

MICHIGAN'S LGBTQ+ NEWS SOURCE SINCE 1993

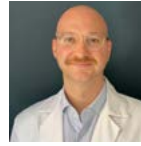
# Between the Lines™

*Plus: Must-follow influencers, 'Heated Rivalry' & a comedian for dark times*

## The Influencer Issue

West Michigan native Zaya Perysian — a TikTok star with 5 million followers — is suing Trump over her passport's gender marker

By Chris Azzopardi



# Advice to Be Well

From Dr. Mark Bornstein and Dr. Paul Benson



## Hi Doctor. My adolescent child just told me that they are trans. I am unsure how to react. What do I do?

I am so glad that you are being thoughtful about your reactions as this is an important time in your child's life. This first and most crucial thing you can do, is be affirmative! While I understand this can be jarring, surprising or even confusing for you, it is important to remember that the emotions your child is currently going through are likely more meaningful and significant. I also want to assure you that it will be okay and that this is quite common. You are not alone.

Many times, when a child comes out to their parents they will want to start transitioning. It is often misunderstood that transitioning means hormone replacement therapy (HRT) and surgeries. While HRT and surgeries are definitely part of transitioning, it is not the only way to transition. It is up to your child to determine what constitutes transitioning for them. Perhaps coming out as trans is the start of their transition or maybe dressing like their gender around the house is their transition. I cannot stress enough, that there is more to being trans than just hormones and surgeries.

That being said, it is important to talk

about HRT as I assure you it is on your child's mind and can be the most affirming part to their transition. I would encourage you to bring your child in for an office visit where I can talk to the whole family together and to your child alone. It will be helpful to discuss as a group to set expectations going forward. We also recommend coming in for an office visit to discuss different resources that are available to you and your child. There are support groups for both you and your child to attend that we should talk about. While we do not require your child to see a therapist prior to transitioning, we do strongly recommend having your child see a therapist to talk to during this long journey ahead. Networking with other parents facing the same issues as you are can also be good. Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) is a great support group that meets monthly with parents and their children. There are chapters in many cities and a local one for you can be found in a Google search.

In summary, please be patient and affirmative with your child. While I do not want to disregard the feelings you must be going through, the step that your child just took by coming out was likely the most difficult thing

they have had to do in their life thus far. This is a long journey that we will all going through together. Remember, our goals are identical - to provide your child the best environment to thrive.

## I just found out that I have HIV. I have never been on therapy. My friend recommended the injectable medication Cabenuva. My doctor says that I cannot use this medication at the present time. My friend disagrees. What do you think?

Your doctor is correct. Cabenuva is an injectable medication that requires injections either once a month or every two months depending on preferences. It is only approved for patients already on treatment with an undetected level of HIV in their blood for at least 6 months. That is the only current indication because that is how it was studied in clinical trials before becoming commercially available. I cannot comment or would I prescribe it in patients new to therapy. It is also not indicated for persons with HIV medication resistance or history of previous HIV medication failure. My recommendation would be to take oral medications without

missing any doses and if it is still desired consider Cabenuva after 6 months of successful therapy. Many people like the injectable form of therapy. Others don't. Taking medication everyday is a constant reminder that you are living with HIV and have to remember to take your medications every day. Also, with oral medications there is a greater risk of people you don't want to know your status finding your medications by accident. Other people, such as many former IV drug users don't like injections.

The great thing is that there is now a choice. The Be Well Medical Center does have some clinical trials available with injectable medications.

Since 1980 Dr. Paul Benson's Be Well Medical Center has been an inclusive medical center celebrating diversity. Do you have a health related question for Dr. Paul Benson and Dr. Mark Bornstein? Submit your questions to [bewelladvice@pridesource.com](mailto:bewelladvice@pridesource.com). This article is a sponsored editorial produced in collaboration with Be Well Medical Center. Between The Lines's journalism is made possible with the support and partnership of advertisers like Be Well. Learn more about Be Well from their ad below.



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- 4 5 Queer Things You Can Do Right Now-ish
- 6 Too Visible to Erase: TikTok Star Zaya Perysian Is Suing Trump Over Her Passport's Gender Marker
- 7 When Home Becomes a Target: The Ringwald's 'Somewhere' Echoes 1959 Displacement in an Era of ICE Raids
- 8 The Relentless Drive Behind LGBTQ+ Tech Innovation in Ann Arbor (Sponsored)
- 10 Comedian Jessica Kirson's Long Road to the Spotlight Finally Pays Off
- 12 Creep of the Week: Greater Than Is Equal To Trashing Queer Families
- 13 The Scroll: Statement from Pride Source Media Group on Recent Journalist Arrests
- 14 10 Influencers Shaping the Political Zeitgeist in 2026
- 16 What Four Midwest Teens Really Think About 'Heated Rivalry'
- 18 From Fear to Freedom: Da Brat and Wife Judy on Living Openly as a Black Queer Family

Page 6



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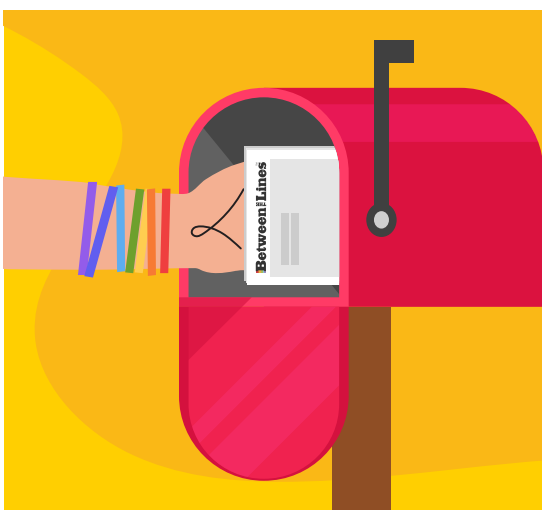
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# 5 Queer Things You Can Do Right Now-ish

BY KELLI DUNHAM

February brings plenty of reasons to leave the house (or at least to put on real pants): comedy that knows how to wink, art that refuses to behave, drag that doubles as community care and a reminder that showing up for yourself is very much a radical act. Whether you're celebrating Valentine's Day with someone special or it's just yourself and a good coat, here are five ways to reconnect with joy right now.



Stevie Phoenix. Photo: Instagram / @stevie\_phoenix

## Laugh In Heels at Stevie's Comedy Cabaret

Stevie's Comedy Cabaret is exactly what it sounds like and a bit more: a glorious variety show where comedy refuses to stay in one lane. Expect improv, stand-up, musical parody, drag, burlesque, audience games and whatever delightful chaos happens when talented people from three counties share one stage. Organized by Stevie Phoenix (the delightfully self-described "Drag King, AuDHDer, trans icon, and everyone's dad"), the lineup is stacked with performers who know how to be silly, sharp and surprising all at once, including Belladonna Marz, Aqua Tofana, Amie Burke and Randy Randazzo.

Feb. 8, 6 p.m., *Ghost Light* (2314 Caniff St., Hamtramck). [bit.ly/comedycabaretGL](https://bit.ly/comedycabaretGL).



Dirty Show performer Faggedy Randy. Courtesy photo

## Explore Erotic Art at the Dirty Show

What began as a scrappy, renegade art show above an auto body shop has grown into North America's largest and longest-running erotic art exhibition all the while still retaining its queer-hearted origins. Now in its 26th year, the Dirty Show features more than 350 works by over 200 artists across every imaginable medium, plus live burlesque, fetish and variety performances that turn the whole experience into something closer to a carnival of desire. This is art that celebrates bodies, challenges taboos and insists that pleasure and politics can absolutely share the same room. Make sure to check all the dates and times for the very hot, very dirty options.

Feb. 13–21, multiple entry times starting at 7 p.m., *Russell Exhibition Center* (1600 Clay St., Detroit). [dirtydetroit.com](https://dirtydetroit.com).



Matteo Lane. Courtesy photo

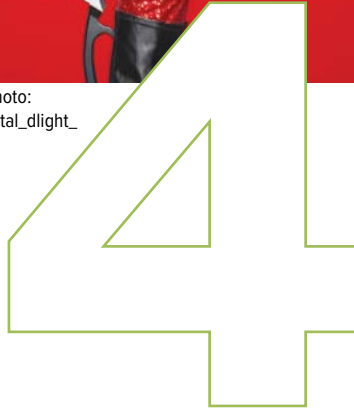
## Get Your Life Right with Matteo Lane

If you need a night of gloriously unfiltered queer comedy served with opera vocals and Italian hand gestures, Matteo Lane's "We Gotta Catch Up!" tour is calling your name. Lane's stand-up is deliciously shameless — equal parts smart observations about gay life, absurd storytelling and the kind of unabashed horniness that'll have you clutching your sides. Did we mention he's a classically trained opera singer who paints and speaks five languages? Because of course he is. This multitasking comedy force doesn't hold back, whether he's dissecting dating disasters or dropping into a six-octave vocal run mid-bit.

Feb. 13, 6:30 p.m., *Masonic Jack White Theatre* (500 Temple St., Detroit), ages 16 and older. [matteolanecomedy.com](https://matteolanecomedy.com).



Crystal d'Light. Photo: Instagram / @crystal\_dlight\_



## Celebrate Love at the Lansing Pride Drag Show Fundraiser

Valentine's Day doesn't have to mean overpriced dinners and forced romance. This Lansing Pride drag fundraiser offers a much better option: fierce performances, joyful community and the knowledge that your ticket supports local LGBTQ+ work. Hosted by Crystal d'Light, the show features a lineup that understands drag as both art form and love language, with performances by Cita Rhode, Salinity Manifesto, utha Auroara Manifesto, Prince Marsallis, Oliver Woodstock, Thon Zillennial and music by DatGuyBlue.

Whether you're coming with a date, a group of friends or your own beautiful single self, this is a reminder that queer joy has always been a collective project.

Feb. 14, 7 p.m., Sir Pizza Old Town Pub (201 E. César E. Chávez Ave., Lansing). [bit.ly/lansingpridedragfeb](http://bit.ly/lansingpridedragfeb).

