

our lives



Taylor Greene



Martha Marvel



Cash & Olive's Pub

HOME+TOWNS

Spaces & places to inspire your ideas of home.

Madison's LGBT&XYZ Magazine

March / April 2024

HOMESTEADING

PORTRAITS OF LGBTQ LIFE IN SMALLER PLACES

Brooklyn

Cambridge

Evansville

Mauston

Waterloo

Readers from around Wisconsin on their experiences living and building community outside of major urban centers.

CHOOSING A NEIGHBORHOOD

Ways that LGBTQ people assess safety when deciding where to buy a home.

RED CLOVER TATTOO COLLECTIVE

A 50% Native-owned and 100% queer-owned tattoo collective focused on community care.



music

José Pablo Moncayo,
Huapango

Manuel Ponce,
Piano Concerto No. 1

Silvestre Revueltas,
**Suite from La Noche de los Mayas (The Night of the Maya), compiled by José Yves Limantour*

**Synchronized imagery by Peter Rodgers*

selections by

Mariachi Los Camperos and the
Madison Symphony Orchestra



PHOTO: Todd Rosenberg

Cinco de Mayo served as an inspirational springboard for this unique concert celebrating Mexican music and heritage. The concert opens with José Pablo Moncayo's *Huapango*, a lively and joyful tribute to the popular music of the Mexican state of Veracruz. Then, I am thrilled to welcome Mexican pianist Jorge Federico Osorio as he makes his MSO debut performing Manuel Ponce's romantic *Piano Concerto No. 1*. Silvestre Revueltas is one of the giants among Mexican composers, and I am very excited to introduce to you his suite from the movie *La Noche de Los Mayas*, featuring a multimedia presentation of Mayan art. And finally, a great mariachi ensemble Mariachi Los Camperos will play selections of Mexican songs with the Madison Symphony. A truly unique concert designed to lift your spirits and bring my 30th anniversary celebration to a rousing and joyful finale. – John DeMain, *Music Director*

El Cinco de Mayo sirve como la inspiración para este concierto único que celebra la música y herencia mexicana. El concierto empieza con *Huapango*, compuesto por José Pablo Moncayo, y es un animado y alegre homenaje a la música popular del estado mexicano de Veracruz. Luego, acogimos al pianista Jorge Federico Osorio y su debut en Madison, *tocando el primer concierto* de Manuel Ponce. Silvestre Revueltas es uno de los compositores mexicanos más famosos, y estoy muy entusiasmado de presentar su Suite de la película *La Noche de los Mayas*, acompañado por una presentación multimedia del arte maya. Y finalmente, el fabuloso mariachi, Mariachi Los Camperos, tocará selecciones de canciones mexicanas con nuestra propia sinfonía. Este concierto especial está diseñado para levantar el ánimo y celebrar mis 30 años como director con una gran y jubilosa culminación. – John DeMain, *Director Musical*

madisonsymphony.org/fiesta

Programs, dates, prices, and artists subject to change. Note that additional Overture Center fees apply to tickets purchased over the phone and online (no fees apply to in-person orders at the Box Office).



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JORGE FEDERICO OSORIO, *Piano*
MARIACHI LOS CAMPEROS

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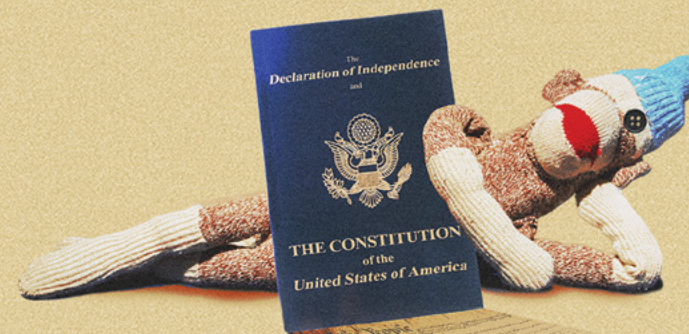
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what the
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means to me

BY HEIDI SCHRECK

DIRECTED BY JEN UPHOFF GRAY



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Join Colleen Madden as she weighs the idealism and hopeful wisdom of her youth against the complexities of being a citizen and a woman in the United States.



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PUBLISHER'S NOTE PATRICK FARABAUGH

WHERE THE HEART IS

AS SOMEONE WHO RAN AWAY as a teenager, the idea of home has often evoked strong feelings for me—from idealistic longing for a physical place, to significant people who've been critical in my development and journey. I've used this lens when I've approached our annual issue focused on the topic, and because of this I've often wrestled with a traditional approach. Capitalism-centered content focused on elaborate home and decor is nice, but hasn't always felt authentic to the mission of *Our Lives*. I've gladly welcomed it when we've come across it, but I have always searched for something that would connect more to an idea of belonging. This issue strikes those chords.



Stereotypically, when people envision queer communities they almost always conjure a vision of a large urban area. While there's truth to that, it's refreshing to be reminded that we are everywhere. This issue leans into that as we've focused on what LGBTQ lives look like in rural communities and small towns across Wisconsin. From Kristen Whitson's account of creating space in Mauston, to the Pride Business Partnership Ashley Bowman talks about in her piece on Evansville, the town she lives in that's a 30-minute drive south of Madison. This issue has a strong focus on what our lives look like outside of the urban sanctuaries that often have consumed all of our attention.

If you can only read one piece (though I'd strongly recommend enjoying the entire issue), then make sure to spend some time with Nicole Kurth's profile of Martha Marvel. Nicole and Martha have given us a gift with this. They vividly, and emotionally, capture the coming out experience for our trans siblings at a time and place in Wisconsin that is invaluable. I was incredibly moved while reading it and hung onto every word. It was a sober reminder of how important home is to our peace and sense of self. ■

CONTRIBUTORS



B. J. DANIELS is a well-known figure in Milwaukee and Wisconsin, with more than 40 years of experience in drag entertainment. She has won numerous awards and recognition from both civic institutions and her peers. B. J. is also a co-author of the book *A History of Milwaukee Drag: 7 Generations of Glamour*, which can be found at any bookstore. She is proud to be a board member of the Wisconsin LGBT History Project. To learn more about her remarkable career, please visit facebook.com/dragentertainerBJDaniels.



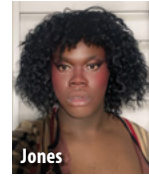
JILIP (JILL) NAGLER (ze/hir; they/them) is President of the Board of OutReach, a local musician (currently playing with queer/trans band NeuroSpicy), a community activist and organizer, and a cat enthusiast. Everything ze knows about justice they learned from Angela Davis, Audre Lorde, bell hooks, and queer/trans folks fighting for our collective liberation around the world.



NYLE BIONDI, MS LMFT, earned his master's degree in marriage and family therapy from Edgewood College in 2007. Nyle spent more than 10 years of his career working primarily with LGBTQIA+ youth and young adults. Nyle was one of the first out trans therapists in the state of Wisconsin. As a result of his own health journey, Nyle has devoted the past few years to helping others heal from chronic pain and health conditions.

READERS TRANSCENDENT VOICES / TESSA JADE PRICE

Trans Advocacy Madison has created a video interview series of local Madison queer and trans voices.



THE FIRST EPISODE of the series features Vica-Etta Henrietta Steel. Vica-Etta is a woman, queer, lesbian, and faith leader.

YOU MENTION THAT YOU HAVE RECENTLY DISCOVERED THAT YOU ARE A TRANS ELDER. [BOTH LAUGH] WHAT DOES THAT MEAN TO YOU?

I resisted it—the thought that I was a trans elder. It was actually my tattoo artist, who is Indigenous and queer, who is fantastic in conversation, who named that for me.

And my argument for why I'm not: I'm 59, right? I'm 59 years old. I'm going to be 60 [little dance] this year, and I'm so excited because I'm alive, and this is powerful.

Even though I have only been out for five years, I have been queer my whole life. I've existed knowing that I had to hide my entire self my whole life. One of the ways that I have come to help people see this is: I was the girl in the boy's locker room. I was shy and quiet.

IT'S LIKE A COPING MECHANISM FOR WHEN YOU FELT LIKE YOU WEREN'T A TRANS WOMAN?

To clarify, I have always known I'm a girl. The best way I have learned to speak to those who are younger—is to stop—to stop speaking and listen because it matters so much. Because what those people in my community, in their 20s and some in their 30s, is beyond anything people in my generation were doing and are still doing. So yes, I am the trans elder, but my purpose isn't to tell people how to behave.

THE SECOND EPISODE features Basal Jones. Basal is an artist, activist, rapper, and November Scorpio.

YOU ARE A RAPPER?

Yes! Yes, I am an artist. I put out two singles last year: "Soul Drink" and "Ghost Stories." "Ghost Stories" had a little mini viral moment that was amazing. I had an EP planned out I wanted to scrap. I'm such a perfectionist. I was like, "I want to go back in the studio, I wanted the funds because I want it to be bold, fun, fresh." And, yeah, I got an EP on my way. I'm really excited! I want to contact a couple of people for some features, get it all clean and polished.

But yeah, I'm super excited to bring my music out to the forefront. I think a lot of the time, when we think about rap, we don't think about the Midwest first.

YEAH, THE DIRTY SOUTH, YEAH.

A lot of bomb rappers that I love—even ones I don't love right now...

YOU'RE TALKING ABOUT...?

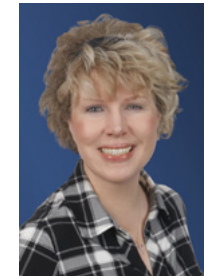
Kanye. I am a fan of Kanye's music. I hate Kanye. I grew up with Kanye. Kanye broke my heart. I loved Kanye. I used to pretend he was my husband. And now—I don't want to be his wife.

Watch the full video interviews on YouTube, Facebook, or Instagram @transadvocacymadison. ■



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OUR NEWS

Leading News & Local Stories



A Year of Crucial Elections

It's 2024, and Americans are bracing for a contentious, ugly election year. The ugliness at the national level is well covered, but many LGBTQ+ Wisconsinites are bracing for their own key elections as state and local officials go head to head, many citing recent anti-gay and trans rhetoric and legislation as a reason to fear the outcomes, should right-wing candidates win.

POLITICS & LAW NEWS ELECTIONS CANDIDATES

DESPITE HAVING NO CHANCE of being signed into law by Governor Evers, Wisconsin Republican representatives and senators have spent time and money to draw up and pass legislation targeting trans minors in sports and health care, and trans adults who are incarcerated. While these bills were defeated, they are a harbinger of what trans and non-binary Wisconsinites will have to face should the state either elect a Republican governor or hand them a super-majority in the legislature.

Additionally, our state lags behind regarding to reproductive rights, and legalized marijuana, despite both having documented majority support. New legislative

maps, a topic of contention for many years, have finally been approved, with the hope that they will make those representing Wisconsinites actually more representative of who we are and what we want from our legislators. This is an important year politically—both for the country and for Wisconsin—and it's important to know what lies ahead so we can work to defeat those who use the Wisconsin LGBTQ+ community as a tool to garner support and money from their base.

PHILIP GORMAN IN ROCK COUNTY

Rock County will vote for Board Supervisors on



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April 2, and Mike Zoril, an incumbent, will face Philip Gorman, a gay man who is married to State Senator Mark Spreitzer of Beloit. Zoril has wasted no time in attacking Gorman for his sexuality, coining the term “Gorman the Groomer,” using a right-wing tactic to elicit fear and prejudice among his base.

In a personal Facebook post, Zoril continued his attack, stating, “My opponent (“Gorman the Groomer”), married to a sitting state senator, came to a county board meeting to talk about how he was lucky to be gay and lobbied the board to vote in favor of gay pride month—but he said it was not for him—it’s for the kids. I’m not making that up.” He follows that up with the plea, “Help me defeat this radical child groomer with your most generous donation.” According to the *Gazette Xtra*, these remarks were referencing an appearance by Gorman in June of 2023 at a county board meeting that went on to pass a gay pride resolution.

In response, Gorman stated that he “spoke in favor of a pride resolution as (a) gay married man. I’ve been working for LGBTQ+ rights



since 2006, and I stand by my comments to the Rock County Board that LGBTQ+ kids in our community deserve to know that they are not alone and that life gets better.”

Zoril has a track record of using the right’s obsession with human trafficking to weaponize resolutions, with complaints and critiques of the bill’s message and wording being met by the board member with accusations of

supporting or even conducting human trafficking. Gorman, who the *Gazette Xtra* states has “never been charged with any sex crime involving children or adults,” accused Zoril of using his homophobia to raise campaign money and rile up his base.

In response, Zoril has doubled down, telling a *Gazette* reporter that “bringing up one’s own sexuality in a board meeting and pushing for pride month for kids should not be an issue the

Wisconsin’s current anti-LGBTQ legislation

- AB 377** Bans K-12 trans athletes from participating in sports that match their gender identity.
- AB 378** Bans K-12 trans athletes from participating in sports that match their gender identity.
- AB 447** Prohibits 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.
- AB 465** Prohibiting gender-affirming care for minors.
Governor Evers vetoed, but it’s been referred back to committee.
- AB 502** Ability to sue a health care provider who provides gender-affirming care to a minor.
- AB 510** Establishes a parental bill of rights that would out students to families and deny proper pronoun use for trans minors.
- AB 609** Allows retaliation against health care providers who provide gender-affirming care to a minor.
- SB 922** Allows retaliation against health care providers who provide gender-affirming care to a minor.
- SB 377** Bans college trans athletes from participating in sports that match their gender identity.
- SB 378** Bans college trans athletes from participating in sports that match their gender identity.
- SB 4** Re-legalizes conversion therapy.
- SB 438** Prohibits 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.
- SB 479** Allows retaliation against health care providers who provide gender-affirming care to a minor.
- SB 480** Bans gender-affirming care for minors.
- SB 489** Establishes a parental bill of rights that would out students to families and deny proper pronoun use for trans minors.

board deals with, but Gorman made it an issue when he decided to involve Rock County’s children, including five of my own. He should be ashamed of himself.”

SENATOR TAMMY BALDWIN

On a national level, Tammy Baldwin, Democratic U.S. Senator, the first woman that Wisconsin sent to Congress and the first openly gay non-incumbent in Congress, is facing a conservative opponent this fall, in a race that will help decide control of the Senate.

Eric Hovde, an ultra-rich real estate mogul, announced his campaign on February 20 after months of speculation about whether he would do so. Tammy Baldwin, who is seeking a third term in the Senate, was instrumental in codifying marriage equality in response to the *Dobbs* decision and the subsequent speculation that a repeal of *Obergefell* was next.

The Associate Press stated, “other Republicans are considering challenging Hovde for the nomination. Scott Mayer, a Franklin businessman, and former Milwaukee County Sheriff David Clarke, are also considering Senate runs,” signifying what might be a contentious primary for the Republican Senate nominee.

The AP continues in praise of Baldwin over her potential opponent, stating, “Baldwin most recently won reelection by 11 points in a race that was seen as a model for how to run as a Democrat statewide in Wisconsin. She is a

tireless campaigner, garnered broad support, including among independents and voters outside of Democratic strongholds in Madison and Milwaukee, and she raised millions of dollars to fuel the successful bid.”

TWO RACES OF MANY

These are two important races, but all of them, from the city school boards, to the county boards, to the Wisconsin legislature, and all the way up to the U.S. Senate, are crucial to keeping the wolf (who in this case is the Republican party and their hateful rhetoric and bills) at bay.

While it is true that the outcome of the Presidential election this November is very important, it is not paramount to the other, smaller elections coming up. We owe it to the queer kids in this state, as well as the adult LGBTQ community, to show up, be educated about who is on our ballot, and vote. It’s true that it often feels like an individual vote is inconsequential, but in the little local elections, that couldn’t be farther from the truth, and these elections have potentially dire consequences.

School boards all around the state and country are voting on book bans, whether students can keep their preferred names and genders private from their families, bathroom rights for trans and non-binary kids, and the firing of teachers that openly support queer students. County board members also have a lot of sway over people’s everyday lives, and can make a county either a welcoming or a hostile place for our community. Pay attention this year; we have a lot to lose. ■

NEWS BRIEFS

WRITTEN BY MELANIE JONES

FAIR WISCONSIN EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR MEGIN MCDONELL WILL LEAVE THE ORGANIZATION AFTER 13 SUCCESSFUL YEARS OF SERVICE

FAIR WISCONSIN, celebrating 30 years in operation, is Wisconsin’s only statewide LGBTQ+ civil rights and political advocacy organization. Founded in 1994 to advance, achieve, and protect equality for LGBTQ+ Wisconsinites through lobbying, legislative advocacy, grassroots organizing, coalition building, and electoral involvement. Fair Wisconsin Education Fund, the 501(c)3 charitable arm of the organization, was established in 2002 to educate the public about the continued need for LGBTQ+ equality.

Megin McDonell has been a long-time staff member and leader of the organization. She joined Fair Wisconsin in 2011 as External Relations Director, managing communications, grant writing, and donor stewardship. In early



2015, when former Executive Director Katie Belanger departed Fair Wisconsin, Megin was named Interim Executive Director and then promoted to Executive Director in October of 2015.

