The Year of Shears

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Lilianna Reyes: Familiar Face in New Role at Affirmations

BY MICHELLE E. BROWN

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is a March 28 Affirmations board of directors meeting, it was confirmed that Executive Director Susan Erspamer resigned from her position without notice. Her official statement of resignation was read publicly at the meeting by Interim Board President Mike Flores.

“It is with mixed emotions I announce my resignation from Affirmations. After over two years of dedicated work I am pleased at Affirmations’ many accomplishments and successes including a new vision, a new mission, a strategic plan, a rebranding and ending 2017 with a surplus,” the statement said. “I wish nothing but the best for Affirmations now and in the future.”

The announcement followed with an allotted public commentary period in which community members were able to pose questions about the board’s next steps in addition to regular comments. The board provided no comment about public questions asked at the March 28 meeting, and promised that answers will be provided in a town hall meeting to be held sometime in April.

“We haven’t selected a date yet, but we do know that it will be at the end of April,” said Flores. “And the reason that we didn’t want to answer questions at the board meeting was for two reasons. Number one, it was to give all the individuals who may have been there the opportunity to speak, but more importantly to give us the opportunity to hear the community, and to be able to reflect on what those questions are and to allow us to really be able to answer that in April.”

When asked about the community center’s next steps, Flores said that he will push to uphold Affirmations’ precedent regarding the appointment of a new executive director.

“One of the things I’m trying to look at as the president is trying to determine how we’ve done this in the past, so we understand what the precedence is. I also want to look at what we can change as we move forward,” he said. “I know that Susan was selected through a national search and we will probably try to engage in that type of search so that we can identify the best candidate for our community. But again, I think that’s still in the early stages of how we’re actually going to select an executive director.”

In Erspamer’s stead, Affirmations’ program director Lilianna Reyes will be taking over.

“As the first Transgender Latina to lead an LGBTQ+ organization in Michigan, I’m honored to accept the Interim Executive Director role. I welcome this challenging transition with open arms,” she wrote via email announcement. “I look forward to working with the community to make a stronger Affirmations. As we near International Transgender Day of Visibility, join me at Spring Bash on Saturday, April 14th, as we celebrate community!”

As the current interim board president, Flores’ position is up for a vote in May at Affirmations’ annual board of director’s meeting. He said that Reyes has not been given a time limit for her interim position and that her position will not be voted upon this coming May. Flores said that this decision is a deliberate one to avoid choosing someone who isn’t “the right person for our community” because they lack the necessary skills.

“It is true, there has been a lot of turnover at the board level in the past, so moving forward, one of my objectives will be to identify board members that have two things: number one, that they are specialists or experts in particular areas that we need to strengthen Affirmations in, and secondly a long-term commitment to Affirmations as board members,” Flores said. “I would love to see board members that would help us strengthen our policies, and controls which were identified as areas of improvement in our 2016 audit. We’ve addressed those in 2017, but I would like to continue working on how we can make Affirmations stronger in those particular areas.”

And although Erspamer wasn’t a member of the board of directors herself, she answered directly to it, and in Affirmations history the executive director’s position has also faced similar turnover. However, Flores said that some of Erspamer’s greatest strengths were her abilities as an administrator who brought Affirmations out of a transitional “crisis” period when she came on the board two years ago.

“I think that’s one thing Susan helped us do in 2016 when we had an exodus of employees and when we were dealing with a deficit. She was able to build a new core team and was able to stabilize our finances,” Flores said.

For now, Flores said that the priority should be on maintaining the organization’s positive financial momentum, developing a clear plan for finding a replacement and maintaining Affirmations’ relationship to the community. And for community members who are interested in helping the center during its time of transition, Flores recommends several ways for community to get involved.

“We always welcome people to volunteer at our center. The second way people can support the center is through individual donations. The center is open because of donations that we receive from the community, so we’re always looking to expand our donor base to either provide opportunities for people to continue to give more,” he said. “Or by participating in some of our events like the Spring Bash that’s coming up on April 14. Other ways that people can become involved is if they are interested in becoming members of our board is self-identifying themselves as potential board members.”

For those who might be worried about the current state of the center, he said that he felt confident in its ability to come out stronger over time.

“I think that the biggest thing to kind of calm the community down is to help recognize that a lot has happened in the last couple of years and to remind ourselves where we were, where we are, and where we’re going,” Flores said. “If we reflect on that, I think the community will be proud about what has happened in the last few years and that they should be excited about what we’re planning on doing in the future.”
people of color, that’s just not how it works. Sometimes there’s these steps that people have to me to find your way back to each other.”

In her time at Affirmations, Reyes has worked with many LGBTQ youth who are estranged from, or those who, with their families, are in the process of finding their way back to each other. She said that this mirrored her own experience in her youth.

“I would never say that I was homeless, but I chose to leave the house. It was a really bad environment and I chose to leave but I was never kicked out,” Reyes said. “My family always loved me. I knew if I got into any issue, I could have called my parents and they would have definitely supported me. For them (being transgender) was a piece of me that they couldn’t support then, but they still wanted me to be OK.”

It wasn’t until college that she began to find her footing, and began speaking out about social justice issues and LGBTQ rights.

“When I initially went to college, I had no clue what I wanted to be. It ended up becoming a safe haven for me, a place where I could be authentically me and learn about who I was,” she said. “I wasn’t this anomaly. I got caught up in this evolving world and it allowed me to be able to understand the world and where I fit in.”

She went on to earn a bachelor’s degree in anthropology, sociology and history with minor in international and global studies and women’s and gender studies. Eventually, it became clear that she wanted to help other people in her life.

“When I found out it was possible to live as a trans person, then I was like, that’s who I am. There wasn’t a whole lot of thought,” Reyes said. “It was like, ‘That’s who I am.’ I knew this was going to be hard. And I had to think like, ‘What am I going to do for a job? I don’t think anyone’s going to hire me.’ And then I’m like, ‘What am I going to do for a job? I don’t think anyone’s going to hire me.’ And then I’m like, ‘Oh, social justice, that should work.’”

Reyes also earned a master’s degree in public administration, focused on non-profit leadership and was certified as a substance abuse prevention specialist. She gained real-world experience when she worked with several nonprofits including Planned Parenthood, National Organization for Women and the NAACP.

When asked if she ever felt that she was tokenized in her work, she responded directly.

“To be completely honest with you, yes. Some did use me as a token,” Reyes said. “The thing is, is that sometimes being used as a token allowed me to get in the door. Once I was in, then I pushed for my agenda to promote diversity and inclusion of the LGBTQ community. The good thing is all those organizations supported me. I also definitely think that a lot of the people that I worked with didn’t really know what or how much they supported LGBTQ people.”

Reyes said that the trick to building bridges with those colleagues who didn’t understand the LGBTQ community was working inside-out, and building mutual respect between herself and them.

“If you can find common ground with people, then it can be really easy to build bridges. So, sometimes, you just got to like work with people even if you think that nothing's going to happen, but really amazing things can happen,” Reyes said. “I've always been an analytical person where I've thought about pros and cons, but I've never been that analytical person that believes that because there are too many cons, you shouldn't do it.”

And beyond her work as an employee for certain organizations, she has travelled across the Metro Detroit providing LGBTQ sensitivity training to police departments and other organizations. She said she feels like it is her duty to speak up and speak boldly about who she is and what she believes.

Reyes is also a founding mother and sitting board member of the Trans Sisters of Color Project – Detroit and her work has gotten national acclaim. She was featured in USA Today's "Faces of Pride Project" that featured members of the LGBTQ community and their allies from all 50 states.

Eventually, the work she was doing even reached back home, and started to patch up the relationships that were damaged when she came out.

“We had a lot of long talks, a lot of real hard talks that I never thought we would have. And one day my mother said, ‘You know, you’re just like me standing up for what you believe in, no matter what anyone says,’” Reyes said. “And she was like, ‘I’ve never been more proud of you.’ My mom ended up getting to a point where she became a social activist for LGBTQ people.”

Her life experience mirrors that of many in the LGBTQ community who turn to Affirmations for support, programs and leadership and from all outside accounts, it seems that she is stepping into this interim position with the skills and history to make a difference.

The archived interview with Reyes Interim Executive Director of Affirmations is available on the Collections by Michelle Brown podcast on Blog Talk Radio, iTunes, Stitcher or SoundCloud. Michelle E. Brown is a public speaker, activist and author. Her weekly podcast "Collections by Michelle Brown" airs every Thursday at 7 p.m. Follow her on Facebook and Twitter @ CollectionsbyMichelleBrown.
Vocal Marriage Opponent Loses Costa Rica Presidential Election

BY MICHAEL K. LAVERS

A vocal opponent of marriage rights for same-sex couples on Sunday lost the second round of Costa Rica’s presidential election.

Official results indicate Fabricio Alvarado lost to Carlos Alvarado by a 39-61 percent margin. Fabricio Alvarado – a Pentecostal minister, singer and former journalist who is a member of the National Restoration Party – and Carlos Alvarado of the leftist Citizen’s Action Party won the election’s first round on Feb. 4. Fabricio Alvarado and Carlos Alvarado, who are not related, faced off on Sunday because neither of them received at least 40 percent of the vote in the election’s first round.