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## Date Night, Population 1

So here's the thing. It's not that easy to be a human on the planet these days; it's even harder to be a queer or trans person on the planet. But since we're all here, let's just assume here is where we're supposed to be. And since we're supposed to be here, let's give ourselves a high five for any act of kindness we conjured up today.

Did you take extra time to play with your cat? Remember to text your Aunt Tracy to remind her you're glad she's on the planet? Did you share your kombucha mother with someone in need of more queer fermentation in their life? Pat yourself on the back and watch something fun on a tiny screen. Self-love can be mighty!

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# Too Visible to Erase



Zaya Perysian. Courtesy photo

## West Michigan native Zaya Perysian — a TikTok star with 5 million followers — is suing Trump over her passport's gender marker

**BY CHRIS AZZOPARDI**

At 23, Zaya Perysian has brand deals, 5 million TikTok followers and an active lawsuit against the president of the United States. The West

Michigan native is suing the Trump administration over her passport's gender marker — a fight that grew out of the same TikTok presence where she shares unfiltered transition updates, biting political commentary

and everyday moments, from surgery recovery to silk presses at Supercuts.

That mix of Gen Z candor, humor and political clarity didn't come from nowhere. Perysian grew up on a dirt road in Lowell, outside Grand Rapids,

surrounded by orchards, railroad tracks and family — a world that now feels far removed from her life in Los Angeles, where she lives with her cats and films much of her content.

But even as her career and platform have carried her 2,000 miles west, Perysian hasn't forgotten the place that shaped her. "I really had the West Michigan experience, for real," she says over Zoom, recalling a childhood spent on an orchard with her grandmother next door and her best friends as neighbors.

Growing up in a conservative small town, Perysian always knew she wanted to be in the public eye. At 12, she was already making videos on Vine, then Musical.ly, diving headfirst into "this whole online social sphere" that would eventually become both her lifeline and her livelihood.

But knowing she wanted visibility and being able to live authentically? Two completely different things.

"I always knew in my head, but, you know, it was West Michigan, in a very conservative little town," she explains, noting how her exploration of queerness at a young age was either misunderstood or unaccepted. "Most people I was friends with did not understand that type of stuff. My dad was not supportive, so I suppressed it until I knew I would have full control over it myself."

As a teenager, she came out as gay — a bridge identity that felt safer, more digestible to her community. "I still got to express myself in different ways," she says of those high school years. "Lots of people hated it, but lots of people didn't. I had a pretty good group of friends, so that's why I was able to exist comfortably like that for about four years before it just became too much."

When she turned 18, the pandemic shut down life as we knew it. With everything changing around her, Perysian decided to make some major changes of her own.

"High school is over with. I don't have to worry about the judgment from my peers," she remembers thinking. "Plus, it was Covid when I graduated. The world was shut down,

and I was like, this is the perfect time. I'm isolated, and I can just do it in peace."

### Building community through visibility

The silly after-school videos came first. She laughs thinking of how, in her first one, she was "probably lip-syncing to some song." It was only after Perysian began sharing her transition on TikTok that she saw the true impact she could have. The response was immediate and overwhelming, encouraging her to open this window into her life even wider.

"I got so many messages and so many DMs from just complete strangers who saw themselves in me," she says. "[They] completely resonated with the fact that we're just people, and this is real and we exist."

On TikTok, she's been candid about everything from getting bottom surgery ("I don't have to fucking tuck anymore!") to vocally questioning the mental state of "Trans for Trump" people. One of her most-watched videos, with nearly a half million views, is called "Super Cuts Silk Press," and it's exactly what you think it is: Perysian goes to a Supercuts and gets her hair straightened, taking viewers through the very dramatic process of getting a silk press.

Those messages and lived authenticity pulled followers even deeper into her life as a trans person navigating an uncertain world. "So many people were just so thankful to have a visual representation of what it's like," she explains. "That's when I first started to realize it, that's why I kept making all my videos, documenting every part of my transition."

Then the brand deals started rolling in — her first real sign that this could be more than a hobby. "I was like, wait, I don't have to just do

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See **Zaya**, page 20

# When Home Becomes a Target

The Ringwald's 'Somewhere' echoes 1959 displacement in an era of ICE raids

BY SARAH BRICKER HUNT

In 1959, a thriving Puerto Rican neighborhood in New York City's San Juan Hill faced demolition to make way for Lincoln Center. The residents were given no choice, their belongings sometimes lost in buildings torn down before they could retrieve them. Fast forward to today, when similar echoes reverberate as the Department of Homeland Security deploys armed agents to family neighborhoods in the name of immigration enforcement, and families across the country face the threat of being uprooted and separated. Both stories share a haunting thread: communities targeted by government force, families displaced or destroyed and neighborhoods gripped by fear.

This is the moment when The Ringwald Theatre brings Matthew López's "Somewhere" to Ferndale for its Michigan premiere, a play about a Puerto Rican family navigating loss and hope in the wake of the San Juan Hill displacement. For actor Latress London, who plays eldest son Alejandro, the parallels aren't abstract. He lives near Detroit's Mexicantown, where the vibrant street life has visibly contracted under the shadow of immigration enforcement.

"Before all this, you could go into Mexicantown, especially, in the summer, and people would be walking, shopping at restaurants, eating and outside playing," London says. "Now, it's quieter. Kids aren't outside playing, and it's really sad because people are afraid. Just imagine being afraid to go out and get the mail. That is insane."

London, 37, grew up singing and dancing, but after one show at age 19, he stepped away from performing entirely. For nearly two decades, theater became something he'd done briefly in his past. The reason was simple: His family needed him. Born to a single mother who worked tirelessly to keep her three children safe and provided for, London set aside his own Broadway aspirations to help support his family.

"She could have been a completely different parent and not cared and we could have ended up in the system



From left to right: Latress London, Ysa Velez, Alexis Morales and Airia Ramirez-Blair. Courtesy photo

or out on the streets," he says. "But because she worked so hard to keep us under a roof, I want to, in a sense, repay her and make her proud."

It wasn't until last year that London auditioned for a show at Stagecrafters Community Theatre and booked his first role as an adult.

It's a story that maps directly onto Alejandro's journey in "Somewhere." The character shoulders his family's survival while his mother dreams of her children on Broadway, even as their neighborhood crumbles around them. "Once I really got to read Alejandro, I realized he and I are the same," London says. "I stopped performing because I had to get a job and help with family stuff. But I always wanted to go off to New York and try it on Broadway."

Alejandro voices what London has felt with lines like, "There's just not time in the day. There's not enough money in the can. It feels selfish pursuing my dreams." It's a sentiment that resonates across generations, particularly for communities facing

economic precarity and external threats to their existence.

Director Jay Kaplan has waited 15 years to stage this play, eight of those years waiting for the script to be published and rights to become available. He was fascinated "by the idea of incorporating the musical 'West Side Story' into the hopes and dreams of these family members, who are trying to escape the limitations placed on them by society and economics," Kaplan says. "I loved the fact that the characters dance when they can no longer express themselves in words."

Playwright Matthew López, an openly gay writer who won the Pulitzer Prize for "The Inheritance," has a personal connection to "West Side Story" — his father and aunt were extras in the 1961 film as children. After a cancelled production at Stagecrafters due to difficulty casting Latino actors (the playwright requires authentic representation), Kaplan organized a staged reading at Affirmations last

July. The response was so enthusiastic that The Ringwald stepped in for this full production, the first in Michigan.

"There's one word that they keep saying in the entire show. It's the word 'hope,'" London explains. "And you want to do well because you want to kind of give people hope that everything is going to be OK, even though it's a really, really crappy time right now."

For London, performing "Somewhere" carries particular weight given the current climate. He identifies as Black and Puerto Rican, and the fear he describes in Mexicantown is not theoretical. "I was born here, but [ICE] could stop me," he says. "It's always a fear. It's very nerve-wracking. You always are looking over your shoulder and it's not a way for someone to have to live."

Black Latino culture "don't really get a lot of representation and the representation they do get, it seems to be very negative for some reason," London says. Through Alejandro, London hopes to show audiences

"not only are they just regular families as well, but they also have their own traditions and their own way of doing things."

London's mother Kimberly will be in the audience, as she always is. "She's always loved watching me do shows," he says, his voice catching. "She's always crying after and she's just always so proud and so happy."

In 1959, New York City urban planner Robert Moses demolished San Juan Hill to build Lincoln Center as a temple to high art. In 2026, communities across America watch their neighbors disappear into federal custody or live in fear of stepping outside. "Somewhere" holds space for both moments, reminding us that art isn't separate from survival. Sometimes it's how we survive.

Read more at [pridesource.com](https://pridesource.com). "Somewhere" runs Feb. 6-22 at The Ringwald Theatre inside Affirmations Community Center in Ferndale. Find showtimes and tickets at [theringwald.com](https://theringwald.com).

# The Relentless Drive Behind LGBTQ+ Tech Innovation in Ann Arbor

How three entrepreneurs and their SPARK partnerships are reshaping Michigan's tech landscape

BY SARAH BRICKER HUNT

*Ann Arbor SPARK supports entrepreneurs and startups throughout Washtenaw County with mentorship, funding and accelerator programs. This is part four of our LGBTQ+ Tech Innovator Series, highlighting diverse entrepreneurs shaping Michigan's tech future.*

*Since November, we've featured Mark Thiesmeyer Hook of Align Athlete, Max Morefield of KISS app, and Sierra Lambert of Gig-L. This final installment explores what drives these founders and how SPARK's partnership model helps them overcome barriers unique to underrepresented entrepreneurs. Video interviews with all three entrepreneurs are available at [pridesource.com](https://pridesource.com).*



Max Morefield (KISS App), Sierra Lambert (Gig-L) and Mark Thiesmeyer Hook (Align Athlete) speaking with BTL on camera about their entrepreneurial efforts.

When Kristine Nash-Wong talks about the LGBTQ+ entrepreneurs she works with at Ann Arbor SPARK, her energy is palpable. As the director of entrepreneurial services – SPARK East, she's the account lead for all three founders featured in this series, and she sees something special in them.

"They're phenomenal entrepreneurs," Nash-Wong said. "They each have that unique relentless trait that makes an entrepreneur successful. They're tenacious and they follow up and they keep going, and individually, they're all incredibly impressive."

