

our lives



Al Poliarco



Noelle Mariano



Oasis Café

# HEALTH & FAMILY

Advancing LGBTQ health equity across Wisconsin

Madison's LGBT&XYZ Magazine

November / December 2025

## FROM BIAS TO BREAKTHROUGH

Denise Jess

How the Wisconsin Council of the Blind and Visually Impaired Executive Director champions independence, breaks down ableist narratives, and uplifts the full humanity of blind and low-vision Wisconsinites.

### MADISON AREA FAITH DIRECTORY

Our list of churches, congregations, and spiritual communities that have visibly identified themselves as open and affirming to LGBTQ+ people.

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"In my view, the best of humanity is in our exercise of empathy and compassion. It's when we challenge ourselves to walk in the shoes of someone whose pain or plight might seem so different than yours that it's almost incomprehensible."

- Sarah McBride, first openly transgender person elected to Congress

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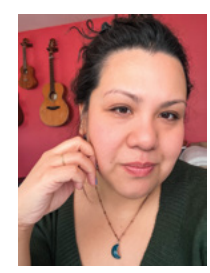
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**EDITOR'S LETTER** ALEXANDRIA DELCOURT



**A THING ABOUT PLANNING**



**WHAT I FIND FASCINATING** about content curation is the fact that whether we originally plan our issues to look any particular way, the final product always seems to reflect the reality of the world at large in a way that surprises me and makes me reconsider my circumstance, perspective, and position relative to those around me.

In this issue, for example, as story pitches and drafts were assigned, shuffled, cut, and edited, a few distinct themes seemed to want to make themselves known. Even though this is our Health & Wellness issue, you'll just happen to find six different stories that, in some way, discuss politics. To start, I'm very excited about our news opener: "The Stakes and the Spark" by **Wendy Faith**. The article discusses the current state of flux in Wisconsin politics, a circumstance many consider to be a rare and important opportunity to shift the balance of power in the state toward more progressive leadership. You'll also find a write-up about the campaigns of **Dina Nina Martinez-Rutherford** and **Jocasta Zamarripa**.

Similarly, flipping through this issue, you might be surprised to see a surprising amount of Filipino representation. This is something that I, as your humble Filipino Editor, am so excited about! To start, **Noelle Mariano** discusses the process of recovering from a hate crime in "Survival is an Act of Politics." A few stories later, "Finding Identity Through Massage" features **Al Poliarco**, owner of Barefoot Hands and Feet Massage, and tells the story of Al's journey leaving the Philippines, arriving in the U.S., coming out, and finding his home and voice here.

And of course, there's plenty of health-related content. I'd specifically recommend checking out "The LGBTQ-Affirming Health Services Directory" that **Kez Cesarz** worked so hard to put together!

But seeing what the content can tell us about the world is just as important as analyzing the content that doesn't. For instance, it has been getting more difficult to find young people willing to write an essay for our Youth Feature. Many don't feel safe publishing essays about their identities, especially alongside their photos—and I don't blame them. This is why there are a number of recent Youth Features that appear without photos. We've also received requests from previous youth who've been featured to take down their essays for safety concerns.

As hard as that is, it's also a reflection of the current state of the world, and it's something we can't afford to ignore for the health and safety of those who come after us. And with that, I hope you enjoy this year's Health & Wellness issue! ■

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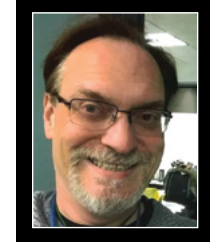


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- 11. Greg Wright**, Princeton

**OBITUARIES**



**SYLVIA SYDNEY ROSENTHAL**, known as Sylvie, age 46, of Madison, passed away on October 14. Sylvie was inclusive, joyous, imaginative, fun and knowledgeable—a light in every community she touched, and a source of comfort and safety for all. As an artist, she was known for her mindfully crafted work, in which she engaged chiseled forms, marbled surfaces, and exactly notched connections that constructed a surrealist menagerie. Through hybrid forms, she merged and transformed technologies, animals, and histories, interrupting a singular narrative in favor of a constellation of possibility.



**MARK R. ALBRIGHT**, age 60, of Milton (formerly of Edgerton), passed away at his home on October 15. Mark attended Edgerton schools and graduated from Edgerton High School in 1984. He continued his education at UW–River Falls and Beloit College, earning a degree in Theatre and Communications. Mark built a successful career with Sinclair Broadcast Group, where he worked as an Assistant Advertising Support Manager. Beyond his professional life, Mark was known for his creativity and warmth. He had a passion for cooking, writing, singing, and acting, and brought joy to those around him through his many talents.

**CONTRIBUTORS**



**KEZ CESARZ** (they/them) is dedicated to improving the relationships between the LGBTQ+ community and the institutions that have historically caused harm. They are passionate about providing training on the unique experiences and needs of the LGBTQ+ community, striving to ensure that everyone receives respectful and affirming care.

**WENDY FAITH** is a trauma-informed business coach, content creator, and longtime advocate for LGBTQ+ healing and empowerment. She was recently featured in *Our Lives* for her essay on navigating political anxiety, and her viral TikTok content has reached hundreds of thousands of queer and trans viewers seeking support and solidarity. Wendy works with LGBTQ+ entrepreneurs and change-makers through 1:1 coaching. Learn more at wendyfaith.com or reach out for coffee, a coaching session, or a good old-fashioned conversation.

**VIRGINIA HARRISON** is a longtime staffer with *Our Lives*. She lives on the east side with her wife, Melissa, and their dog, Franklin. When she's not editing magazine copy, she enjoys yoga, hikes, time with her Unitarian Universalist community, and doing anything with her recently fledged daughter.

**CLARA LEFTON** (he/him) is a juris doctor and journalist. His professional life has been guided by his interest in and lived experiences related to diversity, equity, and inclusion. One of Clara's main areas of experience is at the intersection of LGBTQ+ issues and athletics. Clara earned a BA from Mount Holyoke College where he was a collegiate newspaper editor and NCAA rower; seven years later he enrolled at Rutgers Law School. He has since graduated and worked with three law firms in Madison.

**Corrections**

In our September/October issue, we printed a story about the *Cass Marie Domino* exhibit that ran at the Memorial Union. That article claimed that Scott Seyforth was a longtime friend of Domino, but that was a mistake. The two had never met before working on the exhibit.

Also in our *Trans on the Land* story, we printed that Rufus Jupiter owned several acres of land and ran a fresh flower business. The land is actually leased, not owned. Additionally, we misprinted the name of "Queer Farm Convergence," an organization in Decorah, Iowa.

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OUR NEWS

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## A Turning Point for LGBTQ+ Rights

If state Democrats win a trifecta—controlling the governorship and both houses—  
we could finally move from defense to progress.

NEWS | POLITICS & LAW | HISTORY

**IN THE QUIET MOMENTS** between campaign cycles, it can feel like the needle barely moves. For many LGBTQ+ Wisconsinites, politics has long felt like a cold spectator sport where we're told to cheer, vote, and hope for scraps. But 2026 could be different. According to former state legislator **JoCasta Zamarripa**, the next election isn't just another round. It's a rare, historic chance to shift the balance of power in Wisconsin—and in doing so, reshape what safety, equity, and belonging can look like for marginalized communities.

That kind of shift doesn't come around often.

For the first time in more than a decade, Democrats have a viable path to winning not just the Governor's seat, but a majority in the Senate—and possibly even the Assembly. If

that happens, Wisconsin could go from gridlocked and defensive to proactive and protective. And that, for those of us who have spent the past several years fighting for our rights in a hostile climate, could mean something we haven't dared to imagine in a long time: relief.

### WHAT'S AT STAKE IN WISCONSIN

Wisconsin has been under a Republican-controlled legislature for 15 years. This has resulted in repeated legislative attempts to undermine LGBTQ+ rights, reproductive access, fair elections, and immigrant protections. Even with a Democratic governor like Tony Evers at the helm, progress has been slow and defensive, with Evers vetoing anti-trans

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bills and protecting fair maps rather than advancing expansive protections.

But 2026 could mark a turning point. With Governor Evers retiring, the field is wide open. Current **Lieutenant Governor Sara Rodriguez** is a “Pro-Equality Elected Official” endorsed by Fair Wisconsin, a political action committee committed to advancing and achieving equality for LGBTQ+ Wisconsinites. Democratic candidates like **Francesca Hong, Kelda Roys, and Missy Hughes** are stepping forward with bold, progressive agendas. Kelda Roys, a longtime advocate for LGBTQ+ rights and a member of the Legislative LGBTQ+ caucus, has a track record of standing with marginalized communities. Francesca Hong has included LGBTQ+ protections in her platform, though it is not a primary focus.

Missy Hughes, **Ryan Strnad, Brett Hulsey, and David Crowley** do not currently mention LGBTQ+ rights in their public-facing campaign platforms. While this doesn’t confirm opposition, it leaves a significant gap in understanding how they would advocate (or not) for our communities.

One of the most exciting voices to emerge is **Dina Nina Martinez-Rutherford**, a transgender woman and elected member of the Madison Common Council who is now running for Wisconsin’s 76th Assembly District. In her own words:

Missy Hughes, Ryan Strnad, Brett Hulsey, and David Crowley do not currently mention LGBTQ+ rights in their public-facing campaign platforms.

“Now more than ever, transgender representation is essential in the face of growing attacks on LGBTQ+ Wisconsinites—attacks on our health care, humanity, and fundamental freedoms. Queer and trans youth need to know that someone is inside the State Capitol who understands them and will fight for them.”

“With fair maps in place, we have the ability to elect a legislature that will actually advance LGBTQ+ equality instead of just playing defense and blocking harmful bills.”

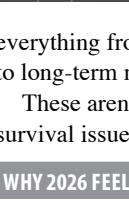
Meanwhile, on the Republican side, **U.S. Rep. Tom Tiffany** is widely considered a front-runner. Tiffany voted against the Respect for Marriage Act and has publicly mischaracterized the Biden administration’s Title IX policies by falsely claiming they allow transgender women to play women’s sports, a move that plays into harmful narratives about trans people. While his official platform avoids



mention of LGBTQ+ rights, his voting record and public comments reflect a consistent pattern of opposition.

Should Republicans win both houses and the governorship, advocates like Zamarripa warn that marriage equality could be “on the chopping block.”

Under the Trump administration, LGBTQ+ rights were systematically undermined by executive actions that dismantled anti-discrimination protections in health care, education, housing, and more. According to a comprehensive overview by the Kaiser Family Foundation, the rollback of protections under Trump’s Department of Health and Human Services included allowing healthcare providers to refuse treatment to LGBTQ+ people on religious grounds. In education, the rescinding of Title IX guidance for transgender students created an environment where discrimination could flourish unchecked. The impact of these actions was far-reaching, touching



everything from access to emergency services to long-term mental health and stability.

These aren’t just policy shifts; they’re survival issues for our community.

**WHY 2026 FEELS DIFFERENT**

Zamarripa, the first out LGBTQ+ Latina elected to Wisconsin’s state legislature, and now a candidate for Secretary of State, sees 2026 as a genuine inflection point. “We have a chance to pick up a majority in the Senate,” she told me. “And maybe even in the Assembly.”

She’s not just hopeful, she’s strategic. With fair maps now in place thanks to the efforts of Gov. Evers and advocacy groups, the playing field is no longer tilted by excessive gerrymandering. That means voter turnout could truly reflect the will of the people, many of whom support LGBTQ+ rights, reproductive freedom, and equitable economic policy.

If Democrats win a trifecta—controlling the governorship and both houses—Zamarripa



says we could finally move from defense to progress. That could include securing marriage equality in state law, restoring reproductive rights, and enacting protections for LGBTQ+ youth and families that go beyond simply blocking harmful bills.



She also shared concerns about anti-immigrant legislation being floated in the Capitol—including efforts to force local sheriffs to act as ICE agents under threat of losing funding. And she emphasized that despite GOP attempts to strip power from constitutional offices like hers, voters have repeatedly rejected those changes.



As she told me, “The Republicans have chosen to prioritize manufactured outrage over the real urgent needs of working families here in Wisconsin.”



This is the kind of shift that could bring tangible, everyday safety to people’s lives. For those of us who live in this state yearround—working, raising families, running businesses, showing up for our communities—the prospect of not having to live in fight-or-flight all the time is no small thing.

If you want to understand how chronic political hostility impacts our bodies and our sense of safety, I invite you to read my recent piece in *Our Lives* about the toll of political anxiety: “Thriving in the Age of Fear: How to Protect Your Joy While Staying Informed.”

**A LEGACY WORTH DEFENDING**

It’s important to remember that Wisconsin was once a national leader in LGBTQ+ rights. In 1982, our state became the first in the nation to pass a gay rights law prohibiting discrimination based on sexual orientation in employment, housing, credit, and public accommodations. That legacy matters. And for those fighting to expand it, the work is personal.

Zamarripa co-authored Wisconsin’s first “Equality Agenda,” a package of bills that aimed to expand and codify rights and protections for LGBTQ+ residents. She also helped pass the state’s first Pride Month resolution, even if she was only allowed to do so on the condition that she not speak about it publicly.

That kind of political compromise is a painful reminder of how often LGBTQ+ recognition in Wisconsin still comes with strings attached.

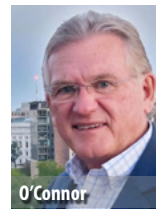
**WHAT CAN YOU DO?**

You don’t have to be a policy wonk or burn yourself out to make a difference, you can:

- Get to know the candidates in your district,
- Ask candidates how they plan to protect LGBTQ+ rights and marginalized communities,
- Support campaigns with time, money, or amplification,
- Stay engaged with local and state-level races,

**NEWS BRIEFS** WRITTEN BY ALEXANDRIA DELCOURT

**STATE REP. JERRY O’CONNOR RECEIVED DEATH THREATS AFTER SUPPORTING BILL THAT WOULD BAN PRIDE FLAG ON STATE BUILDINGS**



ca’s founding values. He defended Assembly Bill 58, which restricts flags on state property to the U.S., Wisconsin, military, and ceremonial flags, claiming it would

**FOLLOWING** the September 11 assassination of conservative activist Charlie Kirk at Utah Valley University, Wisconsin State Representative **Jerry O’Connor** (R–Fond du Lac) called for a ban on flying Pride and other political flags on government buildings, arguing it would help reduce political violence. Speaking on the Assembly floor, O’Connor compared the Kirk shooting to the 9/11 terrorist attacks, saying both were motivated by hatred of Ameri-

promote unity by removing divisive symbols. Democrats, including Representative **Christine Sinicki** (D–Milwaukee), condemned the bill as exclusionary and a thinly veiled attack on LGBTQ+ representation, pointing to a broader wave of anti-LGBTQ+ legislation during the second Trump administration. The measure

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- Gold Winner, Best Massage, International Division, European Massage Championship 2024, Rome, Italy
- Silver Winner, Illinois Massage Championship 2024
- Gold Winner, 1st Wisconsin Massage Championship 2023



passed along party lines, alongside bills limiting health care for undocumented residents and requiring state employees to work in person.

Afterward, O'Connor received multiple death threats referencing Kirk's assassination. Online misinformation falsely claimed he blamed the Pride flag for 9/11 and the shooting. In response, legislative sessions were canceled for safety reasons. O'Connor maintained his proposal wasn't anti-LGBTQ+, insisting that government buildings should remain politically neutral symbols representing all citizens.

**GOP CANDIDATE BILL BERRIEN QUILTS GOVERNOR'S RACE AFTER HE WAS FOUND FOLLOWING A TRANS PORN STAR ONLINE**

**BERRIEN**, a Republican from New Berlin, entered the 2026 Wisconsin gubernatorial GOP primary as a former Navy SEAL, business-owner, and vocal supporter of Donald Trump. He campaigned on "conservative family values," including pledges to keep trans girls out of girls' locker rooms and sports.



However, his campaign was abruptly suspended when it emerged he'd followed a non-binary adult-film performer named Jiz Lee on a social media, and had followed authors of sexually explicit essays and publications focused on polyamory and sexuality (e.g., "Sexography," and "Polyamory Today").

In his withdrawal, Berrien denied wrongdoing and claimed he was simply intellectually curious, arguing that the media cherry-picked his feed to create a sensational picture. He said his departure was "in the best interest of the party, voters, donors, and my family" because he no longer saw a path to the nomination.

Critics highlighted the contradiction between his anti-trans public platform and his social-media activity. Jiz Lee responded publicly, calling out the hypocrisy of backing legislation that restricts trans bodies while engaging with trans-adult content.

**AFTER GREEN BAY PRIDE EVENT POSTPONED, A PRIDE POP-UP WANTS TO KEEP PRIDE VISIBLE**

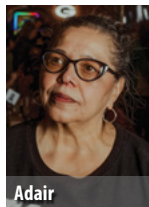
**ON SEPTEMBER 16**, N.E.W. Pride Alive, the organization behind Brown County's annual Pride celebration, announced it would postpone its upcoming event due to "the increasingly charged political climate." Originally scheduled for September 19-20 at the Brown County Fairgrounds in De Pere, the event was expected to feature drag performances, live music, food trucks, and community

organization booths. In a Facebook statement, organizers emphasized that Pride is about both celebration and safety, explaining that because their festival takes place later in the year, it often draws heightened attention during politically tense times. The decision, they said, was a "strategic pause" to ensure the event remains safe and welcoming for all participants.

