

our lives



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# HOME + TOWNS

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Wisconsin's LGBT&XYZ Magazine

March / April 2026

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- Freddie Mercury

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Cover photographed by Maureen Cassidy.



Wisconsin's LGBT&XYZ Magazine

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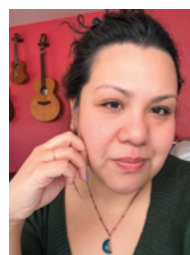
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### EDITOR'S LETTER

ALEXANDRIA DELCOURT



## THE SPACES WE CREATE



**WHEN I FINALLY** got the chance to sit down and look at this issue's content as a whole, I noticed right away that one major theme stretched across nearly every story: creating our own spaces. This wasn't intentional on our part, but it feels appropriate—a subconscious response, perhaps, to the ever-tightening political grip on our assumed freedom of expression and ability to exist in the manners of our choosing.

What stands out is that "spaces," in this case, doesn't simply refer to inhabitable places. It also includes our mental realms, the boundaries of our political impact, the constructs of our communities, and even the capacities of our physical bodies.

Take, for example, Dr. **Vance Baker's** essay, "Fairy Prairie: A Queer Eden in the Driftless Region." In it, the author recalls how a small circle of friends on his rural property gradually transformed into a vibrant, decades-long celebration of queer identity, creativity, and chosen family. Similarly, "Return and Restoration" features **Mike Adank**, a Fountain City resident who found his way back to family and is now working to build an inclusive community gathering space after years in New York City's Broadway world. "Northern Exposure" chronicles the rise and fall of queer bars in Wausau over the last several decades.

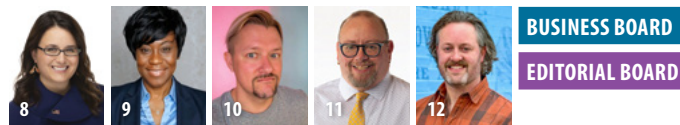
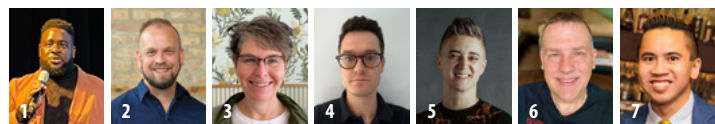
"Running Toward Responsibility" presents an interview with **Dina Nina Martinez-Rutherford**, a current candidate for State Assembly who could make history as the first transgender person elected to the Legislature if she wins. She discusses her advocacy work and the decision to enter politics to help "regular folks build a better world for each other."

Each piece defines for itself what it means to build space, but if I had to recommend one in particular, it would be "The Freedom of Being Awake," featuring **Tommy Crow**, the first known person to undergo a fully awake top surgery under local anesthesia. His story explores the body as a safe or unsafe space for the mind, while examining the relationship between upbringing, truth, and self-advocacy.

There's something fitting about releasing these stories in the spring—a season of emergence, of pushing through soil that seemed impenetrable just weeks ago, of making it happen despite resistance.

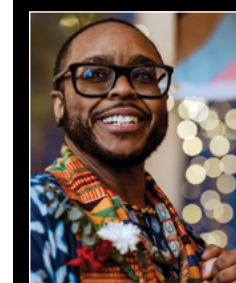
The stories in this issue carry that same energy. They invite you not to wait for permission, to make room anyway, to tend to one another, to notice the spaces you inhabit and create, and to remember that inclusivity is an ongoing practice. I hope you enjoy. ■

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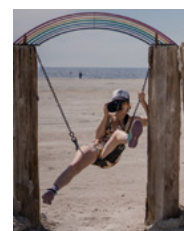
### OBITUARY



**STORMY-KITO ALIYAH TZEDEK JUSTICE**, 51, died March 3 after a brief-but-courageous battle with cancer. A man of warmth, conviction and deep care for others, he found joy in simple pleasures—dogs, the outdoors, and time near the water. Sports were a constant, especially the Badgers, Packers, and the WNBA. As a nurse at UW Hospital and with Dane County Public Health's Sexual Reproductive Health Team, he brought compassion, advocacy, and a commitment to justice to his work.

Stormy embraced his identity as a queer elder and was deeply engaged in Jewish life, active at Beth Israel Center and Congregation Shaarei Shamayim, and a recent board member of Jewish Social Services. He was pursuing Rabbinical studies at the time of his passing. After receiving his diagnosis Feb. 1, he and his partner, Meier, chose to marry, exchanging vows on Super Bowl Sunday—making it home in time for the game. He later honeymooned in Kenya with his husband, the love of his life.

### CONTRIBUTORS



**MAUREEN CASSIDY** is a down-to-earth, professional photographer based in Madison. She specializes in capturing authentic moments and helping people feel completely at ease in front of the camera, creating natural, personality-filled images that you'll actually love to share (and keep forever).



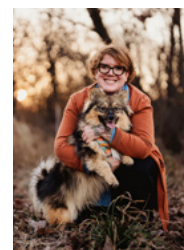
**KATIE ROSENBERG** is an *Our Lives* Editorial Board member out of Wausau. Her advocacy work spans time in local elected office, as a marketer for a Fortune 500 organization, and in her current work in environmental justice. She holds a master's in strategic communications from George Washington University and a bachelor's in philosophy and religious studies from the UW-Stevens Point. Katie hopes to lift up LGBTQ+ voices in Central and Northern Wisconsin during her time on the board.



**GLENN CARLSON** is a retired CPA, entrepreneur, civic leader, and longtime LGBTQ+ advocate living on Madeline Island with his husband, Michael. He serves as Chair of the Town of La Pointe. Earlier in his career, he was a partner at international accounting firms Price Waterhouse and Arthur Andersen in Los Angeles. Glenn served as Treasurer of the LA Gay & Lesbian Center from 1992 to 1997 and as Treasurer of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force from 2006 to 2008. He was Board Chair and then interim Executive Director of Fair Wisconsin from 2006 to 2009. He and Michael are co-owners of Madeline Island Candles and Madeline Island Chocolates, where business, creativity, and community come together.



