

our lives

101

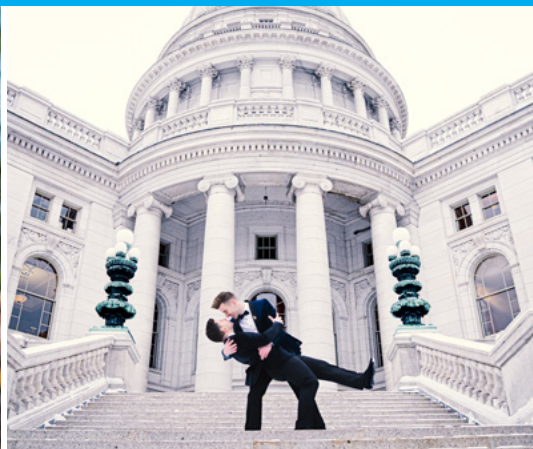
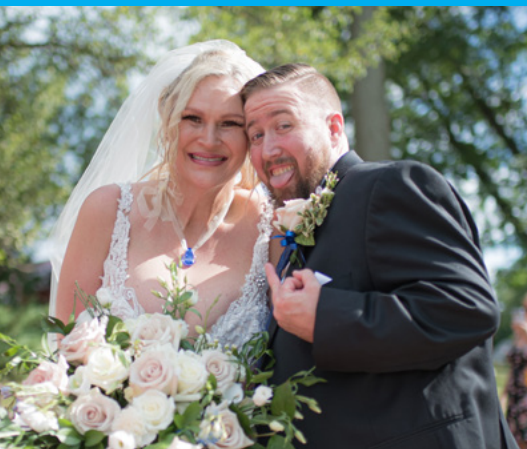
2023

A YEAR IN REVIEW

OUR 100TH ISSUE

Madison's LGBT&XYZ Magazine

100 issues of celebrating LGBTQ Wisconsin's stories



January  
February  
2024



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**YOUR WAY**







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— John DeMain, *Music Director*

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*in C minor, K. 491*

**Gustav Mahler,**  
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- Winnie the Pooh

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Madison's LGBT&XYZ Magazine

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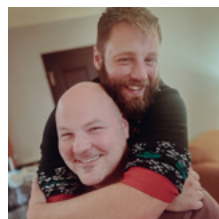
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## PUBLISHER'S NOTE PATRICK FARABAUGH

### 100 ISSUES LATER...

**YOU'RE HOLDING** our 100th issue. As the founder and publisher of *Our Lives*, since the very first issue in July of 2007, it feels unreal to be able to say that we've made it to 100. At only six print issues a year, it's taken 16.5 years to get here. It's a milestone that in the early years I genuinely wasn't sure we'd ever reach. When the first issue of *Our Lives* came out, we were only months away from the Great Recession of 2008-09. Every issue was a struggle and an achievement when it hit readers' hands. Through the highs and lows over the years—from achieving marriage equality to surviving the pandemic—that this magazine exists is never something I've taken for granted. Often I worry that readers are unaware of how fragile it is, and even as the last institutional LGBTQ media in our state, how quickly it could go away.

It's always been my mission that *Our Lives* magazine serves as a voice, a crossroads, and a lighthouse for LGBTQ Wisconsinites. None of this would have ever been possible without the support of so many who've either believed in that mission or in me. So many have lent their talents and support, and it humbles me every day. I hold in the highest regard the trust that our community has placed in *Our Lives* as a conduit for sharing our stories and keeping us connected. Over 100 issues, we've struggled together, celebrated together, and perhaps most importantly: We've grown together. I decided to use the last page of this issue as a tribute to this milestone. On it, you'll be able to revisit all 100 of our covers, and hopefully some will spark special memories and a perspective of how much we've shared and been there for each other since you welcomed this little engine that could into your lives. Thank you. ■



## OBITUARY BOBBY RIVERS

1953 - 12/26/23



**ON DECEMBER 26** we said goodbye to Bobby Rivers. We'll always remember Bobby's quotable queer-coded quotes from WQFM morning radio that raised eyebrows and dropped jaws all over Milwaukee. We'll always remember Bobby on PM Magazine, showcasing the most happening spaces, faces, and places in our increasingly cosmopolitan city. We'll always remember watching him broadcast live from the grand opening of Grand Avenue, where he emceed an Annie lookalike contest with straight-face seriousness. We'll always remember him reporting live from the grand opening of Elsa's, where he asked, "If nobody is drinking cans of PBR, am I even really in Milwaukee?"

And we'll always remember watching him achieve his dream of moving to New York—where he became VH1's first openly gay Black VJ.

Bobby faced tremendous discrimination—on multiple levels—while navigating the broadcast industry, gay Milwaukee, and his intersectional identity. He aspired to be a newscaster because he wanted people like himself to be seen on TV. Along the way, he became an inspiration and a role model for young media professionals everywhere.

He insisted that he wasn't "historical" at all. In fact, he insisted that nobody remembered his name.

We'll make sure that nobody ever forgets it.

Today, we raise a martini to someone who unapologetically broke all the rules—so that he (and we) could be seen.

Thank you, Bobby, for everything. —Michail Takach

## OBITUARY TEMPEST HEAT / JONATHAN CARTHELL HUGHLETT

1/2/24



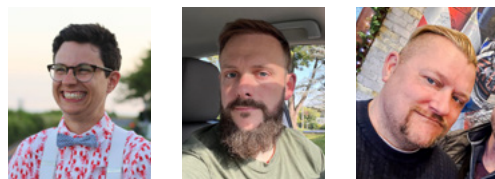
**TEMPEST HEAT**, an acclaimed and beloved Wisconsin drag performer, passed away on January 2, 2024.

Tempest Heat was the drag persona of Jonathan Carthell Hughlett. She graced many stages across Wisconsin, serving as a mentor or "drag mother" to countless other performers. Tempest won many titles as a pageant performer, including "Miss LaCage" (2008-2009), "Miss WI USofA At Large" (2010) and "Miss Gay Madison" (2023), according to the Wisconsin LGBTQ History Project. She was a regular performer at PrideFest, Hamburger Mary's, D.I.X., This Is It! and La Cage in Milwaukee, and FIVE Nightclub in Madison. Tempest also hosted drag queen story hours for children. She was promoting an upcoming gig in Madison as recently as Monday.

In recent years, Tempest became an outspoken champion for Black gay and drag history. After appearing on the BeSeen podcast in 2022, she joined the Wisconsin LGBTQ History Project in 2023 as a Community Advisor.

The performer was battling kidney disease for several years, according to a 2022 interview. An official cause of death had not been released as of press time. —Michail Takach

## CONTRIBUTORS



**CLARA LEFTON** (he/him) is a journalist-turned-attorney. His professional life has been guided by his interest in and lived experiences related to diversity, equity, and inclusion. One of Clara's main areas of experience is at the intersection of queer issues and athletics. He has written extensively on these topics—including for *The Philadelphia Business Journal*, *Dad Vail Regatta*, *Penn Mutual Collegiate Rugby Championship*, and *The Rainbow Times*.

Clara earned a B.A. from Mount Holyoke College where he was a collegiate newspaper editor and NCAA rower; seven years later he enrolled at Rutgers Law School. He has since graduated and worked with two Madison-based law firms and interned with the Honorable Judge William Conley of the U.S. District Court for the Western District of Wisconsin.

**IAN DEGRAFF** is a creative brand storyteller with a talent for corporate video. His current projects include a documentary focused on the intersection of ufology and the lives of Wisconsin residents, producing a food trends and marketing podcast, and editing photographs of butterflies and orchids taken during a trip to Costa Rica. He lives in Madison with his husband and macaw.

**MICHAIL TAKACH** is a historian, author, reporter, and communications professional. He earned his master's in communications and history at UW-Madison. Michail is currently the curator of the Wisconsin LGBTQ History Project, a not-for-profit devoted to connecting local LGBTQ people with their hidden history and heritage.



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QTBIPOC HIV HISTORY

# I Carry On

Ronnie Grace, as eulogized by his mentee and friend Chris Li.

**RONNIE GRACE** spent roughly 40 years fighting HIV and at least half of those years advocating for others living with the virus. His crusade and the energy that surrounds it continues. Ronnie's longevity and outright refusal to deny himself or his community would outweigh racial prejudice, homophobia, and a plethora of his own health issues. In the end, none of these obstacles mattered. Ronnie's legacy speaks for itself, and like any other job well done, his impact will be felt for generations.

## THE FIGHT BEGINS

Sometime in the early 80s, Ronnie may have heard about a disease called GRID. Labeled GRID for Gay-Related Immunodeficiency, doctors across the nation were struck by this serious immune disorder that appeared to affect primarily "male homosexuals." By the mid-80s Ronnie's own diagnosis was clear. Now called HIV for Human Immunodeficiency Virus, Ronnie received his first positive result in Los Angeles while working as a dance instructor for Fred Astaire Studios.

Being in the best physical health of his life, Ronnie later told me he assumed his positive result was a lab error at UCLA. In the early years, the university processed all serum samples and erroneously diagnosed a number of people with HIV. Because he was in overall good health and hadn't noticed any symptoms, Ronnie thought that he couldn't have the virus and that he had to be one of those affected by the mix-up. Years later, he would retest in Atlanta. That positive result would be given to him over the phone without counseling (or, frankly, concern). He received a "We're sorry," and likely a dial tone.

After his second diagnosis, Ronnie was living in Atlanta and battling numerous opportunistic infections. He'd gone missing after having "escaped" (his words, not mine) from a hospital in Georgia. His mother gathered his brothers and told them to "go get my baby and bring him home" and that he "wasn't going to die alone." They had no idea, but in that moment his mother—his family—not only saved Ronnie's life, but they saved mine, too. I live in the home that Ronnie Grace helped build. I am forever humbled by his love and dedication



to our community and by his contributions to end HIV.

## WHAT BRINGS YOU INTO THIS WORK?

I met Ronnie Grace in the summer of 2011. At that time, I was a prospective employee at Diverse & Resilient and became acquainted with Ronnie and the organization's HIV Testing Program through Kofi Short. On my first day with the organization, I remember navigating a maze of hallways and countless staff introductions and until finally I met Ronnie Grace. His office was in the rear of the building, its cold seclusion juxtaposed against the warmth of the man I was standing in front of.

"Chris" Kofi said, "I'd like you to meet Ronnie Grace."

"Hey, Baby!" he said in only the way that he could. "Welcome to D&R. Nice to meet you."

"Thank you," I replied.

We continued with formalities as multiple others entered the room. I met another Chris, a Katie, a Jacob, and a Dylan, too. Names and faces flew by as I tried to put on my best impression. This was the nicest job I had thus far, and I wasn't going to make any enemies.

"All right you all, I'm going to ask that you excuse us for a second. Me and Mr. Chris need to have a little conversation," Ronnie said.

The others hurriedly made their exit, and Ronnie and I were alone.

"Well, tell me about yourself and what brings you into this work?"

## LIVING WITH THE VIRUS

I hadn't prepared myself for this conversation. Although I had interviewed for this

position and answered this question numerous times before, I knew that Ronnie was seeking a deeper meaning—one which I was ill-prepared to give. I didn't know where to start. Did I begin with my troubled childhood, being abandoned by my parents as they chased partners (literally) all over the world? Did I start with stories of being bullied and the loneliness that consumed my younger years? Where should I start? What should I say?

In my mind this would work like it did on television. Ronnie would escort me into his office (me, a recent divorcee a la Mary Tyler Moore) and ask me if I'm Catholic and if I can type. I'd tell him that his questions were inappropriate and then he would exclaim, "Chris, you've got spunk." I imagine all of this happening simultaneously as he pulls two glasses out of his desk (with ice of course), a bottle of blended scotch, and the details of our organization's 403b plan.

Instead, we sat less than two feet from one another in complete silence, the room full of his energy and warmth. I can't remember exactly what I said, but it would take months to finally reveal that I, too, was living with HIV. That during my freshman year in college a disease that I hadn't even considered would change my life forever. It would be the first and only STI I've ever had, and it was contracted during the first few years of my adulthood.

Ultimately, we became friends and shared stories of trials and tribulations living with the virus. I came to find out that like me, Ronnie was also raised by his grandmother. That he also remembers losing friends to the virus, and that he, too, used this position to heal himself and his community. His story was quite like mine, separated by a few decades of "change."

## THE EPIDEMIC CONTINUES

Around the time of my own diagnosis, Milwaukee had some of the highest rates of HIV infection among Black men in the nation. Between 2005 and 2014, only four out of 10 Milwaukee residents reported being Black or African American. During this period, HIV diagnoses in Milwaukee more than doubled in young Black men who have sex with men. Four in 10 Black men who have sex with men living in Milwaukee are living with HIV. To help illustrate this statistic, that means approximately half of all gay Black men in Milwaukee are living with HIV.

While employed at Diverse & Resilient, I witnessed that a positive result always brought out Ronnie's best. He was consoling and sincere and did everything in his power to let

people know that if they took their medication and embraced a healthier lifestyle, that they, too, could live a full life. One pill a day now replaced the former, in some cases hourly, regimen that people living with HIV faced after diagnosis. Paired with recent innovations such as PrEP and scientific validation of U=U (Undetectable equals Un-Transmittable) not only was a cure in sight, but perhaps even a functional one was in place.

Through Diverse & Resilient's Counseling, Testing and Referral program, hundreds if not thousands of young gay men (primarily those of color) were able to access HIV screening and build healthy relationships with men that not only looked like them but sounded like them, too. Ronnie and a vast network of people of all backgrounds and colors contributed to this program's breakthrough.

## DRIVE AND DEDICATION

When remembering Ronnie Grace, I think of Dr. Maya Angelou's "His Day is Done." A tribute poem for Nelson Mandela. I'm including some of that poem here:

*His day is done.*

*The news came on the wings of a wind, reluctant to carry its burden.*

*Nelson Mandela's day is done.*

*The news, expected and still unwelcome, reached us in the United States, and suddenly our world became somber.*

*Our skies were leadened.*

*His day is done.*

*We see you, South African people standing speechless at the slamming of that final door through which no traveler returns.*

*Our spirits reach out to you Bantu, Zulu, Xhosa, Boer.*

*We think of you and your son of Africa, your father, your one more wonder of the world.*

*We send our souls to you as you reflect upon your David armed with a mere stone, facing down the mighty Goliath.*

*Your man of strength, Gideon, emerging triumphant.*

*Although born into the brutal embrace of Apartheid, scarred by the savage atmosphere of racism, unjustly imprisoned in the bloody maws of South African dungeons.*

*Would the man survive? Could the man survive?*

Not only did Ronnie survive, he thrived. Born into the clutches of segregated Mississippi in 1958, scarred by racism, homophobia, physical and sexual abuse, his survival was far from guaranteed. While on this earth, Ronnie had a drive and dedication to his people that in some cases stood shoulder-to-shoulder with South Africa's Nelson Mandela and America's Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Ronnie was of that caliber. He knew who he was and what he had to offer. He will be sorely missed.

I could go on forever about Ronnie's contributions to our community and what his life

means to me. Mr. Grace as I called him (again, forever the ideal secretary) left this physical world being loved by many. So many in fact, that I struggle to think of a world without him. During the final half of 2023, Ronnie revealed to us all that he had liver cancer. We spoke on the phone for hours about treatment plans and what next steps looked like. Although we never vocalized it, we were both aware that a successful treatment outcome would be unlikely. That his time on this earth was limited.

## WE'RE JUST GETTING STARTED

"See, if Mark can't do it, I think you would be a perfect person to represent me in these situations. I ran it by Brenda, and she agrees that I need someone who can be kind of a pit bull."

I couldn't help but smile even though I resented the idea of being labeled a "pit bull." It was now 2023, and Ronnie and I hadn't worked out of the same office in almost a decade. He needed a back-up care navigator. Someone to help navigate the appointments, drop-offs, and pick-ups of all the medications he had to take. Someone who spoke and understood medical jargon and ultimately someone who wasn't easily intimidated by death or otherwise.

"Of course Ronnie, you know I got you in this situation. If Mark can't do it, let me know. I'll take a leave of absence from my job and stay with Stephanie. We'll make this happen."

I could feel his smile through the phone.

"Thank you, Baby, I..."

"Ronnie, let me ask you something."

Pause. I'm sure he sensed my change in tone.

"What do you want this to look like?"

I asked reluctantly. Being raised by senior citizens and in the medical field myself, I've confronted death numerous times. Somehow, I still found myself unable to say the words "what happens if you die."

"Well, I'm not going to be here, that's all," he said rather cheekily, and we both laughed.

Over a few more conversations Mr. Grace finally vocalized his plan. He talked about pursuing treatment until he was no longer able to do so. He talked about his family and how amazing it felt being connected to so many people. He emphasized that he wanted his remembrance to be joyful and how he wanted Martha Wash's *Carry On* blasting from the rafters of his life celebration. We did this, and many other things, while Ronnie was living. He worked part-time at Caroline Jazz Club in what was Milwaukee's old warehouse district. Caroline the owner, a close friend from who knows when (Ronnie had friends wherever he went) let Ronnie use the club for his celebration. August 20 was the last time I saw him.

Ronnie, rest peacefully. Your work may be done, but we're just getting started. ■



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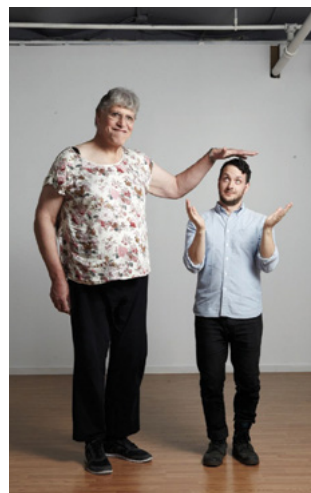
**MARK ANTHONY WENZEL** was born in Green Bay and graduated from UW-Oshkosh in 1983. He spent most of his life on Milwaukee's South Side. While living in Milwaukee, Mark married, raised three children, and became a licensed minister.

Mark lived a life governed by his fundamentalist Baptist faith, although his spiritual and emotional conflicts with religion continued to escalate over time. In 2006, he finally accepted an essential truth about himself that he'd long denied. After 20 years of marriage, Mark came out as Markie, a transgender woman, at age 46. This courageous move cost Markie everything she deeply valued: banished from her church, outcast by her community, divorced from her wife, alienated from her children and grandchildren. As a seven-foot-tall woman, Markie found it difficult to blend into a society governed by rigid expectations of gender identity, expression, and appearance.

For the next decade, Markie bravely pursued a new life while working as a TSA agent at Mitchell International Airport and preparing for gender affirmation surgery. While preparing for surgery, she was misgendered by the scheduling staff, and felt that she would never pass as a woman.

"God does not want this for me," she told herself.

After this crisis in faith, Markie decided to detransition and return to a male life as Mark. Mark "buried" his female identity at a cemetery plot, reconnected with



his family, and rejoined his evangelical community.

Filmmaker Matt Kliegman chronicled this journey in the award-winning 2019 film, "Markie In Milwaukee," which offered "intimate and voyeuristic, tragic and hopeful" insights into Markie's unique experience. The movie opened October 19, 2019 at the Milwaukee Film Festival. Soon, it received rave reviews from local and state media, as well as the *New York Times*, *Boston Globe*, *Huffington Post*, *Los Angeles Times*, and *Film Review Daily*. It was named one of the best documentaries of the year. Today, the film is available on multiple streaming channels, including Vimeo.