In response, Green Bay Pride announced a new pop-up event that was called "We Will Still Be Seen: A Pop-Up Pride" for October 4. It began at City Deck and moved to the Tarlton Theatre for a block-party celebration. The event aimed to affirm visibility and resistance to silencing LGBTQ+ voices. Co-organizer **Tarlton Knight** stated that precautions would be taken to maintain a safe environment. Green Bay Pride also confirmed that its next full-scale Pride festival will be held June 13-14, 2026, in downtown Green Bay, marking a continued commitment to visibility and community despite recent tensions.

**RITA ADAIR OPENS BERNELL'S, A WOMEN-CENTERED SPORTS BAR ON MADISON'S EASTSIDE**

**AFTER MONTHS** of work, **Rita Adair** successfully opened a new bar on Madison's eastside named Bernell's in honor of her late wife **Bernell Hooker**, who passed away in August, 2024 from ovarian cancer. Hooker was a longtime coach of women's basketball and soccer, founded the Milwaukee Aces professional women's basketball team, and was passionate about not only athletes but the business side of women's sports. Adair explains that one of Hooker's dreams was to own a women-centered sports bar, and Bernell's brings that vision to life.



Adair says that in Madison she surveyed about 15 area bars asking if they would show women's sports, and only one said yes. That reality galvanized her to create a space where women's sports are visible and valued. While Bernell's is "women-centered," it will still show all sports and welcome all fans. The venue will also honor the building's musical legacy by hosting live blues nights and will serve a soul-food-inspired menu. After a financial backer withdrew support, Adair turned to community fundraising to make the project a reality.

The grand opening took place on November 8 and drew an enormous and enthusiastic crowd. ■



LGBTQ Organizations Update

General News | Awards | Staff & Board Changes | Events

Curated by Alexandria Delcourt

GENERAL NEWS

Important notes about area LGBTQ groups.

**ACLU OF WISCONSIN** published their 2025 annual report. The report includes a letter from Executive Director Dr. Melinda Q. Brennan. In the report, you can read about a big legal victory for justice-impacted parents and families, a report on the state of cannabis in Wisconsin, election protections, ACLU of Wisconsin's new vision statement, and so much more.

**COURAGE+** announced their new name—a rebranding of Courage MKE that reflects the organization's move to serve a broader area, recognizing many youth in need of services in rural areas beyond Milwaukee County.

**FORGE** has released a new survey that they hope will help increase the understanding and knowledge about the experiences of LGBTQ+ people

and their relationships. If you are part of the community, they encourage you to take the survey at [forge.tips/ipv-survey](https://forge.tips/ipv-survey). Note: This project was supported by Grant Number 90EV0535-01-01 from Administration for Children and Families, Office of Family Violence Prevention and Services, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Its contents are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

**GSAFE** is proud to launch Future Femmes, a new campaign that celebrates the joy, power, and resilience of trans femmes while calling our community into action. Throughout October, they shared prompts and challenges to help folks uplift femme youth. This campaign also aims to encourage more trans femme young people to join True You, GSAFE's mentorship program aimed at creating space for sisterhood, growth, and leadership.

**MILWAUKEE LGBT CENTER** would like to thank community member Sydney who stepped up and rallied her friends and network to help keep our doors open. When she heard the Milwaukee LGBT Community Center was at risk of closing due to funding losses, she raised \$5,000. We couldn't be more grateful for your support!

**OUR VOICE MILWAUKEE** launches their new Season Pass program. Become one of OVM's first ever Season Pass Holders today! This pass includes reserved seats for holiday and seasonal concerts, free drink tickets, ticket flexibility, and more, plus the gratification of knowing you are supporting our members who devote their time, talents, and financial support to do everything it takes on stage and behind the scenes to make the music happen. We are truly a community chorus, committed to spreading harmony and goodwill throughout Milwaukee and beyond, and we can't do it without you.

**PLANNED PARENTHOOD OF WI** Planned Parenthood of Wisconsin has resumed abortion care at their health centers. They maintain their commitment to providing the full range of reproductive health services, including cancer screenings, contraception, STI testing and treatment, miscarriage management, and more. At

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a time when access to reproductive health care is under attack. Planned Parenthood is standing firm in their mission to provide compassionate, high-quality care for all who need it.

**WI LGBT HISTORY PROJECT** installed rainbow crosswalks in the Walker's Point neighborhood of Milwaukee. The project was a collaboration between the History Project, renowned international street artist Jeremy Novy, Crowley Construction Company, local business owners, neighbors, and the Milwaukee Department of Public Works. The crosswalks were dedicated to Jim Dorn, who opened Your Place as the first gay bar owned by gay men in the neighborhood. Dorn's gamble paid off: The bar lasted for nearly 30 years and triggered a migration of Milwaukee's gay bars to Walker's Point.

The Wisconsin LGBT History Project relaunched its PLACES website, which features over a century of photos and a directory of important and historic places in the LGBTQ+ community throughout Wisconsin.

**WI LGBT CHAMBER** is offering the chance for LGBTQ+-owned businesses to become a Certified LGBT Business Enterprise (LGBTBE) through the NGLCC—The National LGBT Chamber of Commerce. Unlock new opportunities for growth, visibility, and contracts. Details available on their website!

**AWARDS / RECOGNITION / GRANTS**

*Special thanks for those who do good.*

**CREAM CITY FOUNDATION** announced the recipients of their 2025 Community Grants Program. Thanks to the generosity of their donors, \$30,000 has been awarded to eight organizations doing incredible work in our community. Congratulations to: **Black Pride Milwaukee, Cactus Plus, BLAQtoberfest (ECAI), Ex Fabula, Fair Wisconsin, GSAFE, Our Space, and The Youth and Family Project!**

Cream City Foundation also announced that they awarded \$50,000 to 20 future LGBTQ+ leaders as a part of their annual LGBTQ+ Scholarship Program! The LGBTQ+ Scholarship Program was founded in 2015 to support LGBTQ+ students in Southeastern Wisconsin. Scholarships can be used for any post-secondary education at the undergraduate, graduate, or postgraduate level. Recipients include:

- **Nanis Rodriguez** (She/Her/Ella) UW-Milwaukee, PhD, Urban Education
- **Miwa Ayodele** (She/Her) | Milwaukee Area Technical College Associate's, Registered Nursing

- **Cylest Brooks** (They/Them) | Arizona State University Master's, Social Justice and Human Rights
- **Darick Fait** (He/Him) | UW-Madison Bachelor's, Biochemistry & Environmental Sciences
- **Emory Wiemer** (He/Him) | Western Governor's University Bachelor's, Health Information Management
- **Ginger Kwak** (She/Her, They/Them) Medical College of Wisconsin | PhD, Medical Doctorate
- **Jaci Robar** (She/Her) | UW-Milwaukee | Bachelor's, Psychology
- **Jake Wolter** (He/Him) | Marquette University Master's, Executive MBA
- **Jeanna Kedrowski** (She/Her) | Medical College of Wisconsin PhD, Medicine
- **Arturo Gonzalez-Villarreal** (He/Him) | Marquette University PhD, Doctor of Nursing Practice
- **Kevin Wright** (He/Him) | Medical College of Wisconsin PhD, Medicine/Medical Student
- **Lydia Paw** (She/Her/They/Them) | UM-Twin Cities Bachelor's, Biomedical Engineering
- **Lin Haggerty** (They/She) | UW-Milwaukee Master's, Public History and Museum Studies
- **Madeline Johnson** (She/Her) | UW-Milwaukee PhD, Clinical Psychology
- **Mary Jane Juern** (She/Her) | Bellin College Bachelor's, Bachelor of Science in Nursing
- **Max Kiekhofer** (He/Him) | Yale University Bachelor's, Biological Anthropology
- **Rylie Cha** (She/Her) | UW-Milwaukee Bachelor's, Information Science
- **Tanner Yops** (He/Him) | Medical College of Wisconsin PhD, Medical Doctorate (MD)

**FAIR WISCONSIN** is honored to have received a grant from the Cream City Foundation to help fund their mission of advancing, achieving, and protecting equality for LGBTQ+ Wisconsinites.

**FREEDOM INC.** would like to congratulate their Community Power Builder, **Ms. Jewel Adams**, for receiving the Courage Award from the Wisconsin Governor's Council on Domestic Abuse. The award honors a survivor who has turned their pain into power, who overcomes adversity and inspires others through their resilience and leadership. Ms. Adams was also recognized as Recovery Advocate of the Year by Safe Communities and the African American Opioid Coalition.

Freedom Inc. would also like to celebrate **Joyce Hall** for winning the Sally Sunde Family Advocate Award at the 2025 Community Change-Maker Awards. As Freedom Inc.'s Gender Justice Coordinator for survivor and victim services, Joyce is a powerful force for healing and transformation. A mother of seven and a survivor herself, she turned her own story of resilience into a beacon of hope for others. Every day, Joyce stands with and for Black and Southeast Asian survivors!

**THE HOUSE INC.** proudly received a \$6,000 grant from the Madison Community Foundation, supporting major center renovations including new desktops, painting, furniture, and upgraded electronics. These updates have created a brighter, more functional space for youth and staff. We've raised \$525 toward our \$2,000 Sip & See pledge goal and are still accepting donations at thehouseinc.org under "Pledge Here." Every contribution helps expand creative opportunities for young artists.

**WI COUNCIL OF TEACHERS OF ENGLISH** has awarded their 2024-25 Diversity and Inclusion award to Erika Gallagher, an English teacher at Verona Area High School. Erika creates learning spaces where every student feels seen, safe, and valued. She draws on her lived experiences to help students explore identity and intersectionality.

**WI LGBT CHAMBER** is proud to announce the winners of the 2025 Business Awards, recognizing excellence among businesses and individuals who have demonstrated outstanding leadership in strengthening and advancing Wisconsin's LGBTQ+ and allied business community. The recipients are:

- **Corporate Partner of the Year:** von Briesen & Roper s.c.
- **LGBTQ Business of the Year:** Renovation Sells Madison
- **Allied Business of the Year:** Miss Ruby Bridal
- **Nonprofit Organization of the Year:** Wisconsin LGBTQ History Project, Inc.
- **Business Resource Group of the Year:** Catalent Biologics' LGBTQ+ Employee Resource Group, LEARN
- **John Ross Pruess Business Leader of the Year:** Joseph Rogan-Nordstrom
- **Advocates of the Year:** Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation's Diverse Business Development Team

**WI LGBT HISTORY PROJECT** would like to congratulate board member **Diane Gregory** and community advisor **Bill Wardlow** for being named 2025 *Shepherd Express* Progress Award winners. They would also like to congratulate board member **Ricardo W. Harris** for being featured in the Greater Milwaukee Foundation Celebrating LGBTQ Philanthropy Report.

**STAFF / BOARD CHANGES**

*Who's moving on or moving into org leadership.*

**DIVERSE & RESILIENT** would like to welcome **KB Pallo** to the team as the new Director of Finance and Workplace Success. KB (they/them) is originally from Kenosha and has a strong background in finance and operations from a national criminal justice reform nonprofit. They would





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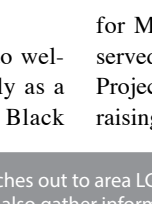
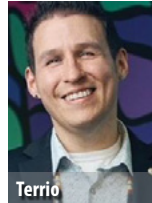
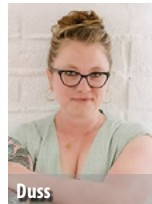
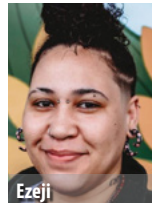
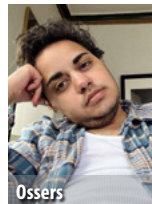
also like to welcome **Tou Fong Lee** as the new Director of Program Operations and Compliance. Tou Fong (he/they) brings experience in public health, LGBTQ+ advocacy, and servant leadership. Additionally, they would like to welcome **Aaleh Hughes** as a Peer Navigator. Aaleh is originally from Rockford, and previously worked as the Youth Program Coordinator at the Milwaukee LGBT Community Center. Finally, they would like to announce the promotion of two leaders, **Corey Clark** and **Lorenza Rivas** as the new Director of Care Services and Director of Prevention Services respectively. Both Corey and Lorenzo have demonstrated unwavering commitment to advancing health equity and ensuring that LGBTQ+ communities of color in Milwaukee and across Wisconsin have access to the care, support, and resources they deserve.

**ENCORE STUDIO** recently welcomed **Sean Langenecker** as a Program Coordinator. Sean comes with a diverse and extensive human services background as well as a powerful theater background. Welcome, Sean!

**FAIR WISCONSIN** would like to welcome **Adam Ossers** as the new Civic Engagement Organizer. Adam (he/him) is a queer transgender artist based in Milwaukee, who brings media and networking skills to our political advocacy organization. Welcome, Adam!

**FREEDOM INC.** is happy to welcome **Ariel Merritt** (they/them) as a Youth Justice Organizer. Ariel formerly ran the organization's Books & Breakfast program, bringing joy, learning, and liberation to young people. Now, Ariel joins the team permanently and will continue to build youth power, leadership, and justice.

**MILWAUKEE LGBT CENTER** would like to welcome **Marz R. Ezeji** (he/they) to the family as a Youth Program Specialist! Marz is a Black



Queer Creative, cultural and community organizer from Milwaukee whose work lives at the intersection of art, activism, and healing. With more than 12 years of experience across social justice movements, nonprofit leadership, youth advocacy, and creative direction, Marz is dedicated to building liberated and affirming spaces where BIPOC and LGBTQ+ folks, especially young people, can create, unlearn, and thrive.

**OPEN FOUNDATION** has announced that the OPEN Foundation founder, **Heidi Duss**, will be stepping down from her leadership role at the end of this year, and will be replaced by **Laura Paisley Beck**. Laura has been an integral part of OPEN Foundation's work for years as an entrepreneur, innovator, and advocate who shares their vision for inclusive and sustainable growth. Among other things, Laura writes queer books, consults inclusive businesses, and hosts the Be the Glitter Podcast.

**THE HOUSE INC.** is expanding its leadership and creative team! **Shania Shaw** (Center Administrator & Marketing Lead) oversees operations, communications, and youth programs. **Skye Moss** (Fundraising Chairperson) leads donor engagement and grant efforts. **Rachelle Fochs** (Ballet Instructor) enhances our dance program with classical training, and **Jaspur "Penny" Winslow** (Assistant Coach) supports youth development. Together, they bring fresh vision and dedication to our growing mission.

**WI LGBTQ HISTORY PROJECT** is proud to welcome **Dan Terrio** to the Board of Directors. Dan is a member of the Stockbridge-Munsee Band of Mohican Indians in North Central Wisconsin and grew up on an Indian Reservation. He is a Diversity and Inclusion officer for Milwaukee County. Since 2023, Dan has served as a Community Advisor for the History Project. In his new role, he will oversee fundraising and community partnerships. ■

**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](mailto:contact@ourliveswisconsin.com).

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PEOPLE OF COLOR POLITICS TRANSGENDER IDENTITY

## The Politics of Survival

**Noelle Mariano** recounts how the hate crime she survived shattered her world and brought her to the brink—and how she reclaimed herself and her power. Now, she tells stories to change hearts and minds.



**WITH THE RECENT** “No Kings” rally reaching a fevered pitch across the country, questions have surfaced about the nature of protest itself.

Is it really a protest if you have to register? Is it still a fight for liberty if we’re told to “follow the rules” of civil engagement? And how much resistance is there if the police are cheering you on from the sidewalks?

But here’s the truth: Any means of protest matters. Representation matters. Boycotts matter. Presence matters. Even when it feels small or symbolic, it still counts. Because when you’re living in a body that feels perpetually under attack, *everything* you do to survive becomes political.

### CHANNELING FIRE INTO ACTIVISM

It’s November 2024. I’m standing at the edge of Lake Mendota. My hoodie and jeans are weighted with rocks. I’ve taken off my shoes. The water is cold, but I don’t care—soon, the cold won’t matter. I shove my hands into my pockets for warmth. That’s when I find it. A butterfly.

To the outside world, I was the model first-generation kid: Respectful, high-achieving, driven. First in my family to go to and finish graduate school. The shining example for my nieces and nephews, both here and back in the Philippines. I got good grades, said

“please” and “thank you,” and never cracked the illusion of the “perfect child.”

What I didn’t show was the fight burning inside me. My parents didn’t raise me to shy away from challenges. I wasn’t allowed to use a calculator until I could prove I could solve the problems without one. That push to be better shaped me—and so did the fire I carried as a queer person of color navigating the world.

I channeled that fire into activism, working with organizations like UndocuQueer and Black & Pink. I wasn’t a “social justice warrior.” I was a *social justice barbarian*, storming through the world with relentless passion, demanding dignity and safety for those who, like me, dared to live authentically.

That fire brought me to Wisconsin. I taught LGBTQ+ and ethnic studies at colleges across the state. It brought me to Madison where I worked in diversity initiatives to make campuses safer for first-year students. I fought to make this country live up to its promise.

Then, on March 9, 2024, everything changed.

### HIDING MY REALITY AFTER A HATE CRIME

I was unloading groceries outside my apartment on Monroe Street, just three blocks from campus. Two strangers walked by and asked about a sticker on my bumper. I thought they were laughing at my “Bigfoot is real” sticker, but they pointed to the one beneath it: A faded heart in the colors of the trans pride flag.

“It’s a trans pride sticker,” I said.

Minutes later, they were at my doorstep.

They ambushed me. Shattered a bottle and used it to slash my throat. They stomped on me, screaming slurs. I fought back—biting, scratching, slashing with my keys—until they fled. They left me bleeding on the ground. My neighbor stepped over me and drove away.

No one tells you what comes next. After something like that, your other identities—your queerness, your culture, your ambition—all fall away under one label: *Victim*.