That combination of drive and SPARK's support system has helped the three business leaders transform personal experiences into innovative businesses addressing real needs in their communities.

## Bridging the gap between idea and reality

For all three founders, the

distance between having an idea and building a business felt overwhelming at first.

"When I had the idea for KISS, you go from idea to creating a whole business, and how you do that, there's so many steps that are involved and there's so much to do, and there's so many gaps from where you are from idea to bringing something to fruition," Morefield told BTL in a video interview.

Thiesmeyer Hook encountered similar challenges. "It can be exciting as you're coming up with a concept, and every day you run into a road bump or a roadblock where you're like, I don't know how to approach this," he noted.

The roadblocks were specific and daunting. Thiesmeyer Hook needed to understand intellectual property protection for his physical product. "Anyone who's developing

a physical product has to think about, well, do I do a patent on this device so that it can't be readily copied and put out there as a knockoff and basically knock away my company before it even has a chance to succeed," he explained.

Lambert faced different but equally challenging questions. Running a coffee shop while building a tech platform meant she needed expertise she didn't have. "I work with somebody through SPARK who helps walk me through things and gives me insights from working with other founders," she said.

Addressing the specific, unique needs of up-and-coming entrepreneurs is where Nash-Wong's approach becomes most impactful. She emphasized that SPARK works with each founder individually to identify specific barriers and connect them with the

right resources.

"Underrepresented founders face more barriers," Nash-Wong said. "It's our goal to work with each founder individually and identify what those barriers are and help them find the resources they need."

The support goes far beyond general advice. Morefield received funding through SPARK's Business Accelerator Fund, which he used for trademarking his app, website design and creating animated videos. He also participated in SPARK's Entrepreneur Boot Camp, which he described as "an accelerated program structured to move your idea forward and to test and to iterate and to make it as good as it can be."

For Thiesmeyer Hook, SPARK's network proved invaluable. "They helped me navigate challenges and figure out how to line up the

whole process from a concept in my brain to a physical product that had some intellectual property protection to a manufacturer who could take that physical prototype and turn it into a thousand different units to fulfillment," he said. The organization connected him with mechanical engineers for prototyping, website designers, videographers and marketing professionals who helped craft his social media strategy.

Lambert found support through SPARK's Digital Summer Clinic program, including the work of two interns from Eastern Michigan University who needed marketing experience. "SPARK has been amazing with their programs, the people who work there and financial support, too," she said.

See **SPARK**, page 23



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# Comedian Jessica Kirson's Long Road to the Spotlight Finally Pays Off

With sold-out theaters and a hit Hulu special, the queer comic reflects on crowd work, vulnerability and why laughter is essential in an overwhelming moment

BY KELLI DUNHAM

For nearly three decades, Jessica Kirson has built a stand-up career the long way: performing night after night, city after city, trusting that if she stayed honest, vulnerable — maybe even just a bit raw — and kept getting better, her own audience would eventually find her. These days, they have. Kirson now plays sold-out theaters across the country, drawing crowds who know her voice, her energy and exactly what kind of night they're signing up for.

Her Hulu special "I'm the Man" marks a moment that's been a long time coming — not a pivot, but a culmination of her fast, physical and deeply observational style into an organized, hilarious tornado. She opens the show by forming her mouth into an almost awe-inspiring square. She then adds a tongue waggle. She explains the waggle as either a demonstration of her own sexual dysfunction or mimicking the dining habit dysfunction of the extremely senior audience that might typically come out for her shows in Florida.

In the next moment she has turned completely away from the audience and is whispering a save line she has honed and polished to perfection over the years: the beginnings of an anxiety-fueled interior monologue into the microphone.

"Why won't they laugh?" Kirson asks, making the audience immediately, of course, laugh.

Grabbing the stage this way takes confidence that only comes from years on stage, and from learning what actually connects with people in real time. And — if we're to be quite honest — her degree in social work from New York University probably doesn't hurt either.

As Kirson prepares to return to Michigan with a show on Feb. 15 at The Masonic — a state she's been performing in since early in her career — she spoke with BTL about touring, longevity, crowd work, queerness, women in comedy and why, in a moment that feels increasingly overwhelming, making people laugh together still matters.

**You've called yourself a "traveling clown" because you're on the go so much. And it's not like you just started yesterday; you've been at it a**



Jessica Kirson. Courtesy photo

**while. What makes performing on the road still worth it?**

You can't make a living from the internet. It helps, but it's more that a lot of us put up videos to build an audience we can perform for on the road. Because people follow you. They look at your schedule; they look at where you're performing.

Plus, I've been doing live stand-up — I just started my 27th year — and [online] it's not the same, you know, because you don't have that live audience reaction. Now that I'm performing for a thousand people each time; it's very different from the years and years of just doing it and hoping an audience shows up. The demand is there now.

The traveling is very, very hard — the planes and the hotels and all of that stuff — but the shows are amazing. So when you get

there, it's all right. But on the way, it's a lot.

**What makes a trip better or more meaningful once you're there?**

I really love anywhere I go, because now it's my fans. It's not like I'm performing for random people that I don't know where they stand in life. I adore my fans. They're amazing people.

There are certain places where I've been going for so long — Seattle, Vancouver, Chicago, New York, Boston — where I've been performing for 25 years, and it's a little different. But I also love going to smaller places where they don't have a ton of entertainment, or they don't have a huge queer community, or it's much harder to be queer. That's very heartwarming for me.

**Have you always done queer material?**

No, I didn't always do queer material. I started in '99 and knew that if I wanted to have a big career and do stand-up and get somewhere in half the time, I couldn't, as a business decision, talk as much about my lifestyle at first. Before, I wouldn't say I have a boyfriend, but I just wouldn't talk about any relationship. But I always did gay shows. Once I had children, I told myself I'm not gonna hide who I am.

I've always been mainstream. And I think that's also, unfortunately for other people, why I am where I am, because I did it in a certain way.

**Does queer material land differently now than it did 10 years ago?**

Yes. It's so much more accepted now. Completely different. When I've done queer material for straight people, it's to educate them instead of just telling them they need to accept it. I do it in a way where I'm explaining it to them and not making them look stupid and ignorant, but in a way that's more loving — not attacking. It's very gentle. And it works.

**How did the bit where you turn away from the audience to share your panicked internal monologue evolve?**

I just did it on stage one night. I don't even remember where I was or when. For a long time, it didn't work. People were like, this woman has a mental disorder. Until I realized [it was a save line]; I had to do it when a joke didn't go over well or when there was awkward silence. Then the response was so positive that I kept doing it.

*“This isn't about me. It's just people feel seen in the struggles that I talk about on stage and then they feel less alone.”*

**Why do you think you're so good at crowd work?**

I've always been a people person. My mother's a therapist. I grew up in therapy. I studied to be a therapist.

Joy Behar and other comics told me I should host shows because as a female comic you'd get hired more. They always need a good emcee. Hosting forced me to talk to the crowd. I was good at it. I hosted shows for years in New York and on the road. I got better and better. I started posting [crowd work] clips because you don't want to post your [current] material online — you burn it. And people loved the crowd work. But I'm not a crowd work comic. I do crowd work and then I do an hour of material. People are shocked by that.

**Are there people you avoid talking to in the crowd?**

I used to find the person who looked the most miserable and angriest and go talk to them. Normally, a straight white guy. That was projecting. It hardly ever goes well.

Now I look for people who really want to talk to me. If someone looks uncomfortable, I say, “Do you not want to talk to me?” I'm not gonna make you uncomfortable. People up front want

it. The front rows sell out first.

**When I was prepping for this interview, I was amazed to read comments similar to this one in response to your performance clips: “I don't usually like comedy, but I like your comedy.” Do you have a sense of why that is?**

I hear that all the time. I also hear, “Women aren't funny, but this woman is.” I get it every single day. There are fucking funny female comics. There are just less of us. It's harder to get headlining gigs. People walk in thinking women aren't funny. Some men are threatened by our power. They're not open to it because it would be bad for their manhood if they laughed. They're too busy hating.

**What makes your “I'm the Man” special different from your other previous specials?**

I worked so hard on that material. I don't do a special every year because I want it undeniable. I want screaming laughter. This special was more edgy because I was in an edgy place. The election, Covid, a horrible divorce. I got pushback because it was dirty. Men can say the edgiest things and it's fine. I'm proud I did what I wanted to do, even knowing some people wouldn't like it.

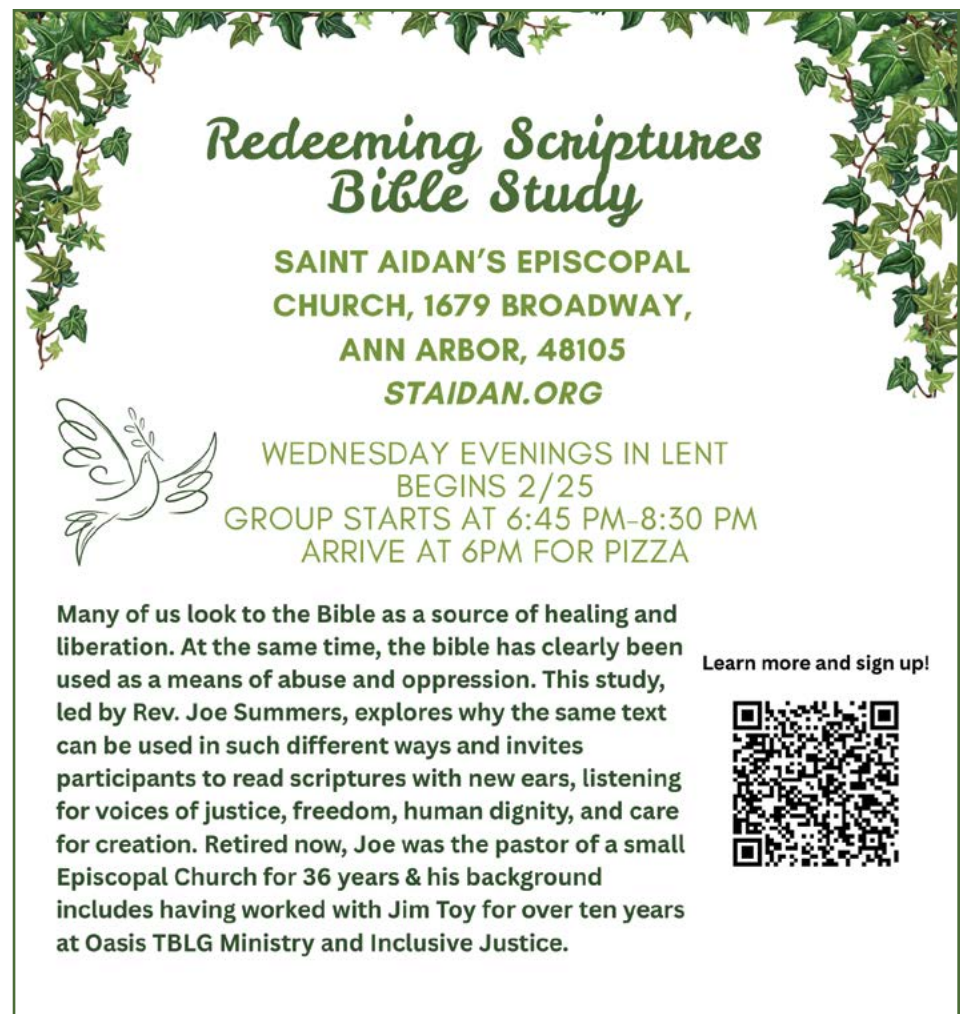
**What does comedy give this moment we're in?**