The film ends on an ambiguous note, hinting that Markie was not gone forever. It appears that Markie only returned to a male identity for a very short time. After resuming hormones in September 2021, Markie again began pursuing a physical transition. This time, she refused to leave her church. She maintained a very difficult balance—"one foot in the church, and one foot out"—for the rest of her life.

"I had to finally realize," Markie wrote on December 10, 2021, "as much as I ran and hid and denied and fought, I indeed was running from myself. It is not what I want to be. But this is who I always have been. And YES IT IS OK."

Sadly, Markie Wenzel died in December 2023 at age 63. No obituary was published and no cause is known.

—Michail Takach

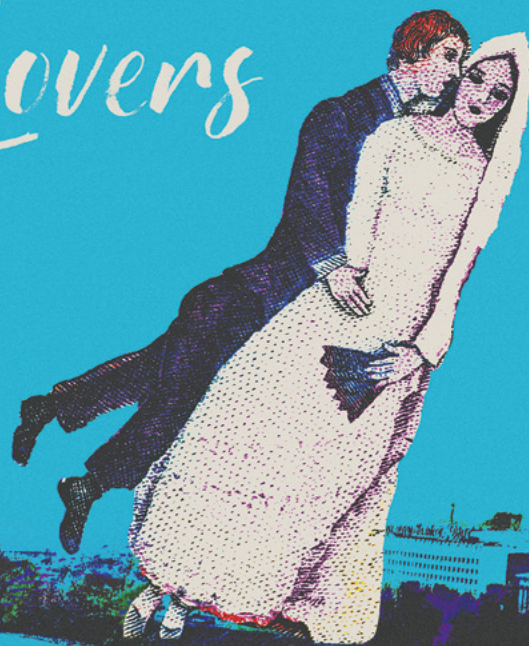
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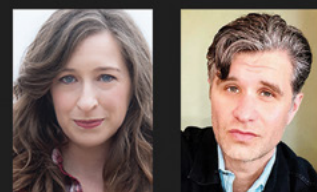
BY DANIEL JAMIESON



JAN 25 - FEB 11

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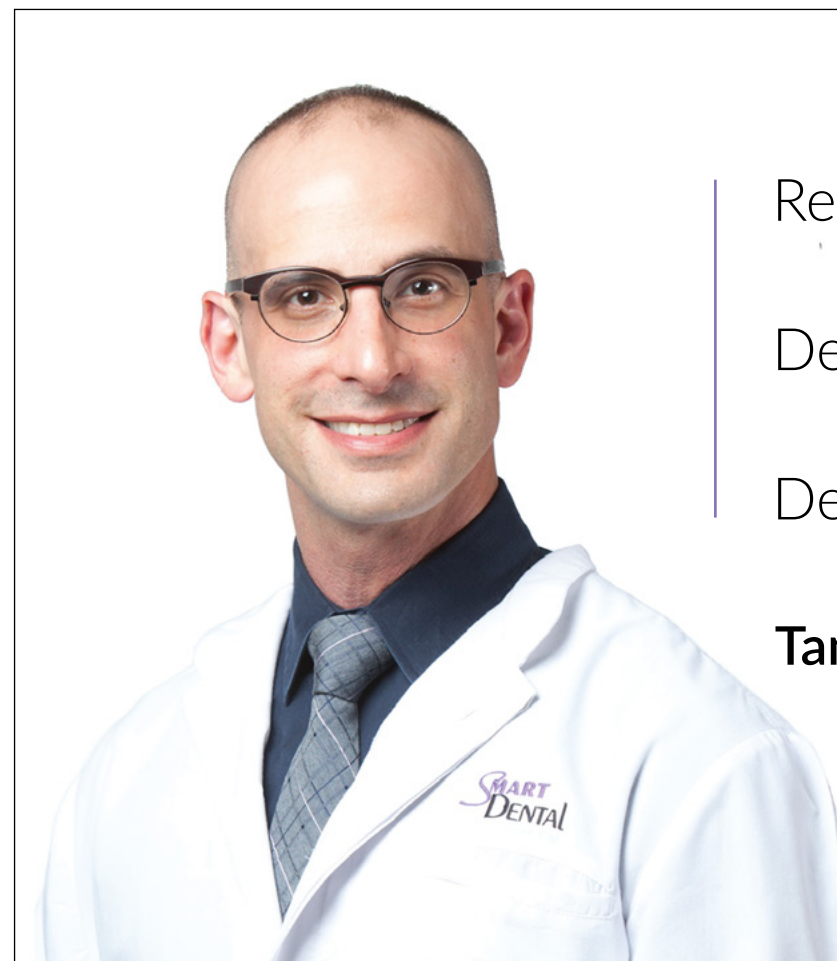
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OUR NEWS



Leading News & Local Stories



## Resilience & Commitment

We take a look back at some of the **local, national, and international events** and **people** that made headlines throughout 2023.

**THIS YEAR** we saw transgender rights for minors increase and decrease throughout the country. A neo-Nazi group protested a pride event in Watertown, and “Safe Space” stickers were banned by the Oak Creek-Franklin Joint School District. Meanwhile the nation’s first male transgender judge was appointed, and Dane County became a sanctuary for transgender and nonbinary individuals.

In international news, right at the end of the

**2023  
YEAR IN  
REVIEW**

year, Pope Francis shocked the world by formally approving letting Catholic priests bless same-sex couples. Brazil outlawed homophobic hate speech, and the first same-sex marriage occurred in Nepal. Japan declared

it unconstitutional to force an individual to have gender affirming surgery before they can legally change their name. However, same sex conduct was criminalized in Uganda, and Russia designated queer activists as extremists. ■



9

Wisconsin Governor Tony Evers appointed James Bond to the position of secretary of the Department of Veterans Affairs, making him the first openly queer individual to lead one of Wisconsin's state cabinet agencies.



12

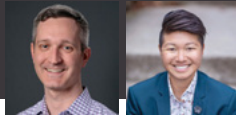
Wisconsin Republicans voted in favor of continuing to legalize conversion therapy.

16

A gay-owned Chicago restaurant was attacked by a man with a hammer in Rogers Park. Courage MKE, a non-profit for displaced queer youth, purchased C2 Apartments. The new residence will provide housing for people 18 to 24 who are aging out of the social welfare system or are homeless.

21

The Cream City Foundation announced new members for its Board of Directors. Charlie Nash was appointed Board Chair and President, while Laura Mayerle became the new Board of Directors Vice Chair.



21

The Food and Drug Administration announced it would end its longstanding gay blood donor ban and instead use a new risk evaluation model.



31

Slovenia amended its definitions of marriage to include same-sex couples.

9

Genderfluid performer Big Freedia, announced plans for a New Orleans hotel. The business will open under the name Hotel Freedia.



21

Brittney Griner signed on to rejoin the WNBA's Phoenix Mercury after having been detained by Russia from February to December 2022.



23

Daniela Arroyo González was elected the first openly transgender woman to compete in a Puerto Rico Miss Universe contest.



23

The City Council of Somerville, MA amended its Code of Ordinance to define and recognize legal protections for polyamorous families.



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NEWS BRIEFS WRITTEN BY MELANIE JONES

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION INVESTIGATES SUN PRAIRIE SCHOOL DISTRICT

ON DECEMBER 1, the U.S. Department of Education "opened a sexual harassment investigation of the Sun Prairie School District after an incident in March in which a transgender female student allegedly disrobed in front of four girls in the shower area of a high school locker room," according to the Wisconsin State Journal. While the incident being investigated happened in March of the same year, the conservative Wisconsin Institute for Law and Liberty filed a complaint claiming that the district "failed to appropriately respond to the incident under Title IX of the Civil Rights Act, which prohibits discrimination in educational programs on the basis of sex." Our Lives will not be including quotes from WILL, as they not only mischaracterize what happened, but they also misgender and villainize the trans student in question.

When the incident occurred, the conservative media had a field day, grossly mischaracterizing the incident in a ploy to continue to demonize and other transgender students, particularly when it comes to bathrooms and sports. They did so with so much fervor that the Sun Prairie School District had to create a website directly addressing what happened, what the district has done in response, and also to outline general policies and support for the LGBTQ+ community within the district. According to this site, an email sent out to parents on April 22 stated the following:

While we do not know the source of the information that has been shared about this

incident, we need to make one thing clear: several accounts of this incident are ill-informed, inaccurate, and incomplete. While student privacy and other laws prevent the District from addressing the specific events that occurred, we can share the following information:

- All individuals involved in this incident were students enrolled in the District.
The District addressed this incident after it was brought to the District's attention.
The District took steps to ensure a similar incident does not recur.
The District talked with the students and families who were involved who came forward.
The District offered and provided support to the involved students and their families.

Further, and to be clear:

- The Sun Prairie Area School District does not condone any student of one sex being present in a state of undress in the presence of students of another sex.
The District does not condone a student of one sex showering in the presence of students of another sex.
What happened in this incident was not in line with our District's practices.

Unfortunately, what is playing out in the media is based on assumptions about this incident that are simply untrue. We know it is easy to blame schools for events like this when people are outraged. The simple truth is that this incident should not have happened. But it

did, and the District addressed it long before the recent publicity.

This same site includes messages of support for the district's LGBTQIA+ community from Mayor Paul Esser; Dane County Board Supervisor Analiese Eicher; Representative Melissa Ratcliff; Senator Melissa Agard; and Brian Juchems, Executive Director of GSAFE. While it continues with an acknowledgement that the laws surrounding trans students have been vague, and interpretations vary around the country, Sun Prairie will follow guidelines put out by the Seventh Circuit, which state that "school policies prohibiting bathroom access consistent with a transgender student's gender identity can violate both Title IX and the Fourteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution."

In a letter written to Daniel Lennington, deputy counsel for the Wisconsin Institute for Law & Liberty, The U.S. Department of Education acknowledges both the complaint and the law that the complaint states was broken by how the district responded to the incident, but clarifies that the investigation does not mean that they have found any wrongdoing. "Please understand that opening an investigation does not mean that OCR has made a decision about the complaint," the letter outlines. "During the investigation, OCR is neutral; OCR will collect and analyze the evidence it needs in order to make a decision."

WISCONSIN DEMOCRATS PLAN LEGISLATION TO CODIFY MARRIAGE EQUALITY

TO CELEBRATE the one-year anniversary of President Biden signing the "Respect for Marriage Act," which codified marriage equality for both queer and interracial couples, Wisconsin Democrats announced in a press release that they planned to introduce similar legislation to update Wisconsin's constitution to guarantee marriage equality. Senators Mark Spreitzer and Tim Carpenter, along with Rep-

resentatives Greta Neubauer, Lee Snodgrass, and Marisabel Cabrera all co-sponsored the bill, stating that they "reaffirm our commitment to ensuring that our state is just and equitable for all Wisconsinites, and hope that our legislative colleagues will join us in supporting these important bills."

On June 26, 2015, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in favor of James Obergefell and made marriage equality the law of the land, saying that it was guaranteed to same-sex couples by both the Due Process Clause and the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment of the Constitution. But many started getting nervous that this decision would be overturned when, following the Dobbs decision that overturned Roe v. Wade, Justice Clarence Thomas, himself one half of an interracial marriage, stated that marriage equality was next up on the chopping block, using his concurring opinion on the Dobbs decision to state that the court should reconsider the three decisions that currently protect same sex couples and their right to privacy. In response to this statement, Congress passed a bill codifying marriage equality, with bipartisan support. President Biden signed it into law in December 2022.

Portrait of Spreitzer
Portrait of Carpenter
Portrait of Neubauer
Portrait of Snodgrass
Portrait of Cabrera
With the Obergefell decision still intact, and the Respect for Marriage Act still a federal law, these new bills by Wisconsin Democrats might seem redundant and unnecessary. Wisconsin Pub-

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March

23

Walter W. Cole, Sr.—known under the drag name Darcelle XV—died at the age of 92. She owned a drag venue in Portland called Darcelle XV Showplace, and the Guinness Book of World Records says she was the world's oldest working drag queen.



31

New regulations went into effect for World Athletics, the governing body for international track and field and cross-country running competitions. They banned all transgender women from elite athletics and furthered restrictions on intersex participants.

3

Drag performer Heklina was found dead in London at the age of 54. Heklina was born in Hennepin, MN, and became a staple in San Francisco's drag scene.



4

Dina Nina Martinez-Rutherford became the first openly transgender woman to be elected to Madison's City Council as a Madison Alderperson for District 15.



17

Twitter (now X) removed a 2018 policy banning misgendering and deadnaming transgender individuals.



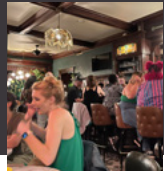
22

Queer-owned Madison breweries Delta Beer Lab and Giant Jones created a Double IPA and celebrated the First Annual Delta Pride Celebration.

May

23

Historically queer Madison tavern and nightclub the Cardinal Bar reopened under new ownership.



23

Same sex conduct was criminalized by Uganda's President Yoweri Museveni.



June

2

Tennessee's U.S. District Judge Thomas Parker overturned the state's anti-drag law as an unconstitutional restriction on free speech.

7

The first out, male, transgender judge in the nation, Seth Marnin, was appointed to the New York State Court of Claims.



8

The Biden Administration announced an LGBTQ+ Community Safety Partnership in association with the Assistant Attorney General of the Civil Rights Division of the Justice Department.



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lic Radio addressed this with "The Wisconsin legislation's authors say that, although same-sex marriage is the law of the land, aspects of Wisconsin family law still presume that any married couple comprises a man and a woman. The proposal would replace that language with gender-neutral references to 'spouses.'" They continue that the changes would especially target parental rights, and would "allow married couples to jointly adopt children and to jointly claim a child conceived through artificial insemination. And it would change language about how to establish 'paternity' to 'parentage,' for purposes of determining which

adults are legally the parents of a child." There is also a separate proposal to change language in the state constitution that was added in 2006 defining marriage as being "only between 'one man and one woman.'"

Fair Wisconsin, the statewide LGBTQ+ civil rights and political advocacy organization, included the following statement from Executive Director Megin McDonell:

Currently, 35 states including Wisconsin have statutory or constitutional amendments banning same-sex marriage. Although we have the precedent of the Obergefell and Wolf decisions, if these decisions were to be over-

turned our constitutional ban would most likely go into effect. The Respect for Marriage Act does not supersede Wisconsin's constitutional amendment and does not require every state to allow same-sex marriages. It simply requires that if a marriage is performed in the future in a state where it is legal, it must be recognized by any other state.

Enshrining protections for marriage equality was and still is core to Fair Wisconsin's mission. It is far past time to remove the outdated and unenforceable constitutional amendment banning same-sex marriage, update our state statutes to remove gendered language, and add gender identity and expression to our non-discrimination laws.

BILLS TARGETING TRANSGENDER INDIVIDUALS STALL IN LEGISLATURE, GET VETOED

IN OCTOBER, Republican lawmakers sought to pass several bills aimed at trans residents of Wisconsin, most of which were aimed at trans youth in regard to gender-affirming health care and participation in sports. Another Assembly bill that was put forward got much less attention but is no less an encroachment on the civil rights of trans people in the state. AB 447/SB 438 was put forward to "prohibit incarcerated trans, nonbinary and intersex people from being housed in facilities matching their authentic gender identity. The bill also requires strip searches be conducted by corrections staff whose sex aligns with the incarcerated person's sex assigned at birth," according to the ACLU of Wisconsin. They continue, "This bill creates a statutory rule for determining appropriate housing classifications for people in jail and prison instead of allowing for a case-by-case determination as required by the Prison Rape Elimination Act (PREA) standards for placement of those in prisons and jails."

Lambda Legal, in a study published in 2020,

found that "A shocking 47% of Black transgender people, and more than one out of five (21%) transgender women of all ethnicities, are incarcerated during their lifetimes." They continue that this is mostly because of bias and discrimination in housing, employment, and education, and that the crimes committed by trans people are frequently what they term "poverty-related offenses," like theft and survival sex-work. In addition to high incarceration rates, "According to data collected by the Bureau of Justice Statistics at the Department of Justice, 40% of incarcerated transgender people have been sexually assaulted—more than 10 times the general prison population rate. Incarcerated transgender people also face an uphill battle accessing gender dysphoria care, such as hormone therapy or gender confirmation surgery, with more than 40% reportedly being denied medically necessary care," according to the same study.

This is all despite the Prison Rape Elimination Act, which mandates that prisons make housing decisions that ensure the safety of trans people generally, and trans women in particular. AB 447 and SB 438 both go against this mandate, and would actively put trans

people in harm's way. These bills did not get as much public outcry as those targeted at minors, likely because people facing incarceration are seen less sympathetically than minors, but as Lambda Legal pointed out, many of these people are facing incarceration because of systemic failure, and not because of any sort of moral failing. Nevertheless, all people facing incarceration, regardless of their crimes, have the right to safety, dignity, and medical care.

Happily, these two bills have seemed to stall in the legislature, with the last action on them being the public hearing in October. The other bills put forth this fall, those that sought to restrict medical care access to trans minors, and those that sought to limit the ability of trans athletes to participate in sports in both K-12 and college-level athletics, were passed through the legislature, but were vetoed by Governor Evers. Evers, for his part, has always said that he would not sign the bills, telling attendees of the LGBT Chamber of Commerce's Coming Out Breakfast that "not a single one of those... bills will become law." He didn't mention the fact that this is only true while he is governor, outlining the need to keep pushing against these bills despite the promise to veto. ■

LGBTQ Organizations Update
General News | Awards | Staff & Board Changes | Events
Curated by Doug Rowe

GENERAL NEWS
Important notes about area LGBTQ groups.

ACLU OF WISCONSIN has filed records requests with six school districts that have banned books. The ACLU says book bans have largely targeted reading materials with LGBTQ+ and race-related content, and the removal may be a

violation of first amendment rights. Concerned citizens contacted the ACLU to investigate who initiated the book banning requests.

COURAGE MKE opened applications for a new Americorp position at Courage House on December 7. The Courage House Resident Care Americorp member is responsible for implementing the daily schedule of activities while



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9

Dane County became the first sanctuary in the nation for transgender and nonbinary individuals via a vote of the Dane County Board of Supervisors.

19

The first openly queer supervisor for Milwaukee County, Peter Burgelis, was attacked at the Mayfair Mall in Wauwatosa. This incident involved a "near collision" in the parking lot, a gay slur, and being punched in the jaw.



27

In a 6-1 vote, Wisconsin's Oak Creek-Franklin Joint School District approved Policy 387, which included prohibiting "Safe Space" stickers.

30

A Colorado resident who refused to make wedding websites for same-sex couples was supported by a U.S. Supreme Court decision.

6

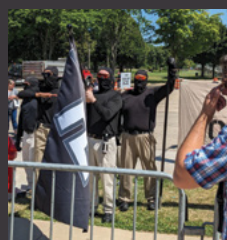
A federal judge issued a temporary restraining order against the Mukwonago Area School District. It halted a new rule requiring schoolchildren to use locker and bathroom amenities corresponding to the sex they were assigned at birth.

7

Portland's O'Bryant Square was renamed Darcelle XV Plaza after the death of the iconic local drag queen in March.

31

A neo-nazi group had a presence at Watertown Pride.



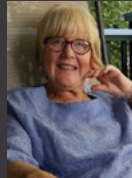
31

SSM Health, a Catholic non-profit health system, stopped providing gender-affirming surgeries via Middleton's Aesthetic Center.