Sunday’s election took place less than three months after the Inter-American Court of Human Rights issued a landmark ruling that recognized same-sex marriage and transgender rights.

Outgoing Costa Rican Vice President Ana Helena Chacón subsequently announced her government would comply with the ruling. Fabricio Alvarado made his opposition to the decision a centerpiece of his campaign.

Carlos Alvarado publicly supports marriage rights for same-sex couples. He is also a member of outgoing President Luis Guillermo Solís’ party.

“I am very happy,” Margarita Salas, a Costa Rican LGBT rights advocate, told the Solís’ party. “We did what was best to work for both sides,” said Al Salas, president of the group. The committee chose to honor Heywood because of his history of research and his national recognition related to hate groups and hate violence.

“He himself was assaulted and beaten up. He decided one of the things he was going to do in life is to work against hate crimes,” said Salas. “What better way than to honor someone from Lansing to honor what we believe? That’s Cesar Chavez.”

Heywood’s questions generated a community response in Lansing after two incidents in 2017. The first: the murder of a local gay man, Kevin Wirth, outside of his home. Heywood questioned police practices in alerting the LGBTQIA community of bias crimes. Lansing police initially failed to identify Wirth as gay man, a decision that could have been detrimental for the safety of citizens while Wirth’s murderer was at large.

Emily Dievendorf, President of Lansing Association for Human Rights, cited Heywood’s relentless questioning as a reason for his success.

“Todd’s work has always been unsettling,” she said. “It has been productive in how uncomfortable his questions make you. And that is how real change happens. Real change requires seeing the whole truth.”

In July, the second incident arose: an undocumented immigrant from Mexico was brutally assaulted while walking home, a sign stapled to his body, “Go back to Mexico, wetback.”

It took a week for police to alert the public. Heywood alerted leaders in the Hispanic community after the victim approached him. A swift press conference was organized by civil rights leaders to alert Lansing’s large population of immigrants. Allen Tapia of Lansing, an activist of Michigan United, joined in on the response.

“Todd’s diligent research brought to light the 2017 hate crime that ended up mobilizing the community and led to several new safety initiatives,” she said. “I find his work on monitoring hate groups brave and valuable, not just for my neighbors of color here in the city, but for all of us. He plays an important role in our goal of an inclusive, equitable community.”

Speaking before the crowd at the Cesar Chavez dinner, Heywood called for human commonalities to rise above hate groups and fear.

“That hatred is rooted in a deep, gut-wrenching fear. If we want to end the hatred, we are going to have to step up and hear the pain and the fear underlying the hatred.”

Sam Inglot who serves on the Ingham County Health Department and our community health centers is one reason Ingham County has been recognized as a leader in providing healthcare to our LGBTQ residents.”

BTL Journalist Receives Lansing for Cesar E. Chavez Committee’s Humanitarian Award

BY THERESA ROSADO

Over a simple meal of habichuelas and rice, the Lansing area Latino community came together over the Easter weekend to celebrate the life and legacy of Caesar E. Chavez. About 200 people attended the dinner to honor the civil rights legend as well as celebrate the renaming of Grand River Avenue in the Old Town neighborhood of Lansing after the icon. Old Town is also home to Lansing’s two LGBTQ bars.

Also on the agenda, Between The Lines reporter and activist Todd Heywood was honored with The Lansing for Cesar E. Chavez Committee’s Humanitarian Award.

“Todd was chosen unanimously out of 5 individuals because of what he stood for. Cesar Chavez was not about white or black or just Hispanic. He did what was best to work for both sides,” said Al Salas, president of the group. The committee chose to honor Heywood because of his history of research and his national recognition related to hate groups and hate violence.

“Heywood’s questions generated a community response in Lansing after two incidents in 2017. The first: the murder of a local gay man, Kevin Wirth, outside of his home. Heywood questioned police practices in alerting the LGBTQIA community of bias crimes. Lansing police initially failed to identify Wirth as gay man, a decision that could have been detrimental for the safety of citizens while Wirth’s murderer was at large.”

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That hatred is rooted in a deep, gut-wrenching fear. If we want to end the hatred, we are going to have to step up and hear the pain and the fear underlying the hatred.

– Todd Heywood

awareness of the hardships and, in many cases, the injustices faced by folks with HIV as well as the LGBTQ community. He is someone who uses his platform to advocate for care and fairness for people who are often marginalized,” she said. “I know that his work with the Ingham County Health Department and our community health centers is one reason Ingham County has been recognized as a leader in providing healthcare to our LGBTQ residents.”

Sam Inglot who serves on the Ingham Community Health Center Board echoed Hope’s sentiments.

“Todd is an open government and transparency purist. No violation is too small,” Inglot said. “All realms of the public, city to Federal level – we need that now more than ever. Lansing is very lucky to have him.”
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Mytesi is a prescription medicine used to improve symptoms of noninfectious diarrhea (diarrhea not caused by a bacterial, viral, or parasitic infection) in adults living with HIV/AIDS on ART.

Do Not Take Mytesi if you have diarrhea caused by an infection. Before you start Mytesi, your doctor and you should make sure your diarrhea is not caused by an infection (such as bacteria, virus, or parasite).

Possible Side Effects of Mytesi Include:
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- Bronchitis (swelling in the tubes that carry air to and from your lungs)
- Cough
- Flatulence (gas)
- Increased bilirubin (a waste product when red blood cells break down)

For a full list of side effects, please talk to your doctor. Tell your doctor if you have any side effect that bothers you or does not go away.

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What If I Have More Questions About Mytesi?
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To report side effects or make a product complaint or for additional information, call 1-844-722-8256.

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Mytesi comes from the Crotalaria jecheri tree harvested in South America.
Joint Chiefs not Briefed before Trump went Public with Trans Military Ban

BY CHRIS JOHNSON

The joint military service chiefs were not briefed on the recommendations by Defense Secretary James Mattis against the transgender military ban or the Trump memo seeking to implement them before the White House went public with them last Friday, according to two sources familiar with the process.

One source said the top uniformed officials at the Pentagon had to download the documents online just like the rest of the public late on March 23 to obtain them for the first time.

Maj. Carla Gleason, a Pentagon spokesperson, wouldn’t deny the joint chiefs weren’t briefed on the recommendation before it went public, but said their representatives were on the panel of experts that advised Mattis on transgender service before he made his recommendation.

“Recommendations and conversations between the secretary and the president are private, however, each service was represented on the panel of experts,” Gleason said.

Gleason said the group of experts on which Mattis relied before making his recommendation on February 22 to the White House was “a panel of service and joint staff senior leaders.”

A defense official said the service chiefs may not have had the documents in hand before they went public Friday, but that wasn’t unusual because it was a part of a process in which Mattis was tasked with producing a recommendation and there was no actual policy before the White House issued its memo March 23.

There’s a history of Trump not consulting the joint chiefs on his plan to ban transgender people “in any capacity” from the armed forces, which he announced via Twitter in July. A BuzzFeed report last month on an email exchange immediately after Trump tweeted out his announcement revealed Chair of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Joseph Dunford called the move “unexpected” and intended to tell Congress he was “not consulted.”

The White House didn’t immediately respond to a request for comment late Friday on why the administration elected not to brief the service chiefs before making the transgender policy public.

Even after the White House made the transgender policy public last week, the Pentagon has insisted it will continue to assess and retain transgender troops in accordance with multiple court orders against Trump’s earlier policy that found banning transgender service members is unconstitutional.

Widow of Pulse Nightclub Gunman Acquitted

BY MICHAEL K. LAVERS

A jury on Friday acquitted Noor Salman of charges that she helped her husband carry out the 2016 massacre at the Pulse nightclub in Orlando, Fla.

Federal prosecutors charged Salman with obstruction of justice and providing material support to a foreign terrorism organization in connection with the June 12, 2016, shooting that left 49 people dead and 53 others injured. Salman’s trial began earlier this month at a federal courthouse in downtown Orlando that is roughly two miles from the Pulse nightclub.

The Orlando Sentinel reported Salman was crying after the jury reached its verdict. The newspaper also noted Barbara Poma, owner of the Pulse nightclub, and several of the victims’ relatives did not speak when they left the courtroom after Salman was acquitted.

“I respect the criminal justice process, and we all have to trust that the jury made its decision free of bias and emotion,” wrote Poma on her Facebook page. “Those of us directly affected by this tragedy must find peace in our hearts and remember that he (the gunman) was the one who pulled the trigger that night. He was the perpetrator, and he should not have one more minute of power over our lives.”

The massacre was the deadliest mass shooting in modern U.S. history until a gunman on Oct. 1, 2017, killed 58 people and injured nearly 500 others during a country music festival in Las Vegas.

Brandon Wolf, a survivor of the Pulse nightclub massacre who is vice president of the Dru Project, a gun control advocacy group, is among the hundreds of thousands of people who participated in the “March for Our Lives” that took place in D.C. on March 24.

