

MICHIGAN'S LGBTQ+ NEWS SOURCE SINCE 1993

# Between THE Lines™

## The Home Issue

Jonathan Adler has built a career on joy.  
So why doesn't it come naturally?

By Chris Azzopardi

**TAKING THE NATIONAL STAGE**

Locals compete in Miss International trans pageant

**THE QUEER LEGACY OF 'SCREAM'**

How Kevin Williamson's identity shapes the franchise

**FROM UNAWARE TO ALLY**

Comedian Zarna Garg on immigrant family acceptance



# Advice to Be Well

From Dr. Mark Bornstein and Dr. Paul Benson



**Hi Doc, Whenever I look at my lab results on the portal, there always is a lot of “red” in my patient results and the provider never goes over them. Should I be concerned? Last time it said I have 1+ protein in my urine. What does that mean?**  
- AJ

Hi AJ! This is a two-parter. Both are great questions and both have different answers. First, it is very important to understand that lab results are interpreted by your provider as a whole. When I see one lab that is “abnormal”, it matters what that lab is and what the other lab results during that blood draw were. Interpreting labs in isolation does not give the provider the entire picture. More importantly, on the patient side, it can lead to unnecessary anxiety. That being said, I never want to deter you from asking your provider questions. If you are curious about a lab result, please ask! I just want you to know that one lab result that is listed as abnormal does not always mean that there is a problem.

For your second part of the question, protein in the urine is something that the provider will be monitoring. There are many different labs that we use to monitor kidney function. Most of them are monitored in the blood but it is also important to monitor kidney function through your urine. Your provider will use the lab results from the blood and urine to develop a diagnosis and plan to address kidney results.

When someone has protein in the urine, it is

a sign of kidney dysfunction and it needs to be addressed. There are many reasons for protein in the urine, although high blood pressure or diabetes are two common disease states that are often times the culprit. If you have either high blood pressure or diabetes, you should be monitored for protein in the urine. The reason this is important is that if it goes unaddressed for years, it can lead to further kidney damage.

Now for the positive and uplifting news... there are medications to help with protein in the urine! We have both older medications and newer medications that help preserve kidney function and decrease the amount of protein in the urine. This is why it is important to test. If we can identify dysfunction early and start someone on meds, we can prevent new kidney disease and further worsening of existing disease. As we always say, prevention is the best medicine.

**I am living exceptionally well with HIV. I am on a one pill once a day medication for treating HIV. My viral load has always been undetected and my CD4 count stable at around 600. My doctor asked me if I was interested in entering a clinical trial with a new medication to treat HIV. I told him I would think about it. Is this a good idea?** – MJ

Dear MJ,

Your decision whether to participate in a clinical trial is 100% voluntary. It is your choice. Scientific trials are regulated by the

Food and Drug Administration (FDA). Principle Investigators (physicians or other qualified experts) are required to comply with Good Clinical Practice (GCP) laws and regulations to ensure integrity of data, on which approvals of new medications are based, and most importantly protect the rights, safety, and welfare of human subjects.

Research subjects must read, sign and understand the informed consent, which explains in detail what the clinical trial is about and the medication being studied. There are 3 levels of clinical trials a compound must go through prior to approval. Phase 1 has a relatively few healthy subjects and evaluates safety. Phase 2 also has relatively few subjects and tests for efficiency. The third phase has many participants and evaluates safety and efficacy. Phase 3 trials usually are blinded (the investigator and the subject do not know if the study drug is the one being studied, a specified comparative drug used for the same proposed indication, or a placebo). Phase 4 trials are sometimes used for post approval study of an approved drug.

As a clinical trial participant, you have the right to discontinue the clinical trial for any or no reason. As a clinical trial participant, you should be certain you can comply with scheduled study visits and procedures for the entirety of the study.

Clinical research is the engine that fuels new and better medications. Many patients want to be part of that process and eagerly participate in clinical trials. Others do not share that feeling.

Whether or not to participate in a clinical trial is your decision. If interested, you should have a thorough discussion with the investigator and ask all the questions that you have during the informed consent process. If it does not feel right, don't do it. If it is something you feel good about, then go ahead and participate.

At the Be Well Medical Center we have participated in over 120 HIV related clinical trials since 1981. We feel good knowing that we were part of the process in getting most of the medications we use to treat HIV today. We are also currently participating in a HIV prevention study (PrEP) with an injectable medication injected every 6 months, as well as future medications for treatment naive and heavily treated patients living with HIV. You can call our office and select option 7 to reach the clinical studies unit to hear about some of the studies we are currently participating in.

Thank you for the question!

*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. This article is a sponsored editorial produced in collaboration with Be Well Medical Center. Between The Line'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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Courtesy of Jonathan Adler

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**PRIDE SOURCE MEDIA GROUP**

www.pridesource.com  
Phone 734-263-1476

**PUBLISHERS**

Benjamin Jenkins  
benjamin@pridesource.com

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

**EDITORIAL**

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

**Managing Editor**

Sarah Bricker Hunt  
sarah@pridesource.com

**CREATIVE**

**Cartoonist**  
Paul Berg

**Graphic Designer**

Sarah Wolf

**Contributing Photographer**

Andrew Potter

**ADVERTISING & SALES**

sales@pridesource.com

Carolyn Cardenas

734-263-1476

carolyn@pridesource.com

Tim Powers

734-263-1475

tim@pridesource.com

**National Advertising Representative**

Rivendell Media, 212-242-6863

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# 5 Queer Things You Can Do Right Now-ish

BY KELLI DUNHAM

It's that late-winter moment in Michigan when the sun lingers just long enough to make us believe in hope again. The crocuses are plotting. Your group chat is waking up. And you, dear reader, deserve to leave the house for something other than just buying oat milk. This current lineup includes fresh air, fierce scholarship, experimental queer performance and basketball with hot dogs. Let's do something that reminds us we're alive.



## Wander for Spring at the Queer Nature Club Hike

If you've been craving proof that winter is not, in fact, forever, join the Queer Nature Club for a gentle, curious ramble through Central Park South in Okemos, just east of Lansing. The mission: Spot early plant sprouts, birds doing their flirty seasonal thing and maybe even vernal pools. It's low-pressure, high-delight, and open to LGBTQ+ folks and allies of all ages (minors with adults). Trails are mostly flat, a mix of paved and dirt, possibly muddy — which honestly feels on-brand for March. Wear boots. Bring wonder. Leave pets at home.

March 19, 1–3 p.m., Central Park South (1990 Central Park Drive, Okemos). [bit.ly/queernaturehike](https://bit.ly/queernaturehike).



PRISM performs at Pistons Pride Night in 2025. Courtesy photo

## Cheer Loudly at Pistons Pride Night

It's that time of year again, when professional basketball goes queer. Pride Night ticket package includes a seat for Pistons vs. Pelicans, access to the Pride Party Area with all-you-can-eat arena fare including hot dogs, nachos, popcorn, pop, water (carb-loading for equality can be a thing of beauty), a complimentary Pride giveaway, a themed halftime performance and the chance to shoot a free throw on the Pistons court after the game. Even (or perhaps especially) if your athletic peak was middle school dodgeball, you deserve this moment. Organized by the Detroit LGBT Chamber of Commerce, it's community, spectacle and snacks in one glitter-adjacent package.

March 26, 7 p.m., Little Caesars Arena (2645 Woodward Ave., Detroit). [gofeuo.com/event/Pridenight336](https://gofeuo.com/event/Pridenight336).

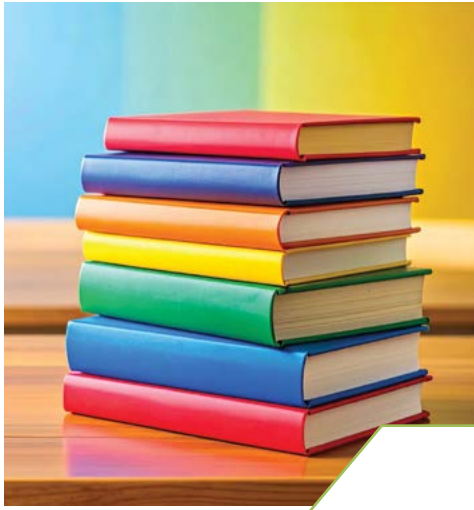


Charli Brissey. Photo: University of Michigan

## Witness Wonder at 'Fawn' in Ypsilanti

Award-winning artist and University of Michigan dance professor Charli Brissey premieres "Fawn," a 75-minute interdisciplinary solo performance exploring grief, desire and how one body can hold contradiction without combusting. Drawing from mythology, trauma response ("fawn" as appeasement) and queer ecological dreamscapes, Brissey plays with the double meaning of "fawn" and "faun," celebrating what some might consider our community's superpower: the ability to mourn and dance all at once.

March 13–15, Ypsilanti Freighthouse (100 Market Place, Ypsilanti). [bit.ly/fawnumich](https://bit.ly/fawnumich).



## Support Scholarship at the Queer & Trans Research Symposium

Craving a space where queer and trans scholarship is the default setting, not the diversity footnote? The University of Michigan's Queer and Trans Research Symposium has you covered. This half-day conference uplifts graduate, professional and undergraduate student research across disciplines. It's a chance to watch emerging scholars present, network with faculty and peers and remember that knowledge production is also community care. Show up, listen well, ask thoughtful questions and maybe leave feeling a little more hopeful about the future of academia and the LGBTQ+ people inside it.



March 13, 11 a.m.–4:30 p.m.,  
Rackham Assembly Hall (915  
E. Washington St., Ann Arbor).  
[bit.ly/researchumich](http://bit.ly/researchumich).



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## Identify Your Queer Safety Net

Queer resilience sometimes looks like paperwork. Take 15 minutes to update your emergency contact info in your phone, and make sure you've done all paperwork for your medical proxy. Does at least one person in your group apartment know your medical history, your pharmacy and your allergies? Have a designated spot to keep all the info — some folks choose the refrigerator. It's not glamorous. But it is wildly loving.

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# Joyful Output, Joyless Outlook

Ahead of his Ann Arbor talk, Jonathan Adler gets candid about grief, creativity and why exuberance has never come easily

BY CHRIS AZZOPARDI

In Jonathan Adler's world, there's a giant Lucite mushroom glowing somewhere in the corner — a symbol, perhaps, of what he calls his current state: "I'm living in a trippy glam-rock fantasy."

It's a fitting, though perhaps unlikely image, for the designer whose career took off as the AIDS crisis was finally waning in the early '90s. Adler's response to surviving this era would emerge as a global lifestyle empire built on technicolor irreverence and unapologetic glamor. As he prepares for his upcoming Penny Stamps Speaker Series talk on April 16 at the Michigan Theater, Adler offers a confession that complicates his image. "I have a joyful output and a joyless outlook," he tells me.

That's to say the "happy" in Adler's decades-long "happy chic" credo — what he now calls Modern American Glamour — is not only deliberate but forged.

"I hope I wasn't too bleak," he says at one point, half-joking, half-checking himself. Then, with a laugh: "Yeah, I'm amazed. For someone who's dead inside, I really appreciate that I could pull that off. I have a very pessimistic outlook. I think it's part of the nature of being creative to be intensely analytical, self-critical and uncompromising. It's hard to be a successful creative person who's peppy and upbeat."