During her tenure, Megin oversaw one of the largest legislative advocacy efforts since Fair Wisconsin’s 2006 marriage amendment campaign and successfully defended against the largest wave of anti-LGBTQ+ legislation that Wisconsin has ever seen. She worked with the Evers Administration to ensure that state funds cannot be used for the dangerous and widely discredited practice of conversion “therapy.”

She also helped draft Executive Order #1, the first executive order issued by Governor Evers in 2019, which protects state workers and employees of state contractors from discrim-

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ination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity. Megin has worked with more than a dozen municipalities across Wisconsin to educate, build community support, and pass local protections against conversion “therapy.”

While Executive Director, Megin ensured that Fair Wisconsin’s presence ranged from grassroots coalition building to institutional partnerships. Her vision and dedication helped guarantee that Wisconsin’s LGBTQ+ community was—and will continue to be—seen and heard at all levels of the political process.

Prior to her time at Fair Wisconsin, Megin served as the Program Director at the Tenant Resource Center in Madison for 14 years. She has been active in state and local politics and elections, including serving for 11 years on the Madison Equal Opportunities Commission, and working on numerous aldermanic, county board, assembly, and congressional campaigns. Megin also previously served as Co-Founder and President of the Social Justice Center Board of Directors and Chair of the NARAL Pro-Choice Wisconsin Board of Directors.

Megin’s numerous accomplishments were praised by Fair Wisconsin’s Board of Directors: “While we are sad that Megin is departing Fair Wisconsin, we cannot wait to see what

she does next. We are incredibly grateful for her leadership and steadfast dedication to our organization’s mission,” said Jodi Greig, Chair of the Fair Wisconsin Education Fund Board of Directors. “Megin has been a critical piece of Fair Wisconsin’s history, and her work will ensure that we continue to grow and serve our community in the years to come.”

“Megin’s success in expanding protections for the LGBTQ+ community cannot be overstated. From collaborating with state legislative leaders on pro-LGBTQ+ bills and working with Governor Evers to issue Executive Order #1 which protects state employees from discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity to ending the use of state funds for so-called conversion ‘therapy’ and expanding the number of communities who now explicitly prohibit the practice, Fair Wisconsin has accomplished so much with Megin at its helm,” said Laurie Guilbault, Board Chair of Fair Wisconsin Inc. “Because of Megin’s leadership and vision, Fair is well positioned to continue on our forward trajectory to make Wisconsin a place where everyone can be who they truly are and live free from discrimination.”

The board of directors will conduct a search for a new Executive Director and will provide more details in the coming weeks. Sean O’Brien, who currently serves as the Policy and Advocacy Director, will continue in his role and oversee Fair Wisconsin’s programming, legislative advocacy, and electoral organizing while the search is ongoing.

“I am confident that Sean will ensure continued success during this transitional time for Fair Wisconsin and help make 2024 one of our best years yet,” said Jodi Greig.

LGBTQ-OWNED MADISON RESTAURANT HARVEST TO REMAIN CLOSED

THE PANDEMIC and subsequent hardships with inflation, changing consumer habits, and difficulty keeping staff have caused the closure of Madison institution: Harvest. The fine dining establishment on the Capitol Square had been a staple for 20 years.

The owner, Tami Lax, also owns the busy and popular The Old Fashioned next door, and has decided to keep her focus there instead of trying to also revive a restaurant that has been shuttered for so long. According to the *Wisconsin State Journal*, this decision was finally fully reached when it came time to renew the lease.

Several factors went into this decision. Lax told the *State Journal* it was difficult to find employees, especially those versed in the intricacies of fine dining, after restaurants



reopened after the shutdown. She moved the kitchen staff of Harvest to The Old Fashioned, stating, “I was just going to move them back in that direction and rebuild the front of the house,” she said. “But I turned 62 this year, and to be honest with you, it’s almost like opening a brand-new restaurant after that amount of time of being closed.” She continued, “I want to just put my focus on The Old Fashioned and get back to cooking and enjoy that part of my life.” Additionally, the building that housed Harvest needs some work to get it up and running again.

In the *Wisconsin State Journal* Lax described the hardships and hesitations she faced while trying to reopen the restaurant. She started Harvest Go in March of 2020. “It was comfort food in larger portions that could travel, but in keeping with Harvest’s commitment to buying local, fresh, and organic whenever possible,” according to the *State Journal*. She indicated that it was never very financially viable, but she did it to keep her employees and to keep momentum going for the restaurant, but she still struggled to both keep and attract knowledgeable employees and chefs. She cited seemingly endless interviews, but with little follow-through from potential employees, with many deciding to go elsewhere and some leaving the restaurant industry entirely.

For it’s part, The Old Fashioned is seemingly thriving, with three working kitchens, a dining room expansion into the old L’Etoile space, and plans to use the space previously occupied by Harvest to both continue to expand The Old Fashioned’s dining area, and open “a Wisconsin-centric retail shop selling Wisconsin spirits, beer, Old Fashioned T-shirts and hats, and local ingredients used by the restaurant.”

But the loss of Harvest hurts. Lax told the *Wisconsin State Journal*, “Knowing that we made an impact and there are so many people that really enjoyed the restaurant and spent sort of landmark times—their anniversaries and weddings—and just all the people that I’ve worked with over the years, it’s really hard to say goodbye to that.” ■



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 along with Common Cause Wisconsin, and Disability Rights Wisconsin, has assembled a voting guide for the 2024 election cycle with information about election dates, how you can vote, requirements, and special circumstances. View the guide: aclu-wi.org/en/voter.

BADGERLAND PRIDE SOFTBALL has opened registration for the upcoming LGBTQIA+ softball season! This is a Recreation/Social League on Mondays starting May 13th. Sign up as free agents. We take all skill levels. Early Bird Rate of \$65 (until March 15), Standard \$75 (until March 31), and \$85 Late Fee (until April 10 - Anyone signing up after April 10th will be put on a waiting list and NOT guaranteed a shirt). Competitive League on Sunday mornings starting in June. Team Fee \$450. Sign up as a team or a free agent, and we will help you find a team at badgerlandsoftball.com.

DIVERSE & RESILIENT is currently offering free LGBTQ focused programming for Milwaukee County youth on the topics of alcohol harm reduction (ages 14–24) and comprehensive sex education (ages 12–20). Through the evidence-based curriculums, Alcohol Skills Training Program and Making Proud Choices, teens will learn to make empowered choices.

If you would like to bring D&R programming to a youth group, classroom, or group of friends in 2024, please reach out to Jaylin Mitchell, Youth Program Coordinator: mitchell@diverseandresilient.org. This programming is made possible by the United Way of Greater Milwaukee, Waukesha County, and Community Advocates.

FAIR WISCONSIN endorsed Tammy Baldwin in her campaign for U.S. Senate.

FREEDOM, INC. and other abolitionist-minded groups and individuals, won a victory in their campaign against a proposed police training facility when the project failed to reach enough votes to have the \$50 million design plans approved in the Fitchburg city budget. A police

station with a smaller budget could be introduced at a later time.

GSAFE held their annual Middle School GSA Leadership Summit with more than 100 young leaders and their club advisors in attendance. The conference aims to break isolation, foster community, and build leadership skills to affect change in schools and communities.

They also announced that the theme of this year’s Quilt & Fiber Art Auction (November 27 through December 3) will be “Together.”

LGBT CENTER OF SE WI provides service at their space in Racine and will now additionally provide youth programming in Kenosha at the Creative Space downtown.

LOUD ‘N UNCHAINED THEATER CO. has begun distribution of “Split” by T. S. Banks. This is the third chapbook of poems that details his journey through madness, grief, and spiritual harm. It weaves together themes from his previous chapbooks, “Call me ill” and “Left,” including surviving the psyche ward, resisting ableism and internalized ableism, surviving service agencies, church, and psyche institutions. “Split” talks about what happens to the body-mind when moving through loss, trauma, and illness.

MILWAUKEE LGBT CENTER will be hosting a group open to Asexual, Aromantic, and questioning adults. This group intends to hold space for individuals to support one another and plans to discuss successes, difficulties, and struggles as an Ace/Aro individual and will meet every Monday at 6:00 p.m.

OPEN has kicked off their Transform Program, along with OutReach LGBTQ+ Community Center, including an inaugural cohort of six women along with a team of dedicated mentors and coaches. The mission is to empower and uplift transgender women and transfeminine individuals in Dane County.

OUTREACH LGBTQ+ CENTER continues to offer free condoms, dental dams, lube, Plan B, and more for community members in need.

VIVENT The lifepoint program provides free

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OPEN welcomes diverse LGBTQ+ and allied professionals to share perspectives and experiences in connecting, developing, and building a vibrant community.

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OPEN believes in demonstrating personal and professional leadership as stewards of an inclusive community where all are equal and valued.

Career Resources

Exclusive Events

Discussion Boards

Job Board

Featured Members

Networking

OPEN provides education and information resources regarding issues of gender and sexual diversity and other issues of professional concern to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBTQ) individuals who live in the Madison and Dane County, Wisconsin area.

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syringes and safer injection supplies to people who inject drugs, as well as safe disposal of used syringes. For more than 25 years, the Lifepoint program has been a national leader in promoting the health of people who use drugs and empowers them to take control of their health and wellness. Vivent is dedicated to harm reduction and providing judgment-free care to people who use drugs.

AWARDS / RECOGNITION / GRANTS

Special thanks for those who do good.

COURAGE MKE was named Milwaukee's Best Non-Profit/Human Services organization and Best LGBTQ Advocate by The Shepherd Express as voted by readers.

DIVERSE & RESILIENT is being recognized for The House of History, their new program that became the first Black LGBTQ+ history project in the nation, and the first LGBTQ+ history project in the state of Wisconsin, to be awarded a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities. The project not only uncovers and shares the long-overlooked historical contributions of Black LGBTQ+ people, but does so in creative and compelling ways.

Oral history interviews with elders and community leaders become short, shareable videos filled with wisdom and resilience about topics such as racism, homophobia and transphobia, COVID and HIV/AIDS, love, religion, family, and what is special about Milwaukee. House of History will launch an interactive website June 5 and in the meantime is sharing videos on their YouTube channel House of History MKE.

FAMILY EQUALITY COUNCIL would like to thank Wisconsin friends who helped to raise over \$10,000 at their Whitewater house party fundraiser along with Minocqua Brewing Company, PRP Wine, and FCCU.

LGBT CENTER OF SE WI received \$52,000 from the United Way of Racine County for the Trans Resource Project to develop a website of gender-affirming medical and mental health professionals for the state. Also, to develop intensive training on the trans and non-binary experience designed for medical and mental health professionals.

LGBT BOOKS TO PRISONERS would like to thank longtime supporters at Mystery to Me books and ALM for donations of "advance reader copies" and new books to send to LGBT indi-

viduals incarcerated in Wisconsin.

OUR VOICE MILWAUKEE was given the honor of performing at a kickoff rally for the Vice President of the United States as she tours to speak about reproductive freedom. They were additionally honored by opening a Milwaukee Admirals hockey game with the singing of the National Anthem.

VIVENT would like to thank Hunger Task Force, Inc. for supplying over a third of the fresh food offered in their Milwaukee food pantry. Donations allow the pantry to allocate funds to other types of foods that are needed by patients.

STAFF / BOARD CHANGES

Who's moving on or moving into org leadership.

DIVERSE & RESILIENT welcomes back **Corey Clark**, Peer Navigator, as the Peer Navigation program expands to the Fox Valley area through their Appleton Office. Corey was previously with D&R from 2020-22 during the initial launch of Peer Navigation services at the Milwaukee office. The program expansion will help D&R better serve people living with HIV get connected and stay connected to the quality HIV care services Wisconsin has to offer. These services are made possible by the Wisconsin Department of Health Services.

FAIR WISCONSIN announced the departure of Executive Director **Megin McDonell**. She joined Fair in 2011 and was later named Interim Executive Director and then promoted to Executive Director in October of 2015.

LATINO ACADEMY has announced the departure of Executive Director **Baltazar De Anda Santana** after 12 years of combined service. Under Baltazar's leadership, the Latino Academy is now a standalone organization, running numerous training programs, serving an ever-growing number of students and with a multimillion-dollar annual budget. President of the board, **Shiva Bidar-Sielaff**, announced that **Bob Rodriguez** will now serve as administrator until the search for a new director is completed.

LGBT CENTER OF SE WI welcomed **Haven Slatner** as an intern this year. A Sociology major at Carthage College, Haven is serving as the Center's Trans Coordinator. He has provided free counseling sessions for the community, runs the trans and non-binary support group, and facilitated the Trans Day of Remembrance celebra-

tion. All groups can be accessed either in person at the Center in Racine or on Zoom. To sign up for peer-to-peer groups got to lgbtsewi.org/support-groups.

UPCOMING EVENTS

Plan ahead to join in.

FREEDOM, INC. **March 13** Several events will be held to assist those who wish to apply for the Black and Southeast Asian Queer Education Scholarships. Dinner will be served and computers will be available along with support and advice about how to apply. Additional dates: 3/27, 4/10, and 4/24.

CREAM CITY FOUNDATION **March 13** Buchanan's will partner with Kilwins and Backlot Pizza to put on a whiskey and chocolate pairing to benefit Cream City Foundation (\$50).

WI LGBT CHAMBER **March 15** The Milwaukee Area Coffee Connection networking event will be held at Brewhouse Inn & Suites.

COURAGE MKE **March 15** C2 Apartments ribbon cutting and open house. Soon six queer young adults will call this new space home!

PFLAG MADISON **March 17** PFLAG Madison meets 3rd Sundays at Friends Meeting House.

PLANNED PARENTHOOD OF WI **March 20-21** Safe Healthy Strong Virtual Conference 2024 organizers have selected 60-minute workshops that explore best practices in sex education, healthy sexuality, reproductive health, social and reproductive justice, health equity and access for all people, and/or that examine related or intersecting topics. "Sexuality" encompasses many components. All sessions are presented virtually and recorded for later viewing (\$0-200 donation).

LGBT SPORTS MADISON **March 23** FIVE Nightclub will host a sports-themed drag show "Wette Your Whistle." At 8:00 p.m. representatives from Madison's LGBT sports leagues will be available to answer questions about joining (Volleyball, Softball, Rugby, Bowling, Hockey, and more). This is NOT a fundraiser. All tips and reserved tables are going to the performers who chose to participate in this event.

MILWAUKEE LGBT CENTER **March 23** LOVE+ AWAKEN, a community self-love and self-care event. Embrace a day of relaxation, togetherness, and uplifting activities designed to nurture your mind, body, and soul. This event is an inclusive space open to all community members.

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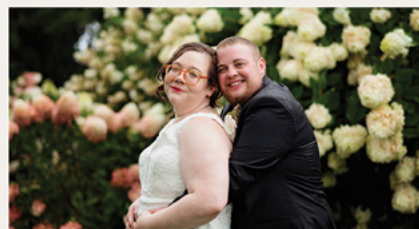
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MILWAUKEE LGBT CENTER **March 31** An opening event for the second annual art exhibition "Trans Enough" for Transgender Day of Visibility will be held at the center. This exhibition aims to showcase the diversity throughout the transgender community by sharing personal stories, and works of art related to a person's gender journey. It will run through April.

WI LGBT CHAMBER **April 10** The Northeast Wisconsin Area Coffee Connection networking event will be held at Tara Breathe, Appleton.

WI LGBT CHAMBER **April 16** The Chamber, in partnership with humanworks, will hold the Culture Elevation Series: Authoring Your Personal Core Values, via Zoom. Develop values language to distinguish yourself, make decisions, and build confidence—whether you're an established leader, just beginning a leadership journey, or anywhere in between.

GSAFE **April 17 & 18** Safe Schools Safe Communities Statewide Conference on LGBTQ+ Youth will be held at MYArts in Madison. SSSC24 will feature a variety of speakers and workshops facilitated by local and regional experts. Conference participants will gain critical skills,

tools, knowledge, and connections to help lead and support efforts to create safer, more inclusive environments for LGBTQ+ youth across Wisconsin, especially LGBTQ+ Youth of Color and Transgender and Nonbinary Youth. The intended audience includes adults who work with youth and their families. Registration is now open (\$140–175), and a limited number of full and partial scholarships are available.

STAGEQ **April 19–May 4** Twelfth Night by William Shakespeare will be presented on the Evjue Stage at The Bartell Theatre. StageQ will bring a non-binary perspective to Shakespeare's classic comedy of mistaken identity.

COURAGE MKE **April 21** Flourish! A pageant fundraiser for C2 Apartments. All the way from Out TV's Camp Wannakiki, and Hamburger Mary's, the hosts for the evening will be the FABULOUS Sugarbaker Twins! There will not be separate Mister and Miss Categories—all contestants compete against each other. The pageant is open to all genders and gender presentations. Only one will take the crown and become Courage MKE's 2024 Ambassador!

MADISON GAY HOCKEY **April 26–28** The MGHA Classic Hockey Tournament will be held at Verona Ice Arena. Players include members of the Madison Gay Hockey Association, players from gay hockey associations in other cities, local players from other leagues and hockey groups, and potential hockey friends from all over. Registration (\$45–90) includes four games, a tournament jersey, and social events.

