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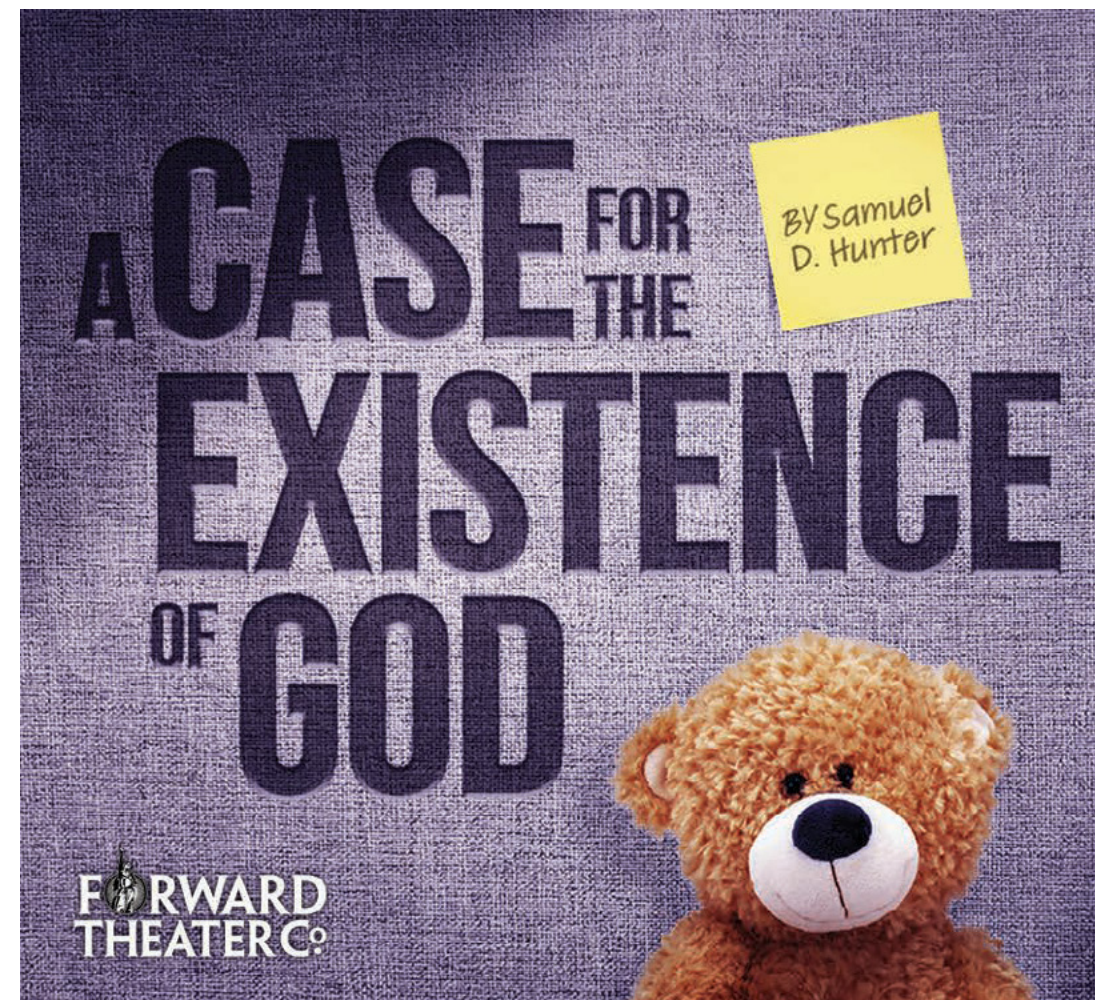


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Subscribers in 450+ Wisconsin cities & towns

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HUMOR NIK SHIER HEARTBRAIN.ORG/QUEERJOY



Nik Shier (they/them) is an artist and storyteller from Menasha, Wisconsin. While they love creating art that inspires the full range of human emotions, they are IN LOVE with Queer joy. And making art from trash. To see more of their work, check them out on Facebook or Instagram @Nik.Shier.



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OBITUARIES



GARTH WILLIAM WANGEMANN was born in Sheboygan on December 26, 1955. He graduated from Sheboygan South High School in 1974. After high school, he went to UW-Sheboygan, then transferred to UW-Milwaukee where he met Roy Badger, his friend, his love, his partner, and his husband of 48 years.

After college, he worked in the title insurance industry, first at Pioneer Title, then at Chicago Title. Garth went on to MATC and graduated with honors in health and human services. Before retiring, he worked at Buy Seasons Halloween Costumes in New Berlin.

Roy and Garth committed themselves to each other on November 7, 1976, and were legally married 38 years later on November 8, 2014. Roy and Garth were one of eight couples involved in a lawsuit for marriage equality, taking it through appeals to the U.S. Supreme Court.

This was all possible through the efforts and talents of individuals unique to the cause for equality from the ACLU Milwaukee chapter, which Roy and Garth held dear to their hearts. The success of these efforts made it possible for people from all walks of life to marry with the full rights allowed by the United States government.

A long-time member of the Galano Club, an LGBTQ recovery center, Garth helped many people battling with their struggles with drugs and alcohol. For many years Garth also DJ'd dances and set up fundraising activities for the club.

A long-time volunteer, Garth offered his time and talent to the Milwaukee AIDS project with the Buddy Program and was a member of the Board of Directors. He also gave his time for many years to the Channel Ten Auction, Irish Fest, and Pride Fest.

He loved his dogs, Reva, Harley, Cosmo, Daisy, and Winston, and is survived by his little 6-pound Effie.

We will miss you dearly Garth, and we will be together again when the time is right.



RENE LIVINGSTON-DETIENNE
Oct. 20, 1971 - Jan. 8, 2025

On January 8, 2025, we lost our beloved Rene—a mother, spouse, poet, and artist.

Rene is survived by daughters, Noelle Livingston and Emerson Livingston-DeTienne; and spouse, Dannee Livingston-DeTienne. She is preceded in death by her mother, Sue Paukert; and children lost to miscarriage, Jet Elijah and Charlee Lue.

Rene was privately laid to rest at Natural Path Sanctuary. A memorial service was held on Sunday, March 2, at the Arts + Literature Laboratory in Madison. All who knew Rene and were touched by her life are welcome.



If you would like us to publish an obituary for your loved one, please reach out to us directly at contact@ourliveswisconsin.com

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Rollbacks, Erasure, and Dismissals

A round-up of administrative and legislative attacks on the queer community during Trump's first months back in office.

- POLITICS & LAW
- BATHROOM BANS
- TRANS ATHLETES
- TRANS HEALTHCARE
- TRANS SERVICE MEMBERS
- GENDER MARKERS
- DEI
- MARRIAGE EQUALITY
- HATE SPEECH

MANY HOPED this time would be different, but since Donald Trump took office on January 20, he's been swiftly rolling back rights for the queer community. Are you overwhelmed by the slaughter and looking for a summary of the most important issues? We've got you covered with a summary of what we've seen happen from his inauguration through the first of March.

BATHROOM BAN ON CONGRESSWOMAN SARAH MCBRIDE

Even before Trump officially took office, conservatives began rallying to cause havoc and send negative sentiments to the queer community. In November 2024, South Carolina's U.S. House of Representa-

tives member Nancy Mace brought legislation to ban transgender women from using women's facilities on federal premises. This was a strategic move by Mace, as Sarah McBride had just become the first openly transgender individual to become a state senator.

META'S PIVOT AWAY FROM FACT CHECKING & TOWARD HATE SPEECH

Before Trump's inauguration, Mark Zuckerberg announced Meta would be abolishing its fact-checking system, hate speech ban, and abuse rules. Instead it will be prioritizing a crowdsourced model of "free expression."

NIGHTLIFE MILWAUKEE BARS ALLYSHIP & INCLUSION

The End of the Line for a Legacy

This Is It!, Wisconsin's oldest gay bar and vital LGBTQ community space, closed abruptly on March 9.

IN AUGUST 1968, Catherine "June" Brehm and business partner Michael Latona were shopping for a space to open a new kind of bar. After a long day of shopping, June took a look around the tiny tavern at 418 E. Wells Street, and announced, "This is it! We aren't going anywhere else."

For the next 56.5 years, This Is It! served three generations of Milwaukeeans with a spirit of love, acceptance, and unity that customers couldn't always find in the outside world.

This Is It! was open the night the Stonewall Uprising began. Milwaukee celebrated major historic victories here—the non-discrimination ordinance of 1980, the Gay Rights Law of 1982, the First Annual Pride March and Rally of 1989, Tammy Baldwin's election in 1998, statewide marriage equality in 2014, national marriage equality in 2015, and the bar's own 50th anniversary in 2018—as well as countless moments and milestones across six decades.

This Is It! survived the AIDS crisis and the COVID pandemic to become the state's oldest gay bar and one of the 10 oldest gay bars in the nation.

Sadly, This Is It! closed its doors on Sunday, March 9, after years of unforeseeable financial challenges, including a global pandemic, skyrocketing supplier costs, and a devastating road construction project that left the business almost totally inaccessible (and often, perceived to be closed) for nearly a year.

"At a time when our history is literally being erased and/or rewritten, we are also rapidly losing the heritage sites that matter most," said Michail Takach, Wisconsin LGBTQ History Project chair. "For the past decade, we've all been told repeatedly, 'We don't need gay bars anymore; nobody cares if you're gay anymore.' As the outside world becomes more and more hostile, where will people go when these inside worlds no longer exist?"

Since 2018, This Is It! has been home to one of Wisconsin's two rainbow crosswalk locations, installed as a collaboration between owner George Schneider and community partners. (Madison's rainbow crosswalk came four years later, in 2022.) The bar has also hosted the city's only permanent Wisconsin LGBTQ history exhibit since 2018.

"We're seeing right now how much people care—and how much we needed and will continue to need these spaces," said Takach.

A LEGACY OF UNAPOLOGETIC INCLUSION

Since day one, the history of This Is It! has been obscured by urban legends, although the true story is actually much more remarkable.

June Brehm, a married suburban mother of two, opened This Is It! to create a haven for her gay friends. June, a service industry veteran, visited many of the city's gay bars with her restaurant co-workers. She was shocked at what she saw.

"You simply could not get a decent cocktail. You had no idea what you were drinking, because the bottles were unmarked," said June in a 2008 interview. "And there was never any ice. Never!" "I told my friends, 'I'm going to find you a better place to be, even if I have to open the damn thing myself,'" said June. "And that's exactly what happened."

"Everyone was so busy telling me I was crazy for wanting to run my own business," June said. "You're a mother with two children, can't you just be happy with what you have? You're a woman, what do you want with a bar? These questions didn't make any sense to me. They called me stubborn, silly, stupid—on and on! It really pissed me off."

"I do remember one person, a gay friend, saying, 'June, you're going to get yourself in trouble, and for what?' And I said, 'Because I know it needs to be done, and if that gets me in trouble, then so be it. Let them come for me,'" she said.



EXECUTIVE ORDER ON TWO GENDERS

Upon taking over the Oval Office, an executive order was signed acknowledging "female" and "male" as the only biological sexes. In particular, it cites its purpose as "Defending women from gender ideology extremism and restoring biological truth to the federal government."

HALTING TRANSGENDER PASSPORT & OTHER IDENTIFICATION APPLICATIONS

In the same executive order as above, Trump implemented "changes to require that government-issued identification documents—including passports, visas, and Global Entry cards—accurately reflect the holder's sex." Thus, banning authentic government identification for transgender, intersex, and

In a January 29 executive order titled, "Ending Radical Indoctrination in K-12 Schooling," Trump attempted to ban teaching gender identity and critical race theory. The order spotlights stripping federal financial funding from K-12 schools and universities. Additionally, it mentions a Madison Metropolitan School District policy that emphasizes disruption to the gender binary.

gender fluid individuals. Later on, Marco Rubio, Secretary of State, informed employees of the State Department that individuals requesting X gender markers would be suspended.

CORPORATE DEI FREEZEOUTS POST-INAUGURATION

Another executive order to come out of the White House on January 20 was "Ending Radical And Wasteful Government DEI Programs And Preferencing." Following this, a burgeoning number of corporations began rolling back their Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion programs. These include popular household names like Amazon, Goldman Sachs, Google, Ford, Harley-Davidson, Lowe's, McDonald's, Molson Coors, Paramount, PepsiCo, Target, and Walmart.

TRUMP ADMINISTRATION HALTS H.I.V. DRUG DISTRIBUTION IN POOR COUNTRIES

In the executive order "Reevaluating and Realigning U.S. Foreign Aid" President Trump ordered a 90-day freeze of foreign aid starting on January 20. This includes advising international organizations to cease distribut-

ing H.I.V. treatment bought with United States aid, and even freezing George W. Bush's President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief.

BAN ON TRANSGENDER PARTICIPANTS IN THE MILITARY

On January 27, President Trump signed another executive order entitled "Prioritizing Military Excellence and Readiness," in which he declared the "Armed Forces have been afflicted with radical gender ideology." This plan seeks to rid the military of having transgender individuals participate, followed by an order from the Pentagon dislodging all current service members and banning future transgender people from enlisting.

IDAHO EFFORT TO TRIGGER SCOTUS OVERTURNING MARRIAGE EQUALITY

On January 27, the Idaho House of Representatives passed a resolution with the intention of provoking the United States Supreme Court to reverse its decision in *Obergefell v. Hodges*. This case was pivotal in the 2015 decision for same-sex marriage equality, as it established the right under the due process clause of the 14th Amendment and the equal protection clause. The Idaho house ruling passed the House Joint Memorial 1 in a vote of 46-24; however, the ruling does not bring any effect of real law and is merely symbolic.

GENDER-AFFIRMING CARE RESTRICTIONS PUT IN PLACE FOR TRANSGENDER YOUTH

In the executive order "Protecting Children From Chemical and Surgical Mutilation" from January 28, Trump strongly advised against any medical intervention for transgender adolescents. The order reads, "Accordingly, it is the policy of the United States that it will not fund, sponsor, promote, assist, or support the so-called 'transition' of a child from one sex to another, and it will rigorously enforce all laws that prohibit or limit these destructive and life-altering procedures." Thus, individuals under 19 years old will not have access to surgery, hormone replacement therapy, nor puberty blockers.

MADISON METROPOLITAN SCHOOL DISTRICT POLICY CITED BY TRUMP

In a January 29 executive order titled, "Ending Radical Indoctrination in K-12 Schooling," Trump attempted to ban teaching gender identity and critical race theory. The order spotlights stripping federal financial funding from K-12 schools and universities. Additionally, it mentions a Madison Metropolitan School District policy that emphasizes



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June's commitment to her "boys" created conflict in the business. Welcoming gay men—at a time when it was technically illegal for licensed taverns to serve homosexuals—was not only controversial, but risked scaring away the downtown professional customers Latona wanted. He warned June that This Is It! was getting a bad reputation—and that it would never survive as a known gay bar.

Frustrated, June made a historic stand that sealed the bar's fate.

"I pulled out two \$20 bills and asked him, 'You tell me which \$20 is gay and which \$20 is straight,'" she said. "He looked totally confused and just kept getting redder and redder in the face. I don't know if he was going to have a stroke or what! I just laughed and said, 'Until you can tell me what the difference is, I'll serve whoever I want to serve, and you can shut the hell up!'"

Latona exited the business in 1970. June became sole owner of This Is It! for over a decade.

CHANGING TIMES

After June had a stroke in 1981, This Is It! became a true family business. Her son, Joe Brehm, managed the bar for the next 25 years. Longtime customers remember the "Joe & June" years as a golden age, despite the devastating impact of HIV/AIDS on the local community.

"My grandmother called herself the 'Gay Queen,'" said Sarah Freiheit, Joe's daughter. "We'd go to luncheons at Mayfair Mall, and she always seemed to know everyone, everywhere."

June passed away on January 3, 2010 at the age of 92. Even at her advanced age, June was still involved in the day-to-day operation as a bookkeeper and business manager. Her longtime friends were certain she'd live to 100—or longer—due to her lifelong determination.

George Schneider, who joined the bar in 2010, worked closely with Joe to learn the business. When Joe's health declined, George took on additional responsibilities, and ultimately bought the business with the Brehm family's full blessing. Joe Brehm passed away on April 3, 2016.

In 2021, Brian "Trixie Mattel" Firkus invested in This Is It! as a remote business partner. However, Schneider and his team continued to manage day-to-day operations for the next four years, despite incredible financial, operational, and logistical challenges to the survival of the business.

"Some seemed to think Trixie came in with a bag of money and saved us. That's not what happened," said George in a 2022 interview. "This was an investment. This was not a bar rescue."

In recent years, This Is It! expanded not only its space, but June's original vision of support and inclusion, by adding a non-alcoholic 17+ night for queer youth and serving as a home base for Milwaukee's ballroom house culture. These changes introduced the space to an entirely new generation, as well as communities of color who might not always have been welcomed in white-owned queer spaces.

This Is It! announced its closure on social media on Sunday, March 9. Unlike other legacy gay bars, This Is It! did not host a closing celebration. However, its customers hosted an unofficial celebration in Cathedral Square on Sunday, March 9, featuring DJ Femme Noir and other local artists.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

At the time of the Stonewall Uprising in 1969, Milwaukee already had three dozen known gay bars and continued to host a surprising number—for a city of its size—until the early 2000s.