**VANCE BAKER** is a 75-year-old retired psychiatrist, father, grandfather, and naturalist. He spent his life serving people with serious and persistent mental illness in community settings. Working in the Driftless Area in the mid 1980s, he purchased 80 acres of an old, degraded farm and proceeded to restore half of it to a native tall grass prairie, open oak woodland, and oak savannah. The joy of watching the natural world respond to his efforts was only matched by the joy of his gay community gatherings there over the years.



**MELANIE JONES** is a human and dog photographer who splits time between Madison & Columbia, SC. She's the owner of **Melanie Renee Photography**, which is queer centered and focuses on weddings and editorial work, and of **Dulcy Dog Photography**, where she celebrates the relationships between dogs and their people. She is also a dog-mom, an avid reader, and an okay gardener.



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## When Swipes Turn Sinister

As **Grindr** celebrates its 17th anniversary, its evolution reveals a deeper tension between queer visibility and escalating safety risks. A recent **Wisconsin stalking case** reveals some of the dangers app users could potentially face.

NEWS | POLITICS & LAW | CRIME | TECH | DATING

**ON MARCH 25, 2026**, Grindr celebrated its 17th anniversary by challenging users to share their “funniest Grindr screenshots” in exchange for free, unlimited subscriptions valued at \$44.99/month.

Grindr got more than it bargained for: The call for entries received over 21 million views and more than 1,200 (mostly unhinged) replies.

Once upon a time, the app was seen as a sordid hook-up app. Today, it has become a core component of queer culture, and some feel it is the only way to be visible, marketable, and dateable in a competitive world with impossibly short attention spans.

With 15 million monthly active users across 190 coun-

tries spending an average of 67 minutes/day on the app, Grindr is deeply embedded into society. Moreover, integration continues in unexpected ways. It’s more than just frequent mentions in TV shows and movies. In July 2024, a “significant spike in usage” during the Republican National Convention in Milwaukee crashed the entire Grindr network and made international news headlines. On April 25, 2026, Grindr hosted its first White House Correspondents’ Dinner, something that would have been laughable and unthinkable only years ago.

“If you want to date, you have to be on Grindr,” said a contributor. “It’s not exactly fun, in fact, it’s the most necessary evil in my life.”



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## STALKING ARREST

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- USED GRINDR DATING APP TO ARRANGE MEETINGS
- WOULD POSE AS VICTIM, DIRECT MEN TO ENTER VICTIM'S HOME
- WOULD WATCH THE MEN ARRIVE
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Using a catfish profile, Huebschman would instruct the men to go directly into the house, telling them "Just walk in, the door is open." When he was arrested, Huebschman was outside the home observing these Grindr "dates" arrive at his target's home.

However, the same discretion that allows users to explore their identities and connect safely can also provide a shield for predators. The history of the app has been scarred by organized violence, homophobic harassment, and horrific crimes:

- In 2014, **Dino Dizdarevic**, a friend of Milwaukee Alderman Peter Burgelis, was murdered in Philadelphia after making plans to meet someone from Grindr.
- Between 2014 and 2015, British chef **Stephen Port** (the "Grindr Killer") used the app and over a dozen hook-up sites to meet four men in East London. He murdered them with lethal doses of GHB, sexually assaulted them, and staged their deaths as accidental overdoses. Metropolitan Police spectacularly ignored evidence, neglected essential testing, and failed to connect the deaths. After being condemned for their "catalog of failures," and accused by the victims' families of homophobic negligence, the police reopened 58 date-rage drug homicides for re-examination.
- In December 2017, **three Dallas men** were sentenced to prison for a conspiracy that targeted 9 gay men for violent crimes, including carjacking and kidnapping, while using the app.
- In November 2024, **12 college students in Maryland** were charged with hate crimes for using a fake profile to attract and assault a gay man.

- Throughout 2025, "**Grindr Gangs**" in the **UK and Australia** used the app to lure victims to locations where they were beaten, robbed, and blackmailed. One victim in Perth was stripped naked, chased into a swamp, beaten, tasered, and almost blinded.
- In March 2026, **Daniel Andrew McGee** was sentenced to 12+ years in prison for a 2021 hate crime, in which he lured a Grindr user, attacked them with a tire iron, and attempted to disfigure them.

Recent cases were solved because of "posting and boasting," i.e., perpetrators openly trading video footage of their crimes.

"Anonymity gives offenders something to hide behind," said one of the Australian victims. "Digital gay bashing relies on two things: your trust that you've found something too good to be true, and their opportunity to prove you were very, very wrong. Grindr makes crimes of opportunity possible millions of times every day all over the world."

App-based crimes usually target users actively seeking sex. However, a recent Wisconsin case demonstrates how Grindr can be weaponized against people who are not even on the app at all.

On October 28, 2025, 30-year-old **Matthew Huebschman** was arrested in Appleton and charged with one felony count of stalking. Huebschman allegedly impersonated an innocent person for over a year, arranging for

unknown men to arrive at their home for sex under false pretenses.

Using a catfish profile, Huebschman would instruct the men to go directly into the house, telling them "Just walk in, the door is open." When he was arrested, Huebschman was outside the home observing these Grindr "dates" arrive at his target's home.

According to police, this sustained harassment, which continued with no rhyme or reason at all hours of the day for months on end, created a traumatic experience for the victim and their household.

On December 15, 2025, Huebschman pled not guilty to Outagamie County Judge Carrie Schneider. He faces 3-1/2 years in prison if convicted, and the victim is seeking \$9,000 in restitution. Huebschman was ordered to have no contact with the victim or their family, and notably, not to use dating apps.

To date, no motive has been shared publicly, the victim remains entirely anonymous, and it is unknown if Huebschman even knew the victim personally. His pre-trial conference has been rescheduled for May 21, 2026.

In response to this surge of statewide "Grindr crimes," law enforcement agencies (including the Milwaukee Police Department) have issued urgent red flags for online dating:

- **Suspicious profiles:** Be wary of profiles with-

out photos or with an AI-generated photo (which could indicate a bot), individuals giving vague answers to basic questions, or constant questions about money, income, or access to recreational drugs.