I never understood how a one-minute video could make a difference. But then someone sends me a message like “Hey, I'm not OK, I'm mentally ill and I'm very depressed and I was thinking of hurting myself and watching your videos has helped me.”

This isn't about me. It's just people feel seen in the struggles that I talk about on stage and then they feel less alone. When I come off stage, after hearing people laughing, and knowing that they're healing, [I know] that this is helping them in this hour. That's why I do this. As recently as this weekend, I was reminded, “Oh my god, people really need to laugh.” I still don't understand it. But I see what it does for people. This is a horrific, scary time, and people really need to laugh.

**Is there anything someone considering coming to your Michigan show should know?**

I love performing in Michigan. Michigan is one of the places I've always come to since I've started, and I'm so happy to be performing here and also not to be performing in a little shithole! With my comedy, you don't have to think too hard. It's rapid fire, and I'm going to give you a lot of energy, and you're going to be entertained. You can come and just relax and enjoy yourself. Come and laugh, and for an hour, we won't worry about the world.




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## Greater Than Is Equal To Trashing Queer Families



BY D'ANNE WITKOWSKI

Big announcement everyone! ICE, the masked paramilitary force that is terrorizing neighborhoods and executing people in the street with the full support of the federal government, will now have each

officer wear a body camera. And not a moment too soon!

Of course, if you actually want to see any of that body camera footage, you could file a Freedom of Information Act request. But you're better off subscribing to ICE's OnlyFans account where you can find snuff films of ICE beating the absolute shit out of people and/or murdering them for the crime of not wanting their immigrant neighbors to be dragged away from their families. Also a lot of foot pics for some reason.

Anyway, abolish ICE.

In good news, that adorable little boy in the blue bunny hat and his father who ICE nabbed off of the street in Minneapolis and shipped to a measles infested concentration camp in Texas have returned home.

The order to release Liam and his dad came from U.S. District Judge Fred Biery.



marriage equality on this argument.

"It's a mother and a father that bring forth children into the world, and that's by design, because children need a mother and a father," professional homophobe Tony Perkins of the Family Research Council says in a video for "Greater Than," a campaign by 47 anti-LGBTQ+ groups who are seeking to overturn the U.S. Supreme Court's 2015 Obergefell ruling.

The campaign's slogan is "Child rights > adult desires" and the campaign's visual aesthetic is modeled after the Human Right Campaign's: the same blue and yellow, the same sans serif font, but none of the equality.

In the same Greater Than video, Lila Rose of Live Action says, "Redefining marriage robs children of the natural right to their mother and father."

Ah. So including my wife and I in the definition of marriage "robs children of the natural right to the mother and father." I see.

And so it is with a heavy heart that I apologize to Liam Conejo Ramos. See, I thought that his violent and sudden separation from his mother was caused when ICE agents took him away to Measles Camp in Texas along with his father for the "crime" of seeking asylum in the United States. I had no idea that it was actually my fault.

Seriously, though? I'm real tired of being lectured about

my fitness as a parent or even as a human being by people who think that disappearing and/or killing mothers and fathers is fine so long as it's done in the name of keeping America white.

And I sure as hell am not going to be accepting criticism from people who think that the Epstein files are no big deal, thus shrugging off untold numbers of children who were sexually assaulted and abused by Epstein and allegedly Trump and other rich abusers as well.

You're accusing me and all LGBTQ+ parents of being a danger to children? How fucking dare you.

The people behind the Greater Than campaign claim they don't want children to get hurt. They say that they want all kids to grow up in stable and happy homes. And so that's why they've got to overturn marriage equality.

Here's what I don't hear them supporting: Paid family leave and universal health care so that a parent can afford to miss work and take a sick kid to the doctor without worrying about how they'll pay for it. Or how about affordable, high-quality child care? Free school lunches? Paid time off? Access to free or low cost mental health treatment, including marriage and family counseling? Affordable housing? Vaccine mandates so we don't have outbreaks of formerly eradicated diseases spreading like wildfire? Or how about gun violence prevention since the most common way for a kid to die in the U.S. is being shot?

Nope. Nothing to ease the burden and stress most families feel. Nothing to protect children from actual dangers.

If they want to talk about "Child rights" being greater than "adult desires," they can start with the desire of these particular adults to hurt queer families and dehumanize LGBTQ+ people.

“

*You're accusing me and all LGBTQ+ parents of being a danger to children? How fucking dare you.*

"[This case] has its genesis in the ill-conceived and incompetently-implemented government pursuit of daily deportation quotas, apparently even if it requires traumatizing children," Biery wrote in his order according to ABC News.

Judges matter, folks. And yet on the day I write this, there are Democrats who are still voting to place Trump's judicial picks on the bench. Absolutely unacceptable.

Anyway, let's talk more about traumatizing children. Because the same folks who support ICE tearing apart immigrant families have an awful lot to say about how kids have a right to a mom and a dad.

And they're basing their latest attempt to overturn

### Statement from Pride Source Media Group on Recent Journalist Arrests

The arrests of journalists Don Lemon and Georgia Fort are an unacceptable assault on press freedom and a dangerous escalation in the Trump administration's war on independent journalism.

As an independent media organization serving Michigan's LGBTQ+ community, we know firsthand that marginalized communities depend on journalists willing to cover the stories others won't touch. When the federal government criminalizes journalism, it doesn't just threaten reporters, it threatens every community's right to know what's being done in their name, to their neighbors, by their government.

The message is unmistakable: Cover protests at your own risk. Document government overreach and face federal charges. This cannot stand.

A federal magistrate judge found no evidence of criminal behavior in Lemon's reporting from the



Georgia Fort and Don Lemon. Photos: Wikimedia Commons CC license



Jan. 18 Minnesota church protest. In an act better described as intimidation versus "law enforcement," the Department of Justice then went judge shopping until it could arrest him anyway.

When the government arrests journalists for documenting protests and civil rights issues, and when it prosecutes reporters for doing their jobs, we're subject to the outcomes of an authoritarian

playbook we've seen in Hungary, Russia and other nations where silencing independent media becomes a defining feature of governance.

As Tim Richardson, journalism and disinformation program director at PEN America, stated, "Journalism is not a crime." We stand in solidarity as members of the free press.



The Rebel Loon, based on Minnesota's fierce state bird, has become a symbol of resistance against ICE tactics nationwide.

### Movement Continues with Ongoing Protest Events

Last week, hundreds of thousands of Michiganders took to the streets for a national shutdown protesting ICE enforcement tactics. Students walked out of local high schools, while other demonstrators gathered across the state. The protests followed the fatal shootings of Renee Good and Alex Pretti by Department of Homeland Security agents in Minneapolis.

Democratic state senators are advancing legislation that would restrict ICE enforcement in Michigan at schools, hospitals and houses of worship, ban masked law enforcement officers, and prohibit immigration authorities from demanding personal information without a warrant.

Upcoming protest events include:

- Feb. 7: ICE Out Now, Ann Arbor (every Saturday), RoundAbout Revolutions Weekly Protest and March, Lansing
- Feb. 8: Anti-ICE/Anti-Fascism Rally, Rochester Hills
- Feb. 14: Concert Benefiting Families Affected by ICE, Grand Rapids
- Feb. 15: Stop ICE for Good Rally, Grand Rapids

Find more events and event details at [mivoter.org/protests](http://mivoter.org/protests).

### Advocacy Orgs Raising Alarms

In recent weeks, queer-affirming advocacy organizations have been speaking out online against recent Immigration and Customs Enforcement actions and offering resources to protect community members.

On Instagram, Immigration Equality has raised alarms about ICE leadership allegedly ordering home entries without judicial warrants, calling the practice "unlawful and unacceptable" and emphasizing that queer immigrants deserve safety.

The ACLU of Michigan (@aclumich), Michigan Immigrant Rights Center, MI Poder and the Michigan League for Public Policy issued a joint statement condemning what they describe as "violent actions" by ICE and the threat the agency

poses to communities statewide.

On its social channels, Affirmations in Ferndale (@goaffirmations) has expressed solidarity with immigrant communities across Metro Detroit and Minnesota, emphasizing that "taking care of each other is how we survive."

These organizations are bringing urgent issues directly to social media feeds, making it simple to stay informed and know where to direct worried community members.

### Know Your Rights While Protesting

If you're planning to attend a protest, know your rights. You don't need a permit to protest in response to breaking news, and you have the right to photograph or record anything in plain view, including police. If stopped, ask if you're free to go. If arrested, you have the right to remain silent and ask for a lawyer immediately. Don't sign, say or agree to anything without a lawyer present. Find comprehensive protest guidance at @aclumichigan.

