

our lives

01

2025

A YEAR IN REVIEW

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Love List: Celebrating Wisconsin's LGBTQ+ Relationships



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OTTORINO RESPIGHI *Pines of Rome*



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Madison's LGBT&XYZ Magazine

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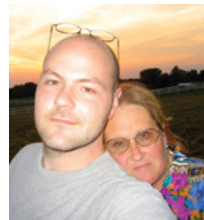
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PUBLISHER'S LETTER PATRICK FARABAUGH



THE COST OF LOVE



AFTER LOSING HER MOTHER, my mother-in-law told me that grief is the price we pay for love. A month ago, I learned how true that is when I lost my own mom unexpectedly. Nothing could have prepared me. Next to my husband, she was the most important person in my life.

I have never known a world without the person who loved me from before my first day. Whenever I told her, "I love you," she would say, "I've loved you longer." Now I'm heartbroken and learning what life looks like without her. Soon I'll be able to tell her something I never wanted to: "I've loved you longer."

What hurts especially is that I have almost nothing of my mom's. Two months before she died, my parents lost everything in a house fire late Thanksgiving night while our whole family was home.

My mom saved our lives that night. She was the only one awake and discovered the fire. Had she found it even minutes later, my brother and I likely would not have made it out alive. As it was, my brother was only minutes behind me and spent four days in a burn unit. It's hard not to cry knowing that may have been the last thing she did for us.

You may have noticed that this issue—and the one before it—arrived very late. I feel like I owe you an explanation. Since November, I've had two surgeries, survived a fire, and lost my mother. Between grief, recovery, and trying to help my dad learn how to live on his own for the first time in more than 50 years, I've fallen behind. I sincerely apologize.

It's not lost on me that I'm writing this in our annual Love issue. If grief truly is the price we pay for love, it is one I would pay for the rest of my life to have my mom still here with me. ■

OBITUARIES

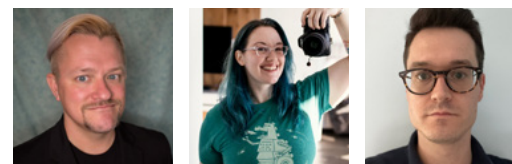


Born in Green Bay, **JAMES "JIM" A. MELOTTE** founded Avant Garde Body Piercing in West Allis in 1999, becoming Wisconsin's oldest licensed body piercer. He helped update state legislation governing body art and taught medical staff about piercing care. A dedicated LGBTQ+ advocate, he served as president of the Milwaukee Pride Parade since 2006, helping grow it from fewer than 15 entries to more than 200 by 2025.

CHERI BECKER, 68, helped shape Madison's LGBTQ+ nightlife. In 1984, she and partner Ruth Sigel opened Back East, later followed by Club 3054 and Wings. These venues became vital community spaces. Becker later retired to Loyal, Wisconsin, where she enjoyed cooking, football, gardening, and time with her dog, Bailey.

RUDY ROSBECK-LEDESMA (MILANO BREEZE), of Jackson, Wisconsin, passed away Feb. 4, 2026, while vacationing with his husband, T.J. Performing since 1993, he released three albums and was named Mr. Gay Wisconsin USofA in 2015. Known for his warmth and kindness, he left a lasting impression on audiences and friends alike.

CONTRIBUTORS



MICHAIL TAKACH (he/him) comes from six generations of Wisconsin lumberjacks, iron miners, ice fishers, and storytellers. By day, Michail is a healthcare communications professional. By night, he is a journalist, author, and historian.

SAM WALDRON (she/hers) is a Madison photographer whose work centers queer joy, fat liberation, disability pride, and pleasure activism. Sam owns Dutcher Photography and Reverence Intimate Portraits, and is a co-owner of Madison Photography Studios. Sam's artwork has been most recently featured in the Ford Foundation Gallery exhibition, *Indisposable* (2020–22) and *Pleasure is Power: The Pleasure Art of Sami Schalk and Sam Waldron* (2025).

ANDY HARTMAN (he/him) is a content director at a digital media company and a writer in his spare time. He's a lifelong Wisconsinite with strong opinions on cheese curds (batter is better!) and a deep love for supper clubs. He lives in Milwaukee with his husband and daughter.

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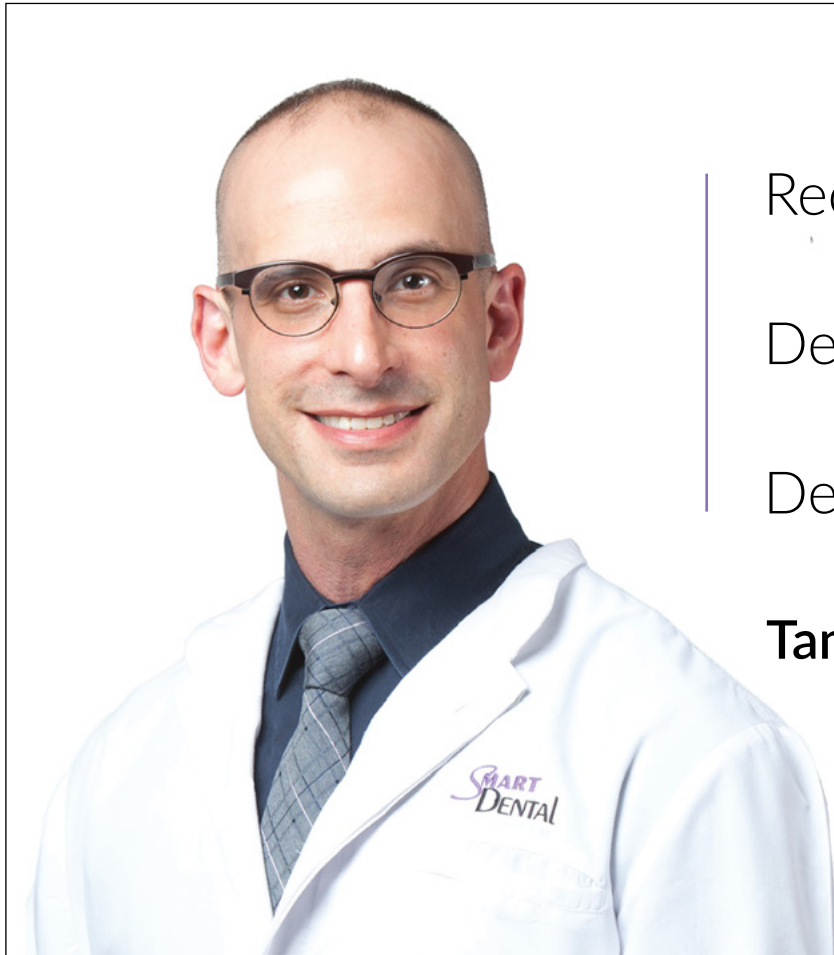
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OUR NEWS

Leading News & Local Stories



Pride Through Turbulence

We take a look back at some of the **local, national, and international events** and **people** that made headlines throughout 2025.

IF 2024 was the frying pan, 2025 was the four-alarm fire. It was a year driven by intense, relentless and divisive political moments that threatened the equality, safety, well-being and happiness of queer people everywhere. We may have been threatened, but we were never defeated. These legislative attacks only reignited an activist spirit in Wisconsin that had been asleep for far too long. Across the state, people organized, showed

2025 YEAR IN REVIEW

up and spoke out. Community groups grew stronger, new leaders emerged, and longtime advocates found renewed purpose. What was meant to silence us instead reminded us that our power has always lived in solidarity, persistence, and the refusal to disappear. In town halls, school boards, and state hearings, queer Wisconsinites made it clear: We are not leaving, we are not shrinking, and our communities are worth defending. ■

January

3

Wisconsin Senator Tammy Baldwin, the first out LGBTQ+ member, is sworn into a historic third term by Vice President Kamala Harris.



7

Under the guise of "free speech," Meta announces they are rolling back hate speech protections and third-party fact-checking services.

9

A federal district court strikes down President Biden's Title IX regulations. This ruling dissolves expanded protections for gender identity and sexual presentation in public schools.

Garth Wangemann passes away at age 69. Garth and his husband Roy Badger were together for nearly 50 years and were among the ACLU plaintiffs named in *Walker v. Wolf*, the landmark 2014 lawsuit that eventually brought marriage equality to Wisconsin.

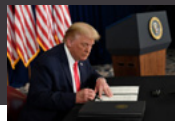
18

The Wisconsin Drag Awards honor nearly two dozen local performers, including Loretta Love Lee, Montell Infronti Ross, Anita Bobbypin, Bryanna Banx\$, and Travvy Trav.



18

On Day One of the Trump Administration, the president signs an executive order "restoring biological truth" by defining gender as fixed and assigned at conception. Trump also eliminated PEPFAR, the largest HIV/AIDS relief program in human history, which had saved over 26 million lives.



February

5

President Trump signs "Keeping Men Out of Women's Sports," an executive order that places undue attention on transgender athletes.

8

Black Pride Milwaukee celebrates Milwaukee's Black LGBTQ+ community at the Winter Lights Gala and Awards Show.



14

The National Park Service quietly erases transgender history from the Stonewall Memorial in New York City.

21

Amyri Dior, a 23-year-old trans woman, is murdered on Milwaukee's northwest side.



9

This Is It!, open since 1968, abruptly closes. Denied a chance to say goodbye, people gather in Cathedral Square. Three days later, part-owner Trixie Mattel issues a farewell message in an Instagram story.



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JURY AWARDS MADISON COUPLE A HISTORIC VERDICT, RECOGNIZING CIVIL UNION FOR LOSS-OF-CONSORTIUM DAMAGES

IN A LANDMARK decision, a Cook County jury in Illinois awarded a \$104 million verdict in October 2025 to Madison couple Rob Rosā and Michael Johnson following a devastating limousine crash on Interstate 90 in 2016. The crash, which struck a poorly marked construction barrier near the Fox River Bridge, left Rosā paralyzed from the neck down and claimed the life of a close friend.

The case has drawn attention not only for the award but for its legal significance. Approximately \$80.5 million was allotted for Rosā's pain, suffering, and lifelong care. Additionally, roughly \$24.1 million was awarded to Johnson for loss-of-consortium damages (compensation for the loss of companionship, support, and intimacy), which have historically been reserved exclusively for legally married spouses.

At the time of the accident, Rosā and Johnson were in a civil union in Wisconsin, which they had entered into before nationwide marriage equality was firmly established. Despite arguments from the defense counsel that a civil union should not be equated with marriage under Illinois law, the jury's verdict recognized their civil union as equivalent to marriage for purposes of awarding consortium damages. This outcome may represent a first in Illinois, setting a precedent for how courts consider similar legal relationships in catastrophic injury cases nationwide.

After more than nine years of litigation and appeals, the verdict affirms both accountability for the tollway authority's negligent roadway design and broader recognition of non-marital legal relationships. While the award will help fund lifelong care and rehabilitation needs, Rosā emphasizes that no amount of money can fully restore their pre-accident life. ■

LGBTQ Organizations Update
General News | Awards | Staff & Board Changes | Events
Curated by Alexandria Delcourt

GENERAL NEWS

Important notes about area LGBTQ groups.

BLACK PRIDE MILWAUKEE postponed their Winter Lights Gala, originally scheduled for February 7, 2026, due to hardships many in the community have faced in 2025.

COURAGE+ announced that they will be moving from the Courage House, which served as the foundational space for the organization, a beacon of community, hope, and love: Four walls that hold so much growth and so many memories. They will move into their new home in Milwaukee soon, and are asking for donations in order to help make the new house feel like a home from day one. Those interested can find the donation link on their social media pages.

CREAM CITY FOUNDATION relaunched their Community Grants Program, enabling \$30,000 in trust-based grants to eight grass-roots organizations prioritizing support of transgender communities and communities of color.

DIVERSE & RESILIENT announced that due to funding decreases across the sector, they will be downsizing their physical building in Milwaukee and refocusing on approaches that center sustainability. They note that their HIV Care services remain a core commitment, and they want their community to know they remain dedicated to sustaining HIV care and support through this period of transition.

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- Silver Winner, Overall Winner, World Massage Championship Competition 2025, Singapore
- Gold Winner, Extreme Level Massage Championship 2025 Asian Freestyle, Istanbul, Turkey
- European Massage Championship Master Class Teacher 2025 Paris, France
- 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



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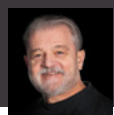
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March 18
The federal Department of Veteran Affairs announces that they will no longer provide gender-affirming care to transgender veterans.

April 1
Shaundel Washington-Spivey is elected as Mayor of La Crosse. He makes history as the city's first Black mayor, and first LGBTQ+ mayor.



May 1
Fair Wisconsin launches a tool to track and take action on anti-queer bills.
Our Lives celebrates the legacy of Mark "Za" Mariucci, whose LGBTQ+ advocacy has transformed Green Bay.



May 30
The Wisconsin LGBTQ+ Caucus introduces the 2025 Equality Agenda. Priorities include the removal of the "Gay and Trans Panic Defense," a ban on conversion therapy, designation of June as Pride Month, and the removal of marriage restrictions from the Wisconsin constitution.

May 31
The Milwaukee LGBT Community Center debuts "Hope, Heart & Heritage," a documentary celebrating the 30-year history of the organization. The film, produced by Ashley Altadonna of Tall Lady Productions, elevated the voices of Center leadership across multiple decades.

June 1
The Wisconsin LGBTQ History Project presents the BeSeen Awards to six pioneers who've elevated LGBTQ+ visibility, equity, and heritage, including Ricardo Gonzalez, Sharon Dixon, Vicky Hasko, Mark Mariucci, Ritchie T. Martin, and Chad Carroll.

June 2
Trump doesn't make a Pride Month declaration, instead has the Department of Education rededicate June as "Title IX Month," directly targeting transgender Americans.

June 7
Five years after the March with Pride for Black Lives Matter, *Our Lives* celebrates founder Montell Infiniti Ross for his leadership advancing Wisconsin's Black LGBTQ+ community.



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GSAFE launched their 2026 Impact Partner Program and invites businesses, community groups, and supporters to become partners. As a partner, orgs help fuel year-round youth leadership programs; support for families, caregivers, and educators; scholarship opportunities for graduating seniors; and statewide trainings and events.