- **Rushing to meet:** If people demand to meet in person before you have even had the most basic online conversation, ask yourself why.
- **Location demands:** Avoid individuals who will not share their location, but demand to know yours, or suggest meeting up in specific, uncomfortable, or inconvenient places.

To stay safe, experts advise:

- Protect your personal information.
- Verify who you are meeting before you meet.
- Meet in a busy place, not a secluded or remote area.
- Stay sober, especially the first time you meet.
- Share your plans with someone you trust.
- Never turn off location-sharing on your phone.
- Never entertain requests for money.
- Always use protection.
- Block and report bad actors or suspicious activities.
- Trust your instincts.

In 2020, Milwaukee was ranked #7 among the top 100 cities for high STD rates. While

it's not clear when the next Center for Disease Control and Prevention statistics will be released, Milwaukee accounted for 36,000+ cases that year with 2.4M cases nationwide.

After 17 years, many users are experiencing Grindr fatigue, and others are already living in a post-Grindr world. Newer apps, like Sniffies, provide more targeted experiences without the mundane headaches of Grindr.

"Grindr, in 2026, has become an expensive, glitchy, and bot-heavy tool," said a contributor. You are either getting hit with 'too good to be true' gorgeous men (with their location settings turned off) or crypto investment scams. It just is not worth my time anymore.

If an app has been around 15+ years, it's reasonable to expect its developers to make solid improvements to the user experience, especially when it comes to safety."

Could or should Grindr and its competitors do more to protect users? Maybe. Are they likely to be federally regulated or legally required to do so anytime soon? Probably not.

"With subscription costs going as high as \$500 a month, going back to real-world cruising seems like the more economical route," said a contributor. "At least you'd be able to see who you were really talking to."

Until online safety can outpace offline dangers, the best advice remains simple: Be careful out there. ■



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Madison's Dread Pirates hockey team.

**TRANS ATHLETES FACE GROWING EXCLUSION UNDER USA HOCKEY'S NEW ELIGIBILITY POLICY TIED TO SEX ASSIGNED AT BIRTH**

**A NEW POLICY** from USA Hockey is set to restrict transgender participation in sex-segregated leagues, affecting players in Madison and across the country.

Adopted in late 2025 and taking effect in April 2026, the rule requires athletes to compete based on their sex assigned at birth. Under the policy, transgender women will be barred

from women's leagues, while some transgender men undergoing hormone therapy may be excluded from both men's and women's divisions.

The **Madison Gay Hockey Association (MGHA)**, an all-gender league, will not be directly governed by the change but says many of its members also play in USA Hockey-affiliated leagues where the rules will apply. MGHA president **Kriona Hagen** told *Our Lives* the policy will prevent her from continuing in the women's league she considers her athletic home.

USA Hockey officials have reached out to MGHA and similar organizations to discuss the new eligibility framework, inviting them to participate in a participant policy forum as part of ongoing conversations.

Advocates say the policy threatens both access to sport and vital community connections, reflecting a broader national trend of increasing restrictions on transgender athletes.



Hagen

**JOSH KAUL SECURES COURT ORDER BLOCKING FEDERAL LIMITS ON GENDER-AFFIRMING CARE**

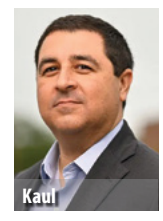
**A FEDERAL JUDGE** has temporarily blocked a Trump administration effort to restrict access to gender-affirming care for transgender youth, marking a significant legal victory for Wisconsin and a coalition of more than 20 states.

In a March 19 ruling, the U.S. District Court in Oregon found that the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services overstepped its authority when it issued a December declaration labeling treatments such as puberty blockers and hormone therapy as unsafe and threatening providers with loss of federal funding. The court determined the policy was enacted without required administrative procedures and granted preliminary relief to healthcare providers.

Wisconsin Attorney General **Josh Kaul**, whose office joined the lawsuit, argued the federal government was improperly interfering in medical decisions. The ruling blocks enforcement of the policy while the case proceeds.

The federal directive had already created uncertainty nationwide. In Wisconsin, major providers including UW-Health and Children's Wisconsin paused gender-affirming treatments for minors following the announcement.

The decision does not resolve the broader legal battle but allows providers to continue offering care without immediate threat of federal penalties, as challenges to federal and



Kaul



state-level restrictions on transgender health care continue across the country.

**THIS IS IT! AFTER CLOSING, WISCONSIN'S OLDEST GAY BAR APPROVED FOR STATE HISTORIC MARKER**

**A BELOVED PIECE** of Wisconsin LGBTQ+ history will soon receive permanent recognition. Following its closure in March 2025, Milwaukee's iconic bar *This Is It!* has been approved for a Wisconsin State Historical Marker.

*This Is It!* was the state's oldest continuously operating gay bar, having opened in 1968 and operated for nearly 57 years. It was also one of the longest-running LGBTQ+ spaces in the United States. Wisconsin LGBTQ History Project leaders and community partners pushed for the designation to preserve the site's legacy as a vital gathering place for generations of queer Wisconsinites.

State officials say the marker will ensure the story of the bar's role as a safe, welcoming space during decades when LGBTQ+ acceptance was far from guaranteed is not forgotten. The marker is expected to be installed outside the former location in downtown Milwaukee later this year.

The recognition makes *This Is It!* only the second LGBTQ+ site in Wisconsin to receive a state historical marker, following the *Black Nite* Uprising site, also in Milwaukee.

While the bar's closure marked the end of an era, the designation ensures its cultural and historical significance, along with its decades-long role as a cornerstone of the community, will endure for future generations.

**FAIR WISCONSIN OPPOSES CMS RULE THREATENING GENDER-AFFIRMING CARE FOR TRANS YOUTH**

**LGBTQ+ ADVOCACY GROUP** Fair Wisconsin is raising concerns over a proposed federal rule that could further restrict access to gender-affirming care for transgender youth.

