched Ties Like Me become something far different from typical networking groups. Warner, who has attended since the beginning, appreciates that Beyerlein and Lalicki rejected the rigid, transactional model of other business networks. "We're not

under huge pressure, like, 'Geez, I didn't bring three [referrals] for you to call next week.' We just go and we have a drink and it's a lot more casual." That approach has created space for genuine relationships. When a member recently lost his husband, the Ties Like Me community rallied around him. "When I say we're kind of like family, that's what I mean," Warner said.

The mission has evolved too. What Beyerlein described in 2005 as serving "gay and lesbian professionals" now welcomes the broader LGBTQ+ community — reflecting both broader cultural shifts and the organization's own growth.

"We have evolved," Lalicki said simply. "There have been folks



Attendees enjoy each other's company at a Ties Like Me event. Courtesy photo

from every part of the alphabet, if you will, who have come to Ties Like Me and have really found it worthwhile because they've met so many other people."

At their 20th anniversary celebration in October, Lalicki was struck by the longevity of those connections. "It was wonderful to see people we haven't seen in such a long time, and many of them were there the very first one or two months that we started."

Both founders still greet



Robert Lalicki and Reid Beyerlein at a Ties Like Me event. Courtesy photo

attendees at the door — a practice they've maintained for 20 years. Beyerlein sees it as essential.

"We want people to feel welcome so that good energy stays through the whole entire event," he said. "In today's environment, you see a smiling face at a door and sometimes that's all it takes."

Remarkably, both men still work full-time jobs and volunteer their time to Ties Like Me. They've never charged membership fees or dues.

"We do this because we think it's the right thing to do," Beyerlein said. "And that's the blessing of it

— everybody comes and supports Ties because they believe it's the right thing to do, too."

When asked what keeps them going, Beyerlein's answer is simple: "Robert and I look back and we just say we are blessed. If it was just Robert and me every single month... I love Robert and we'd have a great dinner, but [the group] wouldn't be there. It's really just been the community of Detroit that has made it happen and made it stay happening for so long."

Ties Like Me meets on the third Wednesday of every month at rotating venues throughout Metro Detroit. Learn more at tieslikeme.org.

For This Emmy-Winning News Anchor, Truth-Telling Came With a Price

Popular Flint anchor David Custer wins retaliation lawsuit as former colleagues detail homophobia at WNEM-TV

BY SARAH BRICKER HUNT

The anonymous cards started arriving shortly after David Custer lost his job. The first one, addressed to his husband, featured a naked man and handwritten text so vulgar and homophobic that the couple spent days “side-eyeing everyone” in their lives, wondering who hated them enough to send it. The second card arrived after Custer’s replacement anchor was announced, praising the new hire as “so much better.”

For Custer, an Emmy Award-winning journalist who’d spent 11 years at WNEM-TV, the cards represented something darker than typical viewer criticism. Someone who knew where he lived. Someone who knew intimate details about his firing. Someone with an axe to grind.

In October, a Genesee County jury unanimously sided with the former anchor, finding that the Flint-area CBS affiliate had retaliated against him for supporting a colleague’s harassment complaint. But the legal battle is far from over. Now both sides are appealing, with the station’s insurance company seeking to overturn the verdict and Custer fighting to introduce explosive evidence the judge excluded from trial — including those disturbing cards and allegations about who might have sent them.

Custer built his career on truth-telling, but inside WNEM’s walls, he sometimes felt silenced. As an openly gay anchor in a mid-Michigan market, he suspected he was breaking ground. “I think that I may be one of the first main anchors in this market that’s been out as an LGBTQ+ person,” he told BTL.

The subtle discrimination felt constant. He noticed being excluded from social activities. Anonymous journalism forums criticized not his reporting, but his sexuality, and included inside information only people working at WNEM knew. “The biggest issue they always had was my sexuality,” Custer said. “It

was never about my work or the stories that I was doing.”

He mentioned these concerns to HR but stopped short of filing a formal complaint, worried it would “backfire.” Still, the internal conflict gnawed at him. “I built an entire career on telling the truth and speaking truth for other people,” he said. “Yet, I almost felt like inside the walls of the TV station, I was being asked to do the opposite by my management.”

That changed in November 2023, when co-anchor Meg McLeod filed a complaint with HR about News Director Jayne Hodak-Soboleski’s behavior. According to court documents, one concern involved “making fun of a Black woman’s hairstyle.”

HR called Custer as a witness after McLeod listed him as someone who had observed some of the concerning behavior, and he shared what he had experienced and witnessed during the investigation.

“I told the truth, and I don’t think I could sleep at night had I not told the truth, but it wasn’t favorable for how management was treating people in the workplace,” Custer said. “And once I did that, it was almost like a snowball rolling down a hill.”

Hodak-Soboleski’s arrival at WNEM in June 2021 raised eyebrows among some staffers. She’d previously served as news director at WJRT (ABC12) from 2003 to 2019 — a

tenure that included a period when former reporter Leslie Toldo filed a racial and gender discrimination lawsuit against that station. Toldo’s lawsuit, which settled in December 2015, alleged discriminatory discipline and contract non-renewal after she complained.

General Manager Ken Frierson hired Hodak-Soboleski just before Gray Media’s acquisition of WNEM closed in December 2021. According to former Digital Content Manager Brianna Owczarzak, that timing mattered. Gray Media’s corporate policy would have prevented hiring someone involved in a lawsuit at another station in their portfolio, but because Hodak-Soboleski was



David Custer. Courtesy photo

already in place when Gray took control, the policy didn’t apply.

Owczarzak, who worked at WNEM for 11 years before leaving in March 2025, watched what happened to Custer after he supported McLeod’s complaint. “From a manager standpoint, I wish everybody in that newsroom was like David,” she said. “They had no reason not to offer him a new contract.”

She had firsthand knowledge of station policy. When she wanted to decline renewing a producer’s contract due to performance issues, management told her “it was station policy if an employee did not have a history of discipline you had to offer them a new contract.”

“David had no discipline record. He had never been written up,” Owczarzak said. She provided an email from Frierson documenting the policy during her deposition, but Judge B. Chris Christenson excluded it from evidence at trial.

This email was submitted as evidence in Custer’s trial but was excluded by the judge.

The retaliation, according to court documents, began almost immediately after the HR investigation. Management obtained Custer’s confidential statements and “began treating Plaintiff improperly,” according to the initial court filing, which details how Frierson “began

freezing Plaintiff out, no longer talking to him.”

How the case unfolded

May 2024: Custer filed his own retaliation complaint with HR against Hodak-Soboleski and Frierson.

July 1, 2024: Custer received written notification that he was being terminated on July 28, 2024.

July 22, 2024: Six days before Custer’s contract was set to expire, attorney Tom Pabst filed a lawsuit on his behalf alleging discrimination, harassment and retaliation under Michigan’s Elliott-Larsen Civil Rights Act.

July 25, 2024: Frierson was served with the lawsuit. Within hours, according to Pabst, Hodak-Soboleski terminated Custer. “She’s in there talking to Dave saying, ‘That’s it. You’re done. Give me your key fob. Give me your work phone,’ Pabst said. “They fired him. All they had to do was sit back and wait for three more days and his contract would have expired. But they deliberately wanted to punish and humiliate him.”

The abrupt termination struck Owczarzak as deliberate. Management refused to issue any public statement about Custer’s sudden departure — “unusual given that every single time” someone left during her 11 years there, “whether that person left on their own or they were fired, we had a statement to give to the public. This was the only instance where we were told not to say anything.”

Late July 2024: The anonymous cards began arriving at Custer’s home. The first was addressed to his husband Dan Buccilli and featured an image of a naked man. The handwriting on the front read: “David Custer Looser!

See **David Custer**, page 10

The Ann Arbor Tech Founder Who Asked What Would Happen If STIs Were Tracked Like Covid

BY ANDREA POTEET

SPARK helps emerging companies navigate from concept to market with grant funding, expert guidance and structured programs. This is part two of our four-part LGBTQ+ Tech Innovator Series, featuring diverse entrepreneurs partnering with SPARK to bring breakthrough ideas to life. See the video companion to this article at pridesource.com.

When the Covid pandemic hit, people became hyper-aware of contact tracing and protecting each other's health.

For Max Morefield, a 38-year-old gay entrepreneur from Ann Arbor, this heightened awareness sparked a crucial question: Why don't we have the same level of care and technology for sexually transmitted infections?