MADISON PUBLIC LIBRARY BUBBLER **April 27** The Bubbler, along with other organizations, will host Madison Print & Resist Zinefest at Central Library. Join dozens of regional artists, writers, print-makers and advocates for a day-long festival of transformative and transgressive DIY publishing and printmaking. The event is free to attend and open to the public, keeping in mind that artists will not be censored and some content may not be suitable for children.

WI LGBT CHAMBER **April 30** Ethical Leadership and Social Responsibility will be the topic of this installment of the free BoldColors Business Lecture Series. Recognizing the importance of addressing systemic barriers and providing access to resources, BoldColors features dedicated sessions where representatives from non-profit organizations and corporate partners specializing in queer, BIPOC, and trans-related topics will share valuable insights and information. ■

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A SHOT AT LOVE

Middle school is where it started getting harder because physical changes started happening, and I was starting to have feelings for girls, the way my girlfriends were having feelings for boys. I remember this show on MTV. It was about a woman trying to find love. She was bisexual, so she had men and women on the show fighting for her love. I remember watching it late at night and just being mesmerized because it was nice to see that there were people who had feelings like me.

Growing up in a small town raised in church, you don't see much of that. The first person I came out to was my younger sister. After telling her, I asked her to keep it a secret. She said she would, then immediately walked up to my mom and asked what it meant. She called me out so hard! We laugh about it now. But my mom came in shortly after and talked to me about how it was a phase.

I met my first girlfriend when I was going into sophomore year, and I asked if we could keep it low until I could tell my family. She said she understood, but sadly I was kinda forced to tell them. My girlfriend's mom went off on me saying "My daughter won't be friends with someone like you," and much more, that just made things scarier for me to want to tell anyone.

I started dressing differently because I liked rock music, but after I changed my look my friend's mom started rumors about me. Just like that, I lost everyone. Already going through so much with hating my body, and feeling like I couldn't ever be me, I was scared of the rest of the family disagreeing. I lost my friends, and everyone was thinking I was doing the awful things this woman claimed. Things only got worse when I went to high school and started doing drugs to numb the pain.

I met my first girlfriend when I was going into sophomore year, and I asked if we could keep it low until I could tell my family. She said she understood, but sadly I was kinda forced to tell them. My girlfriend's mom went off on me saying "My daughter won't be friends with someone like you," and much more, that just made things scarier for me to want to tell anyone. When I got home, my parents kept on me until I said it: "This is my girlfriend."

My mom again didn't take things very well, and my dad didn't say much. We dated for about a year, and my parents got better over time, but when we broke up it also broke me. I got worse with drugs and attempted suicide. I ended up in a hospital and almost spent my 17th birthday there. When I got out, I realized that the people I thought were my friends didn't care. I came to realize I didn't want to be that person anymore. I had let what everyone said about me define me. Change me. Break me. After that, I said "never again."

I started doing so much better in school. I got clean, and I graduated.

FAMILY SUPPORT

Even though I didn't see it then, my family was there for me. My siblings were my rocks and my grandparents were—and still are—my everything. When my grandma found out, I was so scared. She came to my stand when I was selling products for a farmer. I hadn't shaved for a while so my chin strap was there, and she acted like nothing was wrong. When she left, I texted her and asked if she still loved me. Then she asked if I was happy, and I said yes, she replied, "As long as you are

happy, I love you!"

That was all I needed. That was it, nothing after that mattered. Nothing anyone else said mattered. I wish I would have had more trans people to look up to, and that's why I'm so open and understanding, because I wish I could have had that. I hope people come to understand it is real, and you're not messed up like some made you believe.

My grandparents' farm made me the man I am with the hard work they made me do. I was 19 when I was finally able to find a therapist who would help me start testosterone. It took me years to find him, so I'll never forget the day he called me back and said he could. I was at the farm sitting behind an apple tree. Happy tears fell from my eyes like rain with so much excitement. I mentally prepared myself that I might lose people. Worried they would say things. But I didn't care because this was for me!

ENTERING AND JOINING COMMUNITY

GSA in high school had a day of silence. It was a protest that culminated in Madison with other GSAs attending from other schools. We taped our mouths to keep from talking to show how much of a difference it can make to be silent. I had never been to Madison before, so it was scary and new. Seeing all the other people that showed up filled my heart. We marched to the Capitol, and I just remember the feeling I had in my chest that I was right where I needed to be. Once we got to the stairs, we counted down and ripped the tape off! We yelled, cheered, and celebrated who we were. We spoke for those who feel like they can't. It was so powerful.

My first gay bar was Plan B. It had 18+ nights on Thursdays. I remember the line was always out the door, and everyone was so nice. Walking in, it was like a wave crashing into you—seeing everyone able to be themselves and not having to explain anything to anyone. I remem-

ber the music and the lights. I fell in love right away, like I had found my place. My friends and I went to Five Nightclub for New Year's Eve, and we had so much fun we continued going because these places were what we needed to make us feel whole and like we weren't different or weird or strange. We were just us.

Now I am 10 years on testosterone with all my surgery completed and have been voted best trans performer. Performing in front of thousands at the Milwaukee Pride was a dream come true. I'm proud of my mom for coming so far, too. From being scared for me with what others said to now being my biggest supporter. She took care of me after surgeries she wasn't ready for. I'm proud I'm living a life I never thought would be real, driving my truck and working a job where everyone knows and doesn't care. Living in my place with my dog as the man I was always meant to be.

I don't give myself enough credit and forget how far I've come!

CONCERNS AND ENCOURAGEMENT FOR THE FUTURE

I worry about how politics have changed. How divided it has made everyone and everything. It makes me so worried that we come this far to only fall back. I worry that they will change things with insurance, and teachers won't help the students that need it because others are bullying them for who they are. I'm worried because of how some parents are. I think the world needs to do better all the way around. Stop fighting each other and start fighting together. So much needs to change for the better for everyone.

Don't let what anyone says stop you from doing what makes you happy, because this is your life. Let the words they say push you forward and use them as motivation to better yourself to prove them wrong. Don't hold onto things that hurt you, and keep trying to find things that make you happy. ■

RURAL TRANSGENDER COMING OUT

This Is Your Life

For Trevor Topel, finding his way in rural life wasn't always easy as a transgender individual, but at 29 he is determined to continue seeking happiness.

FOR AS LONG AS I CAN REMEMBER, I knew something was different but couldn't explain it. I knew it didn't make sense to me that my sisters liked being girls. I didn't know there was a word for how I was feeling, people just told me I was a tomboy. I grew up in a small town and spent a lot of time on my grandparents' farm. My family was close, and it never crossed my mind that I wasn't a boy until my mom would try and put me in dresses. I would fight her so hard on that!

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Join us for two exclusive social gatherings following our April concerts, Boundless Beauty! Each event offers a unique opportunity to mingle with MSO Musicians, Music Director John DeMain, and other special guests.
All tickets are \$50 and include a Circle-level seat at the concert, plus access to a post-concert reception at The Rigby, featuring hors d'oeuvres and complimentary beverages. Or, if you already purchased concert tickets, reception-only tickets are \$30. Please register for one or both events by Friday, April 5! Limited availability.
MSO After Dark, Friday, April 12, 2024
Join fellow classical music lovers ages 21-40 for general music trivia with MSO musicians, with food and drink provided. madisonsymphony.org/out
MSO Out at the Symphony, Saturday, April 13, 2024
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Purchase single tickets (\$15-\$102) at the Overture Center Box Office, by phone (608) 258-4141, or at overture.org. Love great music. Find it here.



and drawing chalk on the sidewalk. You know, moving with intention.” They came to their understanding with time, “It took me a long time to boil it down, because for many years I thought I was a non-practicing Satanist. But then I’ve realized no, I’m actually very much practicing, and I’ll keep practicing.” Adding that, “I’m not thinking ‘I’m being a Satanist’ as I’m picking up trash in my neighborhood. I’m thinking I am bettering this area for everyone because I love this area, and I love the people who walk in this area, and I love the environment and the animals in this area. I’m not thinking ‘Hail Satan,’ I’m thinking, ‘Yay, let’s connect with our environment.’”

GROWING UP AN OUTSIDER

Bill does share the pain of growing up as an outsider, and how they are deeply rooted in loving family, “I have always very, very much received love and been given love. I’ve had an amazing family who loved me openly and deeply, and I think that they really showed me how to love not only myself but others.” Unfortunately, Bill did not receive such love in the area where they grew up. Their parents had been “forcibly raised in religion, and they didn’t want to do that with me.”

Bill goes on to say, “I was going to rural Wisconsin schools where everyone knew all the [Bible] stories, and I was completely clueless on anything to do with religion. I found it really alienating.” Bill adds that their queerness “definitely impacted my othering in school. I knew I was queer very, very early. I knew my gender wasn’t correct, but I didn’t have the words for genderqueer when I was a kid. The constant othering of me made it easier to push away from Christianity. And there were literally no other religions practiced in the schools that I was in. There were no Jewish children, and there were no other Atheist-raised children there. There were only Christian children.”

Bill found community in underground communities “which definitely were the other queers and definitely were the other autistics. I found community in other people who liked not acting like everybody else.” In particular, punk rock became a place of welcome, “I liked punk rock because you can stim and stuff in public and it fits in appropriately at a punk show. And you can act like yourself. And even though there’s some conformity to punk, the underground in general, when you don’t conform to that, it’s still accepted just fine.” Bill says that “the common thread is not being the same as the general population, whether

that looks like a punk rock costume or looks like whatever.”

Bill shared their own take on the “whatever” of punk rock costuming, “I always like to do kind of a combination—I would do hyper-femme and then punk rock on top of it—mashing the two together felt right for me.” Sometimes that looked like thrifted “1960s polyester dresses with combat boots with spiked boot chains, a black leather vest, the spikes and all the punk stuff painted on it. And then a green Mohawk,” and other times it looked like layered lingerie, “I would wear slips as dresses, but I would wear like five of them. So I would wear a full length slip as the base dress and then I put a bunch of slips over the top of it to create a dress. It was all very thrifted and very lacy and bright colors and prints and no one else was dressing like either of those things. But that was fine, and it fit with my community of underground punk rockers.”

SPIRITUALITY AND ACCESSIBILITY

Bill told me they did feel a call to the spiritual early. In high school they tried to read the Bible, but, “It was lost on me. Any messages in there that I would have agreed with, I wasn’t



able to get through the text to get to the root of any of the messages, so I couldn’t understand why anybody reads it over and over. But now I understand you have to read it over and over to get to those messages, and I do understand now why people carry a careworn Bible with tabs in it like that. It makes sense to me now, but when I was a teenager I couldn’t understand why anyone would want to try reading that over and over again.”

For Bill, faith developed in personal expression, “So I find that when I need spiritual interaction, it’s more looking to myself. And because Satanism is really about the self and worship of the self, which sounds really selfish, but it’s actually looking at how you can interact with things and valuing your ability and your needs and your gifts. So when things get hard or when things are especially easy or joyful, I definitely feel that connection with other people through love; that’s where my spirituality lies.”

As for their own faith, Bill rejects the official institutions of all kinds, including the Church of Satan, saying they put as little effort as possible into official things. “I read their stuff, but I don’t memorize it. I don’t subscribe to their plans. I do love their efforts in the community.” Bill clarified that, despite rejecting the official organization, they are still Satanist, “I think it is the most accurate description, and I do like that it makes people go ‘ew!’ It very clearly says, ‘I’m spiritual, but I spit in the face of your spirituality.’ It helps me cull out the people who aren’t worth discussing religion and spirituality with.”

Bill goes on to clarify what this confrontational quality means for them, “‘Spit in your face’ basically is a term to get past the people who aren’t willing to even have an open discussion and aren’t even willing to learn anything about me. They’re not bringing ideas in a good faith way. I don’t think it’s worth my time to try to mess with that. I want to connect with people. I literally love people of all religions and care deeply about their spirituality and their religion and actually respect that very deeply.”

NO HATE, NO LIMITS

Bill has no time for those who choose to live into hate or limits, and has all the time in the



VICA-ETTA STEEL is a Vicar at St. John’s Lutheran. She also serves as a public chaplain at the Madison Farmers’ Market, at coffee shops, and on Tik-Tok. It is her joy to work with people across the spiritual spectrum, and the many atheist and agnostic people who taught her how to believe deeply in love, in community.

world for those who walk in love and welcome. Bill turned their yard into art for their neighborhood. “I have turned the majority of my yard into a spectacle of art and toys designed to delight and maybe give a little fright.” They also take joy in “hearing what other people think is happening in the scenes I create. It’s my favorite part. It is a wonderful way to connect with people and see their perspective.”

With that in mind, I close this article with a spell they shared. For this spell, we begin with a gift of tea for another or for yourself. And in preparing the tea, move “through the motions, not as a zombie with muscle memory, but preparing this as a gift for myself. This is my special treat of the day.” But don’t stop at thinking only of the treat, take that feeling of something special, and put “it into the entire act, not just the holding the cup for that first sip, but in the measuring and the brewing and pouring the tea in the cup and putting it on the table and the warmth in your hands just connecting with your body and the objects, whether that’s tea or food or a book—all of the senses intertwined, that’s the connection and it’s anything that you connect deeply with. Just root yourself in it.”

And for each of us reading, maybe you find for yourselves as I find for myself, rooting in the intentional love of this deep faith, this challenging faith, this powerful loving faith of Satanism expressed by Bill Blanton. ■

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RELIGION SATANISM AUTISM

Loving Yourself to Love All Else

Bill Blanton speaks about their personal practice of Satanism.

IF YOU THINK OF SATANISTS, is the first word that comes to mind, love? I asked Bill Blanton (they/them) how they would define their faith as a Satanist, and their answer, “Love. It always comes down to love. We always come back to love. It’s what gives me hope and an opportunity for growth. It is all love.”

Bill has grown into their understanding of what it means to be Satanist and how they express their faith, “When I was a teenager, I thought that meant setting up candles and a salt circle and doing this elaborate thing. And now I know that it doesn’t have to look like that.” For them, expressions of their faith might “look like going on a walk with a friend

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CAMPING RURAL SMALL BUSINESS

Camp & Glamp Adventures

Like so many, **Nichie Bendt** and **Terri “Zeke” Zeman** survived the isolation and disruption of Covid by finding ways to stay connected to their community (and to sanity) by getting outside and finding peace and joy through camping and outdoor adventures. They have now started a Brooklyn, Wisconsin-based hospitality business rooted in luxury camping accommodations and the creation of memorable experiences.

PARTNERS NICHIE (graphic designer) and Zeke (social media consultant) said they weren’t initially thinking of forming a new business. As they thought about how to tap into their love of the outdoors and live life more adventurously, while also lessening the burden of stressful jobs, their ideas and spirits began to soar. During a drive through the Beartooth Mountains in Wyoming, the conversation focused on reflections from their COVID experience, what got them through, and what it all meant to life going forward. On that road trip, an idea with merit was formed—to create the type of immersive and memorable experience that would give people a respite from the hectic day-to-day and a sense of peace from reconnecting with nature and with each other.



NOT MERELY A TREND

The passion and creativity are all theirs, but the market trend supporting the idea is rock solid. Glamping, or glamorous camping, is predicted to reach \$1.30 billion by 2029 and is widely considered one of the hospitality industry’s hottest options. The glamping phenomenon is not merely a trend, however. It’s a reflection of the changing preferences and values of today’s travelers.

Millennials and Gen Zers are at the forefront of this movement, driving the glamping market to new heights with their adventurous spirits, sustainability consciousness, and love for sharing their experiences on social media. The allure of this global phenomenon lies in its ability to provide unforgettable escapes, where tranquility and luxury converge in a one-of-a-kind experience. With a solid market to stand on, and from that initial big idea conversation, Nichie and Zeke got to work.

Imagine camping, but with all the comforts of a fine hotel, including a platform bed with a memory foam mattress, high-end furniture, cooking essentials, and other personal amenities. Camp & Glamp Adventures, LLC creates a luxury oasis smack dab in the middle of... wherever you want it to be. The luxury bell tent sites are 100% mobile and can be set up at partner locations, campgrounds, or at the site of your choosing.

Permanent installation plans and negotiations are nearing completion with local partners in Paoli that are proving very exciting with more news coming soon. While the biggest consumers of the glamping trend are Millennials and Gen Zers, the experience and opportunity are open to all ages, from youth to seniors—anyone who wants a novel and fun



ANNA HLAND.

way to get away, reconnect with the outdoors, and celebrate memorable moments.

The tenants of the business also naturally flow from what is most important in Nichie and Zeke’s own lives, including a commitment to land stewardship, support for local culture and economy, creation of partnerships to create greater value and help all parties succeed, and to honor the roots of camping and outdoor experience. “We feel blessed and energized that who we are, both as individuals and as a couple, has merged so effortlessly with what this business has become, and will continue to become,” noted Zeke.