The rule, introduced by the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS), would allow the federal government to withhold funding from hospitals that provide gender-affirming treatments such as puberty blockers and hormone therapy to minors. Advocates warn

the policy could have sweeping consequences for healthcare access nationwide.

In response, Fair Wisconsin submitted formal opposition, arguing the proposal would "hold federal funding hostage" and interfere with medically necessary care. The organization emphasized that major medical associations continue to support gender-affirming care as evidence-based and essential.

The proposed rule comes amid ongoing uncertainty for providers. In Wisconsin, major health systems have already paused gender-affirming care for minors, citing fears of losing federal funding tied to Medicare and Medicaid.

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Advocates say the impact on transgender youth and their families is immediate and harmful, forcing difficult decisions and limiting access to care. Fair Wisconsin and other groups are urging federal officials to withdraw the rule, warning it could deepen disparities and politicize healthcare decisions traditionally made between patients, families, and providers.

**MILWAUKEE LGBT COMMUNITY CENTER ANNOUNCES HISTORIC RELOCATION AND LAUNCH OF SPECIAL RELOCATION CAMPAIGN**

**THE MILWAUKEE LGBT** Community Center has announced a major relocation effort, paired with a fundraising campaign aimed at sustaining and expanding its services.

The Center will move to a new, more accessible space in Milwaukee's Walker's Point neighborhood, returning to the area where it first opened in 1998. Leaders say the relocation is designed to improve visibility and better serve community members by placing the organization closer to key neighborhoods and transit routes.

Executive Director Ritchie T. Martin Jr. called the move both "historic and deeply meaningful," emphasizing that it reflects a commitment to long-term growth.

Alongside the move, the Center has launched a "Special Relocation Campaign" to cover transition costs while maintaining critical programming. These include youth services through Project Q and programs supporting older adults and people with disabilities. These services collectively reach more than 1,000 people each year.

The relocation is also expected to reduce occupancy costs, allowing the organization to invest in programs and expand services, including clinical offerings and Medicare support.



Center leaders say community support will be essential to ensuring a smooth transition and continued access to vital LGBTQ+ resources across the Milwaukee area.

**EVERS VETOES ANTI-TRANS BILLS ON TRANS DAY OF VISIBILITY AT STATE CAPITOL**

**GOV. TONY EVERS** vetoed a slate of Republican-backed bills March 31, Transgender Day of Visibility, at the Capitol, rejecting a series of measures targeting transgender youth, school policies, and access to gender-affirming care.

The bills would have imposed sweeping restrictions across education and health care:

- **AB100/SB117** sought to require school sports teams—including those in private schools participating in parental choice programs—to be designated based on a student's sex assigned at birth.
- **AB102/SB116** extended those requirements to University of Wisconsin and technical college athletics.
- **AB103/SB120** would have required school boards to adopt policies regulating how students can change their legal names and pronouns in school.
- **AB104/SB157** aimed to prohibit gender-affirming medical care for individuals under 18.
- **AB400/SB405** would have allowed minors to bring civil lawsuits related to gender transition procedures.

In vetoing the measures, Evers reaffirmed his position that the state should not interfere in personal medical decisions or create barriers for LGBTQ+ youth in schools.

"This is about making sure every kid in Wisconsin can be safe, respected, and supported for who they are," one attendee said.

The vetoes marked the latest chapter in an ongoing clash between the governor and Republican lawmakers, who have advanced similar proposals in recent legislative sessions. While supporters of the bills framed them as protections for fairness in sports and parental rights, in reality they disproportionately targeted transgender youth and risked serious harm

to their mental health and well-being. For many in the Capitol for the ceremony, the moment carried both relief and urgency. While the vetoes halted the bills for now, advocates noted that similar legislation continues to emerge across the country—and in Wisconsin—making visibility, community, and political engagement as critical as ever. ■

**LGBTQ Organizations Update**

General News | Awards | Staff & Board Changes | Events

Curated by Alexandria Delcourt

**GENERAL NEWS**

*Important notes about area LGBTQ groups.*

**ACLU OF WISCONSIN**, in partnership with My Way Out, kicked off their "Know Your Rights: Law Enforcement and Supervision" training for those in the Milwaukee Community Reintegration Center getting ready to graduate and return to their community.

**ACLU OF WISCONSIN** has filed a motion to dismiss the Trump administration's attempt to obtain court authorization to force the Wisconsin Election Commission to hand over voters' private data after partnering with the ACLU's Voting Rights Project and Law Forward to intervene in the case in January.

**BADGERLAND SOFTBALL** is currently open for registration! Anybody interested in joining a team can register online. Registration is open until May 11, with the season beginning on May 17. The registration fee is \$50. Financial assistance is available. For more information, visit badgerlandsoftball.leagueapps.com/leagues.

**COURAGE+** is working on expanding their programming to include Courage+ Salon, a social enterprise designed to transform the lives of LGBTQ+ youth, particularly those aging out of foster care or facing housing instability. Their inclusive salon will serve as a safe, affirming space where personal care meets professional development. Their model creates a full-circle impact: Youth will gain skills, employment, confidence, and community. They'll be supported as they learn, mentored as they grow, and celebrated as they give back.

**DIVERSE & RESILIENT** announced that they will now be offering free confidential HIV & STI testing every Tuesday and Wednesday from

9:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m., by appointment only (no walk-ins right now). They have morning and afternoon slots available, including comprehensive screenings in the afternoon for folks who want full panel testing. Comprehensive screening and treatment services are provided in partnership with Holton Street Clinic. For those who need later time slots, they offer late-night testing every 2nd Thursday of the month by appointment only. All testing is confidential, affirming, and judgment free.

**FAIR WISCONSIN & GSAFE** are partnering to

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gether to establish the Wisconsin Trans Youth Health Care Access Fund. This fund will support Wisconsin's trans youth and their families in accessing gender-affirming health care. The Wisconsin Trans Youth Health Care Access Fund, which is a partnership with the Trans Youth Emergency Project at the Campaign for Southern Equality, will be housed under the Fair Wisconsin Education Fund. Donations to the Wisconsin Trans Youth Health Care Access Fund are tax-deductible.