I wore that label tightly. I disappeared from my own life. Stopped returning texts. Cancelled plans. With the semester ending and my lease almost up, it seemed easier to vanish. No students waiting on office hours. No obligations. No one to disappoint.

There was one final commitment left: I’d agreed to be a camp counselor for the GSAFE LTI Leadership Camp for LGBTQ+ youth.

Assigned the color orange, I brought streamers, garlands, and a box of tiny monarch butterflies to decorate our space.

The campers, aged 13 to 21, were just beginning to step into their identities. They

wanted to lead, to learn how to uplift their communities. I lied to them, told them how proud I was to be thriving in my identity. But the truth was that I had already decided to die.

And then something unexpected happened.

They opened up. They learned. They shared pieces of themselves with me, and I saw them grow. And every time I saw that spark of understanding, I handed out a butterfly.

“You learned.”

“You grew.”

“You matured.”

What they didn’t know is that I was giving everything away—my books, clothes, games—because I didn’t plan to take any of it with me. I made sure they were fed, happy, taken care of. It was easier to care for them than for myself.

On the final day, one camper told me how much it meant to see a queer adult living, thriving. I broke down. I wasn’t thriving. I was barely living. I told them what happened to me.

They didn’t call me “brave” or “resilient.” They didn’t tell me how strong I was.

They just *sat* with me.

One camper, Kyle, stood up, handed me back the butterfly I had given him, and said, “You learned. You grew. You matured. You survived.”

To paraphrase Margaret Cho: You may become a victim, but you don’t have to be victimized.

### FROM VICTIM TO SURVIVOR

I became a survivor the day I put my hands in my pocket and found that butterfly.

I emptied my rocks. Put my shoes back on. Walked home.

Being trans in America is living life on hard mode. Our “holidays” are either about being seen or being mourned. That’s it.

When I told the campers what happened to me, one of them said, “In the drag world, if you fall and they laugh, you get up, serve cunt, and make them eat it.”

I still don’t fully know what that means. But I think what they were saying is: *Live well anyway*. That is your fight. That is your revenge. That is your thriving.

I’m not the social justice barbarian I used to be. Now, I’m a *bard*—telling stories that make people feel, think, and change.

Orange is the color of healing. And the word *mariposa*—Spanish for butterfly—has long been a slur for queer people. I’m reclaiming it. I give butterflies away as symbols of transformation.

We fight in different ways. We have to, even in liberal Madison.

If you want to stand up for the marginalized and don’t know where to start, you can start here. You can *say our names*. *Mourn our dead*. And *fight like hell for the living*.

I’m still here. Living for not just my students, but for myself. Might as well keep fighting. ■

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I MET ROBIN COPLEY for coffee on a Sunday afternoon this fall. She had just recently resigned from her position as Madison’s Independent Police Monitor citing personal health reasons, and the news cycle had been less than kind to her about it. Her decision had been covered by several media outlets, with the attention prompting many to poke into her private life, post scathing comments online, speculate about her health and identity, and even cast damning allegations against her on platforms like Reddit.

But despite the public’s reaction, there’s something everybody seems to have missed: The truth. That’s the story Robin wanted to tell me.

WHERE IT ALL BEGAN

“In the weeks before my interview for the City of Madison’s new Independent Police Monitor position, I had left my fiancé and began a new relationship. After I accepted the position, we moved to Madison. I remember moving during a huge snowstorm. That was February of 2023.

Shortly after arriving, I threw my back out, so I was lying on the floor all weekend. My then-partner went to pick up a friend of ours who needed a place to stay. She was a trans woman whose partner had been violent with her. We had the space, so I said yes.”

A week earlier, Robin had finally told her partner that she’d been experiencing gender dysphoria since she was eight years old. It was a secret she had never shared with anyone before. “I wasn’t even sure how to talk about it,” she said. “I just said, I think this has been part of me for a long time. I didn’t know what to do with it.”

Her partner brushed it aside. Then, days later, told Robin they’d shared that private revelation with the friend now sleeping down the hall. “There was no way to express the level of betrayal I felt,” Robin said. “I had nobody I could trust. It didn’t matter how accepting the other person was. That wasn’t the point. I’d kept this secret for over two decades because I didn’t feel safe. This was the first person I felt safe enough to open up to, and now I needed to be careful about what I tell them.”

What followed was a slow corrosion of safety, the kind that hides itself behind intimacy. “At first it was small things,” she said. “Without my knowledge, they would review this ‘Digital Wellness’ app on my phone to see how much time I spent on my browser that day. Then they would ask strange questions and build from my confused answers.”

“A month or two after I told them about my feelings of gender dysphoria, they started saying really weird stuff about ‘male socialization,’ and about how trans women can still benefit from being assigned male at birth. I didn’t push back on most of it. Sometimes I tried to ask questions to see if I could get that reasoning to another place or get them to hear what they sounded like, but it never went anywhere.”

By August, Robin’s work life had grown more demanding. She was running Madison’s Office of the Independent Police Monitor, a small department next door to the Common Council’s office. The more time she spent in the office, the more her partner, who worked from home, grew suspicious and began accusing her of being distant, unavailable, and cold.

“I was just saying no to sex more often,” Robin told me. “I didn’t want to explain why, but the truth was, I didn’t trust them anymore. Months later, I learned I was right to distrust them. I learned they had been reading my messaging history from the last several years, a diary I started keeping a few years after getting sober from opiates, and a journal I was using in my current therapy sessions.”

After examining Robin’s phone activity, her partner confronted her about finding erotic stories about men becoming hyper-feminine women and reveling in their new lives. “Those stories made me happy,” recalled Robin. “But my partner didn’t like that. She asked, ‘Is this a sexual thing? Do you get off on this?’”

Though there’s obviously a sexual dimension to it, for Robin, that was not the appeal. “I don’t think you can fully disconnect gender and sexuality. There’s this debunked psychology about a fetish called ‘autogyne-philia’ that seeks to erase trans identities as nothing more than a fetish. Unfortunately, that’s the lens they saw my every action through.”

Robin’s interest in trans content at large was more about identity and validation than anything, but none of that mattered. “I remember one of our biggest fights happened because she walked into the living room to find me watching a YouTube video uploaded by a popular streamer who had just started HRT and was explaining their experiences. That was obviously not sexual. It was testimonial,” said Robin. “But by then, they had already decided I had a sex addiction.”

That accusation changed everything.

A TWISTING OF THE MIND

Robin is 15 years sober from opioid addiction. When her partner told her she might be a “sex addict,” she didn’t argue. “If there’s one thing I know about addiction,” she said, “it’s that I’ll always be the last person to see it. Everyone else will notice before I do. And this was still the person I trusted more than anyone. So, I said, okay. Let’s get treatment.”

Shortly thereafter, Robin started seeing a therapist who specialized in sex addiction and joined a 12-step program called Sex Addicts Anonymous. She would return home from these meetings to her partner’s suspicion and resentment. “Every day, it was some new interrogation,” she told me. “Why did you say this? Why did you think that? Why did you look at that website? And it all came back to two things: That I was a deeply misogynistic person, and that I was being abusive by hiding all of this from my partner. And the only way to correct that was to give them more access to my private documents, my writings, my devices, and my time.”

The therapy’s goal, she explained, wasn’t recovery. It was erasure. “By the end of it,” Robin said, “I didn’t just feel ashamed of who I was. I felt guilty for being who I was. It made me feel like it was something I was choosing because I was a bad person.”

In the time since Robin went through that experience, she has been through a lot of therapy and has come to realize that there was something much more sinister than simple insecurity or misunderstanding happening in that room. “What was happening is the difference between therapy and conversion,” Robin stated. “Therapy starts with the idea that you can heal. Conversion starts with the idea that you’re wrong.”

THE CROSSROADS OF SEX, GENDER, MORALITY, AND PURITY

In the United States, sex addiction treatment can occupy an odd and sometimes dangerous intersection between pop psychology and moral panic. Groups like Sex Addicts Anonymous are run by members—other addicts—with no professional facilitators present. The program borrows the structure of 12-step recovery, but when improperly administered, runs the risk of leaning on moral language about purity, accountability, and sin. And because the morals of sex are often the most heavily policed in religious spaces, sex addiction treatment programs thrive in places like church basements and private clinics. These places promise transformation but often deliver shame, especially for queer and trans people who are already pathologized simply for existing outside the heterosexual norm.

While there are people who suffer from legitimate sex addiction and benefit from treatment, Robin’s experience shows how those systems, when abused, can replicate the same power dynamics they claim to treat. “Every conversation in the ‘recovery program’ was about how I was objectifying women and how my existence was proof of male entitlement,” she said. It was a pipeline for TERF ideology disguised as recovery.

Sex addiction groups, like much of recovery culture, are rarely designed or run with queer and trans people in mind. They often rely on binary gender scripts that declare men as pursuers and women as direct

PEOPLE POLITICS & LAW TRANSGENDER IDENTITY

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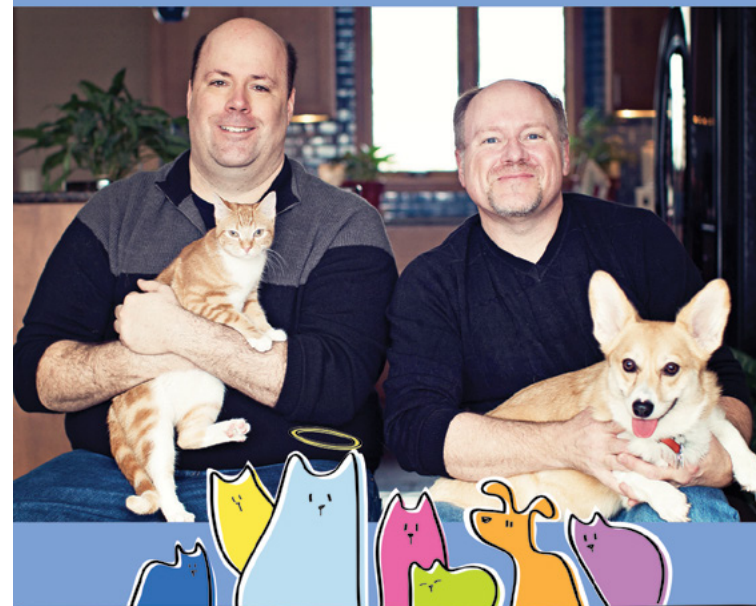
Robin Copley, Madison’s former Independent Police Monitor, describes her experience coming out as a trans woman, being pressured into a “sex addiction” recovery program, and finding that it closely mirrored conversion therapy. She traces how shame, gender, and recovery culture collided to nearly destroy her and her career. Now she’s trying to reclaim her life.

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or indirect victims, and collapse under the weight of anyone who doesn't fit neatly inside them. For trans people, these spaces can become a minefield of misgendering, moralizing, and violence disguised as care.

What makes this especially dangerous is that these programs are filled with people who have no idea trans participants are even in the room. Her story sits at the crossroads of several American obsessions: The addiction industrial complex, the policing of sexuality, and the medicalization of gender. It reveals how easily good intentions curdle into coercion when the underlying belief is that some people are broken.

Robin's story is a reminder that healing isn't possible inside systems built on shame, and that calling something "therapy" doesn't necessarily make it humane. It is also a reminder that visibility, the simple acknowledgment that trans people are in the room, is itself a form of survival.

STEPPING OUT OF THE FOG

By December, Robin's world had collapsed to the four walls of her apartment. Her partner controlled when she could leave, whom she could talk to, and even which friends she was allowed to text. "They told me to delete old photos, stop talking to friends in California, including people I've known my whole life," she said. "They said I was probably cheating, and because I was so deep in the recovery rhetoric, I started believing it. I thought, maybe I really am this horrible person."

That spring, Robin attempted suicide. "I took out a revolver," she told me, "and I put one round in. I kept an open space for every person I could think of who would miss me, and spun the wheel. Then I pulled the trigger." She survived. "After that, the police came and I went to the hospital still believing I was an irredeemable sex addict who was unworthy of love and frankly, a burden on everyone around me."

When she was discharged, Robin checked herself into a residential mental health facility for two months. "I was really upset when there weren't any personality disorders like Narcissistic Personality Disorder, sociopathy, or addiction on my diagnosis," she said, all things her part-

ner had claimed she was. "It was just PTSD, gender dysphoria, anxiety, and depression. And that was a painful moment for me to realize that this person I'd been with, that I had trusted with my life, was wrong about me. All the stuff I went through wasn't treatment. It was abuse."

RECONCILING RECOVERY & LIFE

After leaving treatment, Robin returned to work, trying to rebuild some sense of normalcy. But the PTSD followed her. The gaslighting, suspicion, and constant need to prove she wasn't lying was all being reiterated in new forms.

"I was working for the city, overseeing police oversight," she said. "Every day was some new political fight. It was like being back in that relationship, the same kind of manipulation, the same power games, the same disbelief."

Eventually, she felt she had no choice but to leave. "I realized I could work through the PTSD, or I could work through the institutional abuse, but I couldn't do both," she told me. "They interplay with each other, and life's too short to spend it constantly wanting to die. Working in policing was full of triggers for me." Robin was dealing with flashbacks from her relationship, and at the same time, handling graphic police cases, dealing with budget cuts, and feeling like a political punching bag between the mayor and City Council.

At a certain point, it all became too much. In early October, Robin chose to resign as Madison's Independent Police Monitor, a move that was met with a surprising amount of public ridicule and personal allegations being published about her online.

But for Robin, giving this interview and telling her story isn't about responding to that news cycle. "I've seen accusations that my health concerns are a plea for sympathy, which doesn't make a lot of sense if I haven't disclosed these health problems until after I resigned. I have nothing to gain." Robin sought to share this story for others that might be or can avoid landing in the position she did. "It's about shedding light on the experience I went through so that maybe other people won't have to go through the same thing in the future."

RECLAIMING A LIFE

I asked Robin what she plans to do next. She hesitated before answering. "I once wrote in a report in the office that said we're living under fascism, and that caused a huge uproar. But I meant it. Trans people aren't safe here. We're told we're predators or perverts. And it's really hard for trans people to plan any kind of a future right now. Honestly, the way things are right now, I don't know if I'll even stay in this country, let alone this state."

"It breaks my heart that I can't continue as a police monitor because this is all I have ever thought about doing," Robin told me. "My dad was a cop. I come from a family of conservatives in a very, very red county, and policing was just an inescapable part of all our lives. The city was undergoing this gang crackdown when I was in high school, and I remember riding the bus and seeing cops pull kids off the bus simply because they had the wrong tattoos. So, I always knew there needed to be more oversight in the way we handle policing." While in law school, Robin focused her education on Constitutional Criminal Procedure and interned with the State Public Defender's Appellate Division.

"The last five years in this work has been very hard, and I don't think I'll be able to return to it again. But I'd like to say I'm hopeful," she concluded. "Maybe I'll get some middle-management job with the state. Something nine-to-five where I can come home and have the rest of my life to myself. That would be nice." ■



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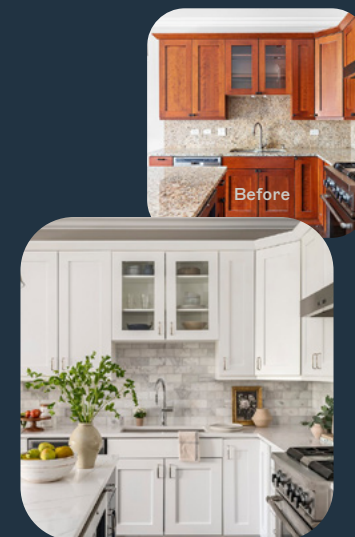


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# Defying Bias, Building Bridges

A lifelong advocate and current Executive Director of the Wisconsin Council of the Blind and Visually Impaired, **Denise Jess** confronts ableism, homophobia, and decades of institutional bias to build a movement rooted in visibility, belonging, and dignity for all.

PEOPLE HEALTH & FAMILIES DISABILITIES

**LIFELONG WISCONSIN RESIDENT** Denise Jess (she/her) has spent her time fighting against homophobia, ableism, and separatists. She has run into various professional and personal challenges as both a self-identified lesbian and blind person: “I have some functional vision, but not a lot.” Nevertheless, today she serves as the Executive Director of the Wisconsin Council of the Blind and Visually Impaired (“the Council”) where she makes sure her decision making is informed by all the lessons she has learned along the way.

During our 40-minute conversation, it was very apparent that Jess is a force to be reckoned with; her vulnerability and earnestness shined throughout our discussion.

## BEGINNINGS

Jess grew up in Door County on a 35-square-mile spit of land called Washington Island. From there she moved to Madison at 18 years old to attend the University of Wisconsin where she was initially drawn to both writing and meteorology. But it was 1981, and Jess found that, “neither the science nor the journalism world was really prepared for

a blind student. While I don’t mind dealing with barriers, there were going to be so many that I was like, ‘The juice isn’t going to be worth the squeeze.’”

Despite being disappointed, Jess continued pursuing a degree and shifted her focus towards elementary education with an emphasis on special education, noting that she “really wanted to help kids open up doors of opportunity that had been closed.”

She student taught at the Wingra School, but upon graduation struggled to find employment. “Folks would say I interviewed really well. They loved me, but because I’m a non-driver, they didn’t know how I was going to get to and from work. I’m like, ‘I have that worked out, I’ve been doing the blind thing my whole life.’ I have strategies, but I faced just so much unconscious bias.”

Eventually the Wingra School brought Jess back as a co-teacher in 1985 and later promoted her to head teacher. It was during her work at Wingra that Jess, at 24 years old, came out as a lesbian. At the time, she had been volunteering with Dane County Advocates for Battered Women, now DAIS (Domestic Abuse Intervention Services). The other

participants in the organization served as positive role models and mentors for Jess in navigating her lesbian identity, although this joy at times felt like a double-edged sword.