That question led to KISS, an innovative app that's tackling one of healthcare's most stigmatized challenges. Launched in February 2025, KISS addresses the key reasons STI rates continue climbing. The Ann Arbor resident, currently pursuing his MBA in entrepreneurship at Eastern Michigan University, is building KISS into a comprehensive sexual health hub with anonymous contact tracing at its core. The app is available in app stores or by visiting MyKissApp.com.

Tell me about KISS.

KISS stands for Knowledge, Information, Safer Sex. It's an app that addresses the four main reasons STI rates keep climbing: the explosion of hookup culture through dating apps, lack of comprehensive sexual education, failed partner notification systems and inconsistent condom usage. What makes us unique is our anonymous contact tracing system. Users record encounters through unique QR codes without sharing personal information like names or phone numbers. When someone tests positive for an STI, the app instantly



Max Morefield
KISS App

Don't miss our video on pridesource.com featuring Max Morefield, where he shares more about creating the KISS App and how his team uses the tech to improve lives.

and anonymously notifies all recent partners. We also provide education you can trust, testing reminders and we're building out a comprehensive sexual wellness marketplace.

Why were you driven to create KISS? What problem are you trying to solve?

During Covid, I was living with a friend who's an HIV/STI specialist, and we were watching how contact tracing worked. People were being so careful about their health and notifying others when they got sick. I thought, why don't we have something like this for STIs? I'd experienced situations where I never got notified by past partners about their STI status. When I researched, I discovered that when someone tests positive, they either don't remember encounters, can't contact app-based

hookups, or are too ashamed to reach out. The taboo nature is actually what allows STIs to thrive.

What resources have been helpful to you along the way?

Ann Arbor SPARK was instrumental from the very beginning. I had an idea, but it's very hard to go from idea to reality. SPARK was the first place I went for help. Through their Business Accelerator fund, I was able to become fully trademarked and copyrighted, get my website going and create animated videos. They helped improve the app's design and functionality. I participated in SPARK Boot Camp, which is an accelerated program focusing on competition analysis and go-to-market strategy. I didn't win that competition, but I was voted "best idea."

Why is LGBTQ+ representation important in the tech field?

Men who have sex with men are disproportionately affected by STIs, and queer people in general sometimes lack access to resources, so the LGBTQ+ community is definitely our biggest market. But it's also about breaking down barriers around taboo topics. Sexual health and STIs are very stigmatized. Having LGBTQ+ voices means we're mission-driven and vision-focused, trying to change the world while building viable businesses. We understand that our community faces specific challenges, and we're creating solutions that address real problems with empathy and understanding.

What's on the horizon for KISS?

Our main focus is growing downloads and finding brand ambassadors who truly care about the mission. Version 2 will include verified STI status features so people can see when partners were last tested and make informed decisions. We're building out that comprehensive sexual wellness marketplace where users can order testing and treatment, connect with identity-affirming clinics and access educational resources. We want to integrate with doctors and make this a one-stop hub for sexual health. We're targeting a couple million downloads in the next two years, with our total addressable market around 45 million users in the U.S., Canada and Europe.

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[sic] FIRED!!!” Inside: “Dan — Your boyfriend has no \$ — got FIRED!!! LoL!! No gift just his Cock fucking your pussy! LoL!!! Or do you want his cock distressed to fuck!!! He was FIRED!!! His legs was bigger than his Cock!!! LoL!! LoL!!”

After Custer’s replacement was announced, they received a second card with the same handwriting, this time including a photo of the new anchor on air. “They included a picture of him and basically said, ‘We like him. He’s so much better,’ Custer said.

The couple took security precautions, locking doors and setting alarms. “We were always looking over our shoulders,” Custer said. “When I think about all the thought that went into it, it rattles me to my core because we didn’t know who did it, and we also didn’t know what else this person was capable of doing to us.”

According to testimony from Gray HR Director Sharel Bend, only four people knew about Custer’s termination when the first card was sent: Hodak-Soboleski, Frierson, Custer and his husband Dan.

But there were other anonymous letters circulating too. Cheryl Sclater, the Public Relations Manager at ELGA Credit Union and an acquaintance of Hodak-Soboleski, received one. According to testimony, Hodak-Soboleski told Sclater that David Custer had written the letter and that “there were other letters and David Custer was sending the letters out to people in the community to attack her.”

Hodak-Soboleski added, according to the testimony, that “there was no way to absolutely prove who sent the letter because you can’t get fingerprints off a letter.”

Custer maintains he never sent any anonymous letters. Pabst is more direct: “I believe Jayne Hodak was sending something through the mail. If it’s an anonymous letter to Cheryl Sclater, how does Jayne Hodak know Dave sent it?”

October 2025: The case went to trial in Genesee County Circuit Court. Judge Christenson had dismissed Hodak-Soboleski as a defendant and excluded significant evidence, including the anonymous cards, testimony about workplace discrimination and Owczarzak’s email documenting station policy. The case was narrowed to a single

retaliation claim against the station.

Notably, Hodak-Soboleski did not testify despite defense attorneys indicating in opening statements that jurors would hear from her.

Oct. 17, 2025: After eight hours of deliberation over two days, a jury of six men and two women returned a unanimous verdict in Custer’s favor, awarding \$40,000 in damages.

The station had offered to settle for \$1,000, according to Pabst.

WNEM’s response

In their motion for summary disposition, WNEM’s attorneys argued the station had “legitimate, non-discriminatory and non-retaliatory business reasons” for not renewing Custer’s contract. They cited his “repeated rejection of multi-year contracts, insistence on a one-year term, citing better offers elsewhere and failure to pursue further employment with the station.” The defense maintained that General Manager Ken Frierson alone made the decision and that Custer had never reported discrimination based on his sexual orientation to HR.

The defense argued it “defies common sense” that a station which employed Custer for years “knowing that he was a homosexual and offered him future multi-year employment contracts would suddenly become homophobic after his existing contract expired.”

However, the motion contained what Pabst characterized as a damaging admission. Regarding Custer’s removal from the air on July 25, the defense stated: “Due to the Plaintiff’s adversarial lawsuit and concerns over Plaintiff’s continued presence on the air, Gray decided to remove Plaintiff from broadcasts and pay out the remainder of his expiring employment agreement.”

This admission — that they removed him from broadcasts in part specifically because of his lawsuit — formed a central piece of evidence in Pabst’s retaliation case. As Pabst told BTL, “The defense attorney actually filed a piece of paper with the court saying ‘due to his adversarial complaint, we pulled him off the anchor chair.’ That’s our case. That’s exactly what I’m saying was retaliation.”

The aftermath

The experience took an emotional toll that extended beyond Custer himself. “You’d go into work with a

pit in your stomach,” he said of the period after the HR investigation.

Others witnessed the fear rippling through the newsroom. “We had one person that even put that in a text message to me along those lines — saying, ‘I don’t want this to happen to me. I need this job. I need the money,’” Custer said. “Everybody knew what they did to me. And they instilled fear in everyone by doing this.”

Jim Kiertzner has spent more than 50 years in television news, earning eight Emmy Awards and induction into the Michigan Emmy Silver Circle. The veteran investigative reporter worked at WNEM from 1983 to 2002, then hired Custer at Fox 66 in Flint where they worked together for four years before Kiertzner moved to Detroit stations WDIV and later WXYZ, where he worked until retiring in 2022.

“David is my newsroom son,” Kiertzner told BTL, describing their relationship.

When Custer first approached him about the situation at WNEM, Kiertzner was immediately troubled by what he heard. He knew Custer to be a dependable, loyal employee and dedicated journalist after their years working together.

During the trial, he was particularly struck by an apparent lack of proper documentation. “I don’t believe David received any sort of consistent performance reviews. I mean, nothing in writing,” Kiertzner said. “There’s apparently very poor documentation at this station, which is very uncharacteristic of a television station. You have all these reviews and everything is documented ahead of something like a non-renewal or a termination.”

However, Kiertzner said he had doubts it was a winnable case, “given the limited scope. I was obviously greatly and pleasantly surprised when the verdict came down. They polled each of the jurors with a raising of the hands. ‘Do you agree with this verdict?’ And all hands went up.”

While the jury’s decision validated Custer’s experience, the fallout from the case extended beyond the courtroom.

Owczarzak left the station in March 2025 to become a stay-at-home mom, but the circumstances weighed on her decision.

“I still feel like if the station management was different or if David was still there, I would have chosen to sign another contract with the station, but because of the current environment, I chose to leave,” she said. “TV5, I honestly thought I would retire there. That was the station I



A card sent to Custer’s home. Courtesy photo

grew up watching. It was my first job out of college. I worked there for 11 years. I was promoted twice during those 11 years. And everything that happened to David just kind of left a bad taste in my mouth.”