MILWAUKEE LGBT CENTER announced that they will receive CCS (Comprehensive Community Services) and Medicaid reimbursement for

the first time in their history, ensuring long-term sustainability and expanding access to LGBTQ-affirming mental health services.

WI LGBT CHAMBER calls for all LGBTQ+ and allied restaurants to apply for grants up to \$2,500 plus virtual business education through the 2025-2026 National LGBT Chamber of Commerce FOOD: Fueling Opportunities for Owner Development Program, supported by the Grubhub Community Fund. Apply online!

AWARDS / RECOGNITION / GRANTS

Special thanks for those who do good.

BADGERLAND PRIDE SOFTBALL held their End of the Year Awards Banquet to cap off the season's end. Congratulations to Lee Kampa (Asst. Commissioner for two years and Commissioner for four years) and Mike Westley (Madison's UIC for many years for both the competitive league and the tournament), who were named the 2025 class inductees into the Badgerland Pride Softball Hall of Fame.

BLACK PRIDE MILWAUKEE would like to congratulate their founder Matt Hogans for being named one of this year's "40 Under 40" by the *Milwaukee Business Journal*.

CREAM CITY FOUNDATION announced that its Valentine Fund (advised by Michael Johnston aka Karen Valentine) awarded \$44,500 in 2025 to support local LGBTQ+ organizations.

DIVERSE & RESILIENT announced the recipients of their 2025 Togetherness for Resilience Campaign Awards:
Movement Builder: Jay Roby
Community Partnership: Holton Street Clinic
Allyship: Bethamie Wyatt
Allyship: Dr. Tracey Golden
Health Equity Champion: BESTD Clinic
Resilience: Ericka Sinclair, founder and CEO of Health Connections, Inc.
Ronnie Grace Legacy: SUNSEEKERS MKE.
Legacy: Ronnie Grace, whose life and leadership laid a foundation for Milwaukee's Black LGBTQ+ community. His award was presented to the Wisconsin Historical Society, where his contributions will be archived.

WISCONSIN HISTORICAL SOCIETY named Michail Takach the winner of the 2025 William Best Hesselstine Award for the best article published in the *Wisconsin Magazine of History*

this past year. Takach's article, "From Legend to Landmark," was a two-part feature exploring the history of the Black Nite uprising of 1961, and the Wisconsin LGBTQ History Project's decade-long effort to research, validate, commemorate, and dedicate this historic event.

STAFF / BOARD CHANGES

Who's moving on or moving into org leadership.

COURAGE+ welcomes **McKenna DuFresne** to the team as an Administrative Assistant who helps handle correspondence and organize the company admin. McKenna lives with her fiancé, and says she was drawn to Courage+ after seeing the life-changing difference the organization makes every day in our community and in the LGBTQ+ community at large.

DIVERSE & RESILIENT announced that their Community Education & Outreach Advocate, **Nick Ross**, has stepped into a leadership role on the End Abuse/WCASA Joint LGBTQ Committee, so that D&R can have a direct impact on the Wisconsin statewide coalitions' LGBTQ+ programming. They also joined the Core Team of the Wisconsin LGBTQ+ Health Equity Coalition, a statewide coalition working to achieve health equity for LGBTQ+ people in Wisconsin.

MILWAUKEE PRIDE PARADE announced with a heavy heart the passing of long-time Parade board President **Jim Melotte**. Until the board has a chance to meet, the current Vice-President, Andrew Larsen, will serve as Acting President.

OUTREACH LGBT CENTER has announced that **Linda Lenzke**, their LGBTQ+ AODA Advocate, retired at the end of December. They will miss her tireless energy, her compassion, her counsel, her long-term knowledge of everything LGBTQ+ in Madison, and her dedication to OutReach and their work with Harm Reduction in the community. Congratulations, Linda! ■



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More info:



12

"Living, Not Just Surviving," an exhibit celebrating Madison drag and trans icon Cass Marie Domino, debuts at the Memorial Union at UW-Madison.



14

The first of two No Kings protests mobilizes over five million people in 2,000 planned protests nationwide, including thousands in Milwaukee, over 10,000 in Madison, 2,000 in Appleton, and 1,000 in Wausau.



16

Milwaukee's Chef Gregory Leon is named a semifinalist for Outstanding Chef at the James Beard Awards. He and his restaurant Amilinda were featured in *Our Lives* in May.



18

The U.S. Supreme Court upholds the Tennessee ban on gender-affirming care for minors, establishing a legal precedent that will make challenging bans in other states difficult-to-impossible.

26

For Pride, the Milwaukee County Board recognized Mark Tillman, Montel Infiniti Ross, Ruthie Weatherly, the Kilwins, David Lau and Guy Roeseler, Andy Nunemaker, Bi Pride MKE, and the Wisconsin LGBTQ History Project.

Chef Vanessa Rose and the House of Bridges open queer-focused third space Mother's (2900 S. Kinnickinnic Ave.) in Bay View.



3

Wisconsin Governor Tony Ever signs Senate Bill 45 into law, updating state statutes with gender-neutral language for married couples. The law codifies protections for marriage equality at the state level, "harmonizes" Wisconsin statutes with the U.S. Supreme Court ruling, and removes outdated "zombie laws" that would reactivate if the national freedom to marry were overturned.

10

UW-Madison Chancellor Jennifer Mnookin announces the closure of the university's Division of Diversity, Equity and Education Advancement. While Mnookin claims no scholarships or support programs will be reduced, the university cancels the Diversity Forum for the first time in 20 years, restructures Student Affairs, terminates the Academic Coaching to Thrive and Succeed tutoring program, and closes the Office of Equity, Inclusion and Employee Well-Being. Critics see these moves as a reaction to Republican-ordered audits and claims of racial discrimination against white students.



HAPPY HOMEOWNERS



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



Rita at the grand opening of Bernell's on November 8.

athletes but wanted to be involved in the games how to participate on the business end," Adair said. "And she was really excited when women's basketball started getting more visibility and equity. Her dream was to own a women-centered sports bar."

When Hooker was diagnosed with ovarian cancer late in her life, she and Adair moved to Las Vegas, where she watched the Las Vegas Aces play as often as she could.

Bernell Hooker died from ovarian cancer on Aug. 30, 2024. In November 2025, Rita Adair opened Bernell's Bar and Grill.

OPENING THE DOORS: THE WEIGHT OF DOING IT RIGHT

Opening any bar is hard, but opening one while grieving and trying to honor someone's memory without turning it into spectacle is harder still.

Adair faced financial hurdles, logistical setbacks, and the emotional toll of making hundreds of decisions alone that she once imagined making with Bernell.

There were moments when Bernell's seemed like it might not open at all. Renovations took longer than planned. Funding was a constant concern. And every step forward carried reminders of absence. Yet Adair persisted, supported by friends, chosen family, and a Madison community that understood the significance of what she was trying to build.

As the work continued, a larger truth emerged: The effort was about equity and visibility.

"I did a survey in the Madison area and asked about 15 bars to turn on women's sports. Only one place did," Adair said. "They had all kinds of excuses. To me, that was not okay. That really gave me the passion to do this."

A FAMILIAR ROOM, A DIFFERENT KIND OF WELCOME

Walk into Bernell's and you immediately feel something rare in contemporary bar culture: Ease.

PHOTO BY HEDI LAMARR

The space follows in the footsteps of the Red Rooster, the Madison restaurant and blues bar that once occupied the same address. Rather than erasing the past, Bernell's embraces it. The exposed ductwork, warm wood, and unpretentious layout echo the Red Rooster's



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A Promise Kept

In a former blues bar, **Rita Adair** has built more than Madison's first women-centered sports bar. **Bernell's** is a living memorial to her late wife, a continuation of a beloved neighborhood legacy, and a place where grief and joy quietly coexist.



munity gathering place, and an act of devotion made tangible. At the center of it all is Rita Adair, a woman who turned loss into purpose and memory into motion.

RITA ADAIR: A LIFE SHAPED BY LOVE AND RESOLVE

Rita Adair does not present herself as a visionary entrepreneur in the conventional sense. She is not flashy about it or interested in reinvention for its own sake. Instead, she comes across as grounded, thoughtful, and deeply relational—a person whose life has been defined by connection, chosen family, and the courage it takes to live authentically in a world that does not make space for you.

Adair grew up on the south side of Madison during the 1950s but moved around with her family throughout her childhood. The child of an interracial family, she considers herself

ON A QUIET DARK ROAD on the eastside of Madison, inside the old blues bar many residents remember as the Red Rooster, a story about love, grief, persistence, and legacy is being told. Bernell's, Madison's first women-centered sports bar, is not just a new business occupying an old address. It is a living memorial, a com-

lucky to have grown up in an environment where differences in color, gender expression, sexuality, and identity were met with acceptance and respect. As she grew older, she became involved in community activism during the Vietnam War era and studied to become a social worker.

She had three children, divorced twice, and became a foster parent to 23 adolescent girls—something most would consider a lifetime's worth of experiences. But Adair's life took a surprising turn when, at 45, she came out.

The years that followed were marked by hardship: being kicked out of her church, losing contact with her son and two granddaughters, ending relationships, starting and closing a business, and moving to Chicago to heal. But in the wake of those events, Adair met and fell in love with Bernell Hooker, who eventually became her wife in 2021.

After Bernell's death, Adair chose not to retreat. Instead, she chose to build. Bernell's Bar is the physical manifestation of that: a refusal to let a life be reduced to tragedy and a determination to let love leave a mark on the city.

REMEMBERING BERNELL

To understand Bernell's, you have to understand Bernell.

"She was extremely passionate about women's sports. That's what she breathed every day and talked about every day," said Adair.

Bernell Hooker played basketball competitively, coached collegiately for 25 years, advocated for professional players to earn a livable wage, and ran multiple basketball camps for girls in the Milwaukee area through her nonprofit Images of Us, which she started in 2002.

If she had had more time, her dream would have been to bring Wisconsin its first WNBA team. The Chicago Sky played exhibition games in Milwaukee because of her connections, and she was well connected within the WNBA's administrative circles. On the road to that dream, Hooker started the Milwaukee Aces professional women's team in 2014.

"She wanted to teach women who weren't

17

Although the program served more than 1.3M callers in crisis since 2022, the Trump Administration disconnects funding for the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline's LGBTQ+ youth option. Accusing the hotline of "indoctrinating children with radical gender ideology," the Department of Health and Human Services claimed to protect parental rights, including consenting to their child's course of care.

22

The Wisconsin Historical Society approves This Is It! (418 E. Wells St., Milwaukee) as a historic landmark site. The Wisconsin LGBTQ History Project advances a formal application for a State Historic Marker to be installed in 2026.

2

Dedicated to the memory of Kai Hoenig, an all-woman crew set sail from Sault Ste Marie to Copper Harbor to Duluth in the "Trans Trans Superior Race." The crew raised more than \$7,000 for The Trevor Project.



20

Claiming that rainbow crosswalks were a distraction for "Safe Roads," the Trump Administration influences their removal in multiple Republican states. On August 20, Florida erases the rainbow crosswalks outside the Pulse Nightclub Memorial.



26

The Department of Education orders 46 states (and Washington D.C.) to remove all references to gender ideology in their educational materials within 60 days.

1

Trans of the Land, a social network for trans and non-binary people in the Driftless Area of western Wisconsin, is showcased in *Our Lives*.



13

After an extensive remodel and rebranding, the Emerald opens in Wausau, replacing Oz (1997-2025) and continuing a 36-year legacy of queer spaces at this address.



16

NEW Pride Alive, Brown County's annual LGBTQ+ festival, announces the postponement of its 2025 Pride event due to an "increasingly charged political climate." After a groundswell of community demand, local organizers from Green Bay Pride took immediate action to restore LGBTQ+ voice and visibility in Green Bay. "We Will Still Be Seen: A Pop-Up Pride," launched Saturday, October 4, was a grass-roots block party with live music, performances, food trucks, community resources, and more.



legacy as a place where regulars felt at home. This is not an urban, hyper-curated sports bar chasing novelty. It is rooted in the tradition of the Midwestern small-town bar. TVs are tuned to games, tables cluster between the stage and screens, and there are no servers circulating constantly—you simply get up and grab what you need. Ordering at the bar and picking up food from the window creates natural interaction between patrons and staff. The vibe shifts depending on the day. Weeknights can be quiet, but when a big game is on, it can be hard to find standing room. On weekends, especially during brunch, arriving early helps. When live music fills the stage on

Thursdays and Saturdays, the crowd feels more like a family reunion than a night out. But while Bernell's centers women's sports, it shows all sports. "There's been conversation that if I say women-centered, men won't want to come, and that's so not true," Adair said in an interview with Madison's WMTV. "This is a sports bar that's going to make sure women are seen." **FOOD THAT SURPRISES** Bar food rarely aims to surprise, but Bernell's manages it anyway. The menu is straightforward and rooted in comfort: Soul food, fish fry, French toast, and

chicken and waffles during weekend brunch. Everything feels fresh and intentional. And then there's the spaghetti—unexpected alongside the fish fry but surprisingly good. Leaning into a Southern Louisiana style, it offers warmth and depth. **LEGACY AS A LIVING THING** There is a temptation, when writing about places like Bernell's, to frame them solely as symbols. But Bernell's resists that flattening. It is not just a statement. It is a living place. What makes it powerful is its ordinariness. People come to watch sports, eat, drink, flirt, and argue about referees. In doing so, they

participate in something quietly transformative: A space where women-centered does not mean exclusionary, where queer and trans lives are not explained or defended—just lived. In this way, Bernell's embodies a romantic notion of legacy as something ongoing. Bernell's memory is not preserved in amber. It is carried forward in laughter, music, clinking glasses, and shared meals. In a city that prides itself on progress, Bernell's offers something deeper than novelty. It reminds Madison that the most meaningful spaces are not always the loudest or the newest, but the ones built with care, honesty, and love. ■

Bernell's: Carrying a Dream Forward By Rita Adair, Owner of Bernell's Sports Bar and Grill

WHEN PEOPLE WALK into Bernell's Sports Bar & Grill in Madison, they see televisions glowing with live games, hear blues music floating through the room, and smell food meant to bring comfort and joy. What they may not immediately see is that Bernell's was born from love, grief, and a promise I made to my late wife.