“Coming out, I felt like I got a lot of support, but there was a lot of not seeing me also as a person with a disability. One dimension of my identity was really honored in the community, but another dimension of disability was just not talked about... There was more space for women using mobility devices and wheelchairs than the needs of those of us with vision loss; I would almost call it a hierarchy ranking. So, these needs for these people with disabilities are more important than these needs for these people with disabilities. It was an uncomfortable, awkward time to navigate being so jubilant about being out and being held in community and also not having my full identity really honored,” explained Jess.

## CHANGING TIDES

After almost a decade at Wingra, Jess decided to take a swing at something new and ran a sole proprietor consulting practice, which she did for 22 years. The work was focused on, “knowing the skills of being a worker: the human interaction skills such as the ability to work through conflict, have difficult conversations that are meaningful, understand the different ways we show up in the world, creating space for that and not asking people to assimilate.”

Additionally, she started teaching classes ad hoc at the University of Wisconsin until 2016, when she finally became Executive Director of the Council.

What follows is our Q&A with Jess:

## HOW LONG WERE YOU A BOARD MEMBER BEFORE BEING EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR?

I was on the board for under two years before becoming ED. I had been a little apprehensive to get involved with the organization, because the blindness community really siloed itself from the community at large and from other disability communities. Both as a lesbian and as a human, I’m not into separatist culture, and that was a hot topic when I was a young. I enjoy the challenges of interacting with people who are not like me and who are like me.

I reached out at the Council a couple of times, and found them back in time to be very, very, very separatist. As someone who has a little bit of sight, I got the message that I wasn’t blind enough. So, there have been some painful points.

I remember one day I was teaching a workshop on conflict transformation. I always start workshops by letting folks know who I am and doing my brief bio, and then letting them know that I’m legally blind, so I won’t see their raised hands. I say, “I’ll pause frequently, but when you have questions, just say my name, and I’ll check in. This is how to get my attention.”

When we went around the circle and people were introducing themselves, this one man said, “I’m so grateful for what you said. I also am going blind, and this is just comforting to me to know someone else is in the room—someone with a lot of ease and confidence.”

At the first break he came up and said, “I’m the new incoming president for the Wisconsin Council of the Blind and Visually Impaired Board. Would you consider joining our board?”

I said, “I gotta think about it because I don’t have the most positive history with them, so, let’s talk.”

I had a really good conversation with him and decided to step forward. I was on the board for just under two years, and then my predecessor was getting ready to retire. She asked if I would consider throwing my hat in the ring. I really appreciated her. I’d known her for years in other contexts, so I decided to give it a go.

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#### HOW DID THE COUNCIL COME INTO BEING?

When the organization was formed in 1952, its original mission was advocacy in the state legislature. The founders were folks who were blind and understood those institutional barriers. Then over time, the vision services and education mission were added.

When I joined the Council, the advocacy piece was still part of the mission, but it needed a booster shot, which was really exciting to me—to help really reinvigorate public policy and advocacy and to build a lot of coalition work. We're members of the Wisconsin Disability Voting Coalition and other coalitions around the state where we have common ground with folks. The blindness world was very siloed for a long time, and when I came into my seat it was very siloed, not interacting so much with other disability groups, or other groups in general. So I wanted us to de-silo ourselves.

I'm really proud of the work that we've done together over the last nine years—de-siloing the organization, interacting across disability, finding our common ground, and lifting up each other's issues. Particularly now, we really need that. Then increasing the footprint of the Council's visibility: When our sighted community sees us as positive and contributing and as people with a lot of life force, that helps break down those stereotypes and those biases that folks have after maybe reading about blindness. So often, the narrative about blindness is Helen Keller. I'm like, "Oh it's that and so much more." We have been on a trajectory of increased visibility and I'm really, really proud of that.

#### WHAT KINDS OF FUNDRAISERS DOES THE COUNCIL HAVE?

We have a White Cane Campaign. One of the things that I have loved about this organization is that even before we were incorporated, the folks who were thinking about moving us in that direction wanted to make sure they could put a white cane into the hands of anyone in



*"Coming out, I felt like I got a lot of support, but there was a lot of not seeing me also as a person with a disability. One dimension of my identity was really honored in the community, but another dimension of disability was just not talked about..."*

Wisconsin who needed them for free.

The cane is such an important tool for independence, mobility, and self-confidence; knowing how to use your cane is liberating, because for so many folks who don't use a cane or are losing their sight, the world is a terrifying place. There's a lot of noise, there are a lot of obstacles, even in familiar spaces, both indoors and out. So, without a white cane in your hand and learning how to use it, people often stay home, which is incredibly painful to me, or they only go out when they

can be on the arm of someone they trust.

Our forefathers and foremothers recognized that the cane was liberation, so that campaign is something I'm so proud of. We still receive funding from our generous donors to be able to do that: To put a cane in someone's hand for free. And they can replace that cane every two years. For our kiddos, we replace them sooner than that because they grow so quickly and because they are really hard on canes. Sometimes they use it like a pogo stick—just hilarious. So, that's one of our most important campaigns.

We have small fundraisers that run throughout the year, and our end-of-the-year one is big. Those are all still old-fashioned mailed letters and email campaigns. We have donors that have been with us for 35–40 years. We have a really high donor retention rate about 62–63% and the industry standard is about 40%.

We're also proud members of Community Shares of Wisconsin and participate in The Big Share every year, as well as workplace giving. Dining in the Dark is primarily an education event, but it does have a bit of a fundraising turn to it as well, because people pay for their dinner ticket. Our restaurant hosts are often very generous with what their expenses are so that we can have a bit of a walk away—it might be under \$1000, but it all goes together in the pot to make things work.

#### WHAT BIG CHANGES HAVE YOU SEEN IN YOUR DECADE WITH THE ORGANIZATION?

Some of the biggest changes that I've seen are that shift in attitude of the board and staff—and the Wisconsin blindness community in general—to reach out, to connect with other groups and to connect with each other. There was a lot of territorialism, and I thought, "Wait, why are we doing that?" I'm really proud to be a leader in those groups and to have people coming together for the greater good, instead of a "Who took my cheese?" attitude. That's super exciting to me.

Our society is still so deeply rooted in ableism, and it's often an un-talked about form of oppression. Even when I came here, there was still some discomfort about naming ableism as it is. I say, let's call it what it is. I'm seeing a shift there and a deepening understanding of how the challenges that people who are blind and low-vision face fit into a system of oppression and that dismantling is beneficial to everybody. That is a really powerful shift in intersectionality.

I basically said to the board chair when I was offered the position, "I'm not going back in the closet as a lesbian. I'm out, I'm proud, and I've been married for a long time. I've got daughters. You get what you get." I sensed there was some pretty significant homophobia in the blindness community, and we've made a really positive shift there of creating space for intersectionality; that is just so incredibly critical." ■

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# Finding Home One Barefoot Step at a Time

Barefoot Hands Bodywork is a thriving business on the eastside of Madison with multiple practitioners and a loyal client base of more than 3,000 people. Owner and barefoot massage practitioner **Al Poliarco** is at home here, but that wasn't always the case.

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**STEPPING THROUGH THE DOOR** of Barefoot Hands Bodywork on Williamson Street in Madison is like entering some kind of tropical Narnia: You go from the busy concrete intersection of Willy Street and John Nolen Drive and then a second later, you find yourself immersed in diffusely lit, broad-leaf foliage, Capiz shell decorations, furniture and décor woven of natural fibers, and traditional statues and carvings from around the world. There's a light trickling of water somewhere nearby, and all around you, the air smells faintly of lavender and tea tree oil. In the center of it all stands Al Poliarco, smiling and unassuming,

and only slightly nervous.

He welcomes me and shows me around, eventually leading me to one of the teaching rooms where I see bamboo bars mounted above massage tables, and anatomy charts lining the walls.

We exchange pleasantries, but it doesn't take long before he feels familiar to me. He speaks with the same accent I grew up hearing around my family's dinner table, and that makes it easy for us to find common ground, for the conversation to quickly turn to the road that led him from the Philippines to Madison.

And it is quite a road.

## FROM THE SLUMS OF MANILA TO THE STREETS OF BOSTON

Al was born and raised in the Philippines. "I grew up in the slums of Manila," he tells me. "I smelled it, I tasted it, I lived it." It's a reality not many people from the United States can picture or imagine unless they've traveled to developing nations and seen it for themselves.

As a young man, he became a community and political organizer, one of what he calls, "the Marcos babies," active in the protests and youth movements that rose up against dictatorship in the 1980s. "I helped people kind of see the situation and organize around the issues,"

he says. "To act on it as a community instead of just being apathetic." He smiles wryly. "I loved it. I felt like I belonged there. Like I was doing something that mattered."

But his mother, who was already living in Boston, was worried about the danger in that life. "She told me, 'Either you continue what you do, but it's going to be your hole in the ground, or you come to the U.S.'"

He pauses. "And I listened to her. That really changed everything."

Al was 27 when he landed in Boston in 1991. He traded the crowded chaos of Manila's streets for the cold quiet of New England, the smell of humidity and chicken adobo for snowy winters and salt air. "It was hard," he says. "I left not only my friends, but my three kids. Their mother, too. I loved what I did, and I loved where I came from. It was a very painful time."

In Boston, Al found work managing group homes for adults with disabilities and later as a social worker. "I was helping people again, which I loved," he says. "But I still felt like something was missing. I was living here, but I wasn't here."

## LOSING & FINDING HOME

The process of becoming American was, for Al, slow and difficult. "It even took me a while to come to terms with the idea of becoming a U.S. citizen," he says. "I didn't want to give up my Filipino citizenship. It felt like I was giving up who I was."

When he finally took his citizenship oath in 2000, the judge's words stayed with him: "Becoming an American doesn't change who you are. It contributes to the beauty of this diverse nation."

"That moved me," Al says. "It made me realize I wasn't losing everything that made me who I am. I was bringing something to the table. I was contributing to this fabric."

By then, he had settled in Madison with his then-partner, Bill, a research scientist he'd met in Boston. Together they built a home and, eventually, reunited Al's three children from the Philippines. "Bill knew how much I struggled to be away from them," Al says. "When we finally brought them here, it was hard. Their mom couldn't come at first, so the adjustment was painful. But we did everything we could to make them feel at home."

For years, Al poured himself into his social work career, helping people with brain injuries and developmental disabilities through Avenues to Community, a Madison nonprofit. But after two decades, something inside him began to shift. "I knew I needed a change," he says. "I loved helping people, but my English, and

especially my writing, was always an insecurity. I had to ask friends to proofread everything I wrote. It made me feel small."

He laughs. "I said, 'Maybe I'll be a nurse. Or maybe I'll be a computer programmer.' You know, typical Filipino choices."

After trying both paths and finding neither to be a good fit, he took a leap that would change his life: Massage school.

## THE A-HA MOMENT

In 2015, while still working full-time, Al enrolled in night classes for massage therapy at Madison College. "That changed everything for me," he recalls. "I knew right away that it was the right thing, and I thought 'I should have done this a long time ago.'"

He describes it as a revelation. "In social work, my job was about helping people, but always through paperwork, through words. With massage, I could help people directly. I didn't have to worry about grammar or writing. I could express myself through my hands."

During school, he began exploring different techniques, and one day he stumbled upon something that caught his eye: A method called barefoot bar therapy, wherein the therapist uses overhead bars for balance while massaging with their feet. "The first time I saw it, I said, 'What is this?'" he laughs. "And then I read that the woman who developed it got her inspiration from the Philippines."

She had once seen Filipinas walking on the backs of American soldiers, holding bamboo poles for balance. "When I read that, I got chills," Al says. "I knew I had to bring it back to Madison. It was like the technique had come full circle from the Philippines to the U.S., and now it was coming home to me."

## DANCING ON THE BODY

Al trained with the founder of the method in Colorado and brought the technique back to Madison, where he began practicing what's now known as Ashiatsu Barefoot Massage. "From the first time I tried it, I knew this was it for me. It was everything I loved about helping people, but it was also art. It was movement. It was freedom."

He shows me the bars—simple, sturdy wooden beams suspended from the ceiling. "You use your body weight, your gravity," he explains, "so you can go deep without strain. It's like dancing on the body."

Clients, he says, often describe the sensation as rhythmic and fluid. "They say it feels like I'm dancing," he smiles. "It's deep, but not painful. And because I'm using my feet, I can give pressure that's broad and even, that hugs the whole muscle instead of poking at it,



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which can be more aggressive and leave you sore afterward.”

He laughs when I ask if it’s difficult to learn. “Learning it is like learning to use chopsticks for the first time, but with your feet! You have to practice until it becomes a dance.”

And for Al, that’s exactly what it is. “When I’m doing it, it’s like I’m performing, but also meditating,” he says. “I can feel the client’s breath, the rhythm of their body, and I just flow with it.”

#### BUILDING A BUSINESS, BUILDING A COMMUNITY

By 2019, Al had begun teaching the technique to others and opened Barefoot Hands Bodywork. “It started in a back room behind a salon on Broom Street,” he says, laughing. “A broom closet, really. But it was a start.”

**“I got chills,” Al says. “I knew I had to bring it back to Madison. It was like the technique had come full circle from the Philippines to the U.S., and now it was coming home to me.”**

Today, Barefoot Hands Bodywork has grown into a thriving business with multiple practitioners, most of whom are trained in barefoot massage, and a loyal client base of more than 3,000 people. “The community here has been so supportive,” Al says. “Madison has been good to me. People are open. Curious. They want to try new things.”

The space feels like an extension of him. It is filled with handmade wooden carvings, woven lampshades, tropical plants, and a quiet spiritual undertone. “People ask who my interior designer is,” he says, grinning. “I tell them, ‘It’s me!’”

“This place is not just about massage,” Al says. “It’s about creating a space that feels like home for me and for my clients.”

#### FROM MADISON TO THE WORLD

What started as a personal journey has now taken Al across the globe. In just the last couple years, he has competed in (and

won!) massage championships in Wisconsin, Illinois, Rome, Copenhagen, Malaysia, and more. “When I first competed, it was just to connect with other therapists, maybe for marketing,” he says. “Then I won first place. And then another. And another.”

When he travels, he brings his own invention: A set of portable overhead bars he designed himself. The idea came after realizing he couldn’t lug the traditional 100-pound wooden bars overseas. In collaboration with a construction worker in the Philippines, he designed and created a lighter, collapsible version. “Now it fits in a ski bag,” he says proudly. “It weighs less than 50 pounds.”

He had the design refined and manufactured by a small Filipino company run by a family friend. “It’s made in the Philippines now,” he says. “So even my equipment carries that connection home.”

Earlier this year, he launched the product commercially and has already sold more than 150 units. “It’s helping massage therapists work smarter, not harder,” he says. “And it’s helping me share a little piece of the Philippines with the world.”

Along with the growing recognition, people from all over the world have started asking Al to co-teach workshops. Just this year, he has taught in Paris, Vienna, and Istanbul, among other places. “The competitions

opened so many doors,” he says. “People want to learn the technique, and I want to teach it.”

He’s also helping to organize the Philippine Massage Championship, slated for 2027. “It feels like coming full circle again,” he says. “I learned this from a technique inspired by my own country, and now I’m bringing it back home to the Philippines.”

#### HEALING WITHOUT WORDS

Despite his global travels, Al’s heart remains in Madison. “This city is home,” he says simply. “It’s where I found myself again.”

He gestures to the massage table, the bars, the quiet space around us. “For a long time, I thought I had lost my identity when I left the Philippines,” he says. “But through massage I found it again.”

One of the most powerful aspects of this work for Al is that it doesn’t require words; it’s a conversation that transcends cultures and languages. “I don’t need English,” he smiles. “I don’t even have to try hard. What I do now is everything I am.”

He tells me about moments when clients unexpectedly cry during a session. “Sometimes, they have an emotional release. They’ll say, ‘Please, keep going.’ There’s something about this work that moves people. It’s not just physical. It’s energy. It’s connection.”

And sometimes, it moves him, too. “Once, I was working on someone, and I almost cried,” he says quietly. “It was this feeling, this overwhelming gratitude. I felt like I was giving something very important to that person, something from my culture, from me.”

#### THE FULL CIRCLE

Today, Al’s children and grandchildren all live within 10 miles of him. Their mother, now also in the U.S., often visits his studio. “We’re close,” he says. “It’s like everything that was scattered has come together again.”

He’s proud, too, of how his Filipino and LGBTQ+ identities coexist in his work and his life. “I’ve always been out since I’ve been here,” he says. “And Madison has been very accepting. Even the Filipino community here has been good to me. Maybe not always ‘accepting’ in words, but definitely tolerant, supportive, and loving. That’s enough.”

Before I leave, I ask him if he ever misses Manila, the noise, the heat, the intensity of it. He smiles. “Of course,” he says. “But I bring it with me. Every time I work, every time I teach, every time I dance on someone’s back, I’m bringing the Philippines with me. Massage isn’t work for me. It’s not something I do. It’s who I am. And when I do it, I feel at home.” ■



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# The Accidental Detective

In our July issue, we published a story about the Billy Newton murder. **Clark Williams**, who was pivotal in solving that unsolved, decades-old crime, and who has now returned to his home state of Wisconsin, is picking up where that case left off and making a new career as a cold case investigator.

PEOPLE HISTORY TRUE CRIME

**AFTER SOLVING** the Billy Newton case, Clark Williams turned to his husband and said, “I guess I’m done now.” He couldn’t have been more wrong.