**FORGE** released a technical training assistance resource document in March titled "Bystander Intervention and ICE: Understanding the Intersections of Immigration and Transgender and Two-Spirit (LGBTQ+) Rights." The document dives into topics like the impacts on transgender survivors during Immigration Enforcement surges, and discusses what to do if ICE comes to your program or place of employment.

**GSAFE** announced that tickets are now available for its 30th Annual Celebration of Leadership—an event rooted in connection, courage, and collective impact. This year's theme, "We All Have a Role," reminds us that building a safer, more affirming world for LGBTQ+ youth takes

ALL of us. Ticket includes admission to a joyful celebration featuring delicious food stations and an inspiring program honoring our award and scholarship recipients. Please email lane@gsafe.org for sponsorship opportunities.

GSAFE also released information for their Leadership Training Institute 2026, a four-day, three-night camp for LGBTQ+ high school students interested in activism and expanding upon their leadership qualities. Campers participate in workshops on queer and racial justice and how to create change in their schools. They also will participate in gender, sexuality, and racial identity caucuses. LTI 2026 will take place July 23–26 on the UW-Whitewater campus. Financial assistance is available.

**MADISON MINOTAURS** kicked off their season in April. To join the club, simply attend one of their practice sessions held on Tuesdays and Thursdays from 6:00 p.m. to 8:00 p.m. at the Wisconsin Rugby Sports Complex in Cottage Grove. No prior experience or appointments necessary. The team specializes in teaching new players through the "Minotaurs Academy," which helps you prepare for your first match.

**MILWAUKEE LGBT CENTER** moved to its new location at 161 S. 1st St. marking a return to the Walker's Point neighborhood—the same area where the organization got its start. The relocation reflects the Center's commitment to visibility, accessibility, and equity for the LGBTQ+ community, bringing services closer to the neighborhoods and transit routes most frequented by program participants.

**MILWAUKEE PRIDE** is now taking applications from community organizations and individuals looking to get involved in PrideFest Milwaukee 2026. The applications include sponsorships, PrideFest Marketplace (for artists, makers, small businesses, and vendors), Health & Wellness (for community partners, nonprofits, health providers, and wellness organizations), and Volunteers. Links to those applications can be found at pridefest.com

**OUR VOICE MILWAUKEE** had the pleasure of performing at the Pabst Theater for the first night of the 2026 Midwest ACDA Conference. This biennial conference is one of the most prestigious choral gatherings in the United States, bringing together top choral professionals, educators, and musicians, primarily from the Midwest, but also drawing attendees from across the country. It is a momentous occasion to celebrate choral artistry, exchange ideas, and inspire the next

generation of musicians and leaders in the field.

**OUTREACH LGBTQ CENTER** released its 2025 Willma's Fund Impact statistics report. In 2025, they gave \$48,447 in assistance to 66 LGBTQ+ households, which included 54 rent payments for eviction prevention and 10 security deposits for new, stable housing. They noted that of the people they served, 44% identified as trans, 67% were BIPOC, and 45% were disabled. If you want to support Willma's fund, visit outreachmadisonlgbt.org/willmasfund.

**STAGEQ** announced that auditions are now open for SoundQ season one: StageQ's new audio drama podcast! Low commitment time, no memorization, and no body acting expected. Are you a stage actor wanting to branch out into new media? Are you someone who hasn't acted in years but wants an easy way back in? Are you someone who never thought you would be able to act due to the barriers of entry? StageQ has a role for you! More information can be found on their website or social media.

**VIVENT HEALTH**'s Make a Promise Gala sold out weeks ahead of the scheduled celebration. Net proceeds from Make A Promise directly support the health and well-being of patients in Milwaukee. The event also celebrates the 40th year of Vivent Health, and the legacy of AIDS Resource Center of Wisconsin (ARCW), standing at the front lines of the HIV epidemic—delivering care, dignity, and hope for people living with and impacted by HIV in Wisconsin.

**WI LGBT CHAMBER** released its 2026 Economic Outlook Snapshot, which tells a story of cautious optimism. Businesses are growing and moving forward, but doing so thoughtfully, navigating rising costs, policy uncertainty, and tighter margins. Chamber President and CEO Jason Rae noted that what stood out most is the resilience of this community and the strength found in our local connections.

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

**CREAM CITY FOUNDATION** would like to thank Molson Coors, Woody's, and POP! Bars for their generous \$3,000 gift to Cream City Foundation through the Tap Into Change program. Molson Coors provided the funding, and Woody's and POP selected the recipient. Cream City is grateful for partners who believe in investing in and uplifting the community.

**FREEDOM INC.** would like to thank everyone who donated to their Big Share fundraiser. They were able to raise \$19,904 from more than 165 donors to support, protect, and provide hope to Black and Southeast Asian victims and survivors.

**OPEN FOUNDATION** wants to thank MG&E, UW Health, and Destination Madison for their generosity and partnership in supporting workforce equity and affirming professional development for LGBTQ+ community members.

**PERFECT HARMONY CHORUS** sold out back-to-back performances of the "In Our Musicals Era" Cabaret Fundraiser shows. Congratulations!

**PFLAG** (National) is excited to announce that their video series, "I Changed My Mind: Stories of Un-Learning, Growth and Transformation" has been named a finalist at the 18th Annual Shorty Awards. "I Changed My Mind" is a series of thought-provoking and inspiring conversations developed by filmmaker Brooke Sebold, produced in collaboration with PFLAG, that centers parents, families, and LGBTQ+ individuals and their stories of transformation and courage to change and renew. Congratulations!

**WI LGBTQ HISTORY PROJECT** is excited to announce that the Wisconsin Historical Society approved a State Historic Marker for This Is It!, which will now become the second LGBTQ+ historic site in the state. The History Project has been working on getting approval for the historic marker through its Landmarks program since This Is It! closed in March of 2025.