### Billie Eilish Ices ICE at Grammys

Queer pop star Billie Eilish wore an "ICE OUT" pin to the Feb. 1 Grammy Awards and used her song of the year acceptance speech for "Wildflower" to condemn immigration enforcement.

"No one is illegal on stolen land,"

Eilish told the audience. She called for continued protest and resistance, saying "our voices really do matter and the people matter" before CBS bleeped out her next statement.



Billie Eilish at the 2026 Grammys. Photo: Instagram/@billieeilish

### Journalists Face Arrests at Protests

According to the U.S. Press Freedom Tracker, at least 32 journalists were detained or charged in 2025, with 28 of those arrests occurring at immigration-related protests. The Committee to Protect Journalists documented over 150 assaults on journalists covering protests last year. Most detained journalists were released without charges, suggesting law enforcement aimed to deter news gathering rather than pursue prosecution. Track ongoing press freedom violations and learn how to support journalist safety at [pressfreedomtracker.us](http://pressfreedomtracker.us).

# 10 Influencers Shaping the Political Zeitgeist in 2026

The creators and leaders making queer politics impossible to ignore

BY SARAH BRICKER HUNT

Michigan's LGBTQ+ political power isn't just in the capitol — it's on TikTok, Instagram, podcasts and viral press conference moments. In 2026, influence looks like perfectly timed clapbacks, creators who make policy shareable and leaders who understand queer internet culture as well as they understand governance.

These 10 political influencers are shaping the zeitgeist in Michigan and beyond, commanding attention online while driving real-world change. If you want to know where queer political power is headed next, start here.

## 1. Julia Pickett, Gov. Whitmer's Digital Director and Social Media Powerhouse

If you follow Michigan politics online, you're following Julia Pickett whether you know it or not. As Gov. Whitmer's digital director, Pickett has turned the governor's social media into appointment viewing. She orchestrated Whitmer's legendary June 2025 appearance on the "Gaydar" show (where Whitmer proved her queer history bona fides), created the viral "Governor Barbie" content that won a 2024 Webby Award and styled Whitmer's pronoun jacket moment at Motor City Pride 2023. Behind every perfectly timed TikTok, every "Big Gretch" moment, every viral political clapback, there's Pickett pulling the strings and making Michigan's governor the coolest politician on the internet.

## 2. Dana Nessel, Attorney General with the Saggiest Twitter Fingers

Attorney General Dana Nessel doesn't just



Pete Buttigieg (Photo: Instagram/@pete.buttigieg), Kris and Dave Hutton (Photo: Andrew Potter), Anania (Photo: anania00.com), Jon Kung (Photo: Johnny Miller).

prosecute cases — she prosecutes straight people on Twitter. The lesbian A.G. who helped win marriage equality in Obergefell v. Hodges back in 2015 now spends her days defending Michigan's expanded Elliott-Larsen Civil Rights Act, tracking federal attacks on LGBTQ+ rights through her Federal Actions Tracker (launched June 2025) and serving absolute fire on social media. She co-hosts the "Pantsuits and Lawsuits" podcast where she dishes about politics and law in an approachable way. When she's not in court defending queer rights, she's online reminding everyone why Michigan elected the first out lesbian A.G. in the country.

## 3. Anania Williams and the 'Gaydar' Show, Teaching Queer History Through Viral Comedy

Trans and gender nonconforming content creator and drag queen Anania Williams (@anania00) hosts "Gaydar" on TikTok to 600K followers — it's the viral show that asks guests "Gay, straight or homophobe?" while sneaking in actual queer history education. When Gov. Whitmer appeared on the show in June 2025, it became one of the governor's most-watched social media moments — proving that Anania has figured out how to make civics class actually fun. The show has racked up over 80 million views by packaging LGBTQ+ knowledge into bite-sized, shareable content that's teaching a generation their queer history through comedy and celebrity interviews, and Anania herself boasts 2.4 million followers on the platform — her personal account is worth the bandwidth too. [tiktok.com/@gaydar.show](https://www.tiktok.com/@gaydar.show)

## 4. Jeremy Moss, State Senator Turned Viral Sensation

State Sen. Jeremy Moss is running for Congress in Michigan's 11th District in 2026, and if his campaign is anything like his viral moments, it's going to be a show. The President Pro Tempore of the Michigan Senate made headlines in February 2025 when he dominated a Republican press conference with a perfectly timed interruption that went absolutely viral. Since being elected in 2018, Moss has combined serious legislative work with the kind of social media presence that makes C-SPAN watchable. He's proof that you can pass actual laws expanding LGBTQ+ rights while also being incredibly online — and he's bringing that energy to Congress. [@jeremyallenmoss](https://twitter.com/jeremyallenmoss)

## 5. Pete Buttigieg, TikTok's Favorite Political Daddy

Former U.S. Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg relocated to Traverse City in July 2022 with husband Chasten and their kids, and Michigan has claimed him ever since. With 1.4 million TikTok followers (he joined in August 2024), Mayor Pete pivoted from fixing America's infrastructure to being infrastructure daddy on the internet. He announced in March 2025 that he won't run for Michigan Senate or governor in 2026, which disappointed everyone who wanted more Buttigieg content dominating Michigan politics. But with his TikTok presence, he's influencing the discourse anyway — just from his living room in Traverse City. @pete.buttigieg

## 6. Josh Helfgott, TikTok's Gay News Anchor

With 5.9 million TikTok followers, activist Josh Helfgott's "Gay News" has become essential viewing for anyone who wants to understand what's happening in LGBTQ+ America. The GLAAD award winner delivers rapid-fire news updates with impeccable comedic timing, using fast-paced quick cuts and the kind of internet-native editing that makes complex political stories instantly digestible. A recent example: his coverage of Renee Good, the lesbian woman shot and killed by an ICE agent, intercuts Jesse Watters' incredibly homophobic Fox News report with his own astonished quick-cut reactions to create a sharp, media-literate approach to advocacy. It's all driven by a deeply personal mission. "I make videos for 13 year old me. To show him he is loved and he is not alone. Because no LGBTQ+ child should ever have to experience a childhood like I did," he explains on his page. @joshhelfgott

## 7. Kris and Dave Hutton, Instagram's Army Veteran Power Couple

Army veteran couple Kris and Dave Hutton have turned their historic Detroit home restoration project into an unexpected Instagram phenomenon, with @kris.and.dave amassing over 1.5 million followers through fearless LGBTQ+ advocacy. When a man at a neighborhood home and garden tour demanded they remove their Pride flag for religious reasons, Kris' response — "Sir, that's not going to happen" — launched them into viral fame overnight. Now the straight allies screenshot hateful comments, block the trolls and turn their bigotry into teaching moments, always ending with Kris' signature Southern-drawled mic drop: "You go on and you have the day you deserve now." Their elaborate annual Pride arbor has become a Detroit landmark, and last year's message felt particularly resonant: "The first Pride was a riot."

"The way my voice sounds, the way we look, Dave's big-ass truck, I think we probably look like we might not be allies. We might present as people who are close-minded," Kris told BTL in June 2025. "And I think when people find out we aren't, what I hope is that it empowers them to be more vocal in their support as well." @kris.and.dave

## 8. Jon Kung, Detroit's Thirst-Trap Chef Who Talks Politics

Detroit chef Jon Kung pivoted from law school at University of Detroit Mercy to TikTok stardom, and now his 1.7 million followers tune in for cooking tutorials, thirst traps and surprisingly pointed political commentary. The nonbinary chef behind the cookbook "Kung Food" has built a following by being authentically queer while teaching people how to make dumplings. He's vocal about politics and represents the kind of LGBTQ+ influencer who doesn't separate their identity from their craft — he's just out there being gay, cooking and looking good while doing it. @jonkung

## 9. Erin Reed, The Trans Journalist Everyone's Reading

Trans journalist Erin Reed has become required reading for anyone tracking LGBTQ+ rights in America. Her newsletter "Erin in the Morning" has over 130,000 subscribers, won a 2024 GLAAD Media Award and often gets cited by the AP, New York Times and Washington Post. She created the viral informed consent HRT clinic map that's been viewed 8 million times, tracks every piece of anti-LGBTQ legislation nationwide and is married to Montana State Rep. Zooezy Zephyr (they got engaged at a gay prom, naturally). While based in Maryland, her exhaustive coverage of Michigan's legislative battles makes her essential reading for understanding what's happening here. erininthemorning.com

## 10. Stand With Trans, TikTok's Trans Rights Rapid Response

Founded in 2015 by Roz Keith and frequently fronted by communications director Sander Jennings, Stand With Trans exploded on TikTok in January 2025 after Trump's executive orders targeting trans rights. Their platform has become the go-to source for trans people and allies looking for immediate, actionable information on what's happening and what to do about it. They've mastered the art of turning complex policy into digestible TikTok content that actually helps people — making trans rights education accessible to millions who might never read a policy brief. tiktok.com/@standwithtrans

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# What Four Midwest Teens Really Think About ‘Heated Rivalry’

Follow along as a group of straight, trans and queer friends live-react to the viral hockey romance that broke the internet

BY SARAH BRICKER HUNT

They came for the 9.3 IMDb rating. They stayed for the tuna melts and the character growth — and the way “Heated Rivalry” understood that sometimes being vulnerable is scarier than being closeted.

Over several watch sessions, a group of straight, trans and queer friends made their way through all six episodes of “Heated Rivalry,” the Canadian gay hockey drama that everyone you’ve ever met has been obsessed with for months. The show follows Canadian hockey captain Shane Hollander (Hudson Williams) and Russian star Ilya Rozanov (Connor Storrie) across eight years of rivalry, secret hookups and increasingly complicated feelings.

These straight, queer and trans teens say the show’s queerness isn’t a curiosity or a political statement. It’s simply the framework for a story about human connection, desire, fear and the compromises people make to protect both their dreams and their hearts.

Here’s what happened when we handed our watch party crew the mic. (Warning — spoilers ahead!)



Hudson Williams (left) and Connor Storrie (right) in “Heated Rivalry.” Photo: HBO Max

## The watch crew

**David, 17:** The cultural critic (and this writer’s son), who can’t always remember character names but nails the thematic analysis. He asked his friends if they wanted to be interviewed about the show, then kept the camera rolling through a minor carpet crisis.