However, with the exit of This Is It!, Milwaukee now has seven surviving queer spaces: Fluid, Walker's Pint, Woody's, Harbor Room, Kruz, Pop, and La Cage. The title of the longest-running gay bar in Wisconsin now falls to Green Bay's Napalese Lounge (opened in 1983).

"The closure of This Is It! means the loss of a space where people could freely express themselves, connect with chosen family, and celebrate their identities," said Ricardo Harris of the Wisconsin LGBTQ History Project. "It also represents the erasure of history, as such spaces are often some of the few places where LGBTQ history is preserved and honored outside of books and museums. For local LGBTQ businesses and performers, it means losing economic and creative opportunities. Ultimately, the loss of This Is It! is deeply felt because it was more than just a bar, it was a home, a cultural landmark, and a place of resistance and joy."

"The abrupt closure of This Is It! is a reminder of the fragility of LGBTQ community in the state," said Don Schwamb, History Project founder and This Is It! customer since 1971. "It is unfortunate to lose gay bars, which during the 1980s and 1990s were the lifeblood of the community."

"We at the Wisconsin LGBTQ History Project encourage all in the community to support those bars and businesses that still survive," Schwamb said. "We will continue to ensure that all LGBTQ people, businesses and organizations live on permanently by preserving our collective memories and knowledge—so future generations can remember, learn, and take inspiration from them." ■

disruption to the gender binary.

TRANSGENDER ATHLETE BAN IN WOMEN'S SPORTS

"Keeping Men Out of Women's Sports" is an executive order from February 5, in which President Trump prohibited transgender competitors from engaging in women's sports. The order allows federal agencies the ability to make sure establishments which get federal funding comply with Title IX via interpreting "sex" as what is assigned at birth.

STONEWALL NATIONAL MONUMENT PARK WEBSITE SCRUBBED

The language changed on the webpage for this historic New York City landmark from "LGBTQ+" to "LGB." This marks a serious offense to a milestone which traces its roots back to famous trans women, Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera, who played a pivotal role in the uprising at this bar in 1969. Although a seemingly small typographic change, the disappearance speaks volumes about what the Trump administration is willing to acknowledge.

EDITING OTHER FEDERAL WEBSITES

Additionally, the Trump administration has made a variety of other changes to many federal websites. One example is the State Department's website addressing information for, "LGB Travelers," when it previously said "LGBTQI Travelers." Meanwhile another State Department website reads, "Resources for LGB Prospective Adoptive parents," but prior said it was for "LGBTQI+."

RED STATE EFFORTS TO TRIGGER SCOTUS OVERTURNING MARRIAGE EQUALITY

As of March 1, five state legislatures introduced measures asking the Supreme Court to overturn *Obergefell v. Hodges*, the landmark 2015 ruling granting federal marriage equality. Those states are: Idaho, Michigan, Montana, North Dakota, and South Dakota. So far both Idaho and North Dakota have passed their measures. This stated the ruling in *Obergefell v. Hodges* was felonious and should be overturned by the United States Supreme Court. Four additional states—Missouri, Oklahoma, Tennessee, and Texas—are currently working on similar legislation.

UNIVERSITY OF CINCINNATI CHANGES ITS RESTROOMS SIGNAGE

This public Ohio-based institution of more than 50,000 students has revised its bathroom signs to say "biological men" and "biological

women." It is the result of legislation signed by Mike DeWine, the state's Republican Governor.

DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE AFFINITY GROUP SHUT DOWN

Since 1994, the Department of Justice has had an employee resource group known as DOJ Pride. However, due to Trump's executive order seeking to eliminate DEI initiatives from the federal government, this group and its website have been shut down.

GOVERNOR OF IOWA REMOVES GENDER IDENTITY PROTECTIONS

On February 28, a bill withdrawing gender identity from statewide civil rights protections was signed; this made Iowa the first state to eliminate such protections. Governor Kim Reynolds put her signature on the bill after the state senate voted 33–15 in favor. Additionally, this will force Iowa birth certificates to display an individual's sex assigned at birth, as well as remove a clause that prior enabled transgender individuals to update this marker later on if desired. ■

Editor's Note: This list is growing by the day. By the time you read this, the list will undoubtedly be longer.

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WRITTEN BY MELANIE JONES

TRANS STUDENTS UNDER ATTACK IN THE STATE LEGISLATURE—AGAIN

ON MARCH 6, the Wisconsin Legislature Committee on Education held public hearings, again, because Republican lawmakers, again, have re-introduced two bills aimed at trans students. After a very brief introduction and a few clarification questions on Assembly Bill 101, which aims to require Wisconsin schools to track American Indian students and their tribal affiliations. Republican Representative Barbara Dittrich explained the bill she co-wrote with Senator Jacque and others would require parental permission for students to use a different name and pronouns than the ones assigned to them at birth. According to FastDemocracy.com, a website that tracks legislative activity in Wisconsin, “The name and pronoun usage policy stipulates that a minor pupil’s parent or guardian determines the names and pronouns that school staff may use. School staff are prohibited from using names or pronouns that do not align with the pupil’s biological sex without written authorization from the parent or guardian, although they can use shortened versions of the pupil’s legal name without such authorization.”

Dittrich described the copycat bill as a “common sense parents’ rights bill” that mimics policies set by many school boards around the state. She and other proponents of the bill referenced field trips, photos, and Tylenol as other things in school that require parental permission and consent, in an effort to align this new policy with other innocuous requirements. “It really is that simple,” she stated contemptuously. Senator Jaques, who co-wrote and sponsored the bill, later derided teachers and administrators who allow minor children to use different names and pronouns in school, accusing them of “intentionally deceiving parents,” and in some cases even indoctrinating children with “liberal ideas of sexuality and gender.”

Francesca Hong, a liberal Assemblywoman from Madison, questioned the bill several times, noting that buried in it is a stipulation that even if a child legally changes their name and gender markers, school boards have the power to override that legal change and decide whether the school has to honor it. Dittrich’s response was that kids who were denied using their changed legal name by their school board

could just choose to go to another school district, one that is different from their peers in their neighborhood, and which might require parents driving their kids some ways and isn’t accessible to many students as an option.

Luke Berg, a lawyer from the conservative Law and Liberty Group, spoke in defense of the bill. The Group has tried to bring suits against the school districts of Eau Claire and Madison for their gender and privacy policies but were not successful in either case because the parents were not directly affected by these policies, or had moved out of the district. However, the vast majority of the speakers were against the bill. A full gallery, along with three overflow rooms, was a clear indicator of the outpouring of support for trans kids in the state, with many speakers citing the continued introduction of these bills as disruptive, harmful, and pointless. The bills are pointless because Governor Evers has already vowed that he will not sign any anti-LGBTQ+ legislation, and Republicans do not have a veto-proof majority.

Most opposition speakers noted that many queer youth do not have supportive families, and that policies like these are not only unnecessary, but are at times dangerous. Studies have shown that only 1/3rd of LGBTQ youth find their home to be affirming, while 52% found that their school environment was. Speakers of all ages spoke of their own experiences with their families, children, and neighborhood kids, citing that for many, school is a place to “try on” new identities before going through the big step of coming out to families, who again, might be hostile. Doing so gave confidence and clarity in a time that can be scary and isolating. Many parents who spoke noted that if they found out that their kid came out to their teacher first, that their reaction would not be to “sue the safe adult” that they’d told, but to have a conversation with their kids about what they could do to make it easier for their kids to talk to them. Trans adults spoke to their own experiences, both with unsupportive families and with supportive teachers, saying that if they had not had the refuge that school gave them, and if the teachers had reported them to their parents, it’s possible that they would not be alive right now.

The overwhelming majority of speakers cited mental health and suicide rates among LGBTQ youth, particularly trans youth, as a

major reason why the mere introduction of these policies, as well as any possible implementation of them, is so harmful. As the country as a whole targets trans people, school needs to be a safe place for kids to be themselves, their whole selves, safely and without fear.

Such was the response to AB 103, that AB 100 was not even brought up until several hours into the hearing, with few people remaining to speak against it. AB 100 is yet another bill to limit trans children’s access to team sports, written to “protect girls.” The bill would allow “A pupil of the female sex who is deprived of the opportunity to participate in an athletic sport or on an athletic team or who suffers any direct

or indirect harm as the result of a violation of sub. (2) (b) or (c) may bring a cause of action against an educational institution for injunctive relief, damages, and any other relief available under law.” This would set a dangerous precedent that would effectively ban especially trans girls from participating in school sports. It designates sex as assigned at birth AND what is on the birth certificate as the student’s gender identifier with regard to sports, and it seeks to “prohibit pupils of the male sex from participating on an athletic team or in an athletic sport that is designated for females under par. (a). and (c) Prohibit pupils of the male sex from using locker rooms designated for females.” ■

LGBTQ Organizations Update

General News | Awards | Staff & Board Changes | Events

Curated by Doug Rowe

GENERAL NEWS

Important notes about area LGBTQ groups.

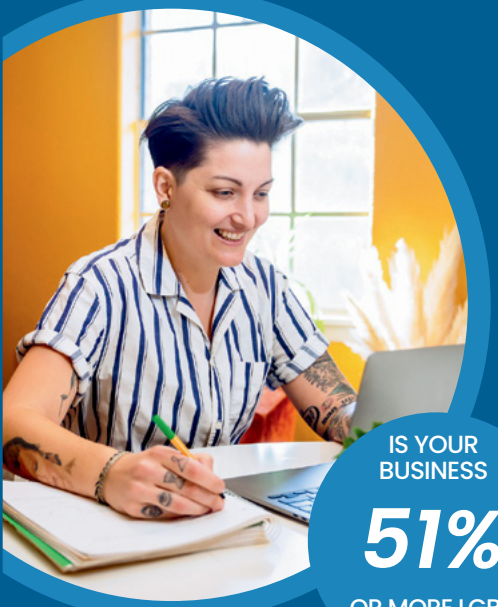
BADGERLAND PRIDE SOFTBALL 2025 Registration is now open! They have both a social/rec league for all skill or no skill levels and a competitive league for those who like a little extra competition. BPS is a safe space for all those in our community as well as our allies. Please go to badgerlandpridesoftball.org for all your info.

COMMUNITY SHARES OF WI held their Big Share event on March 4. If you missed it, you can still donate year round to their 70 member organizations. With changes in federal funding, donations are needed now more than ever to support local organizations in continuing their work for our community.

CROSSROADS COMMUNITY FARM has received many calls from food pantries looking for supplies following the dissolution of the Farm to Foodbank program at Second Harvest Foodbank. They plan to continue to supply the Badger Prairie Needs Network in Verona with 30 share equivalents, as well as Healthy Food For All’s mobile food pantry with 60 share equivalents. New for 2025, Crossroads plans to directly supply the Allied Food Pantry with nutritious organic produce each Wednesday. The amount will be determined by the success of fundraising this spring.

DIVERSE & RESILIENT The Peer Navigation Program (PNP), lovingly shaped by the late Ronnie

Grace, continues to be a lifeline for people living with HIV, ensuring they stay connected to the care they deserve. In a moment when DEI initiatives and federal funding face growing threats, Ronnie’s life and legacy remain a beacon of hope, inspiring the next generation at



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GENDER & SEXUALITY CAMPUS CENTER at UW-Madison has released a virtual LGBTQ+ Perspectives training. This self-paced virtual training will help you build your awareness and skills to help create a more LGBTQ+ inclusive culture and climate at UW-Madison and to improve the belonging and well-being of all employees, students, and campus community members. The course has three sections. You get to choose where to start based on your existing knowledge.

GSAFE has launched “True You—A mentorship program for trans femme youth in Milwaukee and Dane County.” This program is for youth aged 14–18 looking for community with other trans youth and mentorship from trans adults. GSAFE is seeking trans femme mentors for this program. They are also currently accepting applications for their annual Leadership Training Institute (LTI). This 4-day, 3-night camp is for LGBTQ+ high school students interested in enhancing their activism and leadership skills. Applications are due June 21, and the program will take place July 23–27 on the UW-Milwaukee campus.

MILWAUKEE LGBT CENTER has reorganized their lending library. The lending library is available to all community members who visit the center and would like something to read. Thanks to a partnership with Feeding America, their food pantry can also provide groceries to those who visit. They have nonperishable food items as well as fresh produce, dairy, and frozen meats. Food donations are accepted during operating hours.

OPEN is currently selecting the next cohort of their Transform program (in conjunction with OutReach, Inc. and generously supported by A Fund for Women—A component fund of Madison Community Foundation). This initiative is designed to provide support to transgender women and transfeminine individuals in Dane County in overcoming barriers to employment. This transformative program has a clear vision—to empower transgender women and transfeminine individuals with the skills, knowledge, and connections required to access

METHODOLOGY | *Our Lives* reaches out to area LGBTQ+ organizations to seek information for inclusion in this section. We also gather information from newsletters and social media put out by the various organizations. If your LGBTQ+ organization would like to be included in these updates, please reach out to us directly at contact@ourliveswisconsin.com.

higher-paying careers. Interested individuals can apply at openmadison.org.

OUTREACH LGBTQ+ CENTER is open to the community! Stop by and hang out in the lending library, use the free wifi or computer labs, use the Community Pantry, find information on local LGBTQ+ and LGBTQ+ Friendly businesses, and much more! OutReach is located at 2701 International Lane in Madison. You can find more information at lgbt Outreach.org.

WISCONSIN LGBTQ HISTORY PROJECT is now seeking interns for spring 2025! They have an ambitious agenda for the year ahead and are looking for diverse and energetic new talent. All candidates must be active college students; previous non-profit/volunteer experience preferred. While all positions are unpaid, they will work with academic advisors to ensure credit is earned. Email wislgbtqhistory@gmail.com to learn more.

AWARDS / RECOGNITION / GRANTS
Special thanks for those who do good.

DIVERSE & RESILIENT was honored to receive the Organization of the Year Award from Black Pride Milwaukee, Inc., presented at the Winter Lights Gala & Awards Show. It was a beautiful event celebrating the resilience, achievements, and brilliance of Black LGBTQ+ communities in Milwaukee.

MADISON MINOTAURS RUGBY CLUB raised \$6000 at their annual Jocks in Frocks drag show at FIVE Nightclub. Thirteen current and former players got all dolled up and painted by some of Madison’s finest drag artists, and lit up the catwalk with performances to modern classics by Sabrina Carpenter, Lorde, Chappell Roan, and Charli XCX. Ten percent of the proceeds were donated to GSAFE.

WISCONSIN LGBTQ HISTORY PROJECT congratulates Bill Wardlow, owner of Fluid, and community advisor, who was recently recognized with a Lifetime Achievement Award by Milwaukee Mayor Cavalier Johnson and Milwaukee County Executive David Crowley for his relentless commitment to local LGBTQ history. Bill’s bar, located at 819 S. 2nd Street, has been

home to no less than eight queer spaces over the past 80 years. In December 1944, a trio of former servicemen took over The Friendly Bar, a Croatian family tavern, and created one of the city’s earliest safe havens for gay men. Since then, the space has also been home to The Decision, The Hideaway, The Hustler, The Mint Bar II, BJ’s, and Zippers. Every day, Fluid carries forward an eight-decade tradition of love, acceptance, and belonging for the LGBTQ community.

STAFF / BOARD CHANGES
Who’s moving on or moving into org leadership.

COURAGE MKE welcomes **Chris Logan** (he/him) to be their new Director of Development. Chris was born and raised in southeastern Wisconsin. He has traveled the world and is driven by a deep passion for making a difference. After a successful stint in high-tech he left to join the Peace Corps. From Eastern Europe to Asia and back home in Wisconsin, Chris has had an extensive and fulfilling career.

CREAM CITY FOUNDATION is thrilled to announce the addition of six talented new members to their Board of Directors. Together, with nine returning board members, their fully vol-

unteer team is at full strength and getting to work to help ensure the region has the funds and support to be a place of health, prosperity, and equity for all LGBTQ+ people. Please join in welcoming **Katie May, Trenice Ferguson, André Allaire, Dre Lozano, Zach Burrus, and Delia Kovac.**

MILWAUKEE LGBT CENTER welcomes **Ritchie T. Martin, Jr.** as the Center’s new full-time executive director. Ritchie’s professional experience, combined with his service to the Center and his lived expertise as a young person who frequented the Center’s services and programs, brings both a historical and fresh lens to the Executive Director role. Ritchie will provide the strategic direction necessary to sustain Milwaukee’s youth and older adult spaces dedicated to the LGBTQ+ community, continuing the Center’s long-standing contributions to the Milwaukee community. They also welcome **Brook Stanley** (they/he) as their Aging and Disability programs coordinator. Brook Stanley is a disabled and genderqueer community advocate who has provided education and training on disability and LGBTQ+ issues for institutions throughout Wisconsin. They completed their master’s degree in Clinical Psychology at Marquette University, researching the lived experiences and support needs of autistic adults in colleges and universities.



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OPEN FOUNDATION has hired a part-time COO and an Operations Assistant to support event coordination, community engagement, and program management.

OUTREACH LGBTQ CENTER has added four new staff to their team: Wilma's Fund Manager **Becca Bedell**, Senior Care Advocate **Lynn Currie**, Internal Accountant **Anthony Brylski**, and Grants Manager **Doug Rowe**. Additionally former Program Director **AJ Hardie** has now been retitled as Associate Director of the organization.

WISCONSIN LGBTQ HISTORY PROJECT is proud to welcome **Ricardo Wynn** to their Board of Directors. In this new role, Ricardo will oversee Team and Talent Development, including board training, development, and governance, while supporting and guiding overall nonprofit transformation. Over the past 18 months, Ricardo has served as a Community Advisor and Board Consultant to the History Project.