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

**OUTREACH LGBTQ CENTER** is excited to welcome **Doug Holtz** as their new Events Coordinator. Doug brings years of Madison community expertise from his years at WORT, the Mad City Sisters, and local theater. He's already gearing up for Magic Pride Festival at Warner Park this August, but his time here has already opened his eyes to the deeper mission of OutReach.

OutReach would also like to welcome **May Wilkins**, their new Rapid Rehousing Navigator with Everstrong. As a trans femme community member, May supports LGBTQ+ young adults in finding stable housing, helping them move toward safety, security, and independence. For May, this work is more than a job. It's about giving back, building meaningful relationships, and creating real change in the lives of people who share marginalized identities. ■



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Queer Pool Night.

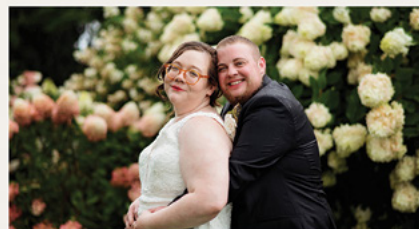
SPORTS COMMUNITY BUILDING ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

## A League of Our Own

Across the Madison area, these **leagues** prove that even **casual recreation** can become a powerful tool for building community and belonging.

**ON ANY GIVEN NIGHT** in Madison, queer community is something people are actively building. Across arcades, ice rinks, climbing gyms, and corner bars, local organizers are carving out spaces where LGBTQ+ folks can gather, compete, learn something new, or sim-

ply feel at ease. Whether it's flipping a pinball machine, lacing up skates, scaling a wall, or lining up a shot at the pool table, these meetups offer recreation, connection, visibility, and the quiet power of showing up as yourself in spaces shaped by care, intention, and belonging.



NOW BOOKING FOR 2024/2025

# Melanie Renee

PHOTOGRAPHY

[melaniereneephoto.com](http://melaniereneephoto.com)

### PINBALL

This pinball meet-up goes by two names—“Belles Mad City” or “Belles & Chimes—Madison.” The group centers women, women-identifying, nonbinary, and gender nonconforming players, and is open to all skill levels and ages.

Organizer Tiffany Han describes a welcoming, low-pressure environment where players can learn, compete, or simply have fun. “We encourage all players, new and experienced, to come flip with us,” she said.

Meet-ups take place on the second Wednesday of each month (6 p.m. sign-up, 6:30 p.m. start) and the fourth Sunday (11:30 a.m. sign-up, Noon start), alternating between the Kickback in Middleton and Aftershock Classic Arcade on Madison’s east side, with about a dozen attendees per tournament.

Organizer Jacque Mackey said the group was founded to make pinball more accessible in a male-dominated hobby, connecting locally to the international Belles & Chimes network.

For more info, visit @BellesMadCity on Facebook or Instagram, or [bellesmadcity.com](http://bellesmadcity.com).

### MADISON GAY HOCKEY ASSOCIATION

First founded in 2006 by *Our Lives* publisher Patrick Farabaugh, the Madison Gay Hockey Association is a no-check, all-gender league that has become a staple of Madison’s queer community. Despite its name, the league welcomes players across the LGBTQ+ spectrum and, as of 2026, is the largest queer hockey league in the world. After years of waitlists, it recently expanded by 60–70 players, bringing total participation to more than 360. Games take place Sundays from September through March at Bob Suter’s Legacy20 Arena in Middleton and Legacy20 Arena in DeForest.

“The last thing you want to do is take away a space or community from people that could otherwise benefit from it,” said A.J. Rezin, MGHA’s director of marketing. “Especially with the way the world is right now, we can all benefit from a place where being queer is normal and welcomed.”

The league offers beginner, intermediate and advanced tiers, welcoming everyone from new-to-skating to experienced players—some even commuting weekly from Milwaukee. The season begins with preseason clinics, followed by team assignments, often with playful names like *Cirque du Sol-gay* and *The Margayritas*. Games begin in November, with start times ranging from late afternoon to late evening, balanced across teams.

Rezin, who came to the sport without a tra-

ditional athletic background, said the welcoming environment made all the difference. “If I can do it, you can do it too... Being around people as a spectator is what drew me in.”

For those outside Madison, MGHA hosts the annual MGHA Classic Tournament each April, where players from around the world sign up and are placed on teams by skill level.

### QUEER CLIMBING SOCIAL

This social rock climbing meetup gets together every first Saturday of the month from 3 p.m. to 6 p.m. at Boulders Climbing Gym’s downtown Madison location, and every third Sunday of the month from 6 p.m. to 9 p.m. at Greater Heights Climbing Gym in Fitchburg. The event at both locations is free for members and “pay-what-you-can” for non-members, but \$10 is suggested.

The event is open to, “Anyone who identifies as LGBTQ+ and is interested in climbing!” explains organizer Clara McGlynn (she/her).

“Wear clothes that you can comfortably move in and a water bottle. Socks are recommended if you don’t have your own climbing shoes.”

For more information about Queer Climb Madison check out [bouldersgym.com/events](http://bouldersgym.com/events) for scheduling updates or [linktr.ee/queerclimbmadison](http://linktr.ee/queerclimbmadison) to connect more with the community.

### QUEER POOL NIGHT

This billiards meet-up gathers every second Thursday on Madison’s east side at the Crystal Corner Bar. From 6 to 8 p.m., attendees play pool and darts in a welcoming environment.

“Unfortunately, a lot of pool leagues in town have few queer players, if any at all, and joining can feel intimidating. Many seem largely comprised of cis[gender and heteronormative] men, and while I try not to judge, it didn’t feel welcoming at a glance for me as both a woman and a queer person. The benefit of having such a tight-knit community in Madison is that any sport without a queer recreational league can become one—someone just has to start it up,” explained Queer Pool Night founder Eva Gray.

The meet-up began about a year and a half ago with a slow build. Gray recalls struggling to fill a single table at first but recently saw a record 29 attendees in March and hopes to host a doubles tournament in the future.