“I have not been watching the trial,” he wrote on his Facebook page after the jury acquitted Salman. “I am not personally invested in the outcome, but I know this: True justice, in my eyes, comes from creating a world our 49 angels would be proud of. A world where we are celebrating life, not running from bullets.”

“I love you all,” added Wolf. “Stay strong. We do it for them.”

Poma in her Facebook post said the verdict “cannot and will not divide us.”

“The survivors, families, and first responders as well as the community of Orlando and everyone around the world must now focus on the work ahead of us,” she wrote. “We will always carry the pain of what happened at Pulse, and we will never forget those who were taken. We will wrap our arms around all affected today and in the days to come.”

“It will be difficult, but we will focus now on healing, and we will continue to work to help communities emerge from violence and hate,” added Poma. “It is as important today as it was 21 months ago.”

This article originally appeared in the Washington Blade and is made available in partnership with the National LGBT Media Association.
Poll Gives Trump Poor Numbers on LGBT Rights

BY CHRIS JOHNSON

A recent Economist-YouGov poll on President Trump and a range of other issues gives him a poor numbers on his handling of LGBT rights just days after the administration reaffirmed its ban on transgender military service.

A total of 29 percent of U.S. adults said they approve of the way Trump is handling gay rights, with 12 percent saying they strongly approve and 17 percent saying they somewhat approve. Meanwhile, a total of 44 percent said they disapprove of his handling of this issue, with 9 percent saying they somewhat disapprove and 35 percent saying they strongly disapprove. Twenty-seven percent had no opinion.

The poll was conducted between March 25 and March 27 among 1,500 U.S. adults and has a margin of error of 3.4 percent. The poll also asked respondents about a variety of issues, including views of foreign countries, trade and social media websites.

On whether respondents approved of Trump’s performance as president generally, a total of 39 percent said they approve, with 19 percent saying they strongly approve and 20 percent saying they somewhat approve. But 49 percent said they disapprove, with 9 percent saying they somewhat disapprove and 40 percent saying they strongly disapprove. Twelve percent weren’t sure.

Respondents were specifically asked about their views on transgender people in the U.S. military and Trump’s attempt to ban them from the armed forces—a move he reaffirmed with a memo last week. Despite the memo, the Pentagon is continuing to assess and retain transgender service members in accordance with court orders against his earlier policy.

A plurality of 49 percent said they support openly transgender service, with 31 percent saying they favor it strongly and 18 percent saying they favor it somewhat. Meanwhile, 11 percent said they oppose it somewhat, 23 percent said they strongly oppose it and 17 percent didn’t know.

On whether transgender service has increased military readiness, 10 percent said it has made readiness better, 45 percent said it hasn’t made much difference, 26 percent said it made it worse and 20 percent said they don’t know.

On whether transgender service has increased military readiness, 10 percent said it has made readiness better, 45 percent said it hasn’t made much difference, 26 percent said it made it worse and 20 percent said they don’t know.

As noted by Frankovic, the table results reveal knowing someone who’s transgender increases support for allowing them to serve two-to-one.

The results found Democrats are twice as likely as Republicans to know someone who is transgender. However, veterans and those 65 and older are least likely to know a transgender person. Only 11 percent of veterans said they know a transgender person and 13 percent of those 65 and older said they do.
T
his week’s issue of Between The Lines marks the kick-off of our celebration of 25 years of our dedicated, meaningful, challenging, rainbow-community outreach publication.

Whew! Who would have thought it possible? (Did you?)

I proudly – and, of course, as always somewhat modestly – note that I have been with BTL since day one when co-publishers Susan Horowitz and Jan Stevenson took previous publisher Mark Weinstein’s radical faerie advocacy publication in a radical new direction for all concerned.

I remember our first meeting to discuss the direction the paper would take under Jan Stevenson and Susan Horowitz’s leadership. Mark and his supporters advocated a strong, militant, in-your-face approach. Something along the lines of earlier Gay Liberation newspapers of the late ’70s and ’80s (Tim Toy and John Kavannaugh were proud, innovative promoters).

Horowitz, who, once prominently involved in the Stonewall Riot scene in New York 1969, felt BTL should be a source of news about the vital progress our community is making, its positive events and its personalities. Importantly, news of its varied, nationwide and worldwide interests as well.

Radical militancy would not be the paper’s primary focus – Susan also brought to BTL her extensive journalist/publication/printing background honed in the New York LGBTQ scene.

I began writing my Parting Glances columns in 1993, and again modestly say I have written over 500 columns – approximately 305,000 words total so far – and never missed a deadline, a comma, an asterisk or an after-hours conjunction.

Whether or not at my advanced age that means I’m AC – anal compulsive – is open to psychotherapeutic – albeit nonsexual – group discussion with grammatically correct therapist Joe Kort.

My Parting Glances columns usually run about 600 words. They originally began at about 150 words and were devoted to brief overviews of the outstanding past LGBTQ events of the then soon-to-be-ending 20th Century. How time flies!

Before joining BTL I was writing an occasional story for an earlier LGBTQ newspaper, Ten Percent, and had done an interview with Stevenson, then first executive director of the Affirmations LGBTQ Center.

Stevenson asked me later if I would be interested in writing for BTL. I said yes. Why not? And during my tenure as a writer of history, Detroit background, coming-out personalities, humor, drag queens and the notorious Sister Scatterpin – now running a gift shop on the Isle of Capri – I’ve met many creative, dedicated colleagues.

Dr. Tim Retzloff, Cheryl Zupan, Jason A. Michael, Michelle Brown, Todd Heywood, D’Anne Witkowski, Kate Opalewski, Eric Rader, Ann Cox, Eve Kucharski, Chris Azzopardi, Kevin Bryant … And here’s a real plus for BTL readers. Within a matter of weeks all 1000+ issues of BTL will be accessible online for fast reading reference, local history and, so importantly, remembrance of past trials, tribulations, triumphs – before Trump, and pretty-boy Pence.

And! I modestly invite my PG readers during our BTL 25th Anniversary year to read Parting Glances: The Best of Charles Alexander. (Been there. Done that.)

Charles Alexander is prolific both as a BTL columnist (700-plus columns) and as a well-known LGBT community artist (1000 Face Book images). He is a Spirit of Detroit Award recipient and an Affirmations LGBT CENTER Jan Stevenson awardee. Connect with him at Charles@pridesource.com.

To be transgender in 2018 is to deal with challenging, difficult times. We face attacks from all sides, and the specter of death itself lays heavy upon our community. As a result, I find I often have to spend a lot of time ringing the alarm bells, and warning of dire times.

Yes it is just as important to take a moment to step back, and realize that in spite of the adversity, we are gaining ground.

I think back to when I started out in the transgender community, such as it was at the time. We met in back rooms of hotels or in shadowy clubs – if at all. We were wholly outside the mainstream, and the notion of being “out” as trans was utterly foreign. Our role models were few and far between, as scarce as rights to protect us, or organizations willing to support us.

Today, we’re seeing a bumper crop of amazing transgender people in public roles, from politicians like Danica Roem, authors like Sarah McBride, Jenny Boylan and Janet Mock, and actors like Laverne Cox.

Movies and television were churning out a constant stream of bad “cross-dressing comedies” where a person – usually male – was appearing as a female in order to deceive someone and/or get something. All of this seemed to be borne out of the popularity of the 1960 movie “Some Like It Hot,” where the main characters – on the run from witnessing the St. Valentine’s Day Massacre – join an all-female, traveling musical act. The same tropes powered films like “Tootsie,” “Mrs. Doubtfire,” “Juwanna Mann,” “White Chicks” and so many more forgettable films. This was when they weren’t making films featuring cross-dressing murderers like the Buffalo Bill character in “ Silence of the Lambs.”

In those days, we in the trans community were liable
Over the last few years, we’ve seen a new type of film take hold, one that features an actual trans character rather than the capers of the stereotypical “man in a dress” comedies. We’ve seen characters like Rayon, portrayed by Jared Leto in “Dallas Buyer’s Club,” or Eddie Redmayne’s take on Lili Elbe in “The Danish Girl.” I think this came out of the success of Hilary Swank’s groundbreaking portrayal of Brandon Teena in “Boys Don’t Cry,” coupled with an overall increase in trans awareness over the last couple years.

We’re in an era where, in spite of all the adversity we’re facing, we’re showing just what we’re made of – and we shine just like gold. And should we take hope when we see wins like this. What’s more, this isn’t – shouldn’t – be the apex, no more than the capers of the stereotypical “man in a dress” comedies. We’ve seen characters like Rayon, portrayed by Jared Leto in “Dallas Buyer’s Club,” or Eddie Redmayne’s take on Lili Elbe in “The Danish Girl.” I think this came out of the success of Hilary Swank’s groundbreaking portrayal of Brandon Teena in “Boys Don’t Cry,” coupled with an overall increase in trans awareness over the last couple years.

Of course, all of these still have an issue: the transgender characters are played by people who are not themselves trans, and who are all identified with their character’s birth gender.