UPCOMING EVENTS
Plan ahead to join in.

FORGE March 26 Navigating COVID and Trauma: A Conversation on Boundaries, Healing, and Community Care — Trans/nonbinary communities are disproportionately impacted by COVID and long COVID. Join for a conversation on COVID and trauma, strategize ways to build community care and navigate trauma, and hear stories of moving through the world as COVID-cautious trans/nonbinary people.

MILWAUKEE LGBT CENTER March 29 MKE LGBT Makers Market — Come and support local LGBTQ+ crafters while finding handcrafted artwork you can treasure forever or gift to a friend. Vendors will include crochet and knit work, impact toys, candles, waxes, ceramics and more! The Center's youth program will be selling concessions, and the older adults will be holding a bake sale. The space is accessible, and there is free parking in a lot next to the building.

FORGE April 3 What's that Feeling? Emotional Care Workshop Series — Join FORGE in this three-week interactive series to explore how we take care of ourselves and our feelings. The oth-

er dates for this event are April 10 and 17.

PFLAG MOUNT HOREB April 7 Monthly Meeting — Meetings are held at the Mount Horeb Public Library. The guest speaker will be Marg Produ, a person living with intersex traits.

PFLAG MADISON April 20 No Monthly Meeting — There will be no meeting for the month of April due to Easter.

OPEN April 23 Spring Career Fair — The Out Professional Engagement Network will hold an LGBTQ+ inclusive Career Fair. This free event for jobseekers provides a unique opportunity to connect with inclusive employers committed to professional development and equity. There will be resume review services available, a Career Couture Closet run by Chrysalis Closet, and networking opportunities.

FORGE April 16 Trans Survivors Book Discussion: Falling Back in Love with Being Human by Kai Cheng Thom — Participate in a book discussion with responses and thoughts on the book, create your own love letters, and reflect together.

BAY AREA COUNCIL ON GENDER DIVERSITY April 26 NFL Draft Party — Party for trans adults, family, friends, allies, at the Napalese Lounge. BACGD wants to extend hospitality to any CD/TG Non-Binary persons, both from out of town as well locals, during the 2025 NFL Draft. ■

Please see our online calendar for a complete list of upcoming events.

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Connecting to Community through Music

Opera singer **Lauren Decker** has sung at the Lyric Opera of Chicago, but she's finding her happy place in much smaller, more personal venues in her hometown where she can bring her fine art to people who might otherwise find it inaccessible.

OPERA SINGER Lauren Decker has graced stages across the globe, but her most impactful performances may be the ones she puts on in her hometown of Montello, Wisconsin.

Decker spent four years as a member of the Ryan Opera Center at the Lyric Opera of Chicago, and is slated to perform in the Ring Cycle in Berlin, Germany next season. But right now, she lives with her wife in Montello, where she prioritizes bringing “higher art” to small communities and new settings.

ART FOR EVERYONE

With a love for grassroots art, she brings opera everywhere, from a neighbor’s backyard to local bars. “It’s been really fun to do that in an area that my whole family is from,” Decker tells *Our Lives*. “It feels like paying homage to them and to all the parts of Wisconsin—or America—that feels that higher art isn’t for them.”

Decker has been drawn to music her whole life, first falling in love with singing as a teenager participating in musical theater.

A PART OF SOMETHING BIGGER

“I feel really understood as a singer. I feel very capable of emoting and expressing things in this manner, and I have stayed very passionate and interested in opera and in classical music and performing because of how collaborative it is,” she said. As a singer, you’re rarely completely by yourself. “It’s such a privilege to be able to play a part in something bigger than I could ever do myself, and that is even just with one other person or hundreds of other people.”

This continual community surrounding Decker has always influenced her path. She initially thought she would go into music education, but a college friend encouraged her to pursue a performance career. That same friend is now Decker’s manager at IMG. “It feels really special that the person that really saw something in me in that way, is now really representing me in the world,” Decker tells *Our Lives*.

FINDING HER VOICE

She sang soprano through college, which was not the right fit for her and led her to take a year-long gap from music. When she came back to opera through a young artist program, her peers once again encouraged her to pursue a career. With a one-of-a-kind voice, those around her weren’t afraid to tell her “opera needs you.” They recognized there was no one in the industry singing the way Decker can.



After the encouragement she needed to persist on an unconventional path, Decker started training seriously while working a part-time job. One of her favorite opera singers, Dolara Zajick, mentored her for several years until 2016, when Decker moved to Chicago and began her training at the Ryan Opera Center.

LYRIC OPERA

Despite performing on a stage being one of “highest privileges” of her life, while she was at the Lyric Opera House, Decker realized that she “cares about something more than just performing on a stage.” It was the community created by her craft that truly inspired her.

“Before I realized I wanted to be an opera singer, I knew I wanted to be an artist,” she says. “And I wanted to be an artist because I wanted to connect with people.”

PANDEMIC RECITALS

After the pandemic hit, Decker saw firsthand how in a snap everything can change. “If art mattered enough to me, I needed to find a way to make it happen outside of that world [of professional stage performance].” Her love for opera, and for the people around her, led her back to Wisconsin, where she first started putting on shows for her community. She started with small recitals through windows at senior homes, where her wife worked. The concerts, Decker says, were a way for both her and her wife to pour into their passions. The “driving force” for her art is human connection. “I want to explore those relationships and those experiences in our life that are sometimes incredibly isolating, but are actually incredibly universal.”

COMMUNITY ART

Now, as a board member of a local nonprofit, Princeton Art Collective (PARC), she works with other Wisconsinites to help share art with her community. Through the nonprofit, Decker is able to share opera with those that may otherwise find it inaccessible. “It has been such a joy to show them that a lot of these things are incredibly human and can really touch you,” she tells *Our Lives*. “It’s not just what you picture an opera singer being.”

She grew up visiting Montello, as the house she lives in now is her family’s lake house. When COVID hit, she and her wife lived there “out of necessity.” The pair moved around in Wisconsin, but ended up quickly returning to Montello. “We felt really called back to being at the house,” she says.

The house itself wasn’t Decker’s only destiny in Montello. “Since we’ve been here, I’ve been so surprised, because I’ve always viewed this area as a place that I wouldn’t find any community, much less a very queer community and a very artistic community,” she says. “Now I really can’t imagine being anywhere else...my heart is just called to this space and these people whenever I’m not here.”

QUEER OPERA COMMUNITY

The queer community in Montello—and in the opera world—welcomed Decker. Before starting at Lyric Opera, she wasn’t sure what the experience would be like as a queer woman. Turns out, “just about everyone at Lyric was gay,” which she calls a “privilege” to see.

“From running the companies to directing, to being on stage, to being backstage, being stagehands, being orchestra. There are so many queer people,” she says. “And I think most people would agree: queer people in general keep a lot of these arts relevant and vibrant and important.”

Decker often brings her queerness to her performances, where she plays queer roles. Whether characters who were queer in real life, or characters made to be queer women for the first time. Last year, she played a “pants role” for the first time, and sang as a man on stage. “Being able to be comfortable in my queerness, and then having an opportunity to explore that in a more characterized way has been very interesting.”

Every time she is on stage, whether in a neighbor’s backyard or in a prestigious show, Decker uses her talent—and her queerness—to connect with others. “Being queer in general has made me more cognizant of how many different experiences that there are in life.... A huge part of being an artist and connecting with the public through your art is to be able to acknowledge the many different experiences possible,” she says. “I think being queer allows me a different perspective in order to do that.” ■

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years they have bandied about the idea of trying to highlight their town, whose proximity to the Twin Cities tends to overshadow their queer community and events. They were recently hanging out in a bar feeling like “big city” perspectives were pervasive, and they decided it was time to highlight the small town queer experience.

Now, 15 episodes in, they have spoken at length of their own experiences in all facets of life, including dating, relationships, religion, and growing up queer. They are also unafraid of exploring the raunchier side of queer life, with episodes on kinks, and one entitled “Glory Holes and Cemetery Sex.” They’ve even received feedback from a segment of their straight female listeners that they want more of the “spicier content,” and there is always a segment in every episode that explores these areas.

GROWING UP GAY

Travis grew up in Eau Claire and feels deep pride in his community, especially the drag scene, which he has helped grow from a show once a month at one bar in town to a show a week at least with multiple bars participating. He owns a hair salon, employing 10 people, eight of whom are queer-identifying people, and says that when people who work for him or customers who come in have a “different perspective” than him, he challenges himself and those around him to be welcoming, but to not allow it to moderate their queer joy. “Queer joy is the biggest resistance we have to this movement,” he told me, and even when he wants to run and hide, or is overwhelmed in a situation, he wears his joy as armor.

They want their podcast to be a beacon of hope for queer people in middle America, to bring light and resistance, and spread the word that the community is “here and queer, and not going anywhere.”

As a larger-than-life drag queen and a personality to match, Travis is not going to shrink himself to fit what other people want of him. He is also deeply empathetic. When asked about protesters at events and possible fear for his own safety, he talks about them like someone you feel sorry for, like their hate is so pathetic that he is often more concerned for their safety than his own.

Chance, for his part, indicated that he would be okay with being a person that made those hateful protesters afraid, rolling his eyes when Travis expressed concern for them. Growing up in a small town near Mauston, Travis was raised to be deeply religious, and he didn’t come out until college after a brief career in a religious missions company. He was queer secretly, privately, but indicated that when he did come out, no one was very surprised. Now, living in Eau Claire with his husband, he also wears joy as an act of resistance, helped by British punk bands. Chance has more of an edge than Travis, invoking the protests from the AIDS epidemic as ways to fight back. “Urine speaks louder than words,” singer/songwriter Pat the Bunny once said, and while Chance does not advocate for violence, that quote speaks to him in this moment we are in.

LIVING OUT LOUD

Even though things are charged now, neither Travis nor Chance are particularly afraid of continuing to live their life out loud in Eau Claire, where the University of Wisconsin–Eau Claire is one of the most queer-friendly campuses in the country. It even has a Rainbow Floor in the dorms specifically for queer students of any gender to feel safe and comfortable where they live. UW–Eau Claire also plays host to The Fire Ball, a large drag ball with 700+ attendees. (“Come as you are. Come as you want to be,” the main website for the event proclaims.) While they understand the “queer urge” to move to larger cities, they are committed to creating an environment in the Chippewa Valley so queers don’t feel they have to travel across the border to the Twin Cities to have and create opportunities.

SEEKING DIVERSE PERSPECTIVES

But they also understand and acknowledge their own limitations, and want the podcast to become more than just their own experiences. As two cis-passing queer white men, they want to open their platform up to the larger queer community in small town Wisconsin, hoping to bring in trans perspectives in particular. While many queer people move from their nascent towns, others don’t have the ability or desire to, and those people who stay should be celebrated, especially right now.

STANDING ON THE SHOULDERS OF GIANTS

They want their podcast to be a beacon of hope for queer people in middle America, to bring light and resistance, and spread the word that the community is “here and queer, and not going anywhere.” Chance iterated that he felt that while it is a scary time, and it’s okay to be scared, now is the time to be “openly queer and authentically ourselves,” in a world that wants “us to skitter back into the closet.” He finds comfort and courage from thinking about our queer ancestors who faced greater odds and worse violence, saying that he is “standing on the shoulder of giants, and can’t let fear win.”

At 600 downloads a week, “Small Town Big Gays” is still a small podcast, but Chance and Travis were surprised at how far afield their listenership is, with many on the coasts and even one in Spain. And they want their listenership, and the breadth of experiences they cover, to grow as large as possible. Their “White Whale” interview is Trixie Mattell, who grew up in small town Wisconsin (Trixie, if you read this, they’d love for you to get in touch), but they want all kinds of queer people to talk to, and welcome people who’d like to be interviewed to reach them at smalltownbiggays@gmail.com. Listeners and readers are also welcome to submit their funny Grindr stories, and requests for advice for the “Dear Khloe” segment, where Travis, as his drag persona, answers questions about life and love.



PODCAST QUEER JOY SMALL TOWNS DRAG QUEENS AUTHENTICITY

Small Town Big Gays

Eau Claire’s Travis Gorell and Chance Smith host a queer podcast that highlights queer joy in smaller cities and small-town America, and they would love to hear from you!

IN EAU CLAIRE, down a small street in a modest duplex, two gay men are working hard to combat the image that there is no queer joy in small town America. Travis Gorell and Chance Smith were tired of only hearing news from the large LGBTQ enclaves on the coasts, in NYC and SF, while smaller cities, like Eau Claire, and small towns everywhere, were largely ignored—and subsequently passed over for opportunities. I’ll admit to this bias too, as someone who lives in Madison, despite spending the past few years driving all over the state covering queer people in all the little pockets of Wisconsin. I am always enamored of these people and their bravery to live out and proud among the Trump signs in the red counties, and Travis and Chance are no different.

HIGHLIGHTING THE SMALL TOWN QUEER EXPERIENCE

They became friends years ago while doing drag shows, and for a few

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Cleaning Up in Chippewa Falls

Tony Liedl and Kevin Brylski are blending Wisconsin cultural expressions like “You betcha” with LGBTQ visibility via their Chippewa Valley soap business, **Ope! It’s Soap**.

TONY LIEDL and Kevin Brylski are really “cleaning up” Chippewa Falls, where they offer handmade body bars, bath bombs, shampoos, lip balms, and other wellness essentials at Ope! It’s Soap, their store at 116 N. Bridge Street. And if you can’t make it to Tony and Kevin’s shop, don’t get in a lather—they have an online store as well!

“I had wanted to make soap,” said Tony, a graphic designer by trade. “But I never had time to delve into it.” It was a gift from Kevin that launched a hobby-turned-business. The two met in December, 2015.

“I was invited to go to bar trivia down at the Sheeley House in Chippewa Falls,” Tony said. “I was sitting there with four of my friends, and in walks this guy and sits down across from me. He was mutual friends

with them.” That, of course, was Kevin. They soon learned they grew up in the same neighborhood.

Over time, their feelings for each other grew, and eventually Tony shared how he felt with Kevin. “He said he was feeling the same way,” Tony said. “We got together, and it’s been magic ever since.”

The couple had just returned from their wedding trip when the pandemic hit. With time on their hands, Kevin gifted his new husband with a little soap making kit.

“He had known that I always wanted to make soap,” Tony said. “It was very sweet, and we had a lot of fun with it. “But I thought, ‘That was fun, but I want to learn how to make it from scratch.’ I don’t want to just learn how to melt and pour soap.”

Tony began by researching the subject and joining Facebook groups that offered recipes and helpful tips. He started with pure olive oil soap then looked into other ingredients and how they affect the skin. “I kind of kept tweaking my recipe until it became one that I really enjoyed,” Tony said. When he started exploring fragrances, Tony discovered Midwest Fragrance Co., also located in Chippewa Falls.

“I started off doing craft shows,” Tony said. “And those were a lot of work, actually. Carrying totes and totes of product that weigh hundreds of pounds was pretty backbreaking.”

A friend knew of a storefront opening downtown. It was the right move at the right time. “I looked into it, talked with the landlord, and we said, ‘let’s try it for a year,’” Tony said. “And it really stuck.”

MIDWEST FLAVOR

“Oh my gosh, it smells so good in here.”

That’s the comment most make upon entering, Tony said. With fragrances like “Sugar Plum Fairy” and “Fireside Embers” mingling with “Cozy Cashmere,” the aroma welcomes all but the most scent-sensitive.

The above-named scents belong to some of the artisanal body bars offered by Ope! It’s Soap. But what do their soaps with names like “Ope!” and “Welp” smell like?

“I call it the signature collection,” Tony said. “They’re boxes of soap, and they’re all named after Wisconsin slang terms like ‘You betcha’ and ‘Geez Louise.’ And each box has a fun little saying on the back that ties into the scent of the soap and the name it was given.”

Here’s the description of “You Betcha!” body bar, for example: “Ya know, if you like that classic barbershop smell, you’ll love this soap. You betcha! With notes of amber, rum, with a light top note of musk and bay.” Other inspired scents include “Queen of the Night” and “Love is Love” for your queerest friends, or those who simply want to smell a little gay.

Rounding out the collections of handmade soaps are products like shampoo bars and room and body sprays. But probably the most popular items are the body butters.

The body butter called “Wissota Sun” has a beachy fragrance and contains body glitter. It is named after Lake Wissota.

COMMUNITY SUPPORT

“Chippewa Falls has really come a long way,” Tony said, in reference to the city being a friendly place to be openly queer. Back in the 90s, he said, it wasn’t uncommon to see a T-shirt with a homophobic slogan on display at the mall. He also experienced workplace discrimination at a large retailer in the area.

And while it’s certainly a mark of progress for a proudly LGBTQ-owned company to be a downtown success, Tony said there have been issues with neighborhood kids.

“I make soap in my basement,” Tony said. “I also live right next to the high school, and a lot of the kids will walk by my house after school is let out. One day, I was making soap in my basement, and I hear, ‘We don’t want gays in our neighborhood!’”

At that moment, Tony froze. But later, he made a Facebook post that he said got the attention of a lot of the right people. String Theory Studio, a local craft store, created “Hate Has No Home Here” and similar signs that soon appeared throughout Tony and Kevin’s neighborhood.

THE ROAD AHEAD

Not only is Ope! It’s Soap here to stay, the story recently moved to a new location where there is more foot traffic. “It’s kind of funny because String Theory Studio—who started the movement with those yard signs—is in the same building,” Tony said.