AND YOUR LITTLE DOG, TOO

Several of the luxury tent set-ups are dog-friendly, and all are family-friendly. As lesbian owners, this duo is especially proud to create a welcoming space and memorable experiences for the LGBTQ+ com-

munity. “It is exciting to focus on the LGBTQ+ community and provide such a meaningful retreat. The community is central to our lives as a couple, and we love seeing other couples and groups happy, reconnecting, and loving life and nature through this unique experience,” said Nichie.

The glamping options are many. Outfitted bell tents can be rented out for retreats, parties, or gatherings to fit any timeframe, for as few as 90 minutes or for several days at the site of your choice. Nichie and Zeke have several promising partnerships in the works that will take the experience to vineyards, breweries, or racing events where individual tents or tent villages welcome communities to relax and unwind together. Whether a couples or family outing, reunion, wedding, retreat or just a novel approach to a weekend getaway, Camp & Glamp Adventures, LLC makes the luxury tent setup effortless and unique to the needs and hopes of each guest.

FINDING MORE MEANING

Their vision has become a reality, supported by a strong network, savvy business sense, and an unbridled passion to share the outdoor experience with more people. To see the initial road trip conversation and dream become a reality is inspiring. Additionally, it’s providing a way out of corporate jobs and a shift to work that is far more meaningful and closer to their hearts. Nichie and Zeke see an exciting future in Camp & Glamp Adventures, and are excited to grow the business and capitalize on the glamping trend.

A night in a decked-out luxury bell tent, sipping good wine or a cold brew, watching the fire glow before resting well on a platform bed: It’s fun, effortless, and unforgettable. As Nichie offers with a broad smile, “To lessen today’s stress and chaos and to disconnect, it just doesn’t get any better than this upscale adventure under the stars.” ■

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ADVOCATES TATTOOING COLLECTIVE QTBIPOC

Tattooing Accessibly and Collaboratively

Red Clover Tattoo Collective is now settling into an East Main Street location neighboring queer-owned brewery Giant Jones.

LIKE SO MANY queer origin stories, Red Clover Tattoo Collective's start began with folks who admired one another's art/practice from afar (social media), found that they shared community values, and identified a personal and community need in Madison's tattoo and artist collective scene. While there are several tattoo shops in Madison, and a few artist collectives, there was a distinct lack of visibly queer owned/operated tattoo and artist collectives that are typically seen in other similarly situated progressive cities, especially considering the large population of LGBTQ+ people and the large arts community.

Red Clover Tattoo Collective (RCTC) is a 50% Native-owned and 100% queer-owned tattoo and artist collective. Many of the artists are also transgender, nonbinary, and/or genderqueer, BIPOC, disabled, and neurodiverse. RCTC is currently located at 931 East Main Street in the Main Street Industries complex, in the same building that houses the queer-owned brewery Giant Jones. This location offers a large, secure, accessible, and private space that caters to RCTC's by-appointment-only model. The space is warm and inviting with walls filled with art, books, and culturally relevant items and ephemera.

Prior to the move to Main Street in August of 2023, RCTC* was located in a smaller and less accessible space at 1236 Williamson Street that opened in late summer 2020. The move to the current location was prompted by the need for a larger and more accessible space due to RCTC's values of accessibility, comfort, and care, as well as the growth of their artist collective and their apprenticeship program. RCTC currently has four owner tattoo artists: nipinet, Bear, Mar, and Ari; four

artists/apprentices: Harlowe, Lucia, Caitlin, and Glory; and a recently added microblading artist Aku.

**RCTC was formerly known as giige with the opening of the tattoo and artist collective reported on in August of 2020 by Tone Madison via Holly Marley-Henschen.*

COMMUNITY WITHIN COVID

Opening a tattoo and artist collective during a global pandemic was difficult in many ways, and also, the artists shared that they found that the transition to incorporating more Covid safety measures was not as difficult as navigating the ever-changing guidance and surge levels, as the process of tattooing involves several safety and sterilization

One of the core values of RCTC is the desire to create a tattoo and artist collective that actively works to dismantle the toxic and harmful values/norms that the artists experienced as tattoo apprentices, either directly from their mentors or conveyed to them by their clients.

measures, such as using sanitizer, gloves, regular hand washing, and of course using sealed needles and fresh ink pots for every client, using protective barriers on tattoo machines and regularly sterilizing surfaces that come into contact with clients.

Additional safety measures that were implemented and still utilized

include requiring masks for all artists and clients, the addition of air purifiers in the space, requiring negative Covid tests, and requiring folks to reschedule their appointments if they are sick. The artists shared that they appreciated that the collective opened during the pandemic as it offered them the opportunity to deepen their relationships with one another, build community with other Covid-conscious folks, and create intentional safety precautions and procedures.

It also gave them a place outside of their homes to be in community with folks with shared values, especially regarding Covid safety and precautions. And while there have been folks who have cycled in and out of participation in the collective since inception for various reasons (typical of most collectives), the core artist/owners and their vision and values have continued to grow while centering intention, care, sustainability, and liberation.

ADDRESSING INDUSTRY ISSUES

One of the core values of RCTC is the desire to create a tattoo and artist collective that actively works to dismantle the toxic and harmful values/norms that the artists experienced as tattoo apprentices, either directly from their mentors or conveyed to them by their clients. They aim to create and grow a space that honors tattooing traditions across cultures, honors the artist/client relationship, centers access, intention, care, communication, consent, autonomy, agency, and offers a space that is inviting to those who had bad experiences, have been alienated from mainstream tattoo shops, and/or have otherwise had unsafe tattoo experiences.

Many marginalized folks are terrified to get into and/or stay in the tattoo industry due to the prevalence of toxic practices regarding consent, agency, artistry, bodily exposure, incidents of harassment and assault, and lack of access and accommodations for folks who are not cisgender men, heterosexual, white, and/or abled. It is also important for the collective to share anti-capitalistic, anti-colonial, and liberatory values

for all marginalized folks, especially prioritizing and centering BIPOC, queer, trans, disabled, and socio-economically disenfranchised folks.

Although anti-capitalist values in a business may seem counter-intuitive, RCTC looks at how to disrupt the status quo through shared power, shared values, consistent communication, and shared decision-making. There are no set hours that artists are required to work each week, as they are given autonomy over their schedule and work/life needs.

Artists are paid for the work that they do individually while a predetermined percentage is recovered as the "shop cut" that is used to pay for rent, utilities, supplies, professional development, events, and other such things that benefit all of the artists. If the "shop cut" results in a profit, those funds are given back to the artists, as the purpose of the "shop cut" is to cover the essentials and sustain the space/needs of the collective. Apprentices are paid a living wage and contributions to the "shop cut" are carefully considered within the context of socio-economic barriers.

Additionally, each artist offers two free tattoos for BIPOC folks each month, as a way to connect with culture and community, pay reparations, and recognize the socio-economic barriers that prevent access to tattoos for BIPOC folks. Tattoos are offered on a sliding scale, and monetary constraints can be taken into consideration on a case-by-case basis, especially when planning larger and more expensive pieces.

RCTC artists also participate in fundraising opportunities and mutual aid projects throughout the year. The mutual aid projects are led by nipinet, and while RCTC funds are not used to support these projects, the collective works to support nipinet as much as possible by making the RCTC space available as an organizing hub and through sharing information about the projects across their personal social media. Most recently nipinet has been involved in raising art donations, funds, and goods to support a Two-Spirit Care Package project that will be providing culturally relevant, customized care packages to Two-Spirit youth across the so-called United States.



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- Eligibility: Resident of Dane County, WI; Must identify as Southeast Asian & LGBTQI+; Plans to pursue post-secondary education (college, vocational, trade, etc.)
- Application: bit.ly/YeeYang2024

Application Deadline: May 3, 2024, 11:59PM

Questions? Contact kher@freedom-inc.org



AN ACCESSIBLE SPACE

RCTC emphasizes the desire to create as accessible a space as possible for all folks. Face masks are required at all times. If an artist or client is ill, the appointment will be rescheduled with no penalty. Tattoo artists and apprentices use massage tables that are comfortable for folks of all weights and sizes, unlike traditional tattoo chairs. Accessible parking is available, there are no stairs at the entrances, and the space can be navigated easily using mobility devices. RCTC offers comfort items such as pillows, blankets, books, and stim toys. Other accommodations are welcome and appreciated upon request (such as scent sensitivities, allergies, medical conditions, etc.). Food and water are available if needed, and active consent is considered at every step of the tattoo process.

In the spirit of learning, growth, and collaboration, RCTC is always looking for opportunities to collaborate with others in the tattoo community and encourages artists to reach out if they are interested in talking shop and/or having a guest spot, as they love hosting guest artists.



The artists recognize the power dynamics involved in tattooing and that getting a tattoo puts the client in a vulnerable position, therefore open communication in all aspects is not only welcome but highly encouraged. The artists emphasize communication and consent in all aspects of the process, including asking for permission before touching, drawing, placing stencils, being mindful and open about how much of the body needs to be exposed and proper placement of the tattoo, being mindful of the time the tattoo will take and ensuring that breaks are part of the session, and welcoming the use of bactine or other lidocaine gels for pain management. They recognize that people can feel pressure to please the artist, so they don't speak up when they are uncomfortable or the stencil is not placed correctly, or if they even need a break. Artists at RCTC implore clients to speak up and be active in the tattooing process.

The shared goals of the artists at RCTC, for themselves and their clients, are to do what they can to avoid the "bad tattoo" and the "bad tattoo experience." This requires relationship building, trust, and care from both the artist and the client. RCTC artists welcome feedback and accountability, as well as the desire to resolve any issues that may arise, whether those issues come from the client or the artist, as accountability in the tattoo artist/client relationship must be reciprocal and considerate of all the power dynamics involved. Many of RCTC's policies and practices, as well as their Client Bill of Rights, are inspired by the book *Could This Be Magic? Tattooing as Liberation Work*, by Tamara Santibañez, which offers well-defined liberation practices for tattooing and guidance for navigating issues as they arise for both the artist and their clients. As a bonus, this book is available as a free PDF online.

PRACTICING AN ARTFORM

Unlike other tattoo shops, RCTC does not offer "walk-ins" and does not contain walls of standard/popular/borrowed tattoo flash for clients to choose from. All of the flash that they offer is created by the artists and made available to clients on either a limited basis (designs that are only available to one person) or as repeatable flash (designs that are available to more than one person). RCTC also offers custom designs and prioritizes cultivating a collaborative atmosphere over the capitalistic predilection to make as much money as possible by tattooing as many people as quickly as possible.

Each artist has their own art style and subject matter preference for

LUCIA Tattooing for 5 months

I've started with a neo-traditional type style to start dipping my toes in the art of tattooing. I enjoy making art with horror themes and things found on the land: plants, animals, etc. I'm currently very excited to progress my craft and thoroughly enjoy tattooing. **What do you not tattoo?** I steer clear from culturally specific tattoos that are not from mine or my client's culture. I'm still learning which styles are most enjoyable for me to tattoo; at the moment I am happy to challenge myself with different styles and themes.

HARLOWE Tattooing for 8 months

I love doing abstract wavy styles and playing with texture and line weights. I'm excited to do much larger full-body pieces. **What do you not tattoo?** I don't do photo realism or realism.

NIPINET Tattooing for 6.5 years

Blackwork and bright color! I love Ojibwe florals, goth and horror designs, color gradients, woodcut designs, and abstracts. Anything that honors a connection to land and place and culture is right up my alley, but I also love a good old massive sword.

What do you not tattoo? Black and gray realism, portraits, floral arrangements, other people's styles.

AKU Microblading since November.

Microblading is a semi-permanent tattoo process practiced to sculpt and enhance eyebrows to frame one's face naturally. I am ecstatic to build new connections!

GLORY Tattooing for 7 years

I prefer large scale, black and white designs centering elements of the natural world with an emphasis on the beauty to be found in the ma-

cabre. I also love to do large-scale ornamental and abstract designs like bracelets and necklaces.

What do you not tattoo? Portraits, swastikas, full color work

ARI Tattooing for 3 years

I love doing illustrative realism, detailed fine line work, and manga-style tattoos. I've been starting to get into color realism with a painterly approach and would love to do more!

Subject matter I'm always interested in: Vulture culture (taxidermy/entomology), human/animal hybrids (mythical creatures), organ-

taking on custom tattoos. The collective values tattooing as a co-creative process and wants to ensure that their clients are given every opportunity to have as much agency and autonomy in the tattoo process as the artist is given. However, RCTC tattoo artists are selective about the work they will take on and carefully consider requests for work produced by outside artists and culturally significant tattoos. The consultation process is extremely helpful in determining whether your custom ideas are aligned with the artist's style, expertise, and interest.

CENTERING COMMUNITY & COLLABORATION

The artists at RCTC recognize that change does not occur in a vacuum or a bubble, and they are very fortunate to have found support within the collective, the Madison tattoo artist community, as well as within other tattoo and artist collectives around the country. In speaking with the apprentices and their mentees, there is so much joy and care in the collaboration, as well as pride in what they co-create as a collective. RCTC is truly supportive of one another and seeks to extend that support and collaboration with others who share their goals and values.

In the spirit of learning, growth, and collaboration, RCTC is always looking for opportunities to collaborate with others in the tattoo community and encourages artists to reach out if they are interested in talking shop and/or having a guest spot, as they love hosting guest artists. If you are interested in collaborating please reach out via email to admin@redclovertattoocollective.com.

For more details on RCTC, including bios of the artists, booking information, links to find the pictures of their work on social media, as well as other ways to support their work visit redclovertattoocollective.com. ■

ic abstraction, full-color botanicals and insects, Manga-inspired (either a panel recreation or custom characters), little critters doing human things, cats.

What do you not tattoo? American traditional, lettering or text without imagery, anything culturally appropriative, anything pro police, military, or hate symbols, direct copies of other tattoos, and direct copies of other artists' work without direct consent and compensation for that artist.

BEAR Tattooing for 6.5 years

I think my style falls into the illustrative/neo traditional genre, but I also do some fine line and black work designs on occasion.

I'm always interested in occult, celestial and natural imagery, anything art-nouveau or art deco, queer iconography, pop culture references, and memorial tattoos. Lately I've been really into full-color pieces highlighting or including florals and have been wanting to do more large-scale art nouveau designs that flow with and highlight the natural human form.

What do you not tattoo? Hate symbols, custom lettering, and designs not from the clients' cultures or appropriated designs

MAR Tattooing for 9 years

Mar's work is largely illustrative, featuring themes of nature, folklore, and personal metaphor. Their line work is delicate, often fussy, and their color is typically muted. They love designing with the body so pieces move and flow with muscles, fat, and joints. Right now they are in love with tattooing birds, fish, and figures in a style similar to golden age illustrators like Florence Harrison and Henry Justice Ford. **What do you not tattoo?** Mar won't take on projects from outside their culture unless guided by a client from that culture. They'll happily refer clients to talented local artists (in RCTC and out) for cultural tattoos, American traditional, portraits, and anime tattoos.

CAITLIN Tattooing for under a year

Ojibwe florals & American traditional styles **What do you not tattoo?** Fine line work.

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APP TRANSGENDER STARTUP TECH

TRACE Your Transition

Madison-born **Taylor Greene** (he/him) has created the world's first mobile application for transgender and non-binary individuals. **TRACE** is an acronym representing the app's purpose: Transition, recording, and community engagement.

THE TRACE APP features both a social media network and documenting capabilities to capture transition milestones e.g. haircuts, coming out, or surgical anniversaries. It has just over 11,500 users, with the majority being in the United States but many others in places like Australia, Canada, Germany, India, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom. TRACE is compatible for iOS and Android users.

"I'm the proudest of the product when we get messages from the community that we have been able to facilitate through the app and people tell us that we've saved their life and changed their life forever by creating this community," said Greene who is both TRACE's Chief Technology Officer and a Co-Founder.

Greene's journey from Epic Systems employee to tech entrepreneur has been quite fortuitous; not only had he never built a mobile app, but the opportunity at TRACE grew out of an Instagram direct message with Aydian Dowling (he/him), a transgender advocate and social media influencer.

"We weren't friends beforehand, but with working together and doing something like starting a company, you get very close. That's also been a really great benefit—his friendship in all of this as well," said Dowling.

BETA BEGINNINGS

After childhood, Greene moved to Minnesota to attend St. Olaf's College where he received a Bachelor of Arts degree in Hispanic Studies in 2013. After graduation, he returned to Wisconsin to work in Quality Assurance for Epic. Soon after he realized, "I didn't want to test the software, I wanted to build it. I've always been someone that loves building things and fixing things in my house. I never realized until I was older, that is essentially what a software developer is."

Upon overcoming his mislaid fear that computer science would involve "complex math," Greene enrolled in night classes at UW-Madison to receive a Computer Sciences Capstone Certificate. Finally, in August of 2019, Greene swapped into a Software Developer role at Epic.

Despite having just completed a major career shift, three months later his life took another turn as Greene realized his transgender identity while on a trip to Italy. This self-discovery led Greene to want to find others like himself and participate in transgender culture. "Our community does not have a place where they are supported online in any traditional social media aspects," he explained.