That tension between dark sensibility and exuberant output traces back to when Adler came of age: the postmodern era, which he absorbed growing up in New Jersey. Aesthetically, he saw that period as an invitation — a chance to "have the freedom to mash different styles up, sample and unapologetically blend myriad influences."

"Conceptually, the idea was that maybe we lived in a world in which everything had already been done, and so our role as creatives was to comment on it and play with it," he says. "That postmodern sensibility is totally reflected in my work. I'm a culturally voracious consumer and thinker, and that appetite shows up in what I create."

His style mirrors what he admired in music at the time: sampling — the art of building new sounds from old riffs. He describes that creative cross-pollination as "mind-blowing." His anthem of the era was the Love and Rockets' 1987 post-punk song "No New Tale to Tell." "It really said it all for me," he says. "Though as it turns out, I've told plenty of new tales in my life."

This eclectic sensibility became the foundation of Adler's professional work. Wit and optimism have infused his work since 1993, when Barneys New York purchased Adler's first pottery collection. After Barneys, he expanded into furniture, home decor and opened a store in Soho in 1998, growing into a global design company built on playful luxury. His aesthetic — glossy surfaces, punchy geometry, high-glam irreverence — became unmistakable and remains widely accessible today, available at high-end department stores such as Neiman Marcus, more accessible retailers like JCPenney and online through Wayfair.

But that buoyancy didn't emerge in a vacuum. For a gay man coming of age in the 1980s and '90s, creativity wasn't just self-expression but survival. The AIDS crisis ravaged the community, reshaping friendships, futures and any easy sense of permanence. Seen in that context, Adler's exuberance reads less naïve, more defiant.

The giant Lucite mushroom may signal glam-rock fantasy. The lacquered surfaces may scream joy. But neither tells the whole story. "Don't get me wrong, I'm not a drug-addled [artist]," he tells me. "If anything, I'm actually a very conventional and bourgeois person, to be honest, so I would say I don't really conform to any stereotypes of 'artist.' I'm neither tortured nor particularly crazy. I'm actually just a very bourgeois, workaday person."

Beneath the gloss is something quieter and harder-earned: a gay man who remembers



Jonathan Adler. Courtesy of Jonathan Adler

See **Jonathan Adler**, page 20

# Hometown Pride Meets National Stage as Two Trans Michiganders Head to Major Pageant

Lindsey K. Taylor and Juliette Cayao compete in Miss International Queen USA

BY SARAH BRICKER HUNT

When Lindsey K. Taylor steps onto the stage at Harrah's Casino in Atlantic City this month, she'll be trading her hard hat for an evening gown and crown. Taylor, a construction professional currently overseeing a \$330 million mixed-use portfolio in Detroit's Corktown neighborhood, is one of two Michigan contestants competing in Miss International Queen USA, the nation's largest transgender beauty pageant and the official preliminary to the international competition held in Thailand.

"Trans people are people that are overlooked," said Giovanni Mack, director of Miss International Queen USA. "These are ladies that don't get as much recognition. I don't really see the difference between a cisgender pageant woman and a trans woman pageant."

Joining Taylor is Juliette Cayao, a Lansing-based model, activist and hospitality leader who serves as assistant general manager with Marriott International. For Cayao, the upcoming event marks her first beauty pageant after years of professional modeling work.

"I never realized there was a national pageant space to celebrate trans existence," Cayao said. "To discover Miss International Queen USA felt like an opportunity to finally step into a dream I once thought wasn't meant for me."

The March 26-27 competition brings together 31 transgender women from across the United States. Unlike the quick, televised spectacles many associate with beauty pageants, Miss International Queen USA offers contestants a week-long experience that emphasizes community alongside competition.

"We are huge on sisterhood," Mack explained. "Once you win here you do have to go to Thailand as our winner and represent the USA, and they're there for about a month. So what we like to build is this sense of family."

Taylor, who has competed in several pageants across Michigan and the U.S., has followed Miss International Queen for nearly 15 years, drawn to how the international competition celebrates both resilience and representation for transgender women worldwide.

"I've seen the resilience and the representation that this pageant allows to be a platform for trans women all across the world," Taylor said. "It really celebrates sisterhood and the advocacy that we're putting back into our community."

Both women are leveraging their platforms to address critical issues facing transgender communities. Taylor's focus centers on trans youth, accessible healthcare and affordable



Miss International USA pageant contestants Juliette Cayao (Photo: Jeff Rawk Photography) and Lindsey K. Taylor (Photo: Instagram).

housing, reflecting both her professional expertise and personal passion.

As an active board member of Stand with Trans, Taylor helps program support services including a parent and ally support line, nutrition counseling for people on hormone replacement therapy and behavioral health resources. The work holds particular meaning for someone who found her own path without formal support structures.

"When I was coming up, I was just taught the way by elder trans people that I had just stumbled upon and kind of made my family," Taylor said. "I want to be that next link to the generation behind me, to reach back and lend a hand and provide support and resources."

Cayao's platform tackles suicide prevention and queer mental health awareness through tangible community action. She transformed her most recent birthday into a fundraiser for Trans Lifeline, which provides peer support and crisis intervention resources. She's also in the process of launching the Empowerment Closet. The initiative will provide "gender-affirming apparel for trans individuals in the community, ranging from binders, tucking undergarments, professional attire and everyday clothing, and in the spirit of our trans youth entering into prom season this year, evening gown apparel and suits," Cayao explained.

The Empowerment Closet, which Cayao is developing in collaboration with Lansing's LGBTQ+ community hub, the SALUS Center, and potentially Transgender

Michigan, reflects Lansing's growing role as a regional hotspot for LGBTQ+ resources and affirming leadership.

"Being a Lansing-based contestant, I feel very proud of representing the spirit of my community," Cayao said. "With Lansing being the state capital, we've seen a lot of positive impact, inclusive leadership and affirming policies to support the safety of our community members. To think that I'm a Lansing girly going to the national stage, it feels like an honor to bring that same spirit and present it mainstream across a wide audience."

Both women spoke about the importance of visibility during a time when transgender people face increasing political scrutiny and targeted legislation. Mack emphasized that safety remains paramount at Miss International Queen USA events.

"We really make sure that everybody feels safe," Mack emphasized. "I want everyone to feel like they are welcomed warmly — that they are part of a cozy kind of thing."

The stakes extend beyond the Atlantic City stage. The winner of Miss International Queen USA advances to compete at Miss International Queen in Thailand later this year. Last year, American contestant Midori Monét made history by winning both the U.S. preliminary and the international crown, becoming only the third American to claim the title since the pageant's inception in 2004.

For Taylor and Cayao, who have already begun bonding with fellow contestants through

group chats, the week ahead promises more than competition. The schedule includes galas, fashion shows, charity work, workshops and shared accommodations designed to foster genuine connections.

"There are so many amazing contestants," Cayao noted. "We have the first ever trans NFL cheerleader and a lot of girls who will represent as the first trans contestants in their Miss State USA pageants. I've been texting our group chat saying 'I'm so excited to meet you. I hope we're roommates.'"

The pageant's collaborative spirit challenges stereotypes about cutthroat competition. As Cayao noted, "It's not just a traditional pageant contest. It's a platform for visibility, leadership and empowerment."

For Taylor, the opportunity represents the culmination of years watching from afar. For Cayao, it's a dream she thought wasn't meant for her finally realized. For Michigan's LGBTQ+ community, it's two women demonstrating that transgender excellence takes many forms, from construction sites to stage lights, from corporate boardrooms to community organizing, from professional modeling to pageant crowns.

"It's just going to be an amazing time to share the space all together," Cayao said, "and to just share trans joy with each other."

*Tickets for Miss International Queen USA are available at [bethetransformationalchange.org/miq-usa-tickets](https://bethetransformationalchange.org/miq-usa-tickets), and highlights from the pageant will be posted online. Follow updates on Instagram @missinternationalqueenusa.*

# Pistons Pride Night Returns With All the Good Vibes (and All-You-Can-Eat Nachos)

The annual event brings Detroit's LGBTQ+ community courtside for a night of basketball, belonging and celebration

BY SARAH BRICKER HUNT

When Kevin Lewis attended Pistons Pride Night last year at Little Caesars Arena, it wasn't just the basketball that made an impression. "What stood out to me most was the strong sense of camaraderie among everyone who attended," said Lewis, policy and advocacy director for Stonewall Sports Detroit, which runs LGBTQ+ recreational sports leagues in the metro area. "It was a great opportunity for us to come together outside of our leagues or bar spaces."

That feeling — part family reunion, part block party, part electric sporting event — is exactly what the Detroit Pistons are aiming to deliver again when Pistons Pride Night returns on Thursday, March 26, as the team hosts the New Orleans Pelicans at 7 p.m.

"The Detroit Pistons are honored to celebrate and stand alongside the LGBTQ+ community through our annual Pride Night," said Melanie Harris, Detroit Pistons president of business operations. "Our organization believes in fostering an inclusive and welcoming environment, using the power of basketball to bring people together and ensure everyone feels valued for who they are."

Now in its 12th year, the event has become one of the most anticipated nights on the calendar for Southeast Michigan's LGBTQ+ community. Organized in partnership with the Detroit Regional LGBT Chamber of Commerce, Pride Night has grown from a simple ticket offer into a full evening of celebration that extends well beyond the final buzzer.

## Where community meets courtside

For Lewis, who spends his days building community through sports, the parallels between what Stonewall Sports does on a local level and what the Pistons create on Pride Night are unmistakable. "People join our leagues for many different reasons, but a common thread across many of those reasons is the desire to find community," he said. "Events like this create additional spaces and new ways for us to connect, gather and unite."



The Pistons Dancers perform at Pistons Pride Night in 2025. Courtesy photo

That sense of connection is palpable from the moment fans walk through the doors. The dedicated Pride Party seating area is back this year, giving attendees their own section where they can settle in with all-you-can-eat hot dogs, nachos, popcorn and non-alcoholic beverages (with alcohol available for purchase). The Pride Night ticket package also includes a complimentary Pride giveaway, a special Pride-themed halftime performance and the chance to shoot a free throw on the Pistons court after the game.

It's a lot of fun packed into one evening — and a seriously good deal for a night of professional basketball.

In a moment when some corporate entities have quietly stepped back from

LGBTQ+ initiatives, the Pistons have stayed the course. The organization's commitment to the community isn't limited to one night a year — the team has maintained a consistent, year-round relationship with local LGBTQ+ organizations, actively seeking out ways to deepen its engagement.

"This is especially important in the times we're living in now," Lewis said, "because having an organization as prominent as the Detroit Pistons involved makes a meaningful impact and sets a strong example for other organizations to follow."

Lewis said last year's Pride Night delivered something that went beyond the perks and entertainment. "For me, this event represented visibility and a genuine sense of inclusion."

## Grab your crew and get in the game

Whether you're a die-hard basketball fan or someone who's never watched a game in your life, Pistons Pride Night is one of those events that's really about the people in the stands as much as the players on the court. It's a chance to cheer loud, eat well, celebrate openly and feel the energy of a community that shows up for each other — on the court and off.