In the future, Tony and Kevin plan to grow the business in several ways. “We will continue to expand our footprint in our new downtown location,” Tony said. “At the same time, we remain committed to transitioning our products to more eco-friendly packaging, aligning with our mission to reduce environmental impact.” They are also looking for ways to increase their online and social media presence.

“I have an eco-friendly refill station with big jugs of soaps, shampoos, and conditioners for people to refill their own containers and pay by weight,” Tony said.

As for the commitment to sustainability, Ope! It’s Soap recently received an award as the best business for eco-friendly products and services in Chippewa Valley.

The store was also voted “best of” in other categories.

“My store won first place in ‘Best Shop Pet’ because I often have my dogs at the store,” Tony said. “They are Willie, Molly, and Bruce.” ■



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MENTAL HEALTH REPRESENTATION LIVED EXPERIENCE THERAPY

The Clinicians that We Need

Madison's **Center for Community Healing** offers counseling services for LGBTQ+ people by LGBTQ+ people.

QUEER AND TRANSGENDER people in Wisconsin and across the country often struggle to find mental health services that meet their needs and affirm their identity. At the Center of Community Healing, a counseling center dedicated to serving LGBTQIA+ individuals, practitioners understand the need for adequate support first hand.

Dean Dvorak, a counselor-in-training at the center, says the practice offers “an in-community space to process experiences related to our identities,” something they had trouble finding when seeking their own provider. “It feels important that I am able to do that work.”

“I think we’re trying to be the clinicians that we need,” says Shannon Neimeko, owner of the center and Dvorak’s supervisor.

In 2017, Chelsea and Owen Karcher co-founded the Center for Community Healing. When they relocated, they entrusted the practice to Neimeko, who had been working there part-time. Since taking over, Neimeko has carried forward the mission to provide high-quality therapy for LGBTQIA+ individuals across Wisconsin.

IMPORTANCE OF LIVED EXPERIENCE

The Center for Community Healing operates under the belief that queer people in distress deserve “access to skilled clinicians who understand their lived experiences and identities.”

While Neimeko acknowledges there are a number of providers with the clinical skills to address common concerns among queer and trans clients, they believe lived experience can provide insight to the suffering queer and trans people may experience while struggling to access the care they deserve.

When working with queer and trans people, Neimeko says “patterns emerge” in a way that may not be as visible to providers who only see a few LGBTQ+ clients or are not engaged in community with queer and trans folks.

“While my individual experiences certainly aren’t the same as every trans person, I think that there’s an easier bridge for me to connect with people around what those experiences might be,” Neimeko says, noting that there are many “relatively common” experiences for individuals who are deciding to come out or pursue gender-affirming medical care.



When working with queer and trans people, Neimeko says “patterns emerge” in a way that may not be as visible to providers who only see a few LGBTQ+ clients or are not engaged in community with queer and trans folks.

“Every queer and trans person is different, and yet I do find that we live in more similar worlds than I found when I’m working with cis and straight people,” Dvorak echoes, explaining queer and trans people navigate the world and think about safety similarly. “It’s a set of knowledge and experiences that you just won’t get from reading a book.”

Shared lived experience not only impacts the relationship between client and provider, but between colleagues. “I was excited for the opportunity to work solely or primarily with queer and trans people as clients and colleagues,” Dvorak says. “I so much enjoy getting supervision with another trans person. I think it makes such a big difference.”

GENDER-AFFIRMING CARE

Those seeking gender-affirming medical care must go through an assessment to obtain a letter in support from a mental health provider. The process can be a barrier for queer and trans people accessing the care they need. Some clinicians may want to protect their own reputation or have various ideas about “responsibility” that put the client at risk, says Neimeko.

At the Center for Community Healing, Neimeko says they have a lot of nuance around someone expressing anxiety, worry, or uncertainty about a procedure. “It’s not necessarily about the procedure itself,” they say. “Oftentimes, it’s about the reality-based stressors of undergoing a significant surgery, or about the awareness that might create a public-shifting perception that the person has to balance in order to live as joyfully as they’d hoped.”

Neimeko says that various feelings regarding “really big changes” don’t mean those changes will not be “beautifully life-altering” for the person experiencing them.

“It is protective, and a green flag, to be able to talk about the uncertainty that you have before you undergo a significant life experience,” Dvorak says, adding that even if someone has wanted a surgery for decades, it is a lot of trust to put into a medical provider.

Less than one percent of people who underwent gender-affirming

surgery expressed regret, which is much lower than the regret rates for elective plastic surgeries, according to the *American Journal of Plastic Surgery*. Dvorak noted the low regret rates among people who have sought out gender-affirming surgery, saying the ability to share information within community, talk about doubts, and process and integrate after surgery contributes to those low regret rates.

WORKING TOWARD COLLECTIVE RESILIENCE

Though mutual lived experience creates a powerful basis for counseling, Neimeko says it can be challenging to know how to handle having similar fears about the world, especially as there has been increased threats to queer and trans rights. This past year alone, 15 different pieces of anti-trans legislation have been proposed in Wisconsin. Neimeko says they work to understand how to balance their own fears with a “sense of optimism and resilience.”

The Center for Community Healing works to “center and grow collective resilience.” Dvorak connected their work to grow collective resilience to a “radical healing approach.” This approach to therapy does not minimize the oppression and harm marginalized people face, but acknowledges that people have to have joy, pleasure, and connection happening at the same time. “You can’t focus on one reality, without acknowledging the other,” Dvorak says. “I think that shows up in our work a lot.”

“I think about sessions where we’re laughing and crying in the same 15 minutes. There’s a joke, and then we’re talking about something really serious. You have to go in and out to be able to tolerate really difficult conversations,” Dvorak says. “Queer and trans people, we’ve had to learn that skill.”

Building resilience is an expansive goal that practitioners at the Center work on beyond one-on-one therapy sessions.

“We don’t have to think of resilience as unidirectional from the therapist supporting the clients,” Neimeko says. “We can also think about it as constructing our own community of clinicians that can offer support.”

THE FUTURE OF THE CENTER

The Center of Community Healing offers psychotherapy for a range of issues including depression, anxiety, trauma, stages of life, neurodiversity, and other common therapeutic concerns. They also offer assessments and letters that are required by insurers and surgeons to access gender-affirming care. Beyond one-on-one support, the Center of Community Healing hosts a virtual support group for trans and nonbinary adults. They also offer expansive kink and nonmonogamy-friendly relational counseling.

Neimeko also hopes to offer care for adolescents in the future, as long as they find the right clinical match. They’d also like to find practitioners who have other specializations such as OCD or exposure therapy, so people don’t have to choose between receiving care for a common clinical need and choosing care within a clinical structure where they’ll feel most visible, they say.

One challenge Neimeko and Dvorak face is reaching the population they could best serve. “Trans folks are a really small percentage of the population,” Neimeko says. “If the people that we’re most likely to be able to serve really well are so spread out, how do we make sure to let them know we’re here?”

Dvorak is currently accepting new clients, and is working to reach new clientele.

The Center for Community Healing provides services that allow more queer and trans people to access the mental health support they need and deserve. “We offer the perspective that this is both a unique point in time and also not necessarily unique in terms of trans history that’s been erased and stolen,” Neimeko says. “One of the things we can do is help them reconnect with the fact that we’ve been here forever, we’re hella fierce, and we’re not going anywhere.” ■

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Top row, left to right:
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Adelaide Aeschliman
Christen Lester-Jones
Sarah Canon

Bottom row, left to right:
Seraphine Novus
SunShine Raynebow
Pr. Nick Utphall

TRANS COMMUNITY | COMMUNITY MEALS | HATE CRIMES | TRANS-ONLY SPACE

Breaking Bread: How a church-sponsored dinner is strengthening the trans community in Madison

Madison Psychologist **E. G. Meier** and ally **Sarah Canon** co-created trans community dinners at their church in the hope of building safe space and community. The dinners have achieved all that and more.

JANUARY 2023. The New Years confetti wasn't even cleaned up, and it was already turning out to be a deadly year for trans people in America.

E. G. Meier (pronouns: Meier / Meier / Meier's), a licensed professional counselor and psychologist working in Milwaukee and Madison, watched the headlines piling up with a growing mixture of anger, grief, and dread. There was Jasmine "Star" Mack, stabbed to death in Washington, D.C. on January 7; KC Johnson of Wilmington, North Carolina, who was kidnapped in January and whose body would not be found until April; nonbinary environmental activist Manuel Esteban Paez Terán, shot 57 times by police in Atlanta on January 18 as they protested the construction of a new "cop city" training center; Maria Jose Rivera Rivera, an immigrant from El Salvador, killed sometime before January 21 in Houston by an intimate partner in an apparent murder-suicide; and Unique Banks, fatally shot on January 23 in an attack on her family's apartment in Chicago that also seriously wounded her mother's boyfriend and two other trans women.

And that was just January. Five brutal killings in less than a month, in a community that comprises an estimated 0.5% of the U.S. population. For Meier, the alarm bells were already ringing.

As the bloody year dragged on, more names and stories were added to

the ledger, while cynical politicians poured gasoline on the fire with an unprecedented number of anti-trans bills targeting health care, bathroom use, and participation in school sports. Trans people were the target du jour for the Right's endless culture war—the latest class of expendable people to be demonized, terrorized, and blamed for all of their constituents' problems. The hateful rhetoric and the acts of violence reinforced one another, bathing the trans community in a toxic stew of fear and alienation. In Milwaukee alone, four Black trans women would be murdered from September 2022 to October 2023: Regina "Mya" Allen, Brazil Johnson, Cashay Henderson, and Chyna Long.

Something needed to change, and it needed to happen soon.

THE IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNITY

A long-time social studies teacher before pivoting to clinical work, Meier was already primed to think locally when pondering potential efforts to benefit the LGBTQIA+ community. A doctoral program in counseling would deepen this focus: Meier's clinical work centered on caring for people in and through a community setting, particularly those who were marginalized along multiple axes. Serving trans women ensnared in carceral spaces was an especially salient clinical experience

for Meier. "One of the things they reminded me of was the importance of community in the face of impossible things," Meier said. "Community is part of how we survive the impossible."

For Meier, as for many, community had its roots in religion. Meier is an active member of Madison Christian Community (MCC), a partnership between Advent Lutheran Church and Community of Hope UCC. By early 2023 MCC had long been an Open and Affirming congregation, meaning that they welcomed and celebrated their LGBTQIA+ members and encouraged them to be present as their full, authentic selves. Still, there was room for growth. While the church had expressed a desire to serve the trans community, it had not yet taken any practical steps in that direction. Meier challenged the church to change that.

Sarah Canon (she/her/hers), then the president of Advent Lutheran's leadership council, found herself in church meetings with Meier in the spring of 2023. "Meier indicated in one of these meetings that they [sic] didn't always feel welcome or safe at MCC," Canon recalled. "I didn't like that. I asked to get coffee with Meier and talk about it."

It was at this meeting over coffee, and others that followed, where Meier laid out a plan of action.

A PLAN OF ACTION

"The Lutheran tradition is, when things are hard, you come together and break bread," Meier said. The counselor envisioned a regular gathering where trans and nonbinary people could come together for a free meal and fellowship with one another: To make and strengthen friendships and to share their joys and struggles without outside distractions.

"I fundamentally believe that we are wired for community, and in the pandemic, we lost our third spaces," Meier said. Most of the opportunities for socialization with other LGBTQ+ people in Madison took place in bars or nightclubs, which created challenges for individuals who were sober, neurodivergent, or had social anxiety. A quiet dinner in an alcohol-free space would fill a social niche that had otherwise been lost.

The church leadership was immediately supportive, but it took time for the new dinners to take shape. Many different groups used the space at MCC, and it was important to find a night when the guests would be assured the privacy to engage in authentic and unfiltered conversation. Coordinating the necessary volunteers—for cooking, hosting, transportation, child care, and cleanup—was also a logistical challenge.

"I had never tried to organize anything like this before," Canon said. "It was a big learning experience."

With Meier both finishing up the doctoral program and helping to plan the 2023 Transgender Day of Remembrance (TDOR) service, the decision was made to postpone the launch until December 27, after both of those responsibilities had been completed. The holidays were often a challenging time for trans people, whose relationships with blood family are often strained or broken, and Meier hoped that the dinners would be especially helpful in that context.

"On paper, it's not what you should do," Meier acknowledged. "Starting something over the winter, over the holidays, in Wisconsin. But part of the conviction of this is that holidays are hard, so if that's what you need, why would you wait?"

CULTIVATING COMMUNITY

To get the word out, Meier promoted the dinner at a resource fair following the TDOR service. The counselor also reached out to SunShine Raynebow (she/her/Queen/Goddess), a local poet, activist, and drag queen whom Meier had met during the planning for the 2022 TDOR.

"If you want to talk about who knows community, that's SunShine," Meier said. She was active in many different community spaces around the city, and Meier felt it would be negligent not to ask her. Raynebow quickly agreed to take part.

THE NEED FOR SAFE SPACE

The night of December 27 was cold, windy, and quiet. Besides Meier and Raynebow, two other attendees showed up: Robin Kelby (pronouns: they/them/their), a software engineer at Epic, and myself, Christen Lester-Jones (pronouns: she/her/hers). Sitting around a meal of hearty soup, salad, and bread provided by Canon and her husband, we discussed the possibilities of these dinners and what they could become.

"You didn't realize it when you came here, but you are now my co-conspirators," Meier told us, with a characteristic sly grin. "So let's see what kind of mischief we can make together."

One key object of discussion at that first meeting was the importance of making the dinners a space that was welcoming to people of all religious backgrounds. Since it was being held at a Christian church and three of the founding members were Christians (Meier and I are Lutheran, Kelby is Methodist), it would be too easy to turn into a "Christian thing" that would exclude people who didn't share that heritage.

"I was thinking about how to hold space in a way that feels safe," Meier recalled later, "because we were asking our community to step into a religious space. That's loaded for a lot of us, even if it's good."

KEEPING IT SIMPLE

The dinners would have a simple format: From 6:00 to 6:30 p.m., we would welcome guests, encouraging them to put on name tags and engaging in unstructured conversation. Dinner would be served buffet-style, and we would all sit together at large tables in the lobby outside the kitchen. (As attendance grew, seating was moved from the lobby to the adjacent Covenant Room, which provided more room and greater privacy.) We would pose some icebreaker questions to encourage engagement among the guests, and then let the conversation flow where it may. Meanwhile, the church volunteers ate together in another room, leaving the guests to enjoy a trans-only discussion space. There would be no prayers over the meal, no invitations to other church events, no religious practices or rituals of any kind. The dinners were a space for us as trans people, not for any other affiliations we may or may not have. Dinner would last for about an hour, and then volunteers would clean up and provide transportation home for those who needed it.

From that first dinner we grew slowly, meeting every 6–8 weeks from February through July. We spread the word through texting, social media, Discord channels, Pride events, and LGBTQIA+ groups at our places of employment. At some of the early dinners, only we organizers showed up, but we kept planning the next event, and gradually built a circle of regulars, who in turn built connections with one another. In July we decided that there was enough demand to make the dinners monthly, and with one exception due to a scheduling conflict (September), we've held them every month since. Attendance varies but is usually around 10–12 people, about half of them regulars.

"Being involved in the Trans Community Dinners has brought me healing, friendship, and peace," Raynebow said. "It's one of my favorite

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things that happen in my life.”

“I appreciate being able to share with a small group of trans people that just ‘get it,’” Kelby said. “I can be myself in freedom.”

SUSTAINABILITY

Making the dinners happen monthly has required resources beyond MCC alone. As a member of the Reconciling in Christ (RIC) subcommittee at Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, I extended an invitation to the other members of that group. Several of them quickly volunteered, assisting with transportation, cooking, hosting, or clean-up. After positive experiences with the dinners in November and December, the subcommittee decided to share the invitation with Good Shepherd as a whole. At the time of this writing, the dinners have a volunteer list of 15 people who are assigned tasks on rotation. For the February dinner, Canon arranged the assignments so that members of Good Shepherd and MCC would be working side-by-side for the first time.

“So many of us are looking for places to connect that are sustainable, and it’s been fun to see churches start to come together,” Meier said. “I’m humbled by the partnership that’s emerged between our two churches. We’re actually doing these things that we espouse to be our values.”

“Good Shepherd Lutheran Church is deeply committed to fostering inclusion, support, and community for all,” says Sarah Simon, chair of the RIC subcommittee. “Our involvement in the monthly Trans Community Dinners reflects this mission, offering a safe, welcoming space for individuals to connect, share experiences, and enjoy a sense of belonging. We are excited to be part of this particular gathering because it provides the opportunity to support the well-being of a community that often faces unique challenges. Being able to contribute to a space that nurtures connection, empowerment, and visibility is an honor.”

Additional help has come from Meier’s therapy practice, Integrated Counseling, which has a charitable arm that has been an organizational partner in facilitating the dinners. Heather Andrews, Meier’s Practice Manager, assists with the behind-the-scenes work to keep the dinners running smoothly. “She’s amazingly organized,” Meier said.

EVEN GREATER NEED FOR COMMUNITY NOW

The Trans Community Dinners recently celebrated their one-year anniversary, and interest shows no signs of flagging. The year 2025 is shaping up to be an even darker year for trans people than 2023, and the need for community in the midst of hardship has only grown.