My name is Rita Adair, and I am the sole owner of Bernell's. This bar exists because of Bernell—my wife, my partner, and one of the fiercest advocates for women's sports I have ever known.

Bernell dedicated more than 20 years of her life to coaching basketball, mentoring young athletes, and teaching them discipline, confidence, and resilience. Her passion didn't stop on the sidelines. She later became the owner of the Milwaukee Professional Women's Basketball Team, determined to prove that women's sports were worthy of investment and respect.

She was ahead of her time. Long before women's sports began receiving the visibility they are finally starting to get, Bernell was already fighting for screen time, sponsorships, and packed stands. And long before Bernell's Sports Bar and Grill opened its doors, it was her dream.

We talked about it often—a place where women's games wouldn't be an afterthought. A place where community mattered more than margins, where people could gather safely, celebrate excellence, and feel represented.

In August of 2024, Bernell passed away from ovarian cancer. Losing her changed everything. In the months that followed, grief sat heavy with me,



but so did clarity. I knew that if I didn't build Bernell's, the dream we shared would disappear with her. Opening Bernell's Sports Bar and Grill became my way of honoring her life and continuing her work. Starting a business while grieving tests every part of you—emotionally, financially, spiritually. But I was carried by the belief that this space was meant to exist. From the beginning, Bernell's has been intentional. We center women's sports while welcoming everyone. We serve soul food, celebrate live blues music, and create an atmosphere where people don't have to explain why representation matters—it simply exists here. What has surprised me most is how quickly the community responded. Guests tell me they didn't realize how badly they needed a place like this until they found it. Parents bring their daughters to watch women compete at the highest levels. Fans linger after games, talking about what it feels like to finally be seen. Our success isn't measured only in packed game nights or sold-out events. It's in conversations, connections, and the sense of belonging that fills the room. Bernell's has become a gathering place—not just for sports fans, but for people who believe inclusion makes communities stronger. Bernell may not be here to see this space filled with life, but her spirit is everywhere—in every cheer, every shared meal, and every young athlete who sees herself reflected on our screens. Bernell's is my promise kept. It is her dream, carried forward. As long as these doors are open, Bernell's legacy lives on. ■

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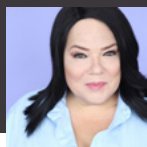
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18

Dina Nina Martinez-Rutherford, the first trans woman on Madison's Common Council, announces her candidacy for State Assembly in the 76th District, replacing Francesca Hong. If elected, Martinez-Rutherford will be the



first trans person to serve in the Wisconsin State Legislature.

3

The second annual BlaQtoberfest launches in Milwaukee. The three-day weekend spotlights cultural expression, wellness education, and collective action for health equity.



4

Dan Terrio places as first runner-up in NEW Dancing with Our Stars 2025, an annual fundraising competition in Brown County. Dan and his dance partner, Michael Witte, were the first same-sex dance team in the event's



history, and the Wisconsin LGBTQ History Project was the first LGBTQ beneficiary.

6

Days after rainbow crosswalks were destroyed in Miami Beach, Milwaukee celebrates their own at 2nd and National. Guided by the Wisconsin LGBTQ History Project. Funded by private donors, supported by business owners, the crosswalks will be maintained by a LGBTQ+ Landmarks program.



9

In a landmark ruling, a Cook County jury awards a Madison couple \$104M, specifically including loss-of-consortium damages. This is the first time an Illinois court has granted such damages to a same-sex couple in a civil union. In 2016, Rob Rosa and Michael Johnson suffered a tragic car accident that paralyzed Rosa, killed another passenger, and led to nearly a decade of litigation.



13

Miss Major Griffin-Gracy, Stonewall survivor and lifelong trans activist, passes away at her home in Little Rock, Arkansas.



28

Tarl Knight, long-time activist and community builder, announces his candidacy for District 9 alderman of Green Bay. Knight, deeply involved with local performing arts since age 13, has co-owned the Tarlton Theatre since December 2018.



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HISTORY FOOD & DINING WORKPLACE NIGHTLIFE

Stepping Inside the Napalese Lounge and Grille

Making memories and preserving history are part of the culture and mission of this Green Bay mainstay, but those memories have come with a price. Co-owner **Butch Pendergast** sees it as his way of giving back to the community.

ORIGINALLY LOCATED at 515 S. Broadway in Green Bay, the Napalese Lounge and Grille opened its doors in 1982 and has been open for more than 40 years. In 2000, the business moved away from its S. Broadway building after receiving the message from the police and city of Green Bay that the bar was not welcome in the area, which was a rough neighborhood from the start. The bar sat across the street from an adult bookstore—something the police were not too excited about. Eventu-

ally, the City of Green Bay claimed eminent domain, and Napalese was kicked out of their space on Broadway.

Since 2000, the Napalese Lounge has operated out of 1351 Cedar Street in Green Bay. As part of the move, they took the original front door from S. Broadway, and it now serves as an interior door to access the space's outdoor patio and remains an iconic piece of the business's history.

The move didn't come without its own set

of struggles. Shortly after moving to Cedar Street, harassment from anti-LGBTQ+ community members prompted the then-business owners to seal the front entrance. Bar patrons regularly experienced trash and water balloons being thrown at them, and fireworks being shot through the front door. For the next couple of decades, a side entrance was used to enter the Napalese Lounge and Grille.

NEW OWNERSHIP

In 2012, new owners Butch Pendergast and Stacy De Sotle purchased the establishment. Butch will be the first to tell you that business is not easy, and that it has its highs and lows. Things were flowing well for the first two years after the pandemic, but has settled into an unpredictable pattern once more in recent years. On some nights they experience increased activity, while other nights the bar sits almost empty without an apparent pattern.

When talking to Butch, he noted that over time, Napalese has become his way of giving back to the community. "Moreover, it's a safe space to be who you are," he said. But it's not a money-making enterprise. Customers show their appreciation by coming to drag shows, community events, or for the weekly Friday Fish Fry. Napalese is a gathering place, and the staff takes pride in providing a space for folks.

Butch shared that keeping the Napalese Lounge and Grille open and running has been constantly on his mind since the closing of Milwaukee's *This Is It!* in 2025. Nevertheless, it is a challenge when there is always a list of expensive upgrades and replacements that he will be incurring sooner rather than later. His current list includes a new beer tap, cooler, fridge, prep table, and fire system. When asked how the closing of *This Is It!* has affected him,

Butch responded that, "The idea is terrifying that we wouldn't be able to stay open, and so much more devastating for the community." He says he focuses on business on the weekends to keep his sanity.

Outside of his co-ownership in the bar, he works fulltime as a jeweler—a career he has held for the last 35 years. Butch's career as a jeweler has made continuing to provide Napalese as a gathering space possible. He sees it as a labor of love in providing the kind of space he wishes he had in his youth. In addition to working for 35 years as a jeweler, he has worked part-time in restaurants for most of his life.

Originally, it was his partner's idea to purchase and run Napalese Lounge and Grille. Butch, having spent significant time working in the restaurant and bar business, was reluctant knowing how much work goes into owning a restaurant. But he now says that he wouldn't give the Napalese up for anything. He credits his stance as a "hyperactive night owl" and his strong work ethic as the ingredients that have allowed him to be a good caretaker of the Napalese Lounge and Grille.

MAKING MEMORIES

Reminiscing about his time at the Napalese so far, Butch says some of his favorite things about being an owner are the moments of connection that a place like Napalese provides for others. He says, "All you have to be is kind and accepting." He considers it his job to ensure that no harm comes to the patrons in Napalese under his watchful eye. Ultimately, Butch just wants people to be able to be themselves and celebrate their differences. He enjoys providing spaces for all, including the trans community. In fact, the Bay Area Council of Gender Diversity (BACGD) uses Napalese as a monthly gathering space.

Butch is especially proud of the Napalese's presence in Green Bay, and the connections made through the space. The UW-Green Bay



archives department has met at the Napalese on numerous occasions to identify photographs and gather interviews of LGBTQ+ people, which preserves this knowledge for future generations. In fact, a portion of this history was featured in the "Telling Our Stories: LGBTQ+ Voices of Northeastern Wisconsin" exhibit, which was on display from February to November 2024 at the Neville Public Museum in Green Bay. The exhibit brought forth the history of spaces like the Napalese to new audiences while providing the opportunity to reflect for others. The Neville Public Museum exhibit would go onto win the prestigious Award of Excellence from the American Association for State and Local History (AASLH) in June.

That same month, author Erik Piepenburg published his book, *Dining Out: First Dates, Defiant Nights, and Last Call Disco Fries at America's Gay Restaurants*. In the book, Piepenburg profiled diners that serve as a place of safety and celebration for the LGBTQ+ community, both past and present. Napalese Lounge and Grille was one of the restaurants profiled and has its own dedicated chapter. Butch expressed appreciation for being included in the book and prominently displays his personal hardcover copy behind the bar. Whenever a patron asks Butch about the book, he proudly shows them.

Piepenburg's book is just one of the many memories displayed all over the space. In fact,



The Napalese Lounge's mural features images of Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera.



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10

The U.S. Supreme Court declines to hear a challenge to Obergefell vs. Hodges (2015), which upholds the freedom to marry in all 50 states. Kim Davis, represented by Liberty Counsel, is now personally liable for over \$360,000 in damages for refusing to issue marriage licenses in Rowan County, Kentucky.



13

The Wisconsin LGBT Chamber of Commerce names its 2025 Business Award winners at a special ceremony at the Milwaukee Public Museum.

24

Jim Melotte passes away at age 76. For nearly 20 years, Jim was the president of the Milwaukee Pride Parade, growing the event to over 200 entries by 2025. Jim was recognized by the Milwaukee County Board of Supervisors in 2023 for his unwavering contributions to the LGBTQ+ community.



1

The Trump Administration orders federal employees to refrain from promoting World AIDS Day through any communication channels. For the first time since 1988, the United States does not support the global observance.

14

Francis "Frank" Ford, celebrated Milwaukee photographer, passes away at age 80. Ford captured glimpses of Milwaukee nightlife, counterculture, and media personalities through a unique and colorful lens.



18

The Department of Health and Human Services announces plans to withhold federal Medicare and Medicaid funding from all hospitals who provide gender-affirming care to minors.

23

The Valentine Fund, advised by Michael Johnston (aka Karen Valentine) celebrates nearly \$45,000 in donations to 20 arts, humanities, and culture organizations.



most of the décor in the bar has some memory attached to it. In one spot, there is a whole slew of Golden Girls merchandise, all gifts for the Napalese left by patrons for Butch, a dedicated fan of the show. He keeps those items displayed for everyone to enjoy, noting that the décor helps make the lounge belong to everyone, as it helps the space take on a cozy, home-like atmosphere.

MURAL & DOOR RE-OPENING

On August 21, 2021, the local community gathered to celebrate the unveiling of a new mural by local artist Chue Lor located on the outside wall of the Napalese Lounge and Grille. The mural, sponsored by a number of

local businesses, features images of Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera with the phrase, "We Will Be Seen" in front of the Pride Progress flag.

In addition to the mural unveiling, the front door to the Napalese Lounge and Grille was reopened after being sealed for so many years. To mark this special occasion, representatives, including Green Bay City Mayor Eric Genrich, and Lt. Governor Mandela Barnes gathered for a ceremony and celebration. The mural unveiling was an emotional day for Butch. He remembers climbing onto the roof of the Napalese to survey the crowd below. He was impressed by the love of the crowd clapping and cheering as a supportive community.

A CHANGE OF HEART

The police have not been known historically to be nice or caring to the LGBTQ+ community at Napalese, but that all changed with the shooting at Club Q in Colorado Springs, in November, 2022. On that occasion, a gunman entered the LGBTQ+ nightclub killing five and leaving 19 additional wounded. Shortly after the shooting, the police in Green Bay appeared to have a change of heart. They stopped into the Napalese and informed them they were there to protect, and instructed the staff and patrons to call if they were needed. The police also came to Napalese Lounge and surveyed the layout of the bar to give the owners recommendations for where to install cameras. It was a complete turnaround and welcomed change for the Napalese. Other changes also soon came to the area of Main Street, including local businesses hanging Pride flags during June, along with city lampposts proudly displaying rainbow flags for Pride month. The neighborhood was indeed changing.

THE TIMES, THEY ARE A-CHANGIN'

As Bob Dylan once sang, "The times, they are a-changin'," and that holds true for the LGBTQ+ bar business. Ask any owner of such a bar and they will tell you of their ups and downs and the changes that they had to go through to make it. Until 2025, the Napalese held the title of "Wisconsin's third oldest gay bar." The oldest continuously operating LGBTQ+ bar in Wisconsin was claimed by This Is It! in Milwaukee, which was founded by an ally named June Brehm to provide a place for her gay friends to gather. Over the years, numerous gay bars in the U.S. closed as they weathered many storms including the AIDS crisis, inflation, and the pandemic. Each hit made it even harder for businesses to survive, and many did not.

At one time, This Is It! was one of the 10 oldest gay bars in the U.S. When they closed, the title of "Oldest LGBTQ+ Wisconsin Bar" passed to the Cardinal Bar in Madison, which

had been open since 1975. At Napalese, the loss of This Is It! hit home as the realization that a staple Wisconsin queer gathering space was gone. After the initial shock, the understanding dawned that it was now up to Napalese to carry the title of second oldest LGBTQ+ Wisconsin bar, a feat the staff and the regulars do not take for granted.

When asked about a piece of advice or something he wanted others to be aware of, Butch didn't hesitate to answer. He shared: "If you don't want history to repeat itself, understand it. Have responsibility and stand up for something, or you will fall for anything. Be proud of who you are because other people put in the effort before you, so enjoy it."

PLAN A VISIT TO THE NAPALESE!