Tickets for the Pride Night package are available at [pistons.com/pride](https://pistons.com/pride).

*This content is made possible through our partnership with the Detroit Pistons. Follow the team and buy tickets at [pistons.com/tickets](https://pistons.com/tickets).*

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# Do You Feel Right at Home in These Pages? Here's What You Told Us

## BTL survey reminds us why this work matters

BY SARAH BRICKER HUNT

We've been at this for more than 33 years now — telling the stories of Michigan's LGBTQ+ community through the pages of *Between The Lines* and on [pridesource.com](http://pridesource.com). Over that time, we've grown from a scrappy local paper into the state's longest-running LGBTQ+ publication. But in all those years, we know it's important to occasionally check in with you directly: How are we doing? What do you need from us? And what does it mean to have an independent queer news outlet in your corner?

So last fall, we put out a reader survey. And you showed up — from across the state.

Readers from throughout Michigan responded, many of them taking the time to write detailed, thoughtful answers to our open-ended questions. Some of what you told us made us tear up. Some of it made us laugh. Some of it challenged us. All of it made us better.

Here's what we heard.

## You fiercely value independence

When we asked what “independent LGBTQ+ media” means to you, the responses were passionate and consistent. You told us it means being free from corporate control, beholden to no one but the community. One reader put it simply “It means you have skin in the game.” Another described it as “our community researching and reporting the news that matters to our community.”

Several of you emphasized the importance of truth-telling without compromise — that BTL “tells the truth that the mainstream media doesn't tell.” Others connected independence directly to credibility “fact checking, being real.”

That trust is something we never take for granted. Last Pride, our editorial director, Chris Azzopardi, wrote about how longtime LGBTQ+ activist Judy Lewis shared a story during the filming of our video project at Affirmations — about someone in the mid-'90s who had nearly taken their own life due to isolation, and how connecting to other community members through this very publication made them feel less alone. These pages have always been more than news. They've been a community. A home.



## You want more local coverage — and not just in Metro Detroit

The most common request across the survey was for more Michigan-specific content. You want local event listings, community calendars, Pride Center activities across the state and coverage from places that don't always get attention — mid-Michigan, the Upper Peninsula and Jackson among them. One respondent pointed out that with Outpost no longer publishing, there's a real gap in local LGBTQ+ cultural listings.

We also heard from readers who don't even live in Michigan full-time but still follow our work. One reader in Florida with a summer home in the UP noted they never see coverage of the UP's queer community. We hear you on that.

## You're hungry for arts and culture

Multiple readers flagged arts and culture as an area they want to see even more of. As one respondent put it, news can be found elsewhere, but regional LGBTQ+ arts and culture coverage is rare and deeply needed. That's a message we appreciate — and it's an area where we actually do a lot of work. Arts and culture is a subject we love. In 2025 alone, we published dozens of stories in this space, among them a profile on Detroit Opera's Davóne Tines and our seasonal theater previews, as well as coverage

of community showcases like Affirmations' Kaleidoscope Art Show. What we're hearing is that we need to do a better job of making sure these stories find you. So expect to see us highlighting more of this work on our social feeds going forward.

## You want to see more of the community reflected

Readers asked us to spotlight LGBTQ+ youth, gay seniors, lesbians, trans masculine people, people with disabilities and low-income community members. You also want more coverage of LGBTQ+ friendly religious communities, activism opportunities and safe spaces for well-being. We're committed to making sure more of our community sees itself in these pages.

## You want positivity

While readers appreciate our coverage of politics, policy fights and hard news, several of you gently reminded us to balance it with hope. One reader asked for “fun, positive short stories of good things that are happening in our community on socials — celebrate some of the wins even if they are small.” Another invoked Harvey Milk's famous call to action: “You have to give people hope.”

Feedback about positive stories has helped inspire us to cover queer joy from across the state during Pride season and beyond in our print and online editions, and it's shaping how we approach storytelling across all our platforms.

## You told us you're grateful — and that means the world

Across the survey, expressions of gratitude and encouragement dominated the responses. “I'm grateful for you.” “Continue to advocate for us.” One reader wrote that “our community relies on BTL to keep informed since legacy media all but ignores us.”

In a moment when independent journalism, and especially independent queer journalism, is under enormous pressure, knowing that this work lands with you is what keeps us going.

## We heard the hard stuff, too

A small number of respondents expressed frustration with our trans-inclusive coverage, advocating for a narrower LGB focus.

Over 33 years, BTL has always evolved to reflect the moment our community is living through. Right now, our transgender community members face unprecedented, relentless attacks on their rights, their health care and their very existence. Our guiding voice has naturally led to more of this coverage, and we won't apologize for that.

It doesn't mean we've forgotten anyone. It means we understand that our resources are limited, and that this is an urgent time for trans representation and full-throated allyship. BTL has always been a publication for the entire LGBTQ+ community, and that's not changing.

## So what comes next?

We're taking this feedback and running with it. Here's what you can expect to see more of from us in the months ahead: expanded coverage beyond Southeast Michigan, more arts and culture, and more stories that celebrate the everyday joy and resilience in our community.

But this conversation doesn't end with a survey. Drop us a line at [editor@pridesource.com](mailto:editor@pridesource.com) with feedback and story ideas, connect with us on Instagram, Facebook, Bluesky and TikTok, or just flag us down when you see us out in the community. This publication has always belonged to you. Help us keep making it feel like home.



# How Trans Kids Became Political Targets

ACLU attorney Jay Kaplan dismantles the myths behind trans sports bans



BY JAY KAPLAN

Opponents of LGBTQ+ rights began shifting their focus away from marriage equality after the U.S. Supreme Court's 2015 landmark decision in *Obergefell v. Hodges* opened the way to same-sex marriages throughout the country. As *The New York Times* subsequently reported, that victory for equality prompted the religious right to start shining a malevolent light directly at trans people. Making that turn of events even more disconcerting is the fact that trans youth were often the ones absorbing the brunt of these attacks.

It was a simple calculation.

Reasoning that most Americans are unfamiliar with the concepts of gender dysphoria and gender identity, they believed they could create their own fictitious narrative regarding transgender people, particularly transgender youth, and how this community supposedly threatened the general population.

Unfortunately, many people believed the lies and distortions, allowing far too many politicians to use bigotry and ignorance to rile up their base and generate campaign contributions.

The results have been devastating. Since 2020, we have seen an exponential increase in the number of anti-trans bills being considered by state legislatures, with 850 to 950 pieces of legislation introduced in 2025 alone. Sadly, 27 states now have laws

or policies that ban gender-affirming care for transgender youth. The same number of states have bans on transgender girls being able to play interscholastic sports on female teams. Last month, the U.S. Supreme Court heard arguments in two cases challenging the constitutionality of such bans in Idaho and West Virginia. Most court watchers believe the conservative majority will uphold these sports bans.

I hope those predictions are wrong, because the effects of these bans can be devastating for the people they target: kids who are already dealing with the immense difficulties that come with being a trans youth.

In Michigan, members of the Republican-controlled state House introduced and passed two bills that would ban transgender female athletes from playing school sports in accordance with their gender identity. Fortunately, those bills are not being taken up by the Michigan Senate, which is controlled by Democrats.

A Michigan parent of a cisgender female student has filed a discrimination complaint with the U.S. Department of Education against her school district, for allegedly having her play in a volleyball match against a school district that had a transgender female on their team. And a well-known Michigan gubernatorial candidate recently announced his support for a ban against transgender female athletes, referring to them as "boys."

This false narrative, which essentially says

See [Jay Kaplan](#), page 17

## Kansas Opens New Front in War on Transgender People



BY D'ANNE WITKOWSKI

You don't change the name of the Department of Defense to the Department of War if you're not planning on going to war. Donald Trump and Pete Hegseth and Stephen Miller and all of the other weak and pathetic fascists running the country absolutely love killing and hurting people. It's their kink. This is definitely a time when kink shaming is more than appropriate, and yet they have no shame.

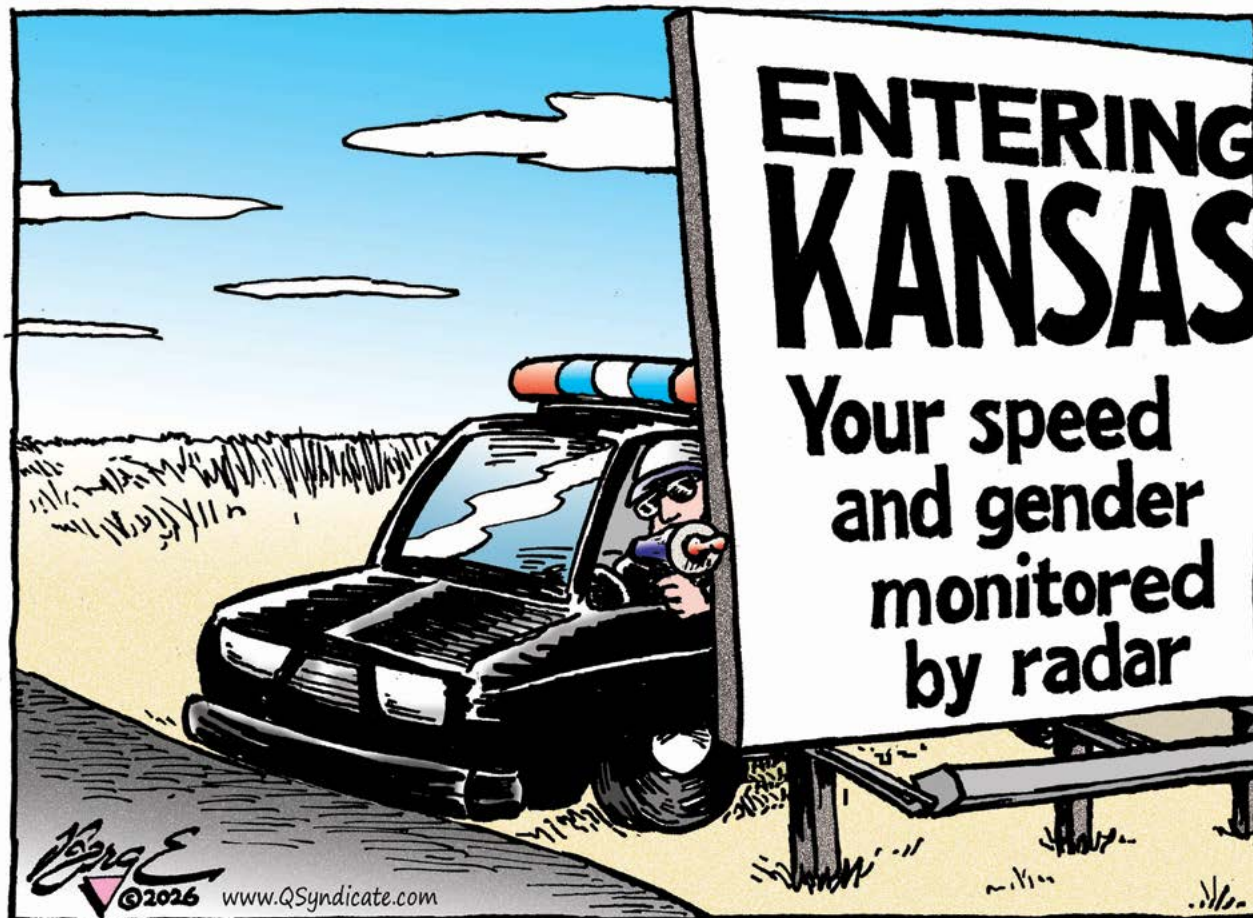
I'm not just talking about Iran, a country the U.S. just started bombing because the aforementioned blood-lusting freaks just felt like it, a situation that is getting worse by the minute. I'm also talking about the war against immigrants, the war against Black and brown people, the war against American cities like Minneapolis, the war against public education, the war against reproductive freedom, the war against democracy, the war against the media, the war against science and, of course, the war against transgender people.