She’s not alone. “There are so many people who have left that station since then,” Owczarzak said. “And it just blows my mind that Gray Media has not done anything to address the issues at the station with that many people leaving in such a short amount of time. And especially now with a jury ruling that David was retaliated against.”

In a statement released after the verdict, Custer reflected on what the case meant. “I’m happy with the verdict. It was never about the money. It was about the truth,” he said. “We could’ve settled, but it was really about accountability. This win was for everyone who doesn’t think they can fight back against being mistreated in the workplace.”

But the legal battle continues. Despite the jury’s unanimous decision, both sides are now appealing. WNEM’s insurance company seeks to overturn the verdict. Custer filed his cross-appeal in mid-November seeking a new trial that would include the excluded evidence.

Pabst argues the judge shouldn’t have dismissed Hodak-Soboleski as a defendant. “She doesn’t have to be a decision maker to be liable,” Pabst said. “All she has to

do is be an abettor.”

Both Frierson and Hodak-Soboleski remain employed at WNEM, which is owned by Gray Media. While BTL reached out for WNEM’s viewpoint, Frierson cited the station’s policy not to comment on matters involving ongoing litigation.

Custer, a 12-time Emmy Award winner now serving as creative director for Michigan gubernatorial candidate Genesee County Sheriff Chris Swanson’s campaign, says the fight ahead is about more than his own case. “This is about standing up for what’s right and standing up to big brother and letting people know that you can’t treat people like this in the workplace.”

For Kiertzner, who has seen management changes across decades in the industry, this case hinges on leadership. “Every operation all comes down to local management,” he said. “If you work for good management, which I have been fortunate to have done over my years, it can be a great place to work. Even if there are problems, problems are brought forward and they’re resolved. If you work with bad management, an injustice like this can be the end result.”

Kiertzner remains hopeful for Custer’s future. “I want to see David emerge from this, not to have this episode in his life change his life,” he said. “He deserves to have a great, long, successful career.”



LAGOS

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Oklahoma University Offers Exciting New Degree in Anti-Trans Ideology

BY D'ANNE WITKOWSKI

A long, long time ago, in a distant era, I used to teach writing at the University of Michigan. I was a lecturer, which is much different than a professor. I taught kids who are probably all now making way more money than me how to write an essay in which they make and support an argument. I also taught creative writing.

It was not an easy job. But I was good at it. I even won a You Are Good At This Job award which I got to go to a little luncheon for and everything. It is probably gathering dust somewhere in my basement.

Anyway, long story short, I don't teach there any more. Thank the lord. Because in today's political climate I would likely not make it very long.

I got a text from my mom the other day that read, "Have fallen down the rabbit hole on this. Thought as a college instructor you might find it interesting, too."

Ahem. Former college instructor.

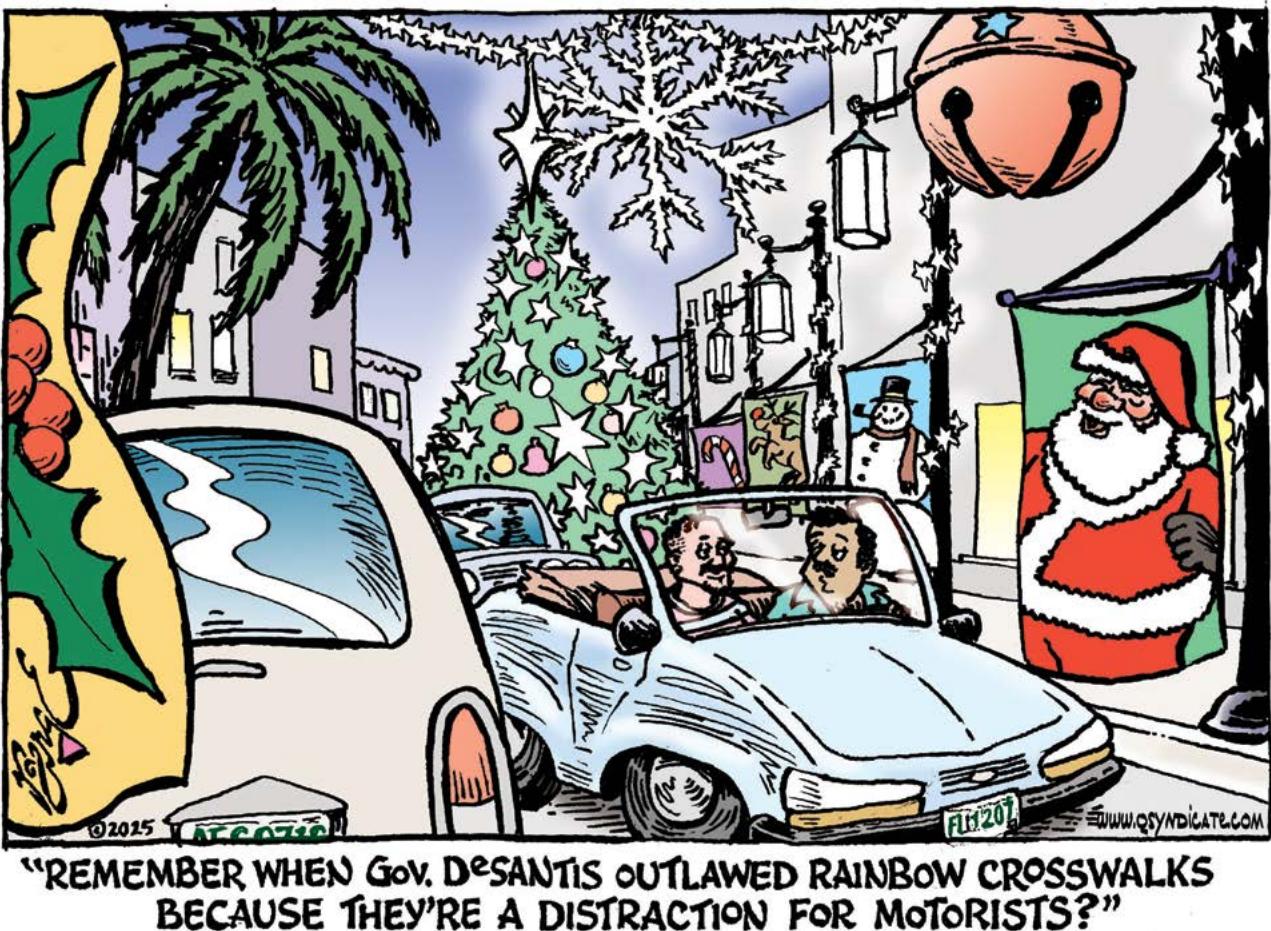
I really cannot emphasize how dangerous the world is for transgender people right now. The most powerful governments in the world are focused on dismantling anything and everything that allows transgender people any dignity or humanity.

She linked to an article about Mel Curth, a graduate student instructor at the University of Oklahoma, who was suspended after giving a failing grade to a student for her essay that was supposed to use evidence in an exploration of how social expectations shape gender. But instead of doing that, this student wrote an essay about how God says being trans is demonic.

The student is now crying that she's a victim of religious discrimination.

As my mom put it, "This girl turned in a crappy essay and is screaming discrimination because it was graded appropriately."

My mom is right. She is also obsessed with TikTok. "There are multiple TikToks defending the instructor and vilifying



the university and the state," she wrote. "I am interested in how this continues to unfold. I hope the instructor sues and wins a bundle."

"That is unlikely to happen," I texted back. "Especially not in Oklahoma."

"This paper was reviewed by another instructor who agreed with the grade," she replied. "I hope this turns out to be a blessing in disguise for the instructor and a better offer of employment is in the future. It may just be my algorithm, but I am having multiple TikToks pop up in support of the instructor."

Oh, Mom.

I explained that there are no civil rights protections for transgender people in Oklahoma. Plus, Curth is a teaching assistant, which is a very low rung on the

ivory tower of higher education. It's unlikely they have any kind of union protection or job security. On top of this, the Governor of Oklahoma has entered the chat.

"The 1st Amendment is foundational to our freedom & inseparable from a well rounded education," Governor Stitt posted on X. "The situation at OU is deeply concerning. I'm calling on the OU regents to review the results of the investigation & ensure other students aren't unfairly penalized for their beliefs."

You know, just a normal thing a governor does, weighing in on a shitty undergraduate psychology paper.

"It's quite possible that the instructor's educational career and future professional prospects are cooked," I texted back. "This person is likely totally fucked."

I really cannot emphasize how dangerous the world

is for transgender people right now. The most powerful governments in the world are focused on dismantling anything and everything that allows transgender people any dignity or humanity.

On Dec. 5, students and other instructors gathered outside to protest Curth's suspension.