TRANSITIONING TO TRACE

As a result of realizing his trans identity, he took to Instagram where he one day stumbled upon the user account of his soon-to-be TRACE Co-Founder and CEO, Aydian Dowling. Dowling was in the process of just starting the company and had recently had another engineer and developer quit, but he was determined to get his idea off the ground.

"Overall, now more than ever the community needs a place where we can gather without fear of judgment, and fear of ridicule, and have a true community. You know, all these social networks and social commu-



nities—they always use this word 'community,' but a community is a place where you should feel safe and free—[and] more than 50% of all trans people, we don't feel that," he explained.

Desperate, Dowling posted a few times, "Anybody know how to build apps?" on his Instagram story. Despite being total strangers, Greene wrote Dowling, "I've never made an app before, but I bet I could do it!" Soon after, they had a virtual meeting along with the app's third Co-Founder and Chief Design Officer, Elizabeth Rhodes (she/her).

"We really hit it off," said Dowling. "He came to the first meeting with all of these ideas before we had even officially met. So, that was a clear sign that this was going to be a good relationship."

Despite still working his day job at Epic, Greene did "a very basic launching pad" of the app on a trial basis to prove he could build a beta mobile app. He officially joined TRACE in November of 2021 and convinced his co-founders to incorporate the app in Wisconsin because of "the general blossoming tech hub that Madison is."

BUILDING A BUSINESS

In 2022 TRACE became a member of the Gener8tor (Madison Accelerator's annual cohort) which provided TRACE \$100,000 in funding as well as 12 weeks of training. Additional funding has come through the LGBTQ-run investment firm the Gaingels, the nonprofit Hopelab, as well as one private angel investor. In 2023, TRACE also received mentorship in partnership with the University of Pennsylvania's Eidos LGBTQ+ Health Initiative. TRACE itself was also a presenting sponsor

of the 2023 Milwaukee PrideFest.

"[I'm] just really proud of the work that [Greene,] myself, and Elizabeth have been doing over these years and excited to continue to see it grow," explained Dowling. Now, TRACE is launching an update that will allow voice tracking reminders to help those who go on hormone replacement therapy and want to document any vocal changes they experience.

"A lot of use on social media is following the breadcrumbs trail to find your community," said 40-year-old Asher Marino (he/him), a TRACE user and Massachusetts resident. "I've had [teenagers on TRACE] reach out and say, 'I'd never seen a transadult.' I was like, 'Honestly, me neither,' [but] now I know transadults!"

The March update will also restructure how TRACE features other reminders and include rewards if users hit a certain number of goals e.g. taking their medication on time, photographing themselves over time, or whatever other reminder the user may want. These new features will be behind a paywall, but Greene insists the app will always have a free version.

"A lot of media is about promoting, and I just wanted to share," continued Marino. "Embracing the aspects of masculinity that I always felt inside but also having that softness, is really the trans[masc] experience. It has been great to share with others... There's a different vibe, there's less vanity... it's more about just getting support for the process, and it's exciting to be finally feeling your own skin for once. Sometimes it can feel superficial on other platforms."

QUESTION & ANSWER

WHAT WAS THE BIGGEST CHALLENGE FOR YOU?

The biggest challenge is never having written a mobile app before. I had only done enterprise software—really large company software. So, going into the mobile space and just having to learn everything and being a one-person developer shop is obviously very, very difficult. It comes with lots of challenges—every day trying to learn new things.

DO YOU HAVE ANY COMPETITORS OUT THERE?

There's nothing that exists for trans and nonbinary individuals.

ANY ADVICE FOR QUEERS TRYING TO BREAK INTO THE TECH SPACE?

Make sure to align yourself with organizations that are queer friendly because we have found through our funding and just through other organizations in general, that tech organizations are generally pretty queer friendly, and certain individuals (like certain investors) are not queer friendly.

I don't actually think it's that hard to find organizations that are queer friendly—there's just not a lot of representation. You are going to have to be okay with breaking down barriers, depending on what field you're going into, and just believing in what you're doing and sticking your neck out for it. You're going to have to remind people that we matter, and our community matters, over, and over, and over again, because they will have little to no understanding of our community.

If you're marketing something for the queer community, people are going to hammer you with saying, "There's not actually that many trans people in the U.S.," (as an example) when that's clearly not the case. You're going to have to do a lot of education around whatever product you're doing and whatever market space you're going into.

IS IT IMPORTANT TO YOU TO CONTINUE TO WORK IN QUEER SPACES?

Yes, I definitely want it to be a part of my work. The goal would be that TRACE works out and to be able to continue to provide a space for

our people as our country continues to try and tear us down more and more and more.

There are lots of ways that different industries are overlooking queer and trans people, and being able to bring that mindset is crucial. It's important to have people think about things slightly differently, even if it isn't typically considered a queer company. Even things like travel companies or book selling companies can have a huge queer component to them, and bringing that awareness will always be a thing that I will advocate for.

HAS TRACE IMPACTED YOUR PERSONAL LIFE?

I have gone from not having many trans friends in Madison, to then through the tagging feature (where you can tag locations and have channels of Reddit-style threads of general topics), I found three great transguys who are new close friends of mine through the app.

HOW DO YOU FEEL ABOUT LIVING IN WISCONSIN AS A QUEER PERSON?

I always grew up in a relatively queer-safe environment in the "bubble" of Madison, even before I knew I was queer. I've just seen over the last 10 years living here as an adult, just an extreme amount of acceptance. So many buildings and businesses now have single stall restrooms, and they don't even have to be educated on why that's important.

So, as a queer person and a transperson in Madison, I feel generally safe going in 90% of establishments in the city, which I think you cannot say about most places. Outside of Madison I definitely do not feel as comfortable, but within Madison I have felt a large amount of security in being openly queer. I understand that I am a white, cis-passing, able-bodied man and know I have extreme privilege. So that needs to be taken into account for this question. ■

Note: The author and Greene are friends who met through TRACE.



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ORGANIZERS LITERATURE BOOK CLUBS

Queer Joy Book Club

A Q&A with the Social Media Administrator, **Jamie Butler**, about a monthly meetup at the Goodman South Madison Public Library. The **Queer Joy Book Club** strives to be inclusive by considering books available in the Madison library system that have an e-reader option, an audiobook option, or even a graphic novel.

WHAT IS THIS MEETUP ALL ABOUT?

We partner with A Room of One's Own Bookstore ("Room") to feature monthly queer joy books and provide our members with a 10% discount. We also connect with the local libraries, fundraise for LGBTQIA2S+ charities, and participate in other queer clubs and organizations. Our goal is to provide a safe space for queer readers and see ourselves in stories that have joyful messages—something that is uncommon in mainstream media.

According to our social media presence, we are already at 240+ local members (at least 20 members join us in person each meeting!), and we are growing our reach virtually through social media and other online avenues. The club reads joyful queer books with a range of BIPOC/AAPI and LGBTQIA2S+ representation.

We celebrate stories with diverse queer main characters, found family, humor, and happy endings. We try to select and promote our featured books months in advance to allow time to drum up excitement, promote the book, and have our local bookstores prepared with pre-ordered copies or reservations at libraries.

HOW DID THIS GROUP GET STARTED?

I went to "Room" and ordered some of K.J. Charles' books, then I posted on her Facebook group, "Hey, Room is stocking up a whole bunch of her books." A bunch of people from the Madison area were like, "Oh my gosh! That's my favorite bookstore. It would be so great if we could get together." So, we did!

There's a lot of queer spaces that involve going out and partying and doing things that I don't have anything against, but it's just not really my jam. I'm fairly introverted, and I like books and sewing. So, I was just really looking for a community and space where like-minded people could get together and discuss queer books and find joy. So much of our mainstream media and the books that are promoted are incredibly straight—like, laughably straight! It's frustrating to always see yourself as the side character, or the tragedy character, or the person who is the butt of the jokes. I wanted to find happy ending stories with queer main characters.

WHAT'S IT BEEN LIKE TO WATCH THE CLUB GROW?

I've had a couple of people talk to me about how grateful they are for this space and how much it changed their lives, and it feels very surreal to me. It's a space where people feel like they can come and be themselves, and they don't have to mask that nerdiness.

You'll meet people who will bring knitting, and they'll just knit while we do a roundabout as a group. Some people don't want to be the center of attention or focus, so we're really careful in our book club meetings to say, "If you want to speak you can, but if you don't, it's okay! If



you want to read the book you can, but if you didn't read the book, it's okay—you can still come." We really just want to be a safe space; we just want to be a community.

ANYTHING ELSE?

We're more than a book club now. We really have become a community—it surprised me to realize it, but it's true! Friendships have been made in this group. People that feel very shy and don't often even leave their house have really come out of their shell. We've had people who said they lost a lot of their friendships, or they did not really like reading before joining the group.

The pandemic really shook their lives up, and this group has given them a sense of normalcy. We also do a lot of different things together that aren't book related. We go to the Big Gay Market. We go to movies together. We host parties and potlucks. If people are really looking for a place to belong, and they don't want it to just be going to a bar to look for friends, come to our book club!

To learn more, visit Instagram @queerjoy_bookclub, Facebook under the group "Queer Joy Book Club," Discord under "Queer Joy Book Club," or at roomofonesown.com/queer-joy-book-club. ■

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Kristen Whitson (right) and her wife, Gaia.



Troy Ullman and Steve Osheim.



Finding and Building Community in Mauston

Kristen Whitson and her wife, **Gaia**, bought 11 acres in Mauston, WI (population 4,347 as of the 2020 census) and were pleasantly surprised to find themselves as new buds in a now blossoming LGBTQ+ community.

RURAL COMMUNITY FARMING HOMESTEADING

“MY HUSBAND AND I are having a party—” I didn’t hear anything else the man standing in front of me was saying, because I was so shocked that other gay people existed in rural Mauston, where my wife and I had purchased property the year before. I cut him off: “Wait, your WHO?” “My husband and I,” he continued, “are having a Fourth of July party at our place across the street [my level of disbelief increased] and we have SO MANY roasted chickens, you have to come over and help us eat them.”

We did go to that party, walking down their long driveway with nervousness and anticipation. There were, indeed, a bunch of roasted

chickens—along with many people, a Pride flag, a swimming pond with a fountain, commercial-quality fireworks, a DJ, and the nearest neighbors we’d been avoiding for a year.

MOVING TO MAUSTON

Gaia and I bought 11 acres in Mauston in June 2020, which we aptly named the Goddess Gardens. It was, I readily acknowledge, an act borne partially of fear: The pandemic and associated supply chain issues spurred a desire in us to expand the gardening and chicken-raising skills

we’d acquired in suburban Madison into personal food security in a rural area. It felt safer to be in charge of our own survival, a prepper mentality I like to believe was on the saner side.

The rest of what I’ll share here is all filtered through that lens of privilege: We are cisgender, able-bodied, white, educated, middle-class people—our only element of marginalization is that we are two women married to each other. Our journey and community-building efforts are undoubtedly made easier by those privileges.

When we bought the property in the throes of an election year, we passed many Trump/Pence 2020 signs on our frequent one-hour drives between Madison and Mauston. The general miasma of fear, insecurity, and isolation that year led us to make the decision to keep to ourselves. We didn’t know how Mauston, the seat of Juneau County, would react to lesbians in their midst—and naively and self-centeredly, we believed ourselves likely to be first, or first out. We’d lean on that oldest of tropes; perhaps neighbors would think we were roommates or even sisters.

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Troy, he of the chickens and invitation, blew our hope of staying incognito out of the water. His habit of beginning invitations with “my husband and I” wasn’t limited to us; I’m not sure he’s ever seen the inside of a closet, going back to his club-kid days in the late 80s. Troy has a habit of making connections with everyone in whatever bar he’s in, while his husband Steve—a quieter, steadier presence—strikes up the coherent conversations. Their combined roadshow has brought all of us a greater sense of community, and deeper friendships, than any of us expected.

ABLE TO BUILD

Gaia and I built a house on our property in 2022; we keep a few dozen egg-laying chickens, a couple of beehives, a so-so orchard still in its infancy, and a huge garden. We raise and process our own meat chickens, and will start doing the same with feeder pigs in a few years. Steve and Troy do the same at their property, named Camp 54: Chop firewood, raise chickens and guinea hens, grow gardens and trees. We share equipment, homestead duties, help each other at the drop of a hat, and love each other’s pets like our own.

This way of life certainly wouldn’t work for everyone, but it’s not uncommon up here—in fact, our shared abilities to build, grow, chop, butcher, plow, grade, and generally manage the required manual labor seems to smooth any initial awkwardness in conversation. Folks we haven’t met might be taken a little aback by my introduction of my wife, but they forget about that when we start commiserating about the cabbage moths, tent caterpillars, avian flu, and other pests. One of the farmers in Sarah Stellino’s Queering Rural Spaces show said that when you’re farming (or growing things), you kind of forget that you’re queer. Sometimes it feels like the least interesting thing about our life. It’s way more interesting that we successfully harvested 17 pounds of honey last fall!

Likewise, one of many fascinating things about Troy and Steve is the private recreation area they’ve built to share with friends and family. They have a beautiful, naturally filtered swimming pond with a waterfall, decks, and bonfire rings, and a private, fully functioning pub complete with a full bar. It’s the perfect setting for gatherings of our friends and allies, and I’ve never felt as safe as I do floating in that pond on a 90



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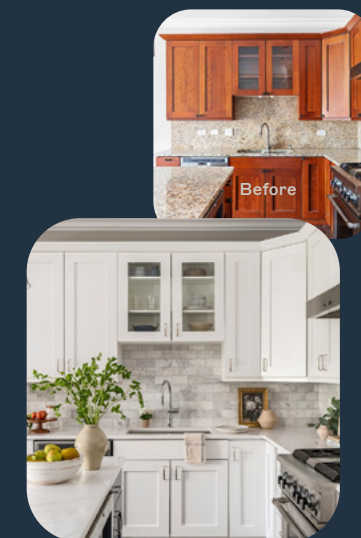
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degree day in August. The entire setup is on private property and is not open to the public, so unexpected visitors are nonexistent.

OUT AROUND TOWN

But the time comes to leave the safety of the swimming pond and our fenced-in properties. Troy frequently quotes Harvey Milk when he's dragging me down to the neighborhood bar: "Come out to your neighbors, to your fellow workers, to the people who work where you eat and shop...Once and for all, break down the myths. Destroy the lies and distortions. For your sake. For their sake." That bar, three miles away from our homes, is owned by an extremely supportive straight couple originally from New Jersey.

In June 2022, when a bunch of us pulled up at the bar in the Camp 54 bus, decked out in rainbow gear for the Camp With Pride event, the owners could not have been more thrilled to have us. All the other bar patrons took their cue from the owners and either joined the fun or scooted to the other end of the bar. One of the bar owners took me aside to say forcefully, "You all are very welcome here, and if anyone gives you a hard time, you let me know, and I'll take care of it." The New Jersey shone in her eyes like she was spoiling for a fight. We all still visit that bar frequently; Thursday is an informal locals night and we meet more neighbors every week. It's about as Wisconsin as it gets, to overcome prejudice by getting to know your neighbors over an Old Fashioned and bar dice.

The Juneau County LGBTQ+ community isn't limited to our two homesteads, not by a long shot. We were astonished to find out that not only were we not the first out lesbians around, but that several folks—mostly gay and lesbian, mostly cisgender—were already well-known and beloved. Richard Kilmer now lives full-time in Wonewoc, and in 2020 was elected to the Juneau County Board of Supervisors. He ran on a sustainable farming and environmental protection platform, issues that went a long way in a county that still supports plenty of large- and small-scale farming operations.

At the local deli, one of the first times we walked in, a man with warm brown eyes and a scruffy goatee offered us a taste of a new pasta salad he was working on. He called himself "the salad queen," a confirmation to what we'd already guessed about him. Jared tragically passed away last year from complications from a fall on an icy sidewalk; the outpouring of love and support in his memory made it clear that everyone knew exactly who he was and loved him fully.

OUR PREDECESSORS

So far, I've painted an accurate but rosy picture of the surprising level of embrace we've received up here in Juneau County. But it certainly hasn't always been this easy. Some of our other new community relations include Cheryl* and Nora* (not their real names), both professionals who worked for local institutions. They've been together for 30 years, all of them in Mauston, and the first 20 or so of those years were marked by harassment, vandalism, job threats, discrimination, and pain. They had friends and allies in their jobs and social circles, but the 1980s and 1990s certainly did not see the kind of embrace and acceptance we're meeting in the community now. I asked them, "Why did you stay here?" and their answer made it feel like it was the most obvious thing in the world: "This was home. Our home is here."

We know others in Mauston, both single and coupled, who are firmly, permanently, irrevocably in the closet. Given Cheryl and Nora's experiences with physical harassment and mental and emotional anguish, it's pretty understandable. Still, to continue to choose to love authentically in the face of that kind of harassment is a continued act of bravery—a determination to create and be home to each other.



A GROWING COMMUNITY

In what is perhaps the most cliché beginning to a story told by a white lesbian: So there we were at the Brandi Carlile concert in Madison... feeling a tap on our shoulders from the lesbian couple behind us, they said we were cute in our cuddling (we were). We got to talking, we asked where they were from, and they said "We just bought a house in this small town called Mauston." None of us could believe it.