10

Martha Dixon Popp passed away at age 77 after a two-year struggle with ALS. She was the Founder of the Gay Lesbian Straight Education Network of South Central Wisconsin. In the 1980s, Martha sued the YMCA for denial of a family membership, which paved the way for Madison's Domestic Partner Ordinance.



24

Brazil outlawed homophobic hate speech.



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modeling healthy life skills. They are seeking Americorp members who are seeking to develop strong interpersonal skills and are committed to making a positive impact in the lives of LGBTQ youth who are in out-of-home care placements for reasons including foster care, juvenile delinquency, and other CHIPS and JIPS orders.

CREAM CITY FOUNDATION awarded \$50,000 in scholarships to 20 recipients in the 2023-24 school year, a milestone for the foundation and thanks to the support of community donors.

DIVERSE & RESILIENT in Milwaukee is offering free STI testing (chlamydia, gonorrhea, HIV, and syphilis) by appointment Monday-Thursday 9:00 a.m.-3:00 p.m.

FAIR WISCONSIN organized speakers and protests against multiple anti LGBTQ bills throughout November and December.

GSAFE wrapped up its fourth annual Quilt and Fiber Art Auction. This was the most successful auction to date in terms of participation and funds raised. GSAFE is now accepting donations of all sizes and prices for the 2024 auction, to launch on Giving Tuesday.

MILWAUKEE GAY SPORTS NETWORK is proud to announce they were able to raise \$5000 through the 2023 Grant Heffelfinger Big Gay 5K Run/Walk and presented a donation to Pathfinders of Milwaukee on December 19. Thank you to all who participated or donated. Please save the date for 2024: September 15 at Veterans Park.

OUTREACH CENTER together with OPEN Foundation, is proud to announce the launch of a program that has been generously supported by A Fund for Women, a component fund of Madison Community Foundation. This initiative

is designed to provide support to transgender women and transfeminine individuals in Dane County in overcoming barriers to employment.

PLANNED PARENTHOOD OF WISCONSIN announced on December 5 plans to continue providing abortion services now that a Dane County circuit court judge ruled that an 1849 statute does not apply to voluntary procedures.

PROUD THEATER - MADISON held their first in-person performances since the pandemic in a show called "Commercial Break!"

STAGEQ has collected submissions for their third annual CapitalQ Theater Festival and held auditions for their upcoming "Torch Song."

AWARDS / RECOGNITION / GRANTS

Special thanks for those who do good.

FREEDOM, INC. would like to recognize co-founders Kabzuag and M. Adams for their hard work, dedication, and leadership as the organization celebrates their 20th anniversary.

GSAFE was one of three recipients of the Wisconsin Department of Health Services' Wisconsin LGBTQIA2S+ Youth Acceptance Project, funded by the Wisconsin Title V Maternal and Child Health grant. This two-year grant allows GSAFE to sustain and grow their Youth Activist Council as well as establish programming for families of trans and queer youth.

MILWAUKEE LGBT CENTER Aging and Disability Programs Coordinator, Christie Carter, has been selected as a member of the Steering Committee for the Accessible Transportation Resource Center out of Washington, D.C. Christie is honored to have the opportunity to

advocate for the needs of both older adults and people with disabilities as it relates to transportation.

The Center would also like to congratulate volunteer John Griffith on his advocacy work with the Commission on Aging. John tirelessly advocates for older adults in the LGBTQ+ community and beyond. Most recently, he spent five years as a commissioner, and one year as the chair of the commission, bringing to light the needs and challenges of LGBTQ+ seniors.

LGBT CENTER OF SE WISCONSIN congratulates their home city of Racine for a second consecutive year of scoring 100 on the Human Rights Campaign Municipal Equality Index.

STAFF / BOARD CHANGES

Who's moving on or moving into org leadership.

CREAM CITY FOUNDATION is thrilled to announce the addition of Cory Highshaw to its board of directors. Highshaw has worked for US Bank since 2012. Most recently, he was a Business Banking Development Consultant for the State of Wisconsin before becoming a Business Banking Relationship Manager in August 2022. Cory is an advocate for providing financial literacy and shrinking the wealth gap for minority-owned business owners.

DIVERSE & RESILIENT Peer Navigator, HIV advocate, and 17-year contributor to the organization Ronnie Grace passed away on November 9 and was memorialized on November 25. Ronnie's legacy will continue to inspire and guide the work of Diverse & Resilient.

GSAFE is pleased to announce that Sue Neeley and Lane Hanson recently joined the GSAFE team. Sue is the new Director of Youth Programs and Family Engagement. Lane is the Grants and Compliance Manager. In addition, Katie Rickert was promoted to Associate Director of Youth Leadership and Advocacy.

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19

After decades of silence, former Massachusetts State Rep. Althea Garrison spoke openly about her transgender identity. She is thought to be the first transgender person elected to a state legislature. She was outed in 1992 but kept silent until she turned 83.



27

Missoula Montana County District Court Judge Jason Mark issued a temporary injunction blocking officials from enforcing Senate Bill 99. This law would have stopped gender-affirming medical care for youth, while allowing exceptions for intersex minors in non-consensual situations.

29

U.S. Representative Mark Pocan (WI-02) introduced bills calling for a commission to study the potential creation of a National Museum of American LGBTQ+ History and Culture and to establish it within the Smithsonian Institution.



6

Cal Calamia, a nonbinary runner, was allowed by the U.S. Anti-Doping Agency to compete in the Chicago Marathon while taking testosterone. This groundbreaking decision was deemed a Therapeutic Use Exemption, which overrode the World Anti-Doping Agency's Prohibited List.



8

Chyna Long, a Black transwoman, was killed from multiple gunshot wounds in Milwaukee.



24

The National Hockey League reversed its brief ban on rainbow pride tape after the Arizona Coyotes' Travis Dermott defied the rule.

Club Q, the site of a 2022 queer mass shooting in Colorado Springs, announced it will reopen in a new location under the name "The Q" in winter 2024.

25

Japan's Supreme Court declared it unconstitutional to force an individual to have gender affirming surgery before they can legally change their name.



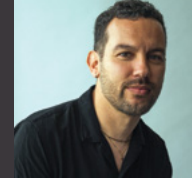
8

Republican lawmakers introduced Wisconsin's version of Florida's "Don't Say Gay" bill.



15

The National Book Award for fiction was given to *Blackouts*, a queer novel by Justin Torres.



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BY HARVEY FIERSTEIN

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ARTS THEATER YOUTH VETERANS QTBIPOC

## Making Theater the Priority

Local theater professional **Zak Stowe** interviews teaching artist **Laura McMillan**, the current Education Manager at **Children's Theater of Madison**.

**LAURA MCMILLAN** is a whirlwind force. Just reading her biography on the back of a playbill makes one out of breath. Actor, director, choreographer, producer, educator—holding several of those titles while simultaneously serving in the US Navy. She is also one of the many amazing—and queer—individuals that help lead the Children's Theater of Madison (CTM). She also happens to be one of my favorite theater friends to run into at the bar after a show!



I was excited to ask her a few questions about her life in the arts. In the coming issues, I look forward to sharing more of the amazing CTM staff with readers and their views on the role of theater in young people's lives—especially young queer people's lives.

WHAT WERE SOME OF YOUR FIRST EXPERIENCES WITH THEATER?

My first theatrical experience was when I was growing up in Southern California. My grandparents took me to see *Smokey Joe's Cafe* at the El Capitan Theatre in Hollywood. When I was young, I was the Wicked Witch of the West. I ended up scratching my makeup off part of my face during the show because it itched. I funnily remember my grandma kept telling me to stop touching my face.

DID YOU ALWAYS WANT THIS CAREER?

I always knew theater was going to be a part of my life in some way. Most of us dream of making it a career, but the realist in me always

kept other jobs (sometimes five at once) in the mix, as I didn't think I could do theater full time. So, after joining the Navy and still making theater the priority during military intel exercises, I knew that it was always going to be my priority. After four years, I got out and went back to college to pursue my passion.

NOW YOU'RE WITH CHILDREN'S THEATER OF MADISON. WHAT BROUGHT YOU TO CTM?

I am the Education Manager at CTM, and I have been with the organization for four years. My day-to-day responsibilities include being the Student Matinee Coordinator and working with schools and educators to fill out matinee shows. I am also the Registrar, so I answer all parent questions about our academic programs

and registration as well as building the classes in our registration system to go live on our website. As part of my registrar duties, I am the Financial Aid Coordinator, in which I work closely with families to give financial assistance for students to be able to attend a variety of our programs. I am also lovingly known as Space Queen, as I oversee booking all space for the education department.

When I first moved here in 2015, I saw an opportunity to intern at this organization where the focus is to bring arts to the youth in our community. I knew connecting with CTM would be a good opportunity to get my foot in the door in the theater scene. I had also done my research and knew they were a well-known company with high-quality artistry. After going back to college and receiving my degree in theater and theater studies, a job opportunity was sent to me by my dean for a role she thought I'd be perfect for. The rest is history!

IDENTITY HAS SUCH A PROFOUND EFFECT ON ARTISTS AND SHAPES THE ART THAT THEY MAKE. HOW HAVE YOU SEEN IT AFFECT YOU?

As a queer, BIPOC, bi-racial, woman and a US Navy Veteran, identity and representation has always been important to me. Finding where I fit has been a lifelong journey and very difficult at times. I am starting to realize that my story is not one that is often told. With all my identities, I heard pieces of myself in many different stories, but never one that I can say fully, "That's me." With that being said, the arts and the stage are my space to express my unique self. That is what I love about it so much—if I can't find my story, I can create it.

HOW DO YOU VIEW THE IMPORTANCE OF THEATER/ARTS IN THE LIVES OF YOUNG PEOPLE?

The arts are vital to any community. It's a space where children can create, build relation-

ships, and grow their self confidence. I always want to make sure young people are seeing themselves on stage and on the page.

WHAT ARE SOME OF THE MOST FUN PROJECTS YOU'VE GOTTEN TO BE A PART OF OVER THE YEARS?

I've had so much fun as part of the cast of CTM's *A Christmas Carol*. My Madison community theater debut was with Mercury Payers in *The Revolutionists*, and that was a blast! I have been honored to work all over the country including WI, CA, AZ, FL, and HI. Hawaii has given me some of my most cherished memories with being in *Zombie Prom*, *Rocky Horror Picture Show*, and an award-winning Broadway revue at the beautiful Paliku Theater.

I'd be remiss not to mention The Goodwin Project, a series of plays written by Idris Goodwin to spark tough conversations around race for youth. I was humbled that Roseann Sheridan had given me my first opportunity to work as a producer on this. I believe it was CTM's first fully BIPOC team, and I was very proud of that—to have our voices heard not just on camera but behind the scenes as well. That was the one good thing about it being during the pandemic, I was so fortunate to be able to work



with the people I did who spanned across the United States. We came together to tell these stories in a time when we needed to hear them the most. We ended up getting national recognition from not only TYA/USA but also from the creator himself, Idris Goodwin.

WHAT ABOUT THE ARTS KEEPS YOU COMING BACK? WHAT OR WHO INSPIRES YOU TO CONTINUE?

The arts offer spaces where I can authentically be myself while also stepping into the shoes of others. The opportunity theater provides to immerse myself in different perspectives inspires me to continue. This process of exploration and empathy is rewarding and keeps me passionate about the arts.

WITH SUCH A DIVERSE BACKGROUND, HOW DO YOU VIEW MADISON'S ART AND THEATER SCENE?

Madison boasts a robust theater scene, offering a wide range of artistic experiences for a city of its size. It's truly a gem, providing big city amenities in a compact and vibrant community. Madison's untapped resource lies in its diversity, which is reflected in the multitude of voices and perspectives found here. Arts organizations in Madison have a remarkable opportunity to collaborate and leverage this diversity to propel both the industry and the community forward.

WHAT ARE SOME PROJECTS THAT YOU ARE WORKING ON OR WOULD LOVE TO WORK ON IN THE FUTURE?

I just played Fred's wife, Lucy, in CTM's *A Christmas Carol*, and I'm excited about the rest of CTM's season: World Premiere of *Life Doesn't Frighten Me*, a hip-hop tale for the young created by Paige Hernandez; Percy Jackson's *The Lightning Thief*, which is selling out fast; and *The Diary of Anne Frank*. The other project I'm excited for/love to work on is Charles Payne's *Da Classroom Ain't Enuf*. I was in one of the readings of it early on, and now it's being produced at Broom Theater. I'm so excited for all involved and hope the community will support it in April! ■



HAPPY HOMEOWNERS

"We loved working with Curt and Janean. The results are enjoyed aesthetically and functionally every day!" **PAULA & ANN**

Looks like it's...  
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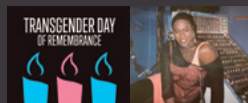


9

Florida's proposal to impose a law targeting drag show performances was rejected by the U.S. Supreme Court.

28

The Boston Police Department recommitted to solving the mystery of the November 28, 1998, murder of a Black, transgender woman named Rita Hester. She was killed in her Boston apartment, and her death inspired the annual international vigil known as Transgender Day of Remembrance.



29

Napal had its first legally recognized same-sex marriage. A Cuban and Indigenous transgender woman named Savannah Ryan William was killed by gunshot in Minneapolis. She was 38 years old and a member of the Aliveness Project's Tea Time, a trans femme support group for Greater Minnesota residents.

30

Queer activists were designated as extremists by the Russian Supreme Court.

1

Online chatroom program Discord officially banned users from misgendering and deadnaming trans individuals.

6

Wisconsin Governor Tony Evers vetoed a bill that tried to ban gender-affirming care for minors.



7

Gay actor and *Heartstopper* Netflix star Joe Locke announced he will debut on Broadway next month in *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street*.

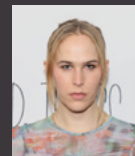


8

The highest civil court in Scotland upheld the UK government's move to stop a historic gender-recognition law approved by the Scottish parliament.

12

The movie production of the queer graphic novel *Laura Dean Keeps Breaking Up With Me* by Mariko Tamaki was announced. Tommy Dorfman, a transgender female actress, is set to direct the film, while Tamaki will write the screenplay for Wildling Pictures.



13

Rights for transgender minors were restricted with the passing of an Ohio senate bill.

19

Pope Francis approved a declaration that allows ministers to confer blessings to those in "irregular" (same sex) relationships. This is not a blessing of the union itself, such as with marriage, but is rather a recognition that parishioners need not be perfect to receive God's presence through a non-liturgical blessing. This is a far cry from a truly accepting stance on LGBTQ+ relationships, but may allow those living within the Catholic faith broader inclusion. ■



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## For Such a Time as This

Vica-Etta Steel speaks to Reverend Peter Beeson about his faith and work as Lead Pastor at St. John's Lutheran church as they pursue a rebuild that includes affordable housing.

**NEAR THE BEGINNING** of my conversation with the Reverend Peter Beeson (he/him), Peter shared an understanding from monks who were the "desert fathers in early Christian Church history, they were based in the Cappadocian Region of Turkey, and they talked about the womb of the father. As a transgender man who's given birth, I found such delight in that really ancient and very expansive understanding of God who is bigger than any of the limits we humans place on God."

Talking with Peter, I couldn't help but see how finding this expansive understanding has deeply guided the work of his personal transformation and his work as a faith leader. He is currently leading and working with the congregation of St. John's Lutheran toward tearing the church down and rebuilding it as 110 units of affordable housing plus worship and community space in the heart of downtown Madison. Peter names that "particularly, as a transgender man, transformation is incredibly painful. Transformation is difficult. It is complex. It is the dissolving, essentially, of one identity and the forming of a newer, more whole, more complete identity, at least for me," yet that process can also inform movement forward toward transformation of the church.

### AN UNLIKELY TRANSFORMATION

That Peter would become a pastor is, in many ways, an unlikely transformation. Peter was raised evangelical. He says that when he "was coming out as queer the first time as a teenager, I really wrestled with the scripture because I was very involved in the evangelical church. At that point in time, I firmly believed that being queer was a sin, and I firmly understood that I was, in fact, queer." He tried to be what the world and his church said he should be, to find that superficial fix.

He tried out the Ex-Gay movement, but that didn't work for him, "The Ex-Gay movement, for people who were socialized as women, often would say, if you think you're queer, you just need to wear high heels and lipstick. I did femme drag really well." Peter adds, "There is a power in being able to present femininity—and that was not the answer."



Peter says, "I got into this place where I believed if God had created me as an abomination, and there was nothing I could do to change that, then God was sadistic—a really malevolent creature—and what person of integrity would worship that evil . . . and so I left the church. I was done with religion. I bought a little fixer-upper house in Phoenix and worked in IT for more than a decade."

But faith was not done with Peter. "I was driving, on my way to my tech job. I passed this gorgeous 1950s Spanish colonial church building with this big rose stained glass window on the front. I love old buildings, and I really wanted to see inside. So one Sunday morning, I came in late because I didn't want to talk to any of the church people. And the sun was just streaming through the windows in this beautiful, gorgeous way, and it felt special." That Sunday, he left early to avoid the congregation, but he came back the next Sunday. In the sermon on that day he "heard a message of God's grace and God's compassion and God's mercy" that was so unlike the message he'd grown up with. This was "the first place I really realized there could be a thinking faith and a complicated faith."

That same day, while sitting in the back of the church again, a man from the choir, "jumped out of the choir loft up front while they were still singing the closing hymn, ran down the aisle, cornered me against

the wall and said, 'you have to come back on Saturday and help us build the organ.'" Peter laughs, saying, "And that's not normally a good evangelism strategy, which I frequently tell people, but as a young queer person who loves buildings, the ability to come and be in this group of 15 to 20 older men, building a church organ every Saturday morning, was exactly the right sort of affirmation and sense of community I needed. And so I kept coming back."

### HEARING THE CALL

Over time, Peter felt a call awaken, "I wanted to be a pastor dating back to when I was a five-year-old. But as someone who was socialized as a woman, that was not ever going to be an option in my evangelical faith tradition, and certainly when I came out as queer at the church." Yet he was urged to pursue leadership by "a fairly closeted gay Latino pastor." In making his decision toward leadership, Peter knew that "for me, it goes back to when I was first coming out. A person of integrity is not going to worship a sadistic God. A person of integrity can't get up and say they proclaim the gospel every Sunday while they're lying about a huge portion of who they are." Yet he decided that, in part due to his involvement, starting in the early 2000s, in the Lutheran denomination he'd joined, he could start the process toward becoming a pastor. "This was in 2008, before the ELCA voted to affirm LGBT people."

In his journey, Peter came to see "God coloring outside the lines," adding that "our mainstream American society has sort of pastiched unto God the worst aspects of itself. But looking into the Bible, you have God who repeatedly tries to rescue and save and liberate the people, a God of grace." Peter shares that, prior to the 4th century, when Christianity joined the empire, "You have Christianity which was this pacifist, life-affirming, serving the poor, worshiping God, pro-peace movement. So much so that when people came to persecute them, they would not attack or defend themselves, but they would allow themselves to be executed. Because they believed it was against the teachings to take out the sword. And you know, you see that shown in Jesus hanging on the cross when the soldiers are taunting him and saying if you're the Son of God, save yourself. And while God certainly could have changed that moment, God chose peace in the face of the world's terror."