"We have policies in place for assessing whether or not a complaint is legitimate, but there's enormous pressure from the outside to not follow those policies. We should be defending our academic integrity," Hunter Heyck, an OU history professor, told KOSU.

Heyck indicated that he did not fear reprisal for speaking out.

"If I was in a more vulnerable position I would have to be careful," Heyck acknowledged. "In our department, we have thought carefully about who would teach certain classes that are likely to raise hot button issues so that they would be people who are less vulnerable."

In other words, in order to protect vulnerable instructors, we limit their professional opportunities.

I am sure that this is done with the best of intentions, but it's another example of how trans people can be hurt by even the best intentions.

As for the student who wrote the Very Bad Paper (whose name I am intentionally not using), she's going to be fine. More than fine. She'll likely ride this wave to a lucrative career opposing transgender existence. She'll become the next Riley Gaines, who tied for fifth place during a college swimming competition with a trans athlete a few years ago. Now Gaines makes her living screaming that transgender women should not be allowed to play sports.

This student will become a Turning Point USA poster child in no time. All for trying to ruin a transgender person's life.

LGBT Detroit Faces Sexual Harassment Lawsuit

A former LGBT Detroit employee has filed a lawsuit alleging the organization's executive director subjected him to years of sexual harassment before firing him in retaliation for reporting the conduct.

Jerron Totten filed the complaint in Wayne County Circuit Court on Nov. 18, alleging Executive Director Nzere Kwabena repeatedly touched him inappropriately throughout his employment from 2019 to this past April. The lawsuit alleges violations of Michigan's Elliott-Larsen Civil Rights Act.

According to the complaint, Kwabena told Totten during his first day that "touching and kissing" were commonplace at the organization. The suit alleges Kwabena subsequently

subjected Totten to unwanted hugging, inappropriate touching and groping. After Totten reported the behavior in early 2025, he was diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder and generalized anxiety disorder. Two weeks after his attorney sent a letter outlining the allegations, LGBT Detroit terminated his employment.

"My client pursued this case because every member of the LGBTQIA+ community deserves a workplace that is safe, respectful and free from sexual harassment," said attorney Tad T. Roumayah of Sommers Schwartz, P.C., who is representing Totten.

In a statement provided to BTL, LGBT Detroit's board executive committee said the organization "categorically denies the allegations" and intends to "fully and vigorously defend the organization and its leadership against these unfounded accusations."



Influencers Urge Political Leaders to Cut the Cringe

On Dec. 6, influential LGBTQ+ digital creators gathered at the Victory Institute's International Leaders Conference in

Washington, D.C., to deliver political leaders a hard truth: Your online presence is embarrassing, and it's costing you elections.

As the nation heads into a contentious election year with legislative majorities at stake nationally and in statehouses, a closing plenary moderated by MSNBC's Jonathan Capehart brought together transgender writer Charlotte Clymer and viral content creator

RaeShanda Lias to tell hundreds of LGBTQ+ elected officials that authenticity beats calculation. "You [need to] say the things others are too scared to say — because that's what leadership means," Clymer said.

The conference made one thing clear: Silence on critical issues like attacks on trans rights isn't just bad politics. It's a liability voters will remember.

Buttigieg Slams Democrats' Identity Politics

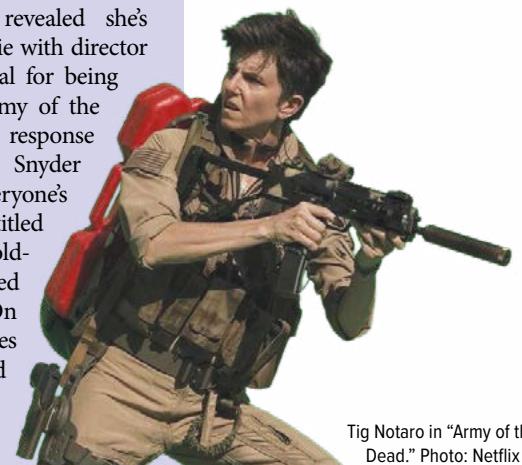
Former U.S. Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg might disappoint some fans with his recent remarks that criticized the Democratic Party at The Texas Tribune Festival, saying it "got sucked in" to focusing on identity rather than everyday issues. "There were expressions in the Democratic Party that suggested all that matters is based on your identity," he said. Buttigieg argued Democrats should focus on healthcare and housing affordability.

Spirit Awards Spotlight LGBTQ+ Stories

Looking for queer entertainment this holiday season? The 2026 Film Independent Spirit Awards nominations offer a solid roadmap. "Peter Hujar's Day," a biopic about the legendary gay photographer, leads film categories with five nominations including best feature and best director for Ira Sachs. On the TV side, BBC's "Mr Loverman," about an older gay man's journey, tied for the most nominations with four nods. Find the full list at filmindependent.org/spirit-awards.

Tig Notaro Writing 'Hot Lesbians' Action Movie

Comedian Tig Notaro revealed she's writing a lesbian action movie with director Zack Snyder after going viral for being "sexy" in his 2021 film "Army of the Dead." The unexpected fan response inspired Notaro to pitch Snyder on a project where "everyone's a hot lesbian." The film, titled "Deviants," takes place in "old-timey days" featuring "closeted deviants," Notaro told "On With Kara Swisher." She jokes the poster tagline might read "Hot Lesbian Action."



Tig Notaro in "Army of the Dead." Photo: Netflix

Federal Workers Face Modern Lavender Scare

A national security expert is calling current Trump administration tactics a second "lavender scare" mirroring the mid-20th-century purge of LGBTQ+ people from government positions. Lucas F. Schleusener, cofounder of Out in National Security, told The Washington Blade the current climate "absolutely constitutes a second lavender scare," citing anti-trans military policies and attacks on employee resource groups.

The comparison gained traction after an FBI employee was fired for displaying a Pride flag. Schleusener noted that right-wing influencer Laura Loomer has "essentially declared herself the new Joe McCarthy," using social media to identify and target federal employees with LGBTQ+-related job titles. Federal employee advocacy groups like GLIFAA have been severely disempowered under current administration policies.

THE TRANS-WELCOMING WORLD OF COSPLAY

How dressing up as anime characters became a haven for gender exploration

BY ANNI ARBOUR

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

Getting ready the morning of a convention has never gotten any less chaotic for C.J. Stiles. They wake up, find whatever source of caffeine they can and begin the long transformation process: skincare, makeup, getting into the cosplay, and finally throwing on their wig and accessories to pull it all together.

"I'll always love the feeling of finally seeing all the pieces come together for the first time," Stiles told me.

That transformation process, though now aided by modern makeup tutorials and Amazon wig vendors, hasn't changed much from its historical antecedents. Even at the earliest gatherings of comic book fans back in the 1960s, convention attendees would wear costumes related to their favorite characters — Batman, the Flash or perhaps a risqué Red Sonja in a chain-mail bikini. It was a way for comics fans to vicariously become their favorite superhero, if just for one day.

The concept spread worldwide, becoming especially popular in Japan by the 1970s. What was a minor aspect of the American comic convention emerged in that country as a distinct fandom of costumed players — cosplayers — expressing themselves as characters drawn from anime, manga and video games. American comic conventions eventually morphed into multimedia events, and cosplaying became such a major draw that cosplayers began holding conventions apart from comic book fans altogether.

Once a niche hobby enjoyed by an enthusiastic few, a 2023 estimate by Konvoy Ventures claims there are currently over 10 million cosplayers worldwide. Within this burgeoning community, a subgroup of transgender cosplayers has emerged, attracted by the freedom of gender expression that cosplay offers.

Stiles, a 28-year-old veteran of the craft from Southeast Michigan, started cosplaying 16 years ago when they first

attended Youmacon 2009 dressed as Yuki Cross from "Vampire Knight."