We’re seeing a new category opening up, the next step beyond these stories and a sign of how far we’ve come since Robin Williams donned a pair of falsies and a gray-haired wig.

In the 2017 film “A Fantastic Woman,” Daniela Vega, a 28-year-old trans woman from Chile, played Marina who is a transgender waiter and singer. Also out from Chile, played Marina who is a 28-year-old trans woman Daniela Vega, a 28-year-old trans woman. She’s spoken out against marriage equality, saying she feared it would essentially make Catholics look like bad people for discriminating against gays.

That’s something she has a knack for, apparently. Doing or saying totally reprehensible things that no decent human would do and then offering a weak apology. Case in point her recent Twitter tantrum in which she made fun of Parkland shooting survivor David Hogg because he didn’t get accepted by colleges he applied to.

As you know, Hogg is a high school student. A 17-year-old. A child. Ingraham is, purportedly, a full grown adult. One without a filter or any compassion.

Now, when I say that Hogg is a child, I am not saying he’s too immature to have opinions and feelings, which is what right-wing pundits like Ingraham believe. He has shown himself to be smart, mature and very articulate on these issues. He’s also said some things that remind us that he’s a 17-year-old who is angry, and rightfully so, after his classmates were slaughtered at his high school. It’s pretty telling that the right wing gives “Mulligans” to Trump for literally every sin and crime he has committed, but are so keen on attacking the Parkland kids for, like, using the F-word sometimes.

This isn’t the first time Ingraham has bared her fangs at a child. And she called the existence of transgender kids, “This new gender-bending phenomenon, which clearly is facilitated and encouraged by a popular culture that seems to have concluded that, you know, traditional gender roles are yesterday’s news.”

Traditional gender roles, which have been used to keep women subservient and men violent and are the basis for sexism and homophobia and transphobia, are something the right-wing loves to champion. Which makes sense considering how morally corrupt their agenda is.

Ingraham has a gay brother, which you would think might bring her around on the issue of LGBTQ rights, but it doesn’t. She’s spoken out against marriage equality, saying she feared it would essentially make Catholics look like bad people for discriminating against gays.

I could go on and on about the many racist and stupid things Ingraham has said, but you can Google that shit if you want.

Instead, I would like to say that at some point in the future people will look back at the time when Americans attacked and vilified children after they’d survived a mass shooting for daring to demand that the people in charge actually do something about gun violence. And they will wonder how a country who valued guns over kids managed to survive.

That is, of course assuming we have a future, because a country that puts gun rights before the right of its own citizens to live cannot survive. Not like this. If we continue on like this we’ll be a country full of angry white men with guns in MAGA and “Who Farted?” hats. Which probably doesn’t sound like a bad thing to Ingraham. After all, instead of having advertisers flee her show, her ratings would go through the roof. And she wouldn’t have to apologize to anybody.

Barring that apocalyptic outcome, maybe Ingraham could just try being a better person.
Who’s to Blame for Trans Military Ban: Mattis or Pence?

By Chris Johnson

When President Trump reaffirmed his ban on transgender military service last Friday, the memo was backed up by a report from Defense Secretary James Mattis in which he asserted that a nine-month review of the issue revealed “substantial risks” in allowing transgender people in the U.S. military. But was it really his doing, or that of Vice President Mike Pence, who has a virulent anti-LGBT record?

Upon the release of the memo, many were surprised – Mattis is one of the more mature voices in the Trump administration – to find he had signed his name to a document against transgender military service. After all, media reports from the time the memo was delivered in February indicated Mattis would advise Trump to allow transgender people to keep serving.

That wasn’t the case in the memo. Apparently by relying on junk science on transgender people, the memo came to the conclusion the Obama administration was in error by lifting the ban on their service and they shouldn’t be in the military.

“The Department of Defense concludes that there are substantial risks associated with allowing the accession and retention of individuals with a history or diagnosis of gender dysphoria and require, or have already undertaken, a course of treatment to change their gender,” Mattis writes. “Furthermore, the department also finds that exempting such persons from well-established mental health, physical health, and sex-based standards, which apply to all service members, including transgender service members without gender dysphoria, could undermine readiness, disrupt unit cohesion and impose an unreasonable burden on the military that is not conducive to military effectiveness and lethality.”

As a result, Trump was able to simply defer to a military expert (this time, for real, as opposed to when he made highly dubious claims on consulting military experts when he announced his ban in July) to maintain the policy. Further, Mattis’ voice gives ammunition to the U.S. government as it defends the policy in court. Now, the Justice Department can clearly argue the ban is a military decision, and the courts traditionally give deference to the military leaders on military matters.

Ashley Broadway-Mack, president of the American Military Partner Association, said Mattis may have been influenced by Pence or President Trump, but signing his name to the document makes the defense chief culpable.

“At the end of the day, Mattis agreed to allow his name to be attached to the final recommendation including outrageous and false claims used to try to justify this administration’s unconscionable transgender military ban,” Broadway-Mack said. “That fact is deeply troubling, and dare I say, a breach of trust for the transgender service members and their families he is charged with leading.”

The conclusions that Mattis reached in his memo are different from views he stated before. During his confirmation hearing last year, Mattis said he intended to reverse Obama-era changes allowing LGBT people in the U.S. military under questioning from Sens. Kirsten Gillibrand (D-N.Y.) and Mazie Hirono (D-Hawaii).

“I believe that military service is a touchstone for patriotism of whatever stripe,” Mattis said at the time. “It’s simply the way that they demonstrate their commitment. And I believe that right now the policies that are in effect – unless a service chief brings something to me, where there’s a problem that’s been proven – then I’m not going in with the idea that I’m going to review these and right away start rolling something back.”

Broadway-Mack said Mattis should remember the words he said under oath before the Senate Armed Services Committee.

“In the end, however, we are confident that justice will prevail in our lawsuit and hopeful that Secretary Mattis will return to the promises he made during his confirmation hearing of ensuring all service members – including transgender service members – are treated with the dignity, respect, and support they need and deserve,” Broadway-Mack said.

For his part, Mattis is keeping tight-lipped about the ban. According to The Hill newspaper, Mattis said new policies “stand on their own” when speaking to reporters Monday prior to meeting with the Indonesian Minister of Foreign Affairs Retno Marsudi.

“I think the statements stand on their own right now, and I don’t need to waste our guests’ time reiterating what’s already down,” Mattis is quoted as saying.

“Keep in mind the transgender military ban isn’t in effect thanks to court order against Trump’s earlier policy and that’s highly unlikely to change given that courts determined banning transgender people is a form of sex discrimination and a violation of due process under the Fifth Amendment of the U.S. Constitution.

A Defense Department spokesperson told the Blade prior to the time the memo was public the military will “still comply with federal court rulings and continue to assess and retain transgender service members.”

In oral arguments for litigation against the ban on Tuesday, U.S. District Judge Marsha Pechman in Washington State said the Trump administration can’t implement any policy barring transgender individuals from serving in the military as a result of her earlier injunction and those of other courts.

Matt Thorn, executive director of the LGBT military group OutServe-SLDN, said the real villain behind the policy is Trump, although Mattis shares some blame.

“I wouldn’t characterize it as escaping culpability from this,” Thorn said. “He is making a recommendation that is counter-point to major, long studies and feedback that was provided to the Defense Department in 2016, but at the end of the day, this is the president and the president directing this decision.”

Amid expectations a new policy on transgender military service would emerge last week, rumors circulated Pence secretly harbored a desire to ban transgender people from military service and held an “ad hoc” meeting at the White House with anti-LGBT leaders – including Tony Perkins of the Family Research Council and Elaine Donnelly, who long opposed transgender military service – to keep the ban in place.

At the time, the rumors were unverified and not reported by the Washington Blade, but they’ve since found their way to other media outlets. In fact, ThinkProgress reported Pence essentially swapped out the finding of Mattis in February with recommendations from the “ad hoc” group.

Given the report is dated Feb. 22, the time Mattis turned over his recommendation to the White House, and purports to represent the findings of the working group established by the Pentagon, such a substitution would rise to the level of fraud. The document was submitted to courts adjudicating the constitutionality of the ban, which could result in consequences, including criminal liability or being found in contempt of court, if the report was found to be fraudulent.

Even if the report wasn’t a substitute, Mattis was undeniably under pressure to produce a report against transgender service given his boss Trump had already tweeted he’d ban transgender people from the military “in any capacity” and the White House memorandum to the Pentagon in August sought to ban transgender military service.

Mara Keisling, executive director of the National Center for Transgender Equality, wasn’t sure if Mattis was culpable for the ban on transgender service given the rumors Pence secretly drafted the policy.

“It’s not clear how much Secretary Mattis has actually bought into this reckless ban, or whether he simply got rolled by the president and vice president and elected not to fall on his sword,” Keisling said. “There has been some reporting to suggest the latter scenario. What we do know is that the DOD recommendations
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AIDS Watch Brings 500 Activists to Halls of Congress

By Lou Chibbaro Jr.