“I’ve had people tell me they’re glad it exists—that they feel safest and welcome playing pool at our events. I keep that close; it’s made me feel capable as a host. The goal is having fun and creating a space where all skill levels feel comfortable joining the table,” Gray said.

For more info, visit @foolsforpools. ■

*Disclosure: Author Clara Lefton plays in the Madison Gay Hockey Association.*

### What, Where & When

A guide to LGBTQ+ recreational leagues and meetups in the Madison area.



Belles Mad City.

#### Belles Mad City (Pinball)

2nd Wed (6:30 p.m.); 4th Sun (11:30 a.m.)

The Kickback; Aftershock Arcade

[bellesmadcity.com](http://bellesmadcity.com) | @BellesMadCity

#### Madison Gay Hockey Association (MGHA)

Sundays, Sept–March

Legacy20 Arenas (Middleton & DeForest)

[madisongayhockey.org](http://madisongayhockey.org)

#### Mad Rollin’ Dolls / Madison Roller Derby

Practices, bouts, and season vary

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[madisonrollerderby.org](http://madisonrollerderby.org) | @madisonrollerderby

#### Queer Climbing Social

1st Sat (3–6 p.m., Boulders)

3rd Sun (6–9 p.m., Greater Heights)

[linktr.ee/queerclimbmadison](http://linktr.ee/queerclimbmadison)

#### Queer Pool Night

2nd Thu (6–8 p.m.)

Crystal Corner Bar

@foolsforpools

#### Badgerland Pride Softball

Spring–Summer (games vary)

McGaw Park + area fields

[badgerlandpridesoftball.org](http://badgerlandpridesoftball.org) | @badgerlandsb

#### Honeymooners Bowling League

Mondays (7:30 p.m., seasonally)

Bowl-A-Vard Lanes

[honeymoonersbowling@gmail.com](mailto:honeymoonersbowling@gmail.com)

#### Madison Minotaurs Rugby

Seasonal practices & matches

Area fields

[madisonminotaurs.com](http://madisonminotaurs.com)

#### Madison Gay Volleyball (MGVA)

Seasonal leagues

FIVE nightclub + area courts

[facebook.com/groups/MadisonGV](https://facebook.com/groups/MadisonGV)



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FAITH POLITICS & LAW

# Who Will Stand in the Gap?

Even across theological differences, **clergy allies** unite around a shared belief: Harmful legislation demands moral resistance.

**"IF I CAN USE ANY** of my power or influence to just kind of stand in that gap, then great."

"You said it! You said the Ezekiel thing!" I shouted enthusiastically at Madison First Baptist Church's Reverend Tim Schaefer. I had been interrupting Schaefer throughout our 45-minute interview because I was excited to meet the openly gay Baptist pastor who used the power of his pulpit to not only affirm the LGBTQ+ community, but also the power of his own public comment at the Capitol. He testified against some of the most corrosive state legislation of Wisconsin's last half a decade. He is a hero, if you ask me. But you are about to meet several heroes on this journey.

"There is so much harm. And the hateful language is being shrouded in, couched in, and given cover by religious language and being spouted by people who present themselves as *good Christians*," Rev. Hassett lamented.

Rev. Schaefer told me that he grounds some of his work in the historical foundations of the Baptist faith in the United States, the followers of whom, like many European Protestants, found their way to America as an escape from religious persecution.

GETTING TO KNOW CLERGY ALLIES

I'm not a theologian, but I do run in those circles as the annoying pluralist friend. I love to make controversial exegetical pronouncements about ancient texts. That is probably why I was drawn to write about this particular phenomenon in Madison where a whole fellowship of clergy have consistently shown up to hearings in the Capitol, for years,



Rev. Tim Schaefer, Rev. Breanna Illéné, and Rev. Dr. Miranda K. Hassett.

to testify against bills that dehumanize the LGBTQ+ community. There were the bills to deny preferred pronouns and names, the bills to ban birth record changes, and the bills to deny trans athletes opportunities to compete. At every single hearing you could also see at least a few and sometimes many pastors, necks swathed in clerical collars, sitting with the LGBTQ+ community and publicly supporting their humanity and rights. I wanted to get to the bottom of it.

UNITED METHODIST REV. ILLÉNÉ

"I'm a registered lobbyist for the good guys and gals," quipped Reverend Breanna Illéné.

Rev. Illéné is an ordained elder in the United Methodist Church and preaches about once a month. However, during the week she serves as the Director of Ecumenical Innovation and Justice Initiatives for the Wisconsin Council of Churches. She's been with WCC since 2019, but landed her current role in 2023, coinciding with a rash of anti-trans legislation being introduced in the state legislature. And that's when Rev. Schaefer reached out to her to see what WCC was going to do about it.

BAPTIST REV. SCHAEFER

Rev. Schaefer was called to Madison from his previous post in Dallas, where he and his congregation were also active in advocacy work. "This is something I'm really passionate about," Schaefer reflected. "I had done some of this work in seminary. I'd led my congregation to the state capital in Texas, which is a way different experience from doing advocacy at the legislature here."

Seminary for Rev. Schaefer was a very natural-but-secondary path. He was born in Germany, the son of a United Methodist pastor. His family immigrated to the United States when he was a child, and he experienced some of the challenges of being a first-generation American. "I understand, somewhat, the struggle of immigrants. It's hard for all immigrants, and yet I'm a white immigrant from a country that isn't usually targeted. And so I don't have that layer of added burden, so to speak, that some people might face," he said.

Growing up, Schaefer would volunteer with others in his church to serve meals and staff shelters as part of the regular rotation of church congregations. Pastoral care came naturally to him, but when he came out in high school, he set that version of himself aside and focused his

studies on political science. "Because I was dealing with my sexuality at that time, I didn't think I would ever be able to be a pastor. There weren't out pastors at that time," Schaefer said.

Eventually though, Schaefer found himself at Texas Christian University, pursuing his Master of Divinity degree, along with a degree certificate in Gender and Sexual Justice from Brite Divinity School. In November 2020, Rev. Schaefer moved to Madison to serve as pastor of First Baptist Church. "I love that my congregation is behind this work because they're a little bit more civically minded and open to engaging in the legislative process," he said. "They speak their faith values out into the community."