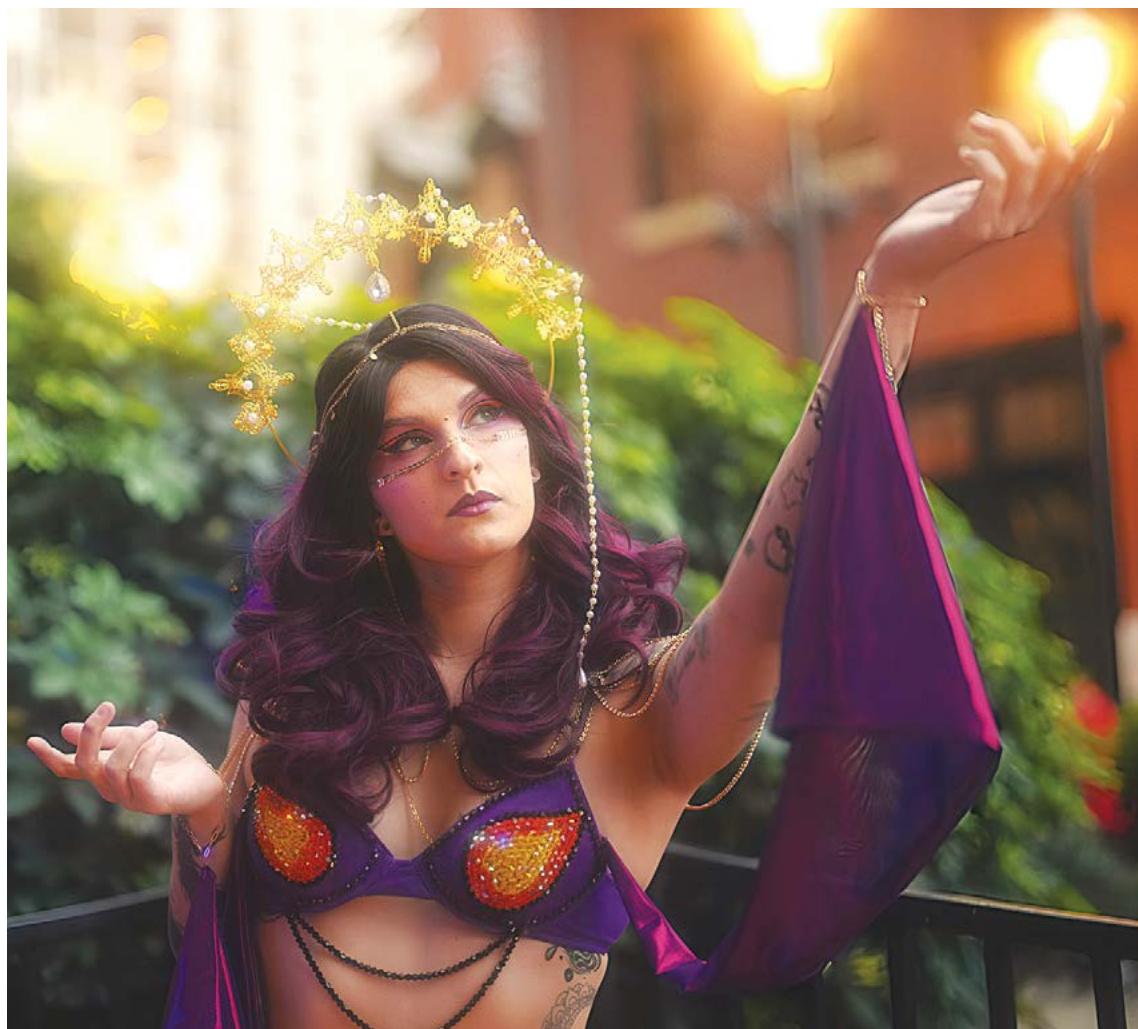
"Cosplay was a pretty easy thing for me to fall into since I had always been into anime and games," they explained. "I grew up watching [Hayao] Miyazaki films with my sister, as well as watching 'Pokémon,' 'Yu-Gi-Oh!' and whatever happened to be on Toonami."

While American media is dominated by gendered characters, Japanese animation and comics feature a surprising amount of indeterminate, gender nonspecific characters — an appealing aspect for Stiles, who defines themselves as nonbinary/gender apathetic. Yet they sometimes cosplay as gendered characters, contrary to their real-life presentation.

"I came out as nonbinary and got a lot more comfortable with just going with the flow and presenting however felt good to me that day," Stiles said. "It never really mattered to me how I'm perceived despite how I present at the time."

For Stiles, cosplay became more than just dressing up as favorite characters. "I actually used cosplay as a way to dress either more masc or more femme since in my day-to-day life I dress fairly toned down," they explained. "Every time I try to dress leaning toward one way or the other it always feels more like a costume, so having actual cosplays was a way to have some form of an outlet."

Vivian, who goes by "Void" in cosplay circles, is another nonbinary Michigander and avid cosplayer who appreciates the opportunities cosplay provides that daily



C.J. Stiles as Arbok. Courtesy photo

life doesn't. "I usually cosplay characters I relate to — aesthetically, philosophically, but also in identity," they said. "Often the characters are canonically nonbinary/agender and present androgynously."

For Void, there's real power in the recognition that comes with embodying a character. "There is a lot of empowerment in being able to embody a character with a certain gender identity or expression and be instantly recognized as that gender," they explained. "It can be refreshing to be seen and acknowledged in a gendered — or nongendered — way that might not be obvious in everyday attire. Cosplay also gives space to play with different or

more exaggerated expressions and feel out more feminine, masculine or otherwise presentations in a safe and playful environment."

Yet another Michigan-based cosplayer, Ted, who started cosplaying in sixth grade, finds that being transgender is mostly a nonissue within the cosplay community. "A lot of time when you cosplay characters opposite from your [birth-assigned] gender you have to almost convince people that you are trans," he noted.

See **Cosplayers**, page 22



Supreme Court Chooses Cruelty Over Evidence in Transgender Passport Case

Latest ruling continues pattern of dismissing transgender humanity



BY JAY KAPLAN

Like so many others, I was heartbroken by the U.S. Supreme Court's decision that allows the Trump administration to enforce its executive order denying transgender and gender non-binary people the opportunity to obtain passports that accurately reflect their authentic lives.

Decided as part of the Court's emergency "shadow" docket, the conservative majority (with no justice identified as the author) provided a four-paragraph opinion that flippantly equated the harm of requiring transgender people to have passports showing their gender assigned at birth to requiring them to list their country at birth. In other words, the Court's conservative majority sees no damage in transgender people being forced to have passports that misgender and misidentify them, but sees irreparable harm to the Trump administration if it is not permitted to target this community yet again for both discrimination and cruelty.

Despite the fact that transgender people, since the George H.W. Bush administration, have been able to correct the gender markers on their passports, this Court does not believe that the Trump administration's actions are arbitrary, capricious, nor reflective of "a bare desire to harm a politically unpopular group."

You have to wonder on what planet this Court's majority resides.

Since January 2025, the Trump administration has issued a number of executive orders targeting the transgender community. Among other things, these orders have been used to deny transgender people the ability to enlist and serve in the military; access to medically necessary and in some cases life-saving treatment for transgender youth 19 and younger; the ability to play sports in accordance with their gender identity; and legal protection against discrimination under federal civil rights laws.

In addition, the current administration has threatened to take federal funding away from medical facilities that offer gender-affirming care to transgender youth. The administration has also threatened medical providers with criminal prosecution for providing such care and has subpoenaed patient records at hospitals providing such care. In addition, the Trump administration has threatened to remove funding to public school districts that support transgender students by recognizing their chosen names and pronouns, permitting them to access restrooms and play sports in accordance with their gender identity.

The Trump administration's goal is to essentially erase the acknowledgment and existence of transgender people and

See Jay Kaplan, page 17

Why Should Trees Get All The Ornaments?

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10th Annual Santa Run Brings Holiday Heat to Downtown Detroit



PHOTOS BY ANDREW POTTER

Detroit, your sexy Santa game is strong!

On Sunday, Dec. 7, the non-profit HALO Detroit celebrated 10 fabulous years of its Santa Run, the one-mile downtown dash where jingle bells aren't the only things bouncing.

Runners, elves, reindeer and scantily-clad snowmen filled Checker Bar and the surrounding streets in a mix of Santa drag,

holiday couture and "strategically layered" athletic wear (and in some cases, next to nothing at all).

The free event benefited the Ruth Ellis Center and The Greening of Detroit. This year, HALO co-founder Jim Lee said they raised about \$7,500. Remarkably, about half of the 300 fundraiser attendees still participated in the run despite the frigid temperatures, proving Detroiters' resilience.

Lee reflected on the celebration: "To quote an attendee, 'I love this

celebration as I can be free and not worry about judgment.' Many LGBTQ+ people feel that daily, and if a fun event allows a space-in-time to be celebratory and worry-free, our community relishes those opportunities."

Prizes rewarded the boldest outfits, fastest dashes and most enthusiastic holiday spirits, but the real magic came from the vibes: joyful, goofy, sexy, generous.

— Chris Azzopardi



their ability to have their gender identity recognized and respected.

Thank goodness for Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson's 12-page dissent, where she details the documented harm transgender people experience when they have a passport that does not accurately reflect both their gender identity and gender presentation.