Alex and Coleen live two miles away from us, and we've had the joy of introducing them to the idea that they, too, don't have to hide—that there is a whole community of us up here. Both Alex and Coleen left toxic situations to create a home together in Mauston, and they also approached new neighbors with a wary sense of caution. They quickly

Troy frequently quotes Harvey Milk when he's dragging me down to the neighborhood bar: "Come out to your neighbors, to your fellow workers, to the people who work where you eat and shop...Once and for all, break down the myths. Destroy the lies and distortions. For your sake. For their sake."

found that they commanded respect from their neighbors with their constant and visible work ethic: Clearing land, chopping firewood, cleaning outbuildings, and so on. By the time their neighbors found out they were engaged to each other, they were already part of the neighborhood beer and bonfire circles.

That theme is one we've heard often from friends and allies in Juneau County: They get to know us, appreciate and respect the work we do, and then who we share our lives with doesn't seem to matter. Sure, it's a

low bar to be glad that our friends and neighbors aren't mean to us. But given the worst-case scenarios some of us envisioned as we made the move here, it's a relief to clear that low bar as we build our homes.

WELCOME HOME

Of course I wonder, what if we didn't have white skin, nice tractors, and comfort with firearms? These are folks who are just as likely to say they "don't see color" as they are to tell us "it doesn't matter to me who you sleep with," which is simultaneously comforting and discomfiting, because the population is so white that none of us see people of color here. If Gaia and I were women of color, would we be extended the same grace and hospitality, the same appreciation for our hard work? I would like to hope so, but I don't know.

What I do know is that we are building a sense of community, support, and belonging for all LGBTQ+ people here. We're navigating rural spaces, coaxing sustenance from the land and water in different ways, correcting assumptions and stereotypes, and joyfully (if quietly) celebrating the budding friendships and relationships underpinning the foundations of our lives.

Home transcends the physical confines of a building or a property; it is a complex tapestry woven from emotions, memories, and relationships. It can manifest as the comforting shelter of four walls or the warmth of a familiar town. Yet, home is equally about the intangible—a feeling of safety, belonging, and acceptance that accompanies genuine connection. It resides in the shared laughter of chosen family, the understanding glances between friends, and the comfort of being seen and valued. Home, in its essence, is the sum of these elements, a sanctuary that extends beyond the boundaries of brick and mortar to encompass the profound ties that bind us to people, places, and the core of our most authentic selves. ■

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Inclusion Efforts in Evansville

A 30-minute drive south of Madison, **Evansville** (pop. 5,703 at the 2020 census) has many residents who aren't interested in a provincial mindset.

RURAL | BUSINESSES | GUIDE | SMALL TOWN

COMMUNITY AND SOCIAL CONNECTION are hugely protective when it comes to well-being and resilience. As we all know, the unfortunate reality is that small communities can be places where bigotry and hate are allowed to flourish. They are often unsafe for marginalized folks.

Small communities can be places where support and love are unparalleled—where our true selves are embraced, and where you really get to see the power of a few people getting together to speak up.

Make no mistake: The small town of Evansville, between Madison and Janesville, has seen its share of bigotry. If you've heard about some of the hateful things that have happened here, it's because of the very vocal LGBTQ+ folks and allies who are bringing these stories to the news while rallying support. Yes, bigotry and hate exist here, just as they do everywhere. But we also have an abundance of love and support.

FINDING SUPPORT

Personally, I ended up in Evansville mostly by accident. When I desperately needed a place to live, a brand-new friend offered a room in her house. After a bad experience in another state, I had sworn off living in a small town ever again. But I told myself I could live here briefly and just keep to myself—I didn't have to engage with the community. I could

protect myself. I didn't want to be a part of small town life again.

More than eight years later, I am still here. At some point the walls I had built around myself started cracking—just a little at a time—and eventually, one connection at a time, I found myself immersed in one of the most authentic communities I have ever been a part of. It was here in Evansville that I found, for the first time, I was unconditionally embraced as my most true and open self.

In 2020, a lot of small towns in the area and around the country found that there were pockets of people banding together in support of racial and social justice causes, including LGBTQ+ inclusivity and acceptance. But, from what I've observed, many of those pockets of people lost steam. As so many of us do, they burned out. They were no match for the pressures of established norms and institutionalized oppression, even at the local level. In many ways, however, Evansville just kept going.

In Evansville, many people have remained connected to an unwavering commitment to fighting against the culture that oppresses and harms LGBTQ+ people. It may have been kindled at the same time that it came up around the country, but it didn't fade away so easily. We have a lot of work to do here, and those who are doing the work will be the first to tell you this. But we have experienced a lot of progress.

BASE & PRIDE BUSINESS PARTNERSHIP

In Evansville, a local nonprofit (Building A Safer Evansville, or BASE) created the Pride Business Partnership—a program where local businesses sign up to be listed as LGBTQ-safe spaces. They post a rainbow window cling in their building to signify that in this space, they have our back. Currently in our little town of 5,000, there are 32 businesses on this list—restaurants, shops, the bowling alley, a dentist, our local live music collective, and churches. The people at these businesses know the cost of broadcasting their support. They know that there are people who will decide not to patronize them. But they also know that the LGBTQ+ residents of our community seek them out.

What's more: Multiple businesses whose owners have been openly, relentlessly homophobic and/or transphobic are no longer open. Why? Because people who live here organized and said "That's not okay." They raised awareness about the views of the business owners so that citizens could make informed decisions about where to spend our money.

LGBTQ+ people are represented in all levels of government in Evansville, right up to the mayor, who works tirelessly to advocate for our community. We have a Pride flag that goes up at City Hall in June, along with a Pride Month proclamation from the local government.

Each June, there are several Pride Month events around town: We have had a book discussion with the authors of the Wisconsin LGBTQ history book *We Will Always Be Here* (Jenny Kalvaitis and Kristen Whitson); we have had pride-themed disc golf tournaments at our local park's nine-hole course; and we have had transportation come to bring young people out to Madison's Pride Prom, among other things. Within our little town, there are monthly free "community meals" where local residents volunteer to prepare and serve food to whomever shows up to the community center. During Pride Month, the community meal has been hosted by the Pride Action Team of BASE. Just recently, our bowling alley has started hosting sold-out drag bingo in addition to the Pride bowling nights they host in June.

Take note: Much of, if not most of, the work that goes into creating and publicizing these events is done by volunteers. A handful of people consistently go above and beyond with their personal time (and often other resources) to make these things happen. When BASE's Pride team



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works on their annual parade float for the Fourth of July parade, they are supported by adults and young people volunteering their time, their vehicles, their tools, their lumber, their artistic abilities, and their space.

In 2021, the first year that the Pride team had a gorgeous rainbow float, it won best all around in the Evansville Fourth of July parade—an honor repeated in 2022. That year, and every year since, we’ve had LGBTQ folks come in from other towns and cities nearby to march and participate in the parade alongside our Pride team.

BECOMING BETTER NEIGHBORS

As time has gone on, those few volunteers who have been stretched to their limits have increased into more and more people actively working on inclusivity-related efforts. In addition to BASE, we have seen the rise of Evansville’s own grassroots organization, Becoming Better Neighbors. BBN was formed in 2022, as a response to “incidents of hate and bias in the community,” according to an early flier. The group began as roundtable discussions on what people could do about racism, and how to handle difficult conversations. As a group overseen by another local nonprofit, AWARE in Evansville, BBN has continued to grow—and continues to demonstrate the commitment of more than a few people in

our small town to issues of racial and social justice.

Evansville is far from perfect, but we have a large number of people who are unwavering in their support and commitment to take action when it comes to making our community safer. And they are not backing down. From Mayor Dianne Duggan: “Overall, Evansville is open and welcoming. We are always learning and growing in order to become more accepting. We want everyone to know that they belong here and their voices will be heard.”

As I spend time in and around this little town I have come to call home for the time being, I am aware of the privileges I have that make it a lot easier for me here than it has been for others. It is certainly not all sunshine and rainbows here. A few years ago, Evansville made the news when a young person Snapchatted a video of an “Evansville Pride” sign on fire for the purpose of intimidation. (The culprit was fined.) More recently, Evansville was in the news again because the local “paper of record” routinely published hate speech against LGBTQ+ folks. (The paper has since ceased operations.)

But when I experience Evansville, I experience more love than hate. Evansville Pride signs (and BLM signs, and “We Believe...” signs) adorn lawns in all neighborhoods and in the rural areas surrounding

town. More and more, the businesses I frequent have rainbows in their windows. I even started going to church again—because I was able to find a house of worship that visibly demonstrated (and verbalized in published form) its unambiguous inclusion of LGBTQ+ folks like me.

In Evansville, everywhere I go, I run into the people who’ve made the town what it is. For a while, just driving into Evansville meant going past the BASE billboard which proclaimed a welcome for LGBTQ+ folks.

RAISING OUR VOICES

While riding my bike, I stop to say hello to a school board member speaking on the sidewalk with an ally in her yard about progress on the Pride float. Dana Basch, the school board member and part of the LGBT community, ran for board a few years ago when conflict was hitting a peak at school board meetings. Anti-LGBT propaganda was being spewed from the public too often at meetings, and Dana felt compelled to do whatever she could to make sure there was a voice on the board advocating for our most vulnerable students. A year into her term, she was appointed vice president of the board.

While walking downtown, I notice how many businesses have rainbow decals in their windows—and when I bump into a friend, I point this out. We celebrate together for a minute before continuing on our way.

Attending an outdoor Evansville Underground Music show in the summer, I’m surrounded by a varied cross section of locals and out-of-towners representing an unashamed array of identities—and, quite often, I’m watching performers who are also openly LGBTQ. (It’s not by accident. It’s intentional. And after I first performed my own original song, “I Like Girls,” at an EUM show, I’ve been asked back to perform every June for a Pride Month show.) Going to a church gathering, I compliment everyone else I see who’s wearing shirts or jewelry promoting inclusivity—and there’s quite a few of them.

STILL A SMALL TOWN

Evansville is, for better and for worse, a small town. If you live here, you know this. If there’s someone in town you’d rather avoid, rest assured that out of all 5,000+ residents you WILL see them at the grocery store. The best way to get a heated discussion going is to mention the possibility of Kwik Trip or Culver’s opening a location in town. Anytime you need to declutter, you can get rid of pretty much anything at all on the Evansville Pay it Forward Facebook page. If you need to know what the roads are like for your morning commute, you can ask in one of the many Evansville community pages. If you have a late-night craving for food that’s not already in your house, you’re probably going to have to go out of town for it. And everywhere you go, a good deal of the people you pass will smile, wave, and say hello whether they know you or not.

If you’ve never been here, come visit sometime—come out to an Evansville Underground Music show, or visit Just Beyond the Willow for their farmers’ market. Stop in at a shop, bar, or restaurant in our picturesque downtown. Take a walk, bring out the kayaks, or throw a few discs in Lake Leota Park. Maybe you’ve experienced the reality that I have: That in many small towns, most people are unwilling to change their outdated, oppressive views, or accept us for who we are. But as with anything, the stereotype isn’t always accurate. We are not the only small town where progress is happening.

It’s hard to write accurately about a place like Evansville: If I am overly positive, it erases the lived experiences of harm that happen here; if I am overly negative, it erases the hard work of those who are making real change here. The reality is that we have both. It is not an oasis of inclusivity. But it isn’t a bastion of hatred, either. At the end of the day, there is one thing I can conclusively say about Evansville. This small town I’ve ended up calling home for now gives me hope for the future. ■

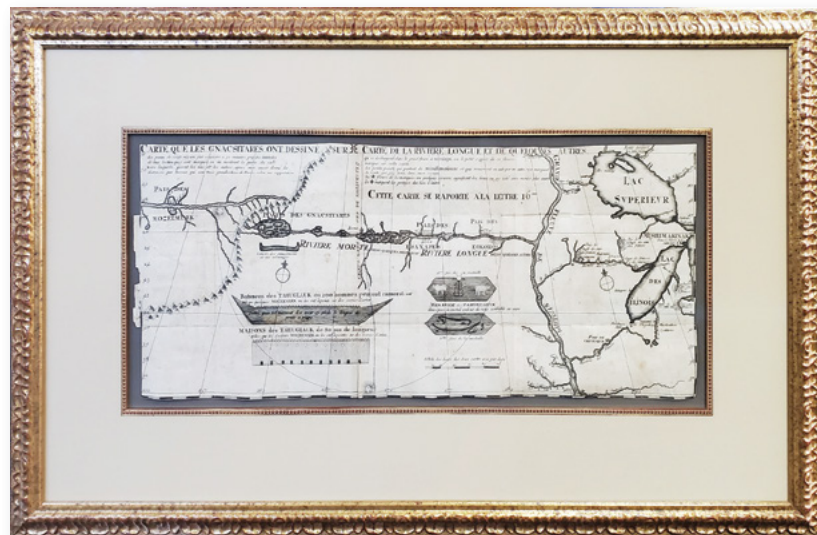
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GREEN BAY MILWAUKEE TRANSGENDER YOUTH ARTS FAITH

Be Every Day

A journey of self-discovery, acceptance, and love decades in the making. Follow along and be inspired at how **Martha Marvel** discovered her truth.

MARTHA MARVEL (born 1951) describes her youth on the South Side of Milwaukee as one of dealing with “strange feelings” that she remembered from her earliest memories. Martha grew up with three sisters and had what she calls a “weird obsession” of trying on her sisters’ clothing when no one was around. The clothes fit just fine, but Martha said that the “magical feelings I had—scared the shit out of me.”

On TV, Martha saw comedians such as Flip Wilson or Jackie Gleason that were men who dressed as women—in comedy routines that people laughed at and made fun of. Martha hid deep inside herself. She had no idea if other kids had the same feelings as her. She was unaware of terminology for her feelings but as she grew older, she learned the terms.

RUNNING FROM HER FEELINGS

Martha described herself in high school as a “super over-achiever” who was, at first, heavily involved in sports and always pushed herself to be the best. She excelled in football at halfback and was at the top of her range playing varsity her junior year when a torn leg muscle ended her football dreams.

When senior year arrived, Martha passed on sports and decided to run for student council where young Martha would become President and would receive the Milwaukee Rotary Club Award for Leadership. To top off her final year of high school, she had the role of Captain von Trapp in “The Sound of Music.” Martha stayed super-involved as a way to run from and suppress “those feelings” and not have any time for what she

I had such a fear of being laughed at. I walked into the ballroom and looked around. Easily, there were 250 trans women chatting and laughing—the energy in the room was unbelievable. Years of self-loathing and confusion melted, and I almost burst into tears.

believed at the time were “those sick fetishistic behaviors.”

It was in college that Martha came across an article by Ann Landers. A word Martha was unfamiliar with was mentioned. It caught her attention and for weeks Martha obsessed over the word. Eventually she gathered the courage to go down to the library and look it up in the card catalog. The word was: “Crossdresser.” Martha finally had a word for her feelings of trying on women’s clothes. The term didn’t fit as well as the clothes, but it was the 1970s. Transvestite was a term commonly used in the 70s and 80s, and the term “transgender” wouldn’t gain traction until the 90s.

Having grown up in a strong Catholic family, Martha felt called to serve and thought about becoming a priest. She ultimately pursued a Master Social Work (MSW) degree, but in college she became very involved in campus ministry. Martha felt that God gave her talents for a reason, and at the campus ministry she was an “off-the-charts su-



Martha in 2018.

WHO'S WHO in Wisconsin LGBTQ History

per-Catholic.” Her thought process was that if she could get involved in the church, it might counter the feelings that she struggled with.

She opened a volunteer-operated, drop-in coffeehouse, received a Catholic Student Leadership scholarship, and was hired as a volunteer coordinator for the campus ministry. Martha still had a nagging call to become a priest—but she stomped it down because she continued to struggle with her feelings.

She decided instead to serve the church as a lay person. She attended graduate school in Detroit and graduated with a master’s degree in Religious Studies. In Detroit, Martha was a member of the campus ministry team.

In what Martha would call a “lightning rod” moment, a fellow member of the campus ministry staff would come out to her as a lesbian. Prior to leaving for Detroit, Martha also met the woman who would ultimately become her wife. They became engaged and lived hundreds of miles away from one another while in graduate school before they wed. Martha hoped that being married would bring happiness, and the feelings and desire to wear women’s clothing would all go away.

BE ALL WEEKEND

As the years passed, the family expanded by four children. Martha would seek out professional counseling and suffer through bouts of depression and mood swings. All the while, Martha’s wife and children never knew of her private struggle. In the mid 80s, Martha did not feel safe going out in Green Bay for fear of being “outed.” So, instead she took an excursion to the north side of Chicago.

Martha parked in a dark parking lot and dressed by flashlight in her car. She was going to a bar she had heard was a trans hangout space: Charlie’s Angels. While walking inside, she tripped and went flying. She caught herself, but was deeply embarrassed and darted to take a seat. Taking a glimpse around, she saw no other trans folks in sight. A kind bartender came over to Martha and said: “Honey, it’s okay,” and Martha promptly ordered a Manhattan.