**Kane, 19:** Came for the 9.3 IMDb rating, stayed to interrogate why “mid” source material became must-watch TV. His girlfriend recommended it. He’s still not sure if that makes him cool or predictable.

**Finn, 19:** Notices the quiet moments everyone else talks over. Gets emotional about sandwiches. Will absolutely tell you when the show makes a smart choice instead of a stupid one.

**Eddie, 18:** Admits he “wasn’t really locked in” for the first half. By episode six, he’s analyzing Shane’s character arc like he’s defending a thesis.

**Episode 1: “Kane said it had a 9.3 and I didn’t believe him”**

**David:** Kane said it had a 9.3 on IMDb, and I didn’t believe him.

**Kane:** I mean, look at it. [gestures at screen]

**David:** And he was right. And then we watched it and it was fire.

**Kane:** I watched a video reviewing the book that said it was really mid, but then it was hot. I was really curious how the show got such high ratings if the book was mid.

**Finn:** It’s two men trying to navigate their feelings for each other in a career where it’s not normalized and at a time that is not normalized, which is in 2008.

*In the show’s opening, Shane — an Asian Canadian rookie from Ottawa — cheerfully introduces himself to Moscow-born Ilya at the 2008 junior championship. Their first interaction is stilted and awkward.*

**Eddie:** The scene where they first met on those bicycles was really funny. Sipping each other’s water. And then the handshake.

**Kane:** It is low-key clichéd because it’s very overplayed in straight media, too. Like, rivals, but then you have to be friends and work together. And then in straight media, it would be very easy to just add in one more layer and then turn it into a gay romance. But I feel like it’s clichéd because of that. It’s interesting, though.

**David:** The rivals-on-ice, lovers-off-it dynamic works because it shows the split world that gay people live in. It’s like when oppressed minorities live in two worlds — one when they’re around the people who marginalize them and one when they’re not.

**Episode 4: “I thought that was so dumb. I thought that was crazy.”**

*By episode 4 which includes the now-infamous “telepathic sex scene,” Shane and Ilya have been hooking up secretly for years, stealing hours in hotel rooms between games.*

**Kane:** Ilya is jacking off in the shower, and then Shane’s having sex with his girlfriend who he’s imagining as Ilya. Cutting back to each other, staring at each other in the club. I thought that was so dumb. I thought that was crazy.

**David:** The telepathic sex scene was this culmination of jealousy between them. It was the peak of that where they were just enraged at each other and taking it out on other people and themselves. It was deep.

**Finn:** It made me laugh when they were having that scene where they were having sex separately, but they were staring at the camera telepathically. They were moaning. It was a little uncomfortable. It was funny.

*Then comes the moment that broke the internet. For the first time, Ilya asks Shane to stay at his Boston home instead of immediately leaving. They actually sleep in the same bed together through the night, which is a first for the couple. “I’m hungry. You like tuna melt?” asks Ilya. “You want to... make me a tuna melt?” Shane replies. “I was gonna make one for me,” Ilya responds. “I can make two.”*

**Finn:** I liked when Ilya made Shane a tuna melt, and then Shane was like, “You’re going to make me one?” Because it showed how surprised he was.

*While the sandwich cooks, they sit on Ilya’s couch watching a game on TV. It’s domestic. It’s*

daylight. It feels like a relationship. Then Ilya gets a stressful call from his father. Shane asks if he's OK. Ilya brushes him off. Shane leans against Ilya's chest. Ilya strokes his hair. The air is thick with everything they're not saying.

They start having sex again, and for the first time, they call each other by their first names. Shane immediately panics and leaves.

**Eddie:** My favorite scene was when Shane was in the elevator texting — he was writing out messages to Ilya and then deleting them about how he didn't even kiss him goodnight, and he was mad. But you can see his character. He's too emotionally hurt to admit how he's hurt. It was a really good scene.

**David:** They're both incredibly non-confrontational, which is realistic. And you don't see that in a lot of romance shows where they have these crazy deep expositions of their relationship. And that's just not how humans talk because they're awkward and scared all the time.

**10:45 p.m.: A brief interruption**  
[sound of liquid hitting carpet]

**Someone:** Oh shit—

**Eddie:** Spray more. Spray more.

**Kane:** We cleaned it.

**David:** [still filming] Sorry, mom.

**Eddie:** It's working. You can't even see it.  
[editor's note: you can]

[Interview continues]

**Midpoint Check: "I'm really hoping five and six clear that up"**

**Kane:** Ilya is the most complex character, for sure, in my opinion. The rest of them, maybe I'm just not looking deep enough, but I haven't seen too much in the way of depth.

**Finn:** I think for now, the characters are... well, I would agree that they're shallow or clichéd. I'm really hoping five and six clear that up and I could really get to the real depth. It's definitely fun, but the characters are clichéd where it's one guy who's reckless and doesn't care and is unemotional, at least for now. The other guy who is career-oriented and whatever.

**David:** But they're both incredibly non-confrontational, which is realistic.

**Eddie:** It's human emotion. They're just human beings. It's just the fact that [because] they're gay, I like it more.

**Episodes 5 and 6: "Completely deserving of its rating on IMDb"**

Episode 5, "I'll Believe in Anything," earned

a perfect 10.0 on IMDb, briefly tying with an episode of "Breaking Bad" as one of only two episodes ever to achieve that score. The turning point: teammates Scott Hunter and Kip Grady publicly kiss after winning the championship on live television. Shane and Ilya watch it happen in real time.

**Finn:** Personally, I loved it.

**Eddie:** I was disappointed by the lack of any continuity, basically between episodes 2 and 4, and by extension, 1 and 2, and then 4. But episodes 5 and 6 completely salvaged it. Loved, loved, loved episode 5. Completely deserving of its rating on IMDb.

**David:** Preach. Personally, I think that the final two episodes tie everything together. Every loose end in the series, put together in the last two episodes, including the episode 3 side tangent with the smoothie guy. That couple, when they made out on the ice in front of TV, influenced Shane and Ilya directly, which I think is really important because they didn't connect it in a superficial way. They didn't say, "These couples went on a double date" or something. They could have done it in a really lazy way, but they did it in this inspirational way, where just seeing them come out in public inspired Shane and Ilya to continue their relationship and to really dive headfirst into it.

*The finale takes Shane and Ilya to Shane's family cottage. For two weeks, they explore what being an actual couple might look like. They tell Shane's parents everything. Shane's mother tearfully apologizes for making him feel like he couldn't be honest with her.*

## Closing reflections

**Finn:** When there was a story moment where they could choose to do a stupid thing or a smart thing, they did smart things. When Shane's father showed up and then Ilya was all sweet and nice and comforting,

**Eddie:** I appreciated Shane's side of the story. It got more romantic and less just about smut and stuff. His girlfriend supports the fact that he is gay, realizes it for him and urges him to come out and supports him and stays friends with him, which I think is important that he has people in his life who already know and will be open about it. And then the two other hockey players that came out, that is extra support added onto him, so it builds his confidence.

**David:** I like the scene where they're in a ski resort in Russia, and two of the dudes from the American team talk about how dangerous Russia is for gay people. Shane has the realization that Ilya is constantly oppressed. I think [the show] was great. I would rewatch it. I will rewatch it, and I would recommend it to anyone.



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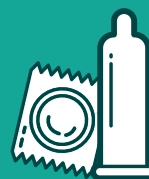
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# From Fear to Freedom



Jesseca "Judy" Harris-Dupart and Da Brat. Courtesy photo

## Da Brat and Jesseca 'Judy' Harris-Dupart on living openly as a Black queer family and advice for LGBTQ+ people still finding their courage

BY CHRIS AZZOPARDI

Six years after Da Brat came out publicly in 2020 — a move that felt both terrifying and inevitable — the Grammy-nominated, Chicago-born rapper and her wife, entrepreneur Jesseca "Judy" Harris-Dupart, are ready to tell their story. And they're not holding back.

Their new memoir, "The Way

Love Goes: A Guide to Building a 'Beautiful' and Everlasting Relationship," out now, opens with a bold declaration about love being "quite the motherfucker," and the honesty only deepens from there. This is a love story with all the messy, beautiful, complicated parts included: the baggage Da Brat initially hid, the therapeutic arguments over whose memory of events was correct, and

yes, even a clogged toilet that taught them about vulnerability (more on that later).

For Da Brat, who spent the '90s and early aughts as a Midwestern hip-hop pioneer while keeping her personal life private, falling for Judy — they endearingly call each other "beautiful" — meant more than finding love. It meant finding freedom. For Judy, whose

own openness helped give Da Brat the courage to live out loud, their relationship is proof that being unapologetically yourself is the only way to be. Together, they're raising a blended family that includes Judy's three children from previous relationships and their son True Legend, born in 2023.

I spoke with Da Brat and Judy about the chaos of writing their memoir together, what their visibility as a Black queer couple means to them and the advice they'd give to anyone still figuring out how to love without fear.

**The opening line of the book is, "Let's face it, love is quite the motherfucker." Is love more of a motherfucker than writing a book about love?**

**Judy:** No, writing the book was more of a motherfucker than love! Yeah, that part was an undertaking.

**Da Brat:** Absolutely.

**Tell me about the behind-the-scenes process of writing this book together. How did it start?**

**Judy:** A big part of it we started doing together. We had somebody help us, and so we had to do a lot of interviewing on the phone, and then we realized how much of our story is different, how she sees the story, how I see the story. So then we had to do a lot of interviews separate.

**Da Brat:** And then when we were doing things together, we were like, "What? It didn't happen like that." And Judy was like, "Yes, it did." And we had to really remember certain things and rehash old things. It was quite an experience, quite therapeutic.

**The book mentions Da Brat's bad texting habits. Are you a better texter these days?**

**Judy:** She is! Well, texting me back, yes. Now, when it comes to texting in general, she's way better than I am. And now that you said it, it's ironic how bad that flipped because I am awful at texting now.

**Da Brat:** You are! I know you got a lot on your plate and a lot of stuff with the business, but I'll text you seven messages and be like, "Hey babe, did you see my messages today?"