The Republican Party's cruel campaign against transgender people should terrify you, regardless of your gender identity. For one thing, it's fucking immoral.

*And here Kansas is, asking transgender people to not just surrender their licenses — they're asking them to surrender their very identities.*

For another thing, did you not read the list of things this administration is waging war against? It's a long, and incomplete, list. I know Republicans love war, but they are fighting too many at once and that was true before they decided that what the world needs now is more war in the Middle East — a war that appears to have no actual plan in place for what happens next.

And I have something to say to the "it's a distraction" crowd. The Republican war against transgender people is



not a distraction from anything. They aren't intentionally harming transgender people to create a diversion. They're doing it because intentionally harming transgender people is something they want to do.

Harming transgender people is not just a Trump administration thing, it's a goal of the entire Republican Party. We're not only seeing attacks on transgender rights, like access to healthcare, coming from the federal government. We're seeing it at the state level, too.

Which brings me to Kansas, a state that has escalated the assault on transgender people literally overnight with the passage of Senate Bill 244.

SB244 might as well be called the "Push Transgender People Out of Public Life Act."

According to the ACLU of Kansas, "Senate Bill 244 requires transgender people to use the restrooms and other sex-separated facilities in government buildings associated with their sex assigned at birth, while creating new civil and criminal penalties to enforce those restrictions."

In other words, transgender people can be punished for daring to use the "wrong" restroom in a government building.

Perhaps more alarming is that SB244 "changes the rules regarding government IDs for transgender people. It prohibits transgender people from updating their driver's licenses or state ID cards to reflect their gender, and also invalidates transgender people's existing driver's licenses, state IDs and birth certificates if those documents were issued in Kansas and reflect a gender different from a person's sex at birth."

Transgender people got letters in the mail dated Feb. 23

letting them know that beginning Feb. 26, their licenses would no longer be valid. They were told they needed to immediately "surrender" their ID and have a new one issued with the "correct" (read: wrong) gender marker. Three days. No grace period.

Journalist Erin Reed calls this "one of the most significant erosions of transgender civil rights in the United States to date."

And there's no reasonable justification for it. The only thing this accomplishes is forcibly outing trans people, invalidating their identities, and making life more difficult than it already is.

I mean, imagine if you got a letter in the mail saying that you had three days (and that's only if you received the letter on the day it was dated and opened it right away, so most people probably had less time than that) to get down to the Secretary of State's office or DMV to get a new license or you would no longer be able to legally drive. Could you do it? Would you be able to drop everything to make it happen? For many people, the answer is no.

And here Kansas is, asking transgender people to not just surrender their licenses — they're asking them to surrender their very identities.

The ACLU is suing to stop enforcement of SB 244 "so that existing driver's licenses remain valid while this lawsuit is ongoing." But who knows how the court will rule or how long that will take.

Bottom line: Trans rights are human rights and trying to eradicate transgender people is a human wrong. Full stop. That is not up for debate. At least not for anyone with critical thinking skills and compassion for other human beings. Which, unfortunately, does not describe anyone currently in charge.

# THE SCROLL

## QUICK HITS & CAN'T MISSES

### DOJ Investigates Three Michigan School Districts Over LGBTQ+ Curriculum

The U.S. Department of Justice has opened an investigation into three Michigan public school districts — Detroit Public Schools, Lansing Public Schools and Godfrey-Lee Public Schools — over the inclusion of “sexual orientation and gender ideology” content in K-12 curricula. The investigation will also examine whether parents are being notified of opt-out options and whether the districts limit bathroom and locker room access based on biological sex.

The probe follows the Michigan

State Board of Education’s November revision of sex education guidelines to include coverage of sexual orientation, gender identity, consent and safe sex practices. The updated standards maintained requirements for parental notification and opt-out options in accordance with state law.

Erin Knott, executive director of Equality Michigan, said she was “deeply disappointed,” noting that Michigan’s civil rights laws explicitly protect LGBTQ+ students. “Inclusive education policies are not ‘ideology,’ they are evidence-based efforts to ensure that every student feels safe, respected, and seen in their own school community,” Knott said in a statement.

The districts have until April 6 to respond to the DOJ’s request for information.



### Kansas Sued Over Law Invalidating Transgender IDs

Two transgender men filed a lawsuit Feb. 27 seeking to strike down a new Kansas law that invalidated the driver’s licenses and birth certificates of more than 1,000 transgender residents. The ACLU argues the law violates equality, due process and privacy rights under the state constitution.

The law, which took effect Feb. 26, requires residents to change gender markers on identification documents to the sex assigned at birth and bans future changes. It also prohibits transgender people from using government building bathrooms that don’t correspond to their sex assigned at birth. Kansas is the only state to invalidate previously approved gender marker changes.

Michigan allows transgender people to update their birth certificates and state identity documents.

### Whitmer Vows to Protect LGBTQ+ Community in Final State of the State

Gov. Gretchen Whitmer delivered her eighth and final State of the State address Feb. 25, using the speech to outline priorities on literacy, housing

and healthcare — and to send a pointed message to Michigan’s LGBTQ+ community just one day after President Donald Trump’s State of the Union called for restrictions on gender-affirming care for minors.

“I want to take a moment now to speak directly to our gay and trans neighbors, family and friends,” Whitmer said. “I want you to know that you are welcome in Michigan. You belong, you matter, and no matter who comes after you, I’ll stand in the

way.” She added that she would veto any legislation that “diminishes your humanity.”

Whitmer, who is term-limited, touted her record of expanding civil rights protections for LGBTQ+ Michiganders during her two terms. She also proposed \$625 million in literacy funding, an affordable housing tax credit and new protections against medical debt.

### Trans Comedian Saves Baby From Lake Michigan

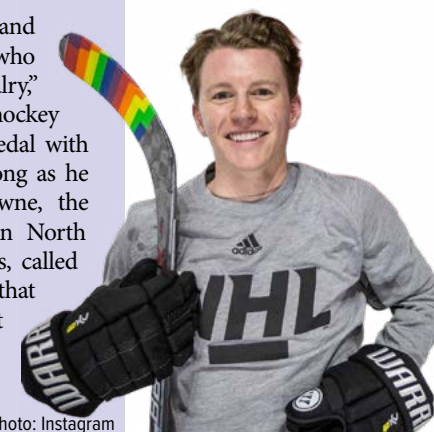
Transgender comedian Lio Cundiff, 30, is being hailed as a hero after diving into the near-freezing waters of Lake Michigan on Feb. 18 to rescue a baby whose stroller had blown into Belmont Harbor in Chicago. Cundiff treaded water for several minutes, keeping the child’s head above the surface until onlookers pulled them both to safety. Cundiff told The Guardian. “I’m just a human who did the most human thing you could do.”

### John Waters Joins ‘AHS’ Season 13

Cult filmmaker and queer icon John Waters revealed during a spoken word performance in Baltimore that he has landed a “big new part” in the upcoming 13th season of Ryan Murphy’s “American Horror Story.” Waters joked he’s been typecast, saying, “I’m always either the devil or Chucky’s father.” The season, expected to drop around Halloween, also features the return of Sarah Paulson, Jessica Lange and Angela Bassett, with Ariana Grande making her series debut.

### ‘Heated Rivalry’ Star Slams Men’s U.S. Hockey Team

Harrison Browne, the trans actor and former professional hockey player who portrays Connors on “Heated Rivalry,” criticized the U.S. men’s Olympic hockey team for celebrating their gold medal with President Trump and laughing along as he mocked the women’s team. Browne, the first openly transgender athlete in North American professional team sports, called on male athletes to do better. “In that moment, there were no allies in that room,” Browne posted on his social media accounts.



Harrison Browne. Photo: Instagram

# The Homebuying Myths Standing Between You and Your First Set of Keys

The path to owning a home might be more accessible than you think

BY SARAH BRICKER HUNT

You're scrolling through your phone on a Sunday morning, watching another couple on HGTV debate whether they can live without a mudroom, and you're thinking: how? How are all these people buying houses? You're in a decent spot — stable job, bills paid on time, doing everything right — and yet homeownership still feels like something that happens to other people. Meanwhile, you're picking out another housewarming gift for a friend who just closed on a place, genuinely happy for them but quietly wondering what they know that you don't.

Here's the thing: They probably don't know something you don't. They just didn't let the myths stop them. And for LGBTQ+ folks, there are a few extra layers of myth to cut through. The homeownership rate among LGBTQ+ people is 51%, compared with 71% for people who identify as straight and cisgender, according to a 2024 Urban Institute analysis, and an Iowa State University study found that same-sex applicants were 73% more likely to be denied a mortgage than heterosexual couples with comparable financial profiles. "At Genisys Credit Union we take pride in fitting our mortgage lending and home loan products to the specific needs of each individual," says Lance Smith, vice president of mortgage lending at Genisys Credit Union. "You will not find cookie cutter loans here — just customized home loan solutions, designed by mortgage lenders who understand what best fits your home, life, and budget."

Those numbers tell a real story — but they don't have to be yours.

Let's walk through what's actually standing in your way — and what's just noise. Spoiler: a lot of it is noise.

## You don't need as much money as you think

Let's start with the big one. You do not need to save 20% of a home's purchase price before you can start shopping. For a \$250,000 home, that would be \$50,000 — a number that feels impossible when rent keeps climbing. The reality is far more accessible:

- FHA loans require just 3.5% down
- VA and USDA loans require nothing down for qualified buyers
- Conventional loans can start at just 3% down

"Genisys Credit Union knows how hard buying your first home can be, and we're here to make it easier on you," Smith says. "Our exclusive First Time Homebuyer Mortgage program offers options tailored to the unique financial situation of these buyers."

That same \$250,000 home might only need \$7,500 to get you in the door. Yes, putting down less than 20% means you'll pay Private Mortgage Insurance (typically 0.5% to 1.5% of your loan amount per year), but it also means you can start building equity now instead of watching rent money disappear while home prices keep rising.

The same goes for credit. You don't need a perfect score to qualify for a mortgage. Many lenders work with scores in the 600s, and some programs go even lower for first-time buyers. What matters more is your debt-to-income ratio and your ability to make consistent payments. And if you're carrying student loan debt? That doesn't automatically disqualify you either. As long as your monthly obligations — including your potential mortgage — stay within acceptable limits (usually around

43% of gross income), you can still qualify.

## Start with a lender, not with Zillow

Here's where most people get it backwards. They scroll through listings, fall in love with houses they may or may not afford and rule themselves out before they even know what's possible.