Today Peter sees a time of transformation because institutions that served for the past 500 years are failing. "Our institutions were formed for a different world. And they're not set up to meet people where people are now. I see we have these tremendous assets in our church buildings." Peter saw how, when serving on the east and west coasts, "church buildings were sold as luxury condos. They're beautiful buildings. They're beautiful high-end luxury condos, and all the social good, all the community good those buildings once provided, is gone. And yes, even acknowledging the evil the church has done, churches have also been a place for soup kitchens, food pantries, 12-step groups, communi-

ty groups to use for free." They were "one of the very few public spaces outside of libraries that people can come to without spending money for a wide variety of community gatherings." He sees that process repeating itself now in the Midwest.

### SOMEONE MUST INTERCEDE

Peter is now an openly queer pastor, leading and working with St. John's in a new transformation, "This is a congregation that's always cared about the poor. It's always worked with the working class. Now they've taken this bold step to tear down the building, to rebuild as affordable housing with room for the church and social service agencies." The purpose of this project is so "downtown workers, CNAs, daycare workers, nonprofit workers, entry-level government employees, have a place to live that they can afford." There's still a financial gap in achieving this transformation, and Peter says that "we need the whole community's support to finish raising the funds so that this project can become a reality."

In thinking about the work of the church toward transformation, Peter spoke of a moment as he "was wrestling with whether or not to persevere in ordained ministry because even with the ELCA now allowing LGBTQ ministers, there's still so much discrimination people face. A friend sent me this story of Queen Esther in the Bible, and there's this phrase, 'for such a time as this.' This young Jewish woman is brought into the harem of this foreign king and ends up becoming one of the king's wives," a king who had executed his first wife and was set on slaughter of her people. Yet she knew she had to intercede for her people. And Peter's friend asked him, "What if God put you here for such a time as this?"

We cannot know whether the transformation of the church Peter leads will succeed. But in this city, in the need for affordable housing, in a young queer person facing fear and helping build a church's pipe organ, in the work of an older German Lutheran congregation, in the womb of the father, and in all of our hearts, maybe we can see a path forward, for such a time as this. ■

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CULTURE ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT PHOTOGRAPHY

## Examining the Unquestioned

The probing and provocative work of **Vaughan Larsen**.

**AS MOST OUR LIVES** readers are in the throes of a gray winter, Wisconsin-born and raised Vaughan Larsen (she/they), a talented trans-feminine artist originally from Omro, is exploring the Los Angeles art scene, evolving their practice, building community, and walking on sunshine.

The artist has been on a personal journey of growth and discovery since they started garnering serious attention for their photography while an undergraduate at UWM. Where Dorothy clicked her heels three times and ended up in Oz, Vaughan uses the power of their creativity to invent emerald cities that blur the lines between fantasy and reality—as well as magical worlds of LGBTQ+ possibilities.

### FAMILY PHOTOS REENVISIONED

Vaughan’s photography jolted the Milwaukee art scene beginning with *Self Portrait as my Grandmother on her Wedding Day*, 2016, in which Vaughan dressed and posed exactly as their grandmother had for her wedding portrait. This project of restaging images from Vaughan’s family photos developed into two full series, *Rites* and *Parenthood*, in which the artist queerfully recreates images of heteronormative rites of passages found in many of our families’ photo albums.

By posing in the same positions as their family before them, Vaughan invites the viewer to compare the resulting portraits to the seemingly normal, neutral images that unconsciously auto-populate the viewer’s mind. In *Self Portrait at my Baby Shower*, 2019, Vaughan recreated a baby shower in which they are the expectant parent. Vaughan sits holding a present in one hand and the other on the round mound in front of their belly, which is clearly a basketball under their shirt.

In another photo, *Self Portrait with the Newest Addition to our Family*, 2019, Vaughan, sits in a hospital bed, wearing a gown and IV. They hold a small dog swaddled like a newborn baby, and a “partner” embraces them and the dog while the couple proudly smiles at the

camera. In both examples, Vaughan appears to be having fun playing with friends, even four-legged ones, but the underlying commentary is a much more serious critique about how much our society encourages and rewards nuclear, monogamous, heterosexual families, and sexual reproduction. We are all too familiar with these and other clichéd scenes that fill our families’ photo albums and are plastered all over social media. Through queering the reproduced poses, the images in *Rites* and *Parenthood* effectively shed light on the systematic privilege conferred on people in positions to document these idealized scenarios.

*Rites* and *Parenthood* propelled Vaughan into Southeast Wisconsin’s regional arts scene in 2019, after they graduated with a BFA in Photography and Imaging from UWM. That same year, Vaughan was the first place winner of the Getty Images Creative Bursary LGBTQ+ Stories, Amsterdam Pride Photo Award, and received the prestigious Greater Milwaukee Foundation’s Mary L. Nohl Emerging Artist Fellowship.

Vaughan did not keep the limelight to themselves. In 2018 they started curating projects with other queer artists. Vaughan launched an Instagram takeover account for LGBTQ+ artists to share their work (@thatwa.y). In 2021, as people were still social distancing due to the pandemic, Vaughan organized a show called “Queering the Cream City” and invited T. J. Dedeaux Norris and Laurence Philomene to assist as co-curators.

With the support of the New York-based organization SaveArtSpace, “Queering the Cream City” placed contemporary art from 12 LGBTQ+ artists on billboards throughout Milwaukee. As part of the exhibition, Vaughan also collaborated with The Alice Wilds Gallery to share the art of 13 additional artists from the project in a brick-and-mortar setting. For one glorious month during the summer of 2021, 25 local, national, and international artists transformed the Milwaukee cityscape into a COVID-safe, intersectional, urban gallery, and placed “culture over commercialism” in keeping with SaveArtSpace’s mission.

### FURTHERING THE EXAMINATION OF PARADIGM

In September of 2021, Vaughan moved westward for what was supposed to be a self-financed mobile arts residency of one year. After

Clockwise from upper left: *Green Doesn’t Always Mean Fertile*, *Self Portrait with the Newest Addition to our Family*, *From Thin Air*, *Lady Nosegay*.

about six exhausting and expensive months, they landed in LA where they continue to explore the essence of personal identity and how we relate to one another. What sets Vaughan’s work apart is that instead of emphasizing romantic love or love of God, as Western artists have done for hundreds of years, Vaughan focuses on platonic love, eco-sensuality, love of nature, trans joy, and trans sisterhood.

Recently, the Museum of Wisconsin Art (MOWA) curated a solo exhibition titled, *Vaughan Larsen: Everything I Could Ever Want* (10/13/23—01/14/24) at MOWA’s Milwaukee outpost in Saint Kate, The Arts Hotel. The exhibition was initiated by Ally Wilber, former Curator of Public Programs at MOWA (she/her) and brought to fruition by Co-Curators: Thomas Szolwinski, Associate Curator of Architecture and Design (he/him), Anwar Floyd-Pruitt, Associate Curator of Contemporary Art (he/him). MOWA’s Executive Director Laurie Winters (she/her) explained, “Ally Wilber proposed the exhibition idea which was immediately embraced by the institution. MOWA is committed to including and representing our Wisconsin LGBTQ+ communities.” In *Everything I Could Ever Want* Vaughan still utilizes both portraiture and mimic reposing, but in ways that depart from the parodies of *Rites* and *Parenthood*.

Thomas Szolwinski describes this evolution as a natural unfolding, retelling the story of a pandemic road trip the artist took. According to Szolwinski, the artist “found themselves in a beautiful field, and the wind was blowing across their face, and they felt so free that they started crying, and I think that was a turning point where they said, ‘I really have to engage with nature in a deep way.’ And that is where they started photographing themselves in nature.” Soon after Vaughan moved to LA, they were focusing on self-portraiture in the living world, but also portraits of—or with—friends. Examples include, *One with Moss*, 2020, *Green Doesn’t Always Mean Fertile*, 2020, and *Morass or More Ass?*, 2021.

When Vaughan was considering hormone replacement therapy, they created an entire series titled, *Cotyledon*. On their website they wrote, “As I worked through feelings about the ‘natural’ state of my body, I photographed myself as a feminine figure in the American landscape.” In these portraits, classically composed down to the smallest details of how Vaughan positions their feet. The naked body is not raw or erotic, but conveys a spirituality and sensuality that emerges from and merges into nature, recalling Michelangelo’s words, “What spirit is so empty, that it cannot recognize the fact that the foot is more noble than the shoe, and skin more beautiful than the garment with which it is clothed?”

Vaughan appears to be having fun playing with friends, even four-legged ones, but the underlying commentary is a much more serious critique about how much our society encourages and rewards nuclear, monogamous, heterosexual families, and sexual reproduction.

Some of Vaughan’s newer prints are far removed from nature, as Vaughan experiments with the staging and other tools of illusion Hollywood is known for. In *From Thin Air*, 2022, staged in the artist’s living room, Vaughan lays on their back, eyes closed, emerging from a slit in iridescent silver paper. Szolwinski enjoys the striking juxtapositions in Vaughan’s current efforts, noting that in MOWA’s recent exhibition, he deliberately centered *From Thin Air* so it would contrast with the lush green and earth-toned images behind it. Szolwinski attributes this movement in Vaughan’s artistic practice to the artist’s new environment and experiences in Los Angeles. “They started meeting more community members,” he said, “and really finding themselves at home there [and] they started to photograph inside and on sets and incorporating some less natural elements like the reflective silver and red wrap.” Whether taken outside in nature or staged indoors, Vaughan is still redeploying

familiar tropes as a way of championing personal authenticity, liberation, and community connection, while encouraging the viewer to examine the unquestioned standards and values our cultural idols convey.

### MAKING NEW WORK FROM OLD WORK

More recently, instead of family photos, Vaughan is drawing from the canon of Western art history, especially art historical representations of gender and sexuality. In *Lady Nosegay*, 2023, Vaughan reclines on a rich floral set created by the infamous artist Paul McCarthy. Vaughan’s backside to the camera and their head turned over their shoulder, flowers cover their eyes. The resulting image looks like a mashup between *Grande Odalisque*, 1814, by Jean-Auguste Dominique and an early 1960’s film still from the queer art pioneer James Bidgood.

For another example, in *Graces*, 2023, three trans-feminine figures pose nude on a rocky beach, embracing in a tender and sisterly way. Many artists including Botticelli, Ruben, and Raphael have depicted their society’s feminine ideals via the allegory of the three Graces from Greek mythology. Vaughan’s work continues the dialogue, drawing attention to the exclusion of trans-feminine figures from representations of ideal feminine beauty and offering a counter-narrative in which transgendered bodies are charming, graceful, and beautiful.

Thirty-year-old Vaughan’s journey as an artist seems to both parallel and document their personal journey. In their quest to “connect with people first and foremost,” Vaughan has been moving more into performance art. Their performances include poetry, audience engagement, ritual, and ceremony. In Vaughan’s LA performance titled, *Communion*, 2022, the artist began by meditating in front of a shrine containing a platter of their estrogen pills and ended with a Karaoke version of Neil Diamond’s song “Girl, You’ll Be a Woman Soon.” Another piece, *Ritual of a Girl*, was performed for the first time in LA in the summer of 2022, and at the Milwaukee art space, Underscore, the same year, and for the third time in LA in spring of 2023. In it, Vaughan recites a line of their poetry repeatedly while encouraging the audience to join in until it becomes a chant. Then, the artist begins to sing on top of the audience’s chanting. During the performance, the artist invites guests to approach and “exchange love with them” by dipping hands in a bowl of glitter, rubbing it on Vaughan, and vice versa.

Vaughan is also moving more into video, perhaps an inevitable temptation for any artist who relocates to LA. Their digital video *Doll’s Night*, 2023, depicts a group of friends gathered for a DIY spa night. They are hanging out together in a living room, laughing, painting toenails, their faces covered in what appears to be avocado facial masks, towels wrapped around their bodies as well as on their heads, turban-style. Vaughan appreciates how the moving image breaks the plane of a two-dimensional photograph and hopes that these moving images create a more inclusive experience for the audience, inviting us into the idealized, fantastical world that eliminates the exclusions they wish to break down.

In a world where straight, cisgender romantic and familial relationships continue to take center stage, Vaughan centers and celebrates non-sexual forms of love and affection. Through Vaughan’s photos, poetry, and performances, viewers experience the caring moments of platonic companionship that are the basis for human connection. Their work challenges the dichotomies and hierarchies of heteronormative love and highlights the importance of the communities we create and the natural environments we inhabit. Vaughan’s genius lies in the way their images gently educate some viewers about unconscious oppression, by critiquing unchecked privilege, while simultaneously telling delightfully queer platonic love stories, and showcasing a side of human connection that often goes unnoticed. Ultimately, Vaughan’s images elevate and celebrate the deep love of queer “families of choice” that have sustained members of the LGBTQ+ community since before Stonewall. ■





Erin Anderson & Kate Miller



Wes Meives & Sam Rodenberg

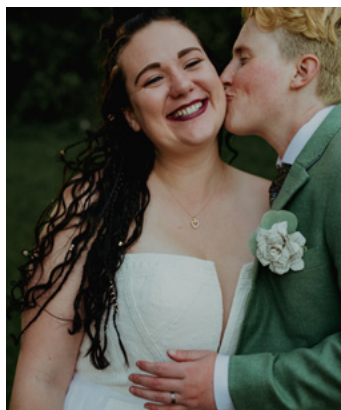


José Vega & Mike Webber

LGBTQ MARRIAGES

*Celebrating Your Special Day, Done Your Way*

Wisconsin's LGBTQ newlyweds share their wedding day experiences.



Megan Gour & Terri Marsh



Danielle & Rachel Maes



Brad & Ryan Branwell



David Heuer & Ted Ketterhagen



Charley & Gillian Blake

*Cold Never Bothered Me* // Daniel Felix & Daniel Freiburger

**January 27** // Engaged November 17, 2021 // The Tinsmith, Madison  
**AS DISNEY FANS** planning a winter wedding, of course “Let it Go” was on our must-play list. About halfway through the reception, we heard those iconic intro notes twinkling across the dance floor. We locked eyes and even though we hadn’t planned or even talked about it, we both knew where this was going.

We started lip-synching our hearts out with an improvised dance number. Even though it was utterly spontaneous, we were completely in sync—matching and mirroring each other as we each manifested our own snow powers. The DJ turned all the lights icy blue and everyone formed a big circle around us, singing along at the top of their lungs. I don’t think either of us stopped smiling through the entire song—it was a moment we’ll never forget! **Photographer:** Brad Ryan Photography

*From Near and Far* // Danielle & Rachel Maes

**May 20** // Engaged October 23, 2021 // KI Center, Green Bay  
**IT WAS A GORGEOUS**, sunny day for the wedding. The trees in the courtyard at Schreiber Foods were blossoming, and our ceremony overlooked the Fox River. Danielle said vows to our three kids, Richie, Bryn, and Gemma, and they shared why the day was special for them.

Our officiant, Zeb, made a return appearance at the reception as Ms. Mimi Jackson and helped get the party started. During the reception, we had so many LGBTQ couples who are our found family on the dance floor dancing side by side with our blood relations. Having so many people important to us show up (even from Switzerland!) was a really special testament to our love and commitment.

After a few hours of sleep, we drove straight through to Orlando to visit Disney World and Universal Studios for our familymoon. Thank-

fully, we got there about a month before it became illegal for trans folks to use public restrooms in Florida. The food was great, the rides were amazing, and the familymoon was a great way to solidify our new family. **Photographer:** Alyssa Lentz-Underwood

*The Luckiest* // Allison & Hailey Wilson

**May 23** // Engaged July 25, 2022 // Dandy, Milwaukee  
**OUR WEDDING** was supposed to be a destination wedding. We had the event planned and paid for with only five weeks to go. Then my father’s health declined, and his battle with cancer took the highest priority for us. He was unable to travel, and we refused to get married without him, as he and I both always dreamed of sharing a father-daughter dance.

We canceled our destination wedding and planned an entire Wisconsin wedding in only five weeks. My bride is the most selfless, caring, and thoughtful person I know, and to cancel everything meticulously planned without hesitation to ensure that my family could all be together is only one of many reasons I proudly married her. It quickly became clear that we could get married anywhere in the world and still be the luckiest. **Photographer:** Happy Gnome Photography

*The Eastsiders* // Sarah Airozo & Chelsea Cornelius

**May 27** // Engaged December 30, 2021 // Goodman Center, Madison  
**WE MET IN CHICAGO** in 2018 but didn’t start dating until January 2020. Sarah was living in Chicago at the time, and Chelsea was living in Madison. We went on our first “official” date at Mint Mark on the east side of Madison. In March 2020, during the first wave of school shut-downs, Sarah came up to Madison to “visit” and hasn’t left! Our love came full circle in December 2021 when we got engaged playing cards at the end of the bar at Mint Mark.

We both decided that it felt important to have our wedding on the



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east side. We have both devoted our careers to children, Sarah as an early childhood educator and Chelsea as a pediatric chaplain, so it only seemed fitting to have our wedding at a venue that supports Madison's youth. We got married on Memorial Day weekend in 2023 at Goodman Community Center. Sarah surprised Chelsea by taking the mic from the DJ and singing "Semi-Charmed Life." (Shoutout to DJ Femme Noir for being the most fun and easy going DJ! She is wonderful!) After the ceremony, we promptly jetted away to Puerto Vallarta for the honeymoon.

**Photographer:** Lianne Milton

*A Re-Wedding* // Amber Lefers & Rachel Veltman

**June 4** // Olin Park Pavilion, Madison

**BECAUSE I DIDN'T** get to wear a wedding dress (before transition) on our original wedding day in 1998, we had a re-wedding ceremony in June for our 25-year anniversary where I wore a wedding dress.

We made new vows, since we're both different people now. We also had people write notes to us and tie them to a flower and bring them up during the ceremony instead of having a traditional receiving line.

After the ceremony, for attendee photos, we invited them to "photobomb" us, and it was an absolute blast to see what people came up with! Finally, we got to tell our courtship story during the reception since most people that are our close friends now did not know us when we got married 25 years ago! **Photographer:** Sam at Dutcher Photography

*Beary Good Time* // Lou Lindley & Amy Stuhlman-Lindley

**June 15** // Engaged August 18, 2020 // South Lake Tahoe, California

**SO MANY** unexpected things happened! Two bears crashed our wedding. We wrote our vows separately, but both mentioned Liberty Mutual commercials in them. We left in a boat, and the driver almost crashed

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Alyssa Lentz-Underwood & Holly Underwood

into another boat because it was dark out.

We didn't focus on trends. We just threw together all of the things we love. Lou does research, so my bridal party bouquets were made out of his research papers. Our seating chart had queer and trans icons instead of numbers. Our sendoff was with kazooos. We had a rainbow shag-rug inspired cake. There were six-foot paper flowers and huge floral pillars. We had adaptogens instead of alcohol, and all of the food was vegetarian. Our friend read an Andrea Gibson poem during the ceremony, and that was really special. **Photographer:** Luna Munn Photography

### With Gratitude // Ava Kempainen & Amanda Prohaska

June 21 // Engaged December 14, 2022 // Cafe Hollander, Madison

**MY WIFE AND I** decided to plan this wedding on a whim, and we only spent three months doing it. We ordered some pretty dresses, sent out some last-minute invitations, and found a place where we could celebrate the night with a family meal. My mom's best friend—and practically a second mother to us—officiated our wedding for us and planned an incredibly intimate hand tying ceremony that left us in tears.