Nearly 550 people living with HIV and their allies visited the offices of more than 200 members of the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives on Tuesday as part of the 25th anniversary gathering of AIDS Watch, the largest constituent-based annual HIV advocacy event in the nation.

Among those participating in the Capitol Hill visits were three grandchildren of actress Elizabeth Taylor on behalf of the Elizabeth Taylor AIDS Foundation, which serves as the lead sponsor of AIDS Watch. Also participating in the event this year was celebrity fashion designer Zac Posen, who serves as an Ambassador of the Taylor Foundation.

“The overall objective of AIDS Watch each year is to bring HIV advocates from the grass roots directly to Congress to tell their story and to advocate for the appropriate policies we need to continue to change the trajectory of this disease in America,” said Jesse Milan, president and CEO of AIDS United, the national advocacy group that serves as lead organizer of AIDS Watch.

Milan said AIDS United organizes the event in collaboration with The Treatment Access Expansion Project, which helps provide low-income people with HIV access to treatment and support services; and the U.S. People Living With AIDS Caucus.

He said the activists participating in the congressional visits and who attended a conference one day earlier on HIV issues held at the Marriott Wardman Park Hotel came from 36 states and the District of Columbia.

AIDS Watch participants gathered on the west lawn of the U.S. Capitol on Tuesday morning for a rally before going to congressional offices to advocate for a wide range of AIDS-related issues.

According to Milan, among the issues the activists raised with the congressional offices they visited was the need for increased federal funding for the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention following by a decision by the Trump administration to cut the CDC’s budget next year. The CDC plays a significant role in AIDS research and monitoring the course of the epidemic.

Other issues raised, Milan said, were the need for appropriate funding for the Ryan White AIDS program; support for a federal program in support of housing for low income people with HIV; and federal support for PrEP, or pre-exposure prophylaxis medication that the U.S. FDA says has proven effective in preventing HIV-negative people from becoming infected.

He said activists participating in the congressional visits from southern states were expected to raise the issue of the need to stem the tide of the South continuing to be hit hardest with AIDS in the U.S. Despite the effectiveness of HIV medication in keeping most people with HIV healthy and disease free, many in the South do not know they are HIV positive until they become ill with a life-threatening infection that could have been prevented with early HIV treatment, experts have said.

Although Congress is in recess this week with most lawmakers away on visits to their home states, Milan said AIDS Watch arranged for participants to meet with high-level legislative aides to their respective senators and House members.

“We just completed one visit a few minutes ago with the office of a senator whose legislative aide told us he was thrilled that we were there because he has friends who have HIV,” Milan told the Blade in a phone interview on Tuesday afternoon. It was the office of Sen. Thad Cochran (R-Miss.).

During Monday’s AIDS Watch conference, Elizabeth Taylor grandchildren Quinn Tivey, and Laela and Naomi Wilding presented the fourth annual Elizabeth Taylor Legislative Leadership Awards to two current and one former state legislator.

The three are gay former New York State Sen. Thomas K. Duane, for his longstanding commitment to treatment and care of people living with HIV in New York; gay Pennsylvania State Rep. Brian Sims for his efforts to end employment discrimination against the LGBT community and to advance marriage equality; and Florida State Rep. Carlos Guillermo Smith for his role in recent negotiations that led to the supermarket chain Publix to ensure its employee health plans cover PrEP.

AIDS Watch organizers presented that event’s annual Positive Leadership Award for people who are HIV positive to three people they said showed exemplary leadership advancing support for diverse groups with HIV.

The three are Cecilia Chung, Senior Director of Strategic Projects at the Transgender Law Center; Ronald Johnson, former Vice President for Policy & Advocacy at AIDS United; and Venita Ray, Public Policy Manager at Legacy Community Health.

This article originally appeared in the Washington Blade and is made available in partnership with the National LGBT Media Association.
and report are a weak attempt to reverse-engineer justifications for the same ban that President Trump recklessly tweeted last July. It doesn’t stand up to the least bit of scrutiny. The history of this issue makes clear this ban is being driven by the Trump-Pence White House and its bigoted agenda and nothing more.”

A Defense Department spokesperson referred to the recommendation made public by the White House as the Mattis report when asked by the Blade about its veracity, deferring additional questions to the White House.

A Pence official said the report the vice president swapped a recommendation is “patently false” and insisted he hasn’t been involved in a major way. The official said he defers to the Defense Department on the best way to handle transgender service in the military.

White House Deputy Press Secretary Raj Shah said via email to the Blade the Pentagon produced its recommendation on its own when asked if the president, vice president or anyone at the White House sought to influence the outcome.

“The Department of Defense’s panel of experts was comprised of senior uniformed and civilian leaders who considered the issue based on data and their professional military judgment, without regard to any external factors,” Shah said.

In response to a question from the Blade on whether the ban is a non-starter because of court rulings against banning transgender service, Shah referred to a comment from the Justice Department.

“The point is that the ban is based on scientific distortions, which is why it will fail.”

This article originally appeared in the Washington Blade and is made available in partnership with the National LGBT Media Association.
Scissor Sisters Frontman on Going Solo, Aging and the Day David Bowie Died

BY CHRIS AZZOPARDI

“Oh, did I print that?”

Jake Shears is in a state of surprised perplexity, wondering if a version of his new (and very moving) memoir, “Boys Keep Swinging,” landed in the hands of journalists, such as myself, with what he calls the “weird epilogue.”

After all, Shears (born Jason Sellards) thought he stripped that throwaway entry – quite literally, as “I had them rip that page out from the ones that hadn’t been sent out already when I found out about that” – but those not-to-be-published pages still made the rounds.

In addition to reflecting on the process of reaching into tucked away corners of his life for the two-years-in-the-making memoir, the flash-forward epilogue explains his lengthy break from the Scissor Sisters, which Shears formed with Scott “Babydaddy” Hoffman in 2001, just days after Sept. 11. He writes, “I didn’t have much to say anymore through that particular filter.”

Calling from New York, where he’s starring as Charlie Price in Broadway’s “Kinky Boots,” it’s clear in conversation that even if you didn’t know Shears studied fiction writing at the New School in New York City and went on to adapt Armistead Maupin’s “Tales of the City” into a stage musical, you’d catch on to his writerly conscience quickly. He cycles through his thoughts carefully, acknowledging his tendency to get lost in thought – “here I’m not talking in complete sentences” – or prefacing his explanation of the Trump era’s judgy, joy-shaming rhetoric with, “I’m not gonna be eloquent saying this, I don’t think.”

A love letter to the band of misfits he met living in Seattle and New York responsible for his queer coming of age, a journey that transformed his youth as a suppressed, bullied Christian outcast into a flagrantly gay, go-go dancing, glam-rock superstar, the wonderful “Boys Keep Swinging” is an unflinching account of sexuality in bloom, imbued with Shears’ colorful record of his most influential and formidable years.

Musically, he’s found his creative mojo again, releasing last year’s ’70s-inspired groove “Creep City,” a prelude to his upcoming summer solo debut. “I feel like through the kind of lens of Scissor Sisters, I wasn’t particularly inspired at the moment to make more music that goes through that filter,” he tells me, elaborating on the mixed epilogue. “I really wanted that filter to just be
me, and I’m definitely in a place where I am very comfortable and happy to call the shots.”

My mom is a fan of yours, and we’ve been to a Scissor Sisters show together. She wants to read your book, and I want her to, but I’m worried she’ll ask me a lot of questions about the gay community’s deep, dark secrets – like, what are International Male catalogues? – after she does. It was weird to have my own mom read it! She read it in a day, and I was really beside myself when I finally gave it to her, but I had her primed for it for a couple of years while I was writing it, so she was ready for it. She’s actually been super supportive and loved it.

Considering she wasn’t accepting of you after you came out to her, that’s a pretty evolved woman.

Yeah, my mom’s amazing. I couldn’t have a better mom.

Reading it, I don’t think I expected to find parts of myself in your life story. But some of my earliest memories have been jolted and brought back to life because of you sharing your own. I forgot B. Dalton Bookseller even existed until you mentioned it.

I had no expectations as to what people were going to think or respond to, or whether people would identify with it. It’s funny: (Musician) Sam Sparro, a really great friend of mine in Los Angeles and one of the first people I gave (the book) to when I got the uncorrected proofs, that’s what he said. He was just like, “I feel like this is my own story in so many ways.” The day I turned this book in was devastating to me. I was really very unhappy. Basically, it had to be ripped out of my hands. (Laughs)

Why was letting the book go so difficult for you?

It’d been such a part of my life for a couple of years. I don’t know if I would call it a crutch, but it was definitely this obsession once I had started editing it. I was editing it until the last hour. When I turned in the final – the very last edits – I was so unhappy! I feel a lot better about it now. (Laughs)

When your friend, novelist Rakesh Satyal, suggested you write the book, did you immediately know where to start?

For a while, the book had started where the New York section starts. That was the beginning of the book, and I was going for quite a while. I really wasn’t planning on writing that whole first third (about my youth), and then I hit this point when I was writing well into what is now the second section where I was like, I’m not gonna be able to go any further without actually starting from the beginning. So, I went back. That whole first third I ended up going back and writing.