The Napalese Lounge and Grille is open Tuesday through Sunday. It is a great place to meet with friends, grab a beverage, and enjoy some food. They are known for their weekly drag shows, drag bingo, and the Friday Fish Fry, among other tasty food offerings at the bar. This local gathering place is also lovingly known as "Naps" by the local regulars. Napalese proudly proclaims itself as a supporter of the 21+ LGBTQ+ community, local queer artists, musicians, performers, and for events/fundraisers and LGBTQ+ allies. Napalese also offers a full schedule of event offerings, including a cross dressing/transgender social monthly every first Thursday. The community is wanted and welcomed at Napalese Lounge and Grille. Please see additional pictures and learn more on their webpage: napalese.com. ■



NICOLE KURTH has more than 15 years of experience in higher education, holding a Master's Degree in Student Personnel Administration and a Bachelor's Degree in Graphic Design. She is currently on the board of directors for the Wisconsin LGBTQ History Project. Both Nicole and her wife love animals and have an extensive fur family: Four dogs and four cats. They also raise service dogs for children with autism.



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Cowboy v. Ren Faire // Devon & Moss DeWitt

January 9 // Engaged 11.24.24 // The Tinsmith, Madison

WE HAD A WONDERFUL elopement ceremony! It was part of a donated LGBTQ+ elopements program. Our wedding was cowboy (because we became partners)/renaissance faire themed, and our guests had a lot of fun with their outfits. Friends from music school played a beautiful quartet for our ceremony. We especially like that we did a handfasting, that was a very cool part of the ceremony. **Photographer:** Anya Kubilus

Handfasting & Parachutes // Avery & Silas Ray Dhonemai

April 13 // Engaged 1.18.24 // twelve29, Lannon

WE HAD A CELTIC handfasting ceremony followed by themed mocktails, pizza, and ice cream. Our celebration was full of light, colors, and laughter. Our senior dog Maia stole the show before lots of dancing, and a surprise appearance from a parachute over the dance floor! **Photographer:** Jill Emmer

Tending Our Love // Noel P. & Taylor Haven

January 18 // Engaged 10.26.24 // The Green Room, Milwaukee

FOR OUR UNITY RITUAL, we potted a plant in soil gathered from places of significance to us (homes we've lived in, our church, our favorite spots). We watered the plant as a promise to always tend to and care for our love. Our loved ones also watered the plant as a commitment to nurture our love as well. Today we continue to water the plant and watch it grow, just like our marriage. **Photographers:** Shaan Lashun (ceremony), Taylor Haven (outdoor photographs)

Four Boobs are Better // Amelia & Hanna Benkson

March 29 // Engaged 10.29.23 // Goodman Community Center, Madison

WE RENTED OUT the upstairs of The Rigby and threw a joint bachelorette

party the Thursday before our wedding. We invited all of our friends and had so many come from out of town a few days early. We decorated with scissor balloons and had a cake that said, "Four boobs are better than two" that we served on boob-shaped plates. One of our friends brought goodie bags with scissors and temporary tattoos of our cats. It was so great to be able to have that extra time with our out-of-town friends on such a busy weekend. **Photographer:** Anya Kubilus

Chaos to Dreams // Michelle Kuyoth & James Van Abel

April 26 // Engaged 4.14.23 // Olbrich Gardens, Madison

THE DAY ENDED UP better than we could have dreamed! We did everything we could to make sure that the wedding was very fun and very us. With a Tetris guest "book," pride-themed welcome mirror, Playbill wedding programs, and other little crafty bits, we had even the little details reflect how nerdy (and over-the-top) we are. And our wedding party matched that energy, having planned a surprise group dance at the reception.

The weeks leading up to the wedding were absolute chaos—a mix of anxiety, procrastinated wedding projects, and James ending up in the ER less than two weeks to the ceremony. But from the moment of our first look, we knew everything would be okay.

We will forever cherish the memories of our wedding, the love we showed for each other, and the love we felt from our community.

Photographer: Dutcher Photography

So Happy to be Wives // Andrea & Madison Wasielewski

May 10 // Engaged 11.18.23 // Best Place @ Pabst Brewery, Milwaukee

OUR DAY WAS completely smooth, which honestly was unexpected because we've heard so many horror stories of that not being the case. We took pride in having personal private vows before the ceremony, some-



JEWELERS WORKSHOP

You see yourselves in each other,
WEAR YOUR STORY





Nina Kenefick & Jordan Oyen



Akiya & Nekeya Alexander



Matthew Buechel & Matt Garrisi



Sadie Cordova & Karli Noone



Amelia & Hanna Benkson



Emily & Parlee Hayden

EMILY & PARLEE HAYDEN PHOTO BY MEGAN OF BEYOND THE PINES PHOTOGRAPHY



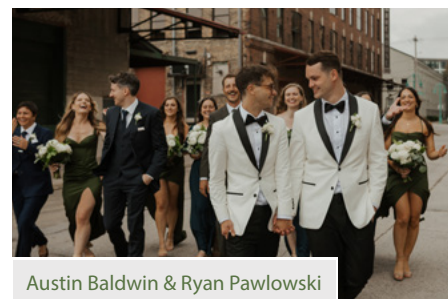
Virginia Harrison & Melissa Peyton



Kalani Delloro & Car Fuhrman



Taylor Abele & Ashe Roupas



Austin Baldwin & Ryan Pawlowski



Chris & Samantha Schara



Josie Condon & Olivia Stam

thing that was much more meaningful because we were both so anxious during the ceremony. (We're just anxious girls...LOL!) We also had the honor of including our son throughout our ceremony which made our unity so much more special. Our day was amazing, and we're so happy to be wives. **Photographer:** Erin Scott, One Shot Scott Photography

A Truly Perfect Day // Josie Condon & Olivia Stam

May 23 // Engaged 4.15.23 // Lake Windsor Country Club, Windsor

OUR DAY turned out so beautiful! It was so special because our friends and families don't live in Wisconsin, so many people traveled to join us on our day. We were so blessed to have all our favorite people in one place, with perfect weather, a gorgeous venue, and a fantastic photographer to make every moment perfect.

Photographer: John Sable, Sable Park Photography

Small & Intimate // Matthew Buechel & Matt Garrisi

June 14 // Engaged 7.19.24 // Madison

OUR ENTIRE DAY went how we wanted. Keeping it small and intimate was important to us. Everyone said how nice it was that they had a chance to talk to every guest there and meet new people in a cozy setting. **Photographer:** Sam Waldron, Dutcher Photography

U-Haul Long Haul // TeKema Balentine & Megan Bentley

June 27 // Engaged 7.3.21 // The Overture Center for the Arts, Madison

WE KNEW our friends and family would show up to support us, but our friends ultimately made the night! It wouldn't have been the same without friends showing up to support us from Madison to Germany! Every vendor we used were all members of the LGBTQIA+ community. It was so gay, there was a U-Haul parked outside the entire night!

Photographer: Dupree Aarmon

A Tapestry of Love // Shayna Rak & Elizabeth Regier

August 2 // Engaged 10.10.24 // The Rotunda, Waukesha

WE HAD AN INTERFAITH, ceremony officiated by Dr. Molly Greening. We received many compliments about how moving the musical and ritualistic service. The tapestry behind us was originally made for the artist's daughter's lesbian interfaith wedding. They graciously lent us the tapestry to help celebrate our special day. This connection to another interfaith lesbian couple by act of kindness is greatly appreciated and added to the magic of the day. During our ceremony we symbolically watered a tree that is now planted in Chapman Park, Oconomowoc. We are hoping to visit this tree on our anniversaries as a reminder of the momentous occasion. **Photographer:** K Mueller Photography

Roll for Smooch // Amani & Felix DeHolton

August 3 // Engaged 3.10.24 // Overture Center for the Arts, Madison

ONE OF THE JOYS of planning a queer wedding was the freedom to pick and choose the parts that felt right to us. The result was a day that truly celebrated our love and life together. Our ceremony was officiated by Amani's aunt and included feeding our sourdough starter as a symbol of nourishing our relationship. Guests threw paper airplanes instead of confetti as we walked out. We had a giant d20 (die) available during the reception for folks to roll—we'd kiss if they rolled high enough, but a low roll meant they had to do a silly dance or share a memory with us. And our best man surprised us with giant cutouts of our cats on the dance floor! **Photographer:** Sara Baillies

Perfect as Life Can Get // Taylor Abele & Ashe Roupas

August 9 // Engaged 11.24.22 // Garver Feed Mill, Madison

WE WERE BLESSED to be surrounded by family and friends celebrating

our love for each other, and our wedding was as perfect as real life can get. We were able to dodge an incoming storm and get the outdoor first look photos we both wanted. The storm ended up helping because our location had no one in the background—everyone fled the oncoming rain and the wind created a gorgeous picture with Taylor's cape and Ashe's veil. Our ceremony was a perfect blend of the two of us, combining Taylor's family's Unity candle tradition with Ashe's Greek heritage for the Stefana (Greek wedding crowns). We combined the elements into a single seamless component of the ceremony—a true representation of two becoming one! **Photographer:** Paul F. Gero

A Reflection of True Love // Emily & Parlee Hayden

August 9 // Engaged 10.14.23 // Chapters on the Horizon, Viola

OUR WEDDING DAY was defined by authentic, unconditional love. Set in the Driftless Region, we intentionally designed it to reflect who we are. From a custom dinner by a caterer from Emily's beloved hometown restaurant, to 130 pieces of thoughtfully thrifted glassware, to a live band of Parlee's musician colleagues, every detail was chosen with care. Nothing was left to chance—not even the weather, thanks to an online witch!

What truly made the day unforgettable were the people who showed up from across the country to celebrate our love. While some family members chose hate over love, those who attended did so loudly and proudly. We have never felt more loved, seen, or celebrated—quite literally, as Parlee's vows nearly earned a standing ovation!

Photographer: Megan of Beyond the Pines Photography

From Knitting to Turkeys // Max Cerrina & Gretchen Zelle

August 12 // Engaged 3.11.23 // Olbrich Gardens, Madison

MAX (he/him) **AND GRETCHEN** (they/them) met on a knitting forum during lockdown and only later discovered we lived in the same city.

We previously had a small legal ceremony, so our day was all about celebrating with community. We couldn't have asked for a more beautiful day at Olbrich. We even had wildlife guests—a turkey greeted us on the patio, and pairs of rabbits hopped around the event garden. Readings by Mary Oliver and flowers from the farmers' market set the tone; we invited guests to participate in the act of commitment by affirming their support. We emphasized mutual care by taking Covid precautions and making joyful accommodations for the varied disabilities among our guests and ourselves. Everyone took care of us throughout the day, leaving us free to enjoy. **Photographer:** Dutcher Photography

Wishing Stones // Nancy Garnier & Vicki Kenyon

August 15 // Engaged 4.5.22 // Our friends' garden in full bloom, Madison

MEMBERS OF BOTH of our families gathered in the garden for an amazing Pagan ceremony officiated by Nancy's niece. There were hummingbirds, butterflies, and bees hovering about on a beautiful sunny morning. Friends traveled from the East Coast, the South, and Illinois to share the day. Our purple Prince-themed celebration at Delta Beer Lab included even more friends and family. We enjoyed a lot of hugs, laughter, food, libations, music, and dancing all afternoon. Our guests honored us with wishing stones and were able to select from an assortment of crystals and charms to take home. This day was perfect—from the weather, to the garden, to the party, and all of the love we received! A fabulous honeymoon in Tulum, Mexico was icing on the cake and bubbles in the glass! **Photographer:** Maureen Cassidy

Music and Magic // Akiya & Nekeya Alexander

August 24 // Engaged 3.3.24 // The Echelon Experience, Lynwood, IL

IT WAS AMAZING to walk out and see so many smiling faces of family and friends that came to share our journey with us. We learned just how



loved we were by so many people in our lives. Something that was so special about our day was the people that were involved. The love and support from our parents, siblings, and close friends was nothing short of magical! We had our good friend and singer from the Madison area, Sultry Shibon, used her beautiful voice to sing us down the aisle as Nekeya walked with both her stepfather and biological father. And Akiya went viral on TikTok as she showed her full personality while locking hands with her father as she walked down! Local DJ, Cooper, officiated our wedding with so much grace that it left us feeling happy and hopeful for the future.

Photographer: Chelle Labelle Photography, LLC

Blessed by Bees // Amanda & Libby Luciani

August 31 // Engaged 6.1.24 // Harvest Moon Pond, Poynette

LIBBY WAS STUNG by a bee at our rehearsal the day before our wedding, and during our ceremony, there were two or three bees buzzing around our heads. During our vows, one even landed right on Amanda's ring. That made it very hard to focus on such an important moment! Overall though, the day was perfect, and we couldn't have asked for anything better! **Photographer:** Anya Kubilus

Sticking by Each Other // Ian Leach & Luke Urbain

September 6 // Engaged 7.29.23 // Madison Public Library, Madison

WE HAD OUR CEREMONY at the Madison Public Library downtown. Of course, there's no weekend in the summer in Madison where there's nothing going on, but we had an Ironman and a football game all in the same evening!

At the event, we had a flower stampede, a name we titled for the seven children between Luke's two sisters who brought flowers down the aisle from ages 3 to 10. After the ceremony, we had our reception at the

Park Hotel, where we got to see the Capitol during the evening.