One of the plaintiffs, AC Goldberg, asserted that he was sexually assaulted by Transportation Security Administration (TSA) officers conducting searches on his body. Another plaintiff, Chastain Anderson,

“It is my hope that this Supreme Court will finally see the humanity of transgender people, and recognize that virtually every aspect of their lives is being attacked by the current administration. ”

attested to being strip-searched by the TSA when traveling with identity documents that didn't reflect her gender expression. Two other transgender plaintiffs were accused of presenting fake identity documents and were forced to out themselves as transgender and non-binary to TSA agents.

To me, the fact that six conservative justices (and let's name them — Chief Justice Roberts, along with Justices Alito, Thomas, Gorsuch, Kavanaugh and Barrett) chose to dismiss the evidence showing how transgender people have been harmed demonstrates the utter failure of these justices to see the humanity of transgender people. That same failure was also reflective in the Court's Skrmetti decision earlier this year, where these same justices upheld the right of states to ban medically necessary care for transgender youth (in this case hormone therapy) to treat their gender dysphoria, while at the same time permitting cisgender youth to access the same medical treatment. It should also be noted that this same Court majority, through the shadow docket, lifted an injunction against the Trump administration's ban on transgender people enlisting or continuing to serve openly in the military. The conservative majority offered no opinion nor explanation of why it did so,

leaving one to speculate that they also did not see any harm to transgender people who have honorably served in the military losing their careers because of who they are.

Is it any wonder that the transgender community and its allies are fearful about this Supreme Court hearing oral arguments on Jan. 13 in two cases (Little v. Hecox and W. Virginia v. BPJ) that address the constitutionality of bans of transgender students playing sports in accordance with their gender identity? Will this Court majority pay attention and give weight to actual facts regarding the participation of transgender girls in school sports and studies regarding competitive advantage? Will they acknowledge the value of transgender students to be able to meaningfully participate in school sports like their cisgender colleagues? Or will they continue to be legally disingenuous in order to reach a result that further marginalizes transgender people?

The Court majority's attitude toward transgender people reminds me of how the Supreme Court once treated gay people.

In the 1986 case Bowers v. Hardwick, the Court upheld the constitutionality of state laws that criminalized same-sex sodomy between consenting adults, even where such sexual behavior occurs in the privacy of one's home. Such laws were often used as a basis to legally justify discrimination against gay and lesbian people in employment, housing, education and public accommodations. Rather than viewing this case as involving a fundamental constitutional right of privacy, the court stated that there was no fundamental right to engage in same-sex sodomy. In doing so, the Court majority viewed gays not as people, but as presumed sexual behaviors.

It wasn't until 2003, in Lawrence v. Texas, that the Court finally struck down these laws as unconstitutional. Another tremendous leap forward in 2015, when the court, in Obergefell v. Hodges, ruled that same-sex couples nationwide have the right to marry, and in doing so recognized that gay and lesbian couples were real people, with children and families, who were negatively impacted by the prohibition on their ability to marry.

It is my hope that this Supreme Court will finally see the humanity of transgender people, and recognize that virtually every aspect of their lives is being attacked by the current administration.

Our federal courts were intended to establish a check and balance on the executive and legislative branches of our government.

How long, I wonder, will the Court's current conservative majority continue to ignore the harms and injustices done to transgender people when they are denied the same dignity and fairness accorded to other citizens?

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‘These Bitches Just Go For It’

Amanda Seyfried and director Paul Feig dive into the camp-soaked meltdowns, queer-minded madness and wildly stylish vision that shaped ‘The Housemaid’



Amanda Seyfried (right) with co-star Sydney Sweeney. Photo: Lionsgate

BY CHRIS AZZOPARDI

Chaos, camp and unrestrained power crash through every melodramatic note — and every broken dish — in “The Housemaid.” In the film, out Dec. 19, Amanda Seyfried — beloved by queer audiences for “Mean Girls,” “Mamma Mia!” and “Jennifer’s Body” — hurls objects, loses fingernails and radiates a deliciously unhinged energy, while director Paul Feig, a Mount Clemens native, clearly revels in each shattered plate and theatrical beat. The result is a film that’s messy, thrilling and gloriously over-the-top. It’s exactly the kind of cinematic joyride queer audiences live for.

Based on the hit book series, the film

opens with Nina (Seyfried) interviewing Millie (Sydney Sweeney) for a housemaid position in her sprawling New York City home. There’s a hot husband who can’t manage a takeout order, a bratty child born into unchecked privilege and... well, plenty more that can’t be said without wandering into spoiler territory. (Some mild spoilers ahead — consider yourself warned.)

Feig — whose work, from “Bridesmaids” to “A Simple Favor,” has long carried an innate queerness simmering beneath glossy surfaces — is known to flip stereotypes and keep audiences deliciously off balance. It’s a reminder of why his films resonate so deeply with LGBTQ+ viewers: extreme characters, sharp humor and the freedom to be messy, complicated and fully human, all celebrated

without apology.

In conversation, Seyfried and Feig dive into the queer-minded sensibilities shaping their work, the psychodrama, the camp-soaked meltdowns and the genre-bending storytelling that keeps viewers laughing, gasping and guessing at every turn. “These bitches just fucking go for it,” Seyfried says — and the on-screen energy proves her right.

Watching Amanda throw things in the kitchen — what did that feel like?

Paul Feig: Greatest day of my life.

Amanda Seyfried: I was struggling with that scene. I was so nervous about it,

because I needed to show all the things. I was afraid. I read the scene in the script and I was like, “Oh, it’s a doozy,” but then after a couple of takes, I was like, “Oh, I can really do anything?”

Feig: You broke some dishes.

A few dishes were broken in this movie.

Feig: Exactly.

Seyfried: And there’s a real moment in there where I lose my nail, and I’m like, the nails are such a thing to put on in real life and for the character, and when I lost it, I was like, “No!” It was really, honestly just life-affirming to be able to be an actor and

get to play like that.

Feig: My favorite line is, "And now my nails are fucked!"

You really do get pretty messy in this movie, Amanda. I've been describing your role as "delicious."

Seyfried: I've been using that to describe how it felt to play her. Because it was definitely a very unique role. I think that there aren't that many roles where people

Feig: Well, I also think she's so deliciously unpredictable in the movie, and that's what's fun. If Nina, for the first hour, was just balls out mean, then the audience is like, "All right, whatever."

Seyfried: Psychological manipulation at its scariest.

There also is the element of camp, of course. Some of it feels very "Real Housewives of New York City."

Seyfried: I think the humor is what gets everybody. It's the sense of humor in it, really infused very potently within the drama, and this psychodrama is so important and elevates the whole thing, and it makes you pee laughing at times when you're like, "Wait, this is weird. This is very abstract," and you almost are confused as to what you're witnessing, and I think that's powerful, for sure.

Paul, you've said that you feel aligned with queerness in spirit and culture. How does that show up in your creative decision-making, especially in a film like this that deals with identity and perception?

Feig: Yeah. I mean, I love things on the extreme, and I like extreme characters, and I also love the idea of taking stereotypes and twisting them on their head. I like to introduce you to a bunch of people, you go, "I know exactly who they are. She's the kooky, sweet housewife, she's the innocent girl, he's the perfect husband," and then make you regret all those judgments that you made.

Seyfried: Yeah. At the end of the day, you just end up questioning your own perception of things, and it just broadens your focus. That's always important. Everything's a little bit of a lesson without it trying to be.

Feig: We hide the pill in the peanut butter, basically.

Seyfried: Yeah. And then, can we just talk about "I Did Something Bad"? It is perfect. I squealed at the end of the movie.

Feig: And thank you, Taylor [Swift], for

See *The Housemaid*, page 24

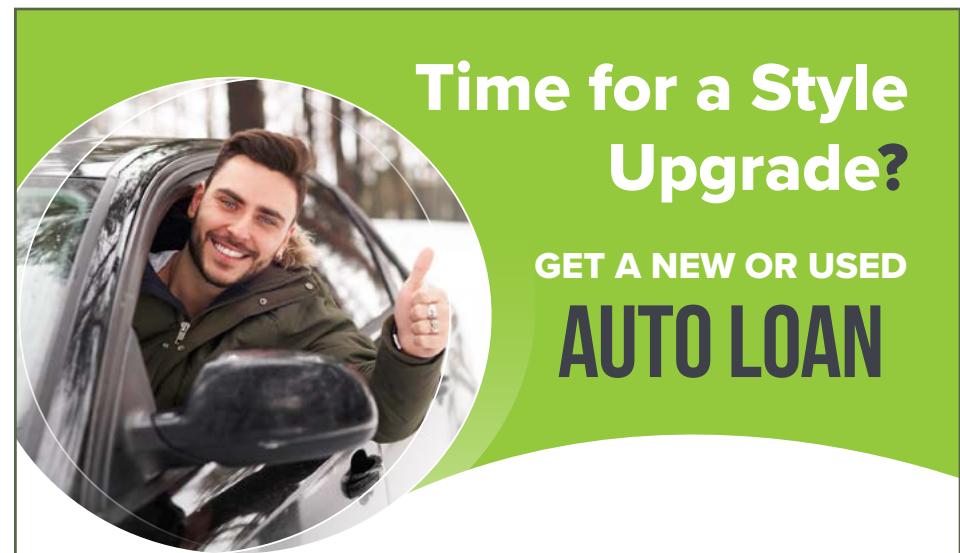
“At the end of the day, you just end up questioning your own perception of things, and it just broadens your focus. That's always important. Everything's a little bit of a lesson without it trying to be. ”

— Amanda Seyfried

are really broken, where [an actor is] performing a crazy person. It just doesn't exist. It is a very niche story, I believe, even though it's a thriller. Paul, all he does is bend genres.