Over time more information began to surface about transgender

individuals. Usually, this information could be found in the back of adult magazines. It was here that Martha would learn of national “Crossdresser” organizations. In the late 1980s and 1990s, organizations like TRI-ESS-CHI Chapter and The Chicago Gender Society caught her attention.

They had an ad for an event called: “Be All Weekend” where annually they took over a hotel near the O’Hare airport. They also periodically sponsored “Holiday En Femme” weekends that Martha decided she wanted to attend. She had never before met or spent time with other trans persons. At this time, she was successfully working locally and nationally full-time for a religious organization, and her wife still had no clue about Martha’s secret.

As Martha put it: “I signed up for the weekend, but I was scared shitless. I walked into the hotel as a man. I remember getting into my room literally shaking. I changed, put my make-up on, and then sat down for an hour and a half—all the while working up the courage to take the elevator to the gathering. I had such a fear of being laughed at. I walked into the ballroom and looked around. Easily, there were 250 trans women chatting and laughing—the energy in the room was unbelievable. Years of self-loathing and confusion melted, and I almost burst into tears. Everyone was so nice and comfortable with who they were.”

It was there that Martha met a woman in her late 70s who dressed all the time because she could easily pass. She was the first trans person from NE Wisconsin that Martha had ever met.

From the “Be All Weekend,” Martha was also able to connect with a group of trans women in Milwaukee. Several met once a month in a church basement on the West Side of Milwaukee. These ladies eventually evolved into a more organized group. Martha was present at the initial organizational meeting of what was named the Gemini Gender Society (GGS). Some members of the GGS met every other Thursday night, at the Club Metro, just down from the Pfister Hotel.

The group of trans women would get a few drinks and then pick a restaurant. The group befriended cocktail waitresses at Blu at the top of the Pfister Hotel, and it became their end-of-the night go-to spot.

Martha could only attend gatherings a few times a year because she was still leading a life of secrecy with her family and friends. Martha said just knowing the group existed gave her something to look forward to. It gave her a much-needed space to be herself after stuffing her femininity down inside herself over the years—she finally had a place to shine.

WE WILL BE SEEN

Being a workaholic was Martha’s way of running from and not having time for “those feelings.” She always told herself that if Martha became known to others, that the work that was accomplished “would save me from total ridicule and rejection.” She remembers praying to God many times just hoping that “one morning I would wake up and



Martha in 1992.



Martha with a manhattan in 2022.



Chue Lor, Justis Tenpenny, and Martha at the Napalese mural unveiling.

God would take it all away.” In moments of frustration, she would question her creator: “Why the hell did you make me this way?”

Finally, after being married for about 13 years, Martha decided she would use her Halloween costume of a bearded lady to facilitate a conversation with her wife (who rounded out the couple’s costume dressed as a guy). After the party was over, Martha and her wife had a heart-to-heart. Martha provided her the 1988 book *Transvestites and Transsexuals—Toward a Theory of Cross Gender Behavior* by Richard F. Docter and some articles that went through all the basic questions: Are you gay? Are you transitioning? There were many questions that Martha just didn’t have a clear answer for, as she was still figuring it out. It would take a full nine months before they talked about it again.

It was the mid-to-late 1990s when Martha worked up the courage

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to walk into the Napalese Lounge in Green Bay for the first time. She remembers sitting by the door with the intent to dash out the door if she needed to should a friend, neighbor, or co-worker walk in. She was scared, but she stayed and had a “liberating conversation with a local drag performer who was in male mode.” Martha was told she was safe, and if anyone harassed her, there were several people in the bar who would “kick the shit” out of the offender. Since Martha’s conversation with her wife, she felt much freer to communicate and always told her wife where she was.

Though they talked openly about Martha, her wife preferred not to meet her. Martha got a P.O. box to correspond with the transgender community, to order clothes, make up, jewelry, etc. The next 30 years would pass in this fashion. Martha used to keep her clothes and makeup in clever hiding spaces around the house and garage, but after coming out, she didn’t have to do that anymore. Little by little, Martha became herself over the years. Martha and her wife are now nearing almost 50 years of marriage. Fairly recently, Martha’s wife met and has spent time with Martha.

Martha retired from her “professional” career in 2017. She no longer had to fear that she would be fired from her job if she was “outed.” In October of 2017, Martha invited three other trans women from the Green Bay area to gather on a monthly basis in what was “The Back Storage Room” of the Napalese Lounge. This meet and greet social support group became known as the CD/TG First Thursday Gathering. Word of the group spread quickly. It has met every first Thursday since then, and today has an average monthly attendance of 25–30, having reached more than 300 trans adults.

Martha met up with her three daughters, told the story and went through all the questions with them. Her son couldn’t be there, so she told them not to say anything to their brother. Martha sat down with her son the next day. Her son is a former Marine Sergeant, and she was a little nervous. Martha told her son: “I need you to shut-up and just listen. I need to get something out, and I need you to listen.”

In 2020, Martha was working with a local arts group called United Arts who had received a modest grant to help underrepresented and marginalized artists. Utilizing some of these funds, it was Martha’s idea to recruit a queer artist to paint a public art mural on the side of the Napalese Lounge to celebrate the LGBTQ+ community in NE Wisconsin. Butch, the co-owner of the Lounge, was very supportive. Martha was the Mural Project Coordinator.

With considerable assistance from a young, talented, queer, community activist, Justis Tenpenny, eventually 24 organizations were brought together and over \$20,000 was raised for the recruitment of an artist, installation of the “We Will Be Seen” mural, lighting, plaque, a new front door, the staging of a weekend of Pride activities, and a block party at the mural unveiling which was attended by 600 people. Chue Lor San would be the artist chosen from the submitted designs to paint the mural.

In August of 2021, the Napalese Lounge had an unveiling of the “We Will Be Seen” mural. It included the progressive pride flag and the images of Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera painted on the side of the Napalese Lounge. In attendance was Green Bay Mayor Eric Genrich, Lieutenant Governor Mandela Barnes, and other community leaders.

Martha was the emcee of this event and introduced the folks who made the mural possible. It was a big celebration that had a ribbon



CDTG’s First Thursday Glamor & Glitz Christmas Party in 2023.

cutting and reopening of the bar’s front door, which had been sealed for years due to prior incidents of homophobia.

BEING SEEN

Prior to the mural unveiling, Martha had been working with the trans community but trying to fly under the radar. However, this was a big public event for her. Martha knew that there would be people who knew her as her male self in the crowd. She wondered if they would recognize her. The answer came eight weeks later when a close friend called up and said a colleague had commented to him about seeing “Mike in drag” at the Napalese mural unveiling.

Initially “Mike” panicked and denied that there was a “Martha.” She felt terrible for lying because this man had been a close friend for more than 25 years. After languishing for 24 hours, “Mike” called his friend, and over drinks “Mike” told his friend about “Martha.” The friend listened intently, affirmed Martha, and then told her three things:

1. I’m hurt you lied to me.
2. I’m sad you didn’t feel safe to share this with me sooner.
3. I’m going to kill the person who outed you.

Martha knew the woman who outed her, and she had a conversation with her after. She was apologetic, and they moved on from it. The friend has now met and spent time socially with Martha. With Martha being outed, she knew it was only a matter of time before her four adult children would hear about it. Since word about Martha was getting out with her wife’s support, she planned to tell their children about Martha in-person.

In 2022, on the day after Thanksgiving, Martha met up with her three daughters, told the story and went through all the questions with them. Her son couldn’t be there, so she told them not to say anything to their brother. Martha sat down with her son the next day. Her son is a former Marine Sergeant, and she was a little nervous. Martha told her son: “I need you to shut-up and just listen. I need to get something out, and I need you to listen.”

Throughout Martha’s sharing, she watched his face, and he was hard to read. After Martha finished, her son asked if he could talk. He responded: “Well, fuck dad—I’ve known for 20 years.” Martha was shocked. Her son told how when he was younger, he came upon an unlocked file cabinet drawer and found Martha’s correspondence with other trans folks and other items. He never told a soul and thought Martha would die before the news came out.

BAY AREA COUNCIL ON GENDER DIVERSITY

Another offshoot of the August 2021 Mural Unveiling weekend of Pride was the gathering at a local church of 10 families with transgender kids and several counselors in attendance. Eventually, the group formed the Bay Area Youth Trans Alliance (BATYA). Trans youth in grades 7–12 began a meet-and-greet monthly Drop-In for Trans Youth. Dave & Busters provided a private party room for the gatherings, game cards, pizza, and soda. Authorized adults facilitated while the children made new friends and had fun. Sometimes parents also gather and support one another. What started as 10 families in 2021 has grown to 150 participating young adults. BATYA has held holiday parties for trans youth and also sponsored the first annual area-wide LGBTQ+ High School Prom at The Historic Tarlton with 80 youth in attendance.

In 2022, a local arts activist, Kent Hutchison, asked Martha if she would help him organize a gathering of 40 artists called “Unhinged,” held at the UWGB Weidner Performing Arts Center in Green Bay. Martha convened and facilitated a group of trans artists (now known as the Trans Artists Collaborative) that installed and offered The Transperience. The goal is to use immersive, innovative art to help people experience what it is like to be transgender. In October 2023 it was installed at the St. Norbert Mulva Library, and in summer 2024 it will be available to the public for six weeks at the Brown County Neville Public Museum.

With the continued growth of the First Thursday Gatherings, the monthly Drop-Ins, and the growing demand for installations of The Transperience, it was time to organize a more permanent overarching organization. In February, 2023, Martha organized and convened the first meeting of the Board of Directors for what is now known as the Bay Area Council on Gender Diversity (BACGD). In March, it was officially recognized by the IRS as a 501c(3) nonprofit corporation. Martha was elected as its first president. Later in 2023, BACGD launched its own website (BACGenderDiversity.org) and a monthly newsletter.

MEETING MARTHA & MAGGIE

In August 2023, Martha did an interview with NPR’s StoryCorps when they made a stop in Green Bay. Martha’s trans friend Maggie would be in town. Prior to this, Martha’s wife had never really spent time with “Mike” as Martha and had never met face-to-face with any of Martha’s trans friends. Two days later Martha’s wife said she would like to meet Maggie. Martha was floored.

Martha had always dreamed a day like this would come when she could spend more time being who she is.

They picked up pizza and beer, the three of them just hung out. It was wonderful. Inside, Martha was doing backflips over this new experience with her wife. A few days later Martha’s wife shared that she really enjoyed the visit. Maggie and Martha’s wife bonded over shared interests. Martha had always dreamed a day like this would come when she would be in retirement and could spend more time being who she is. Martha considers herself to be an independent Christian (though few know of her “faith” perspective—she just lives it and doesn’t talk much about it) who has gifts and talents for caring for the marginalized—like herself.

As Martha reflected on her life, the organization of the monthly CD/TG First Thursdays for adults, the “We Will Be Seen” public art mural and celebration, the monthly Drop-In for Trans Youth, the Trans Artists Collaborative’s The Transperience, and the founding of the non-profit Bay Area Council on Gender Diversity are things she is most proud of.

Through her lifetime of service to others, Martha has lived by the creed of always trying to build “communities care of service.” She has accomplished much. Martha plans to continue to serve and lead others in the queer community. It is what brings her the most joy and is what she believes she was meant to do.

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REAL ESTATE HOME BUYING

Choosing a New Neighborhood

Vivienne Andersen, a full-time REALTOR® for more than a decade, looks at ways that LGBTQ people assess safety when deciding where to buy a home.

THERE IS A BIG ORANGE CAT that thinks of my overgrown backyard as his living room (and kitchen). One of my neighbors keeps the door to his garage cracked open so the cat can come and go as he pleases and sleep in the rafters whenever he wants. While the cat has no idea that we would take up golf clubs and torches to defend him against any human who tried to do him harm, he treats us with healthy levels of suspicion.

Another one of my neighbors has his house festooned with security cameras, a sign in his yard admonishing folks to make sure their garages are locked after dark, and reposts police department press releases on social media. Personally, I am not always 100% comfortable having my pride flag out front. The four of us all live together in the same neighborhood, and we have very different experiences of safety.

IS THIS A SAFE NEIGHBORHOOD?

As a real estate agent who has been selling homes full-time for more than 10 years, I talk with people about their dream homes almost daily. One thing that almost never comes up in these conversations: Safety. I don't think it is because people are disinterested, but that security is intrinsic to "home," it is a part of what separates a place from a home. It is understood that we want the places we sleep, and leave our belongings to be safe.

Conversations about safety usually come up when I am showing a house to a client, and not just the ones like the showing I did a little over a year ago, in Dane County, where my clients and I walked into a home full of Nazi, Confederate, and KKK pride(?) paraphernalia(?). Generally when folks find a house they like, one of the first things they will ask me is, "Is this a safe neighborhood?"

Some risks are easy to mitigate. The loss



For queer folks, the question of safety takes on additional dimensions: "Will I be able to express myself? Will I be seen and valued, or just tolerated? Will I be targeted for my identity here?"

of belongings, through damage, theft, or loss can easily be managed with various insurance products. The concerns first-time buyers express when they are pouring their entire nest-egg into a downpayment, and may literally have no resources to make repairs in the first year if a major appliance breaks, can typically be covered with a home warranty. The fear of loss from a mishandled aspect of a complicated transaction, or an issue a buyer or seller doesn't even know to consider, can be reduced by hiring competent professional help.

But these are not the existential risks that most folks are worried about when they ask, "Is this a safe neighborhood?" It is fair to believe that folks are asking if they will be free

from violence. For queer folks, the question of safety takes on additional dimensions: "Will I be able to express myself? Will I be seen and valued, or just tolerated? Will I be targeted for my identity here? Will I have to listen to a rich, white, straight, cis man sing 'Fast Car?'" Everyone has their own standard.

WILL I FEEL SAFE HERE?

We can turn to data, we can look at police reports, at voting trends, at average household income, or anything else that one might imagine would have an impact on crime and violence. This will give us an approximation of an objective picture of the relative safety of a neighborhood. It still won't answer the real question. Usually the real question is, "Will I feel like I am safe here?"

Our desire to *feel* safe will often override our need for actual safety. I've seen people buy houses in neighborhoods with objectively higher crime rates rather than in areas with lower crime rates because they say they feel safer in the former neighborhoods. I've had queer clients refuse to buy a house on a block with a "politically vociferous" neighbor, and another queer client buy a house on that same block.

Some queer folks tell me that more expensive neighborhoods feel less safe to them. Some folks are afraid an HOA board member will make their lives miserable because they are queer. The cat in my yard is absolutely safe from molestation by humans, but he doesn't feel that this is the case. The words of my therapist explaining my first marriage resonate here: "What you grew up with feels safe and normal to you as an adult, even if it is neither."

So I can't answer the question, "Is this a safe neighborhood" directly, for the same reason almost any answer would be illegal; I don't know what "safe" means to any particular person.

TAKE A WALK

So what is a person considering a new home to do? Walk or roll through the neighborhood. Don't just drive through, walk/roll it. Do it multiple times, at different times of the day. A neighborhood can feel different first thing in the morning, than it does in the middle of the day, than it does in the evening or in the middle of the night.

If you can, and I understand that the pace of real estate may not allow for it, walk/roll a neighborhood on different days of the week. Wednesday might feel different than Saturday. Pay attention to how you feel, how you are received by the people you meet, by the condition of the yards and the cars, by the noise, by the smells. Does it feel like home? Does it feel safe? Would you be happy to sleep there?

And be aware that the neighborhood might be doing what it can to repel or attract you as well. I once did a showing where the girls in the house next door had put a sign in their bedroom window that read "Babysitters live here." I recently spoke with Vicki Kenyon, a newer REAL-



TOR® in Madison who, along with other industry professionals, is hosting a series of discussions about housing safety for queer folks.

She told me a story about how when the neighbor of a friend put their house up for sale, her friend put out her pride flag in an effort to attract people who would be comfortable with a queer neighbor. The new neighbor later confided that they felt safe buying a house in the neighborhood because they had seen the pride flag next door. So many factors contribute to the feeling of safety and belonging. It's worth taking the time to investigate. ■



VIVIENNE ANDERSEN is a full-time REALTOR® with eXp Realty in Madison. She grew up in California, but is not at all what the Beach Boys had in mind. She serves on the Cultural Diversity in Housing Committee at the WRA, and blogs about the Madison Real Estate Market at VivienneAndersen.com.



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HEALTH CHRONIC PAIN THERAPY

Pain Is In the Brain

Nyle Biondi, MS LMFT, was one of the first out trans therapists in the state of Wisconsin and has devoted the past few years to helping others heal from **chronic pain** and health conditions.

I MOVED TO COLORADO from my hometown of Madison in August of 2015. That move became my marker in time for the chronic pain I was experiencing. It would be several years before I was able to label my experience as chronic pain. In reality, I don't know how long I had been in pain. In the beginning, the pain would come and go.

My best guess is that it started sometime when I was in high school. I didn't notice it fully for nearly two decades. I've since learned that this is common amongst people who have chronic pain: We often ignore it and go about our lives until we just can't anymore. We often have a hard time acknowledging our own pain, whether it's emotional or physical.