Originally we couldn't afford a photographer, so we decided to be content not to have professional photos. Luckily, my mom was able to give us a very generous gift, and hired our photographer for us. I look at these photos literally every day and feel so blessed to have such a gorgeous reminder of the most magical night of our lives, and for that I'll never stop being grateful. **Photographer:** Melanie Jones

### Keeping It Classic // Jim Chiolino & Terry Svaglic

June 24 // Engaged April 09, 2022 // Edgewater Hotel, Madison

**WE HAD A WONDERFUL** weekend for our family and very close friends! We had a welcome party at D'Vino which was beautifully prepared.

Our wedding and reception were at the top of the Edgewater Hotel with gorgeous views of the Capitol and Lake Mendota.

We had a lovely ceremony with a string quartet, terrific music during dinner by Mike Massey, and a super-fun DJ after that. The food was great and the company was even better! Finally, we had a farewell brunch at our new home on Madison's east side—before going on a lovely honeymoon to Paris. We packed a lot of fun into June and July! Love our love! **Photographer:** Steve Noll, Noll Photography

### The Show Must Go On // Erin Anderson & Kate Miller

June 26 // Engaged November 29, 2019 // Madison

**IN A PLOT TWIST**, one of the brides, Kate, lands in the hospital at 10 am. Rushing to the ER mid-hair and makeup, we brace for the unknown. An emergency surgery (kidney stones) forces us to make the heart-wrenching call to cancel the wedding. Yes, you read that right: The wedding got canceled! But Erin and the squad decide to pivot.

Frantic calls to vendors follow, with each one agreeing to move the entire wedding to the next day. Kate leaves the hospital at 11 pm on Saturday, and Wedding 2.0 is a go for a Noon ceremony on Sunday. Friends become makeup artists and event coordinators, and the community rallies to make the impossible happen. This wasn't just a wedding; it was a testament to resilience, love, and the belief that the show must go on, even in the face of chaos. **Photographer:** Brianna Jane Photography

### Life's Simple Joys // Eric Durant & Scott Swickard

July 9 // Engaged January 1, 2023 // Pritzlaff 325, Milwaukee

**OUR WEDDING** in downtown Milwaukee was uniquely ours, marked by whimsical and memorable moments. A highlight was our post-"first look" photo session, where we posed in front of a dumpster in an alley,

adding an ironic twist to traditional glamorous shots.

During our ceremony, the traditional flower girl role was joyfully replaced by my two-and-a-half-year-old goddaughter, who marched down the aisle with a lightsaber. Her delightful entrance perfectly symbolized our love for the unconventional, bringing smiles to everyone.

Earlier, in a moment of calm, we were photographed reading the day's newspapers in our wedding attire, showcasing our appreciation for life's simple joys. These moments reflect our journey—a blend of spontaneity, humor, and the extraordinary in the ordinary.

**Photographer:** Amy Erickson, Happy Gnome Photography

### A True Best Friend // José Vega & Mike Webber

August 5 // Engaged July 2, 2022 // Vintage Brewing Company, Sauk City

**OUR CEREMONY** was officiated by Mike's best friend Brian Mitsch. We were surprised how much about our life together he included in the delivery of the ceremony. Our first date, our love of Badger sports, in and out about our relationship in the past 10 years. He clearly had been paying attention. It meant so much to us how detailed he was with his words pertaining to our relationship. It will always be a highlight and most memorable part of our day. **Photographer:** Tiffany Bekx

### Anonymous No More // Cass Downing & Ryan Mueller

August 12 // Engaged Dec. 19, 2021 // Chapel of the Archangels, Beaver Dam

**WE MET YEARS AGO** when we were using and selling drugs. We fell out of contact but reunited years later at a NA meeting where Cass was getting her 13-year key tag. We'd see each other at meetings for the next few years but really started hanging out in the summer of '15. We started dating in 2016. I proposed at her 50th birthday party in December of 2021 in front of friends and family during her drag performance.

We got married in August, and all the vendors were part of the

LGBTQIA and/or BIPOC community, as being a trans couple it meant a lot for us to work with people who have had a similar experience and spend our money to support other small business owners who happen to be a part of the community. Married life has been quite a whirlwind. So far and we have been enjoying it, along with our dogs: Cilantro and Gumbo. **Photographer:** Schuld Photography

### Just Kidding! // Amy Kue & Betsy Moyer

August 19 // Engaged July 31, 2020 // Madison

**THE CEREMONY BEGAN** without the brides being ready, and we had to redo the processional. Amy's sister yelled "Just Kidding!" and everyone had a good laugh. No one was sad about watching four kids come back down the aisle in their adorable coordinated outfits.

We asked family members to decorate and coordinate our low-key wedding, but this led to rushed family photos and missed quality time together. We learned that it's worth the money to hire a wedding planner so that family can just enjoy the day.

We had an unexpected wedding crasher who ended up being the most delightful guest, helper, and partier. We were surprised that we each wrote vows based on nature (geology puns and plant metaphors). We arrived at our reception via a canoe in our wedding outfits. We also had a mashed potato bar. **Photographer:** Farrah (Yang) Photos & Design

### Off Like a Shot // Elizabeth & Jessica Ramirez Mancilla

September 1 // Engaged August, 2023 // South Milwaukee

**WE MET AT PRIDE** this year. Jessica was my best friend's partner's best friend. Never met her before, and the minute I laid my eyes on her, I knew she needed to be mine. I'm very introverted and she's very extroverted. We went out to the bar that night and completely hit it off.

My birthday is at the end of July, and the cake that was used during

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my birthday party had a pull out tab in it. It was a paper asking me to be her girlfriend. We were intoxicated that night, and I said, "You know you should marry me." She giggled. You know; no big deal we are both intoxicated. A couple days later we're having a conversation, and I say, "You should marry me; I'm serious." She says OK.

Next thing you know, I am moving mountains to get married. You no longer get married at the courthouse in Milwaukee, and I had to find somebody. We got our marriage license at the end of August, and the first day of September, we married. A little bit over six months of meeting this woman, and a little bit over three months married. Would do this all over again if it meant ending up with her.

**ACT Riding Into the Sunset** // Charley & Gillian Blake

**September 8** // Engaged January 7, 2021 // East Side Club, Madison  
**CHARLEY AND I** met in 2012 at the ACT Ride, both volunteering for the Massage Team. We hit it off right away, and became good friends, going into business together the following year. We actually started dating in 2017, and got engaged in 2021, on Charley's birthday.

During our engagement, we sold both of our houses, moved in

together, and planned a wedding. We wanted it to be perfect, and it was. The wedding was at the East Side Club, and one of our mothers was the best flower "girl" ever; followed by our children walking us down the aisle. Our officiant was amazing, and invited all 120 guests present to promise to support our union. Then came time for our vows, which we both needed to use our glasses to read. That got a few laughs, and a few tears. The procession was to Kool and the Gang's Celebration.

The ceremony was followed by champagne on the lawn with an amazing sunset. We enjoyed dinner prepared by Upstairs Downstairs, then we had an outstanding dance party with VO5. No one wanted the party to end. A highlight was being in the "Love Train" with our family and friends. So much love permeated the entire event. We were beaming for weeks after. We still are. **Photographer: Maureen Cassidy**

**Spending on Memories** // Megan Gour & Terri Marsh

**September 23** // Engaged September 17, 2022 // Watertown  
**OUR DAY** was focused on intimacy and spending on the memories we would cherish. This meant investing in our photographer, keeping the guest list small, and focusing on how we wanted to feel on our day.



Jim Chiolino & Terry Svaglic



Amy Kue & Betsy Moyer



Casandra & Michalea Moore



Elizabeth & Jessica Ramirez Mancilla



Erin Pierce & Rachel Salemi



Eric Durant & Scott Swickard

We were able to celebrate with our dogs and closest chosen family. This is something that we loved and have heard a lot of positive comments on. We got both of our outfits custom made so that they felt affirming in our identities and confident in our bodies. Terri's closest friend was our officiant, and Megan's best friend gave the speech of the evening. Everything felt incredibly personal and special. We also focused on supporting local businesses and low waste so our values were incorporated throughout the decorations and food as well. We are so happy! **Photographer: Sam at Dutcher Photography**

**Live Your Best Life** // Kim Fleischman & Jenni Fregin

**October 5** // Engaged December 6, 2022 // Las Vegas, Nevada  
**WE MET** on Facebook Dating after she turned me down on Tinder. She gave me a shot because "I wasn't like everyone else." After meeting, we've had non-stop adventures; from Door County, to Mexico, to Canada, to a few surgeries, and bumps and bruises. We enjoy visiting random locations, roadside attractions, and things that people question.

We took a road trip to Vegas and back. Six full days on the road stopping to see the most random things like the World's Largest Ball of Twine. The day of the wedding, Kim and I went to the Little Vegas Chapel with her mom and my daughter. We knew we wanted to get married by Elvis to make it something special. We walked down the aisle to Can't Help Falling in Love sung by "Elvis."

The jokes and vows that were told were enjoyable and fun. Vegas weddings are quick, so afterward we scheduled our photographer to take us downtown Fremont street for some awesome images. We got lucky because while we were getting our tattoos, an amazing person let us use their bike for some of our photos. To be walking downtown and hearing all the congratulations from just random people on the street is an awesome feeling. **Photographer: Cidney Drake, Drake Imaging LLC**

**All My Relations** // Barbara Murray & Brandy Reding

**October 11** // Engaged October 15, 2020 // Union Grove  
**WE ARE BARBIE & BRAN**, or B^2 (B to the power of two). Our relationship is one of beautiful resilience, dynamic work, and committed choice. Both of our individual strengths came from hard-fought, literal battles that nearly took both of us out in our younger years. And we survived and healed, becoming formidable women.

Neither of us were looking for a partner, yet we discovered each other in 2019 at The Milwaukee Old Timers Dance. Our wedding day placed us both into an Ancestral Braid, a realistic bond of who we really are. Family, friends, and pug intertwined with us in ceremony and celebration. It was a beautiful day, one that neither of us ever dreamed we'd have. Grateful to celebrate that we and our Bbraid are our best gifts of life. Mitakuye Oyasin. **Photographer: Family and friends**

**The Wrong Date** // Brad & Ryan Branwell

**October 13** // Engaged August 08, 2021 // Swan Barn Door, Wisconsin Dells  
**WE CHOSE FRIDAY THE 13TH**. The date is by design. We chose it because it's the "wrong date," a date shrouded in controversy, a date some people truly do believe is unlucky or evil. And there are some people out there that think that same thing about our gay wedding itself. Everyone at our wedding was told to wear all black for the spooky theme. Our ceremony provided a mini gay-rights history lesson so everyone could understand the battle queer people have gone through to allow us to get married. **Photographer: Codi Shandel Photography**

**A Lucky Beginning** // Jayce Moe & Christian Swomley

**October 13** // Engaged March 24, 2023 // Lussier Center, Madison  
**WE OFFICIALLY MET** on a Friday the 13th, and we married on a Friday



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the 13th. We knew the day would come but hadn't settled on a date. We knew it would likely happen out of necessity, and not by planning a large celebration, due to the upcoming election and the fear we felt over losing the ability to take care of each other or raise a family together.

Early in October, we realized that Friday the 13th would be the perfect day for so many reasons. For many this is an unlucky day, but for us it would be the most lucky beginning. We had asked a few friends to gather with us, in flannel formal, one to be the celebrant, one to be the ring "bear," and the other eight to be witnesses. Little did we know the ring bearer would show up in a bear costume! It was cold, dark, and raining and we said, "I do!" **Photographers:** Sid Richards & Danny Atwater

### *Kiss the Rain* // Wes Meives & Sam Rodenberg

**October 14** // April 22, 2022 // Verona

**WE PICKED** a mid-October wedding to avoid the rain, as we had an outdoor wedding, but Mother Nature had other plans. It rained all week while we were preparing the space, and all morning the day of. Rain plus 40-degree weather was not fun but showed us that a little rain never hurt anyone, stuff will happen, and eventually the sun will shine again. As long as we surround ourselves with people who love us—and an open bar—nothing can stop us. **Photographer:** Dutcher Photography

### *A Screaming Good Time* // Casandra & Michalea Moore

**October 20** // Engaged December 2, 2022 // The Venue, Janesville

**WE HAD A GOTHIC/HALLOWEEN** wedding where we both wore black and had a substantial amount of candy, sweets, cookies, a hot cocoa bar, and an apple cider bar. It was such a hit! Our maids of honors' grand march walk-in had one wearing a Scream mask chasing the other running away from her as a surprise (because Cassandra loves horror movies). The entire night was a dream! We are so grateful for everyone who cel-

ebrated us and told us that it was the most fun wedding they have ever been to. **Photographer:** TMJ - Taylor Jensen

### *Tossing the T-Shirt* // Erin Pierce & Rachel Salemi

**October 21** // Engaged February 20, 2022 // Goodman Center, Madison

**WE WANTED** to mark the next chapter of our life together with a celebration that reflected what's most important to us: Queer joy! We aren't super-formal people and opted to swap out traditional wedding norms for practices that fit us best. All our guests had drinks before the ceremony (officiated by Erin's mom), followed by a party complete with a T-shirt toss in lieu of a first dance. Both of us are originally from Massachusetts but have made Wisconsin home for the last five-ish years. Our wedding was the first time many of our family members had been to Madison, and we were honored to share what we love about our community here. **Photographer:** Dutcher Photography

### *Soaking It In* // Alyssa Lentz-Underwood & Holly Underwood

**October 23** // Engaged August 13, 2022 // Sheboygan

**AS A WEDDING PHOTOGRAPHER**, I've spent hundreds of hours celebrating other peoples' weddings, but truly nothing could compare to just how joyful ours felt. We poured so much time and energy into selecting all of the details of our day: Custom chocolates from a local chocolatier, utilizing primarily LGBTQ+ vendors, sourcing all of our decor, designing our invites, curating the vibes.

Ultimately our favorite thing was soaking in all of the love and energy from our chosen family. Both of us had experienced less-than-affirming periods in our lives due to religious trauma, and neither of us ever expected to find this level of support and validation. It was an incredible, powerful moment to come together in celebration of queer joy. **Photographer:** Brizzy Rose + Emma

### *The Greatest Fact* // David Heuer & Ted Ketterhagen

**November 11** // Engaged July 5, 2020 // Madison

**WE LOVE THAT** we embraced Madison. We were married in the Capitol, and our reception was across the street with a great view. We were surrounded with so much love from family and friends. We wish we could relive the day. There were so many people we would've liked to spend more time with at the reception, and we wish we could have expanded the invitations to others we wish had been there. Our photographer was a delight. We are extremely pleased with the bakery and florist as well. All other details aside, the greatest fact is that we are now married to the person we love. **Photographer:** Sharon Vanorny

### *Challenge Accepted* // Ross Beattie & Jonathan Foht

**November 18** // Engaged November 27, 2021 // The Lageret, Stoughton

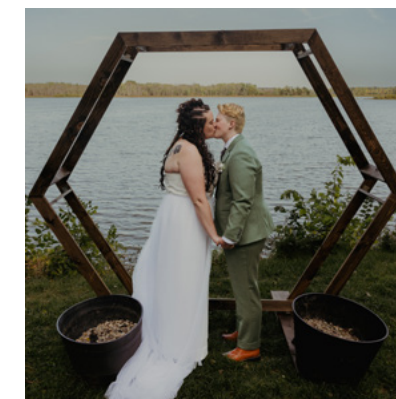
**I AM FROM MILWAUKEE**, and Jonathan is from Galena, IL. We chose the Madison area because it was just about the halfway spot between both our hometowns. For me, planning a large wedding was something that did not interest me. But for Jonathan, it was something he was super-excited to do and something he had dreamt about his whole life.

Looking back, I am so glad we did it. You really don't have many opportunities to be surrounded by all of your loved ones in a single space and feel celebrated. One thing we heard from several of our friends was "expect to be behind" or "expect for something to go wrong." And for us, it was a "challenge accepted" type moment because our homosexual audacity is that we know how to plan a party! Our planning and help from our wedding party/friends/family truly came together (we were ahead of schedule the whole time, LOL).

A fun aspect of our ceremony included a "mimosa toast." On our first date, we had a mimosa brunch followed by a wine tasting at a local winery. **Photographer:** Twig & Olive



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# Selecting Inclusive Wedding Vendors

Wedding photographer and *Our Lives* contributor **Melanie Jones** offers tips on examining a potential vendor's inclusivity.

WEDDINGS BUSINESS INCLUSIVITY

**SOME OF YOU MIGHT HAVE** just gotten engaged over the holidays, while some of you are fully immersed in the planning process of your upcoming wedding. Others are looking to get married at some point and are looking for a place to start visualizing what that might look like. While this is quickly changing, for a long time, queer couples have had to rely on their own imaginations, as traditional weddings do not reflect their own values and needs, and traditional wedding shows and vendors have often left them completely out of marketing materials.

AN INDUSTRY ISSUE

Even though this is changing, thin, white, economically advantaged, and largely cis-gender norms still prevail even when gay

and lesbian couples are represented, and people of color, trans people, people who can't afford a large wedding, and those who are not considered traditionally pretty are often left out entirely. The norms within the heterosexual wedding industry are changing too, as men are becoming more involved in the planning process. So why is the wedding industry as a whole lagging so far behind, with wedding shows still counting participants in marketing materials to potential vendors as how many brides showed up, and are still holding an ideal that has never really been representative of those in the larger community?

Wedding shows as a whole largely don't have a screening process that includes LGBTQ+ inclusion, and as a result, it is

not uncommon for queer couples who attend to run into a vendor that makes them uncomfortable and isn't welcoming. Many of the wedding shows still cling to unconscious bias that includes a higher price tag, while many queer weddings are smaller, use different traditions, and are simply not white/hetero/cis/rich. Even with vendors and companies that do claim that they are welcoming, they are sometimes just interested in what they see as a money-making opportunity, and do nothing to change what many see as a hostile industry. This is called "pinkwashing," and is what we see when companies have rainbows all over their social media presence in June, but still have discriminatory practices and get rid of all queer representation for the other 11 months of the year.

Wedding shows as a whole largely don't have a screening process that includes LGBTQ+ inclusion, and as a result, it is not uncommon for queer couples who attend to run into a vendor that makes them uncomfortable.

Planning a wedding is usually very stressful regardless, and is frequently a fraught experience for those in the LGBTQ+ community. Even as the Supreme Court granted marriage equality in 2015, they have also given bigoted people hiding behind their religious beliefs the right to continue to discriminate. Right here in Dane County, in 2017, a photographer named Amy Lawson sued Dane County because she didn't want to have to photograph queer weddings, saying that to do so would go against her religion. She did so when a heterosexual couple who had secured her as their wedding photographer found out her discriminatory views and wanted to cancel her services and spend their money elsewhere. She wanted to be able to decline those weddings but said in the suit that she was worried about breaking Dane County law, according to the Wisconsin State Journal. She has since stopped photographing weddings because of this stance.

So, what in the world is a queer couple who wants to get married supposed to do? How do we as a community navigate being ignored, misrepresented, tokenized, and left behind when we still want to throw a party and celebration that we can look back on for

years to come and be proud of? How do we pressure local wedding shows and the larger wedding industry to meet the community where we are? What follows is meant to help queer individuals and couples, but is also a call to action for more traditional, heterosexual couples to challenge their vendors, like that couple did with Lawson, and to avoid spending their money with vendors who would discriminate against their queer counterparts. It is also a call to action for cis-gender members of the queer community to avoid spending their money with those who discriminate against or participate in defamatory and hateful speech against those in the trans community.