On February 7, 2023, *The Los Angeles Times* ran a front-page article about the case, where Detective Lamberti named Clark a “savant” of cold case investigation.

“I was humbled and embarrassed, because I’m a real introvert,” said Clark. “I don’t like attention at all. It really makes me uncomfortable and causes great anxiety for me. As soon as that article came out, I started getting calls and emails from survivors of murder victims, as well as law enforcement agencies, asking if I’d look at their cases.”

“I looked at my husband Jim, and I said, ‘Hey, maybe I’m good at this. Maybe I should lean into it for a while and see where it takes me,’” said Clark.

Since then, Clark has worked on 12 cases nationwide, applying the same methods that he used in the Newton case.

“It’s very much a victim-centered investigation,” he said. “I go back to the streets where the victim walked, and go to the places where the victim lived, worked, learned, and played. I work with surviving families and friends to uncover who the victim was. My goal is to rehabilitate the victim, remembering them for something more than the

worst day of their life.”

Clark always chooses the cases that aren’t getting attention. But he never, ever promises to solve them.

“I look for cases like Billy Newton’s,” said Clark, “where the victims may have been marginalized by the justice system. People of color, people involved with sex work, people with substance abuse issues, and particularly, because of my own lived experience, gay and bisexual men who died violent deaths in the 70s, 80s, and 90s. Half my work is devoted to those cases.”

“So much of my work is family therapy,” said Clark. “These survivors have never found peace for their loved ones. They’ve never gotten the answers they’ve long been looking for. They may feel the crime was never sufficiently investigated, or that their loved one was judged for the life they lived instead of vindicated for the violence they suffered. The family bears the brunt when victims are ‘dirtied up’ by the legal system. And that’s unfair.”

THE PATH TO HERE

“My favorite place in the world has always been the basement of a dusty old library,” said Clark. “Throughout my life, I’ve spent countless hours alone.”

As a gay teenager, he didn’t know a single gay person in the world. “It was awful,” said Clark. “Eau Claire was a painful experience that I still carry scars from. When I was 14 years old, I was the victim of a hate crime, but I lied to the police about it because I didn’t want anyone to suspect I was gay. Being gay was the worst thing you could ever be in the 1970s.”

Clark repressed that incident very deeply for a long time. In fact, it didn’t resurface for decades until he was in the middle of the Billy Newton investigation.

“I’d found a letter from Billy’s mother, where she mentions him being the victim of a sex crime at a local skating rink,” said Clark. “I knew the skating rink well, and I wanted to know what happened.”

“So, I was at the library trying to find any reports of this crime in the Eau Claire newspapers, when I found an April 1979 mention of a boy who’d been beaten and hospitalized after an attempted robbery. I thought I’d found Billy,” remembered Clark. “But then I gasped because it wasn’t Billy. It was me. That was me. I was the victim of that hate crime. I was the person in that article. I was beaten up. I was hospitalized. I made up the story about the robbery so nobody would find out the truth.”

“And that incident deeply, deeply affected me, inside out, for years,” Clark said.

ALMOST FAMOUS

In 1991 Clark responded to a *Wisconsin Light* newspaper ad. That response led him to meet author Will Fellows, who wanted to interview him for a potential book project. Clark sat for the interview, and then lost touch with Fellows. Little did he know, that decision would come back to him in unexpected ways years later.

After leaving Wisconsin, Clark moved to New York City, where he attended graduate school for social work. As he was building a whole new life, he discovered a *Village Voice* review of the book featuring his old way of life. Will Fellows’ book, *Farm Boys*, had become a queer sensation.

“I had a panic attack. I couldn’t remember what I’d said in my interview, and I wasn’t sure I wanted to be associated with it. I went down to Barnes & Noble in Union Square immediately. I found myself on page 292, read my chapter, and reconnected with who I used to be.”

**“I look for cases where the victims may have been marginalized by the justice system. People of color, people involved with sex work, people with substance abuse issues, and particularly, because of my own lived experience, gay and bisexual men who died violent deaths in the 70s, 80s, and 90s.”**

With no access to gay community, Clark’s “coming of age” was made up of sexual encounters at rural rest stops. And now, *Farm Boys* was telling the whole world about it.

“If I could have bought every book and destroyed it, I would have,” said Clark.

“So, I did what every good little gay boy did back then,” said Clark. “I repressed those memories so hard. I pretended it never happened. That’s the power of gay men of a certain age. Things happen to you, and you just compartmentalize it for decades. This wasn’t healthy. It was survival.”

But it wasn’t quite that easy. For the past 25 years, when people

learned Clark came from a farm, their first question was: Have you ever read *Farm Boys*? There was even a Broadway play adaptation.

“I totally distanced myself from it,” said Clark. “Until last year, when I got an email from a stranger, who asked if I was *THE* Clark Williams from *Farm Boys*. They pointed out the irony: As a youngster, I was taking these incredible risks in rest areas, and now, 30 years later, I’m solving murders of young men who were killed in rest areas.”

“I decided it was time to stop running from this interview and start acknowledging it. I hadn’t even told my husband of 28 years. So, I went out and got the book again, and I read it with a separate set of eyes. And now, I realize that it’s a diary entry of what I was feeling and thinking in 1991, and I felt a lot of empathy for that version of myself,” Clark said.

“Ironically, there’s a line at the end of the chapter, where I talk about how nice it would have been to meet someone my own age, because that’s what I really wanted,” he said. “And I realized I was looking for someone like Billy, if we’d been able to be ourselves in Eau Claire. It was really a full circle moment, and coming to terms with my childhood helped me become a more integrated and healthier person.”

CLARK’S THIRD ACT

After the Newton case, the LAPD invited him to attend homicide school training as a volunteer.

“I was the only person in the room who wasn’t a law enforcement officer,” said Clark. “Just me, the gay social worker, sitting alongside 25 homicide detectives. I had to earn my place and prove that I belonged at the table.”

“I am motivated to find justice for every victim,” he said. “That’s my motivation.”

Clark’s philosophy is to “never, ever give up” because new tools and technologies can help solve cases that happened decades ago.

“Know that every case remains open until it’s solved. We are not ‘reopening’ these cases, because cold cases were never closed to begin with,” he said.

LIGHTING CANDLES IN THE DARKNESS

Clark understands he can’t change the world, but he’s committed to creating peace and justice for one person at a time.

“I get a lot of people reaching out to me, and I respond to every single one of them. Every single one,” he said. “I believe that every survivor, every grieving family member, deserves to have someone hear them. I know the painful path they have traveled.”

Why did Clark choose this path? He’s not entirely sure himself.

“I just turned 60,” he said, “and I’m closer to the end of my life than the beginning. It’s a natural thing to engage in life review, to reclaim parts of your life, and try to make sense of your life choices. As an aging gay man, who felt long ago put out to pasture, I’m grateful for this third act. Not everyone gets one.”

At the same time, Clark recognizes the risks of his new case work.

“Investigation has an impact on the investigators themselves,” said Clark, “and I really feel that sometimes. It can be very triggering. There are old wounds I’m reopening along the way, and new wounds I’m accumulating too. If you’re serious about this work, you have to recognize what you might be doing to yourself.”

He may live 2000 miles away from his small-town family farm, but Clark is still a Wisconsin boy at heart.

“I still wear my overalls in Los Angeles,” said Clark, “and my daughter and her friends call me Farmer Clark. Wisconsin is where I feel most myself. I love going to games at Camp Randall and Lambeau. When my husband and I retire, we are heading back to Wisconsin.” ■



# LGBTQ HEALTH SERVICES DIRECTORY

Finding **LGBTQ-affirming healthcare providers** and services can be a difficult and intimidating task. Below, you will find a list of some of the state's providers who self-identify as intentionally safe and affirming for the LGBTQ+ community. We will work to expand this list every year, so please let us know if you know somebody we should add!

HEALTH & FAMILIES | GENDER-AFFIRMING | TRANSGENDER

**PARTICULARLY WITHIN** large institutions, finding a provider who is knowledgeable about the specific health needs of queer people can be overwhelming and frustrating at times. So when you set out to find an LGBTQ-Affirming provider that feels like a good fit for you, often the first step can be to determine where you fall on the spectrum of need of affirmation. Would you be okay in an environment where the doctor is an ally whose patients can discuss their health openly without fear of judgment? Would you prefer someone who specializes in LGBTQ+ healthcare, or in the specific mental or physical conditions you are facing? Would it make a difference to you if they had lived through those experiences themselves?

### QUESTIONS TO ASK A HEALTHCARE PROFESSIONAL

- How do you ensure your practice is LGBTQ+ inclusive and affirming?
- Do you have experience caring for transgender and nonbinary patients?
- Is your staff trained in LGBTQ+ cultural competency and communication?
- What would you do if you weren't familiar or educated on something regarding my identity, gender experience, or health?
- How do you handle issues related to gender identity, chosen names, or pronouns in medical records?
- Are you knowledgeable about preventive care and screenings relevant to LGBTQ+ individuals (e.g., PrEP, hormone therapy, fertility options)?
- Do you work with or refer to specialists who have experience with LGBTQ+ health concerns?
- What steps do you take to ensure patient confidentiality, especially around sexual orientation or gender identity?

### HEALTH CENTERS

**Care for All** | **Alison Kliegman** (they/them) | 756 N. 35th St., Ste. 204, Milwaukee  
Care for All is an independent nonprofit health center created to fill a critical gap in abortion care and wraparound services in Milwaukee. We will be adding other services including: STI testing and treatment, expanded family planning options, cervical cancer screenings, and more!

**Public Health Madison & Dane County – Sexual & Reproductive Health Clinic** | **Alex Dudek** (they/them) | 2705 E. Washington Ave., 2nd Floor, Madison  
We are a clinic of nurses who provide no-cost sexual and reproductive health care that is inclusive and stigma-free, welcoming people of all ages, gender identities, gender expressions, and sexual orientations. We do not require proof of income nor identification.

### Methodology

**WE RECOGNIZE** that this list is by no means comprehensive. We compiled this collection of providers by asking medical, mental health, and other wellness professionals who self-identify as LGBTQ-affirming to fill out our online form. We solicited responses via direct one-to-one outreach as well as calls for entries in our weekly newsletter and on our social media pages. If you are an LGBTQ-affirming provider, or know of other providers who are not listed here, please encourage them to fill out our form so they can be listed next year!

We also recognize that due to our data collection methods, and because large institutions and small private practices handle public relations concerns differently, our first attempt at a list highly favors private practice mental health providers. Institutions, while they may take many steps to ensure affirming practices and employ providers who are actively LGBTQ-affirming, have more barriers that may prevent them from participating. This list also does not include any insurance companies.

[ourliveswisconsin.com/health-services-directory-submission](http://ourliveswisconsin.com/health-services-directory-submission)

### DIRECT PRIMARY CARE

**Adwuma Family Medicine** | **Dr. Giselle Argento-Berrio** (she/her)  
2317 International Ln., Ste. 118, Madison | Direct primary care practice rooted in trust, access, and community. BIPOC-immigrant-owned, proudly serving marginalized communities with affirming, inclusive care—no insurance, no rush, no judgment. Hormones, mental health, chronic conditions, or acute care—we see and honor who you are.

**Dedicated Family Care** | **Dr. Wendy Molaska** (she/her) | 2990 Triverton Pike Dr., Ste. 101, Fitchburg | Dedicated Family Care is a direct primary care (DPC) clinic whose mission is to champion health equity by providing an exceptional primary care experience that is personal, high quality, accessible, and affordable. The clinic does not require insurance and provides services on a membership model.

**Presence Primary Care** | **Dr. Anna G. Mirer** (she/ella) | 2500 W Layton Ave., Ste. 260, Milwaukee | We are an independent Direct Primary Care clinic. Our alternative business model allows us to offer gender-affirming care to adults and adolescents without government interference. We welcome patients who identify as neurodivergent. All sizes are respected. Cash pay sliding scale; no insurance needed.

**Tallgrass Osteopathic Family Medicine** | **Dr. Angela Marchant** (she/her)  
103 Owen Rd., Monona | We are a direct primary care practice, a membership-based model with an affordable monthly fee that covers any and all primary care. No insurance, no problem! We celebrate all expressions of sexuality and provide gender-affirming care throughout the lifespan.

### HOSPITAL-AFFILIATED PRIMARY CARE

**Aurora Health Care** | **Dr. Kristen Wilde** (she/her) | 3003 W. Good Hope Rd., Milwaukee  
I'm a board-certified internal medicine primary care physician. I pro-

vide comprehensive care for the adult with specialties in chronic pain, depression, anxiety, bipolar, ADHD and autism, and addiction treatment including MAT for opioid use disorder. I also offer gender affirming hormone therapy.

**Aurora Summit Family Medicine Clinic** | **Dr. Christina Meyer** (she/her)  
36500 Aurora Dr., Summit | Full spectrum of family medicine. I see all ages from pediatrics to adults. I provide contraceptive care including Depo-Provera, Nexplanon, and IUD insertions. I also provide gender-affirming hormone therapy. I have received dedicated LGBTQ+ training.

**Medical College of Wisconsin** | **Dr. Jamie Butth** (she/her) | 840 N. 87th St., Wauwatosa | Provision of trans-affirming and primary care for LGBTQ+ people. Provision of PrEP. I take joy in my work and care about my patients.

### CHIROPRACTIC

**Aurora Health Care** | **Dr. Laurie Harrigan** | 6901 West Edgerton Ave., Milwaukee  
As part of Aurora's Orthopedic Spine program, Dr. Harrigan offers comprehensive chiropractic care that includes spinal and extremity manipulation, soft tissue treatments, nutritional counseling, and exercise prescription to support optimal pain reduction and recovery of injuries.

**Hall Family Chiropractic** | **Dr. Angela Hall** (she/her) | 1000 Links Dr., Ste. 1, Poynette | Inclusive, LGBTQ-affirming chiropractic care focused on nervous system balance and fascial release. Adjustments are low-force, gentle, effective, and supportive—helping you move more freely and feel at home in your body.

**New Health Chiropractic & Integrated Healthcare** | **Dr. Richard Merriam** (he/him) | 2690 Research Park Dr., Ste. J, Fitchburg | At New Health we are dedicated to providing the best comprehensive and personalized care to our patients. We offer chiropractic, along with nutritional supplementation, regenerative therapies, massage therapy, and bio-identical hormone

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**DR. ELAINA MEIER**

**Licensed Professional Counselor, PhD, LPC, NCC**  
Integrated Counseling

I **STARTED MY PRACTICE** with a simple but radical idea: To create a space for people who were being targeted by society, a space where it was okay to be stressed out. “Community serving community” has always been the foundation of everything we do.

I did my master’s clinical training on a burn intensive care unit. That experience taught me what it meant to walk alongside people in deep physical and emotional pain, and to recognize that even good medical intervention can be stressful. I entered the doctoral program at UW–Madison as an atypical candidate: My bachelor’s was from UW–Parkside, but I had something important that mattered: Experience in the real, human side of health care.

To the best of my knowledge, I was the first openly trans individual to graduate from any of UW’s four doctoral psychology programs. That came with challenges. There was even a Title IX event, and Susan Crawford—yes, that Susan Crawford—was my lawyer. But all of it shaped the kind of psychologist I wanted to become: Someone who understands how layered and complicated accessing care can be, especially for trans and queer folks.

Now, my clinic focuses on offering high-quality, affirming care to those who have historically been denied it. We specialize in readiness evaluations for gender-affirming surgery, providing both the clinical scaffolding and the humanity that the system too often strips away. We’ve also expanded into ADHD assessments for adults, because so many queer and trans people struggle to access testing.

Our team is growing, too. One of our clinicians, Dr. Rachel Dyer, specializes in reproductive health and abortion-related psychological wellness. Dr. Dyer provides individual counseling both in-person and via telehealth. Together, we ran our first abortion aftercare support group this summer. We are offering queer-centered mental health care around reproductive health, something that nobody else is doing.

I’m based in Madison and Milwaukee, with plans to expand to the Fox Valley soon. If there’s one thing I’ve learned, it’s that healing isn’t just individual, it’s collective. And if I have the training and the privilege to offer that healing, then I have a responsibility to do it. ■

replacement therapy. We are LGBTQ-owned, and our staff is trained in issues that affect those in our community.

#### MASSAGE THERAPY

**Bacon Therapies LLC** | **Karter Bacon** (they/them) | 7818 Big Sky Dr., Ste. 103, Madison  
Therapeutic and relaxation massage therapist who provides client-centered care in an affirming environment. Also provides KT taping, scar massage, cupping, and gua sha.

**Clarified Bodywork LLC** | **Claire Ninneman** (she/her) | 12065 W Janesville Rd., Ste. 104, Hales Corners | I am a queer cis woman and LMT that has been caring for people with massage for 16 years. Clarified Bodywork LLC is a solo massage practice with an LGBTQ+ mission. I have taken Inclusivity and Gender Identity training to better serve and respect my clients.

#### PHYSICAL THERAPY

**Trimotion Therapy** | **Dr. Emily Kolaga** (she/her) | W307N1499 Golf Rd., Delafield  
Trimotion Therapy is a physical therapy, health and education center. Specializes in complex conditions, chronic pain and health challenges, generalized pain, and orthopedic conditions. Expert-level Myofascial Release treatment, Pelvic health, Trauma-informed care and mental health support. Completed all OutCare LGBTQ+ training.

**Advocate Aurora Health** | **Megan Rorabeck** (she/her) | 9200 W. Loomis Rd., Ste. 107, Franklin | I am a pelvic health physical therapist, board certified in pelvic health through the American Physical Therapy Association. I treat adolescence through elderhood and all genders with any pelvic health needs. I focus on individualized treatment plans to help each patient reach their unique goals.