As gay people in their 30s, it’s sometimes easy to forget the emotional turmoil and personal struggle we went through to be comfortable with ourselves. Did reflecting on your own sexual adversity give you a greater appreciation for who you’ve become – this unabashedly gay role model?

I don’t really think of myself like that, but the thing I did underestimate, though, is, I’m a pretty resilient person. Going back and writing some of the more painful stuff, I feel like I kind of underestimated its effect on me, just in general in my everyday life. I would finish a week and feel terrible and realize I had been sort of reliving some hard stuff, and I didn’t really consider that when I was getting into it and didn’t really know that was happening at the time. It’s strange. I feel like there are 30 different books that I could’ve written.

Did you tap into any other queer memoirists for advice or insight?

The Carrie Brownstein book (“Hunger Makes Me a Modern Girl”) came along exactly when I needed it. It really resonated with me, and it was very influential. Over the summer I met up with (gay author of “The Hours”) Michael Cunningham, and I’ve had a couple of great talks with him about this thing and have gotten a lot of support from him.

It’s hard to give the book to somebody when it’s not finished. It’s just strange. You’ve gotta pick the right people to give it to before it’s done. I had lunch with Elton (John) a couple of weeks ago, and I was excited for him to read it because he plays a prominent part in the last third of the book. He read it in a day and wrote me this email, and he was so happy and loved it. That was really sweet.

In addition to Elton, you write a lot about your childhood idol, David Bowie, in the book. You didn’t actually meet Bowie, right?

No, he just came to a show and I found out about it after I got off stage. I was heartbroken. It was the scariest. Just a really freaky moment for me.

When you found out about his passing how did that affect you?

It was so strange because I’d been pounding “Black Star” all weekend and just absolutely loving it, and then I had told my friend Laura it was great and she needed to listen to it. And so, it was Sunday night and I was hanging out with this guy, this friend of a friend, and we were just having a drink and he didn’t know any Bowie stuff, so I was like, “I’ll play you some good Bowie tunes.” And I was playing Bowie and I got an instant message from my friend Laura that just said, “David Bowie,” with a frowny face. I was so confused. I wrote back and then she gave me the news. It was just a really strange moment because I was playing his music when I found out he died. It was a very weird night. This person that I didn’t really know ended up just being
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**Jake Shears**

Continued from p. 17

with me all night. I was wrecked.
I woke up the next morning and was going
through a lot of stuff at that time in my life,
and I was actually overjoyed in the following
weeks to see the outpouring of love for him.
All the parties and all the memories and just
everyone’s enthusiasm and love for him was
so wonderful, and my darkest time was just
that night, and I’ve been celebrating him ever
since.

Considering Bowie’s influence on you as an
artist, did his death have you contemplating
your own legacy as an artist?

Oh, I don’t know. I don’t even really think
about it. (Laughs) I do feel like I’m into
probably chapter three. The next 10 years are
gonna be another thing for me. The album is
coming out this summer, and it’s an album
that I’m so beyond
proud of and that I
love so much and that
I’m so excited to put
out. You’re gonna dig
it. I’ve never been
prouder of something
so much, as a whole.

Your photos, including
the single cover for
“Creep City,” have
crossed over from
twink to daddy, at least
according to the gay
men who comment on
your Instagram photos.

I know! (The daddy
name) just started a
few years ago and I’m
like, “Well, I guess
we’re here now.” I turn
40 in October and have
a great life and feel as sexy now as ever, if
not sexier. I don’t mind going into my 40s.
I’m really excited about the next 10 years,
and then the next 10 years after that. It was
weird finishing up my 20s and going into
my 30s, but now I’m very happy about my
age and aging.

Regarding the Scissor Sisters, can you give
me an example of something you had to
compromise on that you no longer have to as a
solo artist?

This whole record is about a time and a place
in my life, and it’s definitely me writing
about a very specific place that I was at when
I wrote it. There’s no way I could’ve made
this record without everybody being like,
“What do we all have to perform songs about
you?” (Laughs)

Will it reflect the political turmoil that a lot of
Trump-era art has?

In an inverted way, I personally think
the world needs more joy at the moment.
There needs to be joyful music, and I think
sometimes we forget that in hard times.
Sometimes we can forget to have fun, and I
think right now there are a lot of hands on the
hips and frowning upon having fun, and I just
don’t subscribe to that.

Being in “Kinky Boots” has been the
perfect show for me because it really sums
up my philosophy with the music that I make.
It’s been a really nice fit in that way, and the
magic of being in that show is getting to see
all the people come from all over the world
that have never seen anything like that. As a
New Yorker, we take a lot of stuff for granted.
Urban sophisticates take a lot for granted,
and here’s a show about being yourself, and
in a very loud and proud way. Seeing the
various people come to the show who have
never seen anything like it before is a really
beautiful thing. I do think that it opens
and changes people’s minds.

I make music for
everybody, and I really
don’t care who you are
or what you believe.
If somebody who
has a different belief
system than I do finds
something in my music
to like, I think that’s
a really great thing. I
just really can’t stand
the rhetoric happening
from everybody – or
from a lot of people –
at the moment.

What rhetoric are you
referring to?

I just think there’s
so much judgment
coming from all
sides with social
media. It’s just one
big pile of judgment
on everybody and everything. I just think
everybody’s got room to grow, and I think
that should be encouraged.

You go through a lot of personal growth in the
book. Had you known what you know now about
life, what would you tell your younger self?

I would try to bolster my own confidence that
my own instincts at the time were correct.
There’s nothing I would go back and tell
myself to do differently because I don’t
really have any regrets or anything – OK, I
mean, of course we all have regrets. But I just
took my own path, and I would tell myself,
at 18, 19 years old, “You’re headed in the
right direction. Don’t second guess.” It’s so
crazy how much more self-doubt I have now
as a 40-year-old man sometimes than I did
then. Just writing this book and looking at me
being 21 years old, I’m like, “Oh my god, I
probably should’ve had a little more fear than
I did!”
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Moms Who Love LGBTQ Kids Create ‘Mama Bears’ Documentary

BY DREW HOWARD

Thousands of conservative, Christian mothers of LGBTQ children meet up every day in the virtual world within secret support groups. Together, they help one another grapple with faith, answer questions, and learn how to best support their children.

These mothers are now the focus of the in-progress documentary “Mama Bears.” Helmed by award-winning filmmaker Daresha Kyi, the project will take a closer look at how this group of women — aka “Mama Bears” — found community and a new lens for faith when they chose to embrace their LGBTQ children.

Kyi is now in the early fundraising stage for “Mama Bears.” Interested donors can find a trailer for the documentary and other information on the “Mama Bears” IndieGogo page (https://www.indiegogo.com/projects/mama-bears-documentary), where more than $4,500 has already been raised for the project.

“One of the things I want to talk about is the journey of acceptance. I want to catch a mom who’s just found out, who doesn’t know what way to turn to talk about those early fears,” Kyi told BTL. “Typically the women scour the Bible looking for actual scripture condemning homosexuality, and when they come up empty-handed, there’s a crisis of faith.”

Oklahoma Mama Bear Sara Cunningham found herself in that exact situation after learning her 21-year-old son is gay. As a woman of faith who’d been a member of her church for 20 years, Cunningham was lost and desperate for someone to turn to.

“No one talked about it in church,” Cunningham said. “They tried to minister, but they didn’t know what to do with us. I felt like the only woman in the world reconciling my faith, and feeling like I had to choose between my son and my faith.”

Cunningham was later turned on to a private Facebook group for moms of LGBTQ+ kids called “Serendipitydodah for Moms.” Created in 2014 by Liz Dyer, the page has since grown to 2,500 members and spawned three subgroups focusing on mothers of transgender children, opportunities for activism, and an LGBTQ-affirming faith community.

“Serendipitydodah for Moms” was one of the original inspirations for the “Mama Bears” documentary. Cunningham says the group is for mothers at all stages of the journey, whether that’s a mom who’s still asking questions or reached full acceptance.

“What shocked me was we all had the same story of feeling alienated and separated from our families, churches and society,” Cunningham said. “There are moms losing their husbands because they affirm their child, and stories of youth pastors outing their lesbian youth students on Sunday mornings — it’s just horrible, these horror stories.”

Cunningham started taking her activism to the streets, literally, when she walked in an Oklahoma Pride Week parade holding a banner reading “Free Mom Hugs.” The act proved to be a hit with parade-goers, prompting Cunningham to turn Free Mom Hugs into its entirely own separate non-profit group.

With additional funding, Kyi hopes to document the 2nd annual Free Mom Hugs tour. From May 4-19, Cunningham and a group of mothers will bring the Free Mom Hugs banner to 10 cities along the way to their final destination at the Wyoming grave site of Matthew Shepard, a 22-year-old gay student who was beaten and left for dead in 1998.

Cunningham’s first Free Moms Hugs tour, which concluded at the Stonewall Inn in New York, is featured in the Mama Bears trailer on IndieGogo. Kyi says Cunningham is an example of a mom who turned her grief into activism.