FIRST STEPS, IMPORTANT QUESTIONS

The first step for couples getting married is to identify what values and traditions are important and what they want to leave behind. For example, will religion have a place in your wedding? Will your parents be participating, or will your planning have to incorporate chosen family in their stead? Do you care about first looks, traditional wedding attire, a reception that follows the traditional timeline of dinner/speeches/cake cutting/first dance/parent dances, etc.? Once you have both etched out what you want to keep and



Allison & Hailey Wilson

what you want to get rid of (and by the way, there is nothing wrong with having a wedding that is more traditional), it's time to find your vendors. This is where things become a little tricky, and unfortunately, there are minefields everywhere. The important things to look for and ask are:



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- Does this vendor showcase queer/non-traditional weddings in their marketing? Are there any on their website? If there are some in their social media, and if there are, are they only posted in June for Pride month? Are they queer owned?
- When searching for a vendor, you should not have to ask the question of whether someone would photograph your wedding,

it should be obvious with how they put themselves out there. Find someone who will celebrate you, not someone who will just take your money.

- Do they ask you what you want in your wedding, or do they offer unsolicited advice on what you SHOULD do and want? Do they push back when you say you want something that does not follow how they think the day should go?
- When shopping for wedding attire, do they only carry smaller sizes? Do they offer alternatives, or just the standard faire? How gendered are their fitting rooms? Do they make people who might not follow the cis norm uncomfortable?
- For venues, do they have getting ready rooms that are gendered, or do they have inclusive signage that welcomes everyone? What is their bathroom situation? Will trans/non-binary guests feel welcome? Do they have seating that is size-inclusive, or will larger guests be uncomfortable?
- Does your photographer/videographer showcase couples like you? When you have your consultation, do they seem excited to realize YOUR vision? You will be spending all day with them, do they make you feel welcome?
- For hair and makeup, do they welcome your gender expression? Do they make space to really listen to what you want or will they push their own norms on you, leaving you potentially with a look the day of that is not who you are?
- Will your DJ use the correct pronouns and honorifics when introducing you? Will they choose music that helps you celebrate the day, or will they play from a standard list

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- that does not take you and your tastes into consideration?
- Will your officiant honor your wishes and help you craft a ceremony that is reflective of who you are, and what you want, or do they have a standard script? Do they meet with you in person and get to know you? Are they welcoming of non-traditional ceremonies?

This list really could go on forever, but I hope you get the idea of what questions to ask and how to approach potential vendors. A note to keep in mind is that many vendors know each other, and your venue and photographer should be able to help you find other welcoming vendors in the area.

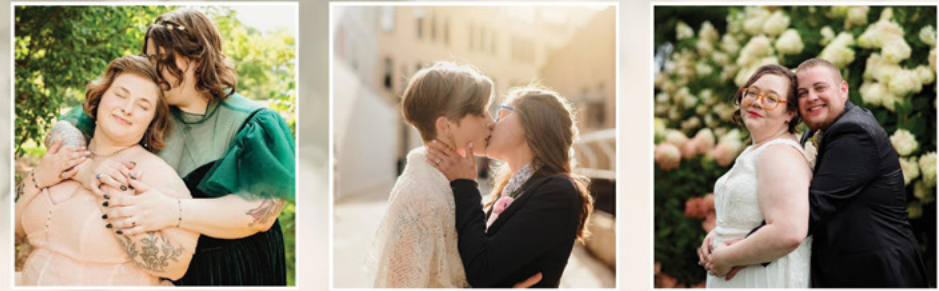
**DON'T SETTLE FOR ANYTHING LESS**

I know this process seems overwhelming, and having to worry about discrimination on top of just the regular stress of wedding planning is markedly unfair. There are places, however, to start that aren't overly alienating and tokenizing, and even large, more traditional wedding planning sites are making changes to help the LGBTQ+ community navigate through this process. The Knot and Wedding Wire both have an option for vendors to mark themselves as queer owned, and for couples to use this as a filter to start their search.

A note to keep in mind is that many vendors know each other, and your venue and photographer should be able to help you find other welcoming vendors in the area.

The LGBT Chamber of Commerce has many vendors, and while membership is not a guarantee that they will be welcoming, it does mean that the vendor spent money and is willing to add themselves to a public list of welcoming vendors. Some even market in this magazine, showing that they support queer media in a meaningful way. And as more and more queer couples get married, you can rely on the community to refer you to people who made them feel welcome. It's also worth googling before signing a contract to see if a vendor you are considering has, say, bashed trans people on social media, or if the reviews say that they made their clients feel uncomfortable.

Bottom line: Don't be afraid to walk away; there are lots of us out there who would be so excited to celebrate with you. Don't settle for anything less. ■



# Melanie Renee

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# For the Love of Love

## 2024 LOVE LIST: CELEBRATING WISCONSIN'S LGBTQ RELATIONSHIPS

By being a part of the Love List, **hundreds of LGBTQ relationships** from across Wisconsin are helping us recognize and celebrate LGBTQ love while also creating connections and visibility for our entire community. We hope this helps to create a portrait of love that reflects our diverse community.

**PUBLISHER'S NOTE:** To protect against trans\* and bi erasure, **only LGBTQ-identified relationships** are represented in photos. Allies only appear in text list.

- AFTON**  
33 Shelley Anderson & Nancy Buzzell
- ALBANY**  
41 Robert Haigler & Roald Henderson
- ANTIGO**  
2 Kim Fleischman & Jenni Fregin
- APPLETON**  
32 Liz Miller & Maureen O'Gara  
23 Helen Boyd & Rachel Crowl  
20 Joshua Cobbs & Benjamin D. Rinehart  
20 Heather & Natalie Starr

- 17 Chuck Erickson & E-Ben Grisby  
17 Kathy Flores & Zephyr Kendzierski  
16 Russ Caspersen & Jeffrey Jansen  
14 Patrick & Ryan Platta  
13 Ryan Merkel & Jake Tulogesi ♥  
5.5 Brent Mecikalski & Nick Ross ♥  
2.3 Anji & Boe Ramsey
- ARGYLE**  
23 Steve Engles & Richard Johnson
- ARLINGTON**  
7 Randy Anhalt & Nick Rich



- ARPIN**  
13 Travis Christie & Preston Weiler
- ATHELSTANE**  
34 Teresa Dziak & Mary Willard
- BARABOO**  
23 David & Ryan Berahn  
11 John Shumaker & Clint Zurbuchen  
7 Michael & Wilk Royer
- BAY VIEW**  
16 Jinx & Micah Ogé
- BEAVER DAM**  
12 Ann & Heather Miller
- BELLEVILLE**  
34 Ken Cameron & Brian Thompson

- 9 Andrea & Sheena Hirschfield  
6.5 Cindy & Stephanie Jorenby
- BELOIT**  
21 Joanne & Tina Lenz-Mandt  
15 Andrea & Genia Stevens  
6 Philip Gorman & Mark Spreitzer  
3 Nicole Nathaniel & Kari Oscar ♥  
0.5 Hazel Alldredge & Cam Meiers
- BLACK RIVER FALLS**  
7 Angela & Rachael Merry
- BLUE RIVER**  
9 Ryan Jahr & Michael Steiner
- BOSCOBEL**  
48 T.J. Meehan & Larry Ortt

- BROOKFIELD**  
23 Lynn Carlson & Lisa Rouskey
- BROOKLYN**  
28 Cheryl Hack & Myrna Peterson
- BURLINGTON**  
12 Ethan & Faith Parnell
- CAMBRIDGE**  
5 Linda & Sarah Newman
- COLUMBUS**  
6 Jordy & Shalene Egli-Wilke
- COTTAGE GROVE**  
24 Deb Fruit-Gaines & Sheila Jacobson-Gaines

**Bold**  
Married couples.

♥  
Engaged couples.

★  
Straight allies.

**1 2 3**  
Relationship Age.

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Straight allies.

1 2 3

Relationship Age.



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To safeguard against trans\* and bi invisibility, our policy is to only publish photos of LGBTQ-identified couples.

#### 16 Kirsten Ray & James Schoenemann

##### DEFOREST

22 Holly Anderson & Colleen Marsden

13 Edwin & Jeffrey Roman-Carney

11 Andrea & Annie Getsinger

4.5 Connor Fish & Vincent Motzkus +

2 Jennifer Mcfaralane & Crysstal Schermerhorn ♥

##### EAU CLAIRE

23 Lisa Herrmann & Jane Schley

16 Brad & Chad Knelson

13 Jazmine Brennan & Nicole Tourville

4.5 Claire Durgan & Sarah Ovsak ♥

##### EDGERTON

20 Amy Kongsli & Michelle Paulman

13 Liz & Marnie Tlougan

4 Wendi Kent & Liv Von Blomberg

##### EVANSVILLE

11 Carol & Kimberly Foglestad

3 Kayla & Liz Kanable

##### FITCHBURG

27 Eric Schmidt & Carrie Waters Schmidt ★

18 Brian James & Wade Richardson

17 Ryan Parkos & Chris Sina

15 Christopher Peguero & Anthony Potter

14 Jill Meunich & Laura Webster

13 Ryan Crose & Steven Heller

11 Daniel Beechler & Michael Lynn ♥

10 Jose Vega & Mike Webber

9 Michael & Phillip Meland

8 Brandon Geracie & Aaron Insko

7 Erin Anderson & Kate Miller

##### FORT ATKINSON

22 David Buggs & Mark Meisegeier

##### FOX LAKE

4 Destiny & Lisa Beaugrand

##### FRANKLIN

9 Donny & Keith Gray-Dozal

5 Barbara Murray & Brandy Reding +

##### FREEDOM

13 Aiden Guerra & Sandra Whippler

##### FRIENDSHIP

47 Ann Jakel Stormoen & Peggy Stormoen

##### GLENDALE

11 Phillip Bailey & Jason Rae

##### GRAFTON

24 Lynn Johnson & Charlene Strouf

##### GREEN BAY

19 Kevin Garrity & Michael Larkey

9 Teresa Ninneman & Jamie Shiner +

9 Angela Baerwolf & Abby Swetz

3 Danielle & Rachel Maes

##### GREENFIELD

0.5 Elizabeth Ramirez-Mancilla & Jessica Ramirez-Soto

##### HARTFORD

2.5 Katie & Mason Rider

##### HUBERTUS

32 Dan Gorman & Bob Schmitt

##### JANESVILLE

34 Eilene & Lisa Coulter

32 Liz Keenen & Amie De Voll ♥

19 Kimberly Blanchette & Colleen Frentzel

11 Daniel & David Malchow-Davis

4.5 Michalea & Casandra Moore

3.5 Hailey Bartlett & Helen Jaroch ♥

##### JEFFERSON

17 Sheryl & Tarrah Spooner

5.5 Sarah Harebo & Amanda Kidwell

3 Jess Gage & Amelia Teeter ♥

##### JOHNSON CREEK

12 Beth & Naomi Zaccard

##### KENOSHA

19 Terry Cowles & Timothy Zimmer

2 Alyssa Lentz-Underwood & Holly Underwood

##### LA CROSSE

33 Tara DeLong & Willem Van Roosenbeek

25 Margaret Beth Cherne & Cindy Killion

17 Nicholas & Reegan Jensen-Shafer

5 Debra & Jo Basset

4 Criss Gilbert & Mark McDougal

3 Ames Barker & Desiree Smith ♥

##### LAKE GENEVA

5 Amy Funderburk & Lisa Szalanski ♥

##### LANCASTER

0.5 Chandler Cook & Charna Halstead

##### LUXEMBURG

3.5 Tonja Mason & Jan Scoville ♥

##### MADISON

63 Clarence Cameron & Robert Lockhart

48 Raphael Kadushin & Thomas McGhee

47 Sunshine Jones & Jo Kelley

46 Betty Harris Custer & Corkey Custer ★

46 Paul Grossberg & Dean Ziemke

43 Louie Phillips & Brian Schultz

41 John Cannon & John Fritsch

41 Sue Currier & Janis Senungetuk

41 Melissa Keyes & Ingrid Rothe

40 Tom DeChant & Paul Gibling

## Cupid's Questions



ANDREW CARLSON & RIKU NOZAKI  
MADISON | 7 YEARS

It's tough feeling close when your partner lives far away. Thank goodness for video calls and texts, but the magic of the internet can't replace the kisses, cuddles, and quality time. Not yet, at least. Riku and I spent almost half of our seven-year-and-counting relationship on opposite sides of the planet—him in Japan and me in the US. And if long distance taught us anything, it was how to get creative with communicating love.

One of our favorite long-distance traditions stuck even after moving to Madison together, and we do it every Valentine's Day. It's simple and intimate, and we're excited to share it with you:

We start by each writing down 5–10 questions on slips of paper and tossing them into a hat. Then we take turns drawing one and reading it aloud. No question is off limits, and we both answer each one. We like to have some lighthearted ones ("Would you rather be an orca or a shark?") mixed in with some deeper ones ("When are we happiest together?"). We've thrown in sexy, stupid, and even financial questions, while some have helped us look to the future ("When do we see ourselves having a child?").

For us, these Valentine's Questions pair well with a Pinot Noir. And when we were long distance, we'd be sure to pick a bottle that we could both find. Sharing the same taste helped us feel just a bit closer.

After our answers and wine, we lay out all the questions and take a picture. We look back at them to see how our relationship has evolved. It's like a little snapshot of what was on our minds that year. Sometimes questions repeat themselves, and sometimes the answers change. In 2022, Riku wrote "When will we get a dog?" and I wrote "What should we name our dog?" Now in 2023, we're still dogless, but we've adopted—and are completely enamored with—our black cat Winnie. Last year, we never would have identified as cat people. But hey, things change. ■

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- 1 2 3**  
Relationship Age.
- +
- Registered as domestic partners.

- |   |                                       |   |
|---|---------------------------------------|---|
| 39 Darren & Stephanie Bush ★            | 28 Deborah Daniel & Linda Novinger    | 23 Jane Bettner & Joan Jung             |
| 39 Phil Biebl & Kevin Grohskopf         | 27 Catherine Briggs & Marty Fox       | 23 Jen Ferstl & Jamesetta Fousek        |
| 38 Stella & Vica-Etta Steel             | 27 Linda Curtin & Mary Ray            | 23 Terry Heiliger & James Moe           |
| 37 Valerie Hodgson & MC Reisdorf        | 27 Michelle Shelhamer & Julie Visger  | 23 Daniel Lippit & Glenn Mitroff        |
| 37 Rob Latousek & Brian McCormick       | 26 Denise King & Nancy Smider         | 22 Barb Arnett & Ellen Sullivan M       |
| 36 Dale Decker & Chad LaFlash           | 26 Jennifer Wagner & Rebecca Wennlund | 22 Cynthia Bachhuber & Jess Bachhuber   |
| 32 Maggie Dugan & Melanie Witte         | 25 Eric Appleton & Rick Bristol       | 22 Olwen & Shelley Hansen-Blake         |
| 31 Dale Daulo & Christopher Walters     | 25 Keith Borden & Johannes Wallmann   | 21 Renee Herber & Tamara Packard        |
| 30 Michael Austin & Bob Stindt          | 25 Diane & Monique Brockley-Drinkman  | 21 Craig Geisler & Jeff Jensen          |
| 30 Callie Bell & Beth Thigpen           | 25 Bob Klebba & David Waugh           | 21 Carol McCann & Carrie Tobin          |
| 30 Karen Bennett & Carolyn Virginia     | 25 Amber Lefers & Rachel Veltman      | 20 Amanda Berg & Becca Schmitz          |
| 30 Jan Gray & MA Long                   | 24 Scott Bennett & Landon Petersen    | 20 Randy Cornell & Jess Salek           |
| 30 Michael McFadden & Steven Scholze    | 24 Jordan Bingham & Heather Stouder   | 20 Jacinda Tessmann & Teri Weiland      |
| 29 Rigoberto Gallegos & David Wahlberg  | 24 Patrick Hoeth & Keith Lupien       | 19 Karen Darcy & Beth McConnell         |
| 29 Peter Hoff & Paul Patenaude          | 24 Lee Johnsen & Rex Piercy           | 19 Donald Haar & Steve Starkey +        |
| 29 Michele Perreault & Stephanie Spoehr | 24 Carol Nelson & Nancy Speir         | 19 Virginia Harrison & Melissa Peyton + |

## Laughing Through Life



**ANDREA & GENIA STEVENS**  
BELOIT | 15 YEARS

Most people know me as a strong, assertive, and confident woman. What they don't know is that I'm all those things because of Andrea's support. She knows me so well that she can sense when I'm struggling, and she immediately knows what I need. It's kind of frustrating at times for someone as independent as I am. I've had to learn to accept that someone loves me and wants to take care of me. We take care of each other.

Whenever Andrea gets frustrated about something at work, she calls me because she wants to know "what would Genia do?" And I tell her—although I don't expect her to do it because I'm far more assertive and outspoken than she is. Usually she just needs me to talk her off the proverbial cliff. I call Andrea at least a dozen times during my workday. I usually start the conversation with "Girrrr! You ain't never gonna believe . . ." And then we laugh and laugh and laugh. Andrea is my favorite person to spill the tea with.

No matter how many times we talk during the day on the phone, we always meet at the kitchen table at the end of the day. I made that a tradition about nine years ago when I noticed we were spending too much time on our phones or sitting in front of the TV, and we weren't connecting the way we used to. I insisted on us always eating dinner together, at the kitchen table, not on the sofa in front of the TV. Oftentimes, we both get home from work pretty late. It doesn't matter though. No matter what time we arrive home, one of us is waiting for the other one so we can talk—again—about our day.