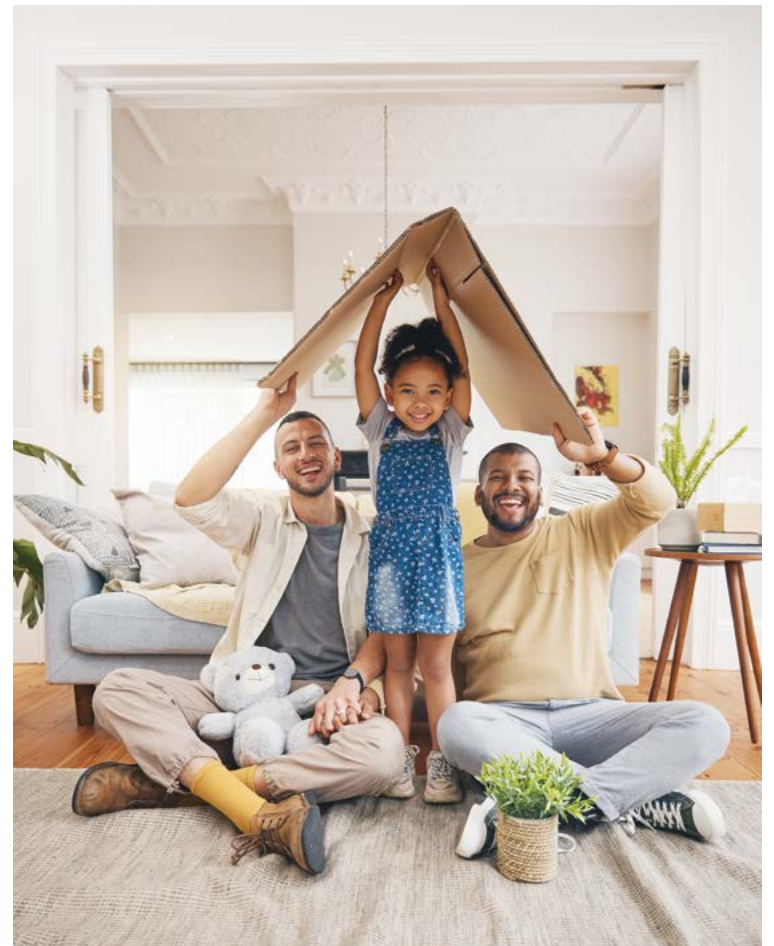
The actual first step is getting preapproved. A preapproval tells you exactly what you can afford and signals to sellers that you're serious. In competitive markets, it can be the difference between getting your offer accepted and watching someone else move into the home you wanted.

"Genisys Credit Union offers the same simple pre-approval process to our first-time home buyers as we do to anyone applying for a mortgage so you will have the knowledge to focus your home search on the right properties" Smith notes.

And while you're building your team, don't skip the real estate agent. A good agent brings negotiation skills, market knowledge and protections you won't have on your own — and for LGBTQ+ buyers, having someone who understands your concerns about neighborhood safety and community acceptance is invaluable.

## Not all mortgages are created equal

Once you're preapproved, you'll need to think about what kind of mortgage actually fits your life. The standard 30-year fixed-rate mortgage isn't automatically the best choice for everyone. It offers lower monthly payments, but you'll pay significantly more in interest over the life of the loan. A 15-year mortgage means higher monthly payments but far less interest overall. An adjustable-



rate mortgage might make sense if you don't plan to stay in the home long-term. This is another area where working with a knowledgeable lender makes a real difference — they can walk you through the math and help you choose based on your financial goals rather than assumptions.

## It's about more than a place to live

Homeownership builds equity, stabilizes your housing costs and creates a foundation for long-term financial security. While rent increases every year, your mortgage payment stays largely the same. That stability can be life-changing, especially for LGBTQ+ people who

may not have access to generational wealth or family financial support.

The barriers are real, but they're not insurmountable. Down payment assistance programs and first-time homebuyer education programs exist specifically to help buyers with lower incomes or non-traditional financial profiles. Whether you're in Detroit, Ann Arbor, Grand Rapids or anywhere in between, the path to homeownership starts with one conversation with a lender. You might be a lot closer than you think.

*This content is made possible through our partnership with Genisys Credit Union. Visit [genisyscu.org](https://www.genisyscu.org) to get started on your journey to home ownership.*



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# When the Person Who Was ‘Home’ Is Gone

For queer people, home is often something we build rather than inherit. After losing his father, Andrew Stillman had to learn what that really meant.

BY ANDREW J. STILLMAN

When I returned to my San Diego apartment after my father’s funeral, I no longer knew what “home” meant. I hadn’t even had a full month in the rental before I lost him. The kitchen still smelled like fresh paint. The wood floors hadn’t had a chance to get dirty. Nothing in that one-bedroom knew what had just happened to me.

In the months before I moved, I had spoken to my father every morning on long walks with my dog. We’d spent the last few years repairing a relationship that once felt fragile, and I’d stopped in Oregon to see him before I made my way south. When I left, he told me it would probably be the last time I’d ever see him. I laughed it off. Now I stood among half-unpacked boxes in the silence of a space I barely knew, and the one person I’d have called for support was gone.

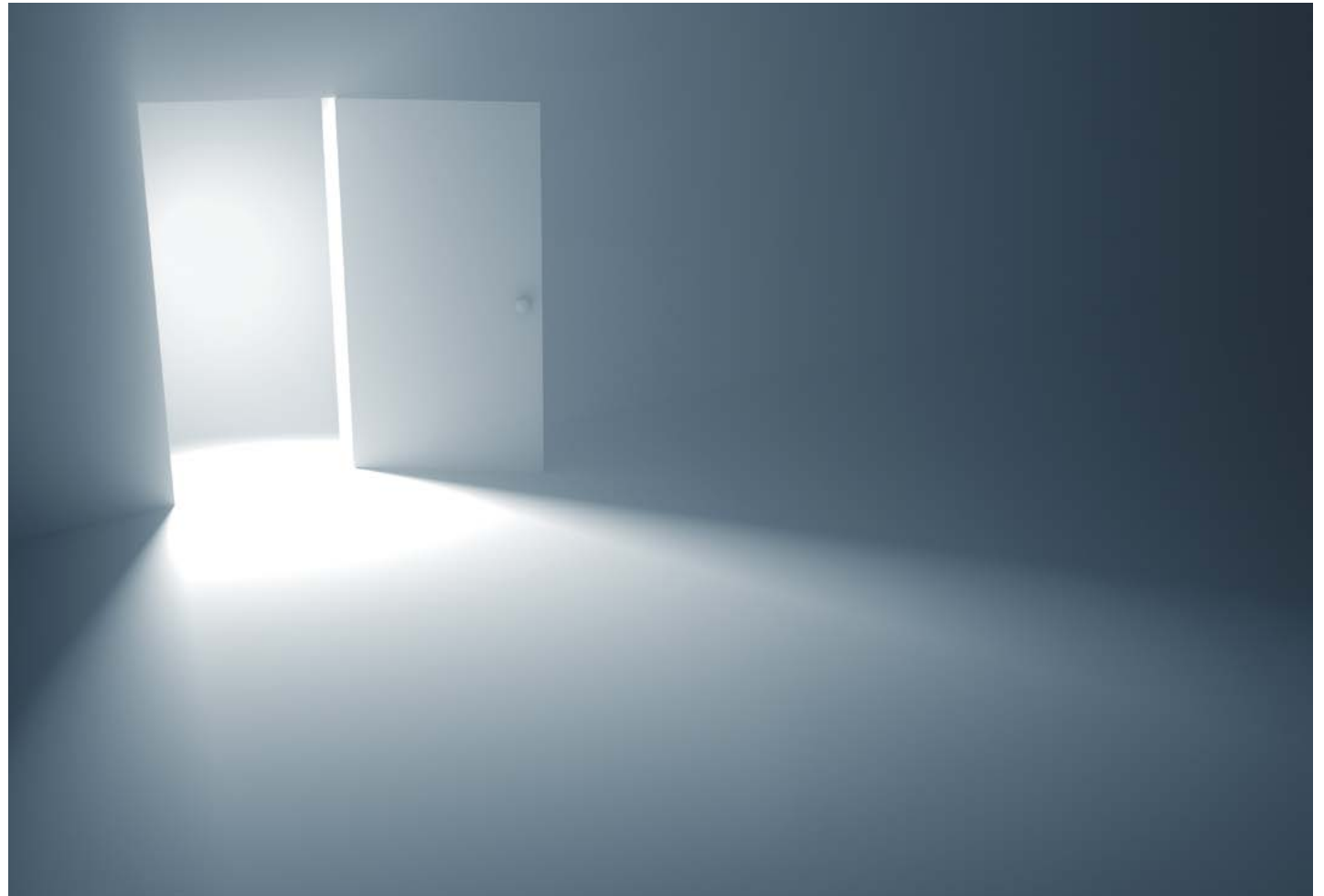
I remember standing there with my keys still in my hand, unsure what to do next. Unpack? Shower? Sleep? Grief makes even the smallest decisions feel impossible. I had looked forward to a whole new life in a brand new city, but all of that shattered when I realized I didn’t have anyone here to lean on yet, and I’d have to navigate this alone. I scrolled through my call list with tears in my eyes as I came to terms with the fact I’d never see or talk to him again.

For a lot of queer people, “home” is already a complicated word, and parental relationships can be the hardest to untangle. For the latter, I consider myself lucky, but it wasn’t always that way. Like many of us, I learned that “belonging” is something we may have to build ourselves. After spending so much effort to rebuild my relationship with my father, however, his loss cracked open a deeper question I was not prepared for:

If home is tied to a person, what happens when that person is no longer here?

I didn’t have the answer, but I did know that I could not sit still inside my grief. The apartment felt too quiet. My thoughts screamed too loudly. He was never meant to live here with me, but I’d assumed he would remain a voice on the other end of my morning walks, a steady presence in a city that still felt unfamiliar. I needed somewhere to put the pain that wasn’t a phone screen or a bottle or another sleepless night. I started replacing “phone call time with Dad” with my yoga mat on the living room floor. Not because I was strong or disciplined, but because I didn’t know what else to do.

Before his death, I’d been following free



classes from Breathe and Flow on YouTube. The teachers behind the channel offered me a steady, strong, no-nonsense approach that made it feel accessible when everything else felt impossible. I decided to join their platform for longer classes that included breathwork and meditation to help me cope. I didn’t show up seeking enlightenment, but rather to “be with” people who taught me where to breathe, how to flow and when to rest.

Over time, the mat became more than a distraction. It became a routine. Then a ritual. Then a small return to myself. In a city where I didn’t know anybody, the practice gave my days shape and my body a place to land. It was the first room in my new definition of “home.”

The more I practiced, the less yoga felt like an activity and the more it felt like a path I needed to take to share with others. Class after class, breath after breath, I noticed my grief turn into little morsels of strength. What began as a coping mechanism wound up becoming a calling.