We got the advice to stick by one another's side the entire night, and it was the best suggestion. We got to share so many special moments with each other's loved ones, even though we might not have met them before. And we got to remember the night together, as a newly married couple. **Photographer:** Melanie Renee Photography

Two More "I Do's" // Virginia Harrison & Melissa Peyton

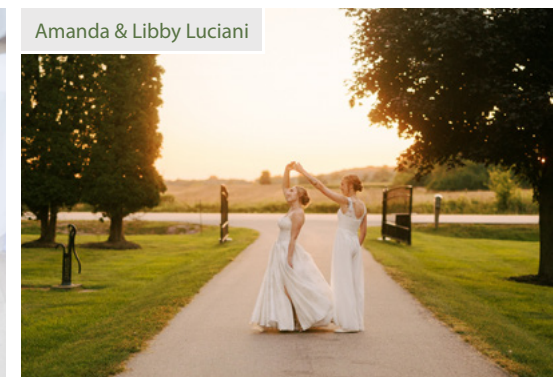
September 13 // Engaged 1.5.25 // Wild Rice Retreat Center, Bayfield

WE DECIDED January 5, 2025 to mark 20 years together by getting legally married, and set the date for September 13. When Trump was inaugurated and issued so many terrifying executive orders within the first week, we got panic-married at the Dane County Courthouse on January 27 to ensure that the legal part was in place. Our friend, Court Commissioner Tony Jamieson, officiated with personalized vows, and our Madison friends made time short-notice to be our enthusiastic witnesses. Then, in September, we gathered our lifelong friends, our daughter, and their partners at Wild Rice Retreat Center in Bayfield to participate in our beautiful wedding ceremony officiated by Rev. Stacy Craig of Ashland. After decades of commitment and celebrations, what's two more "I do's" for good measure? **Photographer:** Aria Rose Photography

Each Other, Forever // Austin Baldwin & Ryan Pawlowski

September 20 // Engaged 6.20.23 // Milwaukee

WE MAY HAVE BEEN the sweatiest grooms in all of Milwaukee! We knew our church didn't have air conditioning, but the weather didn't seem too bad, so we were thinking we might be okay. The lights, the eyes (and heat) of 200 people, and the nerves of the day all bundled together, and we ended up sweating straight through our tux jackets! One thing that came out of that in a cute way was that our guests commented how nice



EMILY & PARLEE HAYDEN PHOTO BY MEGAN OF BEYOND THE PINES PHOTOGRAPHY

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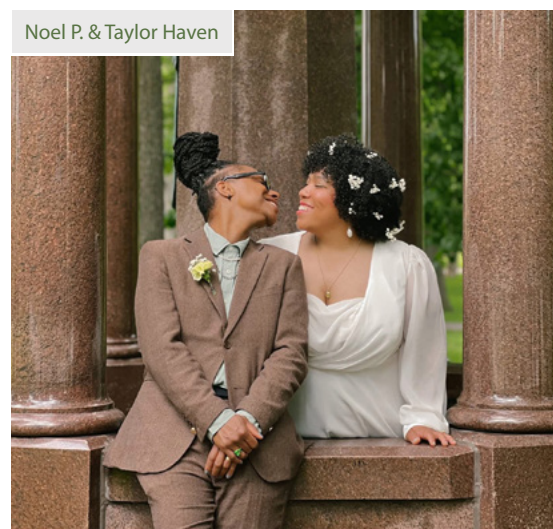
Avery & Silas Ray Dhonemai



Devon & Moss DeWitt



Nina Kenefick & Jordan Oyen



Noel P. & Taylor Haven



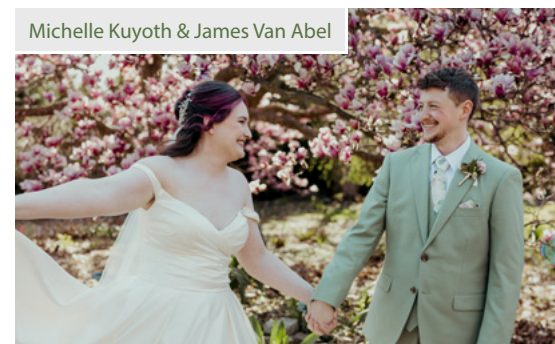
Ian Leach & Luke Urbain



Amani & Felix DeHolton



Josie Condon & Olivia Stam



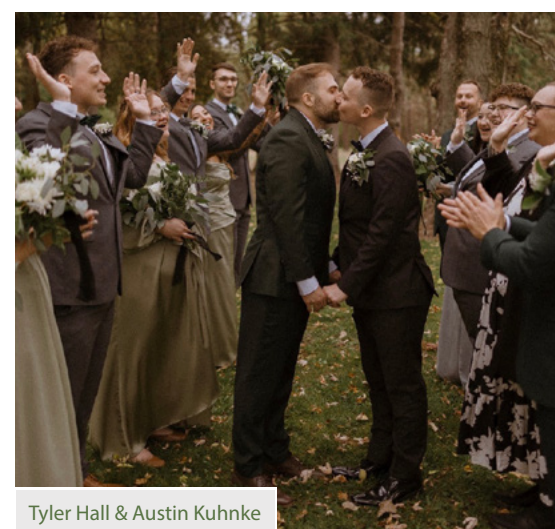
Michelle Kuyoth & James Van Abel



Nancy Garnier & Vicki Kenyon



Cait & Jess Harlan-Gehl



Tyler Hall & Austin Kuhnke



TeKema Balentine & Megan Bentley

it was seeing each other take care of one another, little things like wiping sweat from each other's brow and making sure we each got a quick hydration in right before the vows. **Photographer:** Sarah Glick

Echoing Laughter // Sadie Cordova & Karli Noone

September 26 // Engaged 11.11.24 // State Capitol Building, Madison

WE PLANNED a small, simple ceremony at the Capitol and only casually told family and close friends in case anyone wanted to join us. To our surprise, nearly 20 people showed up, so many that we actually needed a permit to gather in the rotunda. What started as an intimate plan turned into a spontaneous, joy-filled celebration surrounded by the people who love us most. Standing together in such an iconic place, with laughter echoing through the building, made the day feel deeply personal and unexpectedly grand. It was a beautiful reminder that love has a way of growing beyond plans. **Photographer:** Bloom & Evolve Photography

Building Together // Nina Kenefick & Jordan Oyen

October 4 // Engaged 1.20.23 // Our backyard, Nashotah

AS A POLY FAMILY, we bought a home together last year. Jordan and I wanted to host a commitment ceremony for our relationship, as a way to celebrate. We began a remodel in January 2025, and completed it in time to host! My other spouse was a wonderful help preparing our home, and my kiddo loved being a flower girl! Jordan and I had the friend who introduced us years ago officiate, and it was wonderful to see all our favorite people celebrating us and supporting our relationship, non-traditional though it may be. **Photographer:** Melanie Renee Photography

Wedding Trading Cards // Dan Pietrangelo & TJ Tkacik

October 4 // Engaged 5.29.24 // Monona Terrace, Madison

OUR WEDDING was built entirely around things that matter most to us:

Madison, our kitties, family, friends, and love for each other. We wanted the colors to feel personal and spectacular and gave everyone in the wedding party a specific jewel tone rainbow accent. When they walked down the aisle the colors came together, giving every photo a vibrant, heart-warming glow. Our favorite detail was the Wedding Trading Cards. We had custom artwork made of the most important people and pets. Guests got sealed packs to open and trade, turning a simple favor into a fun way to celebrate the people we cherish. Finally, we consciously chose to work with LGBTQ+ vendors for our music, flowers, make-up, and hair, creating a supportive team to bring it to life. **Photographer:** Paul F. Gero

An Emotional Ceremony // Tyler Hall & Austin Kuhnke

October 11 // Engaged 7.1.23 // Green Bay

IT WAS A BEAUTIFUL fall day. The day went perfectly as our wedding party really stepped it up and made sure everything was as stress free as possible. We learned we really do have an amazing support system around us. The ceremony was very emotional as we both wrote our own vows. Dinner was vegetarian/vegan. We had a drag show, and for a lot of people at our wedding it was their first experience with that.

Photographer: Alyssa Lentz-Underwood

Intention & Respect // Chris & Samantha Schara

October 25 // Engaged 3.17.24 // Merrimac

IT WAS A MISTY, rainy day with the chill of fall in the air. Not so different from our engagement, also a misty and raining St. Patrick's day in Belfast, Northern Ireland! We said "I do" surrounded by 150 family and friends in the beautiful bluffs of south central Wisconsin, with our adult kids as the wedding party. We chose to write our own vows, which not only perfectly aligned with each other's, but also concluded with the same four words—to love each other with intention, thoughtfulness,

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Amanda & Libby Luciani



Dan Pietrangelo & TJ Tkacik



Max Cerrina & Gretchen Zelle

kindness, and respect. Our first dance was amazing with a surprise appearance from our dog, Maggie. Many of our guests commented that it was a top five wedding for them, and our DJ politely remarked on our “very enthusiastic dancers,” not only because of the great music, but also the unplanned open bar. **Photographer:** Cree La Vie Studios

A Lifetime of Love // Kalani Delloro & Car Fuhrman

October 24 // Engaged 10.6.19 // DeKoven Center, Racine

WE'D BEEN TOGETHER since we were 12, but seeing each other during the ceremony and in front of all our friends and loved ones made everything feel new and familiar at the same time. **Photographer:** Lindsay Stayton

Harmonious Love // Cait & Jess Harlan-Gehl

October 18 // Engaged 6.30.24 // Pheasant Valley Barn, Brooklyn

WE HAD A WONDERFUL wedding with friends and family. Three members of our wedding party played our processional and recessional music with unique arrangements and compositions by Jess and their sister, CJ. Cait's sister, Isabella, and the band organization she had been in during



Kalani Delloro & Car Fuhrman

high school (Brigade from the Fox Cities area) played at the reception. We love supporting musicians in their musical journeys, so it was great to support kids who played really well together. It was a lot of work to plan and execute the event, but it brought us closer together and felt like the natural thing for us to do together! **Photographer:** Vasco Mangano ■



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| <p>BAY VIEW</p> <p>17 Jinx & Micah Ogé</p> <p>BEAVER DAM</p> <p>6.5 Micah & Scott Topel</p> <p>BELLEVILLE</p> <p>8 Cindy & Stephanie Jorenby</p> <p>BELOIT</p> <p>23 Joanne & Tina Lenz-Mandt
8 Philip Gorman & Mark Spreitzer
7 Sarah Palumbo & Elizabeth Champney</p> <p>BLACK RIVER FALLS</p> <p>10 Angela & Rachael Merry</p> <p>BOSCOBEL</p> <p>50 T.J. Meehan & Larry Ort</p> <p>BROOKFIELD</p> <p>25 Lynn Carlson & Lisa Rouskey</p> | <p>BROOKLYN</p> <p>5 Ian Leach & Luke Urbain</p> <p>BUTLER</p> <p>3 Sadie Cordova & Karli Noone</p> <p>COTTAGE GROVE</p> <p>11 Peg & Rachel Zizmann</p> <p>CROSS PLAINS</p> <p>8 Taylor Abele & Ashe Roupas</p> <p>DEFOREST</p> <p>25 Holly Anderson & Colleen Marsden
14 Edwin & Jeffrey Roman-Carney</p> <p>EAST TROY</p> <p>5 Andrea & Madison Wasielewski</p> <p>EAU CLAIRE</p> <p>18 Chad & Brad Knelson
2.5 Alicia Belden & Kia Bauch ♥</p> | <p>EDGERTON</p> <p>21 Amy K & Michelle Paulman
12 Christa & Scarlett Russell</p> <p>FITCHBURG</p> <p>21 Carrie Waters Schmidt & Eric Schmidt ★
19 Jeff Clark & Tim Hagen
19 Ryan Parkos & Chris Sina
17 Christopher Peguero & Anthony Potter
15 Ryan Crose & Steven Heller
12 Daniel & Michael Lynn
10 Nekeya & Akiya Alexander
5.5 Tsim Muaj Moua & Cia Siab Rose Vang ♥
3 Cait & Jess Harlan-Gehl</p> <p>FORESTVILLE</p> <p>2.5 Darrick DeMeuse & Kevin Marquez ♥</p> |
|--|--|--|

Bold
Married couples.

♥
Engaged couples.

★
Straight allies.

1 2 3
Relationship Age.

+

Registered as domestic partners.

For the Love of Love

2026 LOVE LIST: CELEBRATING WISCONSIN'S LGBTQ RELATIONSHIPS

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

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

- APPLETON**
- 34 Lizz Miller & Maureen O'Gara
27 Helen Boyd & Rachel Crowl
22 Joshua Cobbs & Benjamin D. Rinehart
20 Kathy Flores & Zephyr Kendzierski
19 Charles Erickson & E-Ben Grisby
17 Russ Casperson & Jeffrey Jansen
15 Ryan Merkel & Jake Tulogeski ♥
7 Brent Mecikalski & Nick Ross
- ARGYLE**
- 25 Steve Engles & Richard Johnson

- ARLINGTON**
- 10 Randy Anhalt & Nicholas Rich
- ATHELSTANE**
- 36 Teresa Dziak & Mary Willard
- BAILEYS HARBOR**
- 26 Mike Meulemans & Douglas Smith
- BARABOO**
- 25 Ryan & David Berahn
19 Ann & Cindi Gonzagowski
18 Stephanie & Annie Helmer
13 John Shumaker & Clint Zurbuchen



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Rooted in Community

TSIM MUAJ & CIA SIAB ROSE MOUA
MADISON | 5.5 YEARS



I met my partner at the beginning of the pandemic, during a time when the world felt especially quiet and lonely. We didn't meet the usual way. We met online, through a Facebook space created by older queer folks who wanted us to stay connected when everything else shut down. At first, it was awkward. Really awkward. But it was also honest. We found it easy to talk about politics, values, and the kind of world we wanted to live in. That kind of alignment mattered to both of us, and it still does.

We both do movement work. She's a director at Black and Brown Women Power Coalition, and I organize with Freedom, Inc. Our work focuses on domestic violence, sexual assault, and building power for Black, brown, and Southeast Asian communities. A lot of people think that kind of work would be exhausting to bring home, but for us, it's grounding. We're always teaching each other, always growing. Being in a relationship has taught me what healthy love can look like, especially as a queer trans person who didn't always see that modeled growing up.

We live in Madison now, and we've built a life that feels rooted in community. One of the things I love most about us is how much we love to host. We cook for people who need a place to land, whether they're friends, family, or community members going through something hard. Food, for us, is care. It's how we show love. Our home is rarely quiet, except when it's just us and our little Karen dog, who somehow runs the whole house.

Family has been complicated for me. There's still pushback from my side, even now. But her family has embraced me, and that has meant more than I can say. When you're queer and trans, you learn that family doesn't always come from where you expect it. Sometimes it's chosen. Sometimes it grows toward you slowly and stays.