For Meier, seeing the dream of trans people breaking bread come to life has been a light in the midst of that darkness. The most important decision Meier faced with the dinners was when to step back and leave them in another’s hands—something that happened in September 2024, when the counselor passed leadership of the project to me.

“The model of ministry I was raised up in was big on cultivating not just outreach, but leadership within, to basically cultivate yourself into the background,” Meier explained. “I suppose it’s a Lutheran ‘priesthood of all believers’ thing.”

“I’m really grateful to you all for trusting us and allowing us to provide this for you,” said Canon. “And I’m really glad that Good Shepherd has joined—that it feels like the community of love and safety is expanding. And I’ve really enjoyed meeting everyone who has come in the door, to whatever extent I’ve met them.”

It’s hard to say what the years ahead will hold for trans people in America. Madison feels like an oasis of relative safety, but only time will tell if the hatred, bigotry, and violence being directed at us find their way into these streets. What I do know is this: We are stronger together. Through these dinners, I have had the privilege of making connections with other trans people in this community, and those connections will persist through times of joy and hardship alike. If you’re a trans, non-binary, or gender non-conforming person near Madison, I hope you’ll come and break bread with us, too.

For more information, please visit www.madisontransdinners.com or email info@madisontransdinners.com



CHRISTEN LESTER-JONES is a member of the 10:00 worship band and the Reconciling in Christ (RIC) subcommittee at Good Shepherd Lutheran Church in Madison and Verona. She is a writer, a musician, a podcaster, a scientist, and a follower of Jesus, with varying levels of success in all of the above. She lives in Madison.

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Vulnerability & Strength

Mixed media artist **LaNia Sproles** explores relationships through playful and provocative portraits that express intimacy and hope.

LANIA SPROLES (they/them) grew up in Milwaukee and studied art at the Milwaukee Institute of Art and Design, completing their BFA in 2017. Upon graduating, they stepped into the contemporary art world with a distinct style that challenges representational boundaries.

Now based in Chicago, Sproles creates work that is intimate, playful, provocative, and empowering. Their recent exhibition “King for a Day” (January 17–March 15) at Portrait Society Gallery of Contemporary Art in Milwaukee’s Third Ward offered viewers a glimpse into Sproles’ inner world, where the artist explored their identity, sexuality, and community—and tampered with notions of love, sex, and power.

Sproles has developed a distinctive artistic approach that weaves together drawing, painting, printmaking, and collage. The exhibition was split between intimate portraits of friends and chosen family, and more allegorical works that depict triumph over adversity and obstacles.

Central to Sproles’ work is an exploration of the critical social relationships that sustain them. Their small-scale, expressively rendered portraits serve as contemporary love letters, testaments to the deep emotional connections they share with their inner circle. These pieces transcend mere representation to become intimate dialogues between artist and subject.



In “Impurity Dance,” for example, two of the same blonde figures, in matching shirts, dance together entwined in vines. Their hands connect overhead to hold a candle—a universal symbol of hope—while their other hands join in a prayer-like gesture. One of them gazes directly at the viewer while the other looks off into the distance. Created as Sproles witnessed a friend’s divorce, the piece stands as an offering for her friend’s healthy metamorphosis and wholeness as she moves through change and becomes acquainted with herself again.

Through their work, Sproles examines complex power dynamics and creates paths to agency through artistic fantasy. Their ability to transform personal experiences into universal stories as they tap into fundamental human desires for autonomy and control, resonates with broad audiences. In their self-portraits, they often appear as a powerful, sometimes bond-

agewear-clad, figure that embodies both vulnerability and strength.

Elaborate works, such as “Just One of Those Days” and “Love is Everything That She Kills” feature fantastical scenarios where the artist represents themselves in positions of power, often using sexual assertiveness to depict dominance over reptilian monsters, symbolically confronting adversaries and defeating oppressors. This metaphorical strategy transforms personal experiences of powerlessness into accounts of triumph and agency.

Despite being a self-described private person, Sproles maintains an active presence in Wisconsin’s art community. Their achievements include a 2020 Mary L. Nohl Fellowship and a teaching artist residency at the Lynden Sculpture Garden. Their curatorial work, including a guest-curated exhibition at the NADA art fair with The Green Gallery, demonstrates their multifaceted engagement with cultural dialogue.

Sproles’ work has gained recognition in significant spaces, including exhibitions at Elijah Wheat Showroom, David Zwirner’s online platform, Goldfinch Gallery, and FLXST Contemporary in Chicago. By centering queer, Black, and femme experiences, their art challenges dominant paradigms and creates space for marginalized voices.

The emotional and carnal landscapes in Sproles’ work invite viewers into intimate worlds where vulnerability and strength coexist. Their practice serves as a reminder that art can be transformative—a means of reconsidering social structures and celebrating the complexity of human experience.

“King for a Day” establishes LaNia Sproles as a vital voice reshaping our understanding of portraiture, identity, and representation. Their work invites us to see beyond conventional boundaries and embrace the rich, multifaceted nature of human expression, ultimately reimagining the very nature of power itself. —Karin Wolf

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HOME & DESIGN | WOODWORKING | FURNITURE | SCULPTURE | PUBLIC ART | MADISON PUBLIC LIBRARY

IN THE UNIVERSE of things that Sylvie Rosenthal and her team of queer, trans, and femme artisans are building at Lower Astronomy Studios, craft isn't just about making objects—it's about making meaning, building community, and creating a future worth investing in.

When you first encounter Sylvie Rosenthal's work, you might notice the precision: Expertly notched joints, meticulously chiseled forms, finely carved details, even some marbled surfaces. But spend more time with her pieces, and something deeper emerges: A thoughtful reimagining of what furniture and objects can be and what they can mean in our homes and lives. We are reminded of the power we possess to direct the investment of our money to the people we wish to support, in accordance with our values, as we mindfully form our individual and collective futures.

FURNITURE & SCULPTURE

Rosenthal is the founder of Madison-based Lower Astronomy Studios (LAS). The name "Lower Astronomy" refers to what can be seen with the naked eye, or what Rosenthal calls "the universe of things" on Earth—the constellations of furniture, sculpture,

relationships, and meaning that we form in our everyday lives. The custom-designed interiors and objects created at LAS are intended to reveal those relationships and resonate in the spaces they inhabit. That philosophy seemingly infuses everything designed and created at LAS woodworking studio.

With a BFA in Woodworking and Furniture Design from the School for American Crafts at Rochester Institute of Technology and an MFA in Sculpture from UW-Madison, Rosenthal brings both technical expertise and conceptual depth to her practice. Her work has been exhibited nationally and internationally, but it's in her Madison studio where her vision truly comes to life.

AFFIRMING WORK ENVIRONMENT

To Sylvie, whose path to becoming an expert woodworker took her through both encouraging and hostile learning and work spaces, it is critical to foster a healthy professional and supportive creative culture in the studio, with the people who assist her. That is why she is proud that LAS is a studio where queer, gender-nonconforming artisans can create in a positive and affirming environment.



PUBLIC COMMISSIONS

This forward-thinking approach is evident in standout pieces which showcase the studio's exceptional range and vision. Among Rosenthal's most significant public commissions is *The Gathering Table* (2021), created collaboratively with Olivia Dahlquist of the UW's 4W Initiative and Lori DiPrete Brown. The finished piece, in UW-Madison's Hamil Library at Memorial Union, celebrates 150 years of women at the university.

Crafted from Wisconsin quarter-sawn white oak, the tabletop celebrates the native oak savanna ecosystem, featuring inlaid images of native plants interwoven with depictions of women engaged in university work. With no identifying features of age or ethnicity, these figures allow all women to see themselves within the piece. The women are depicted in various poses that convey studying, thinking, sowing seeds, resting/dreaming, and restoring. Concentric brass circles represent layers of community, while brass dots evoke the night sky. At the center lies the Cassiopeia constellation, inlaid with epoxy and red sand, its "W" shape honoring resilience and remembrance.

During the milling process, Rosenthal discovered lead shot embedded within the Oak. Rather than removing these remnants, she incorporated them alongside the constellation—a powerful symbol of wounding and repair that resonates with many women.

Another piece of public art Rosenthal created is *A Wishing Well* (2023) for Madison Public Library. The sculpture was designed in collaboration with the Bubbler's then artist-in-residence, Maria Schirmer. Artist and Madison Public Library Bubbler Program Administrator, Carlee Latimer explained, "They helped us envision a vessel that can hold the hopes and dreams of our community—everyday things like 'I hope my bestie likes her birthday presents,' to deeper human longings like, 'I wish my family would finally accept me for who I am.'" Latimer continued, "Sylvie and the LAS team bring an intentionality to the projects they take on. They shared with us the process photos/videos which created a broader understanding of what it means for objects to be human made."

In their Instagram feed during the creation of *A Wishing Well*, LAS described themselves as becoming "a circle factory," making 23 poplar circles with 16 pieces per circle stack which were stack-laminated together. The roof of the wishing well holds a green metal panel which provides space for a magnetic letter prompt. The small roof opens to store the letters. *A Wishing Well* was created to be able to come apart and travel to libraries in areas of Madison where residents are grappling with a particular question about their future. The prompt can



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be modified, and *A Wishing Well* can hold the hopes and dreams of that neighborhood.

CUSTOM PROJECTS

While LAS is always open to public commissions, they are especially honored to create custom projects for people's homes. LAS excels at transforming living spaces through thoughtfully designed custom work. Whether you are renovating a kitchen, seeking a statement dining table, or dreaming of a uniquely sculptural built-in, LAS approaches each project with boundless creativity and technical precision.

Rosenthal seemingly thrives on challenges that push the boundaries of conventional woodworking. Their website states, "We love a problem to solve. We love an open-ended question." From kitchen

islands and backlit cabinets and dining tables to assembled objects and sculptures, LAS works closely with clients, artists, and designers to bring extraordinary visions to life. LAS's exquisite craftsmanship is accessible to clients across the country. For those seeking woodwork that transcends the ordinary, Lower Astronomy Studios offers an unparalleled combination of artistic vision and exquisite execution.

HOME GOODS

The LAS website includes a "Home Goods" option under the "Shop" tab on their page which displays the vases, benches, and mirrors they sell. *Ruthless Mirror* (≈ h40" x w22"), for example, is made from poplar hardwood. This striking mirror exemplifies Rosenthal's production line while maintaining the soulful touch of a handcrafted work. Bold and graceful, the mirror honors the spirit of Ruth Bader



Ginsburg and her determination to flourish despite adversity.

The frame features an organic, flowing design that seems to grow around the mirror's surface; though it doesn't circle the whole mirror, it isn't random either. Rosenthal finds the perfect balance, characteristic of her aesthetic. Poplar hardwood is finished to enhance its natural beauty while creating a form that commands attention without being overwhelming.

As a functional object that's also deeply symbolic, *Ruthless Mirror* encourages viewers to see themselves reflected alongside the values of courage, truth, and persistence. It is available as part of LAS's production line, making Rosenthal's artistic vision accessible to a wider audience while maintaining the highest standards of craftsmanship.

For those who wish to bring a piece of LAS into their homes, mirrors and benches offer an entryway into Rosenthal's distinctive vision. Those pieces combine Rosenthal's expert woodworking with conceptual depth. Their forms are both familiar and imaginative, inviting viewers to reconsider their relationship with functional objects. The work exemplifies how Rosenthal brings her artistic sensibility to production pieces, making her work more accessible while maintaining exceptional quality.

MAKING CONNECTIONS

In uncertain times, Rosenthal's work reminds us of the value of thoughtful, handmade objects that connect us to our spaces and to each other. When she starts to feel overwhelmed, Rosenthal looks toward anything that is "forward-orienting." This future-focused perspective helps her stay grounded and drives her to create work that will last—not just physically, but conceptually and emotionally.

Rosenthal also feels a deep connection to nature. She loves being outside and hearing the birds. This connection to the natural world infuses her work with an organic quality, even in its most architectural forms.

By investing in Rosenthal's hand-crafted pieces—whether a custom commission or one of her "Modern, Common + Uncommon objects for the home"—clients are both acquiring beautiful objects and participating in a meaningful act: choosing quality, community, and connection in a world that often prioritizes the disposable and the digital. ■



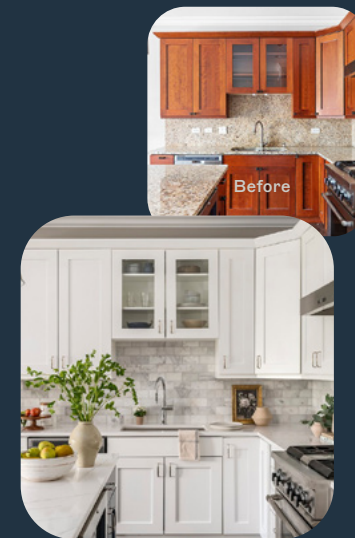
KARIN WOLF is an arts administrator, freelance arts writer, and consultant. She likes to get deep and try to understand complex art, people, and ideas. Writing about them is her favorite way to do so. She has a M.S. in Curriculum and Instruction from the University of Wisconsin-Madison and undergraduate degrees in History, History of Cultures, and Afro-American History.

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The Progressive & Intersectional Response to Trump

To platform the intersectionality of progressive activism, **Our Lives board members** interviewed community leaders on race and immigration, reproductive and gender justice, housing, and education in the current political climate.

POLITICS & LAW | EDUCATION | GENDER JUSTICE | HOUSING | IMMIGRATION | RACE | REPRODUCTIVE JUSTICE

OUR LIVES MEDIA, in partnership with historians, archivists, and community members, recently released Wisconsin First, a digital archive of Wisconsin’s first gay rights legislation in 1982 (AB70), which was the first of its kind in the nation. For the *Our Lives* board, spending time reading through the materials that led to that groundbreaking bill served as a solid reminder of just how intersectional that legislative effort truly was.

In many ways, gay rights in Wisconsin evolved out of similar fights for women’s and BIPOC rights. In fact, David Clarenbach, who championed AB70 during his tenure as a Democratic member of the Wisconsin State Assembly, noted that among the diverse array of accomplices and mentors that were key to his success were Lloyd Barbee, known for desegregating Milwaukee’s public schools, and Kathryn Clarenbach, David’s mother, who was the first Chairperson for NOW, the National Organization for Women. After AB70 passed, Clarenbach also shifted his own efforts to do important work on privacy, prison reform, and indigenous reconciliation.

We are in the midst of threatening political times ourselves, and now more than ever, we want to emphasize the importance of the collective. In an effort to recognize the intersectional work of so many of our community members, we reached out to some of our beloved partners and asked them to share their insights and actions relevant to political issues outside of the specific queer experience.

RACE & IMMIGRATION

Greg Wright, *Our Lives Board*

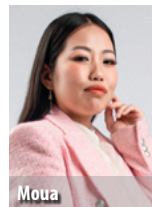
WHEN ASKED ABOUT race and immigration, **Mahnker Dahnweih** and **Zon Moua** of Freedom, Inc. said this:

What do you want the community aware of right now?

Legislative policies have long targeted and harmed Black and Southeast Asian communities, exacerbating existing inequities. These communities are not surprised by the actions of the current administration, as many elected officials continue to advance and support racist, cis-hetero-patriarchal ideologies.



Dahnweih



Moua

Already we are witnessing significant cuts to victim services, family support programs, and childcare—measures that disproportionately impact low-income Black and SEA communities. These cuts push these communities further into the margins and contribute to the increased policing of people’s bodies. The push to restrict access to abortion and gender-affirming healthcare, and to increase funding for law enforcement and expand jails and prisons, underscores a dangerous and systemic rise in violence against Black and SEA communities. This is not just a matter of isolated hate crimes; it is a manifestation of deep-rooted, systemic inequality that needs to be addressed through meaningful change.

What support are you looking for? How can the LGBTQ+ community show up as an ally/accomplice to people navigating these issues?

One of the best things you can do is donate to Freedom, Inc. and other organizations like ours. We are all being hit with budget cuts due to loss of federal and foundation funding. We need individual donors to retain staff and keep programs running. If you have connections to friends, family, neighbors, or professional networks with means,

encourage them to adopt community-based organizations to support.

You can also volunteer to speak with your neighbors about the changes being made by this administration and how they are impacting us all. Freedom, Inc. does phone banks and community canvasses, especially around election time. We also organize large-group visits to our legislatures to inform them of our legislative priorities. Sign up to join our mailing list to learn about volunteer opportunities.

Finally, find ways to help amplify voices from highly impacted communities. Freedom, Inc. shares a lot of statements, livestream videos, graphics on current events, and calls to action. Follow us and other orgs like us, and share our content. Being a visible ally on your social media platforms can lead to discussions with friends and family that shift hearts and minds, and lead to greater social change.

What should we know about the intersections between race, immigration, and the LGBTQIA+ community?

There are LGBTQ+ people of color, refugees, and immigrants. We cannot fight for queer justice without also fighting for racial justice, and we cannot fight for queer justice without fighting for immigrant rights. To be queer and trans is to exist beyond binaries and boxes. If we allow one segment of people to be hunted, locked in cages, uprooted from their families, and then expelled from our country all-together, what do we think they will do when they are done with their heinous work? Do we think they will give back the guns and the gear and turn the detention centers into community centers? No, they will look for the next group to target. All of us who value LGBTQ+ people must also be concerned with Black lives, people of color, immigrants, and refugees.

Ideas about who is “good” and allowed to live in this country shift continuously, and the same tools used to target immigrants and refugees today, can be turned against us tomorrow. All of the actions of this administration can be classified as state repression. Their goal is to ensure that we are too frozen with fear to fight back. They want us to freeze while they codify our place in this country as third class citizens, whose only rights are to be abused and exploited. We must resist, and we must resist now before all avenues to fight are completely taken away.