**Aurora Health Care** | **Grace Kirkpatrick** (she/her) | 945 N. 12th St., Milwaukee  
Pelvic floor physical therapist offering trauma-informed, gender-inclusive, and LGBTQ-affirming care. Dedicated to creating a safe, supportive space for healing and empowerment.

**Aurora Medical Center Sheboygan County** | **Leslie Gerbitz** (she/her) | 3400 Union Ave., Sheboygan | Certified pelvic rehabilitation practitioner and physical therapist. I am able to treat pelvic floor pain and bowel and bladder issues for individuals when concerns are from a surgical and/or non-surgical origin.

**Aurora Sports Health-Mount Pleasant** | **Learnon McGinn** (she/her) | 13250 Washington Ave., Mount Pleasant | Learnon is a physical therapist and certified pelvic rehabilitation practitioner who treats pelvic floor and abdominal wall dysfunction in patients of all ages and genders. She is a trauma informed provider who treats bladder, bowel, sexual health, and reproductive concerns in an outpatient setting.

#### OTHER SPECIALTIES

**About Voice – Speech Therapy Services** | **Ami Bouterse** (she/her) | 4235 Green Bay Rd., Kenosha | I provide expansive voice care to support authentic communication with specialized training and experience serving clients across the gender spectrum. As a WI-licensed SLP and singing voice specialist, I offer in-person services in Kenosha (in Bodywise Ste.s) or online anywhere in Wisconsin.

**Aurora Sinai Medical Center** | **Dr. Marie Forgie** (she/her) | 945 N. 12th St., Milwaukee | OB/GYN providing LGBTQ- and gender-affirming care including preventative, cervical cancer screening, gender affirming hysterectomy, contraception including tubal ligations, and family planning. Member of the World Professional Association for Transgender Health.

**Advocate Lutheran General Hospital** | **Brady Bunkelman** (he/they) | Virtual  
I am a cancer genetic counselor, specializing in talking with patients

about their personal and/or family history of cancer and how it might impact them. I discuss screening options and help coordinate genetic testing for hereditary cancer syndromes to better individualize care.

#### MENTAL HEALTH

**Abegglan Counseling and Consulting, LLC** | **Sydney Walker** (she/they) | 740 Regent St., Ste. 201, Madison | Sydney is an Advanced Practice Social Worker with a focus on the intersection of mental health, disability, and self-exploration. As a queer and non-monogamous provider, she aims to create a non-judgmental environment that allows for a safe and equal relationship between therapist and client.

**Bobby Walker Therapy** | 10 E. Doty St., Ste. 515, Madison | Bobby is a psychotherapist and sex therapist in downtown Madison. She specializes in working with queer individuals and couples/non-monogamous relationship structures, especially those struggling to connect sexually. Bobby provides a non-judgmental, sex-positive environment where expansive ideas about sex are welcome and encouraged, and where no topic is too awkward, crass, or off-limits.

**Branch & Bloom Therapy, LLC** | **Em Walden** (she/they) | 111 S. First St., Ste. 120, Madison | I provide mental health therapy to individuals. I support queer, neurodivergent, gender expansive, and polyamorous folks. I am trained in EMDR and support individuals who have experienced trauma.

**Bronwyn Shiffer Psychotherapy** | **Bronwyn Shiffer** (she/her) | Virtual  
Personal transformation is the first step in healing the world. You are the expert of yourself and already have the capacity to heal. Graduate coursework training: Advanced Treatment with LGBTQ+ Clients.

**Center for Community Healing** | **Dean Amethyst Dvorak** (they/them) | 301 S Bedford St., Ste. 216, Madison | The Center for Community Healing is a counseling center dedicated to serving LGBTQ+ individuals, couples,

and families throughout Wisconsin. We accept Quartz, The Alliance, and Quartz Medicaid insurance, along with private pay on a sliding scale.

**Corazon Counseling and Wellness, LLC** | **Brook Landeo** (she/they) | 110 N Main St., Poynette | Corazon Counseling and Wellness is an LGBTQ-affirming mental health private practice in Poynette (30 minutes north of Madison). Our therapists are poly-friendly and provide gender-affirming care letters as needed. Fill out the contact form at corazoncounselingandwellness.com to get started!

**Counseling and Consulting Professionals** | **Emily Belongia** (she/her) | 424 E Longview Dr., Appleton | I am passionate about helping individuals gain awareness and become more empowered and authentic within their identities. I offer collaboration, respect, care, support, and empathy for each individual I work with. I believe that having genuine feedback opportunities enhances the healing process.

**Counseling and Consulting Professionals** | **Jenna Belongia** (she/her) | 3301B Packerland Dr., DePere | I’m here to challenge and empower you to work toward the best version of yourself. I want to help you recognize the areas of your life that need improvement and celebrate the parts of you that make you feel proud. I’ve attended trainings on gender-expansive youth and the LGBTQ+ community.

**Counseling Psychology Training Clinic** | 1025 W. Johnson St., Rm 312, Madison  
Our clinic offers free culturally responsive mental health care—including gender affirming care letters—to students and the Madison community, while training future psychologists under licensed supervision.

**Eclipse Counseling LLC** | **Cory Tischman** (any pronouns) | 2004 Highland Ave., Ste 0, Eau Claire | Eclipse Counseling offers affirming care for LGBTQ+ folks using individual, relational, and family therapies. We specialize in trauma, ADHD, anxiety, grief, and more—supporting clients with compassion and a collaborative path toward healing and growth.

**Edelweiss Behavioral Health LLC** | **Anna Desai** (she/her) | 725 Heartland

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**DR. RICH MERRION**

**DC, Chiropractor**  
New Health Chiropractic & Integrated Healthcare

**I WORKED IN** the environmental industry for 11 years, but ultimately decided that I wasn't helping people enough, which is really what's at the heart of what I like to do in my life. So, I went back to school for chiropractic medicine. There is a huge need that exists for people to have an alternative form of care to drugs and surgery. I had had great experiences with chiropractic care myself during my career as a swimmer and diver, so I knew that's where I wanted to be.

Chiropractic care is great because it's so personal. Just like with massage, I'm touching people all the time, so it is really necessary to create a space that is welcoming and inviting for people from all walks of life. We have tried really hard to create an LGBTQ+ affirming practice that is staffed with people who are part of the community and also with allies, which I think goes a long way toward helping people feel comfortable in the space. A very high percentage of our client base are queer, trans, or identify as part of the LGBTQ+ community—a much higher percentage than just the amount of LGBTQ+ people who exist in the population—and I think that says a lot about our practice.

One of the things that differentiates my practice is the vast array of services that I offer that are outside of the regular standard adjustments. To start, we have a variety of different tables and techniques to use for people who may not be comfortable with standard adjustments. But we also have MLS laser therapy, which is used for pain and healing. It speeds the rate at which we heal and decreases pain and inflammation. I also have biomedical hormone replacement, regenerative medicine, Emculpt NEO, which is a muscular activation device that helps to build muscle and burn fat for body contouring, as well as HIFEM, or high intensity focused electromagnetic treatments, which causes muscle activation of the pelvic floor and can help with sexual and incontinence issues. ■

**Trail, Ste. 301, Madison** | We are an outpatient behavioral health clinic with multiple providers and many varying specialties. We also offer intensive outpatient programs for individuals struggling with OCD and eating disorders. We have a multidisciplinary team consisting of therapists, dietitians and medication prescribers.

**Empowerment Within LLC** | **Anna Kraft** (they/she) | N14W23777 Stone Ridge Dr., Ste. 135, Waukesha | Empowerment Within LLC is a group counseling practice located in Waukesha, WI. Our team of compassionate clinicians combines innovative techniques with genuine care to create a space where you can explore, grow, and thrive—without stigma or judgment. Some clinicians have dedicated LGBTQ+ training.

**Every Little Fiber** | **Abby Carncross** (she/her) | 120 Bishops Way, Ste. 164, Brookfield | Every Little Fiber is a mental health and nutrition counseling small, private practice with two therapists and a registered dietitian/personal trainer on staff. Our clinicians specialize in eating disorders and neurodiversity, along with other mental health concerns.

**FourRivers, LLC** | **Dr. William Hutter** (he/him) | 133 S. Butler St., Madison | Here at FourRivers, LLC, I offer virtual psychotherapy LGBTQ+ individuals (over the age of 5) and couples (living in Wisconsin, Illinois, South Carolina and Maine) supervision, consultation, coaching and/or training opportunities to individuals across the United States.

**Gifts of Emotion, LLC** | **Leah Gold** | 301 N. Broom St., Floor 2, Madison | My work is informed by psychodynamic theory, particularly relational and attachment perspectives. I am an AASECT Certified Sex Therapist. I have interest in and experience working with LGBTQ+ communities.

**Healthy Healing Solutions, LLC** | **Cathy Morrow** (she/her) | 5497 W Waterford Ln., Ste. C, Appleton | I am an LPC in private practice. I specialize in providing mental health services for those 14+ that may be struggling with anxiety, depression, PTSD, and specialize in helping those within the LGBTQ+ community.

**Home Body Counseling, LLC** | **Zoë Whaley** | 560 Park Ave., Ste. 102, Prairie du Sac | I provide therapy to individuals & couples. I specialize in working with people who've been impacted by distressing or traumatic life experiences and difficult childhoods. If you feel stuck in the past or keep repeating unhelpful patterns in your life/relationships, I can help.

**Honey of the Heart Coaching** | **Lucy Medrow** (they/she) | Virtual | Since 2019, I've been supporting the self identified high achievers, people pleasers, and busy bees of the world. As a Registered Nurse (RN) for 13+ years, and a Board Certified Nurse Coach (NC-BC), my offerings are as unique as you are. From a lighthearted Patreon to 1-on-1 holistic health sessions. I'm a perfect coach for anyone who wants to explore the topic of holistic health and wellness open-heartedly.

**Integrated Counseling** | **Elaina Meier** (any pronouns) | 7818 Big Sky Dr, Madison | Integrated Counseling has locations in Madison and Milwaukee. Through our office locations and telehealth services, we aim to provide a space for the LGBTQ+ community throughout Wisconsin to find room to pause, to be, and to heal.

**Karla Locher Psychotherapy** | **Karla Locher** (she/her) | 2002 Atwood Ave., Ste. 217, Madison | I am a transgender woman practicing psychoanalytic psychotherapy on the eastside of Madison. Psychoanalytic therapy, practiced from a queer and feminist perspective, allows patients to cast aside burdens they have felt but could not understand. I work with clients for long-term psychotherapy.

**Kettle Moraine Counseling** | **Christina Lachner** (she/her) | Virtual | I believe in empowering you to be your fullest, best self based on what you would like that to be. All people deserve to be their authentic selves and I will support you in your Mental Health Journey.

**Kettle Moraine Counseling** | **Angela Waldoch** (they/them) | 303 S. Paterson St., Ste. 6, Madison | I'm a Registered Art Therapist and Licensed Professional Counselor. I specialize in anxiety, depression, mood disorders, CPTSD,

SH/SI, identity exploration, grief and loss, those coping with chronic illnesses, and life changes & transitions.

**Kindness Matters Counseling** | **Erika Wagner-Martin** (she/her) | Virtual | Kindness Matters Counseling aims to provide safe, connected mental health care to Wisconsin residents ages 16 and older. I've been doing my best to help and support clients in the LGBTQ+ community since 2013. All therapy sessions are provided virtually. Please visit my website for more information.

**Lake City Counseling** | **Sarah Armstrong** (she/her) | 1532 W. Broadway, Ste. 202, Monona | Person-centered, strengths-based therapy in person and virtually. I use evidence based therapies to help clients identify strengths, make lasting change and hold themselves with love and acceptance. Support for anxiety, depression, trauma, adjustment and relationships.

**LifeStance Health** | **Emily Lutzen** (she/her) | 440 Science Dr., Ste. 330, Madison | I currently provide outpatient mental health counseling through LifeStance health. My practice uses different cognitive behavioral interventions to help clients gain insight into their specific mental health care needs. I also use a trauma-informed approach with all clients to help them understand how different factors have influenced their experiences. | **Abigail Cohn** (she/her) | 4811 S. 76th St., Ste. 208, Greenfield | Abigail offers a relaxed and non-judgmental approach. She aims to create a collaborative environment to enable clients to develop their own goals and experiment with making important changes. Abigail has experience working with children, adolescents, adults, and families. | **Kristine Jacobs** (she/her) | 1143 Warwick Way, Unit A, Racine | Kristine is a Licensed Clinical Social Worker in Wisconsin who has been practicing since 2015. She has a BS in Psychology from University of Wisconsin-Madison and an MSW from University of California, Los Angeles. Kristine specializes in working with children and families. | **Kelly Theodore** | 111 E. Wisconsin Ave., Ste. 1500, Milwaukee | I am a psychiatric nurse practitioner specializing in diagnosing

and treating mental health conditions. I excel at building strong therapeutic relationships, affirming and inclusive care, tailoring medication management, and integrating evidence-based approaches to support recovery. My strength lies in combining clinical expertise with empathy, helping patients and families navigate healing with compassion and clarity.

**Luna Counseling, LLC** | **Kyle Egerdal** (he/him) | 6709 Raymond Rd., Ste. 174, Madison | I specialize in psychotherapy for teens, LGBTQIA+ individuals and relationships, adults whose parents were distant or abusive, and survivors of physical and sexual violence.

**Milk Thistle Clinic LLC** | **Finn Phoenix** (they/them) | Virtual | My practice is LGBTQIA+-and-neurodivergent-affirming; my clients tend to be queer folx, women, conscientious parents and caregivers, novel thinkers, disabled/chronically ill folx, survivors, creatives, and those generally looking to fortify themselves within their ecosystemic niche.

**MindKind, LLC** | **Dr. Brittany Mathews, PhD** (she/her) | Virtual | Mathews provides evidence-based telehealth psychology services to children, adolescents, and young adults who are struggling with anxiety and/or depression and aims to work from a cultural humility framework, provide LGBTQ+ affirming care, and celebrate each individual's identity.

**Northshore Clinics, LLC** | **Sam Schommer** (they/them) | W67N222 Evergreen Blvd., Ste. 209, Cedarburg | We are here to help you navigate life's challenges. Our therapy sessions are designed to address a wide range of emotional and mental health issues.

**Nova Mental Health Services** | **Taylor Clark** | 4465 N Oakland Ave., Ste. 360, Shorewood | I am the founder at Nova MHS. At NMHS, our mission is to support individuals on their journey toward improved mental health and overall well-being. Providing for diverse age groups and health challenges, Nova empowers clients with evidence-based tools and psychoeducation in order to provide a safe space for one to flourish.

**Nova Mental Health Services** | **Paige Flannery** (she/her) | 4465 N Oakland Ave.,

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## UNITYPOINT HEALTH-MERITER

### Child and Adolescent Psychiatry

Prioritizing Inclusive, Affirming Care for LGBTQ+ Youth

AT UNITYPOINT HEALTH-MERITER's Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (CAP) facility, our commitment to LGBTQ+ mental health isn't just something we say—it's something we live out every day through our specialized programming, staff training, and ongoing community engagement. Our team of psychiatrists, therapists, social workers, and behavioral health specialists is trained not only in evidence-based mental health practices but also in culturally aware, affirming care that meets the unique needs of LGBTQ+ youth.

In all aspects of care, our clinicians are equipped to create a welcoming environment that validates each patient's identity. We use inclusive language, respect chosen names and pronouns, and ensure that all aspects of care—from individual therapy to group programming—are supportive of diverse sexual orientations and gender identities. Our facility fosters open, honest conversations about identity, belonging, and resilience, allowing LGBTQ+ youth to express themselves without fear of judgment.

In addition to our clinical care, UnityPoint Health-Meriter and the Meriter Foundation are deeply invested in community support and advocacy. One of the ways we demonstrate this commitment is through our Love is Love event—an inspiring celebration of the LGBTQ+ community and a critical fundraiser to expand and enhance care for LGBTQ+ youth.

Proceeds from recent Love is Love events went directly toward hiring additional behavioral health staff trained specifically in LGBTQ+ affirming care. These new team members have already begun making a difference—helping to reduce wait times, expand access to care, and deepen the support we can offer LGBTQ+ patients and their families. This investment ensures that more youth can connect with providers who understand their experiences and are committed to walking alongside them in their mental health journey.

At CAP, we also collaborate closely with families, schools, and community organizations to create broader systems of support for LGBTQ+ youth. We recognize that mental health doesn't exist in a vacuum, and we work to empower caregivers and allies to be strong partners in a young person's care.

The mental health of LGBTQ+ youth in our community is not just one of our priorities—it is the priority. We are proud to be a facility where young people can come as they are and receive the affirming, high-quality care they deserve. Whether it's through clinical excellence, community events like Love is Love, or everyday moments of kindness and affirmation, UnityPoint Health-Meriter's Child and Adolescent Psychiatry facility is here to say: You belong, you are valued, and you are never alone. ■

**Ste. 360, Shorewood** | I'm passionate about helping others feel supported and understood, and I bring curiosity, compassion, and a strong foundation in social work values. I am the first point of contact at Nova. I can schedule intake, match you to a therapist, and scheduling concerns.

**Ben Mattson (he/him)** | 4465 N Oakland Ave., Ste. 360, Shorewood | I'm a psychotherapist with a deep belief in the power of empathy, collaboration, and identity-affirming care. I'm passionate about creating a safe, affirming space for LGBTQIA+ folks, especially those navigating identity, trauma, and life transitions. | **Ashley Trapp** | 4465 N Oakland Ave., Ste. 360, Shorewood | I earned my bachelor's degree in nutrition and my master's degree in clinical counseling. I'm especially passionate about working with neurodivergent and LGBTQ+ individuals. My approach centers on creating a safe, affirming space where clients can be their full, authentic selves.