**Judy:** I don't ignore her. I'll be on Zoom and she'll be sending me stuff and I see it. And so in my head I responded to it because I saw it. I suck at this.

**Da Brat:** I'm way better now. Now she's the worst.

**What's something you learned about the other person's thoughts on love while writing this book?**

**Da Brat:** I learned that my wife still thinks about certain things that I thought that she may have forgotten about. [Laughs.]

**Judy:** Well, I mean, if we're going to write a book, we tellin' them a story. When we first got together, she just had a whole mess to clean up and she didn't tell me.

**Da Brat:** I kept it from her because I had a fear of losing her and I didn't want to lose her. And sometimes when you tell people, "I got baggage and I got to do this and I got to do that," they're like, "Oh, I'm not waiting on you. I'm out of here." So I just didn't want to lose her.

**The book shifts between Da Brat's Chicago cadence and Judy's New Orleans patois. How did you decide which parts of your journey each of you would take the lead on?**

**Da Brat:** We just talked about a lot of the things that stood out to us. She liked to talk about the bad things that I did in the beginning, and we both liked to talk about the moment we found love and the time she first came to see me. And then when it came to more personal things in our stories of the things we went through, that's when we did the separate stories. And then when we first kissed, we talked about things like that together. But there are some things that I didn't know about her: some of 'em past relationships. I was like, "Oh my goodness, this is good!" [Laughs.]

I didn't know that in her past relationship, she said it wasn't cool for her significant other to be friends with their ex. And I didn't realize that's where it came from when she told me that it wasn't cool to be friends with an ex. I didn't realize the things she had been through with her ex. And I was like, "Now I get it."

**It's been six years since you came out publicly, Da Brat.**

I've been a longtime fan since the '90s — those Mariah Carey remix days. It's been wonderful to see someone I grew up with living a happy, open queer life. That visibility would've meant a ton to me as a kid. For both of you, how has living openly as a queer couple reshaped your understanding of love and risk?

**Da Brat:** I just feel 10 times lighter. When you're in the closet and you're trying to hide and you're trying to not let people see this and not let people see that, it's a weight on your shoulders. But when you can be free and let the world know who you love, screaming it from the mountaintop and holding their hand and kissing them in public and going out to eat and letting people see you smile, it's liberating. So I love it. I'm so glad I'm out.

**Why did coming out feel like a weight off your shoulders?**

**Da Brat:** I didn't realize it until the weight was actually lifted because at first I was really afraid. I was like, "Oh, god, people are going to really hate me." Because back in the day, it just wasn't cool. It wasn't cool to come out. Remember, Ellen [DeGeneres] lost everything she had. She lost her TV show. People didn't like her

anymore, but thank god it's a different world today. And thank god that I had somebody who made me feel safe enough to come out, who helped bring me out, to share my love with her with the world.

**What did Judy's openness before you came out teach you about bravery in love?**

**Da Brat:** Man, she didn't have any boundaries. She didn't have anything holding her down. Her family, they were not bashing or mean in any way or negative and she just lived her life. When I fell in love with her, I didn't want to hold it in anymore. I didn't even care what people had to say anymore. I just wanted the world to know. I mean, she lived so freely. She just did whatever she wanted to do and I wanted to be a part of that. I felt like, because I was still in the closet, I was making her have to mask her love for me. That wasn't fair.

**Da Brat, you kept your personal life deeply private for decades. Looking back, do you see a connection between the creative freedom you had in the booth and the emotional freedom you've now found in this relationship?**

**Da Brat:** Yes. I feel like then I still didn't

get to say who I was completely or be who I was or love out loud. But back then, it was more safe to keep it protected, but I would've loved to be able to probably express that, but it just wasn't the time. And I don't think I'd run into the person who made me want to live out loud and risk it all.

**For readers who may still be wrestling with coming out or dating publicly as queer people, what part of your story do you hope gives them courage?**

**Da Brat:** Well, I hope it gives them courage when they hear that when my wife — well, before she wasn't my wife then — told me how she felt about me, it scared me and it made me nervous. It broke all the rules of me being Da Brat and the swag I had and all that. And it scared me. And I just feel like even if you're scared or if your nerves are bad, when it comes to feeling the way you feel, if you meet somebody who gives you that feeling of nervousness, of butterflies and you know it's a great feeling that you've never had before, I think just go with it. Go with it and just love on that person and let them love on you and be happy.

See **Da Brat**, page 22

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**Isn't It Grande**  
Puzzle can be found on page 21



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### ◀ Zaya

Continued from page 6

this for fun. I can actually make money," she says, laughing. With management now based in New York City handling the business side, Perysian focuses on what she does best: showing up authentically on camera.

Her success itself feels revolutionary. "You hear all these stories about how trans women don't live long lives, and how we all turn to sex work and that's our only avenue," she says. But here she is, she says, thriving as a content creator. "There are trans engineers, trans lawyers, trans doctors. It's amazing. So to exist in this space successfully that's dominated by cis white people — which, that was the norm for years and years — but anyone can do it. Anyone can do anything."

But Perysian's impact extends far beyond brand partnerships and viral videos. In January 2025, shortly after Trump's return to office, she applied for a passport and received it with an "M" gender marker as a result of the president's executive order. She posted a video about the experience, fully aware of the backlash it might bring. Today, she says it's the video she's most proud of posting.

"That was really scary, and I was like, I don't know if I want to post this, because people are pretty opinionated, and I wasn't really in the headspace to hear it," she admits. "But somebody's gotta say it, somebody's gotta speak up, and I had the platform to do it."

Good thing she did. The video caught the attention of the ACLU, and Perysian became one of seven named plaintiffs in *Orr v. Trump*, a lawsuit filed in April 2025. Early in the case, the plaintiffs won a preliminary injunction ordering the Trump administration to issue her a passport that accurately reflected her gender identity.

After that win, the legal team expanded the case into a class-action lawsuit so the ruling would apply to all transgender and nonbinary people — not just the original plaintiffs. A federal judge granted class-action status, and for several months, all trans and nonbinary Americans were able to obtain U.S. passports with gender markers that matched their gender identity because of the lawsuit.

"We literally had a class action against Trump that went through," she says, with justified pride.

The Trump administration appealed the decision and asked the Supreme Court to pause the ruling while the case moved through the lower courts. The Supreme Court granted that stay. As a result, the class action is temporarily no longer in effect, and passports have reverted to listing only male or female based on sex assigned at birth.

The fight, however, is far from over. "I'm still battling the Trump administration," she says. "It's been a year now." A win in the appeals court could send the case back to the Supreme Court — putting the future of gender-affirming passports nationwide back on the line.

### The cost of visibility

The political climate that made Perysian's lawsuit necessary has also taken a direct hit to her career. As trans acceptance has declined due to the relentless attacks by the federal administration, so has brand interest in working with her.

"When the politicians loved us, the brands loved us. And when the politicians hate us, now the brands are scared of us," she observes with sharp clarity. "Now brands see me as brand unfriendly or too political, just for standing up for myself."

Her management now has to "push 10 times harder" to secure partnerships. It's a sobering reality facing many LGBTQ+ creators, not just trans people. "I know so many people — gay, trans, lesbian, nonbinary — who have also seen a decline recently," she says. "We're just seeing everybody's true colors and how they see us as tools for their marketing."

Despite the challenges, Perysian continues to live comfortably off her content creation, even as the landscape shifts beneath her feet. "I still do enough to live the life that I live," she says simply.

The relentless attacks on trans people make Perysian's visibility feel increasingly urgent. She's watched what felt like real progress get reversed practically overnight.

"We had a slight golden age where everything felt like it was getting super progressive," she reflects, referring to the more inclusive environment under the Biden-Harris administration. "Brands were aligning with us, the media was aligning with us, we were getting representation everywhere. It was seeming like, oh my gosh, people are finally getting it. They're seeing us as human beings."

That acceptance threatened existing power structures, she believes. "The moment we emerge from the shadows, it threatens everything that they built, and they are doing everything they can to push us back."

Her content has shifted accordingly, becoming sharper and more political in response to the near-constant headlines targeting trans people. "I think it's important that people are informed and educated, and that people know what's happening," she explains. "If people remain ignorant, that just makes it easier for them to try and erase us. I'm doing everything I can to make it as hard as possible for them to silence us, and they

hate it."

As much as it's "sad and scary," she's also "empowered and angry and motivated."

"I can't believe there's this powerful group of human beings that put so much time and effort and money into demonizing one of the smallest minority groups in the world, acting like we're this huge threat," she adds. "Take a look at the bigger picture. Take a look at the people who are telling you to demonize us, and actually use some critical thinking, research and look at what they're doing to the world. Look at how they're destroying society as we know it, sucking profit out of every corner of everybody's house. And somehow trans people are the issue, and immigrants are the issue. It's just like, no. You just need to wake up. Like, I'm woke. Bring woke back, please."

### Advice for the next generation

For LGBTQ+ youth stuck in small or conservative communities, Perysian's advice is straightforward: Find your people online.

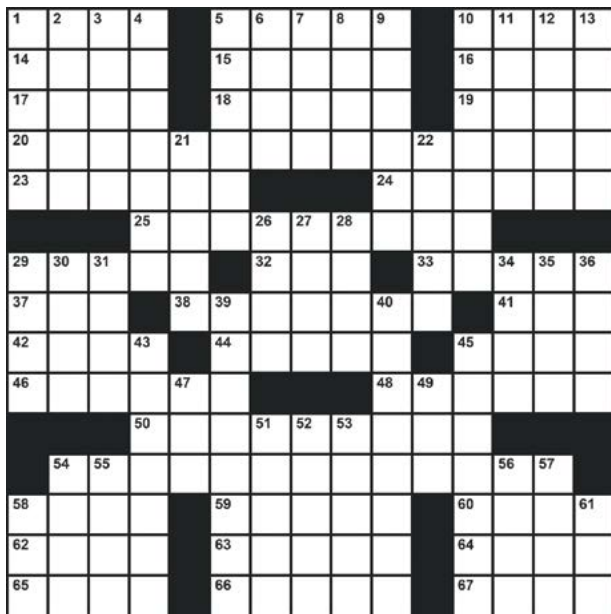
"There was no one like me where I lived, absolutely no one," she says of her own experience. "Once I found community online and I saw that there are a lot of other people like me who exist in the world, it changed my life."