After many practices that left me broken

and crying on my mat, I recognized the healing the practice brought to me. That recognition led me to enroll in yoga teacher training through Yoga Renew, which wasn’t something I would have imagined for myself before the season of loss. I didn’t enter the training to become an expert, but to find a way to understand that what had helped me through my grief could be a practice I shared with someone else who may feel trapped in a quiet apartment, wondering how to get through the night.

During my teacher training, I took a job at the reopening of a beloved piano bar in Hillcrest. Having grown up in Yosemite, I never had an opportunity to be surrounded by other gay men. Working behind the bar meant I wasn’t just watching the community. I was part of its nightly rhythm. I learned their names, and they learned mine. The restaurant only lasted a few months, but the friendships outlived it. They became the anchor that helped me understand what a chosen family is and shaped my life here. Through them, my definition of home shifted. It had less to do

with where I slept and everything to do with where I felt seen.

Years later, I channeled that same instinct toward ritual and comfort into small, tangible things, including launching my own candle business. I couldn’t see it at the time of loss, but the real foundation came on the mat, in the height of my grief, where I learned how to sit and stay with my emotions instead of running away from them every time they surfaced.

“Home,” I learned, is not only where you start. Sometimes, it is what you build after everything familiar is gone. It lives in chosen family, in shared breath, in practices that hold you when people cannot. Mine began again on a yoga mat in a half-empty apartment, and it keeps expanding every time I help someone else find steady ground inside their own storm.

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*Andrew J. Stillman is a San Diego-based writer and yoga instructor reporting on culture, travel, wellness and the people shaping modern life. Follow him @andrewjstillman.*

these young people are “boys” pretending to be girls in order to gain an athletic advantage, has been spread far and wide in both social media and much of the mainstream media. You can also see some people who would otherwise consider themselves to be allies buying in too. It is tempting to say this is really a non-issue, which it should be in terms of the overall population. What’s wrong with that framing is that it can be a matter of life and death for trans kids just looking to fit in and be accepted for who they are, and could be prone to self-harm if denied that.

There is, however, a potent antidote to these cynical efforts to target and further marginalize trans youth: the truth!

A transgender girl is not a boy pretending to be female. Most transgender individuals have suffered from gender dysphoria, which is characterized by the significant distress or discomfort experienced when a person’s gender identity is incongruent with the gender assigned to them at birth.

The population of transgender people is very small. It is estimated that transgender adults make up less than 1% of the population. The percentage of transgender youth who play in interscholastic sports is even more minute.

The Michigan High School Athletic Association (MHSAA) reports that in 2025, out of 175,000 students in 890 school districts playing interscholastic sports there were only two transgender female students who were granted waivers by MHSAA. So far during the 2025-2026 school year, no such waivers have even been requested.

Moreover, the MHSAA has a strict process for addressing the issue of possible competitive advantage regarding transgender female athletes. The organization does an individualized assessment of each student that includes a thorough review of all medical treatments for gender dysphoria, which can encompass puberty blockers and hormone therapy. Puberty blockers, which can be prescribed at the onset of puberty, suppress testosterone levels in transgender females and the masculine physical changes that accompany puberty. Every high school transgender female athlete has to undergo this individualized assessment by MHSAA to receive a waiver to play in interscholastic sports.

Studies have indicated that transgender females who have received puberty blockers do not have a competitive advantage against their cisgender colleagues. Like cisgender female athletes, the ability of transgender female athletes depends on the individual athlete and the sport being played. There are no statistics indicating that they are disproportionately winning sports competitions. Like cisgender people, trans people have varying degrees of athletic ability. Nor are there any statistics

to demonstrate that trans female athletes are displacing cisgender female athletes. In fact, studies in California and Connecticut show that where trans female athletes can participate in sports in accordance with their gender identity, this has actually increased the participation of cisgender girls.

A blanket ban is not about fairness, but about excluding trans people from public life and denying them equal opportunities. Furthermore, these bans are part of a broader, political agenda to limit the rights of LGBTQ+ people, often tied to other policies that deny transgender youth access to gender-affirming healthcare, deny transgender adults access to accurate identity documents and call for the U.S. Supreme Court to overturn the marriage equality decision. These bans have also been found by courts to violate federal civil rights laws (Title IX) and would clearly violate our state civil rights laws that prohibit gender identity and expression discrimination in education.

These bans, which are offered to “protect” cisgender girls, can actually harm them by fostering an environment of scrutiny, harassment and invasive medical questioning. These bans create a climate where any female athlete who does not conform to traditional, stereotypical ideas of femininity is at risk of having their gender questioned. In states that have these bans, cisgender girls have been targeted, particularly minority athletes subjected to body policing and scrutiny regarding their appearance.

If politicians and elected officials were actually concerned about fairness in girls and women’s sports, they would support an increase in funding to ensure that female athletes have the same opportunities as male athletes to participate in sports competitions. And yet many of these same politicians and elected officials oppose funding increases for a level playing field.

In sum, it’s important to know the facts of transgender female athletes playing sports and to be exposed to a new narrative that is not motivated by fear, mistruths and disinformation (and craven political ambition). Transgender female student athletes want to meaningfully participate in sports in accordance with their gender identity, just like other students. In Michigan we have a mechanism to address concerns about competitive advantage and any blanket ban is ill-advised, unfair, discriminatory and harmful to all students.

So, what’s the problem?

Clearly, it is not trans kids gaining an unfair advantage in sports. The real issue is the cynical adults who think they can generate campaign funds and political support by scapegoating and bullying children who only want to fit in.

We can’t let them get away with it.

*Jay Kaplan is staff attorney for the ACLU of Michigan’s Nancy Katz & Margo Dichtelmiller LGBTQ+ Rights Project.*

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# Zarna Garg Didn't Grow Up With Queer Visibility. Now She's Helping Parents Embrace It.

After starring in the gay rom-com 'A Nice Indian Boy,' the Indian American comedian has become a powerful voice encouraging immigrant families to support their LGBTQ+ kids



Zarna Garg.  
Courtesy photo

BY CHRIS AZZOPARDI

Zarna Garg doesn't fit the traditional mold of a queer activist — and that's precisely why she matters right now. She's a straight ally, a mother, a middle-aged Indian woman who grew up with zero exposure to queer life, and now she's become something rare: a bridge. Between generations. Between tradition and change. Between hesitant parents and the kids they're still learning how to understand.

You might know Garg from her razor-sharp stand-up about marriage, motherhood and the immigrant experience, parts of her life she reflected on in her 2024 book "This American Woman: A One-In-A-Billion Memoir." That same year, she made her feature film debut with "A Nice Indian Boy," a critically acclaimed romantic comedy about a gay Indian American doctor who brings his white boyfriend home to meet his deeply traditional family. The film became a word-of-mouth favorite on the indie circuit, playing in theaters nationwide and later expanding to streaming platforms, where it found an even wider audience.

In my review of the film for The New York Times, I called it a "vibrant addition to cinema's romantic landscape," adding that "love isn't the only winner: cultural understanding and the freedom to choose your own path triumph as well." At a time when queer stories — especially queer South Asian stories — remain underrepresented, "A Nice Indian Boy" offered something radical in its simplicity: same-sex love without tragedy.

I called Garg a "standout" in her role as a mother navigating her son's coming out. Through the film and her outspoken social media presence, the comedian has emerged as an unexpected but deeply needed voice urging parents, particularly in immigrant communities, to show up for their LGBTQ+ kids. Garg is currently on her "Million Dollar Excuses Tour," bringing that same sharp wit and frank reflections on culture to Royal Oak Music Theatre on March 13.

When we spoke, Garg was equal parts comedian and cultural translator — proudly claiming her growing queer fanbase, joking

about being called "mother" by gay men, and making it clear she sees allyship not as politics, but as obligation.

**Your first movie couldn't have been queerer.**

[Laughs.] But I loved it! I'm all for it. I have a huge fan base and group of followers in the queer community. I'm a mother. My kids have friends that are all over the [spectrum]. I don't even know who's dating whom anymore. And it's all fine, they're all loving, sweet people. So I'm thrilled to be of support. Indian people of my generation are a little behind, and I'm gonna slap them into position.

**Why is it important to you to be so vocal about supporting LGBTQ+ youth?**

Everybody walking around denying that their kid is [LGBTQ+], it's like, what are you doing? And for what? Like, who has a problem anymore? I think that my community has sought comfort in tradition. We cannot afford to just bury our heads in the sand to what we know and what's going on in the world around us. We have to be active participants. I truly believe it, even not just on the topic of Pride and being queer, but for everything.

In my own way, I'm an activist. We have a responsibility to show up in this world, and to share, if nothing else, a little bit of positivity — a little bit, I'm not asking for a lot.

**You grew up in India, but then ended up in Ohio. So you have some Midwesterner roots.**

In my heart, fully.

**In India, what exposure did you have to the LGBTQ+ community?**

None.

### When was your initial exposure to queer people, and what did that feel like?

I don't think I was exposed to queer people until I lived in New York. I'm being honest. Not even in Ohio. And a lot of it was my own tunnel vision of, like, trying to live my own life and survive whatever complicated circumstances I was dealing with. I had no exposure to almost anybody, queer or not. But once I came to New York... I've been here 30 years now, in Manhattan.

### It's a little gay in New York.

[Laughs.] It is a little. And I love it! Get me the flag! I think meeting people here and having [LGBTQ+] friends is one thing. Being part of this project and being immersed in it was a whole another thing. The director [of "A Nice Indian Boy"] is in a real-life relationship with the lead star of the movie, and now I'm best friends with both of them. Watching their everyday existence made it so real for me. These two people could not be more perfect. For anybody to have a problem with these two coming together, that's like, no, you're the problem.

### What did you learn about queer culture from working on "A Nice Indian Boy"?

What I was struck by is the emotional maturity of the gay community. My friends who are gay literally have the highest EQ of anybody I know. They are so emotionally present for themselves, and even for me as friends. It's a little jarring. I'm used to the brown dad stereotype, where he knows nothing, he understands nothing. He's very nice, he's very kind and supportive, but he's not getting into the weeds of, like, well, why are you wearing that dress? He's not gonna do all that. But my gay friends that look like men will be like, "But girl, that's not working."

It was shocking to me the first few times it happened. It was shocking, because I'm so used to the brown guys who just check out. And then there's all my other friends who are like, "Let's go look here, let's go look there," or "Let's go experience this museum, or show, or culture." There's such an empathetic state that they live in, my friends, and I'm sure you do. I think because of what you go through in the world, and how you walk through the world, the level of empathy that you have is so high. And what a treasure for all humanity. What a loss if somebody doesn't want that in their life. How ignorant can you be?

### Since the release of "A Nice Indian Boy," how has your queer following

### evolved? Did they just get louder?

So many people have come out of the closet. Countless. They're watching the movie and feeling inspired. They're like, "My mom is just like you." It makes them feel like if she, the TV mom, could do this, maybe my mom will not have [an issue]. A lot of helping the Indian gays come out is me just convincing them that they're not gonna be disowned. They're so afraid. And I know the mothers. I'm like, listen, it's not gonna be as bad as you think. It's gonna be a relief for you. Then, of course, the gay community in America, not the Indians, they're, like, "We're singing Hindi songs!" [Star] Jonathan Groff's fan base shows up [to my shows]. Because they have such good feelings for him that it just transfers over to me! [Laughs.]