**No Worries Wellness LLC** | **Jordan Brown (she/her)** | 10425 W. North Ave., Ste. 236, Wauwatosa | No Worries Wellness is a collective of affirming, compassionate, and authentic mental health therapists, including both strong supporters and members of the LGBTQ+ community, offering individual, couples, and group sessions in Wauwatosa and virtually.

**Prism Psychotherapy LLC** | **Leslie Golden (she/her)** | 2002 Atwood Ave., Ste. 223, Madison | I provide individual psychoanalytic therapy to adults with an emphasis on exploration, collaboration, and discovery. I focus on concerns like depression, anxiety, identity, women's issues, interpersonal difficulties, chronic pain/health difficulties and their roots in the unconscious and early life.

**Rogers Behavioral Health** | **Katrina Welborn (she/her)** | 406 Science Dr., Ste. 110, Madison | Rogers provides PHP/IOP levels of care. I specifically work in the Depression Recovery program where I use CBT and DBT skills in a group setting as well as meet with patients individually.

**Roots Work Therapy** | **Kas Gossens (she/her)** | 313 Price Pl., Ste. 212, Madison | The heart of therapy is feeling seen and understood. I practice third-wave psychotherapy as an LGBTQ+ affirmative ally, knowing gender is a social construct and who you love doesn't limit your potential. I welcome couples, teens, and adults into a quiet space near Hilldale Mall.

**Sacred Art Counseling** | **Zara Abu-Hamdan (she/her)** | 6123 Green Bay Rd., Ste. 140, Kenosha | Outpatient clinic working with many issues, including trauma, substance use, eating disorder, etc. The clinic is LGBTQIA+ affirming.

**Sapling Psychotherapy** | **Mariessa Robles (they/them)** | **Virtual** | I specialize in providing gender-affirming therapy and providing surgery readiness letter assessments to adults across Wisconsin. My practice is informed by my lived experience as a trans/Indigiqueer person as well as many years of training in and coordination of LGBTQ-affirming healthcare.

**Stone In Harmony Counseling** | **Kirk Stone (he/him)** | 6402 Odana Rd., Ste. 302, Madison | Everyone has the potential to live a fulfilling and meaningful life, but not everyone is provided with the support, mentoring and practical tools to navigate this life. I provide assistance, guidance and practical tools in your individual, couples and family therapy sessions.

**That Gay Therapist** | **Karisa Quick (they/she)** | **Virtual** | I'm a queer, nonbinary white therapist. I use talk therapy, and EMDR. I mainly work with trauma, religious trauma, depression, anxiety, LGBTQ issues, and gender affirmation letters. I'm licensed in Wisconsin, California, and Oregon.

**Therapy Solutions** | **Liz Hanson Will (she/her)** | 5605 Washington Ave., Ste. 7D, Mount Pleasant | Solo outpatient mental health therapy practice serving people ages 10-99 who are struggling with anxiety, depression, ADHD, grief, identity, relationships or stress

**Water Tiger Psychotherapy, LLC** | **Sara Todd, LCSW (she/they)** | 2002 Atwood Ave., Ste. 211, Madison | Psychoanalytic psychotherapy for teens and adults that addresses the root causes of mental health issues and distress through greater self-awareness and changing old patterns. Specialities include: trauma & complex trauma; depression; grief, loss & mourning; LGBTQ+ concerns; mindfulness.

**Waterways Counseling & Consulting** | **Dr. Victoria Sepulveda (she/her)**

116 West Grand Ave., Ste. 104, Port Washington | I have a small private practice and can see folk in-person and online on a limited basis from an affirming, compassionate, empathic, and empowering perspective. I have had training in LGBTQIAP+ needs and services.

**Whole Hearted Wellness** | **Margaret Renninger (she/her)** | **Virtual** | I support individuals, couples, and non-monogamous relationships using a blend of Emotion-Focused Therapy, Narrative Therapy, and other approaches. My practice affirms trans, queer, and neurodivergent experiences. I have training and experience with writing letters in support of affirming care.

**Willow Counseling & Therapeutic Arts Center** | **Abby Greiten (she/her)** | 1137 N. Sherman Ave., Madison | Willow Counseling and Therapeutic Arts Center, is a queer- and woman-owned counseling agency with specialization working with the LGBTQIA+ community including those seeking support in gender & sexual identity exploration, trans health & advocacy, and sexual health and satisfaction—among others. | **Laura Stoesz (she/her)**

| 1137 N. Sherman Ave., Madison | Rooted in intersectional feminism, Laura provides trauma-informed counseling to adults, teens, and children (8+) for anxiety, mood, and trauma symptoms. She's dedicated to supporting individuals through identity exploration, life transitions, and creating an affirming, inclusive space for all.

### OUT OF STATE

**Advocate Medical Group** | **Kevin Koo (he/him)** | 10 North Cumberland Ave., Illinois | Family medicine clinic provides primary care for all ages, from newborns to those in their 100s and everyone in between. My clinical interests include geriatrics, women's health, minor in-office procedures, behavioral health, gender-affirming care, and PrEP. ■

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# MADISON AREA FAITH DIRECTORY

FAITH OUT CLERGY OPEN & AFFIRMING CONGREGATIONS

**THIS IS OUR SECOND ANNUAL** list of churches, congregations, and spiritual communities that have visibly identified themselves as open and affirming to LGBTQ+ people.

If you don't see a particular congregation on the list, it doesn't necessarily mean that it isn't welcoming. Some groups are welcoming and affirming in essence, but have never debated the issue or created a public, wide-reaching statement about LGBTQ+ people in their community.

If your church or community is not on this list, be sure and complete the form at [ourliveswisconsin.com/madison-area-lgbtq-faith-directory](http://ourliveswisconsin.com/madison-area-lgbtq-faith-directory) so we can include it next year!

### ADVENT LUTHERAN CHURCH & COMMUNITY OF HOPE UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

7118 Old Sauk Rd., Madison | 608-836-1455  
[madisonchristiancommunity.org](http://madisonchristiancommunity.org) | Advent Lutheran and Community of Hope UCC share worship space at the Madison Christian Community. Both are open and affirming. They host a monthly Transgender Community Meal for trans and nonbinary people in the Dane County area, which is also supported by Good Shepherd Lutheran Church.

### BARABOO FIRST CONGREGATIONAL UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

131 Sixth Ave., Baraboo | 608-356-4300 | [ucbboo.org](http://ucbboo.org)  
 Founded in 1847, First Congregational UCC has a long history of social justice witness, in-

cluding supporting the suffrage and abolitionist movements. The membership includes several gay and lesbian members and adopted its open and affirming statement in 2001. The lead pastor, Rev. Douglas Fauth, was the first openly gay ordinand in the Penn Central Conference.

### BETH ISRAEL CENTER

1406 Mound St., Madison | 608-256-7763  
[bethisraelcenter.org](http://bethisraelcenter.org) | An egalitarian community of Conservative Judaism, Beth Israel has hosted an annual Pride Shabbat each summer since 2018. Rabbi Betsy Forester is committed to helping LGBTQ+ people feel at home and "enhance their Jewish lives in relation to their LGBTQ+ journeys." BIC is a sponsor of the Interfaith Transgender Day of Remembrance.

### BETHANY UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

3910 Mineral Point Rd., Madison | 608-238-6381  
[bethanymadison.org](http://bethanymadison.org) | Lead Pastor Rev. Julie Wilson led her previous church in becoming an LGBTQ-affirming congregation and is committed to making Bethany a place where all are welcome. The church is part of the Reconciling Ministries Network of UMC ([rmnetwork.org](http://rmnetwork.org)), which is committed to intersectional justice and the full participation of all LGBTQ+ people in the life and leadership of the church.

### BETHEL LUTHERAN CHURCH

312 Wisconsin Ave., Madison | 608-257-3577  
[bethel-madison.org](http://bethel-madison.org) | We welcome you to Bethel. We see you as we see ourselves, vulnerable to the challenges of human relationships, and deeply beloved by God. We welcome you who have ever felt excluded by the church because of race, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, age, physical or mental ability, family or economic status, or for a reason known only to you. We welcome you whether church life is familiar to you or your faith journey is new, whether you are certain in your beliefs or unsure. We invite you here because God is inviting you to be here.

### CIRCLE SANCTUARY

5354 Meadowvale Rd., Barneveld | 608-924-2216  
[circlesanctuary.org](http://circlesanctuary.org) | A Nature Spirituality church founded by Rev. Selena Fox in 1974, Circle Sanctuary operates from a privately owned 200-acre nature preserve in the Driftless region, about 13 miles west of Mount Horeb. Here the Sanctuary hosts Full Moon circles, seasonal sabbats, volunteer days, and Sacred Fire Circles. It is one of the sponsors of the Interfaith Transgender Day of Remembrance. The nature preserve is not open to drop-in visits, but visitors are welcome at a variety of festivals and educational events.

### COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF MADISON

326 S. Segoe Rd., Madison | 608-233-6297  
[covenantmadison.org](http://covenantmadison.org) | In 2018, the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA) voted to affirm its commitment to full welcome, acceptance, and inclusion for LGBTQ+ people. Covenant Presbyterian Church of Madison is the only congregation in Dane County that is part of the Covenant Network, though the denomination's Pres House Campus Ministry is also explicitly LGBTQ-affirming.

### THE CROSSING CAMPUS MINISTRY

1127 University Ave., Madison | 608-257-1039  
[thecrossinguw.org](http://thecrossinguw.org) | The Crossing is an inclusive, multi-faith, nonprofit at UW-Madison. They host a variety of events on campus, including a pay-what-you-can family dinner every Monday night. They list "Trans is Beautiful" as one of their core affirmations on the organization's website, and back this up as sponsors of the Interfaith Transgender Day of Remembrance.

### FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH

518 North Franklin Ave., Madison | 608-233-1880  
[firstbaptistmadison.org](http://firstbaptistmadison.org) | First Baptist is a progressive, LGBTQ+ affirming congregation affiliated with American Baptist Churches USA, the Alliance of Baptists, and the Association of Welcoming & Affirming Baptists. Since 1994, we have embraced full inclusion of people of all sexual orientations and gender identities in membership, leadership, and ministry. Rooted in historic Baptist principles of freedom and justice, we value open inquiry, diverse expressions of faith, and God's love for all.

### FIRST CONGREGATIONAL UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

131 6th Ave., Baraboo | 608-356-4300 | [ucbboo.org](http://ucbboo.org)  
 First Congregational in Baraboo is a "Just Peace" and "Open and Affirming" church. Founded in 1847, FCUCC's history is of leading the way on opposing slavery, ensuring equal vote for women and men 70 years before suffrage, and calling as its pastor the first African-American, first woman, and first openly gay clergypersons in Baraboo. The congregation officially became an "Open and Affirming" congregation in 2002. We are known for an oversized pride painted Adirondack chair with the words, "There's Room for You."

### FIRST CONGREGATIONAL UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

1609 University Ave., Madison | 608-233-9751  
[firstcongmadison.org](http://firstcongmadison.org) | First Congregational has a long history of open and affirming. It adopted its affirmation statement in 1992. Its senior minister, Rev. Eldonna Hazen, is an out lesbian who was profiled on the cover of the May 2008 issue of *Our Lives*.

### FIRST UNITARIAN SOCIETY

900 University Bay Dr., Madison | 608-233-9774  
[fusmadison.org](http://fusmadison.org) | First Unitarian is a progressive religious community that encourages spiritual growth and community action in an atmosphere of warmth, freedom of belief, intellectual curiosity, and open dialogue. They are an independent organization, but affiliated with the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA). The Society meets in the Frank Lloyd Wright-designed Unitarian Meeting House in Shorewood Hills, which was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1973.

### FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

203 Wisconsin Ave., Madison | 608-256-9061 | [fumc.org](http://fumc.org)  
 First United Methodist Church is an open and affirming congregation in downtown Madison. It is part of the Reconciling Ministries Network of UMC. The church is a sponsor of the OutReach Magic Festival at Warner Park.

### GOOD SHEPHERD LUTHERAN CHURCH

5701 Raymond Rd. (Madison Campus) & 7291 County Highway PD (Verona Campus)  
 608-271-6633 | [gslcwi.com](http://gslcwi.com) | Good Shepherd is part of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), the most progressive of the Lutheran denominations. (Note: Despite

the name, the ELCA is not an "Evangelical" denomination in the cultural sense of the word.) GSLC became a Reconciling in Christ (RIC) congregation in 2019, affirming its commitment to full welcome and inclusion for LGBTQ+ persons. It is one of the sponsors of the Transgender Community Meal that meets at Advent Lutheran and Community of Hope.

### GRACE EPISCOPAL CHURCH

116 West Washington Ave., Madison | 608-255-5147  
[gracechurchmadison.org](http://gracechurchmadison.org) | Grace Episcopal on the Capitol Square has been welcoming and affirming for many years. Same-sex marriage ceremonies and ceremonies of renaming are visible ways we welcome members of the LGBTQ+ community. The Grace Church Pride Committee is an active and engaged group that spreads our outreach mission, participating in community events and Services.

### HOLY WISDOM MONASTERY

4200 County Highway M, Middleton | 608-836-1631  
[holylwisdommonastery.org](http://holylwisdommonastery.org) | Sunday Assembly is a unique worshipping community. Influenced by the Benedictine spirit and tradition, we welcome all to worship with us. We embrace unity around an open communion table, in fullness of equality for all people, and we pray together



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### Local Out Clergy

- 1 **Rev. Katie Baardseth**, Midvale Lutheran
- 2 **Rev. Peter Beeson**, St. John's Lutheran
- 3 **Rev. Douglas Fauth**, First Congregational Baraboo
- 4 **Rev. Selena Fox**, Circle Sanctuary
- 5 **Rev. Eldonna Hazen**, First Congregational Madison
- 6 **Rev. Rachel Kirk**, Middleton Community Church
- 7 **Amanda Huff**, First Baptist Church of Madison
- 8 **Cantor Jacob Niemi**, Temple Beth El
- 9 **Rev. Blake Rohrer**, Midvale Lutheran
- 10 **Rev. Tim Schaefer**, First Baptist Church of Madison
- 11 **Rabbi Laurie Zimmerman**, Shaarei Shamayim

in inclusive language that draws from the best of the Christian tradition. The sisters, members of Sunday Assembly, and the communities of Holy Wisdom Monastery value welcome, inclusion, and belonging for all persons.

### ID-MADISON

608-836-8886 | [idmadison.org](http://idmadison.org) | ID-Madison is an ecumenical Christian faith community affiliated with DIGNITY, a nationwide organization of LGBTQ+ Roman Catholics and their friends, and with INTEGRITY, a similar organization for LGBTQ+ members of the Episcopal church. The Wisconsin Conference of Churches has recognized ID-Madison as an AIDS Caring Community, meaning that it provides all of its services to HIV-infected persons without judgment, hesitation, or reservation. The group meets at St. Dunstan's Episcopal Church (6205 University Ave.) on most Saturdays from September to June.

### JAMES REEB UU CONGREGATION

2146 East Johnson St., Madison | 608-242-8887  
[jruc.org](http://jruc.org) | James Reeb Unitarian Universalist

ist (UU) Congregation was seeded by First Unitarian Society in 1993. JRUC affirms and includes people who are LGBTQ+ at every level of congregational life—in worship, in programming, and in social occasions—welcoming them as whole people. The congregation is culturally diverse and includes many members of the LGBTQ+ community. Sunday services are in person and on Zoom are at 10:00 a.m.

### LAKE EDGE LUTHERAN CHURCH

4032 Monona Dr., Madison | 608-222-7339 | [lelc.org](http://lelc.org)  
 An ELCA church, Lake Edge is a member of the group Reconciling in Christ, which affirms people of all sexual orientations and gender identities. The congregation is active in the community on issues of social justice, environmental stewardship, and anti-racism education.

### MADISON INSIGHT MEDITATION GROUP & MADISON VIPASSANA

[madisonmeditation.org](http://madisonmeditation.org) | Madison Insight Meditation Group and Madison Vipassana practice meditation in the tradition of Theravada Buddhism. Madison Vipassana hosts retreats, while Madison Insight Meditation Group provides regular local meditation sessions and various practice opportunities, both in person and online. They welcome people of every race, culture, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, gender identity, ability, age, and religion, and are one of the sponsoring organizations for the Interfaith Transgender Day of Remembrance.

### MADISON SUFIS

302 East Gorham St., Madison | [madisonsufis.com](http://madisonsufis.com)  
 Spiritual director Shabda Kahn describes Sufism as “a mystic path based on the Awakened human heart recognizing its Unity with the Divine. The signs of this experience are the emergence of love, tolerance, compassion, and courage. Sufism is universal in nature and honors all the great messengers from the world’s religions.” LGBTQ+ people who are part of the Sufi religion can take active roles, including spiritual leadership.

### MCFARLAND UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

5710 Anthony St., McFarland | 608-838-9322  
[mcfarlanducc.org](http://mcfarlanducc.org) | McFarland United Church of Christ is, like many UCC member churches, an open and affirming congregation. Members of the congregation represented McFarland UCC during the ACT 5 AIDS Ride in 2007. The church’s lead pastor, Bryan Sirchio ([sirchio.com](http://sirchio.com)), is also a singer/songwriter who writes worship music for progressive Christian communities. We are McFarland’s and Southern Dane County’s only open and affirming mainline Protestant congregation.