Every relationship has its challenges, even ours. Sometimes we talk more than we listen. That can lead to some serious misunderstandings at times. What saves us is that we love laughing together. It never fails. Within an hour of a disagreement, one of us sends the other one a funny video we found on Facebook or TikTok. Laughter is our saving grace. Andrea is that best friend you can't sit next to at a serious event because you know, at some point, one of you will say something you shouldn't. ■

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- 1 2 3
- Relationship Age.
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- |  |  |  |
|--|--|--|
| <p>19 Nate Mathis-Vargas &amp; Steven Vargas-Mathis</p> <p>19 DaddyDean Nett-Strozak &amp; Alan Strozak</p> <p>19 Philip Renner &amp; Marco Torrez-Miranda</p> <p>19 Michael Velliquette &amp; Tehshik Yoon</p> <p>18 Robin Bechhofer &amp; Pat Lambert</p> <p>18 Eric Borchert &amp; Timmo Dugdale</p> <p>18 Nick Drake, Chez Dickson &amp; Emily Mills ♥</p> <p>17 Amanda &amp; Dawn Siebert-Evenstone</p> <p>17 Bradley Tabor &amp; Tim Walters</p> <p>17 Carolyn &amp; Ruth Barker-Bowman</p> <p>17 Jeff Clark &amp; Tim Hagen</p> <p>17 Judith Davidoff &amp; Rhonda Lanford</p> <p>17 Lauren Leibold &amp; Katie Wilkin</p> <p>17 Donna Vance &amp; Jenni Vance</p> <p>16 Missy Dittmer-Herrmann &amp; Molly Herrmann</p> <p>16 Beth Hanson &amp; Kandis Severin</p> <p>16 Katy Conley &amp; Leonie Dolch</p> <p>16 Jeanine Hutcherson &amp; Tricia Johnson</p> <p>15 Julie Beauchamp &amp; Brenda Stanley</p> <p>15 Jay Edgar &amp; Joshua Feyen</p> <p>15 Allison Foxborn &amp; Ashley Foxborn</p> <p>15 Lavender Knight &amp; Tanya Mudrick</p> <p>15 Lana Lawrence &amp; Louise Stout +</p> <p>14 Anna Celaya &amp; Sherry Holly</p> <p>14 Juliet Darken &amp; Marlo Darken</p> <p>14 Diana Love &amp; Kim Prine</p> <p>14 Jilip &amp; Joey Nagler</p> <p>14 Gina Senarighi &amp; Rae Senarighi</p> <p>13 Bryon Hobbs &amp; Mike Hoelzel</p> <p>13 Jami Degrazio &amp; Holly Hieronim ♥</p> <p>13 Kris Kalb &amp; Robert Von Rutenberg</p> <p>13 Chelsea &amp; Doug Rowe</p> <p>13 Jason &amp; Dan Xiong</p> <p>12 Andy Altmann &amp; Geoff Staub</p> <p>12 Shannon &amp; Nick Ballhorn-Wagner ★</p> | <p>12 Mabel &amp; Sarah Carr</p> <p>12 Lukas Dietz &amp; Jordan Siegler ♥</p> <p>12 Shawn Ramsey &amp; Kelly Staerzl</p> <p>11 Melanie Jones &amp; Christen Lester-Jones</p> <p>11 Martin Batchelor &amp; Jeremiah Kasdorf</p> <p>11 Jason Fowler &amp; Grant Stroobants</p> <p>11 Roz Klaas &amp; Kāri Rongstad</p> <p>11 Stephanie Ricketts &amp; Kelly Schultz</p> <p>11 Brigid Russo-Downey &amp; Josie Russo</p> <p>10 Leah Clark &amp; Terry McLaren</p> <p>10 Benny Blazier &amp; Lacey Blazier</p> <p>10 Anne &amp; Monica Cupelli</p> <p>10 Patrick Farabaugh &amp; Sedrick Huppert</p> <p>10 Andre Glass &amp; Ron Gratz</p> <p>10 Robert Kobuch &amp; Mark Sannito</p> <p>10 Amanda Mobley &amp; Nadine Mobley</p> <p>10 Abbey Scott &amp; Haley Scott</p> <p>10 Ashley Wenten &amp; Sara Wenten</p> <p>9.5 Sandy Eichel &amp; Nancy Noet</p> <p>9.5 Shari Henning &amp; Laura Lenz-Perkins</p> <p>9 TeKema Balentine &amp; Megan Bentley ♥</p> <p>9 Stephanie Budge &amp; Megan McDonald</p> <p>9 Aaron Carreno &amp; Ryan Piaskowy</p> <p>9 Jen Fish &amp; Mel Fish</p> <p>9 Tracy Fitch &amp; Harper Hazelmare</p> <p>9 Liliana Hernandez &amp; Ashley Hiebing</p> <p>9 Jazmin &amp; Jessie LaPlante-Ackman</p> <p>9 Peg Zizmann &amp; Rachel Zizmann</p> <p>8 Becky &amp; Jess Barnes</p> <p>8 Michael Bruno &amp; Jim Smith</p> <p>8 Cass Downing &amp; Ryan Mueller</p> <p>8 Libby Hallanger-Bernstein &amp; Hannah Hankins ♥</p> <p>8 Amy Kue &amp; Betsy Moyer</p> <p>8 Claire Lind &amp; Kurt Nicholson</p> <p>8 Ashley &amp; Rebecca Radue</p> <p>8 Jillian &amp; Katy Werginz</p> <p>7.5 Royal Scheider &amp; Aaron Schliem</p> <p>7 Lauren Altaweel &amp; Niko Nelson</p> | <p>7 Pam Brandt &amp; Amy Spangler</p> <p>7 Andrew Carlson &amp; Rikuma Nozaki</p> <p>7 Erin &amp; Katelyn Danielson</p> <p>7 Andrew Goldsby &amp; Jeremy Pagel</p> <p>7 Zack Henderson &amp; Riley Willman</p> <p>7 Markus &amp; Tyler Kingswan</p> <p>7 Brian &amp; Ryan Maulana-Ponce</p> <p>7 Diana Miller &amp; Emily Pepper</p> <p>7 Karla Pantoja &amp; Lori Richard ♥</p> <p>6 Angie Alcorta &amp; Mel Paugel ♥</p> <p>6 Olivia Biller &amp; Alex Dudek</p> <p>6 Charley &amp; Gillian Blake</p> <p>6 David &amp; Matt Clark-Sally</p> <p>6 Jess &amp; Skye Zitkus</p> <p>5.5 Danny Atwater &amp; Sid Richards</p> <p>5.5 Ross Beattie &amp; Jonathan Foht</p> <p>5.5 Lachele Fisher &amp; Rachel Strauch-Nelson</p> <p>5.5 Dannee &amp; Rene Livingston-DeTienne</p> <p>5.5 Lynn Mayer &amp; Gigi Vail ♥</p> <p>5 Tyrone Creech &amp; Trevor Powless</p> <p>5 Daniel Felix &amp; Daniel Freiburger</p> <p>5 Em Hoggatt &amp; Alex Nelson</p> <p>5 Andy &amp; Audrey Standish</p> <p>5 Mario White &amp; Kieran Sahasrabudhe</p> <p>4.5 Brad &amp; Ryan Branwell</p> <p>4.5 Jim Chiolino &amp; Terry Svaglic</p> <p>4.5 Mady Greene &amp; Robin Matthews</p> <p>4 Sarah Airozo &amp; Chelsea Cornelius</p> <p>4 Sarah Birkholz &amp; Abby Churchill +</p> <p>4 Stacey Garbarski &amp; Rachel Seizer</p> <p>4 Jared Groth &amp; Emanuel Sanchez</p> <p>4 AJ Hardie &amp; William Linden</p> <p>4 David Heuer &amp; Ted Ketterhagen</p> <p>4 Lucas &amp; Dr. Mark Long</p> <p>4 Star Merchant &amp; Rowan Strange ♥</p> <p>4 Jayce Moe &amp; Christian Swomley</p> <p>3.5 Kim Broeren &amp; Karen Kane</p> <p>3.5 Cindy Crane &amp; Judy Mills</p> |
|--|--|--|

Submissions were requested at [ourliveswisconsin.com/lovelist](http://ourliveswisconsin.com/lovelist) via open calls in our November issue, and through our newsletter, Facebook, and Instagram.

## Who We Were Meant to Be



**MELANIE JONES (SHE/HER) & CHRISTEN LESTER-JONES (SHE/HER)**  
MADISON | 11.5 YEARS

We met at the lowest part of both of our lives. Trying to come back from heartbreak, we both went to the internet to try to find human connection to heal our hearts. What we expected was a one night stand. What we got was a loving and solid relationship that offered us both stability and healing. Despite not knowing each other well, Christen allowed Melanie, who was couch surfing and homeless in Oakland, CA, to move into a vacant room in her house, and to go back to school for photography. Giving Melanie that stability and hope saved her life; there is no other way to say it.

Facing burnout and the extreme stress of living in one of the most expensive places in the country had both of us looking for something different. So we left California—and all of our friends—and moved to a small town in south central Montana, where we struggled but also healed and really solidified our relationship with each other. A tight housing market and a layoff meant that we left after only one-and-a-half years. Some friends of Melanie's from Burning Man, who were scientists in Madison, offered to get Christen (who works in science) an interview at a pharmaceutical company. Eight years later, we are settled on the northside of Madison with our six animals and have no plans to leave.

Earlier in 2023, Christen, who was assigned male at birth and had been living and presenting as a man prior to 2023, came out as a trans woman. This change, while big and scary, has unlocked a happiness and comfort in her body previously unseen, and has allowed us to be even closer. Our move to Madison from the mountain west has allowed both of us to really grow into the people we were meant to be. ■

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Straight allies.
- 1 2 3**  
Relationship Age.
- +
- Registered as domestic partners.

- 3.5 Beth Feeney & Sharlene Victor
- 3.5 James Gardner & Edwin Suarez-Zayas
- 3 Ryan Gourlie & Mike Moulton
- 3 Lou Lindley & Amy Stuhlman-Lindley**
- 3 Erin Pierce & Rachel Salemi**
- 2.5 Valerie Burzynski & Valerie Haupt
- 2.5 Gideon Elliott & Amelia Speight
- 2.5 Neal Ellis & Pio (Tim Piotrowski) ♥
- 2.5 Kriona Hagen & Maya Robinson
- 2.5 Patrick Sisson & Steve Wright ♥
- 2 Liz Amaya & Hannah Stowell
- 2 Hayly Brockman & Kadajah Price ♥
- 2 **Megan Gour & Terri Marsh**
- 2 **Vale Guzman Luna & Rae Sowards**
- 2 **Ava Kemppainen & Amanda Prohaska**
- 2 Hollis Rudiger & Heather Winesett ♥

- 1.5 Nick Famularo & Sean O'Brien
- 1.5 Taylor Greene & Diana Pastrana
- 1.5 Jay Lantz & Drew Silver**
- 1 Jen Bailey & Stacy Seibert
- 1 Tommy Crow & Sebastian Daniel
- MANITOWOC**
- 7 Sapphire & Stephanie Garcia**
- MARSHFIELD**
- 4.5 Tracey Bushman & Ashley Mancl ♥
- MAZOMANIE**
- 19 Carolyn Antonie & Minda Engel**
- MCFARLAND**
- 32 Chuck Mocco & Thomas Scheid**
- 16 Jere Foley, 11 & Jason Strader**

- 15 Kristin & Nikki Ellis**
- 8 Mary & Tanya Meyer**
- 4 Cheryl & Michelle McCarty**
- MENOMONEE FALLS**
- 5 Allison Wilson & Hailey Wilson**
- MENOMONIE**
- 24 Sarah Thompson & Christina Vargo**
- 10 Minta Dwyer & Camden Hargrove**
- MEQUON**
- 47 Micheal Plambeck & Harry Sutton**
- 23 Brian LeStarge & Dale Mueller**
- MIDDLETON**
- 28 Ronald Meerhoff & Michael Rhoads
- 15 Erica Gittings & Leslie Gittings**

## Faith, Family, and Friends

**NICK & REEGAN JENSEN-SHAFER**  
LA CROSSE | 17 YEARS



Our relationship started similar to a lot of our friends: On a dating app. It was truly love at first sight, however it took a few bumps in the road to end up together.

In 2008 surrounded by friends and family, we had a beautiful commitment ceremony, but it never felt the same as those around us who were able to get legally married. Our commitment ceremony was held in a small, private venue. It was fun and full of love, yet we were still not married. Fast forward to 2015, when we had the wedding we had dreamed of—in our church with our pastor marrying us—surrounded by 350 of our closest family and friends. Besides the fact that we were legally married, there was one thing at our wedding that wasn't at our commitment ceremony: Our faith.

We were the first same sex couple to get married in our church. A place where we find comfort and support, a place where we worship with all ages who accept us for who we are, a place that has welcomed us from day one. Nick and I now serve as deacons in our church and are able to support our church's ministry with those who do not get to attend church on a regular basis.

We are community focused. This community has given us so much that it is important to us to always give back. From filling little pantries, writing Christmas cards to nursing home residents, ringing bells, co-directing and volunteering within the Miss America Opportunity, and being the first same sex couple to serve as Oktoberfest Grenadiers.

Nick is the level-headed one that supports all of Reegan's wild and crazy ideas. He is there to support Reegan and make sure things stay on task. Reegan is the social butterfly that has to always have a full calendar, and Nick is always there for the wild ride. Yet, we both find comfort in quiet time at home with our two-year-old Shih Tzus: Belle and Roscoe.

We love to travel and collect Christmas ornaments in the places we visit, and each year as we decorate our living room tree, we are reminded of the places we have traveled together and can talk about those trips. Nine Christmas trees and counting...looks like we need to get traveling!

Our advice: Never go to bed angry, and always kiss good night! ■

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- Married couples.
- ♥ Engaged couples.
- ★ Straight allies.
- 1 2 3 Relationship Age.
- + Registered as domestic partners.

All submissons appear in the text list, however all photos are submitted for our consideration. We do our best to publish as many as space allows.

To safeguard against trans\* and bi invisibility, our policy is to only publish photos of LGBTQ-identified couples.

10 Charles Pines & Cailan Rosseter  
9 Lauren Ledin & Lauren MacDonald

**MILTON**

2.5 Mark Albright & Rick Ehredt

**MILWAUKEE**

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- 43 Wendy Pologe & Mary Thoreson
- 43 Steven Sanders & Rand Schmidt
- 37 Gerald Coon & Stewart Dempsey
- 35 Becky Burton & Sue Robinson
- 27 John Harmon & Karter Wilkening
- 27 Ernesto & Scott Valdes
- 22 Mark Janetski & Ed Mullins
- 18 Scott Jones & Thomas Zigan
- 12 Jesse Ehrenfeld & Judd Taback
- 11 Gatlin Dresidan & Gerald Hlyer
- 8 Shelly Doolittle & Dianna Jones
- 7.5 Rick Banks & Javon Dean
- 7 Bruce Seeds & Jason Seeds
- 6 Benjamin & Kyle Caldwell-Chadwick
- 5 Jess Whorrall & Zoe Whorrall
- 4 Giordi & Sylvester Carmichael
- 4 Noel Johnson & Taylor Staples
- 2 Eric Durant & Scott Swickard

**MINDORO**

7 Beth Stuhr & Kayla Stuhr

**MINERAL POINT**

22 John G Greenwood & Fred E. Vaughn

**MONONA**

- 21 Heidi & Jeremy Duss & Jess Blanchard
- 15 Elizabeth Kernan & Jamie Kernan
- 10 Vivienne Andersen & Kye Richards
- 0.5 Ashley Eberhardt & Laura Monroe

**MONTELLO**

18 Cheryl Ravenscroft & Suzanne Fichtel

**MORRISONVILLE**

5 Emer Bursaw & Kim Bursaw

**MOSINEE**

6 Kaya Saia & Megan Van Haren ♥

**NEENAH**

- 42 David Bluma & Brad Morrison
- 3 Allie Krause & Lena Lambrigtsen ♥

**NEW AUBURN**

27 Scott McCracken & Abe Zeman

**NEW GLARUS**

15 Trent Gabler & Justin Miller

**OAK CREEK**

- 17 Charlie Nash & JR Witt
- 16 Thomas Darrow & Michael Houle

**OCONOMOWOC**

7 Emma Sweet & Kelsey Sweet

**OREGON**

- 26 Mark Koch & Robert Manion
- 16 Susan Mosel & Brenda Onken
- 8 Tim Tender & Paul Weber
- 2 Maggie Cedar & Erin Winkels

**OSHKOSH**

30 Daniel Lautenschlager & Tracie Lautenschlager ★

**PORT EDWARDS**

16 Shane Burkart & Kristopher Gasch

**PORT WASHINGTON**

19 Scott Lone & Joseph Maddalena

**RACINE**

- 17 Ann Kelso & Sarah Mueller
- 9 Gina Cesarz & Kez Cesarz

**RICHLAND CENTER**

3 Bradey Engen & George Hege ♥

**RIO**

10 Tom Hessey & Travis Teigen

**SHEBOYGAN**

20 Julie Konik & Christine Smith

**SHOREWOOD**

20 Luc Maker & Susie Seidelman

**SOUTH MILWAUKEE**

24 Chris Jensen & Matthew Weisbrod

**SPARTA**

23 Thomas Mashak & William Ziegelmeier ♥

**STEVENS POINT**

23 Lorie Dobrzynski & Melanie Kuolt

**STOUGHTON**

- 50 Judy Captain & Kate Stormer
- 24 Jill Hauk & Jean Ligocki
- 23 Walt Jackson & Dennis Outhouse
- 21 Todd Cieslak & Brent Eastabrooks
- 20 Kitty Gilbert & Lila Tesch

20 Angie Whitiken & Tammy Whitiken  
8 Sam Eifert & Jason Whitley

**STURGEON BAY**

0.5 Darrick DeMeuse & Kevin Marquez

**SUN PRAIRIE**

- 25 James Candler & Paul Lorentz
- 20 Emily & Shawna Veselsky
- 19 Brittany & Kristen Brazzel
- 14 Rob Gulig & Scott Webber
- 14 Aleta & Patti Klicko
- 13 Tim Lom & Steve Noll
- 11 Maggie & Molly Censky
- 8 Eric & Gavin Logan
- 7.5 Kat Kosmaule & Steph Kosmaule
- 6 Kara & Stacey Christenson
- 4.5 Deb Holland & Jane Kahl
- 3.5 Amy Eddy & Brittany Eddy

**VERONA**

11 John W. Duncan & Rev. Tim Schaefer

**WATERTOWN**

- 6 April & Charity Chandler
- 21 Linda Aumann & Deb Nies
- 16 Holly Ellickson & Corissa Miller

**WAUWATOSA**

- 40 Gordon Reistad & Eric Rentz
- 11 Brad & Nick Schlaikowski
- 7 Jake Christian & Dave Connell

**WEST ALLIS**

- 47 Garth Badger & Roy Badger
- 4 Corrin & Starlecia Alexander
- 1.5 Alisha Fox & Sarah Hedgcock

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43 Cindy Olsheke & Deborah Vance

**WHITEFISH BAY**

14 Anne Marie Arroyo & Tamela Greene

**WHITEWATER**

26 Robin Fox & Kim Simes

**WINDSOR**

11 Paul Fritsch & Jim Hartman

**WINNECONNE**

14 Jenn Fores & Nathaniel Fores

**WISCONSIN DELLS**

16 Jay Fenton & Erick Reigada ♥

# Foxtrotting Into the Future

**LYNN MAYER & GIGI VAIL**  
MADISON | 5.5 YEARS



We each have been dancing for more than 25 years, and dancing is how we met. Gigi saw Lynn dancing barefoot at the club, and a couple of years later, Lynn asked Gigi to two-step.

As time went on Lynn wanted to learn ballroom, Gigi had done some ballroom, so they took a local ballroom class. When they entered the classroom, the instructor said, "Hey Gigi, long time no see." Lynn looked at her thinking, "What else didn't I know about you?"

We continued to not only dance but teach at the local club. At one point, Lynn responded to a Facebook post about line dancing in the Dells. She wrote to them and asked about being an instructor. When Lynn arrived on the first night, she was surprised to find Gigi there helping without knowing anyone. And that was how the Driftless Dancers group began.

Our dance group has been going strong for three years. Our line dancing group has done many events: Flash mobs at malls and dancing in parades in the Dells, in Baraboo, and at pride events. Our group has attended international line dance conventions with choreography competitions.

As we prepare for our public commitment ceremony, you will find us dancing our favorite line dance—"Party of the Beach," with our dance group friends and family to celebrate our five-and-a-half years together this summer. The development of our dance formation endeavors has been like icing on the cake and something we do as we foxtrot into our future chapters together. If you don't find us on the dance floor, find us at the local beach, getting the rays. ■



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# For Life

**Clarence P. Cameron** reflects on his life and amazing 63-year relationship with **Robert (Bob) Lockhart** as Bob transitions toward his final days.

LOVE COMING OUT AGING ARTS

**BOB DIDN'T LEARN UNTIL HE WAS 24** that he was a "homosexual." In basic training, he had developed a crush on Gene, another serviceman. Although they kept in touch during their service, it was only after they were discharged that they had a short relationship. In that era, he would've been dishonorably discharged had the government found out he was gay.