I was thinking of something you once said while I watched this that became a cultural moment. You joked that, "I exist to make the gays happy," so I wanted to ask you, what about "The Housemaid" do you think helps prove that existence?

Seyfried: I said that? I think I was being ironic. But, again, I think it's these bitches just fucking going for it. To own the power and see this kind of eruption of compassion between these women and the storytelling style with which everything is being told, it's the most fun, full-circle experience.



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For more queer-owned businesses, visit notsorrygoods.com, The Detroit Regional LGBT Chamber of Commerce at detroitlgbtchamber.com and pridesource.com.

Shop Local, Shop Queer This Holiday Season

From coffee roasters to fashion designers, Michigan's LGBTQ+ entrepreneurs are building community spaces worth celebrating

BY SARAH BRICKER HUNT

This holiday season, your shopping list can do more than check off gifts — it can support thriving LGBTQ+ entrepreneurs building community spaces across Michigan. From Dexter to Detroit, queer-owned coffee roasters, boutiques and gift shops are creating the kind of visible representation that transforms small towns and strengthens the broader community.

Building visibility in Dexter

For Jess Harmon, managing director of Mighty Good Coffee in Dexter, that visibility means everything. After 16 years in the coffee industry and a stint in Atlanta, Harmon returned to Michigan with a mission to create the kind of space they wished existed when they were growing up in nearby Hamburg.

"Growing up around here, I didn't have visibly queer people to look to," Harmon told BTL. "I went to Ann Arbor for that."

Now, as Harmon builds Mighty Good Coffee's new roastery in Dexter — with a cafe called Notable opening by Valentine's Day — they're providing exactly that kind of visibility in a smaller community. Two of their three employees identify as queer, and the impact of that representation isn't lost on them.

"It would have meant a lot to little me to wander into a coffee shop and be like, 'Oh, there's a butch,'" Harmon said. "I think showing up and being in this space means a lot to the smaller queer community that doesn't necessarily have the same representation in smaller towns like this."

Mighty Good Coffee shares its campus with Jolly Pumpkin Dexter, creating what Harmon describes as a combined space with shared values. The roastery is already operational, with beans available for purchase online, making it a perfect holiday gift for the coffee lover on your list.

A decade of Not Sorry Goods

In Ferndale, Jessica Minnick and her business partner Dy-Min Johnson are celebrating a decade with Not Sorry Goods, the woman-, Black- and Latinx-owned sustainable fashion brand they built from a funny T-shirt idea that came up after a kickboxing class. Though they closed their brick-and-mortar store this summer, Not Sorry Goods is currently operating a shop at Detroit's Downtown Holiday Market (60 Cadillac Square) through the first week of January and will continue



Not Sorry Goods pop-up store at the Detroit Downtown Holiday Markets. Courtesy photo

with an online presence, pop-ups and custom embroidery services from their Ferndale studio.

For Minnick, supporting queer businesses isn't just good practice — it's essential, especially now.

"It's imperative this year just with all of the legislation being passed around the country," Minnick said. "Luckily we live in a state where we're protected, but there's still a lot of discrimination. Queer joy — just being outwardly happy in yourself and existing — is a form of resistance right now."

That philosophy extends beyond Not Sorry Goods' signature "never apologize for being yourself" message. Minnick makes it a point to support queer artists and businesses in her own life, from her hair stylist to nearly every touchpoint.

"It is a conscious decision every day to shop with folks in your community," she said. "It does make a huge difference, and not only just supporting that person, but they're supporting me, and having that community and being able to just be in a safe space."

The Downtown Holiday Market, where Not Sorry Goods

is currently located, features 15 local businesses in wooden shops with glass windows and heating, creating what Minnick describes as an experience akin to a German Christmas market. The market, which runs Wednesday through Sunday through Jan. 4, is located near the ice skating rink and holiday tree in downtown Detroit.

The Downtown Detroit Markets are supported by the Gilbert Family Foundation in partnership with Bedrock and TechTown Detroit, providing not just retail space but also training, mentorship and financial support for local entrepreneurs. Laura Grannemann, executive director of the Gilbert Family Foundation, said the markets are “designed to be welcoming public spaces that bring people together and showcase local talent” while “giving BIPOC- and women-owned businesses visibility they often lack.”

Not Sorry Goods’ snowflake-themed shop showcases their upcycled clothing and designs — a fitting choice, as Minnick says snowflakes represent the brand’s core message about individuality. Among their bestsellers are the “never apologize for being yourself” shirts and Dan Campbell Fan Club hats created by Cottage LvL Chaos, another local queer artist.

The Dan Campbell gear speaks to something bigger in Detroit right now. The Lions coach has become a symbol of hope and resilience for the city, and seeing that fandom celebrated through queer-created merchandise matters. “Everyone loves our football coach and he’s just been a great beacon of hope for our team and a good champion for the city,” Minnick said.

The “never apologize” message resonates just as broadly. “It doesn’t matter if you’re young, if you’re old, your race, your



Jess Harmon. Courtesy photo

sexuality, your religion. It’s a good reminder that we are all connected.”

Also at the Downtown Holiday Market is Bespoke by Feldman, a queer-supportive business specializing in handmade leather goods. Owner Sarah Feldman creates lightweight leather earrings and accessories — all made in Detroit — that have become popular gift items.

What makes these businesses particularly special is how they support one another. Not Sorry Goods hosts work from more than 25 local artists in their markets and collaborates with other queer creators. This unified spirit — lifting each other up, sharing spaces and cross-promoting — is at the heart of the market.

See **Holiday Shopping**, page 26



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Dogged Support

Puzzle can be found on page 25

↳ Cosplayers

Continued from page 14

But not all convention attendees are equally nonjudgmental. Ted has experienced what he calls “crossplaying” — a term that evolved from combining “crossdressing” with “cosplay” — in ways that have put him in uncomfortable and even dangerous situations.

“I have been put into a plethora of not great experiences while crossplaying,” Ted said. “A lot of cis straight men will see a fem presenting cosplayer and assume I’m a cis woman and hit on me, but the second I speak and they

realize I am male, they will get mad. I’ve been threatened with violence multiple times and a lot [of the] time con staff is not helpful.”

Still, cosplayers are generally more open-minded compared to the general populace with all its biases and prejudices intact. The cosplaying community mostly consists of a younger cohort of Gen Zers and millennials who willingly share makeup and hairstyling tips with one another, regardless of gender.

The growth of cosplaying has created a market for more and more conventions and events. To that end, Stiles became an official content partner of Glotaku, a Detroit-area anime rave series.

“Overall in my journey, I think it became a stepping stone for learning new tips and tricks, figuring out binding techniques, shapewear and even just how to carry myself differently.”

— C.J. Stiles

For Stiles, one of the attractions was the series’ inclusiveness.

“They are an extremely inclusive

group that works to uplift the Black nerd and cosplay communities as well as the LGBTQ+ community,”

Stiles said. “They have featured performances from local drag artists and members of the Metro Detroit-based Haus of Justice.”

Trans cosplayers like Stiles, Void and Ted have found in this community a euphoric freedom of gender expression, experimentation and affirmation in ways rarely offered in other aspects of life.

“Overall in my journey, I think it became a stepping stone for learning new tips and tricks, figuring out binding techniques, shapewear and even just how to carry myself differently,” Stiles reflected. “Having that opportunity in a more welcoming environment helped with coming out of my shell.”



Ted as Kafka. Courtesy photo



Void as Leyla. Courtesy photo

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1 The Housemaid

Continued from page 19

letting us use it, because Taylor will not let you use something if she doesn't like what she sees.