REPRODUCTIVE & GENDER JUSTICE

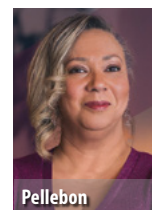
Emily Mills, *Our Lives Board*

WHEN ASKED ABOUT reproductive and gender justice, **Dana Pellebon**, Executive Director of the Rape Crisis Center said this:

What are you bracing for? What do you want to make sure the community is aware of?

We are bracing for more cuts in funding. In 2024, victim service agencies like RCC Sexual Violence Resource Center/Rape Crisis Center received a devastating cut in funding through the Victims of Crimes Act. Since the new presidential administration, we have had potential funding opportunities removed, so grants to help fund the services we already provide have been terminated. In addition, specialized funding to bolster services for historically excluded/ignored communities like people of color and LGBTQIA+ folks are on the chopping block.

Right now, we are looking at ways to increase our revenue-based services. We want to expand our CCS Service Facilitation program through Dane County, if Medicaid is not affected by funding cuts, and ensure that our survivor services like therapy remain free for all. The goal is to continue providing 24/7/365 crisis intervention services to the county, even with less funding overall, and to avoid having to implement



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waiting lists to access services.

In addition, the enormous amount of work that Black, queer executive directors like me have done to educate and institute DEI initiatives into survivor services could be permanently put on hold or taken away, which directly affects service provisions to our communities. If we lose funding, we will have to rely more on donations and increase our outreach to private foundations to prevent layoffs. The loss of funding would change how we support our most vulnerable survivors with services like emergency housing, food, clothing, bedding replacement, rent help, and legal resources.

When asked the same questions, **Tanya Atkinson**, President of Planned Parenthood of Wisconsin, said this:

What are you bracing for?

Planned Parenthood of Wisconsin remains steadfast in our partnership with the LGBTQ+ community and our commitment to the health and wellbeing of all patients, including our trans patients, regardless of the onslaught of unconstitutional political power grabs at the federal level we continue to witness.

The lawmakers who want the government to eliminate access to abortion want to do the same to gender-affirming hormone therapy. And it doesn't stop there. We anticipate further restrictions on sexual and reproductive health care ranging from birth control and hormone therapy, to abortion and the elimination of critical resources people need to access that care.

Simply put, we are allied in a fight for Americans' critical bodily agency and autonomy—to advance a vision where everyone is safe, supported, and affirmed in their healthcare decisions.

What do you want the community aware of right now?

The vast majority of Wisconsinites, and Americans, believe that politicians should have no say in people's personal medical decisions, and that people should be able to access the sexual and reproductive health care and education they need to live safe, healthy, and fulfilling lives. This includes access to supportive, gender-affirming care.

We know that far too many people struggle to access the essential sexual and reproductive health care they need. That's especially true for LGBTQ+ people. LGBTQ+ people, and especially transgender and nonbinary people, often face overt discrimination in healthcare settings.

PPWI filed an original action in February 2024 asking the Wisconsin Supreme Court to find that our state constitution protects the right to bodily autonomy, including the right to have and provide abortion care. The case is awaiting scheduling of oral arguments. If successful, it could serve as a building block to recognition and protection of other bodily autonomy rights, including gender-affirming care.

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How can the LGBTQIA+ community show up as an ally/accomplice to people navigating these issues?

In Wisconsin the LGBTQ+ and reproductive rights communities have a tradition of allyship to advance rights and freedoms. As the federal power grabs continue to unfold, we must stay vigilant and take collective action. Our local and state governments become more important. We must vote in every race in every election. Organize and mobilize your networks. Make our voices heard—be unrelenting in holding elected officials accountable. All the restrictions on reproductive freedoms are meant to harm, divide, and silence our communities. We can't—and won't—let that happen. No Matter What.

PPWI health centers remain open across Wisconsin and appointments can be made at ppwi.org or 1-800-230-PLAN.

HOUSING

Emily Mills, Our Lives Board

WHEN ASKED about housing, **Amy Lindley**, Development and Communications Manager for the Tenant Resource Center said this:

What are you/your org bracing for?

We are bracing for a cut in federal funding, which would impact all of our programs and the people we serve. We are working on advancing safety measures in our office for populations being targeted by the current administration.

What do you want the community aware of right now?

Housing is non-negotiable. Housing is a human right, and our community thrives when everyone has a safe place to live. Stable housing is not a zero sum game. Kids do better in school, and adults earn a higher income when they have stable housing which, in turn, supports our economy. The fact is, housing is health care. Stable housing means healthier individuals, families, and communities.

Understanding your rights is essential—including how to protect yourself and support your neighbors.

What support are you looking for?

We need support on both individual and systemic levels. Share our resources to help people access housing support. Advocate for increased housing funding and stronger renter protections by contacting local and state officials. Donations are invaluable when funding is uncertain.

How can the LGBTQIA+ community show up as an ally/accomplice to people navigating these issues?

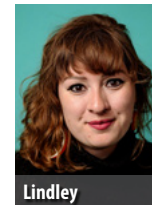
Decenter white cis queerness and challenge racism, transphobia, fatphobia, ableism, and carceral logic within LGBTQIA+ spaces. Center the voices and leadership of BIPOC, trans, gender-nonconforming, disabled, and criminalized people in our community. Advocate for policies that protect trans people, particularly Black trans women.

When possible, redistribute resources through mutual aid and donations, and spend time helping each other. Our community faces disparities in housing, but trans and undocumented people are going to face increased scrutiny finding housing. Go with your friends on their housing searches. Offer to sit in on conversations with landlords. Make sure everyone gets everything in writing.

What intersections does your work have with the LGBTQIA+ community, and what should we know about those intersections?

Ultimately, housing justice cannot be separated from economic or social justice, and LGBTQIA+ rights are inextricable from the fight for racial, economic, and disability justice. LGBTQIA+ individuals—especially BIPOC transgender and gender-nonconforming people—face disproportionately high rates of housing instability and homelessness. Queer and trans youth, in particular, make up a significant portion of the unhoused population.

LGBTQIA+ communities are also profoundly impacted by HIV/AIDS. We partner with UW Health and UW Medicine to provide housing case management services for people living with HIV which, in turn, supports a stable healthcare plan. Additionally, our community as a whole is overrepresented in the criminal justice system, but especially Black LGBTQIA+ people. Having a conviction on your record is a barrier to housing. We work with the Public Defender's



Lindley

office to ensure people can still attend eviction hearings from the jail.

EDUCATION

Michail Takach, Our Lives Board

WHEN ASKED about education, **Tyrone Creech**, GSAFE Executive Director, and **Abigail Swetz**, Fair Wisconsin Executive Director, said this:

What are you bracing for?

Creech: Wisconsin non-profits won't be swayed from mission-critical work. This will not be like 2016. This feels like it's going to be different—and I believe it's going to be worse. I have a lot of concerns: Title IX violations, anti-trans bills, curriculum bans, book bans, faith-based learning enforced in public schools. All of these will impact the student experience for the worse, at a time when queer and trans youth suicide is already a deep concern.



Creech



Swetz

Swetz: The health, well-being and safety of our children in schools is at stake. I'm very concerned about not only funding cuts, but the privatization of public dollars for private (often religious) schools who offer no safeguards for LGBTQ students.

My immediate thought when I read the president's education executive order was this: When a teacher uses the name and pronouns a child asks for, that teacher shows respect for that student and also models inclusion and kindness for their peers. That makes the classroom a safer, more empathetic place, and in turn, those children grow up and make our world a more understanding place. That is a beautiful lesson that our

current federal administration desperately needs to be taught. Empathy is at stake.

What do you want the community aware of right now?

Creech: People need to know that representation matters. People have to show up. Let me say that again: You have to SHOW UP. We have to be seen in large numbers. We need to be seen in those spaces where and when things are happening. We have to be seen at the school board meetings, the town hall meetings, and the State Capitol hearings.

Swetz: You can also tell Fair Wisconsin when you see discriminatory action taking place. If you, your children, your family, or your school are being negatively impacted by any of the executive orders, we need to hear from you. So please, if you are already seeing anti-trans action being taken in advance by school officials or health care providers or sports organizations, please contact testimonial@fairwisconsin.com immediately. We need to know what is happening in order to stop it.

What support are you looking for?

Creech: We will overcome these four years with a lot of support, community understanding, compassion, empathy, and action. There is a difference between allyship and active allyship. People have to be active allies. They have to actually be on the front lines with us, not safe at home commenting and liking our work on social media. Because we're fighting for you, us, and everybody else, and we all have to fight for each other.

Swetz: There is so much a federal administration cannot do to public education, but let's be real here: Because this administration is using their platform in a calculated, chaotic, and hateful way, the executive orders, while largely not actionable, will undoubtedly create a chilling effect of pre-compliance. We cannot and will not allow that. ■



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HISTORY LGBTQ RIGHTS BULLYING SCHOOLS

Don't Let Anyone Steal your Future

After suffering homophobic abuse at school for years, **Jamie Nabozny** filed a landmark lawsuit that changed American legal history.

JAMIE WAS BORN IN 1975 and grew up near Ashland, Wisconsin, where he lived with his parents and his two younger brothers. He remembers enjoying the outdoors, camping, and swimming in northern Wisconsin lakes.

“Being poor was really difficult,” remembers Jamie, “and my parents were on and off government assistance. Everything was so unpredictable.”

Seeking better opportunities, Jamie’s father moved the family to Wyoming, where he hoped to find higher-paying work in the Rock Springs mining industry. When that job fell through, he took a construction job in Gillette that only lasted seven months. The family returned to Wisconsin.

CHILDHOOD MEMORIES

Jamie remembers playing dress-up with his grandmother, who lived in a trailer park. She would do his make-up and let him wear her clothes. His grandma told him never to go outside dressed up, and never to tell anyone else about it, because dressing up would not be okay with other people. If people came over, he would need to go hide, wash his face, and change back into boy clothes.

“She was pretty amazing,” said Jamie.

His gay uncle would bring his partner to visit once a year. He drove a Cadillac and had a lot more money than the rest of the family.

“I remember being five, thinking, ‘I don’t want a wife; I want to have a husband when I grow up,’” said Jamie. “I remember understanding this was an option. When I told my grandmother that, she laughed at me, saying ‘Honey, you don’t have to be gay to buy a Cadillac.’ She thought that was why I wanted to be gay.”

Jamie remembers the first time he realized he had a crush on a boy: Joey Lawrence, from the TV show *Blossom*.

“I had crushes earlier than that, but I didn’t identify them as crushes,” said Jamie. “But Joey! I remember watching that show just to see him. I bought all the teen bop magazines and put up photos and posters of boys all over my room. I had a gay friend, who was not out at the time, and he was so jealous that I was allowed to decorate my room this way. He would come over, and we would sit for hours and hours, and listen to music and talk about boys.”

At age 11, Jamie came out to his family, but it was not entirely his choice. His family sat him down, and specifically asked whether he was gay. Some harassment had already started at school, and his guidance counselor had

contacted his parents about what was happening. Someone from Lutheran Social Services joined the meeting because he had called a suicide hotline for support.

“They were all at our house, and the question came up: You’re getting harassed, people are calling

you fag and queer, and we have a question: ‘Are you gay?’” said Jamie.

“At that point, I was just like, ‘Well, yes, I am.’ I was nervous about saying it, but I did not even hesitate to say yes. I was 11. I was in sixth grade. And here I am, telling my family, which was not normal in the mid-eighties,” Jamie said, “Most people were coming out in college, or even later, and here is this 11-year-old, saying it out loud.

“In some ways, I was fortunate. I had language to describe how I felt. I had vocabulary to describe who I was. I had an uncle, who at that point was identifying as gay,” Jamie said. “I knew my mother was extremely comfortable with that. My dad was not, initially, but his parenting instinct kicked in, and it became more important that I was safe than that he was uncomfortable with my sexuality. And that was commendable for a dad in the eighties.”

Jamie considers himself incredibly lucky because he had a support system from the beginning. “Every guidance counselor I ever had was on my side,” said Jamie.

“My middle school counselor was gay, although I didn’t know it at the time. He was not out to me, or anyone else, but I sensed it,” Jamie said. “Of course, he could not be out, for fear of being fired. He went over the top to help me, even if it didn’t always do any good.”

“When I was in high school, he gave my counselor a gift for me: A pen that said ‘Silence Equals Death,’” Jamie said. “That meant a lot to me.”

UNPROTECTED AND UNSAFE

Jamie remembers the abuse starting in sixth grade. He was a straight A student, so he was name-called a “Teacher’s Pet” and a “Goody Two Shoes.” But he did not like the things other boys liked, including sports, the women of *Baywatch*, or Cindy Crawford. In fact, he did not hang any posters in his locker, as not to give kids anything to use against him.

“I would have been a target regardless of my sexuality,” said Jamie. “And when people

made fun of me, I never responded. I did not deny being gay. I did not even try to get a girlfriend to prove people wrong. I did not start acting or talking like the bullies to fit in.

“I had this naïve belief that the school was going to protect me, no matter what,” said Jamie. “I remember learning about sexual harassment, and that people were not supposed to touch each other, or call each other names, or behave certain ways towards each other.

“Even in seventh or eighth grade, I believed that if I told adults what was happening, they would respond appropriately, and stop it. If I reported these things, I thought they would do what was right and fair for me,” Jamie said. “That did not happen. Not at all.”

When Jamie began reporting the abuse, he got “lip service” in return. The counselor would bring in the kids, talk to them, tell them to stop, and that was it. She did not engage the principal or the parents.

The behavior would stop—for a while—and then it would continue. By seventh grade, it became more physical, and continued to escalate.

“I could ignore them calling me names, and so could the teachers,” said Jamie. “But I thought they could not ignore them hitting me, throwing things at me, touching me. They could not ignore that. I thought, ‘They are going to step in to stop it.’ My guidance counselor was fearful of being outed himself, but he did get the principal involved. And that’s when the problems really started.”

In the beginning, the principal promised to talk to the students, but nothing happened. Then, she promised she would deal with the problem. Nothing happened. And finally, she started to blame Jamie for his own abuse.

“She would say to me, ‘If you’re going to be openly gay, you have to expect this kind of thing,’” said Jamie. “And by ‘openly gay,’ I think I had told her in private that I was gay. She and my guidance counselor knew, but nobody else knew anything. I never told anyone I was gay. I never denied that I was gay either.

“But in her mind, I deserved this, because I was ‘openly’ gay,” Jamie said. “She did not like that, she was uncomfortable with it, and she made me know through her actions that she would never support me because of it.”

VICTIMIZED AND VICTIM-SHAMED

Realizing his principal was not going to help, Jamie became increasingly withdrawn. He stopped reporting the incidents as they happened. He would tell his parents, who became more involved, but Jamie became less involved, feeling it wouldn’t make a difference.

The violence escalated. Jamie was attacked in science class, where two classmates pushed him to the ground, held him down, and pre-

tended to rape him in front of 20 witnesses. During the attack, the boys accused of Jamie of “enjoying” the sexual assault.

“In my mind, I thought, ‘Now they have to do something,’” said Jamie. “I thought, ‘I have read about situations like this. Now, they must step in.’ But when I went into the principal’s office, upset at having been attacked and violated in front of my entire class, all she said was, ‘Do you have an appointment? I do not see people without an appointment.’ Not, ‘What happened to you,’ not ‘Why are you so upset,’ not ‘Do you need medical attention?’ All she said was, ‘Do you have an appointment?’ in the coldest voice imaginable.”

The principal’s response was “boys will be boys.” She implied that Jamie should expect this kind of treatment “if he was going to be so openly gay.” In shock, Jamie left school for the day. The next day, he was sent to a counselor to explain his early exit—with no regard for the violence he’d suffered. No action was taken against his bullies.

As eighth grade continued, the harassment was so bad that a district attorney advised Jamie to take time off from school. When he went back, the harassment accelerated without any intervention from the principal.

The situation—and lack of any care for his trauma—drove Jamie to a suicide attempt.

“I just felt like nothing was ever going to change,” he said. “No matter what happened, no matter what was said or done to me, no matter how far it went. They were not going to stop it. They were not going to help me. They did not care if I lived or died.”

“Principal Podlesny was a horrible human being. She had issues with Native American students, the only diversity Ashland had at the time, and she treated them horribly. When the school district inherited funding from a local man to build a Native American cultural center at the school, the principal rejected it because it would not benefit all students. She had very conservative beliefs,” Jamie said.

HIGH SCHOOL IS WORSE

When Jamie got to high school, he hoped that things might be different. It was a different school, with a different principal, and a different assistant principal. He’d finished eighth grade in a Catholic school, which provided a brief reprieve from the violence.

Unfortunately, none of that mattered. “Assistant Principal Blauert was in charge of discipline, but he seemed to want to protect the kids harassing me,” said Jamie. “He did everything he could to blame me for what was happening repeatedly. Homophobia played a part in that. I also learned that he was a troubled kid, who was always in trouble himself,



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when he was in school. He was always standing up for these kids who were hurting other people. That is just the kind of person he was.”

Appealing to the principal made no difference. Principal Davis believed his assistant principal was doing his job, so he did not see any need to intervene. He was told there were not any issues, and everything was fine, so he never followed up on anything that escalated to his level. Neither Jamie nor his parents really understood that there was a superintendent nor a school board, so they thought the principal was the last level of recourse available.