Bob graduated from the University of Michigan School of Architecture and Design in 1956. He came to Fond du Lac to work for a buddy's construction company. Then, in 1960, he served an apprenticeship with architect Herbert Fritz, at Hilltop, near Spring Green. He came to Madison on weekends to stay at Charles MacLeod's, and to have a warm shower, an amenity not at Hilltop.

It was through Charlie that he met me, after I had refused to meet him four times. At the time, I was still at the UW and dating my landlord's daughter. I had an interest in men, but did not consider myself a "homosexual." When I met Bob, "BANG!" It was love at first sight!

## FAMILY REACTIONS

Bob was 12 years older than I and, after a number of failed relationships, he was ready to settle down. On the other hand, I had just begun to "sow my wild oats." Bob patiently forgave me when I had a fling, once in a while, and I was always honest enough to tell Bob all about it. Since I had invited Bob and Charlie to come to my hometown of Beloit for Sunday dinners, my father grew suspicious and asked my brother if he knew who these older men were. My brother told him that I was gay and to "never give me any trouble about it."

My father never did, and he learned to love Bob, having much in common with him. My mother, on the other hand, did not even know what a homosexual was, so I explained it to her. After that, every letter she wrote to



Clarence with Bob in December.

I finished my year's apprenticeship and had to go to school in Milwaukee. Leaving Bob was sheer agony. I made so many trips back to Madison that the other students thought I owned stock in the Badger Bus Company.

me ended with: "Your father and I hope that, someday, the right girl will come along, and you two will give us grandchildren." I could not stand this for more than about six letters, so I wrote to her, stating, "Mother, maybe the right girl will come along, someday, but until she does, let me live my life." That ended that, and she learned to love Bob like a son. Even my grandmother loved Bob.

Bob had one sister, Jean. She knew Bob was gay, suspecting it when he ran to the mailbox every day to see if he had heard from his Army buddy, Gene. Bob's father and other relatives seemed to like me, but it took about 10 years for Helen to learn to like me and realize that Bob and I were partners. After that she drove to art fairs where we were exhibit-

ing to spend the weekend with us. By the time she was dying in 1994, she had even offered me the fourth plot in the family gravesite. I joked, making her laugh when I said, "Helen, you really want to spend eternity next to me?"

## WORKING & MAKING IT WORK

After two years of college, I began an apprenticeship at Fitch-Lawrence Funeral Home at 626 University Avenue. This made it very convenient for me to rendezvous with Bob. When Bob got his first commission to design a home for family friends in Bryan, Ohio (near Montpelier, his home town), he moved to Madison. He set up an office and maintained an independent home design service.

I finished my year's apprenticeship and had

to go to school in Milwaukee at the Wisconsin Institute of Mortuary Science. Leaving Bob was sheer agony. I made so many trips back to Madison that the other students thought I owned stock in the Badger Bus Company. Once a week, Bob would drive me out to the (two lane) Beltline Highway at 5:00 a.m., so I could ride back to Milwaukee with one of my instructors, who lived in Blanchardville.

After graduating, I came back to work at Fitch-Lawrence, on call 24/7 with every third weekend off... big mistake! Charlie, who was assistant business manager of the UW Medical School, found me a job at the UW Hospital Rehabilitation Center as a Physical Therapy Aide. I loved the work, and the patients used me as a father confessor, so I even sat in on the staff meetings.

I was ready to go back to school to become a physical therapist when I received a call from a former teacher at the school in Milwaukee. She and her husband had bought a funeral home and furniture store in Oregon, and needed a licensed person to manage the funeral home. With only one funeral in four months, I ended up selling furniture (carpenters made both furniture and caskets, so they originally had the two businesses).

Not happy, in 1965, I opened a hobby ceramic shop in the Quonset hut on the back of the building at 1821 S. Park Street. I sold ceramic supplies, wholesale and retail, and had classes four nights a week. It became very successful, and I eventually ended up buying the entire property, which included a house on the back corner.

## THE OWLMAN

Business was slow in the summertime, when ceramic teachers and students went on vacation. Bob and I started exhibiting at art fairs, selling my crude clay sculptures of just about every subject. Owls were "in" at the time, so I made some owls in stoneware and porcelain. They sold very quickly, so, of course, I made more owls. At the little New Glarus Art Fair, a man introduced himself as a freelance writer. He said he liked the owls and wondered if he could ask some questions and take a few photos. Of course! The Associated Press picked up the story, and very soon, people were only buying my owls and calling me "The Owlman."

In 1971, we were forced to give up the apartments, but we were well-reimbursed by the City/University, and the Fluno Center now stands on the property. Bob began looking for a house to buy and found one on Cedar Street, within easy walking distance of my Double C Ceramic Shop. As time went by,

Bob made many design changes to the little house built in 1921, replacing the stucco with cedar siding, remodeling the kitchen and bath, and adding a two-story garden room onto the back. Part of the basement became Bob's working office, and the plans for many new houses and remodelings were created in his thirty-four year career.

Eventually, I sold my ceramic business and then, in 1976, the entire Park Street property. I came home to work in a larger portion of the basement. The old cistern under the front porch became the kiln room, where an exhaust fan drew the smoke and fumes outside. Bob and I continued to exhibit at art fairs around the country, making friends with artists and patrons alike.

There came a time when I became tired of sticking "feathers" on clay owls. A friend suggested that I try carving soapstone. After a short demonstration, I went to Burnie's Rock Shop and bought five pieces. I enjoyed the challenge and the finished pieces, so I took them to an art fair. My regular customers thought they were beautiful but "we still like the clay owls better."

Too bad. A year later I quit clay altogether and advanced to soapstone. I entered a larger piece in the international "Birds in Art" exhibition at the Leigh Yawkey Woodson Art Museum in Wausau, and it was accepted. Since then, I have been in the exhibition 14 times with one of the pieces purchased for the museum's permanent collection. Bob and I have enjoyed attending the openings, and meeting and befriending artists from around the world.

## OCTOBER 26, 2023

Awakened by a loud thud, I reached over to feel Bob. "Bob, where are you?"

"On the floor," was Bob's response. Bob had fallen out of bed. I went around to see if I could help him get up, but we were both too weak. I called Gabe, a neighbor, at 3:00 a.m. He came right over and carefully lifted Bob onto the bed. Bob was in pain, but he could wiggle his toes.

In the morning, his pain was even worse, so I called 911. In a matter of minutes, the ambulance came, accompanied by a fire truck. The eight men in our tiny home decided the best way to get him out was in a sheet. He was taken to the VA Hospital and after examination, it was determined that he had fractured his hip. A "Hemi" hip replacement was performed and theoretically, if it weren't for the pain, Bob could have walked immediately.

As it was, within a week, the 94 year-old could walk about fifty feet, and everyone was

encouraged by his progress. Then pneumonia hit, followed by c diff, and everything changed. Bob failed two "swallow" tests, and was aspirating his food. According to the doctor, he would continue to aspirate his food, get an infection in his lungs... and die.

## DECEMBER 9, 2023

Bob has been in hospice care for thirty days now, and yesterday, the doctor, more or less, told him he was going to die. This was devastating news for Bob, although I had already heard this in my daily visits to the hospital. The doctor also let us know that it was time to "move on" to another facility. When I left Bob in the evening, he grabbed my hand and said, "If I don't wake up some morning, just know that I love you with all my heart." This is not how we expected our sixty-two years to end.

When we tell others, straight or gay, that we have been together for 62 years, they are astonished and always ask the same question: "How have you managed to stay together that long?" We explain that despite the ups and downs in our relationship, there is a burning love in our hearts that cannot be extinguished, whether we simply argue or, as we did in our younger days, actually tussle. That flame burns on. ■

"I love working at Ulla because I get to be part of an amazing team that is passionate about what they do. I have so much fun meeting members of our community and styling them with unique eyewear."

Alia Younes  
Optician

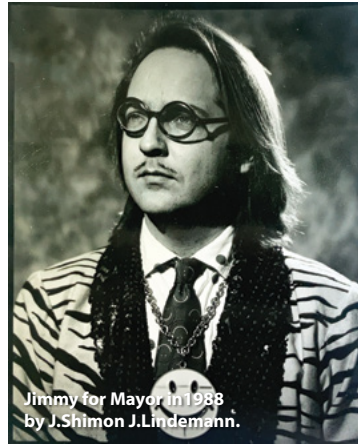


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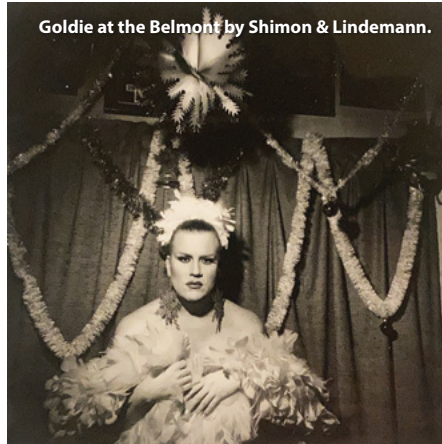




Jimmy for Mayor in 1988 by J. Shimon J. Lindemann.



Christmas craft show with Sister Cashbox.



Goldie at the Belmont by Shimon & Lindemann.



BJ as Lorena Bobbit.

HISTORY ARTS GALLERIES

# Subversive, Rebellious, Pioneering

Take a walk on the wild side with **Jimmy Von Milwaukee**.

**IN THE PANTHEON** of Milwaukee art gallerists, there is one name that was the leader of subversive showings intended for queer audiences: The Leo Feldman Gallery. It was the brainchild of Jimmy Von Milwaukee, and though the art he presented was shocking to some, others thought the works inspired freedom of expression. To call it an “underground” gallery would be an understatement, but it was a place where sexuality wasn’t a dirty word, and skewering the traditional art scene was its cornerstone.

EARLY LIFE & TRAINING

James Mark Skyberg (Jimmy Von Milwaukee) was born in 1954 in Duluth, and was raised in an intellectually liberal family along with his older brother, David Paul (who was also queer). From an early age, his Norwegian parents and grandparents taught him to love and accept everyone. He was inspired and influenced by the fact that his mother’s favorite writer was Truman Capote, and she liked Liberace. The family moved to Waukesha, where he graduated from high school. “They had an incredible art program there with teachers that were artists, too. I was in the school’s art independent study with Jeff Schlueter, and he turned me on to ARTFORM and Richard Diebenkorn, who was my first favorite artist,” says Skyberg.

He went to UWM in 1974 to study drawing and painting with Lawrence Rathsack, the

Gestalt-thinking professor. He was his mentor, friend, and patron. Rathsack bought his first art piece called, “Mary.” The piece won top prize in the Wisconsin Painters & Sculptors competition in 1981. Buoyed by this stamp of approval from the panel of NYC judges, an art career was born.

During this time, he went to his first gay bar, The Factory, where Milwaukee’s Skylight Theater is today. He says, “It was big and spectacular. The streets were deserted, and it felt so underground then in 1973. It inspired me in my art and art

gallery later. I also went to C’est La Vie the first time with Presley Haskel. I thought it was the best punk bar in Milwaukee. I would party with Ginger Spice in front all the time.”

He was thriving in school but dropped out after UWM terminated a professor who was a filmmaker with international awards to hire a man who’d never made a film—because of his famous parents’ theater connections. Seeing this as an affront to art education, he started Leo Feldman Gallery as a reaction to the lies and hype that UWM displayed when it made this unbelievable move. James legally changed his name to Jimmy Von Milwaukee in a nod to a parody he created of Judy Chicago, and it stuck when he ran for mayor of Milwaukee in 1988.

ART OUTSIDERS

The gallery was started with a \$100 unem-

ployment check. Skyberg made everyone take the alley entrance to the subterranean gallery instead of the main one behind Peter Bentz Antiques on Jefferson Street, so patrons would have to walk past the hustlers behind O’Connors Bar. Leo Feldman Gallery had no track lighting, and it served Country Time Lemonade instead of wine. There were no footnotes under the art. It showcased only self-taught art outsiders including works by people of all ethnicities and lifestyles in what was essentially a basement room.

Skyberg made everyone take the alley entrance to the subterranean gallery instead of the main one behind Peter Bentz Antiques on Jefferson Street, so patrons would have to walk past the hustlers behind O’Connors Bar.

The location was chosen in defiance of Frank Lloyd Wright’s assertion that “Basements are full of mold and decay.” Wright didn’t have basements in many of his iconic homes. The Leo Feldman Gallery showed artists like Pete the Beat who was both a poet and collagist. Beat would later die from AIDS. Skyberg’s curatorial talent roster included his best friend Moe Meyer, who was the first performance artist at the MAM, and de KRAMO (Daniel Kramoris) the painter. Sister Cashbox, Jerome Voelske, Ringo White, Francis Ford, Sally Kolf, Matthew Wytych, and many other Wisconsin artists were also given space to show their work. Even the enigmatic Theatre X did a performance there with Swedish artist Jord Circus for the very first Earth Day Celebration.

Holly Brown, trans star of La Cage’s long-running Holly & Co. was championed by Skyberg. He was thrilled to be a frequent judge

for Holly’s talent competition “Claim to Fame” in the late 80s at La Cage. The Milwaukee Journal art critic James Auer wrote a review of Brown’s exhibition that featured her paintings from the Isle of Capri.

Feldman Gallery hosted annual XXX-Mas and Craft Shows that featured weird and wonderful crafts with special appearances by Milwaukee drag queens. BJ Daniels performed as Lorena Bobbit, and also did modeling for photographers Shimon & Lindemann in numerous other guises.

Milwaukee drag legend Goldie Adams performed the Nutcracker in a tutu along with punk band “Hollywood Autopsy” from Manitowoc. Another infamous moment was when artist Andy Nelson’s “Ed Gein Dollhouse” piece was taken off display in the gallery by the FBI in order to examine it. They had it for two days. But according to Skyberg, his proudest moment was showing the work of America’s Most Wanted, Lawrencia Bembenek. The gallery also held a fundraiser for the ACT-UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power). The *Milwaukee Sentinel* never reviewed the gallery during its run, with the exception of art writer Janice Paine.

In 2006 Jimmy was diagnosed with Caposi’s Sarcoma, and discovered he was HIV-positive. “When I first found out, I went into hiding,” he said. But his disease, along with a drunk driving arrest, prompted him to clean up his act. He went on to curate exhibits with assistance from artist Christina Ward for River Rat Gallery, which showed art in urban alleys and alternative spaces such as the C’est La Vie bar on South Second Street. Artists shown there include David O’Leary, Michael Kasun, and Amanda Tollefson.

Still creating art today, Leo Feldman/Von Milwaukee is more interested in using his real name Skyberg now. “I come from Viking stock. When I was a kid I wanted to be Sal Mineo in *Tonka*. I want to channel that in my art again. I want to have a show in Norway. I loved Oslo. I lived ‘The Scream,’ and now I want to paint it.” I have no doubt Jimmy, none at all. ■



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Photo by Melanie Jones.

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A CHEESE SHOP, in Wisconsin, at first blush may not seem like something special, but Fromagination, at 12 S. Carroll street on the capitol square, is not just a cheese shop. Don't be mistaken, they certainly sell cheese, (mostly) artisan crafted, (mostly) locally sourced, amazing cheese; and when I talked to Fromagination's owner, Ken Monteleone, I expected to hear a lot about cheese. But what I heard a lot about was people.

"It is all about the people," Ken told me. "It is all about the artisans, about the team, about the customers, about neighbors, about the diversity of our staff, about the diversity of cheese." Ken is animated talking about the people that make Fromagination possible. He told me that when he opened the shop in 2007 it was all about a love of cheese and that now things had changed, and it is all about a love of people. Even when we briefly talked about the homeless that inhabit the area around the capitol, Ken described them as neighbors and welcome.

I asked Ken what someone should expect if they came into his shop, and he told me that Fromagination is a European-style shop with Wisconsin charm. He told me about being able to sample more than 100 different cheeses, and in addition to actually tasting the cheese themselves, folks would get to hear the stories behind the flavors, the story of the farms where they were produced, and about the cheesemakers. There is also sausage, and honey, and crackers, and, and, and. He told me that he wants people in his store to have fun, that he wants Fromagination to be the antithesis of the drudgery of grocery shopping—a place where a customer might find the person who made the food they are selling offering samples and telling the story of the food they make.

The pandemic of course brought changes to Fromagination, as it



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did for all of us. Unlike many businesses, food-based businesses like Fromagination thrived. Prior to Covid, almost all of the business was done in person, in the store, face-to-face. But because of Ken's commitment to people, and the community, and a healthy dose of good luck, Fromagination was featured on *The Today Show* as part of their Giving Tuesday segment in response to Fromagination's donations to Second Harvest Food Bank. With lots of help from Ken's partner, Kyle, who is responsible for building the store's online presence, they were able to pivot to online orders featuring a "Social Distancing Gift Set," shipping them all over the country. Which led to yet another way to connect with people: Cheese classes. The first were online; every kit contained a link to a Zoom meeting where Ken and his staff got to continue to tell the stories of cheese, and flavor, and pairings, and producers—but this time with a national audience. Ken tells me they don't do nearly as many online classes today, but has continued to teach in-person classes, which he says he wonders why they didn't start doing sooner.

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Yes, Fromagination is a cheese shop. They sell cheese and the things that surround it, but that feels like it is almost incidental to Ken's zest for caring for the people around him, for the cheese producers, for the new small producers who are just getting started and caring for the land, for his diverse staff of folks he hopes to mentor into the people they want to be, for the homeless, the politicians, and even you—if you are lucky enough to get some Fromagination on your tastebuds. ■

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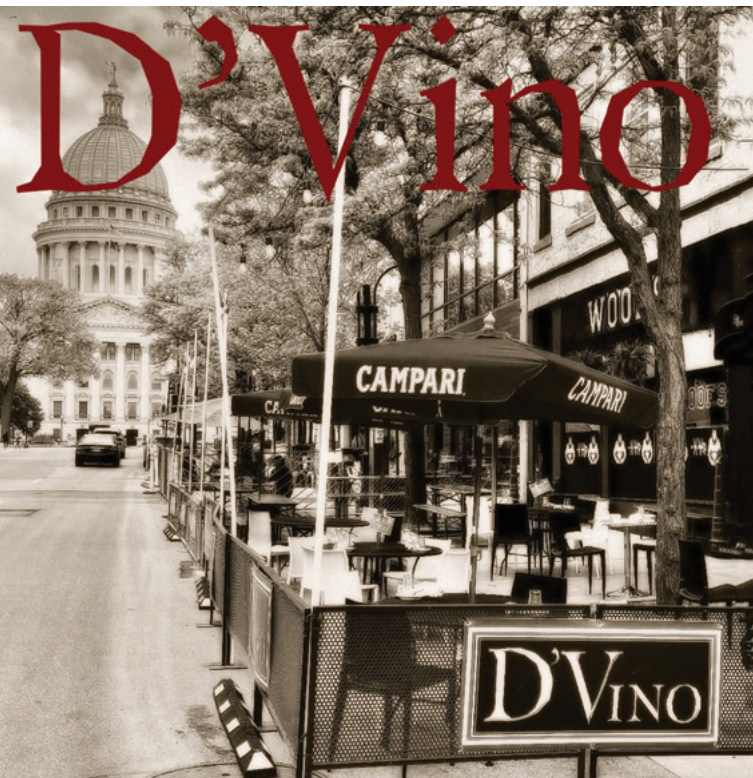
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