### That has to feel great for you.

I'm blessed. I'm honored to be in this position. You know, somebody referred to me as "mother," and that means something. I didn't know what it meant until they explained it to me, but they're like, "You're mother!"

### Madonna is mother. Mariah is mother. And now Zarna is mother too.

To me, that's mom. I've been "mom" for so long, but when they explained it to me, I was deeply honored, because there's no two ways about it. I'm very supportive, and I understand that I'm in a unique position. I'm of that generation that has resisted it. Like, my kids don't even think about it, right? For that generation, this is not a conversation. It's my generation and people older than me. So I know that I'm in a unique gateway position to bridge this gap, and I take it very seriously. I'm very vocal about it. I'm so vocal about it that people are like, "Is your son gay? Is your daughter gay?" I don't know, but if they were, it would be totally fine.

### Do you see space for queer representation in "Zarna"? For example, might there be a queer kid or other LGBTQ+ character in the show?

One-hundred percent, it's gonna happen. I don't know where and when and how because of the mechanics of these shows; you have to fit a particular format. If it was in my hand, it would go a whole different way.

### You would be raising five gay children.

See Zarna Garg, page 26

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### Jonathan Adler

Continued from page 6

when making things was a way to stay sane — to stay grounded, to step out from under grief, even if only for a few hours.

“I’m very lucky to have missed the worst of HIV when that was a true overwhelming crisis in a way I don’t think young gay people could possibly even understand, if I’m being totally honest,” he says. “It was just an existential threat of a different order of magnitude.”

Then he makes it personal. “Imagine if all of your 28-year-old friends were getting sick and dying. It’s a different order of magnitude.”

During that time, he found his way back to the studio. “Going into the pottery studio was a way to avoid thinking about the horror,” he recalls. “I got completely lost in my creative process.”

For LGBTQ+ creatives, that kind of resilience is lived. Adler, now 59, says the design world itself has long been welcoming. “Design has always been a haven for the gay community,” he says. In that sense, he’s felt lucky. More broadly, he adds, “During my life, I’ve seen life as a gay guy get much easier and better.”

“I think it’d be tough to be straight in the design world,” he adds, laughing. “It’d be like being straight on ‘RuPaul’s Drag Race.’ One guy did it and I’m like, did he?”

That deep absorption — the tactile, grounding experience of working with clay — has sustained him personally. It’s why he bristles at what creativity has become in the age of social media. For him, it’s the difference between “productive versus performative.”

“I think social media is a complete blight because it’s not a productive rabbit hole down which to go,” Adler says. “Creativity is a productive rabbit



Jonathan Adler in his early years as a potter, honing the craft that would launch his “happy chic” empire. Courtesy of Jonathan Adler

hole down which to go, and I would exhort people to do that rather than engaging with social media. Being creative is a very private, personal experience. It’s a refuge.”

Then, with characteristic candor:

“Oh, thank god I started before social media. I can’t even imagine. I’d be a completely different person. I mean, not to suggest that I’m living the ‘authentic life,’ but whatever my life would be, my brain certainly would’ve

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gotten a parasite from social media, and I would be a completely different person and definitely a worse person.’

Maybe the real throughline of his work has been a deliberate decision to create beauty despite, well, everything.

On the question of guiding younger creatives, Adler is characteristically contrarian. He credits not mentors but “tormentors” — bosses whose behavior he resolved never to mimic, critics whose dismissiveness pushed him to think differently. Even people who didn’t like his work had something to offer. “Listen to your tormentors and think about what you can learn from them.”

“I guess in my case, it was people whose behavior I chose not to mimic,” he explains. “I saw some of my original bosses. I was a young kid and I’m sure I was a terrible employee, but I resolved never to scream at my employees.”

What he learned along the way, ultimately, was his own standard: “If your heirs won’t fight over it, we won’t make it.” The bar, he says, is both that simple and that high. “I know when something is really unusual and singular. ‘This doesn’t really exist in the world — therefore the world needs this.’”

In a world he views without illusion, Adler still chooses exuberance — not because he believes in it, but because he builds it.



Jonathan Adler. Courtesy of Jonathan Adler

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Early Advocate

Puzzle can be found on page 25

# How Kevin Williamson's Queer Identity Shapes the 'Scream' Franchise

The mind behind Ghostface on why 'Scream' resonates with LGBTQ+ audiences today

BY CHRIS AZZOPARDI

Kevin Williamson knows fear. He's been shaping it, scripting it and watching it slice through movie theaters for 30 years. But with "Scream 7," he's doing something new: directing it himself. For the first time, he's revisiting the world he helped create in 1996 — when Neve Campbell introduced the world to the ultimate "final girl," Sidney Prescott — and seeing it all through his distinctly queer perspective.

In the new "Scream," Sidney is finally living the life she fought so hard for, settled into a quiet town far from Woodsboro and the trauma she survived there. But peace, as "Scream" fans know, never lasts. When Ghostface resurfaces, the threat hits closer than ever — with Sidney's daughter (played by Isabel May) now in the crosshairs.

I sat down with Williamson to talk about why the horror genre spoke to him as a gay kid in North Carolina, bringing openly queer characters like Mindy to life and why the final girl still hits so hard for queer audiences, even decades later.

**How did stepping behind the camera for the first time change the way you relate to these characters and the themes you've carried for decades?**

I feel like everything has led to this. I always wanted to direct one of these. Even Wes [Craven, who directed the first four "Scream" movies] was like, "You should direct one of these." I'm like, "Well, OK." And then it all sort of never happened and life never materialized for this for me until now. And it seems like this is the time. When Neve called and asked me to direct it, I was like, "Oh yeah, absolutely. If I'm ever going to direct one, this is the one to direct." The Sidney Prescott story, that's the one I think I can tell and that's the one I should be telling. And so it all sort of worked, it was kismet.

**When we spoke in 2022, you revealed to me that Billy and Stu were based on real-life queer killers, Leopold and Loeb. That story became one of our most-read articles ever. Why do you think audiences are so fascinated by the idea of a romantic or sexual**



Ghostface is back — and this time, "Scream" creator Kevin Williamson is calling the shots as director of "Scream 7." Photo: Paramount Pictures

**connection between Stu and Billy?**

When you take a knife and stab someone, that's a very intimate act. And I think if you have two people doing it, there's an intimacy there. And there's a lead and a follower and that creates a relationship. I just think it's a very interesting dynamic. I can understand why it's fascinating. I was fascinated by Leopold and Loeb when I did a school report on them. That's how I knew about them, because I was always sort of obsessed with the macabre and I thought, "What an unusual story of one person wanting to kill and the other one just wanting to do it to make the other one happy." It was just such a bizarre relationship. And I thought, "Well, let's make Billy and Stu bizarre, let's make them crazy." And so I kind of just went down that road. I thought it was a fascinating journey.

**When I interviewed Neve, she**

**acknowledged a "burgeoning love relationship" between Billy and Stu. How do you categorize their relationship?**

As a queer writer, my love for horror films comes out of being that gay kid in a small town who was always trying to escape his world. So I really understood the plight of the final girl. I really always connected to Laurie Strode in "Halloween." I felt like I was always running for my life. I think that's true for a lot of young gay kids, and that's why there's such a subgenre of a gay audience for horror films, which I'm happy to be a part of. And so when I sat down to write [the first one], it was just my way of expressing myself. It's a little bit of my queer-coding, so to speak.

**Beyond just Stu and Billy?**

Oh, it's in the characters of everything I

write. I'm a gay writer, so there's no escaping it. There's a reason Dawson and Joey [in "Dawson's Creek," created and written by Williamson] are named Dawson and Joey.

**Would you go as far as saying that Stu or Billy is queer?**

No, I think it's just queer-coding. I do think there's a love story there in the way that you can make of it what you want. But I do think there's definitely a love story between these two guys, these two killers. And whether it's platonic or not, that doesn't really matter: They're crazy.

**You've told me you were a "shy, little gay writer" who wasn't sure how much of himself he could put on a page. As you revisit "Scream" now, what freedoms do you feel that the younger version of you**

didn't have?

We're in such a different world now. I was much more of a closeted writer back then. I was afraid I couldn't express that part of me, always trying to do a subversion of it. But now the world and society has progressed in such a manner that we have Mindy [played by Jasmin Savoy Brown] at the front. The fact that she's gay is just one more part of the story. It's not a coming out story; it's not focused on that. It just is. And I like that — when characters just are who they are and they're allowed to be who they're meant to be.

**Knowing how queer-coded you had to be at the beginning of your career, how does it feel to direct an openly queer character like Mindy?**

I loved it. I mean, that was one of the greatest things. I found it so emotional for me as a gay writer, and I was so happy that we have this character now in the franchise. And I was happy that I got to write her this movie. I got to bring voice to her, and so it was exciting. It was an exciting thing for me to be able to write Chad and Mindy. This was my first chance to write those voices.

**Matthew Lillard's Stu obviously has a massive queer following. When you think about him now, decades later, how do you understand his interior life differently than you did in 1996?**

It's so hard because now... well, Stu's dead. He died in the first film. Or did he? I know Matthew Lillard, I know him as a human being. I know what a special, wonderful human being he is. And so that's who I know and Stu is just dead. I know I'm being... I can't answer this.

**I imagine this whole press junket is a challenge for you in regards to how much you should and shouldn't reveal.**

Stu who? I was hanging out with Matthew on Saturday night and he goes, "You know what? People keep asking me. I haven't even been confirmed I'm in the movie." I go, "Well, I'm pretty sure the poster's coming out with your name on it."

**Do you think your own queerness**

**has sharpened your understanding of vulnerability — who's allowed to survive, who isn't and how you see that within the "Scream" franchise?**

Well, I mean, by the question alone, I feel like the answer's yes, but it's my DNA. It's who I am as a human. And so when I sit down to write, I couldn't even begin to tell you what part of it is which and which is where. But I do think it is part of everything I do. It's the best part of me.

**In that sense, is there a "Scream"**

*“As a queer writer, my love for horror films comes out of being that gay kid in a small town who was always trying to escape his world.”*

**film that has the most "you" in it?**

I would say the first two because they were written so close together. The story for "Scream 2" was already developed by the time "Scream" was written. And so it was one of those things that had been in my head for years, and then it came out in three days on the page, but I had been thinking about it for a much longer time. And I think it was probably the true representation of who I was at that time. And "Dawson's Creek" was the other one. I think because it was all at the same time, I just got it all out at the same time, all the thoughts that were in your head for so long.