BURNING MOUTH SYNDROME

After my move to Colorado, I started to pay more attention to my pain. I'd tell myself "It's been two weeks now, and I haven't had a day without pain." The weeks turned into months, which turned into years. Two years in, I couldn't take it anymore. I was at a seven on the pain scale at all times. Nothing seemed to help. At this point, I still didn't identify myself as someone who had chronic pain. I thought chronic pain involved issues with joints, muscles, and things that made it hard to go about your day. I certainly did not think that the pain I was experiencing in my mouth would have

the same solution as someone experiencing fibromyalgia or carpal tunnel syndrome.

My pain presented in a way that felt like I had paper cuts on my tongue at all times. It was visibly inflamed and most foods were incredibly painful to eat. I thought food sensitivities may be the culprit, so I started down the rabbit hole of elimination diets. Somedays,

Neuroplastic pain is pain that is generated as a misinterpretation of something happening in the body, that is not indicative of something wrong in our bodies.

I thought I had it all sorted out, and then the next day I'd be back in a pain flare. After years of being shrugged off by doctors, I was diagnosed with burning mouth syndrome. This diagnosis was the closest medical explanation the doctors could give me and did not offer me a lot of solutions.

I was beginning to feel frustrated and hopeless when a friend introduced me to a podcast on healing from chronic pain. I skeptically began to listen to the podcast and began doing the work recommended in it. Within a week, I knew I was on the right track. The pain in my mouth was subsiding, and I was experiencing something called "symptom imperative,"

where my brain started sending out pain signals through old neural pathways as it was learning to turn off the pain and inflammation to my tongue. This is a common experience for those healing from chronic pain and conditions, and it helped me realize that other conditions I'd had in the past had the same origins: Plantar's fasciitis, sciatica, wrist pain, lower back pain, and pelvic pain.

As I began to heal physically, I noticed something else happening: Despite my years of therapy, training in trauma, and years as a therapist, I was doing the deepest emotional healing of my life. This made me want to learn more so that I could help others heal in this way, too. I took a deep dive into learning as much as I could about healing from chronic pain and health conditions. It was hard to find the information I needed to heal completely, and it required piecing together information from various sources: Other podcasts, books, and I was eventually in the first cohort of therapists to get trained in Pain Reprocessing Therapy.

PAIN REPROCESSING THERAPY

I learned that most chronic pain is neuroplastic. All pain is generated by our brains, as an interpretation of what is happening in our bodies. Neuroplastic pain is pain that is generated as a misinterpretation of something happening in the body, that is not indicative of

something wrong in our bodies. For various reasons, our brain decides we are in danger, and sends out the danger signal of pain. Or, in some cases, the brain just forgets to turn off the pain signal once an injury has healed.

Through my work, I have learned that 80–90% of chronic pain is at least partially neuroplastic. This is good news. When pain and symptoms are neuroplastic, we can learn how to rewire the neural pathways. This can turn the pain signals off, or significantly turn down the volume. The overall healing approach is twofold: The first step is learning how to reroute the neural pathways to turn off the pain. This involves working with the brain and nervous system. For some people, this step alone is enough.

However, many of us have to get to the root cause in order to keep the pain away. We have to figure out why our brain started sending out erroneous danger signals in the first place. In most cases, it's the result of chronic stress and/or trauma. Essentially, the nervous system is in a heightened state of alert, scanning for danger, and detecting it where there isn't any. Chronic pain and anxiety are two sides of the same coin: An over-activated nervous system, sending out alarm signals that are either too loud or altogether unnecessary.

HOW MARGINALIZATION HURTS

Chronic pain is extremely prevalent in marginalized communities, and it is no coincidence. Living in the margins is stressful. It puts us on guard. As LGBTQIA+ people, we often have to repress parts of who we are in order to feel safe. This sort of repression is extremely taxing on our bodies and our health and keeps our nervous systems in a constant state of fear. Exploring that fear is key to unlocking symptoms.

Constant fear, even at subconscious levels, tells our brain that we are in danger. When our brain detects danger, it can send out any number of danger signals to let us know: Pain, nausea, fatigue, dizziness, itchiness, GI symptoms, etc. And any danger signal that can be sent can be sent in error. This is why chronic symptoms can vary and why many of them can be resolved using the same approach.

I had difficulty finding the path to my own healing. Resources are difficult to access. To address this, a colleague and I have developed a self-directed online course to guide people through this process. We have included all of the information a person needs in order to understand what is happening in their body. We have put together strategies and homework assignments to incorporate along the way.

Much of the work can be done independently, but we also offer options to meet with us

individually, and to join an online community of people who are also healing using the techniques we are teaching. We learned that it can be very hard to heal from chronic pain in a world that tells us it's not possible, particularly when our doctors believe it's not possible. Having a supportive community can impact our ability to continue doing the work.

My journey in healing from chronic pain has truly been life changing for me. I have been impacted physically, emotionally, and spiritually. I'm eager to bring this work into the world, and especially into the communities that have mattered so much to me. If you are interested in the course, you can access it here: healyourchronicpain.thinkific.com and if you'd like to find out if your symptoms might fit the patterns of neuroplastic symptoms, you can access a free assessment tool we've created here: surveymonkey.com/r/P529DFV.

Our Lives readers can receive a 30% discount by using code OL30 at checkout. ■



NYLE BIONDI, MS LMFT, earned his master's degree in marriage and family therapy from Edgewood College in 2007. He's since spent 10+ years working with LGBTQIA+ youth and young adults. As a result of his own health journey, Nyle has devoted years to helping others heal from chronic pain and health conditions.

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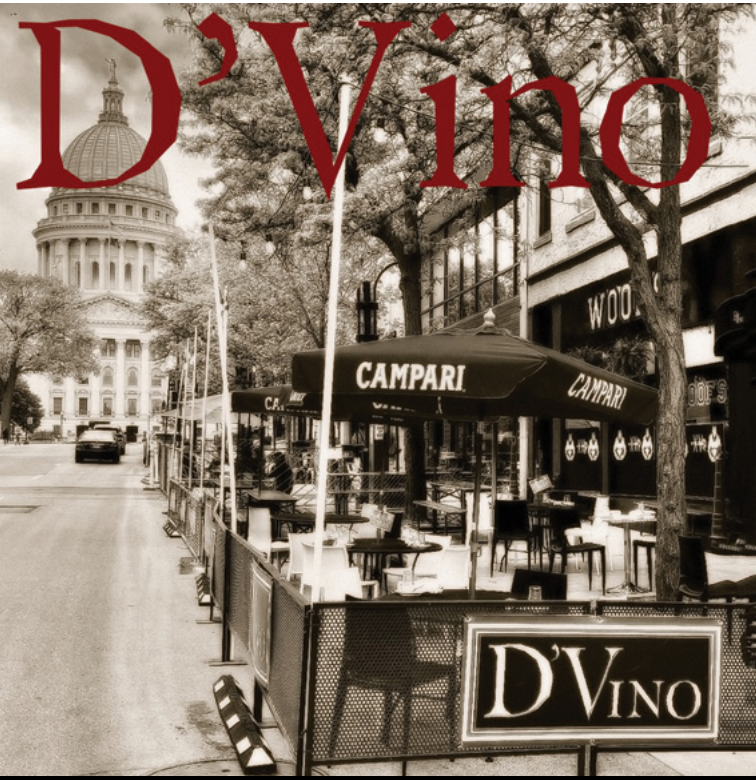
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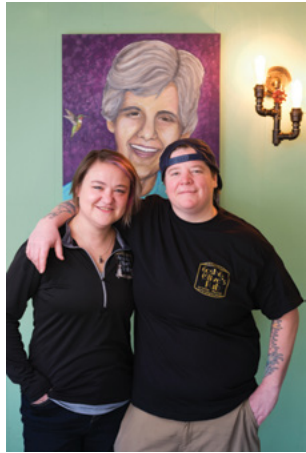
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FOOD & DINING RURAL

Cash & Olive's Pub

Jen O'Branovich and Courtney Sargent of Millie's Coffee & Eatery in Cambridge have traded in the sunny space they formerly occupied in Galleria 214 to expand into a more Scennie-style environment outside the main drag.

DRIVING TO CAMBRIDGE from Madison you get just a taste of fresh air before coming into the historic Main Street of downtown Cambridge. With a population under 2,000 this small village grew around vacation tourism from Chicago but is an easy drive for those living in surrounding population centers such as Watertown, Fort Atkinson, Edgerton, Lake Mills, Jefferson, and Whitewater. Just when you think you may have driven a bit too far, you will see the rainbow flag that marks your destination.



The building is more than 100 years old and was a postal stop in a former life. Both owners agree it's probably haunted, but they fell in love with the location despite seeing dozens of others throughout the years. The property encompasses two acres and backs up to a golf course, which offers diners a view of a broad green-scape. It also offers living space above, meaning that they were able to cut out the commute. It has its own well, which has proved vital in a municipal area where water costs have recently increased rapidly.

Decked in green and gold inside, you will know that you are firmly in Packers territory here, but there is a stylishness and flair to the comfortable bar stools and checkered decor that give the front bar a sodashop vibe.

The Millie's breakfast menu is now available as a drive thru service (7 days a week 6:00 a.m.–11:00 a.m.). Typical coffee items are available along with a couple of unusual items: A Breakfast Baleada and Avocado Crumpet. Decked in green and gold inside, you will know that you are firmly in Packers territory here, but there is a stylishness and flair to the comfortable bar stools and checkered decor that give the front bar a sodashop vibe. They originally opened the bar and dining room under the location's previous name, The Sports Page, but have now rebranded as Cash & Olive's Pub—named in honor of their dogs.

They have revamped the menu but kept the hand rolled pizza that was a favorite with locals—except on Supper Club nights (1st Fridays) when the pizza becomes unavailable in favor of relish trays, steak dinners, classic fish fry, shrimp dinners, and a salad bar. Each day of the week, there is also an additional menu item available with most items made from scratch in-house where they hand-bread items, smoke meats, and corn their own beef. Starting in April, they hope to host a farmers' market Thursdays that will give them access to more locally sourced

ingredients. For the odd item now they run to the local Piggly Wiggly.

Courtney laughs about how you run into absolutely everyone while you are at The Pig looking for something like shallots—which a small regional grocer might not even carry—and you can't judge a book by its cover. The most unlikely looking individuals have turned out to be part of the community, or allies, but there are challenges to developing in a rural area. Their rainbow flag was stolen several times before the culprits gave up, which was unsettling. It has also been difficult expanding their offerings in a village that just isn't accustomed to doing much permitting. Things like pouring a new patio and offering outdoor gatherings can be slow-going with local officials that need time to familiarize themselves with the relevant ordinance. Recently area communities also withdrew from joint agreements for public safety leaving the future of those services unclear.

Courtney describes the businesses as her toddling children and absolutely has the no-nonsense parental vibe that can command a kitchen or bar. While I enjoyed my mocha latte she seemed alert to every coming and going around the building and shooed a lost utility contractor away while Jen checked in with the morning staff (who all seemed happy to be at work). The pair seems prepared to endure through any changes and rely on themselves and their supporters to continue building and hosting organizations like Lesbian Pop-up Bar, New Beginnings Shitzu Rescue (with a potential outdoor Yappy Hour in the works), and Valley View Recreation Club



(locally known for their Annual Nude Car Show). For larger events they bring in private security. That was the case for last year's Pride Storm event which they hope to continue holding annually the first Saturday of October. They have space to park 60 cars, host 27 vendors, and erect a stage—all on private property (no protesters allowed). For those who want to visit sooner, check their website for specials and information on their upcoming events, including the Divas & Dives drag bus tour on May 4. ■

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YOUTH IDENTITY LEADERSHIP

I Understand Myself Better

Isabella Di Carlantonio speaks about labels and the journey to knowing ourselves independent of them.

WHO ARE YOU? Introduce yourself. Tell me what you're like. Write about who you are. Every new class, every new teacher, every new person. Who am I? What do I like? What do I want to become? What do I stand for? How do I know who I am?

Tell them. Tell them what? My favorite book? Tell them I hate wearing socks? Tell them I always lose the TV remote? What can I tell them? How do I know who I am?

WHAT IS IDENTITY?

I asked my friend once, "Am I defined by one pivotal moment, or am I defined by every single choice and action I have ever made?" I think the latter. Who am I but not everything I have ever done, every book I've read, every place I've been, every class I've taken, every show I've watched, every person I've met. Take all of that away, and I am nothing. You would only find a shell of the person I once was. No pivotal moment can erase the decisions I've made to get here. How else would I know who I am?

Identity. What is identity? I think Identity is a tricky thing because it overlaps and changes as you grow old. There is no one set of rules on how to define yourself. It is all up to you, but that doesn't mean it will be easy. To say I completely understand myself would be a lie. Every day I learn something new. Some parts of my identity don't change, like my race and ethnicity, but other things change like my favorite song or my favorite food.

Sometimes the hardest part of your identity to find is something that makes up a large part, like your gender or sexuality. I think a lot of people get caught up in labels. They feel invalid if there isn't a term that defines them exactly. The thing is, most labels never fit a person perfectly, but that is okay. You can just be queer, or you can just be gender-non-conforming; finding a label that suits you can be difficult or even impossible. It's all about how you feel, not how others want you to label yourself.

LTI EXPERIENCE

This past summer, I got to be a peer mentor at GSAFE's Leadership Training Institute (LTI) camp for LGBTQ+ youth around Wisconsin. I met so many new people from different backgrounds with different identities. The kind of people who will become friends for life. LTI was one of my favorite experiences ever. Even though I was there as a mentor, I still learned from everyone else, adults and campers alike. I learned about activism, restorative justice, consent culture, intersectionality, race, healthy relationships, calling out the oppressor, and more.

I knew all these workshops were happening, as I had gotten the schedule a few weeks in advance. Something I didn't know would happen was how much more comfortable I would feel with myself after



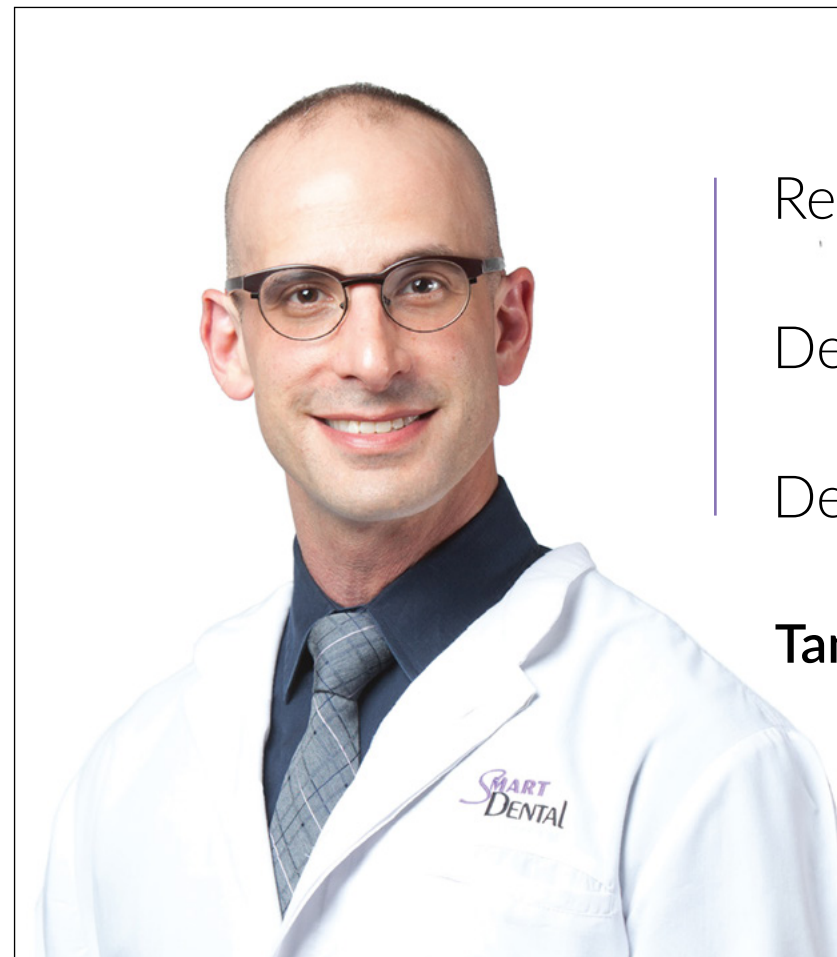
it all. I felt more comfortable sharing how I felt about my sexuality. Everyone there was part of the LGBTQ+ community, so conversations there felt different and more accepting than the ones I have had with my friends or family. Interacting with queer adults was inspiring, and listening to people share about how they discovered they were gay or lesbian, or queer or trans, or gender-fluid or non-binary, helped me reflect on myself.

I'm no longer caught up in finding a label that can define me perfectly. Earlier, I said people get caught up in labels, and I was definitely one of those people. I now understand it is okay to not have a label that completely fits me. Even though I still don't know exactly who I am or who I will become, I am confident that I understand myself just a little bit better than before. Maybe finding your identity is understanding yourself just a little bit better. Maybe it's just knowing one more thing than you did before. ■

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