We've been together almost six years, and we're engaged now, planning a wedding that feels less about tradition and more about intention. We talk a lot about wanting to model a healthy relationship for younger LGBTQ+ folks, especially youth who might not see themselves reflected anywhere else. If our love can show them that care, commitment, and joy are possible, then that feels like another kind of organizing. ■



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

- FORT ATKINSON**
5 Josie Condon & Olivia Stam
- FOX LAKE**
6 Destiny & Lisa Beaugrand
- FRIENDSHIP**
49 Ann & Peggy Stormoen
- GLENDALE**
13 Phillip Bailey & Jason Rae
- GRAFTON**
26 Lynn Johnson & Charlene Strouf
- GREEN BAY**
21 Kevin Garrity & Michael Larkey
17 Michael Vinson & Todd Kane
11 Teresa Ninneman & Jamie Shiner +
9.5 Jade & Becca Gialdini
6 Dannah Piippo & Kristin Vandenhousten ♥

- 5 Danielle & Rachel Maes
10 Angela Baerwolf & Abigail Swetz
- HARTFORD**
4 Katie & Mason Rider
- HOWARD**
2 Noki Heroux & Eli Trembl
- JANESVILLE**
20 Kimberly Blanchette & Colleen Frentzel
13 Daniel & David Malchow-Davis
13 Dean Smith & Tom Clippert
7 Audrey & Andy Standish
6.5 Casandra & Michalea Moore
5 Cori & Joy Link
- KENOSHA**
21 Terry Cowles & Timothy Zimmer
10 Tyler & Daniel Hess

- LA CROSSE**
34 Tara DeLong & Willem Van Roosenbeek
19 Nicholas & Reegan Jensen-Shafer
8 Andrew & Bill Ives
6 Kourtney & Jade Grekoff
5 Criss Gilbert & Mark McDougal
5 River Podjasek & Kaj Jensen
4 Ames & Desiree Barker
- LAKE MILLS**
20 Shaun Dow & Nate Basting
- LUXEMBURG**
5.5 Tonja Mason & Jan Scoville ♥
- MADISON**
52 Raphael Kadushin & Thomas McGhee
49 Sunshine Jones & Jo Kelley
48 Betty Harris Custer & Corkey Custer ★

Submissions were requested at ourliveswisconsin.com/lovelist via open calls in our November issue, and through our newsletter, Facebook, and Instagram.



Bold
Married couples.

♥
Engaged couples.

★
Straight allies.

1 2 3
Relationship Age.

+

Registered as domestic partners.

- 48 Paul Grossberg & Dean Ziemke
- 45 Louie Phillips & Brian Schultz
- 44 Melissa Keyes & Ingrid Rothe
- 43 Sue Currier & Janis Senungetuk
- 43 John Cannon & John Fritsch
- 42 Darren Bush & Stephanie Bush ★
- 42 Tom DeChant & Paul Gibling
- 41 Phil Biebl & Kevin Grohskopf
- 40 Tony Nevalainen & Rod Silva
- 39 Rob Latousek & Brian McCormick
- 37 Linda Crubaugh & Beth Ann Workmaster
- 37 Dale Decker & Chad LaFlash
- 34 Maggie Dugan & Melanie Witte
- 34 Ken Kaiser & Rick Schober
- 33 Dale Daulo & Christopher Walters
- 32 Callie Bell & Beth Thigpen
- 32 Karen Bennett & Carolyn Virginia
- 31 Rigoberto Gallegos & David Wahlberg
- 31 Peter Hoff & Paul Patenaude
- 31 Michele Perreault & Stephanie Spoehr
- 31 Burt Tower & Scott Lundberg
- 28 Catherine Briggs & Marty Fox
- 28 Denise King & Nancy Smider
- 28 Jennifer Wagner & Rebecca Wennlund
- 27 Keith Borden & Johannes Wallmann
- 27 Liz Dannenbaum & Donna Winter †
- 27 Robert Klebba & David Waugh
- 26 Eric Appleton & Rick Bristol
- 26 Jordan Bingham & Heather Stouder
- 26 Patrick Hoeth & Keith Lupien
- 26 Lee Johnsen & Rex Piercy
- 26 Sarah Urban & Christina Urban
- 25 Jane Bettner & Joan Jung
- 25 Jen Ferstl & Jamesetta Fousek
- 25 Terry Heiliger & James Moe
- 25 Daniel Lippit & Glenn Mitroff
- 24 Tamara Packard & Renee Herber
- 24 Barb Arnett & Ellen Sullivan
- 24 Jess Bachhuber & Cynthia Bachhuber
- 23 Olwen & Shelley Hansen-Blake
- 22 Amanda Berg & Becca Schmitz
- 22 Randall Cornell & Jess Salek
- 22 Lela Ann Cunningham & Jennifer Cox †
- 22 Kris Glodoski Wolf & Lesley Wolf
- 22 Jacinda Tessmann & Teri Weiland
- 21 Karen Darcy & Beth McConnell
- 21 Kathy Janda & Berlinda Lopez
- 21 DaddyDean Nett-Strozak & Alan Strozak
- 21 Michael Velliquette & Tehshik Yoon
- 20 Robin Bechhofer & Pat Lambert
- 20 Nick Drake, Chez Dickson & Emily Mills ♥
- 20 Eric Borchert & Timmo Dugdale
- 20 Virginia Harrison & Melissa Peyton †
- 20 Angela Prestil & Lisa Koenecke
- 20 Philip Renner & Marco Torrez-Miranda
- 19 Amanda & Dawn Siebert-Evenstone
- 19 Judith Davidoff & Rhonda Lanford
- 19 Lynn Olson & Cindy Desch
- 19 Bradley Tabor & Tim Walters
- 18 Beth Hanson & Kandis Severin
- 18 Julie Beauchamp & Brenda Stanley
- 18 Jeanine Hutcherson & Tricia Johnson
- 18 Lauren Lebwohl & Katie Wilkin
- 18 Jay Edgar & Joshua Feyen

A Lifetime Circling Each Other



ROSHA & MELISSA GUADALUPE
MILWAUKEE | 4 YEARS

Our story began long ago in the hallways of the Milwaukee School of Languages. We were just kids, navigating middle school life, and sharing the court as teammates on the basketball team. Even though Rosha was a grade ahead of me, we formed a genuine connection that transcended age. That foundation of friendship proved unbreakable. After high school, while we dated others and experienced life's detours separately, we never truly left each other's orbit. We were the best of friends, hitting the nightlife, sharing laughs, and always there for one another—our lives beautifully intertwined even without a romantic label.

Then came fall of 2023. After a few years where life had pulled us into different paths, we both found ourselves single. A simple text led to a casual meet-up for breakfast at my house, and from that moment on, the universe seemed to click into place. We never stopped seeing each other. What started with friendship blossomed into a deep, undeniable love. Everything suddenly made sense; we were perfectly in sync with our life goals, our vision for the future, and how we saw ourselves as a partnership.

Our journey culminated in a moment that felt both intimate and profoundly right: We tied the knot in our living room on October 28, 2025. It was a week before the Supreme Court's momentous decision on same-sex marriage, a powerful testament to the fact that our love makes its own rules. Our shared future is bright, featuring goals of owning several properties and building a family with three beautiful children. Our greatest dream is to eventually move to Puerto Rico, embracing our roots and raising our family in the warmth of the island we both love. ■

And Now We Know



JESS & SKYE ZITKUS
MADISON | 8 YEARS

Three things solidified my decision to start dating Skye: GI Joe, Star Wars (only the original versions), and anything Bruce Campbell related—we have a mutual affection for them all. We met at Lake Street Coffee on a September afternoon in 2017. Like any first date, it started off awkwardly until I ended a sentence with “and now you know,” and he responded “and knowing is half the battle.” If you were a child of the 80s you will recognize this as the catch phrase which summed up the end of every GI Joe cartoon’s “special message.” It has been burned into my brain since about 1984, and now it made its way into a conversation in 2017—reciprocated by the human across from me. The rest of the date was easy. Do you like Star Wars? Have you seen Evil Dead? Wait, you’re watching “Ash vs. Evil Dead?” So are my parents!! We talked so long, we were kicked out of the coffee house.

The following Sunday, we met at a dog park. I got to meet June and Dakota, Skye’s beloved dogs. At one point on our walk, Skye asked me: You know I’m trans, right? I said: Uh...yeah...so what? There was a pause and then a relieved “cool,” and we walked around the park again.

We were both divorced and “dating while older,” which seemed to have a weight to it. I read through a lengthy personality test Skye had taken for his job. We took quizzes, asked all the boring questions that end up being important in the long run, and eventually decided we felt safe with one another. From that moment, we were inseparable. We laughed, and still do, every day. We take care of each other, and life is easier than it has ever been. When my father met Skye, he opened up in a way I had never seen, telling stories I had never heard before. My mom was excited to show off her rock collection and ask a ton of questions, since Skye studied geology.

When we got married on May 4, 2018, my parents walked Skye down the aisle, (think Luke Skywalker, Chewbacca, and Han Solo), and I did my best Princess Leia and put my half marathon medal around his neck. We had a beautiful ceremony officiated by a dear friend surrounded by people dressed in costumes and comfortable clothing.

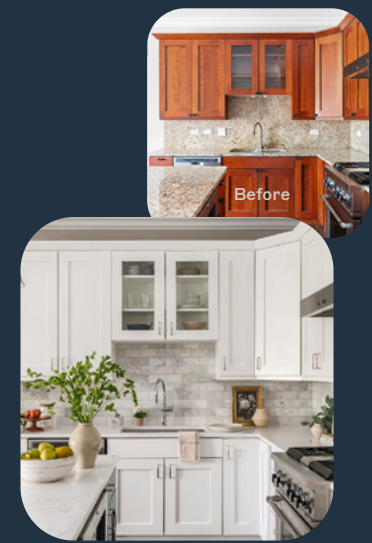
It’s been eight years, and I still tear up when I think about how I might not have ever met him. He is an amazing human, and if you don’t know him, you probably should. ■

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Bold

Married couples.



Engaged couples.



Straight allies.

1 2 3

Relationship Age.



Registered as domestic partners.

- | | | |
|--|--|--|
| 17 Robyn Laskowski & Kris Olds | Lance Lattimer | 8 Erin & Katie Danielson |
| 17 Lana Lawrence & Louise Stout ♣ | 12 Ashley & Sara Wenten | 8 Zack Henderson & Riley Willman |
| 17 Tonya Shaver & Valerie Shaver | 11 J. Belmont, Alexander Garcia & Nick Juris | 8 Brian & Ryan Maulana-Ponce |
| 17 Ali Treviño-Murphy & Amy Winkelman | 11 Sandy Eichel & Nancy Noet | 8 Jess Zitkus & Skye Zitkus |
| 16 Sherry Holly & Anna Celaya | 11 Laura & Shari Henning | 7.5 Danny Atwater & Sid Richards |
| 16 Jilip & Joey Nagler | 11 Abbey Scott & Haley Scott | 7.5 Lachele Fisher & Rachel Strauch-Nelson |
| 15 Bryon Hobbs & Mike Hoelzel ♥ | 11 TeKema Balentine & Megan Bentley | 7 Fox Coenen & Kalen MacAdam |
| 15 Mabel & Sarah Carr | 11 Aaron Carreno & Ryan Piaskowy | 7 Mady Greene & Robin Matthies |
| 15 Jami Degrazio & Holly Hieronim | 11 Anne & Monica Cupelli | 7 Jen & Mel Fish |
| 14 Shawn Ramsey & Kelly Staerzl | 11 Michael Bruno & Jim Smith | 7 Michael Bruno & Jim Smith |
| 14 Katelyn Schultz & Alyssa Brinkman | 10 Hannah & Libby Hankins | 7 Hannah & Libby Hankins |
| 13 Roz Klaas & Kari Rongstad | 10 Amy Kue & Betsy Moyer | 7 Amy & Andrea Yonker |
| 13 Martin Batchelor & Jeremiah Kasdorf | 10 Jillian & Katy Werginz | 6 Sarah Airozo & Chelsea Cornelius |
| 13 Jason Fowler & Grant Stroobants | 9 Andrew Carlson & Riku Nozaki | 6 Amani & Felix DeHolton |
| 13 Stephanie Ricketts & Kelly Schultz | 9 Andrew Goldsby & Jeremy Pagel | 6 Stacey Garbarski & Rachel Seizer |
| 12 Leah Clark & Terry McLaren | 9 Diana Miller & Emily Peffer | 6 Emily & Parlee Hayden |
| 12 Jose Vega & Mike Webber | 9 Shawn Padley & Lucas Meinders | 6 Jazzmine Haygood & Anna Landry |
| 12 Patrick Farabaugh & Sedrick Huppert | 8 Angie Alcorta & Mel Paugel ♥ | 6 Lili Hernandez Marin & Ashley Hiebing |
| 12 Andre Glass & Ron Gratz | 8 David & Matt Clark-Sally | 6 David Heuer & Ted Ketterhagen |
| 12 Bradley Grochocinski & | | 6 Star Merchant & Rowan Strange ♥ |

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Sometimes Parallel Lines Meet

STEPHANIE & CINDY JORENBY
BELLEVILLE | 8 YEARS



I met Cindy in 1989 when I was 14 and she was 17. I was a freshman in high school, and she was a senior. From the beginning, we had an instant connection. People thought it was strange that a senior would give the time of day to a little freshman, but she did.

She came over to my house to watch MTV, Chicago Bulls games and to simply be close. She protected me from freshman initiation and drove me home from practices. What we shared was unlike any other friendship either of us had. At the time, we didn't understand it, but others noticed and some felt threatened by it. In our small rural community, people accused us of being gay, which at the time felt unheard of.

Cindy graduated and joined the Army while I finished high school. We stayed in touch for a while, but life moved forward. She married and had her first daughter. I married after high school and had two sons of my own.

Years later, Cindy called me out of the blue and asked to meet for dinner. That night she told me she was gay. I was shocked, but not surprised. We went through our first divorces at the same time, and during that period we shared our first kiss. I wanted to be with her more than anything, but the timing wasn't right.

She asked me to go to nursing school with her, and I thought, "Why not?" It became one of the best decisions we ever made.

After her divorce, Cindy began a relationship with a woman she later married. I went through a reckless period, struggling with loving my best friend who couldn't choose me. Years passed. Cindy moved to Florida. I met my second husband, and we had a son together, though over time our relationship began to feel more like roommates than partners.