**Why do you think so many queer viewers see themselves in Sidney?**

See *Scream 7*, page 24



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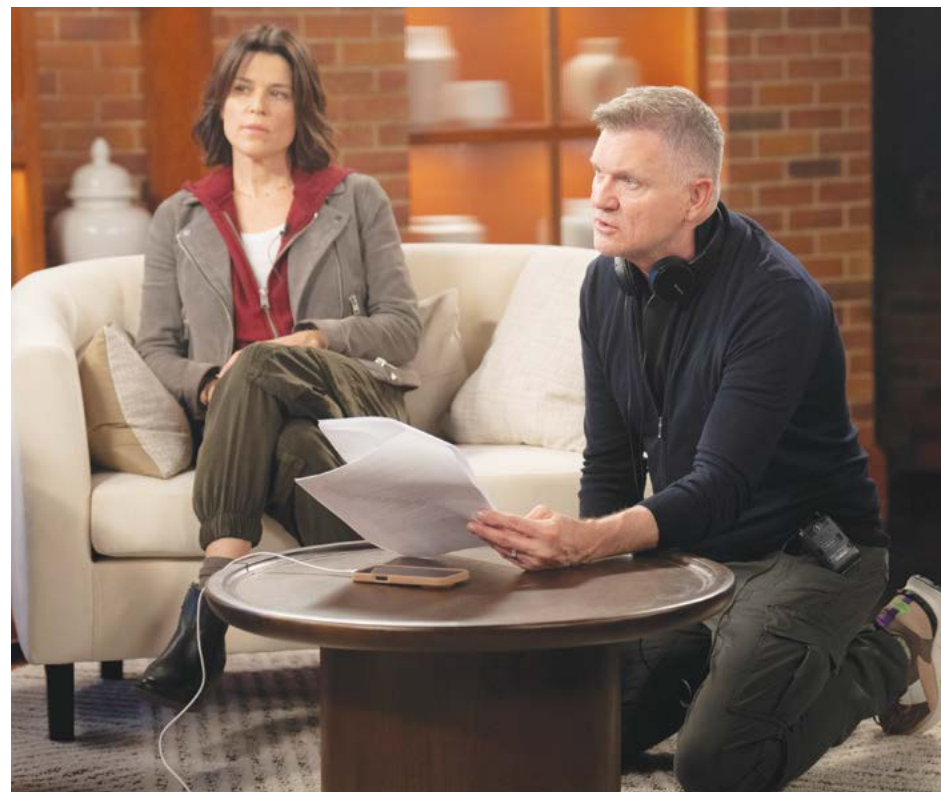
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Neve Campbell with Kevin Williamson on the set of "Scream 7." Photo: Paramount Pictures

#### ◀ Scream 7

Continued from page 23

I think it has to do with the final girl. Certainly as a gay man, I think we can relate to the final girl. We know what it's like to survive, or sometimes we always feel like we're hiding who we are and we can't be our true selves and we're always running and hiding and trying to escape from being exposed. I think that's why the horror genre in general lends itself to the coming out story. And she's fierce and she's awesome, and she's everything that we long to be. I mean, I want to be as fierce and badass as Sidney Prescott.

**And obviously, we have seen her trajectory and the evolution of somebody who has just grown stronger and more fearless. It really resonates.**

Neve Campbell has shaped that performance because that's who she is, and so it's like a marriage of actress to role. She's been this character for 30 years and we've watched her all the way through. This is like one more facet of her, seeing her as a mother. If you think about Sidney's childhood, it's not something you want to talk about. It's like, "Oh, mom, what was your first time like?" "Well, it happened on the night that all my friends were murdered." There's not a good backstory there for her to share. And so it's like, how do you parent when you can't share your true self with them? And it's, what kind of disconnect does that create and can

it be overcome? And what happens when Ghostface comes calling?

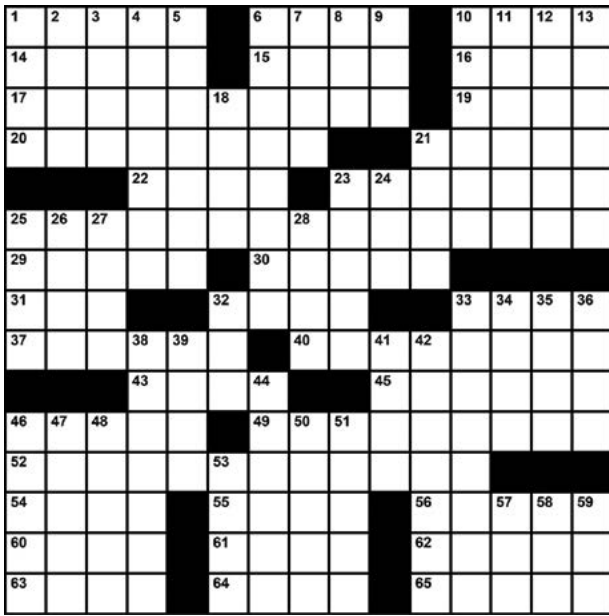
**Neve just carries a kind of emotional truth that can't be replicated. As a gay writer, what has it meant to you to reunite with her as this sort of embodiment that queer people relate to?**

I've known Neve for 30 years now. We've been great friends and we just became greater friends making this movie and we had such a great time. One of the things I love so much is watching her relationship with Isabel May, because casting Sidney's daughter, we wanted to find someone who had the gravitas that Neve has.

Sidney's been through so much, there's a weight to her. And so her daughter probably has a weight to her, too. And so we found this amazing actress who is spectacular and they're so connected in the movie; it's a really great relationship. It's really fun to watch Sidney Prescott be a mother in her Sidney Prescott way, and to watch her daughter, you sort of realize, "At what point is she not going to take any shit either?" Is she going to become a badass? It's kind of like the birth of a final girl.

**As much as I want more "Screams" after this one, I also do want Sidney to just rest. She did nothing wrong. She does not deserve this.**

[Laughs.] I agree with you. I think she deserves happiness, but what you do see in this film is she has found it.



43 Rabble, for short  
 45 Size for the small  
 46 Warship group  
 49 Michael Jackson's ex, familiarly  
 52 First major presidential candidate (1984) to name queer Americans in a convention speech  
 54 Cheerios, once  
 55 Diva's offering  
 56 Lent a hand to  
 60 Former South Korean president  
 61 Clark of Superman fame  
 62 Drink slowly  
 63 Changes colors  
 64 Slight advantage  
 65 Get wind of

23 With a wide-open mouth  
 24 Young boy  
 25 Chilled, as tea  
 26 NY Met, for example  
 27 Fop prop  
 28 "Kiss From a Rose" singer  
 32 WWI troop group  
 33 Metal named for Greek deities  
 34 Stage show with "Sodomy"  
 35 "No" voter  
 36 Voyeur's confession?  
 38 Prepares to go out  
 39 Money from ticket sales  
 41 Sites for three women in a tub  
 42 Laments  
 44 Like bell-bottoms  
 46 Denmark coastal feature  
 47 Former Vermont Senator Patrick  
 48 Cosmetics name  
 50 It tops the cake  
 51 Imitate Dick Button  
 53 Gyllenhaal of "Brokeback Mountain"  
 57 Eminem's mentor  
 58 Immigrant ed. choice  
 59 "Runaway" singer Shannon

**Down**

1 "I'm game!"  
 2 Arthur of the AIDS Quilt  
 3 Person with a PC  
 4 Gets off the track  
 5 Grabs greedily  
 6 Lewinsky, and others  
 7 Very long-range projectile  
 8 HBO competitor  
 9 Stranded driver's need  
 10 River challenges  
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 12 Madonna's "Like a \_\_\_"  
 13 Have in mind  
 18 Peter, Paul, and Mary's "If \_\_\_ a Hammer"  
 21 Harry and family

19 Divide with a comb  
 20 High-ranking angels  
 21 Swinger's joint?  
 22 "Out of Africa" author Dinesen  
 23 Disney lamp rubber  
 25 More of the quote  
 29 Grip tightly  
 30 Enjoys Quentin Crisp  
 31 Ending for velvet  
 32 Lickety-split  
 33 Language of Bangkok  
 37 Bottom scratcher  
 40 End of the quote

**Early Advocate**

**Across**

1 Praises profusely  
 6 Type of personal lubricant  
 10 George's sitar teacher  
 14 City on the Ruhr  
 15 Eight, in Ecuador  
 16 "I \_\_\_ no mood to argue!"  
 17 Start if a quote by 52-Across

19 Divide with a comb  
 20 High-ranking angels  
 21 Swinger's joint?  
 22 "Out of Africa" author Dinesen  
 23 Disney lamp rubber  
 25 More of the quote  
 29 Grip tightly  
 30 Enjoys Quentin Crisp  
 31 Ending for velvet  
 32 Lickety-split  
 33 Language of Bangkok  
 37 Bottom scratcher  
 40 End of the quote

See p. 21 for answers

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### ◀ Zarna Garg

Continued from page 19

[Laughs.] Yeah. And it would be a very colorful show with Bollywood songs thrown in.

**Yeah, you would adopt all the gays who have terrible parents who disown them. They'd all come and live with Zarna.**

And by the way, they would all be doctors, just to be clear. [Laughs.] But with no hesitation, I can say that the answer to that is yes. There will be a lot of different characters that will be in the everyday life of Zarna. And the idea is the show has to reflect a lot of my real life, so it kind of has to be.

**How do you approach material about family expectations?**

I don't think about it, honestly. I find that the most joyful comedy sets that I do are the ones where I just say whatever crazy things come to my mind. The doctor pronoun joke, which I wrote on a whim, really did happen the way I described it. That could have gone different ways. That could have been, like, "Oh, is she not OK with her [son]?" But my audience is brilliant. And I find that the best sets that we do, I'm just out there ranting, because as much as I am an ally of the gay people and the gay community, I am also 50 years old and a part of the mom world. I understand that heart as well, and I'm trying to bring us all to this middle place where we can meet together. And sometimes that means I have to poke fun at the gays. Sometimes that means I have to poke fun at the moms. I don't overthink it at all, because I'm very confident in my audience. They get it.

**What would you say to LGBTQ+ people who are facing attacks right now — and to the parents of those kids who may be contributing to**

**the difficulty they're experiencing?**

This is the gentlest [community] — learn from them. I'd be like, "Take a step back." Not to be the world's leading almost-therapist, but I've been told that real therapists often make you ask, "What exactly are you afraid of?"

**To show her support for the film, your sister made "Moms Love A Nice Indian Boy" T-shirts. What was that like for you?**

My sister is one of the most conservative Indian women on Earth. If you read my book, you'll see her whole role in my life. She was married young; [it was] arranged. Has been happily married all these years. Never even interacted much with the gay community. But I made this movie, and she was at war with every Indian in Ohio. She dragged every auntie and uncle, and I said, "You guys watch every shitty movie out there. You're gonna make time to go and watch this movie, because you need to see. All of you cannot be sitting around pretending that none of your kids are affected by this. This is an obligation you have to be part of the world we're living in." And I gave her that job, and my god...

**She took it and she ran with it, didn't she?**

She booked theaters all over Ohio. She's like, "You know what, don't even pay for it. I'll pay for it, you're coming." That's the thing, I think there's good people, even on the other side. We've just not been able to bridge it. I don't think the people who don't understand the gay community are necessarily haters. I just think that there's a lot of fear of the unknown.

As a mom, I'll tell you what gives me comfort: that this is entirely not true for my kids. My kids' lives are filled with everybody on the spectrum. My daughter will say sexuality is a spectrum. They don't even question it. It's like that software upload was automatic at birth.

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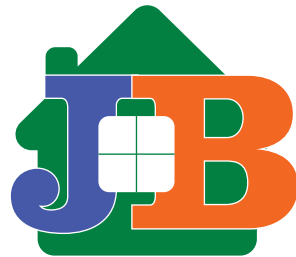
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