“We thought if they weren’t willing to do anything, then there was nothing you could do,” said Jamie.

Meanwhile, Jamie was just trying to survive day to day while staying true to himself.

In ninth grade, Jamie was pushed into a bathroom urinal, where another student urinated on him. He reported the incident to the principal, who simply sent him home to change clothes. When Jamie’s parents pushed back, the principal recommended that he change his school schedule to avoid the bullies. Instead, the school placed Jamie in a special education class with his attackers.

In ninth grade, Jamie again attempted suicide, then ran away. He was only 15.

“I knew high school wasn’t going to be any different from middle school,” said Jamie. “It had escalated to a point where I had gotten badly hurt a few times. I felt like I could not do this anymore. I would not survive three more years of this. I would rather be homeless and on my own than dealing with this.”

“So, my best friend since sixth grade and I decided to run to the Twin Cities. We had this fantasy that we could build this perfect life. Almost immediately, I realized survival meant doing things I did not want to do and would not be comfortable with. We were only there a week and a half before I went home.”

Tenth grade was no better. On the school bus, he was called names, hit with steel nuts and bolts, and constantly harassed. One morning, while waiting for the school library to open, he was violently attacked by eight boys, suffered internal bleeding, and required hospitalization. The bullying had reached life-threatening levels.

The assistant principal laughed and told him he deserved the beating because he was gay.

“The assistant principal would say, ‘Well, when you’re hitting on other boys, they’re going to react,’” said Jamie. “‘You can’t expect them to just sit by when you’re touching them, or flirting with them, or hitting on them.’ What-



Jamie Nabozny and his family today.

ever the situation was, I was told I had done something to provoke it. It was the worst type of gaslighting. The message was that I was somehow instigating my own abuse, and he was not going to do anything about it.”

“I never told any classmates I was gay until tenth grade,” said Jamie. “One of my Spanish classmates was a foreign exchange student, and she came out and asked me. ‘Everyone keeps saying that you are gay, so are you gay?’ And I said yes. She was genuinely nice about it.”

The police were no help. When Jamie’s parents reported the abuse, they would be referred to the school to handle their “disciplinary matter” because it happened during school, at the school. When Jamie’s parents asked school administrators to step up, they were told it was a criminal matter that had nothing to do with the school, and that they should press charges.

“Legally, I was in the school’s care, and the police made horrible mistakes by not investigating or prosecuting crimes they were well aware of,” said Jamie. “They acknowledged that in the end, and it resulted in a police liaison program being established at the school. They realized they could not ignore what was happening there or absolve themselves of their responsibility.”

The second time Jamie ran away, he didn’t come back.

“My guidance counselor told my parents that the school was unwilling to help me,” said Jamie. “So I decided it was time to go.”

In eleventh grade, Jamie left Ashland High School forever. He moved to Minneapolis, where he was treated for post-traumatic stress disorder. In search of legal advice, he connected with the Gay and Lesbian Community Action Council (now OutFront Minnesota).

“The Internet wasn’t really available yet, so I called their hotline,” said Jamie. “And would

you believe, the person I spoke with was OutFront’s lawyer, who was working the hotline that day. After hearing my story, she asked to meet with me, and she listened to my entire story. She was the first person who said, ‘What happened to you was not only wrong, but illegal.’ I was in shock, because I always knew it was wrong, and I didn’t know I had any power to stop it until she said that.”

“That was the beginning of my lawsuit,” Jamie said. “She connected me with a local lawyer who started my case, but she wanted the entire proceedings to remain private. No press, no press releases, no speaking out. She wanted a quick settlement. I did not feel great about that, because one of my reasons for doing this was to make things better for others in my situation. I knew I was not the only one, and I knew that others felt alone and lonely.”

In Minneapolis, Jamie got involved with the District 202 youth center, where he met other kids from all over the state who had endured similar abuse. He realized that he wanted to do more and be more in the world. He wanted to help people like himself.

“Eventually, OutFront’s lawyer dropped out of the case, and Lambda Legal stepped in. Things started moving after that,” Jamie said.

Nabozny v. Podlesny was filed against not only the school district, but several of the school officials as individuals. Attorneys argued that Jamie’s Fourteenth Amendment rights, as well as his rights under Wisconsin state law, had been openly and repeatedly violated. When harassment was reported by female students, it was handled immediately, but that same approach was not applied when gay students were harassed.

HISTORIC VERDICT

When the news broke about the case, the

public was very skeptical. At first, they thought the Naboznys were just trying to get money out of the school. By the end of the trial, the conversation had changed, partially due to consistent coverage in the *Ashland Daily Press*.

“I think people understood this isn’t just about name-calling,” said Jamie. “My last beating put me in the hospital and required several surgeries to heal. I had been hospitalized two other times and had to visit the emergency room two additional times due to beatings. This was not your typical playground behavior. This was much more extreme. This was life-threatening. And it was well-known to the people in charge, and they chose not to do anything.”

Despite the lawsuit advancing, Jamie and his family still did not feel safe. His parents received death threats. Their house was shot up before the trial, and they came home to find bullet holes throughout the house. They found dead animals in their mailbox. But the trial and its coverage shifted the narrative.

“The trial happened the week of Thanksgiving, and I did not want to go back for the Christmas holiday,” said Jamie. “I decided to go after all. I was at a Citgo gas station when an older lady approached me and asked if I was Jamie Nabozny. I was immediately on edge, thinking, ‘Oh here we go. This is why I did not want to come back here.’”

“But all she said was, ‘I just wanted to thank

you. This school is going to be a better place because of you holding them accountable,’” Jamie said.

“And then we went Christmas shopping at Walmart, and people we did not know were coming up to us thanking us and apologizing for all that we had been through,” said Jamie. “And there were overwhelmingly positive letters to the editor, applauding us for speaking up, and calling for the school leaders to explain themselves. Only one letter was vaguely negative, because the writer wanted to know where the money would come from, outside of bankrupting the school.”

Jamie’s attorneys were not sure if they had a winnable case because there was no legal precedent, and the climate was very conservative.

The district court decided in favor of the school district. Jamie was told that he had no legal grounds to sue, as there was no legal right to be safe in school. The district judge also stated that a school could not be held liable for the actions of students against other students.

Undaunted, Jamie took the case to the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Seventh Circuit. However, there was no guarantee the case would go to trial. And, if it did go to trial, the same judge who threw it out would not be cooperative in hearing it again. The system would make it difficult for Jamie to win.

“That’s one of the reasons we chose a jury

trial, instead of a judge trial,” said Jamie. “We already knew where the judge stood. The lawyers said, ‘We cannot win this, and we need to know you are okay with that, but we are also going to do this big media blitz. We want to get your story out there. We want to use your story to educate others.’ I felt good about that, knowing how far and wide this problem really was.”

Lambda Legal was getting calls from all over the country from kids and parents coping with homophobic bullying, harassment, and violence. They brought in Skadden, a high-profile Chicago law firm, as a partner for the trial. Jamie’s new attorney was an openly gay, HIV-positive partner of the firm, who chose this as his legacy case.

“The jury selection process was fascinating,” said Jamie. “The trial was the week of Thanksgiving, and this was northwestern Wisconsin. Most of the men would rather be hunting, and eager to come to a verdict so they could get back to hunting season. Most of the jury members were women, and all of them were moms. The head lawyer said, ‘We want to make sure they see you as someone’s kid, so they think about this happening to one of their kids.’”

Jamie still cannot believe the Ashland school district’s testimony.

“The principals got up there and lied,” said Jamie. “It is the only way to describe what they did. But then, other witnesses testified

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the opposite of how we expected. The school receptionist said, “Yes, she knew my parents because they were in the office a lot. One of the kids’ mothers, who was supposed to be the witness for the school, got on the stand and said, ‘Yes, my son did these things, and the school did absolutely nothing about it.’ Her son was disciplined for beating up other kids, but he was never disciplined when he beat me up. We never expected her testimony to help us, but it did.”

On July 31, 1996, Judge Jesse Eschbach wrote a pointed response:

The question is not whether (the defendants) are required to treat every harassment complaint the same way: as we have noted, they are not. The question is whether they are required to give male and female students equivalent levels of protection. They are, and the law clearly said so, prior to Nabozny’s years in middle school.

The circuit court unanimously agreed that school officials had violated Jamie’s rights:

We conclude...that the District and defendants Podlesny, Davis, and Blauert violated Nabozny’s Fourteenth Amendment right to equal protection by discriminating against him based on his gender or sexual orientation. Further, the law establishing the defendant’s liability was sufficiently clear to inform the defendants that their conduct was unconstitutional. Nabozny’s equal protection claims are reinstated in toto.

“My biggest memory was the verdict taking an hour and a half, which is unheard of,” said Jamie. “My lawyers said that is either good or bad. We were prepared for the worst at that point. We had no idea. We were expecting to lose. The head lawyer said, ‘I need you to not respond when they read the verdict, do not cry, do not scream, do not do anything. Any reaction could affect the damages phase. You need to stay neutral.’”

“When the judge read the verdict, the person who reacted the most was the head lawyer! He had tears coming down his face because he was so happy. We left there, hugging, and crying, despite trying to stay quiet and emotionless.”

In November 1996, the jury found school officials liable for failing to stop the violence. Before the jury could determine the damages, school officials requested to settle.

“We were supposed to return the next day for the damages phase,” said Jamie. “But that night, they tried to negotiate a settlement that took five hours to finalize. I went to bed that night in a state of disbelief. I do not know how else to explain it. When I was in the shower the next morning, I heard on the radio that a settle-

ment had been reached. It was the number one news story of the morning. I broke down crying because it did not seem real until that moment.”

“When I heard it on the radio, I was like, ‘Oh my God, it’s over, I won.’”

The case settled for \$962,000 in damages. A year later, the Department of Education clarified that Title IX requires schools to provide a safe environment for all students—including gay and lesbian ones. The case launched a national groundswell for LGBTQ youth.

AFTERSHOCKS

The Ashland School District did not really face any sanctions, penalties, or consequences, outside the court proceedings. The civil case—which did not invoke any civil rights protections—did not result in any discipline for any of the school administrators, but within one-to-two years, all three of them were gone.

“I think there was a quiet-but-deliberate effort to get rid of them,” said Jamie. “That has never been confirmed officially anywhere, but it is strange that all of them were gone so quickly after the trial. Principal Podlesny was rumored to have had a nervous breakdown. She went on leave and never came back. She wound up being a very unpopular professor at Northland College. Principal Davis retired, and Assistant Principal Blauert relocated to Superior until he retired. It was a complete house-cleaning, whether anyone will ever admit it.”

“Principal Davis was the only person I ever received an apology from,” said Jamie. “He felt he could and should have done more.”

After the trial, Jamie reconnected with some of his bullies—sometimes in surprising places.

“I ended up working with one of them at Wells Fargo,” said Jamie. “I was managing people coming into the company from outside of banking and developing them into becoming bankers and managers for our branches. He was one of the branch managers, and we wound up at happy hour together. He took me aside, and said, ‘I feel bad about everything I did, and I wanted you to know that. Having my own children makes me see the world very differently.’ All I could say to him was ‘Thank you, I appreciate that.’”

“Another one lives in the Twin Cities, and he sent me a Facebook message when his own son was being harassed,” said Jamie. “He said it made him realize the harm he had caused. But he sent me a very genuine apology, explaining that he now understands what my family and I went through.”

“And here’s the weirdest story of all: I was getting a birthday card for a friend at a gay

bookstore in Minneapolis, back when there were gay bookstores in Minneapolis,” said Jamie. “I noticed someone was in the back-room where the adult movies were located, and they kept ducking down to avoid me. But they could not get around me without being seen, because the exit was behind me.”

“So, eventually, I went around the corner to see him, and I knew exactly who he was. He came up to me, terrified, and said, ‘I’m so sorry, please don’t tell anyone, it will ruin my life.’ And I am just standing there, trying to figure out what to even say or do in this situation, and finally I said, ‘You must live with the fact that you are who you are, and you did what you did, for the rest of your life. There is nothing I can do to make that worse.’”

“He left quickly. I had a whole lot to think about after that moment. Do I say something? Do I out him? Sadly, he is now a minister, married with three children, and I am quite sure he is closeted and probably cheating on his wife, while preaching that being gay is a sin. I actually feel very sorry for him.

“And I know others like him. Two of the 10 bullies named in my lawsuit came out, and I know two others who are closeted. Four of these 10 boys were so afraid of people finding out about them, that they took it out on me. One came out to his sister while in prison, and she reached out to me thinking I should know.”

LIFE GOES ON

After the case ended in 1996, Jamie agreed to support Lambda Legal with fundraising and speaking projects. He traveled coast to coast to support the organization. He was happy to do it, never realizing the emotional impact of telling his story repeatedly.

“I didn’t know how it would affect me from day to day,” said Jamie. “There were days I did not want to get out of bed. I had not dealt with what had happened to me. My PTSD was hammering me with a vengeance, and I had a really challenging time being in crowded spaces.”

“After about nine months, I had to stop with the speaking tour. I just could not do it anymore. I quit talking about it with friends and family. And that lasted for more than 12 years.”

In 2009, the Southern Poverty Law Center approached Jamie about making a movie about his life. Initially, he declined the offer.

He was living in Minot, North Dakota, with a boyfriend of 12–18 months, and overseeing 13 bank branches in the western half of the state. When he got off the phone, his boyfriend asked what the caller wanted, and Jamie realized he did not even know how to explain

the request, as he had never even told his boyfriend about his experiences. Halfway through the conversation, his boyfriend stopped him and said, “I already know all of that, because I Googled you when we started dating.”

As someone who endured bullying, he encouraged Jamie to pursue the documentary.

Jamie agreed to do the film. The SPLC project, *Bullied*, was narrated by actor Jane Lynch. The film became part of the Law Center’s Teaching Tolerance series.

“I didn’t realize how big the Southern Poverty Law Center was, or how big of an impact the film would have,” said Jamie. “At that point, they put out a film every few years, produced 10,000–15,000 copies, and shared them with liberal schools around the country. My film extended their reach, because it was a relevant topic for all schools and all students. And it got me back into the public speaking space, because people wanted to meet me and hear my story again.”

Jamie agreed to go on a speaking circuit for a year but wound up doing it for four years.

There were two attempts to produce a feature-length film on Jamie’s life story. The first attempt was sponsored by Bette Midler’s production company, which shocked Jamie as a life-long Bette Midler fan. While the films never came to be, he is still hopeful that his story will be revisited someday.

“I’d love to see a streaming channel do an eight-to-nine episode series, because I think that would be a more powerful way of telling my story,” said Jamie. “There are a lot of kids out there who need help, and hearing my story might give them the inspiration they need.”

Jamie and his husband were married on top of a Duluth, MN ski hill. They’ve been together for 17 years. In 2014, they decided to start a family. At the end of 2016, they became the parents of four children. Today, the family lives in the Twin Cities, where Jamie works as an insurance agent.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

Reflecting on Title IX lawsuits in Wisconsin, Jamie recognizes we still have a long way to go before all students feel safe at school.

“I do believe it’s gotten better in some places, and for some kids,” said Jamie. “I think the biggest problem we are still facing today is that kids who are not gender-conforming face a lot of abuse. That was true when I was young, and it is even more true today.

“Why? Because those kids are not staying in the closet. They are no longer afraid. They are coming out and finding their place in the world. They are not biding their time or laying low so they can graduate and leave their hometowns,” Jamie said. “Kids are coming out younger and younger, and they are expressing


and defining themselves more fluently, even if they do not have full family support.”

“Nowadays, boys can come out, and they can be on the football team, and everyone’s celebrating them, because they’re acting exactly how a boy is expected to act,” said Jamie. “But that same kid would get a quite different response on the swim team or gymnastics team. The reason is that sexism is still stronger than homophobia in schools. Sexism, at its heart, still rules how we respond to each other, and it starts in how we are taught in schools.

“My words of encouragement are the same today that they were in the ‘90s,” said Jamie. “The first one is that you are not alone. There are literally millions of kids out there being bullied and feeling alone, just like you. The second thing is that what is happening is wrong—and you have a right to be protected in school. Ask for help, and do not stop asking until someone listens to you. Everyone has a boss. If the teacher isn’t helping you, you report it to the principal. If the principal refuses to help, then go to the superintendent.”

“And my last point is, you need to stick around to see how amazing your life will be,” Jamie said. “I wish I could go back and tell my 14-, 15-, 16-year-old self what my life is like now and give him the strength and hope he needed to see what the future brings. You never know how amazing your future could be.” ■

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PRIDE CORPORATE SPONSORSHIP RAINBOW CAPITALISM DEI

Corporate Commodification Exposed

As we saw with **Twin Cities Pride** declining Target's corporate sponsorship, Pride orgs must face the new reality where grassroots funding may not only be more sustainable but also better aligned with the origins and spirit of Pride.

SHORTLY AFTER taking office last month, the 47th President of the so-called United States signed executive orders attacking "woke gender ideology" (Defending Women From Gender Ideology Extremism and Restoring Biological Truth to the Federal Government) and Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) (Ending Radical and Wasteful Government DEI Programs and Preferencing), specifically attacking the entire transgender community and ordering an end to federal funding for programs that focused on diversity, equity, and inclusion, specifically targeting programs that support Black and Indigenous folks, the transgender community, the immigrant community, and women. While at the time of writing this article many of 47's executive orders are being challenged through legal means, with judges questioning the constitutionality/legality of these orders, many federal agencies are pre-emptively complying by removing any mention of DEI from websites and funding opportunities, ordering an end to work on programs and projects that are considered DEI in focus, and compiling lists of programs and research projects that could be considered DEI in scope. Additionally, several corporations, who were not directly impacted by these executive orders, chose to end their DEI programs and roll back support for marginalized communities, of which they

had previously championed, to presumably align with the current political regime.