Seyfried: Oh god, I was so excited. I do think we could turn it into a dance party. I do feel like "The Housemaid" should have those screenings where there's a disco light that comes down because it makes you so happy. It makes you feel really empowered, really satisfied and really kind of floating, because you've had this whole experience and now you've got Taylor Swift.

By the end of the movie — and spoiler alert for those who don't know the story — my hope is that Millie and Nina have decided that men were more trouble than they're worth, and that they could just have their lesbian exit.

Seyfried: To be continued. Here's the thing: In the next book, Millie becomes very tight with Enzo, and they're a couple, and so maybe the cool twist that we give the second "Housemaid" [movie] is that we're on the rocks and we live together. Whether we're lesbians or not, we're definitely companions and we live together with [Nina's daughter] Cece.

There could be a very modern fluidity to all of it.

Seyfried: Yes. I mean, that's the thing: "The Housemaid 2" can't be anything, but it can be enhanced, which is what Paul did with this movie. Brought it to life in a new way. Nailed it.

Feig: You can't lose with a cast like this.

What has the LGBTQ+ community

taught you over the years about yourself, your work and how your characters land with audiences?

Seyfried: I guess the more truthful you are, the more grounded you are as a character, the more of an effect you have on people and audiences, and especially just to be true to who you are is everything. It's freedom and my own acceptance of my own self-acceptance.

There are a lot of characters that I've played that I know have had an incredible effect on the queer community, especially with "Mamma Mia!" and "Mean Girls" and I feel like it's a gift to have been able to do those, and it is tenfold when I'm just accepted as an artist who... I don't know. I just feel like the world is safer. I'm a straight fucking average female, but I can be anything, because I feel like I'm safe in this community.

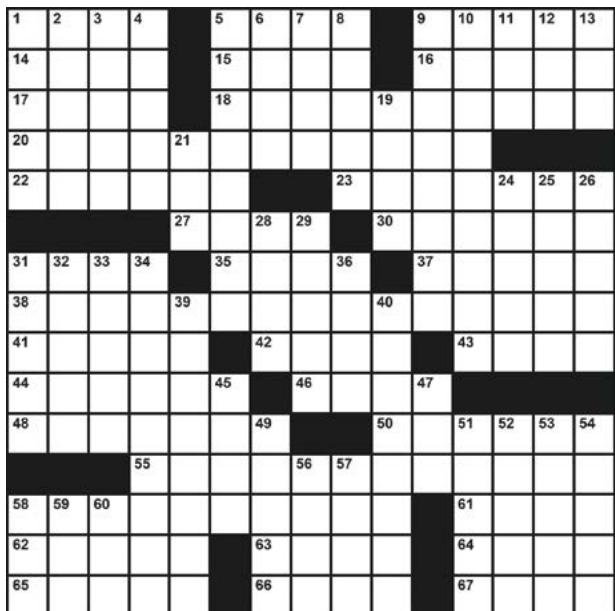
Feig: Yeah, I mean, my life is so much richer because of the LGBTQ+ community. The majority of my friends are gay. They are the most wonderful people. They've made my wife and I's life so much richer. I get emotional about it, because everything I do, I pass by my friends to see how it plays with them, and everyone's so open and accepting.

Seyfried: It's celebratory.

Feig: Yeah. That's why I donate a lot of money and get very wrapped up in the causes — the whole community, from the trans community through the gay community — just because everybody's so under attack right now, and I fucking hate bullies more than life itself, and anybody who wants to mess with the LGBTQ+ community will have to go through me, because I just do not like that kind of judgment on anybody. Everybody should be themselves and everybody should be happy, and then fuck anybody who tells you [that you can't be].



Amanda Seyfried and Paul Feig on the set of "The Housemaid." Photo: Lionsgate



Dogged Support

Across

- 1 Your first mate, and others
- 5 Michelangelo's David, once
- 9 Glinda was the good one of the North
- 14 "Hi" to Lorca
- 15 Part of a U.
- 16 1300 hrs., to Col. Cammer-

- meyer
- 17 "Firebird" composer Stravinsky
- 18 2008 movie comedy with Jane Lynch
- 20 Coming-out installment of "Ellen," with "The"
- 22 Playground piece for a couple
- 23 Fez features
- 27 Places for pints
- 30 Highest point
- 31 Swimmer you can eat
- 35 Brazilian soccer great

Down

- 1 Chocolate pieces
- 2 Errol Flynn, for one
- 3 Become wife and wife on the fly
- 4 Gets bent out of shape
- 5 "Oops!" evokers
- 6 Cloverleaf part
- 7 "___ want is a room somewhere..."
- 8 Like Mary
- 9 More charmingly rural
- 10 Like Juliet, at the end of the

- play
- 38 She sang at the end of 20-Across
- 41 Legal conclusion beginning
- 42 Capable of performing
- 43 Robert of "The Defenders"
- 44 Head cover
- 46 New Mexico art colony
- 48 Ask on bended knee
- 50 Cannot bear
- 55 She played a therapist in 20-Across
- 58 Walking, for the Toronto Tempo
- 61 It's sometimes a drag
- 62 Writer Wystan Hugh
- 63 Isle near Corsica
- 64 Kahlo's eight
- 65 Series with a soccer mom/drug dealer
- 66 Gay-dog owner of "South Park"
- 67 James Baldwin's The Evidence of Things Not ___

See p. 21 for answers



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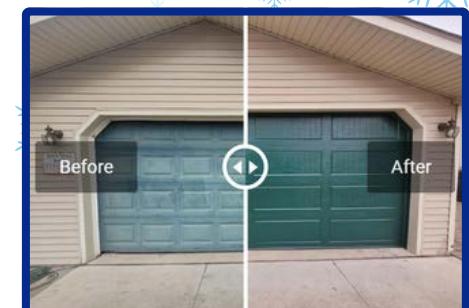
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1 Holiday Shopping

Continued from page 21

For even more queer-owned and affirming shopping options, Not Sorry Goods maintains a comprehensive "Local Love" resource page that showcases indie businesses across the region.

Where else to shop queer

The list of queer-owned businesses across Southeast Michigan continues to grow. In Detroit, options include Avalon International Breads with multiple locations, Good Cakes and Bakes on Livernois Avenue, JP Makes and Bakes on Woodward Avenue and Detroit Vegan Soul on Grand River Avenue. Hazel Perk Cafe in Hazel Park hosts community events including drag bingo and LGBTQ+ social meet-ups. Shoppers can find Public Thrift, a worker-owned queer, woman and Black-owned thrift store in Hamtramck, or browse Well Done Goods for Detroit manhole print apparel.

Ann Arbor offers Vertex Coffee Roasters with locations in both Ann Arbor and Ypsilanti, the vegetarian restaurant Seva, long-time queer-affirming dance club Necto, and Uplift, an LGBTQ+ bar that opened in 2024 featuring drag shows and community events. The North Star Lounge hosts LGBTQ+ nights on Thursdays with open mics, drag shows and live music.

In Ferndale, in addition to Not Sorry Goods' studio, shoppers can visit LGBTQ+ owned Giorgio Conti Jewelers on Woodward Avenue and the Rust Belt Market, which features many stalls operated by queer owners and creators and a wide range of queer-affirming products to round out your gift list.

For those specifically seeking trans-supportive shopping options, BTL columnist

Anni Arbour recently highlighted resources including the Transanta gift registry for trans youth, trans-friendly bookstores like Sidetrack Bookshop in Royal Oak and Vault of Midnight's locations across the state, and trans-created works from artists like Julia Kaye and Ann Arbor's own Carta Monir. Read the full column at pridesource.com.



Dan Campbell Fan Club gear at Not Sorry Goods. Courtesy photo

Whether you're shopping for coffee beans from a Dexter roastery, upcycled fashion from a downtown Detroit holiday market or handmade leather goods (or just grabbing a coffee from a queer coffeeshop as you're out and about this season), each purchase supports entrepreneurs who are building more than businesses — they're creating visible, affirming spaces where the next generation of LGBTQ+ Michiganders can see themselves reflected.

"Anyone can come shop here and we just want to make sure that you're happy and comfortable and that we've helped you bring out the best version of you," Minnick said. "And it's so important right now."

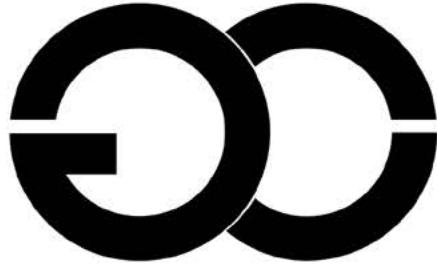
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