When Cindy moved back to Wisconsin, our nursing school friends planned a reunion weekend. Cindy and I met early to catch up. We were both unhappy in our marriages and feeling stuck. As we spent more time together, we realized the love we had carried all those years had never left.

We went through divorces again at the same time and moved in together. We married in October 2018. Between us we have seven children and now four grandchildren.

This is our forever, and it was worth the wait. ■

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Timing Catching Up



SCOTT & MICAH TOPEL
BEAVER DAM | 6.5 YEARS

Some love stories begin with fireworks. Ours began with two kids who walked the same hallways, breathed the same small-town air, and crossed paths without realizing fate was already doing quiet work.

Back in elementary school, we were in some of the same activities, two lives brushing past each other, two names on the same rosters, but we never truly met. Scott eventually moved away, and whatever small spark the universe had planted went dormant-but-not-forgotten.

Years passed. We grew up, lived life, made mistakes, chased dreams. And then one night in downtown Chicago, when we were both 24 (on Scott's birthday), everything shifted.

We met, and suddenly, it felt like we had known each other forever.

There was no "getting to know you" awkward stage. No games. No question marks.

Just two people who, from the moment they started talking, couldn't imagine not talking or being together forever. We became inseparable almost instantly. The kind of connection that feels both brand-new and familiar.

Maybe it was the history we didn't realize we shared.

Maybe it was timing finally catching up to destiny.

Maybe it was just two souls recognizing each other after years of near-misses.

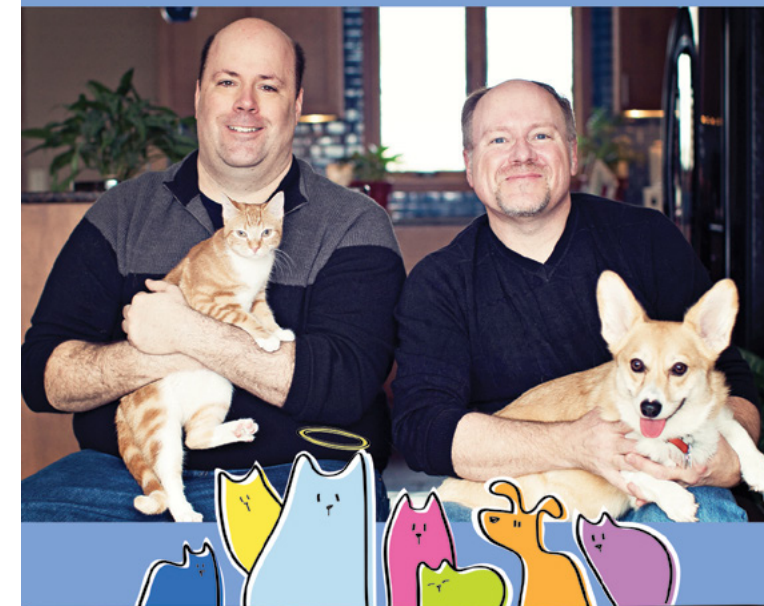
Whatever it was, it worked! It felt easy, right, inevitable.

What started as a chance encounter in Chicago turned into a home, a marriage, a beautiful daughter, and a life built on love that's both sweet and steady. It's the kind of love that feels like it was always supposed to happen.

Sometimes love doesn't begin with a dramatic moment. Sometimes it begins in an elementary school classroom, quietly waiting for the right time to bloom.

And when it did for us, it bloomed into everything. ■

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Bold

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Engaged couples.



Straight allies.

1 2 3

Relationship Age.



Registered as domestic partners.

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- 6 Josiah Stork & Zak Stowe ♥
- 5.5 Cindy Crane & Judy Mills
- 5.5 Beth Feeney & Sharlene Victor
- 5.5 Dan Pietrangelo & TJ Tkacik
- 5 Matthew Buechel & Matt Garrisi
- 4.5 Gideon Elliott & Amelia Speight
- 4.5 Patrick & Steve Sisson
- 4 Michael Braatz & Willian Cano Hernandez
- 4 Vicki Kenyon & Nancy Garnier
- 4 Valeria Luna & Rae Sowards
- 4 Amelia & Hanna Benkson
- 3 Tommy Crow & Sebastian Tosarr-Cattino
- 3 Hollis Rudiger & Heather Winesett
- 2.5 Samantha Harrington & Claire Palmer ♥
- 2.5 Ariel Merritt & Kai Brown
- 1.5 Marie Barabas & Mary Hitchcock
- 1 Andrey Carman & Hannah Renfro
- 1 Christen Lester-Jones & Rain Rylley
- 1 Joan Moore & Rowan Strange

MANITOWOC

- 9 Sapphire Garcia & Stephanie Garcia
- 6 Ashley Brown & Karey Roberts

MARATHON

- 4.5 Mark Blume & Thomas Voss

MAZOMANIE

- 21 Carolyn Antonie & Minda Engel

McFARLAND

- 34 Chuck Mocco & Thomas Scheid
- 17 Kristin Ellis & Nikki Ellis
- 17 Jere M. Foley, II & Jason Strader
- 11 Phillip Knutson & Sam Christel
- 9 Mary & Tanya Meyer
- 6 Jayce Moe & Christian Swomley

MENASHA

- 2.5 Christopher Lambert & Scott McCloskey

MENOMONIE

- 12 Minta Dwyer & Camden Hargrove

MEQUON

- 25 Brian LeStarge & Dale Mueller

MIDDLETON

- 36 Julie & Roberta Woodrick
- 30 Ron Meerhoff & Michael Rhoads

MILWAUKEE

- 45 Steven Sanders & Rand Schmidt
- 45 Wendy Pologe & Mary Thoreson
- 39 Gerry Coon & Stewart Dempsey
- 36 Becky Burton & Sue Robinson
- 29 Scott & Ernesto V.
- 29 John Harmon & Karter Wilkening
- 28 Scott Valdes & Ernesto Valdes
- 24 Mark Janetski & Ed Mullins
- 20 Thomas Zigan & Scott Jones
- 17 Gina Mangruem & Jonathan Kenworthy
- 16 Dana & Jessica Langill
- 12 Catlin Kintsugi & Chamomile Rexley
- 12 Serita Cheeks & Ashley Groth
- 10 Jack Fera & Sam Nelson
- 9.5 Rick Banks & Javon Dean
- 9.5 Bruce Seeds & Jason Seeds
- 8.5 Jessica Raket & Dee Zeh ♥
- 7 Lisa Mendez & Shay Mendez
- 7 Brandy & Barbara Murray-Reding
- 4 Rosha & Melissa Guadalupe
- 4 Alex & Jacquez Martinez-McKinney
- 2.5 Holly Gullede & Natalie Toth
- 2.5 Jamila Mitchell & Deangilo Miller

MINERAL POINT

- 24 John G Greenwood & Fred E. Vaughn

MINOCQUA

- 20 Krystal Westfahl & Tina Breister

MONONA

- 17 Beth Kernan & Jamie Kernan
- 12 Vivienne Andersen & Kye Richards
- 5 Max Cerrina & Gretchen Zelle
- 1 H Due & Kathryn Hunter

MONTELO

- 20 Cheryl Ravenscroft & Suzanne Fichtel

MORRISONVILLE

- 7 Emer & Kim Bursaw

MUSKEGO

- 2 Alisha Hart & Junior Rittenhouse

NASHOTAH

- 6 Nina Kenefick & Jordan Oyen

NECEDAH

- 4 Darla Lannert & Jaimie Brickey ♥

NEENAH

- 44 David Bluma & Brad Morrison
- 44 Brad Morrison & David Bluma
- 5 Austin Kuhnke & Tyler Hall
- 5 Robert Rohloff & Spencer Rohloff
- 4 Allie Krause & Lena Lambrigtsen

NEW AUBURN

- 29 Scott McCracken & Abe Zeman

NEW GLARUS

- 17 Trent Gabler & Justin Miller

OAK CREEK

- 30 Patricia Cline & Patricia McKenzie
- 17 Thomas Darrow & Michael Houle

OCONOMOWOC

- 7 Alissa & Melissa Laasch
- 3 Avery & Silas Ray Dhonemai

ONALASKA

- 4 Jessica DAmbrosia & Lynda Sinnott

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Bold
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♥
Engaged couples.

★
Straight allies.

1 2 3
Relationship Age.

+

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- OREGON**
- 12 Justin Wilder & Tobias Zuercher
- 10 Tim Tender & Paul Weber
- 9.5 Andrea & Sheena Hirschfield
- 4.5 Maggie Cedar & Erin Winkels
- OSHKOSH**
- 1 Brooke Radant & Ann Sabel ♥
- PEWAUKEE**
- 5 Christy & Emily Kolaga
- PLOVER**
- 17 Michelle Rosaleigh Anderson & Stacy Lee Anderson
- PORT EDWARDS**
- 18 Shane Burkart & Kristopher Gasch
- Port Washington
- 20 Scott Lone & Joseph Maddalena
- 6 Karl Letsche & Brad Mueller
- RACINE**
- 19 Ann Kelso & Sarah Mueller
- 11 Gina Cesarz & Kez Cesar
- REEDSBURG**
- 5.5 Amy Eddy & Brit Eddy
- RICHLAND CENTER**
- 5 Bradley & George Engen
- SAINT FRANCIS**
- 6 Gracie Limbach & Sydney Martinez

- SHEBOYGAN**
- 22 Julie Konik & Christine Smith
- SHOREWOOD**
- 22 Luc Maker & Susie Seidelman
- SOUTH MILWAUKEE**
- 4 Shayna Rak & Elizabeth Regier
- STEVENS POINT**
- 21 Sarah & Sandi Lakewood
- STOUGHTON**
- 52 Judy Captain & Kate Stormer
- 25 Walt Jackson & Dennis Outhouse
- 22 Todd Cieslak & Brenton Eastabrooks
- 22 Angie & Tammy Whitken
- 11 Sam Eifert & Jason Whitley
- SUN PRAIRIE**
- 27 James Candler & Paul Lorentz
- 24 Alicia Stevenson & Lindsay Raftis
- 16 Aleta Klicko & Patti Klicko
- 15 Tim Lom & Steve Noll
- 10 Kat & Steph Kosmaule
- 7 Kara & Stacey Christenson
- 6.5 Deb Holland & Jane Kahl
- 3 Meghan Champion & Kristin Ernst
- 1 Kristen Brazzell & Francesca Wilson
- SUPERIOR**
- 2.5 Trevor Belson & Nikki Lewis

- TWO RIVERS**
- 8 Karla Pantoja & Loretta RiChard ♥
- VERONA**
- 13 John W. Duncan & Rev. Tim Schaefer
- 10 Tracy Fitch & Harper Hazelmare
- 10 Deborah Hamill & Alicia Fitzgerald
- 3 Amanda & Demi Ferwerda-Wiemann
- WATERTOWN**
- 8 April & Charity Chandler
- WAUNAKEE**
- 23 Deborah Nies & Linda Aumann
- 16 Holly Ellickson & Corissa Miller
- 7.5 Adam Erdmann & Shawn Langel
- WAUSAU**
- 19 Ryan Wistein & Gregory Schubring
- 7.5 Cindy Hogan & Monica Cook ♥
- WAUWATOSA**
- 13 Brad & Nick Schiaikowski
- 9 Jake Christian & Dave Connell
- 5 Giordi & Sylvester Carmichael
- WHITEFISH BAY**
- 16 Anne Marie Arroyo & Tamela Greene
- WINDSOR**
- 14 Paul Fritsch & Jim Hartman
- WINNECONNE**
- 15 Jenn Fores & Nathaniel Fores

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Opposites Attract & Also Heal



ALISHA HART & JUNIOR RITTENHOUSE
MUSKEGO | 2 YEARS

At first glance, Junior and I looked like a contradiction. He was a trans police officer, steady and uniformed, working inside a system I had spent my life challenging. I had built my career in social justice, naming harm, demanding accountability, and pushing against institutions that too often failed the people they were meant to protect. On paper, we were an impossible equation. Add to that my two boys and a 150-pound mastiff, his two dogs, and an hour-and-fifteen-minute drive between us, and love seemed wildly impractical.

And yet, from the beginning, something clicked.

Where I carried fire, Junior carried calm. Where I questioned everything, he listened deeply. He embodied the very qualities policing desperately needs: Kindness without ego, patience without passivity, steadiness without rigidity. He didn't deny the harm caused by the system he worked in. Instead, he spoke about change from within, about showing up differently, about modeling what safety and dignity could look like in real time. I realized that while I had spent years naming what was broken, Junior was quietly living the tools for repair.

We became the missing pieces for each other.

Our conversations stretched into the night, honest and sometimes heavy, always grounded in mutual respect. We talked about history, oppression, and the gap between intention and impact. We talked about how wanting change is not enough if you don't know how to build it. Together, we imagined something better, not just in theory, but in practice, in daily choices, in how we loved our families and our communities.

After a year, Junior did something that still humbles me. He packed up his life, his house, and his two dogs, and moved closer to me. Suddenly, our world was louder, messier, fuller. Three dogs underfoot. Two kids with endless questions and boundless energy. Schedules overlapping, hearts expanding. The chaos was real, but so was the joy.

What we found in each other was not just love, but healing. We both arrived carrying old wounds, tired from fighting in different ways. Within our partnership, we found peace. Not the absence of struggle, but the presence of safety. The kind that lets you rest. The kind that lets you grow.

Now our life is an adventure built on intention, laughter, and shared purpose. Against the odds, or maybe because of them, we are proof that love can be both radical and gentle. That change can be tender. And that sometimes, the most powerful thing you can do is find someone who meets you exactly where you are and walks forward with you anyway. ■



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From Campus Halls to Holy Matrimony

With rhinestone budgets, comic-book color palettes, and a counselor's heart, **Rob Anderson** is reshaping what modern weddings can look like.

WEDDING PLANNER | SAME-SEX WEDDINGS | CREATIVE EXPRESSION

BEFORE HE EVER coordinated a wedding timeline, negotiated a vendor contract, or sketched out an audacious color palette, Rob Anderson spent more than two decades working in higher education, working his way up the ladder from Hall Coordinator to Associate Dean of Student Affairs. For the majority of that time, he lived in a dedicated space in the first year residence halls. "I spent just over 20 years working in that field," he says of his former career, most of which was spent at small private liberal arts colleges where he admits, his job was more of a lifestyle than a typical 9-to-5. Nevertheless, working in those settings gave him the "opportunity to try on a bunch of different hats, everything from residence life to student affairs and student activities, to orientation and student organizations."