### MEMORIAL UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

5705 Lacy Rd., Fitchburg | 608-273-1008  
[memorialucc.org](http://memorialucc.org) | Memorial UCC is an open and affirming congregation that welcomes people of all ages, races, sexual orientations, gender identities, and church backgrounds. The church hosts the Interfaith Transgender Day of Remembrance, an annual observance honoring the memories of those lost to acts of anti-transgender violence, in partnership with many other faith organizations in Dane County.

### MIDDLETON COMMUNITY CHURCH UCC

645 Schewe Rd., Middleton | 608-831-4694  
[middletonucc.org](http://middletonucc.org) | “We recognize every person as a unique creation and beloved child of God,” says MCC’s website. “We celebrate this diversity and welcome women and members of the LGBTQ+ community to serve at every level of church leadership.” Their lead pastor, Rev. Zayna Hart Thomley, helped found the Southwest Wisconsin Rainbow Alliance. Associate pastor Rev. Rachel Kirk is “a proud Millennial and LGBTQ+ leader.” The church is one of the sponsors of the Interfaith Transgender Day of Remembrance.

### MIDVALE COMMUNITY LUTHERAN CHURCH

4329 Tokay Blvd., Madison | 608-238-7119  
[midvalelutheran.org](http://midvalelutheran.org) | Midvale Community Lutheran Church welcomes all because Jesus welcomes all. With you here, we are closer to who God is calling us to be. If you’ve felt excluded or harmed in any way, you are welcome here. Your gender identity, gender expression, and sexual orientation are welcome here. Your family, children, friends, and partner are welcome here. Your abilities, culture, socioeconomic circumstances, race, and religious background are welcome here.

### ORCHARD RIDGE UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

1501 Gilbert Rd., Madison | 608-271-7212 | [orucc.org](http://orucc.org)  
 Orchard Ridge’s mission statement is “Spiritually Alive, Joyfully Inclusive, Committed to Justice.” There are LGBTQ+ people in every group, ministry, and leadership team at Orchard Ridge. The congregation voted to be open and affirming in 1993. The church is also active in addressing social justice issues, including mass incarceration, homelessness, and racial and immigration justice.

### PLYMOUTH UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

2401 Atwood Ave., Madison | 608-249-1537 | [pcucc.org](http://pcucc.org)  
 Plymouth UCC has been one of the most visible open and affirming congregations in Madison since 1996. In June 2024, the church voted unanimously to declare itself an “Immigrant Welcoming Congregation,” developing

practices and programs to insure the respectful welcome and inclusion of immigrants and refugees. The church’s website states its intention “to work toward helping those who feel marginalized or oppressed in our community.”

### PRAIRIE UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST SOCIETY

2010 Whenona Dr., Madison | 608-271-8218  
[uuprairie.org](http://uuprairie.org) | We’re a welcoming Unitarian Universalist congregation of about 100 adult members—small enough that we can truly get to know each other. As a non-creedal faith, we embrace diverse beliefs about God, spirituality, and the afterlife. What unites us is our commitment to progressive values and the sacredness of our relationships with one another. Our Interweave group works to support LGBTQ+ individuals and their rights.

### PRES HOUSE CAMPUS MINISTRY

731 State St., Madison | 608-257-103 | [preshouse.org](http://preshouse.org)  
 Pres House Campus Ministry is a proudly LGBTQ-affirming church for UW-Madison students located on Library Mall. Pres House welcomes individuals of every perspective and background. The church is led by two BIPOC clergy, Rev. Erica Liu and Rev. Nii Addo Abrahams. According to their website, “We celebrate queer identities and experiences, draw on the richness of queer theology in our preaching, and welcome queer folks to lead in worship, serve on our Council, and otherwise shape our life together.”

### SHAAREI SHAMAYIN

900 University Bay Dr., Madison | 608-257-2944  
[shamayim.org](http://shamayim.org) | Shaarei Shamayim is a Reconstructionist Jewish community, which believes that Judaism is “a means for bringing justice, holiness, and joy to the world.” The congregation of over 200 households is LGBTQ+ inclusive and welcomes Jews-by-choice and Jews of color. Rabbi Laurie Zimmerman is the spiritual leader here; she and her partner, Rabbi Renee Bauer, have two children.

### SHERMAN CHURCH

3705 N. Sherman Ave., Madison | 608-244-0868  
[shermanavenueumc.org](http://shermanavenueumc.org) | Sherman Church is a part of the First United Methodist Church. Since 1953, it has been providing care, community and compassion for those seeking healing, hope, and the Holy Spirit. Today, Sherman Church is a progressive, multicultural, and service-oriented part of the community. Sherman Church, like Jesus Christ, will always stand on the side of the oppressed and marginalized. We are an open and affirming congregation. We know that service and loving our neighbor are the foundation of Jesus’s teachings. Join us for

worship in person or on Facebook at 9:30 a.m. on Sundays.

### ST. JOHN'S LUTHERAN CHURCH

322 East Washington Ave., Madison  
 (Temporarily meeting at 1127 University Ave.)  
 608-256-2337 | [stjohnsmadison.org](http://stjohnsmadison.org) | St. John’s voted to become a Reconciling in Christ (RIC) congregation in 2006. Its “More for Madison” campaign ([moreformadison.org](http://moreformadison.org)), begun in 2022, is tearing down its downtown building and replacing it with a 10-floor development that will include 130 affordable housing units, plus worship and community spaces. Lead pastor Rev. Peter Beeson is an out transgender person and a member of Proclaim, a professional network of LGBTQ+ Lutheran leaders.

### ST. MARK'S LUTHERAN

605 Spruce St., Madison | 608-256-8463  
[stmarksmadison.org](http://stmarksmadison.org) | The mission statement of St. Mark’s Lutheran Church is to “share the unconditional love of God. This includes those who have felt alienated because of sexual orientation, gender, age, physical or intellectual disability, financial resources, and family status.” The church is a Reconciling in Christ (RIC) ELCA congregation, and incorporates both Spanish and American Sign Language into its worship services.

### TEMPLE BETH EL

2702 Arbor Dr., Madison | 608-238-3123  
[templebethelmadison.org](http://templebethelmadison.org) | Temple Beth El is a member of the Union for Reform Judaism, which has been open and affirming since 1987. They are part of Keshet, an organization that works for the full equality of all LGBTQ+ Jews and their families. In 2021, TBE joined the Union for Reform Judaism’s assessment process for racial equity, diversity and inclusion, committing themselves to listen more intentionally to community voices and improve their inclusivity and accessibility. TBE is one of the organizers of the Interfaith Transgender Day of Remembrance service.

### UNITY OF MADISON

601 Tompkins Dr., Monona | 608-221-1376  
[unityofmadison.org](http://unityofmadison.org) | The Unity Church is a spiritual organization founded by Charles and Myrtle Fillmore in 1889. Unity of Madison describes Unity as “a positive, practical, progressive approach to Christianity based on the teachings of Jesus and the power of prayer. Unity honors the universal truths in all religions and respects each individual’s right to choose a spiritual path.” They welcome everyone “regardless of sexual orientation, gender identity, race, gender, economic status, and anything else under the sun.” ■

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# Finding an Escape One Cup at a Time

Get the full experience by eating in at **Oasis Cafe** in Fitchburg, where you will feel the love from the staff to the atmosphere to the food and drinks themselves.

**TUCKED INTO** the city of Fitchburg, but still a reasonable distance from downtown Madison, Oasis Cafe is, indeed, an oasis away from it all. The space is bright and inviting with tables outside that stretch across the long entrance to the building, complete with a dreamy, European-looking pergola overhead. Walking in, you almost forget that you are in a rather industrial area of Fitchburg.

Choosing from the wide selection of beverages and food items is a tall order, although the baristas are eager and happy to give recommendations. Across from the display case of frosted delicacies sits an equally delicate display of locally curated artisanal goods, perfect for browsing while you wait for the caffeine to kick in. The truth is, this isn't just a place to just grab a cup of joe and leave. And while takeout is always an option, you wouldn't get the full experience of the place if you didn't linger here for a while to soak up the vibe. This is a place where tables are filled with regulars as soon as the doors open at 6:30 a.m. most days, a place where hobby groups, local politicians, and others are often seen grabbing a drink or delicious breakfast sandwich and staying for a couple of hours.

Although the business originally started in 2011, Casey Thompson took over ownership of Oasis Cafe in July, 2024. He loves seeing all the regular customers and feels a sense of community when he can remember their orders and notice that they feel comfortable returning again and again. He also appreciates the fact that Fitchburg is made up of folks from all walks of life and loves when someone new discovers their space.

Casey and his husband also own and manage a few other businesses in the area including Fair Trade Coffee on State Street. Casey is business-minded, having worked in a corporate position prior to owning his coffee shops. "Although I liked my corporate job," Casey admits, "I wanted to change my path and become a full-time business owner. I have always wanted to own my own businesses for as long as I can remember, and I have always been entrepreneurial. When this opportunity came up, it was exactly what I needed to be 100% on my own."

He explains, "It has been said that many small businesses fail not because the entrepreneur isn't passionate about the business they are in, but because they didn't have a solid background in business." He loves the fact that his background in business allows him more time to focus on his favorite parts of working in the cafe: His time in the kitchen and providing the best hospitality to their diverse guests.



"As an LGBTQ owner, I do find that I have more focus on inclusion, which I apply to everyone I encounter. We experience all types of people at Oasis, and in my opinion, each one needs to be treated with the same loving hospitality."



### MADISON ROOTS

Casey grew up in Verona and has lived in Wisconsin his whole life. In his very limited spare time, he enjoys riding his bike and spending time in the countryside. "It's where I do a lot of my thinking," says Casey. "I also spend time in the woods in the fall cutting firewood. You could say that this is my meditation time where it is just me and the woods." Another favorite pastime is spending quality time with his two nieces.

It is obvious that he takes his contemplative time and his time spent with family and channels that peaceful energy into the way he runs his business. He is down-to-earth and pragmatic, bringing a hopeful and wise enthusiasm to the way he talks about his staff and the patrons that visit each day. Casey also affirms, "As an LGBTQ owner, I do find that I have more focus on inclusion, which I apply to everyone I encounter. Since each person comes from different backgrounds and has different beliefs, I can be tolerant of most any perspective and opinion without making judgements solely on a person's beliefs. We experience all types of people at Oasis, and in my opinion, each one needs to be treated with the same loving hospitality regardless of their viewpoints."

### MORNINGS IN THE KITCHEN

"I really love cooking and baking," Casey tells me, "but I only really like to do this in a commercial kitchen and not so much at home. There's just something about working in a commercial kitchen: I've got all the tools, I can throw flour around and make a mess, and then bring the garbage can over to clean it up. I frequently work on the line in the kitchen, and I also do lots of the baking, which is my favorite part. I currently bake all of the dessert bars, sweet breads, scones, spicy cheese rolls, and quiches, amongst other seasonal baked items."

Casey's eyes light up talking about how he was once able to fix a piece of kitchen equipment when it broke down. "I have always had an attraction to commercial kitchen equipment and love figuring out how

each piece works," he says. And as I listen, it is easy to see that this job is his passion project. He loves every aspect of it, even the parts that might frustrate another business owner. To him, it's all a part of the bigger puzzle of business ownership.

Another huge part of that puzzle is the cafe's impressive menu. The Deluxe Breakfast Sandwich with bacon comes out quickly after I order. It's a lightly toasted spicy cheese bagel, almost croissant-like, flecked with bits of some kind of hot (but not too hot) pepper, and features scrambled egg, Monterey jack cheese, avocado spread, garlic aioli, spinach, and tomato. The display case of pastries and desserts makes it hard for patrons to choose just one, but the scones are guaranteed to hit the mark with the perfect flaky balance of frosting to pastry ratio. If you stay long enough for lunch, make sure to grab some pelmeni. The pillow-like dumplings are a perfect comfort food for a cold Madison afternoon. The pelmeni is a "holdover from the previous owners, who own Paul's Pelmeni downtown," and it was apparently too popular to not keep it on their menu.

### LOCAL OR BUST

Casey learned pretty quickly that running a locally owned shop means they aren't trying to compete with places like Starbucks. "In general, people who like Starbucks are a completely different customer base," he says. "You're competing with hospitality, things like whether or not you have good drinks or good food." Casey explains that his customers generally prefer to shop locally, and prefer the more intimate feel of a small business.

He also works with staff to provide the same mindful and welcoming hospitality to everyone who places an order. "I don't want people to feel bad about changing their order after they receive it, for example. There are always going to be mistakes, but it is how you react to it. We tell our staff, 'Don't ever ask the customer if you can remake it, tell them that you are going to remake it.'" He also mentions that when it comes to



the staff themselves, he tries to provide as much opportunity as possible for them to grow within their own careers, even if that means they might leave for something new. The restaurant industry itself has a lot of turnover, especially being in a college town, but Casey understands that folks might get opportunities that they can't turn down. He supports them either way.

Casey appreciates that he lives only a few minutes away from his shop and loves being able to support other local Fitchburg businesses and organizations when he can. "I am grateful for the community. Everybody is very friendly and outgoing, and there is a very diverse crowd of folks here. I feel like we really try to cater to that."

It is obvious that Casey has placed a lot of thought and care into each aspect of running his business: From waking up early to bake, to supporting his staff, to fixing his kitchen equipment, and even sourcing local artisans. This is a project of love for Casey. And when there is love in the kitchen, there is love in the food. ■



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YOUTH | POLITICS & LAW | TRANS

## Toward a Proud, Transmasculine Feminism

After a childhood steeped in feminism and femininity, **mk zariel** discovered through anarchist feminism that they can be any gender it wants.

**ONE MIGHT SAY** that my toddler photos tell a political story rivaling my current anarchist organizing projects. The collage is single-minded: A little girl proudly hoisting a makeshift protest sign, traipsing through the living room, and shouting chants to herself. A little girl reading picture books on women’s suffrage, the way other kids might have read *See Spot Run*. A toddler, yes, but a budding feminist.

That little girl eventually turned out to be trans. As a child, I knew I felt masculine-of-center. Still, I justified it the only way I knew how: By claiming a connection to feminist history. In my family, where there were almost no out LGBTQ+ people but many proudly feminist women, this was a passable justification for gender nonconformity, easily believable by anyone I explained

I’ve never felt more feminist than the first time I told someone I was a transmasculine lesbian who used it/its pronouns

it to. See, the historical figures I idolized were all, in my five-year-old mind, attempting masculinity. So I saw my desire to be a boy in (almost) every way, and the fact that I didn’t feel at all like a young woman, as analogous to how feminists of yore argued against being pressured into living as housewives—not a gender identity or sign of transness, but a reaction to a societal role.

This continued until I was 13 and joined my first anarchist group (as one does). I’d been bullied by my schoolmates for being a lesbian, faced with a middle school culture in which every boy was a budding tech bro and almost every girl was okay with that, and I desperately wanted community outside of that. And rather than meeting women who resembled the first-wave feminists in a desire for masculine assimilation, I met anarchafeminist organizers, both cis and trans, who embraced deeply feminine gender expressions. I’ll never forget the first conversation I had with someone who’s become a longtime friend—a core collective member of a local anarchist space, who infodumped to me about Emma Goldman for a solid hour, resplendent in her long hair and press-on nails and considerable knowledge of anarchonihilist theory. A few months later, I spent a whole day making zines with a new friend, a trans girl with a special interest in early gay liberation, a proclivity for the least practical fonts on Canva, and a passion for resisting social hierarchies with glitter and queercore.

Like the girls at my school, the anarchist women around me had



feminine gender expressions. But unlike my middle-school tormentors, they were among the most loudly and proudly feminist people I’d ever met. This forced me to interrogate the story I’d been telling myself for years. At my school, being a feminist meant exclusion from femininity; my own feminist views had led to intense mockery, mainly from straight, cisgender girls. But if it were possible and common to be feminine and feminist at the same time, then my masculinity couldn’t simply be an outgrowth of my feminism. I admitted, during one very late night at a reading group after discussing and critiquing *The*

*Feminine Mystique* with friends, that I was probably not a girl.

I’ve never felt more feminist than the first time I told someone I was a transmasculine lesbian who used it/its pronouns.

Than the time I cut off my long hair, started dressing in an androgynous queercore style, and pursued friendships with trans and GNC masc people. I didn’t have to be like the boys at my school, who worshipped the Andrew Tates and Elon Musks of the world, prone to harassment and lacking in social tact. I could just be my butch feminist self.

Lee Cicuta’s essay *Butch Anarchy* was a guiding light for me: *The sacred weapon in the arsenal of patriarchy, the one they did and continue to do everything to keep us from taking, is not something we even bother to steal under the cover of nightfall. Instead, we swagger right through the front door, wryly appraise the shelf on which it sits, and take what of it suits us best.*

Maybe my anarchist organizing projects, and their implications for my gender, tell a story to rival even the girlishness of my toddler photos. I’m not single-minded anymore, not wedded to a gender that didn’t feel like mine. As an anarchist in my mutual aid projects, street theater groups, the all-consuming BashBack tendency, and the home I’ve made among misfit queers trying to make the world a little more beautiful, I can be everything. Sometimes a butch, sometimes a femboy, sometimes a lesbian, sometimes transmasculine, sometimes an incomprehensible creature made of discarded genders. But always a proud feminist. Not in spite of my transness, but because of it.

I am not a feminist because I am a woman, or because I used to be, but because I believe in masculinity that is culturally lesbian, in lesbian identities that are utterly unrelated to womanhood, in a feminism that gleefully expropriates masculinity from patriarchy. Because I believe that, in the words of Lee Cicuta, “a woman can be any gender he wants to be.” ■



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