“They call themselves the Mama Bears because in the animal kingdom, the mom is the fiercest defender,” Cunningham said. “They identify with that image — once they get on board they’re ferocious. You will see them marching in Pride Parades. You see Sara, who went from laying in bed for five months crying to starting her 2nd Free Mom Hugs tour and traveling to 10 cities, this time her son going with her.”

Kyi will also use donations to document Susan Cottrell, an international speaker, author and Mama Bear of two LGBTQ+ children. Cottrell is also the founder of FreedHearts, a non-profit organization that promotes inclusivity through speaking events, video courses and secret Facebook support groups for moms and dads of LGBTQ+ children.

Like many of the parents she speaks to, Cottrell was forced to reexamine religion within the church when her two daughters came out of the closet. She said the church’s stance on homosexuality was one of the reasons why she started FreedHearts.

“I told a couple women in my church about my daughter and I was simply told it’s a sin and you can’t accept it,” Cottrell said. “How can’t you accept your daughter? I had to get out ahead of this thing and defend this community.”

Cottrell’s work in the community has afforded her speaking opportunities on Good Morning America, ABC’s 20/20, and Nightline, among other places. She’s also authored three books approved by the Human Rights Campaign, including her most recent titled “Mom, I’m Gay - Loving Your LGBTQ Child and Strengthening Your Faith.”

Cottrell’s activism has come at a price, though, as she’s lost touch with family members and longtime friends due to her outspoken beliefs. She still considers herself a Christ follower, one who’s less tied to church and more so to her personal relationship with God.

“I still consider myself a Christ follower by all means,” Cottrell told BTL. “If you look at Jesus he doesn’t say any of this stuff. If they listened to him they’d have a whole different spirit. I still follow Jesus, but I don’t follow churches and pastors.”

“We advocate because of our faith, not in spite of it,” she added.

Kyi was unable to give BTL a release date for the documentary, but she hopes to finish it “within a year and a half.” Kyi will continue providing developments on the film through social media as well as the “updates” tab on the Mama Bears IndieGogo page.

Anyone interested in joining the Serendipitydodah Facebook support group is encouraged to visit the public page https://www.facebook.com/Serendipitydodah1 or email Liz Dyer at lizdyer55@gmail.com.

For more information about FreedHearts, please visit freedhearts.org. Parents can gain access to the FreedHearts private Facebook support page by inputting their information on the website.

To view the official Mama Bears trailer, click https://vimeo.com/227316524.
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Lesbians Who Tech + Allies Hosts Board Gaymes and Trivia

BY BTL STAFF

Board games and trivia can be great fun, but only in a group. For those looking for an inclusive space to meet new people or maybe meet up with old friends, join Lesbians Who Tech + Allies on Monday, April 23 at B Nektar Meadery.

All ages are welcome to this event, and no ID is required. The event is also wheelchair accessible and compliant with ADA requirements for restrooms.

Founded in San Francisco six years ago, Lesbians Who Tech + Allies is a community of queer women in the tech industry who number more than 40,000. The community prides itself on the inclusion of all LGBTQ people and gender nonconforming people and hosts events in nearly 40 cities around the U.S., including 5 international cities. In order to maintain this community, the group hosts monthly meetings in its various chapters.

This year, the group will be hosting its first-ever leadership summit for mid-level and executive non-binary, LGBTQ women and allies.

The free event will be held from 5:30 to 10 p.m. B Nektar Meadery is located at 1511 Jarvis, Ferndale. More information about the organization and its events can be found online at lesbianswhotech.org and on eventbrite.com.

Ferndale’s Soho Bar Hosts Merge & Member Mixer

BY BTL STAFF

Ferndale’s one and only LGBT bar is switching up its usually relaxed atmosphere for a slightly more professional one on Thursday, April 12. From 5:30 to 8:30 p.m. the Detroit Regional LGBT Chamber of Commerce is hosting a Merge & Member Mixer to allow LGBT professionals and Allies to get to know each other better.

“Business is all about connections. DRLGBTCC is committed to building an inclusive community in SE Michigan,” said the DRLGBTCC website. “Cultivating spaces where transparent meaningful connections between professionals and businesses are necessary for building an inclusive community. Participation with DRLGBTCC is not only an investment in your business but also an investment in the future growth of Detroit.”

The event will also feature products from ShannonLoren Marketing Support Services. Soho is located at 205 W. 9 Mile Road, Ferndale and can be reached online at ferndalesoho.com or by phone at 248-542-7646. To pre-register for this free event, go online to detroitlgbtchamber.com.
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The Novi Home & Garden Show 2 p.m. The Novi Home & Garden Show is the one-stop destination to find home improvement products and services for every type of project imaginable, decorating and landscaping exhibits as well as experienced businesses for consulting One event on April 7 at 10 a.m. One event on April 8 at 10 a.m. Suburban Collection Showplace, 4 Novi, 596726381 gmonette@allseasonscommunications.com gmonette@allseasonscommunications.com.
Editor’s Pick

A2CT Offers Long Scene Improv Class

For many, improvisation is something that is incredibly appealing, but might seem inaccessible. However, the Ann Arbor Civic Theatre is helping to change that by offering a workshop to not only work on improvisational techniques, but maintaining them for long periods of time. The workshop is aimed at those aged 16 and up and will be held Saturday, April 7 from 1 to 4 p.m. at the A2CT Studio located at 322 W. Ann St., Ann Arbor. Registration is available both online at a2ct.org or by calling ahead at 734-971-2228. Tickets for members of the theater cost $20 and $25 for non-members.

Thursday, April 5

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The Complete History of America (abridged)
By Adam Long, Frank Madrid, and Austin Pendleton

See Calendar, page 27
Heidelberg Project Brings Arts Education to Detroit Schools

BY BTL STAFF

DETROIT — The Heidelberg Project and four Detroit public schools are piloting a first-of-its-kind program that will use art to empower and inspire students to be change agents in their community.

The Heidelberg Arts Leadership Academy (HALA) serves Detroit students in grades 4-12 to explore art as a tool for social change, self-expression and community healing. HALA, launched in 2018, will serve over 100 students at Martin Luther King High School, Southeastern High School, Marcus Garvey Academy and Cesar Chavez Academy East.

“Using art as a catalyst to change lives is the very foundation of what we do at the Heidelberg Project,” said its President and CEO Jenenne Whitfield. “The Heidelberg Arts Leadership Academy is one way that we are investing in kids and in Detroit’s future. This program fills a critical need in Detroit schools that have seen a significant reduction or complete elimination of arts education funding.”

Founded in 1986 by artist Tyree Guyton, The Heidelberg Project is a Detroit-based community organization that uses art as a catalyst to breathe new life into the community, transforming what others saw as trash into public, outdoor art installations. The nonprofit also offers free art programs to thousands of children in the neighborhood and at Detroit and suburban schools. In August 2016, Guyton announced Heidelberg 3.0, a new vision to transform his childhood neighborhood from an arts installation driven by one man into a self-sustaining arts and culture village.

The HALA program is the sole source of arts education for students at Southeastern High School and Marcus Garvey Academy. It serves a critical enrichment program for students at Martin Luther King High School and Cesar Chavez Academy East.

“The importance of arts education is paramount to the development of the whole child,” said Southeastern High School Assistant Principal Alan Washington. “The Heidelberg Project is an iconic Detroit community arts organization and the partnership with Southeastern high school will allow our students to appreciate the history, significance and richness of the arts in the city.”

The HALA program is the sole source of arts education for students at Southeastern High School and Marcus Garvey Academy. It serves a critical enrichment program for students at Martin Luther King High School and Cesar Chavez Academy East.

LGBT Detroit Hosts Event to Stand Against Sexual Assault

BY BTL STAFF

Same-sex sexual assault can happen on a date, between friends, partners or strangers. Survivors take on the shame, guilt and internal conflict trying to understand why someone could have used these tactics of power to control their bodies. And homophobia increases the likelihood of sexual assault, as it is used as a form of hate crime; a form of punishment and humiliation. And, often especially for LGBTQ survivors of sexual violence, our analysis of their experience must intersect with our understanding LGBTQ survivors of sexual violence, our analysis of their experience must intersect with our understanding of gender based violence, understanding LGBTQ survivors of sexual violence needs a multifaceted perspective. Our stories deserve to be at the center of the sexual assault narrative, so that survivors can understand their experiences through a queer theoretical approach,” said an LGBT Detroit press release.

“The discussion also needs to addressing public discrimination, street harassment, gaslighting and microaggressions.”

But beyond simply meeting to understanding the reasons why perpetrators commit sexual assault, LGBT Detroit is dedicated to delving into why people sometimes avoid reporting these criminal acts against them. At the Talk Tuesday, this issue will be brought up as well.

“Due to the prejudice and lack of power in LGBTQ spaces, survivors often do not seek out support or report these crimes,” the press release said. “Gender variance and nonconformity puts our transgender family at much higher risks. They face sexual violence at rates of 40 to 65 percent, based on racial background. When advocating for our community and survivors of sexual violence, our analysis of their experience must intersect with the historical trauma faced by minorities, LGBTQ community and women.”