TWIN CITIES PRIDE & TARGET

Just days after these orders were signed, Target announced they would be ending their DEI programs, specifically the programs they implemented to increase representation and engagement of the Black community, as well as initiatives that sought to hire and promote women, People of Color, LGBTQ+ people, and veterans. Because of this move, Twin Cities Pride, a non-profit in Minneapolis that hosts the second largest Pride festival in Minnesota as well as other programs that benefit and uplift the LGBTQ+ community, declined Target's \$50,000 annual pride sponsorship and appealed to the community to raise funds to cover the loss. This action by Twin Cities Pride was well received. They raised more than \$89,000 through crowd-funding, surpassing their goal of raising \$50,000 in less than 24 hours. Not only did this tactic work to reinforce community support for Pride events through tangible and material support, but it also represented a successful role-reversal in which the Pride organization pulled funding from the corporate sponsor for not aligning with Pride values, a departure from traditional corporate influence, showcasing the power of our community.

RAINBOW CAPITALISM

Anti-diversity actions, especially in the context of anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric and threats to the rights we've fought for as a community, have reinvigorated ongoing conversations regarding rainbow capitalism (appropriation and profiting from the LGBTQ+ community/movements), rainbow-washing/pink-washing (superficial support for the LGBTQ+ community as a marketing tactic), and the place of corporate sponsorship in Pride celebrations. Pride hosting organizations will now need to contend with questions as to what impact(s) the current political atmosphere and economic uncertainties will have/have had on the future of Pride celebrations, how current celebrations are honoring the origins of Pride in actively protesting the political attacks our community continues to experience—specifically addressing the attacks on the transgender community, whether there is opportunity to create systems to hold organizations accountable to tangible (institutional values that uplift the LGBTQ+ community) and material support of the LGBTQ+ community beyond Pride month/sponsorships, as well as how to ensure that Pride celebrations are sustainable outside of funding from corporations/businesses/organizations that seek only to profit off of Pride month and do not tangibly and materially support our community.

SHALLOW CORPORATE SUPPORT

While many in the LGBTQ+ community have pointed to rainbow capitalism and corporate support of the LGBTQ+ community as indicators of progress and greater acceptance of our community, others have been critical of the commodification of the LGBTQ+ community (rainbow-washing), noting that corporate support is shallow and more of a marketing scheme/money-making tactic than indicative of tangible support of our community. Many corporations that claim to give a portion of their Pride profits to LGBTQ+ organizations do not specify how much they will be donating or which organizations will benefit. And in recent years, corporations that have experienced right-wing/conservative backlash have scaled back their support of the LGBTQ+ community by hiding and/or eliminating their public facing Pride displays, choosing to appease a small-but-vocal group of haters instead of choosing to be steadfast in supporting and uplifting the LGBTQ+ community.

Broad support of our community is always welcome, and we would all love to see the

businesses, corporations, and organizations that we work for, patronize, and otherwise support show visible and monetary support for the LGBTQ+ community, representation at Pride typically amounts to nothing more than selling rainbow goods and superficially inclusive services during the month of June, while abandoning our community the other 11 months of the year. But, commodification of our community is not support, it is exploitation. We need to demand more from those with money and power who claim to support our community, especially when they want visibility and recognition at our Pride events.

CORPORATE VS. PRIVATE DONATIONS

Perhaps the most significant barrier for Pride hosting organizations considering separating from corporate sponsorships is that corporate donations are generally larger than individual donations, as the tax breaks for charitable giving for businesses are generally more advantageous than for most individuals. Additionally, corporate sponsorships are usually sustained annually and are generally easy for a non-profit organization to obtain, sometimes merely requiring an organization to fill out a form online and provide proof of 501(c)3 status. And as many of the organizations that host Pride are non-profits, obtaining corporate sponsorships have a better cost-benefit ratio than the work that is required to put on fundraising events and/or long-term crowd-sourcing campaigns. Traditional fundraising means are usually more difficult to sustain and more costly to the organization as they must consider the costs of putting on the events (e.g., entertainment, equipment, room rental, advertising, etc.) as well as the costs associated with the time paid staff have to put into the fundraising events, which can also take away time spent on other important advocacy initiatives, such as programs to support trans people and housing insecurity in the community, and the costs associated with staff time spent organizing volunteer efforts which can be especially time-consuming when trying to find volunteer staff. However, these barriers should not be considered insurmountable as some corporations have reiterated their commitment to DEI initiatives, can be relied on for continued support, and have the opportunity to deepen their commitment to the LGBTQ+ community beyond Pride month. Additionally, traditional fundraising measures are still effective as well as other considerations for sustainable Pride celebrations.

SUSTAINABILITY IN FUNDING

Alongside ideological concerns with corporate Pride sponsorships, Pride hosting organizations will need to consider how

economic struggles may impact existing sponsorships and how to ensure sustainability in Pride celebrations while also ensuring that our celebrations are honoring the spirit and meaning of Pride. One potential consideration in the event that funding for Pride celebrations become scarce are for organizations and communities to consider holding smaller, grassroots celebrations, reminiscent of the first Pride protests and celebrations, that are well-coordinated and that can be sustained mostly through volunteer efforts and in-kind donations from local businesses. This might look like a smaller

Commodification of our community is not support, it is exploitation. We need to demand more from those with money and power who claim to support us, especially when they want visibility and recognition at our Pride events.

park celebration with a potluck picnic instead of a large festival, or a Pride protest instead of a traditional parade. Another potential solution may involve coordinating crowd-sourcing fundraising campaigns that can be sustained through volunteer efforts by relying on long-term volunteers. Pride hosting organizations can provide volunteers with fundraising toolkits, peer-to-peer fundraising opportunities, and other easy, low-cost incentives to support sustainable fundraising efforts. Additionally, organizations could consider teaming up with other non-profits in fundraising for Pride in a way that is mutually beneficial and shows solidarity in community with a commitment to collective liberation.

YEARROUND PRIDE

Pride hosting organizations can also consider requiring a commitment from all corporate Pride sponsors to not only give funds directly in support of Pride but to also commit to organizing fundraising directly through their organization outside of Pride month activities, in addition to committing volunteers to assist with the Pride event beyond representation at a sponsored booth and in a way that benefits the community (e.g. organizing a kids activity area, sponsoring a water-wagon/water distri-



JILIP (JILL) NAGLER (ze/hir; they/them) is a community activist and organizer, a local musician, a muser, a bibliophile, 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.

ution, giving away free food to attendees, etc.). Corporate sponsors must also be held to a commitment to support of LGBTQ+ employees, patrons, etc. by working with LGBTQ+ non-profits to assess their organizational support of our community and to address any short-comings with opportunities for improvement. There are a plethora of creative ways to move toward tangible, sustainable, material support of the LGBTQ+ community throughout the year and if these would-be sponsors are not truly tangibly and materially committed to our community and all the intersections then they cannot and should not have a physical, visible presence in our celebrations.

ALIGNING WITH PRIDE'S ORIGINS

Now is as good a time as ever for organizations that host Pride celebrations to reflect on how they can better align their events with the origins of Pride, especially considering the violent actions that have already been/continue to be waged against the transgender community as threats to our entire LGBTQ+ community and the intersections therein. We can demand better, and there's no better time than now as we are reminded that the LGBTQ+ community cannot be free when any of us are being attacked, and to honor the transgender folks past and present who continue to fight for us all. And while change is intimidating, and it is disappointing to think that we may need to scale back from the large Pride celebrations we've become accustomed to, is the pomp and circumstance worth selling out our Pride roots—the reason that Pride celebrations exist in the first place—when our rights and well-being are actively under attack?

While change is hard and pushback is to be expected, our community is strong, resilient, and worth celebrating outside the bounds of capitalism and corporate influence. Our greatest Pride celebrations come in the form of resisting and protesting federal policies that seek to erase us. We're still here, we're still queer, and we will continue to fight with Pride for the liberation of all LGBTQ+ people everywhere. ■

ALEXANDER EINSMAN
MS LMFT

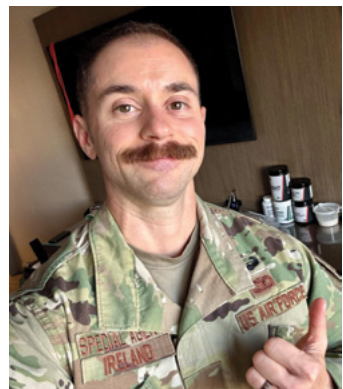




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ARMY TRANS SERVICE MEMBERS GENDER IDENTITY BATHROOMS HEALTH CARE

Here We Go Again: Targeting Trans Service Members

Former U.S. Army Colonel Sheri Swokowski returns to *Our Lives* to share analysis and perspective on the recent executive order dismissing current trans service members from the military and banning entry to trans folks in the future and connects it to the broader anti-trans movement.

WHEN DON'T ASK, DON'T TELL was repealed by Congress in December of 2011 and the Department of Defense (DoD) allowed gay, lesbian, and bisexual people to serve openly the following year, transgender service members (SMs) were left behind and forced to remain serving in silence. Donald Trump, like he did in his first term, is again trying to prohibit transgender people from serving their country—including the 4,500 already in uniform.

HISTORY OF TRANS MILITARY BANS

After a year of study by the RAND Corp (and others) Defense Secretary Ashton Carter affirmed on June 30, 2016 that, to maintain military advantages, DoD was required to avail themselves of the best and brightest talent available. He eliminated the existing ban on transgender service and put in place policies allowing trans SMs to serve openly and receive all medically necessary care. President Trump's July 2017 tweets banned transgender civilians from serving but allowed those in uniform to remain. Secretary Mattis implemented his guidance shortly thereafter. Implementation of ban 2.0 was halted by four court cases. In early 2019, the Supreme Court allowed trans ban 2.0 to remain in place citing trans folks could still serve in their sex/gender assigned at birth. President Joe Biden's Executive Order in January

2021 rescinded the previous orders and allowed trans SMs, once again, to serve openly.

Policies that ban thousands of qualified and experienced trans SMs are dangerous not only for those involved, but for our national defense and individual safety. They create vulnerabilities and opportunities for our adversaries to exploit. At a local level, they incite violence to cisgender and transgenders folks, alike.

On January 27, 2025, President Trump signed Executive Order 14183, "Prioritizing Military Excellence and Readiness" where he somehow claimed, "Expressing a false 'gender identity' divergent from an individual's sex cannot satisfy the rigorous standards necessary for military service." Prior to any policy change, Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth's memo dated February 7 indicated, "The lethality, readiness, and warfighting capability of our Force depends on Service members meeting those standards." It should be noted here that trans SMs have met, or exceeded, all standards since 2016. The February 7 memo clearly states, "Individuals with gender dysphoria have volunteered to serve our country and will be treated with dignity and respect." The same memo denies those serving medically necessary care, and takes away promotions of enlisted personnel who successfully complete Officer Candidate

School and other commissioning options (e.g., service academy, ROTC graduates). Perhaps the new Secretary has a new definition of dignity and respect, but I digress.

On February 26, Secretary Hegseth disseminated the new policy declaring the "high standards for Service member readiness, lethality, cohesion, honesty, humility, uniformity, and integrity...is inconsistent with the medical, surgical, and mental health constraints on individuals with gender dysphoria...and are no longer eligible for military service..." All medical procedures are cancelled; cross-hormone therapy can be continued until separation is complete. Each service (e.g. Army, Navy, etc) now has 30 days to publish separation guidance. Those with 18+ years of service will be allowed to retire (Marines 15+ years), SMs with 6-17 years may qualify for voluntary separation pay if filed within 30 days; those who stay longer than 30 days may qualify for involuntary separation pay (50% of VSP). All individuals being processed for separation are now non-deployable.

Since trans SMs have met or exceeded the standards for almost nine years, readiness standards have been maintained, and health-care costs have declined to \$2.4M per year for trans SMs, the Administration is searching for new reasons to kick out trans SMs. If we want

to talk about gender-affirming care costs, we should mention DoD spends \$100M+ annually for Erectile Dysfunction drugs.

SORTING FACT FROM FICTION

The facts remain that trans SMs are fully qualified for their positions, meet or exceed all standards, and are deployed worldwide in the most austere conditions, on land, in the air, on and under the sea. The DoD's own data (September 2019) indicate 86% of trans SMs are Senior enlisted and Senior Officers; most recent data indicate 73% are Senior enlisted. The average trans SM has 12-21 years of service and multiple deployments. That's an awful lot of experience and leadership skills we stand to lose from the roles.

SPARTApride.org, an org for trans military and veterans, reports numerous military commanders are out in front of any policy change and directing trans members to use bathroom and sleeping facilities that align with their sex assigned at birth, even though Judge Advocates (military lawyers) agree the members should continue to use facilities based on the gender in the military data base (Defense Enrollment Eligibility Reporting System or DEERS).

Trans SMs and allies have filed two lawsuits seeking preliminary injunctions to any new policy prohibiting service by trans individuals. The initial arguments in the first lawsuit were heard by Judge Ana Reyes in DC District Court on February 17 and 18. It seems the Judge's interpretation to date is that "the premise of the Executive Order (everyone has only either XX or XY chromosomes) is just incorrect." Additionally, she surmised our military is incompetent if the greatest fighting force in history is going to have readiness degraded by "less than one percent of the soldiers using a different pronoun than others might want to call them." While she indicated the EO appears to be unfounded animus, this was only the first battle of the first days. At the time of this writing, the next court date was expected to to happen mid-March, shortly after the revised policy was expected to be published. After additional arguments, she was expected to issue her ruling on a preliminary injunction by Mar 10. This will, again, end up before the Supreme Court.

PART OF A LARGER ANTI-TRANS MOVEMENT

The trans military ban is part of a larger movement, one which fails to recognize the



SHERI SWOKOWSKI is a retired Army Col and PhD researcher who has been an advocate for trans military service for more than a decade. She played a role in influencing the Department of Defense in 2014-15 to allow transgender personnel to serve openly and receive medically necessary care. She is the first female infantry soldier to be recognized by DoD when they corrected her DD 214 (record of military service) to reflect her authenticity. While prohibited from serving authentically in uniform, she did so as a civilian senior analyst at the Pentagon 2008-10.

science involved. The benefits of gender-related care are widely recognized and supported by almost all the major, legitimate health-care organizations around the globe. As one who has testified on Capitol Hill and at the Wisconsin State Capitol, I am appalled at the disinformation being peddled by Republicans at committee hearings. Some people claim their research is factual, when they haven't conducted research at all. How they arrive at their conclusions is by conducting selective literature reviews of pieces that agree with their preconceived opinions. An actual research process involves identifying gaps in that literature, hypothesizing a solution to that gap, developing a plan to test the hypothesis, vetting it through an institutional review board process, conducting data collection, analysis, and then submitting results to independent peer reviewers for validation. See the difference?

Unfortunately, we've seen a lot of political theater that has been harmful to the trans community—almost all along political party lines. During the past several years, we've seen 26 red states ban medically necessary care for trans youth, (two states banned trans healthcare for adults). In the first two months of 2025, eight additional states introduced bills banning adult trans health care. The new administration has erased trans/NB/GNC folks from government passports and websites and restricted bathroom use to sex assigned at birth. That started in early January when Speaker Johnson restricted where Sarah McBride (D-DE) could use the bathroom. A subsequent EO and OPM guidance restricts all people to bathrooms based on sex assigned at birth. This applies to all federal agencies and buildings, all federal employees, and visitors. I've been in federal buildings several times since and will not be complying. It would not only be confusing, but dangerous for me. This puts cisgender individuals in danger, as well. When Rep Lauren Boebert (R-CO) thought she saw Rep McBride in the ladies room, she ran to Rep Nancy Mace (R-SC). Upon entering, Rep Boebert was informed she made an error, and issued a formal apology. And, of course, no one has addressed how these rules/laws will be enforced. Sadly, this is all based on the opinion of one person determined to use fear and disinformation to erase trans people from society.

Forcing humans into an outdated gender binary and one different from their identity is

cruel and inhuman and will, undoubtedly, lead to tragic consequences. Forcing trans people into bathrooms by their sex assigned at birth, when their identity differs, is no different than forcing cisgender individuals to do the same. From experience, I know it will create critical mental health crises.

Secretary Hegseth's directive to restrict trans SMs to bathrooms based on their sex assigned at birth will result in harm to many by forcing all genders to use the same bathroom. I thought that was what the GOP/Christian right was trying to avoid? If trans SMs are forced to wear the uniform of their sex assigned at birth, he will be responsible for the catastrophic results. In fact, this has already started with the suicide of a trans military retiree at the Syracuse VA Hospital in February.

Trans healthcare has been around for more than 100 years. The Magnus Hirschfeld Clinic opened in Berlin in 1919. It treated all members of the LGBTQ community and specialized in trans healthcare. In 1933, Nazis raided it. They piled 20,000+ library research references onto the street and ignited them—and murdered half of the staff. "First they came for the trans kids..." I am not an alarmist. In fact, my military leader and analytical skill sets make me the exact opposite. Having said that, the similarities to what is happening to the transgender population in the U.S. today is deeply troubling. ■



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