In those roles, he discovered the foundations of his future career as a wedding planner almost accidentally. Working on college campuses where budgets were lean but expectations high, he developed a personal superpower: Creating beauty with limits. "We didn't have the budget you might have at a big university," he explains. "So, when couples come to me and say they want a nice wedding, but they don't have the same budget that someone else might, I tell them, 'You're in perfect hands because I am fully versed in planning diamond-level events on a rhinestone budget.'"

Rob's undergrad years were spent studying music performance, with an emphasis in voice, but even that training seems prophetic in hindsight. A life saturated in theater and the arts refined his instinct for design, atmosphere, and storytelling. It also honed the interpersonal skills that would be central to his new life.

But after two decades in higher ed, a forced pivot, and then the pandemic, upended his career. Burned out and craving a new direction, he began brainstorming "ideas of businesses that I could start with very little investment."

One idea stuck.

"I decided to take the plunge," he says, "to take my knowledge from working in higher ed, planning those events, and the counseling education I had in my master's program, and then couple that with the creativity and background in theater and music. Wedding planning just seemed like a really good fit for me."

That fit became OSO IN LOVE, the Madison-based wedding planning company that has evolved from a one-person operation into a thriving multi-planner team with an unmistakable aesthetic identity and a cult following among couples who want something different.

BUILDING A NEW KIND OF WEDDING COMPANY

When Rob launched OSO IN LOVE in 2021, he knew it would not follow the standard model. "I didn't want to be just your run-of-the-mill sort of wedding planner," he says. Instead, he built a one-stop shop: Planning, day-of coordination, design and branding, offi-

"There aren't a lot of big differences between working with a straight couple and a same-sex couple," he explains. "But there are some nuances, and it's that shared experience that a straight business owner is not able to provide."

cial services, music and entertainment, decor and linen rentals, an entire ecosystem designed to reduce stress and maximize creative control.

Most planners offer only management. Rob wanted to offer meaning.

"Our whole experience is rooted in empathy," he says. "We're always going to look at things from a perspective of putting ourselves in our couples' shoes." That approach, he says,



"is not the norm" in the industry, where logistics often overshadow emotion. But for Rob, coming from a career built on counseling, conflict resolution, and student development, emotion is the job. "This process of planning a wedding is highly emotional," he explains. "We truly are sort of an armchair counselor."

This emotional intelligence is one of the company's signatures. The other is OSO IN LOVE's design philosophy, which veers far outside the usual white-on-white conventions.

"I gravitate toward out-of-the-box, non-conventional designs," Rob says. "Bold choices. Things you wouldn't expect to see at a wedding." His inspirations come from everywhere: Interior design, architecture, typography, fashion, art. "I may see something and I'll say, 'I need to remember that and figure out a way I can flush that out into a realized concept.'"

One of his most memorable creations came, improbably, from a night in the emergency room. While waiting for hours, he stared at the newly refreshed UW Health System logo on the wall. "I was like, 'God, I really love that. I love the colors.'" That tiny visual spark eventually became a full editorial installation for a wedding expo: A vibrant hybrid of vintage comic books, Roy Lichtenstein, superhero motifs, bold typography, and riotous color. "There



All credits for styling and production on our website and socials.

was nothing else like it," he says. "It was so colorful and so bold and not what you would expect to see at a wedding."

The result resonated. The stationery designer received new bookings from couples drawn to the rebellious aesthetic. The installation's blog post titled "Holy Matrimony" became one of the most-visited pages on his website.

These bursts of unexpected creativity are what Rob lives for. "It's like going back to those days of working in music and theater," he reflects. "Anything's possible."

THE GRIND & THE GLORY OF WEDDING SEASON

Wedding planning may look romantic from the outside, but the job is deeply physical, logistically grueling, and relentlessly seasonal. Rob describes wedding days as "boots-on-the-ground" affairs where his Apple Watch might log "as many as 35,000 steps in a day." Summer weekends basically disappear for him, and the off-season becomes a period of recovery, strategy, and creative development.

Unexpectedly, Rob found that his new work overlapped his previous experience with campus life in a way that surprised even him. "There are a lot of parallels," he says. In both worlds, intense on-site periods alternate with calmer administrative months. In both, burnout is real. And in both, success depends on staying grounded in purpose.

For Rob, that grounding comes from the couples themselves, and especially from the couples whose life experiences mirror his own.

WHY WORKING WITH SAME-SEX COUPLES MATTERS SO DEEPLY

When the interview shifts to LGBTQ+ couples, Rob's voice changes. "I'm sorry, I'm starting to cry," he says at one point. "But as

someone who grew up and was bullied and struggled coming out of the closet, it gives me such intense joy to see these couples have their relationships acknowledged."

His connection is visceral and personal. "There aren't a lot of big differences between working with a straight couple and a same-sex couple," he explains. "But there are some nuances, and it's that shared experience that a straight business owner is not able to provide." He understands the potential micro-pressures, the emotional history, the family dynamics, the fears, the longing for affirmation.

When an LGBTQ+ couple hires him, he says, "It feels like you're at home."

That sense of community extends to the vendor team as well. "Typically, they want to support members of the community who are providing services," he says. The result is a celebratory feedback loop of queer couples connecting with queer vendors, each affirming the other's craft, identity, and story.

There is also an educational element when non-LGBTQ+ vendors participate. "It's an opportunity to help educate that person and make them aware of what it takes to work with diverse couples," he explains. Whether it's pronouns or gender-neutral restrooms, Rob steps effortlessly back into his educator role, happy to bridge gaps and expand understanding.

This is work he would do full-time if the market allowed it. "I wish my bread-and-butter could be just working exclusively with same-sex couples," he says. "It's something that's really important to me."

A GROWING TEAM, A GROWING VISION

From a one-man operation in 2021, OSO IN LOVE has expanded rapidly. "We went from a team of one to a team of two, to a team of



three, to a team of four," Rob says. For 2026, they'll be a team of six. His planners include former interns, longtime assistants, and even former brides and grooms, all people who saw his work up close and wanted to be part of it.

The company now handles nearly 50 weddings a year. But as it expands, its heart remains deeply personal: Empathy-driven, design-forward, and rooted in the conviction that weddings are about people, not schedules.

Rob's long-term dream is to focus even more heavily on design, branding, and creative direction. But no matter how OSO IN LOVE evolves, his core philosophy remains unchanged: "We don't look at couples as just a number. We're here to help you, guide you, and validate your experience."

In the end, it's not just about weddings. It's about giving people the celebration they deserve, one that is bold, beautiful, unconventional, and true. ■

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FOOD & DINING HOSPITALITY MINERAL POINT

Hop-ward Bound

After leaving Wisconsin for life on the coasts, **Mike Zupke** found himself pulled back home. Now he brews up hospitality in every punny and personal beer at **Commerce Street Brewery Hotel**.

IN IDYLIC MINERAL POINT, population 2,581, Mike Zupke, the owner of Commerce Street Brewery Hotel, is running one of the only combination hotel/breweries in the state. “I never thought I’d be back in Wisconsin, let alone running a brewery hotel,” he said with a chuckle.

Zupke grew up in the Sherman Park neighborhood of Milwaukee. “When I turned 18, I left the state and never thought I was coming back,” he said. “I thought, ‘This is in the middle of nowhere. I gotta get out of here.’”

Like many young gays, he had his sights set on the coast. He went to Ithaca College in New York state for his undergrad and, without much of a plan, found himself in law school at the University of Minnesota. “I thought, ‘I need to figure out what I’m going to do with my life. So I guess I’m going to go to law school,’” he said.

While in law school in Minneapolis, Zupke started working for a local firm in internet domain name arbitration. “If somebody claims your domain name is infringing on their trademark or something, you could file an arbitration instead of going to court. So that became my jam for years after law school,” he said. A chance job offer to work at the Internet Assigned Numbers Authority (“the center of keeping the internet working,” according to Zupke) took him to Los Angeles for more than a decade.

WISCONSIN COMES CALLING

But it wasn’t long before Zupke got the itch to start something new. “I was starting to feel burnt out in Los Angeles, and I thought, ‘I want to try something new,’” he said. “So I moved from LA to San Diego to have some fun, and I decided to enroll in beer school. It was perfect for me. And that’s when I decided I wanted to run a brewery hotel. That became my dream.”

Brewery hotels are not common. There are only a handful in the country. After completing beer school, Zupke was on the hunt for a property. And wouldn’t you know it, he found the perfect one right here in Wisconsin. “I was looking at locations all over the country where I could run a brewery hotel,” he said. “I put in a couple offers but nothing panned out. And then this place in Mineral Point came on the market, and I felt like this is kismet. I’ll be close to home again, and my parents will be happy.”

Zupke was no stranger to Mineral Point—he vacationed there with his family when he was eight. “My mom had read some book about Cornish miners and she really wanted to have a pasty, and that’s what Mineral Point’s known for: Cornish pasties.” Seeing it as serendipity, Zupke bought the Commerce Street Brewery Hotel and moved in January 2018.

FROM LAWYER TO BREWMASTER

Zupke wasn’t daunted about making the transition from internet domain lawyer to brewmaster. “Change doesn’t scare me,” he said. “I’m



“When I turned 18, I left Wisconsin and never thought I was coming back. Now I’m running one of the only brewery hotels in the state.”

a ‘dive in and worry about it later’ kind of a person.”

But when Zupke had a stroke a year ago, he realized quickly he needed extra help. He turned to one of his old draft-line cleaners who recently lost his job. “I asked him, ‘Do you want to make beer for me?’ And he said, ‘I definitely do.’ So Zeke’s been making beer for me for the last year,” Zupke said. “He’s having fun. We always have new beers on tap.”

The Commerce Street Brewery Hotel has two different brew houses—one that houses 15 barrels, and one that houses one barrel (which is about 31 gallons). Zupke loves setting Zeke loose and encouraging his creativity. “He gets an idea, I tell him go ahead, and he runs with it.”

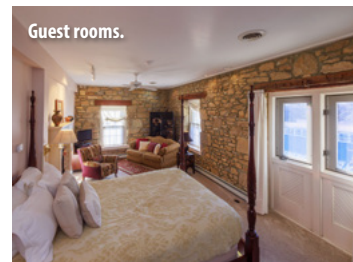
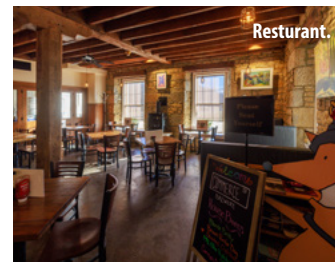
Right now the brewery hotel is serving up a pre-prohibition lager using recipes from before the 1920s. Others in the current lineup include the Blonde Betty (a cream ale ode to Betty White, whose third husband was born in Mineral Point), the Stroked Out (a hazy IPA in honor of Zupke’s stroke), and the flagship beer, the Brown Pointer Dog (a dry Irish stout).

BEERS FOR BETTY

The Blonde Betty is one of their most popular beers. “We started a chalkboard where you could buy a friend a beer,” he said. “So people would come in, see their names on the chalkboard, and realize they had a beer waiting for them.”

Zupke said the list quickly grew to about 50 or 60 people at one time. And due to Betty White’s local connection, somebody bought a beer for Betty White as a joke. “But once people saw Betty White on the board they started buying her Blonde Betty beers, and it didn’t stop.”

What started as a happy hour joke turned into a full-fledged fundraiser. “When she died, people from all over the world started trying to PayPal me and buy her beers. We ended up selling \$6,500 worth of beers for Betty White,” Zupke said. The hotel donated the money to local humane societies, since White was an animal welfare advocate. Zupke says they



still get occasional orders for Betty White, but they encourage people to donate directly to local humane societies instead.

WHAT YOU’RE MISSING IN MINERAL POINT

Zupke said the Betty White story is a reflection of the tight-knit, accepting community of Mineral Point. “Mineral Point is such a cool little town,” he said. “They don’t allow chain businesses, everything is locally owned, and there’s a strong sense of community. It’s such a friendly place.”

As a gay business owner in rural Wisconsin, Zupke feels like part of the community. “Mineral Point is kind of an anomaly. It was founded by lead miners, then was quiet for a while, and then this gay couple who met in the 30s, Bob and Edgar, took it upon themselves to restore this town to its original shape,” he said. “They preserved all these old buildings and saved these historically significant buildings from falling down.”

Zupke says that spirit of local pride has stuck with Mineral Point. “The town is full of artists. Everyone is open and accepting.”

“Locals and tourists love stopping in for a drink, a good meal, or a nice stay,” Zupke said. “We have five rooms, and they all have oversized Whirlpool tubs.” The rooms are large and comfortable, with original brick and hand-carved wooden accents, and some have gas fireplaces. But the brewpub on the first floor is the star of the show.



The brewpub where they serve their homemade beers and pub classics like shepherd’s pie, as well as Wisconsin favorites like giant pretzels and cheese curds (ask for the jalapeño version).

The whole place exudes old-world, European charm. It was originally built in 1854 as a warehouse and dry goods store. Since then, it’s been a livestock exchange, barn, veterinary clinic, and factory.

The pub’s original, exposed wood beam ceiling and handsome, antique bar create a warm, convivial atmosphere. Cozied up to the bar is where you can usually find Zupke, who lives in the hotel’s owner suite. “People expect to see me there,” he said. “But that’s one of the beauties of running a business like this. I’m always making friends, you know? The people who come in become my new buddies. It’s the best job.”

From internet lawyer to brewmaster to hotel proprietor, Zupke was the last person who thought he’d end up back in Wisconsin. But he wouldn’t have it any other way. “The people here are so welcoming. If you look lost, somebody will probably walk up to you and help you out. They’re so open and wonderful,” he said. ■

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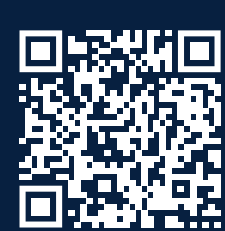


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