The discussion will also answer questions concerning why “LGBTQ, black and brown voices missing from the narrative of the sexual assault movement” and “How do we as a community address toxic masculinity?”

The meeting will run from 6 to 8 p.m. LGBT Detroit is located at 20025 Greenfield, Detroit. More information about LGBT Detroit and its various programs can be found at lgbtdetroit.org.

The "All Children, All Families Celebration" will run from 4 to 7 p.m. at Hands Across The Water's Ann Arbor Office, located at 781 Avis Drive Suite 200.
Joe Hertler & The Rainbow Seekers Headline at Blind Pig

When Joe Hertler started recording music in his Central Michigan University dorm room in 2009, he probably couldn’t have predicted that nine years later he’d be on a national tour with his fourth album. The Lansing-based band has a mixed sound that ranges from funk and soul-inspired tunes to Americana. He’ll be at Ann Arbor’s Blind Pig on Friday, April 6 at 9 p.m. More information can be found online at blindpigmusic.com. Tickets are $15.

Calendar

Continued from p. 25

Connecticut, she is identified as a New Yorker, where she built up her career on the stand-up comic circuit. She is Motor City Casino Sound Board, 2901 Grand River Ave., Detroit. 313-309-4700. motorcitycasino.com/soundboard.aspx.

Foster Care and Adoption Orientation April 21, 9 a.m. Orchards Children’s Services is seeking adults to create smiles in a child’s life. Orchards is looking for adults from all counties to provide temporary care in their home for children ages 0 to 17 for Orchards Children’s Services, 24901 Northwestern Hwy., Suite 601, Southfield. 248-258-044. orchards.org.


RJ Spangler and John “Tbone” Paxton Return to Ann Arbor For an Afternoon Delight April 21, 2 p.m. RJ Spangler, Detroit drummer/bandleader, and Tbone Paxton, trombone/vocals, expect to cover a lot of musical ground on a Saturday afternoon. Adding saxophonists Dan Bennett and Eddie Wyche II, they will be performing swing and on Zal Gaz Grillo Club, 2070 W. Stadium Blvd., Ann Arbor. 734-663-1202. rjpsd9@gmail.com. zalgaz.org.

Walt Matzke’s Four Pianos April 21, 7 p.m. This Piano Philharmonic is a stunning, magical performance featuring four exceptional pianists playing, masterfully and in tandem, a variety of familiar music from classical to Broadway, pop to Hollywood film themes on four grand pianos. Marygrove College Theater, 8425 W. McNichols Road, Detroit. 313-927-1200. walt@fourpianos.com.

Verdi Requiem @ Hill Auditorium April 21, 8 p.m. Verdi Requiem presented by the Ann Arbor Symphony Orchestra, Arie Lipsky, Music Director & Conductor, featuring Indra Thomas, Susan Pfitz, Sean Parkuk, Gary Rejeye and the UMS Choral Union. pre-concert lecture: 7 p.m.

Murray Peraiah, Piano April 22, 4 p.m. “His sound can be pure gold, and he voices chords with a clarity that you have to hear to believe.” Murray Peraiah’s place in the Ann Arbor Hil Auditorium, 825 N. University Ave. Ann Arbor. umich.edu.

Indigo Girls at Motor City Casino Sound Board April 22, 7:30 p.m. Indigo Girls are a Grammy Award-winning folk rock music American duo consisting of Amy Ray and Emily Saliers. They started performing with the name Indigo Girls as students at Emory University, performing weekly at Motor City Casino, 2901 Grand River Ave., Detroit. 313-872-9622. soundboarddetroit.com.

2nd Annual Spring Luncheon Equality Michigan April 27, 11:30 a.m. Kalamazoo born and raised Eric Fanning—the first openly gay, former U.S. Secretary of the Army—will be Equality Michigan’s featured speaker at our 2nd annual spring luncheon “The Business Case for Equality.” on Friday Frederik Meijer Gardens & Sculpture Park, 1000 East Beltline Ave. NE, Grand Rapids. 888-957-1580. meijergardens.org.

THEATER

Kiss the Witch April 19-21, 8 p.m. Ubiquitous Theater presents a play by Emma Donoghue. A collection of familiar fairytales re-envisioned through the feminist lens. The women unite, the patriarchal unrels and witches might kiss. Dreamland Theater, 26 N. Washington St., Ypsilanti. ubiquitoustheater@gmail.com. dreamlandtheater.com.

School of Rock at the Fisher Theatre April 10-22, 7:30 p.m. Fisher Theatre, 3011 W. Grand Blvd., Detroit. 313-872-1000. broadwayindetroit.com.

Metamorphoses April 13-15 & 19-22, 8 p.m. Based on the classic myths of Ovid. Metamorphoses is a rarely seen theatrical marvel that unravels in and around a giant pool of water. Contact for ticket pricing Baldwin Theatre, 415 S. Lafayette, Royal Oak, 248-541-802. stagercrafters.org.

Cold Blood April 19-22, 7:30 p.m. After the resounding success of Kiss & Cry (2014-15 season), the magnificent creative team of Charleroi Danses in Belgium brings Cold Blood, a poetic journey that is filmed before your very eyes. Power Center, 1211 Fettcher St, Ann Arbor. 734-647-3327. smtd.umich.edu.

A2CT Presents Arcadia April 19, 22 7:30 p.m. Ann Arbor Civic Theatre presents Arcadia by Tom Stoppard. In an English country house in 1899, Thomasina asks her tutor Septimus some uncomforably difficult questions. Director Melissa Frelich calls the play “funny, smart, and heartfelt.” Arthur Miller Theatre, 1228 Marlin Ave., Ann Arbor. 734-764-2538. smtd.umich.edu.

April 5, 2018 | BTL 27

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Across
1 Diana of “Lady Sings the Blues”
5 Where they sing “Hello Dalai”?
10 Peggy of WOW Cafe
14 Engaged in
15 The way we word
16 Not hard to get in bed
17 Jane Spahr and Mychal Judge
29 Provide gratis
31 Bay bobber
32 “Sweeney Todd” hot spot
34 Bonehead
38 “The Bells ____ Mary’s”
41 Where boxers are visible
42 Like Nijinsky’s ballet moves
43 www.stopaids.org, e.g.
44 Emulated Sara Gilbert
46 Ambulance letters
47 Sailor’s rear
48 Wallace’s running mate in 1968
49 Quit, with “out”
50 Colette’s fathers
51 Like Scar in “The Lion King”
52 F-word start, for Socrates?
53 Bear up there
54 Bear up there
55 Top player for the Eagles, e.g.
58 WBA decision
60 AfterEllen.com and others
62 Scrabble companion of Q
63 Look at a hottie in a gay bar
64 Twin to Jacob
65 Where Patty Sheehan puts it
66 Land of Emma Donoghue
67 Digs of “Private Practice”
68 Full of lip
69 ____ many words

Down
1 Like Gomer’s Mayberry
2 Type of queen
3 Poet Edna
4 Signal that goes either way
5 Bottom
6 “____ little silhouette of a man…”
7 With 36-Down, Dame Edna portrayer
8 Prod
9 Ball balancers
10 Poseidon’s province
11 He was Edna in “Hairspray”
12 B. D. Wong, for one
13 Earp, who shot off at the O.K. Corral
14 1979 Bette Midler film
15 The way we word
16 Not hard to get in bed
17 Jane Spahr and Mychal Judge
21 Word after pro
22 What 50 million Frenchmen never drink
25 Get hard
28 Prominent cock
30 Pressure meas.
31 Muscle Mary’s pride
32 Like phone sex
33 Lisa Ben’s magazine
35 Elizabeth Taylor movie on the Nile
36 See 7-Down
37 Calls incorrectly
39 Pranksters who have been exposed?
40 Triple X, for Caesar
45 Prepares Easter eggs
47 Boot attachment for Jack Twist
54 Threesome that doesn’t work out?
56 Drags
57 Start of a child’s rhyme
59 Bicolor bite
61 Wicks once of the WNBA
63 Island necklace

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THURSDAY APRIL 26th

DINING OUT FOR LIFE®
HOSTED BY SUBARU OF AMERICA, INC.

Dine out to raise funds for local HIV/AIDS programs.

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EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO KNOW
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The Matrix Human Services Family of programs serve more than 20,000 individuals annually. With more than 56 location across metro Detroit, Matrix is elevating children, supporting families and rebuilding neighborhoods. The Dining Out For Life, Detroit event provides essential funds to Matrix Human Services’ MAC Health program, and helps us offer free HIV/STD testing, education, advocacy and more to thousands across metro Detroit annually. Learn more at MatrixHumanServices.org

Come for the Cocktails
Stay for the Exhibit
Then Watch the Funds Rise...

In memory of Jeff Montgomery
Cocktail Hour | Photo Opp's | Special Exhibition Tour
(Q & A with Durk Dehner and Sharp of the Tom of Finland Foundation)
@ MOCAD

Sunday
Apr 22nd
6:30 to 8:30pm

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