For those interested in following her path to social media success, she emphasizes authenticity above everything else. "I was very authentic and very honest, very open about everything in my life," she explains, though she acknowledges that sharing everything isn't for everyone. "People online love to see personality. They love to see people who are real, and who are just existing."

If she could go back and offer guidance to her younger self, growing up on that orchard in Lowell? "Do it earlier," she says without hesitation. "I was so concerned about what other people were gonna think, which is why I waited so long to really exist as how I am. I would just tell myself, 'Fuck it. Just go. Do it. It's gonna happen anyways.'"

It's advice that resonates beyond coming out — a philosophy for living authentically at any age, in any circumstance. She still returns to Michigan for holidays and summer visits, never forgetting the dirt roads and orchards that shaped her. "The goal is to one day end up back in my Michigan fantasy," she says of potentially returning to the Midwest when she can "settle down."

But that's a someday dream. Right now, Perysian is living proof that authenticity works. She's still here, still visible, still fighting — exactly what some hoped she wouldn't be.



- 42 Empty spaces
- 44 More of the quote
- 45 Belle's companion
- 46 It may be under your tongue
- 48 Butted out?
- 50 Man on the flying trapeze
- 54 End of the quote
- 58 Sign up for
- 59 Words before evil
- 60 Type of stimulation
- 62 Hospital worker
- 63 Made two-by-fours, for example
- 64 Swampy area
- 65 Ran, as colors
- 66 Hints for the future
- 67 Look for hotties in a gay bar
- 30 "Six Feet Under" creator Ball
- 31 Puppy bites
- 34 Prayer ending
- 35 Circumcision, for one
- 36 Aspen vehicle
- 39 Joe that's strong
- 40 Offsprings of a deities and a mortals
- 43 Like cathedral window glass
- 45 Pajama parts
- 47 Nevertheless, poetically
- 49 City in Kyrgyzstan
- 51 Building support
- 52 "\_\_\_ having fun yet?"
- 53 Sheets and stuff
- 54 Potting need
- 55 Sweep under the rug
- 56 "The Little Mermaid" prince
- 57 Singular, to Caesar
- 58 Short punch
- 61 Sportscaster Berman

**Down**

- 1 Swim stroke
- 2 \_\_\_ Minh City, Vietnam
- 3 Gone from the plate
- 4 Ariana Grande's half-brother
- 5 Puts in boiling water
- 6 "More" singer Perry
- 7 Take it from me
- 8 Hard to believe, as a story
- 9 Most cunning
- 10 Struts down the runway
- 11 Visitors at advocate.com
- 12 Backus voice role
- 13 Mass of eggs
- 21 Strokes from Spencer-Devlin
- 22 Checks for STDs
- 26 "You bet"
- 27 Small rum cake
- 28 Put out
- 29 Threesome that visited Mary

See p. 19 for answers

**Isn't It Grande**

**Across**

- 1 Nick Malgieri, for one
- 5 Sings like Ella
- 10 Totals
- 14 Pride expression
- 15 "\_\_\_ Eclipse"
- 16 "Make it quick!"
- 17 Court minutes
- 18 Poet Dickinson
- 19 Video game system maker
- 20 Start of some advice from 4-Down
- 23 Tie in
- 24 Fall, for one
- 25 Like a spider of nursery rhymes
- 29 French painter ...douard
- 32 Order of corn
- 33 Pre-Lenin leaders
- 37 "The Greatest" boxer
- 38 Wet floors
- 41 Wire diameter measure

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## ◀ Da Brat

Continued from page 19

You only get one life. And I had never felt that way before in my life. So if you ever get that, people don't even get that in a lifetime. So if you meet your person, take it and run with it.

**As a blended family and a Black queer couple, what legacy of love — beyond your memoir — do you hope your story contributes to cultural conversations around family and authenticity?**

**Judy:** Especially nowadays, I just hope that our story lets people know that they can be themselves, no matter what. Because I know it's LGBTQIA, but everybody has their own story. Just because you date a woman, it doesn't mean that one has to look manly, one has to look girly. I just hope that us being ourselves in exactly how we are can tell other people it's OK to be yourself exactly how you are. And sometimes you might not get the best support. Sometimes you might get the support and it's OK to actually come out of the closet. It's OK.

And it's not as scary as you think once you've crossed to the other side because the people that support you will support you. And sometimes that can even mean walking away from family, but you being yourself should be the biggest thing, that should be point number one. I hope that with our relationship — seeing what she did and her courage and how she was fine afterwards — could encourage somebody else to just be themselves.

**Da Brat:** Some people are not meant to be in your life forever. They're just meant to be there for a season. And if they don't love and support you in your happiness, your genuine happiness, then they probably shouldn't be there.

**Now that your memoir is about to be out in the world, what's next for you both — not just in your careers, but in the ongoing chapters of your love story?**

**Judy:** My beautiful said she wrote a book while she was in prison. [Da Brat wrote it while serving time in prison after a 2008 conviction for aggravated assault stemming from a 2007 nightclub incident.]

**Da Brat:** I did.

**Judy:** I told the people of the world that they

need to make this a New York Times bestseller so they can get her prison book as book number two.

**Da Brat:** Yeah, that was an experience. So yeah, that's interesting. But we just want to continue to be great moms, better moms. We want to get better at everything we do. We thrive to just be the best. We don't know everything. We just want to continue to grow and learn and support each other and support other people and bless other people as we are blessed. We both love to give. We have big hearts and we love sharing everything. So hopefully people can just pay

attention to our story and learn and just want to be better people. The world is kind of a fucked up place right now. So we just want to create a warm space for everybody to just love.

**My last question is a bit selfish, but since you've clearly learned so much about love that you wrote a book about it — I'm six months into dating someone, so what's one piece of advice you think every couple should hear around that point in a relationship?**



**Da Brat:** Pace yourself. Everything is going to be amazingly good. Just get to know the person. Do some tests, go through some experiences with them, see what pisses them off. You need to see all sides if you can before you cross the line and do something major with the relationship. Just enjoy every moment of it too. Enjoy every moment and just make sure it's genuine and just take your time.

**Judy:** I would say make a mess early. So let me give a little bit of context to that.

**Da Brat:** Oh, god. [Laughs.]

**Judy:** We were at my condo at the time and the toilet was clogged from me doing number two and I could not fix it. I could not. I didn't know how to do it. I didn't know how to plunge it. I didn't know how to do it. And it was pretty early in our relationship and it was absolutely disgusting and embarrassing to me, but she treated it with so much care and understanding and just broke the ice of anything that made you feel like you had to be a certain kind of way.

**Da Brat:** She was like, "Oh my god. Don't go in there." I'm just like, "Girl, that's nothing." I got in there and plunged it and cleaned it out, cleaned it up. "Hey girl, it's fresh. Go on and do what you got. It's fixed."

**Judy:** So devastating.

## The nonprofit difference

What makes SPARK's entrepreneurial services model unique is its structure as a nonprofit that doesn't take equity in the companies it supports. Nash-Wong is passionate about this aspect of the organization's mission.

*“Underrepresented founders face more barriers. It's our goal to work with each founder individually and identify what those barriers are and help them find the resources they need.”*

— Kristine Nash-Wong,  
SPARK East director of  
entrepreneurial services

“I'm pretty passionate about the mission of Ann Arbor SPARK entrepreneurial services and being able to help businesses grow as a way to further economic development in our community,” she said. “It's a unique opportunity and a privilege having a front row seat to watching start-ups evolve and thrive.”

This approach creates a different kind of relationship. Thiesmeyer Hook described SPARK as “a friend handholding me through the journey of Align Athlete,” emphasizing the emotional support alongside practical resources. “Having an ally in your camp that can help you figure out what the next steps are and talk you up when you're feeling a little bit down about your progress and validate the good decisions that you've made” has been transformative, he said.

## Why representation creates better solutions

Each founder connected their LGBTQ+ identity directly to the problems they're

solving and their approach to building solutions.

Thiesmeyer Hook cited published research showing that chronic pain is higher in the LGBTQ+ population. “I know whenever I'm really under physical stress, I can feel certain parts of my body tighten up,” he said. “Think about all of those times you walk into an unfamiliar situation and you think about how people in that room might be judging you. Is it safe to be out? Are they looking at my body and making a judgment on my gender identity? That's the stressful situations LGBTQ+ people face every single day when they go out into the world.”

Morefield emphasized that LGBTQ+ entrepreneurs understand community needs in ways others can't. “Those particular people have specific needs and problems and issues that we are the only ones that are capable of understanding in real-world values,” he said. “As an LGBTQ+ entrepreneur, we have firsthand knowledge about how we can solve those issues.”

Lambert spoke to the importance of seeing yourself reflected in spaces you want to enter. “People shut themselves out of rooms really often, and if you don't see yourself in a room, it's easy to shut yourself out,” she said. “When somebody builds something for you, somebody has to be in that room to build it who knows what you're going through and what you need.”

For Morefield, this moment feels particularly urgent. “In our current climate with our current administration, I think that it's really important for us to represent ourselves and to be ambassadors for ourselves,” he said. “On an individual state level, it's important for us to move forward and to show that the LGBTQ+ community can contribute in a really meaningful and impactful way.”

All three founders emphasized that the tech space is more accessible than it might seem.

“Taking one step forward is more than what most people do,” Morefield said. “So if you have an idea and you're passionate about it, pursuing it is the first step. And places like SPARK will be there to support you.”

Lambert echoed this accessibility. “I think sometimes the tech space can feel really intimidating, especially if what you're seeing is just on your phone and you're seeing all these events,” she said. “It's not as scary as it feels. Go to one event, meet one person, see what they have going on, see what you have going on, and then you can build from there.”

Thiesmeyer Hook offered direct encouragement to other LGBTQ+ entrepreneurs. “Don't be hesitant at all. SPARK has been an amazingly friendly place for an LGBTQ+ founder, and I found nothing but nurturing and support from them.”

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