WISCONSIN COUNCIL OF CHURCHES

But not every church in the Wisconsin Council of Churches shares the same tenets. WCC represents dozens of Christian traditions, 2,000 churches, and 1,000,000 Christians in Wisconsin. "It's hard because we have 23 traditions, and they're not all LGBTQ+ affirming," Rev. Illéné noted. "But we've been watching the world, and the reality is that these bills are harmful. These bills are violent. These bills directly harm trans people, our neighbors. Even holding the hearings is harmful."

WCC members range from Catholics and Copts to Methodists and Mennonites. However, they do share a few foundational tenets. "Everything we do needs to be written in the policy that our membership has passed," Rev. Illéné said. "We have a statement on non-violence, and my boss and I determined that it's pretty clear where we stand, even if a member is not an LGBTQ+ affirming denomination, this is harmful, and you should be against it. Then, we opened it up to our membership and said, 'Okay, who wants to come?'"

EPISCOPAL REV. HASSETT

"Maybe once I actually got to read my statement [at a hearing]," reflected Rev. Dr. Miranda K. Hassett. "I've submitted written testimony other times. But there were also times when I just felt it was important to be there in my collar, just to be in support and be a witness."

Rev. Hassett has served as Rector of St. Dunstan's Episcopal Church in Madison since 2011. There are seven discipleship practices of faith listed on her church's website, and the very first one discusses the intentional practice of welcoming. A quote from a church member explains the practice as, "Erring on the side of acceptance, embrace, and loving."

The Episcopal church has been challenging the status quo over the past few decades and now fully includes the LGBTQ+ community in all aspects of church life, including marriage and ordination. "I think that it's a church with a strong sense of continued revelation in a way," Rev. Hassett says of her tradition at large. "It's a church with a strong sense that we continue to learn and discover how God is at work in the world and how God has been at work in the world."

That's also why it wasn't a hard decision for her to participate in legislative advocacy that supports St. Dunstan's trans members and neighbors. "There is so much harm. And the hateful language is being shrouded in, couched in, and given cover by religious language and being spouted by people who present themselves as good Christians," Rev. Hassett lamented. "I do really feel keenly that the necessity and importance of people of faith who are LGBTQ+ affirming, who are specifically trans-affirming, to show up, to be visible, to be vocal, to make it clear that faith and God and the kind of the claims of morality and virtue and righteousness are not all on one side of that conversation; that we also have a voice and have a position, have a groundedness, in the gospel and the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit and the church."

Rev. Illéné agrees. "People don't expect the progressive tradition to continue in the church despite the fact that history has shown over and over again that this is EXACTLY where the organizing happens."

Even though the State Assembly has adjourned for the session and the State Senate will follow suit shortly, the work continues, though it looks a bit different. Rev. Illéné will continue tracking bills, hearings, and putting out the call when violent legislation shows up in the dockets.

THE GOOD WORK CONTINUES

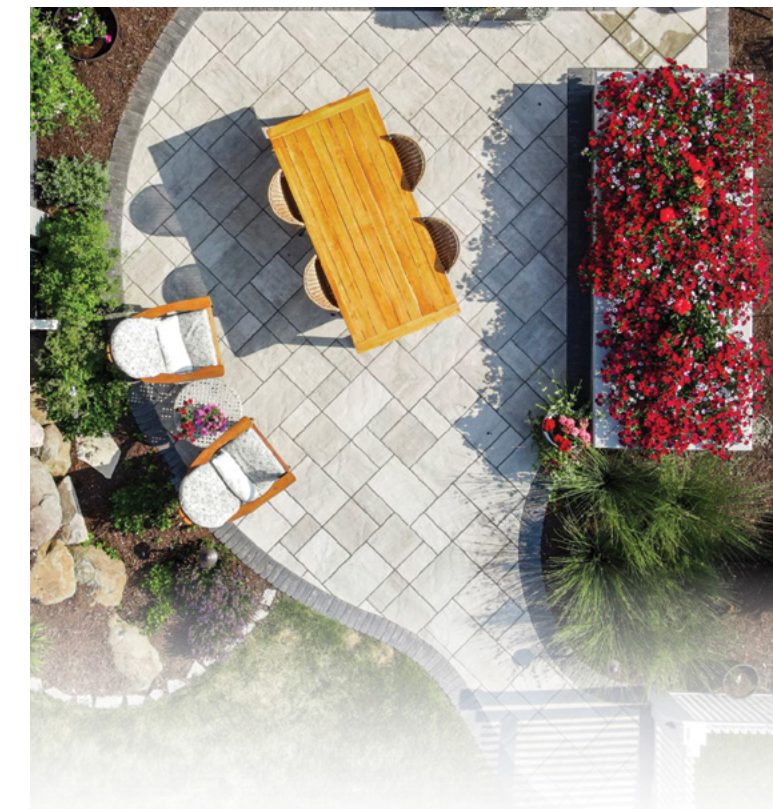
Rev. Schaefer will continue to answer the call to testify, but he is also on a quest to decouple religion from policymaking. He and another pastor are co-leading the Wisconsin Coalition for Religious Freedom. In January, the group was officially recognized by the national grassroots organization, Christians Against Christian Nationalism.

Meanwhile, Rev. Hassett is working on connecting with fellow Episcopal parishes to introduce willing congregations in more purple parts of Wisconsin to people who identify as trans—as well as with family and friends of trans individuals. She hopes that hearing fellow Episcopalians talk about their faith and their lives will help them feel more familiar, less fearful, and more welcoming of their trans neighbors.

The world has always been filled with injustice and oppression. Returning back to the book of Ezekiel, God angrily asks the Old Testament prophet who will stand in the gap between the mortal injustices of this world and help him pursue divine justice for those who have been pushed to the margins. Nobody answered that call. But more than two and a half millennia later, the answer in Wisconsin is different, and it's thanks to the advocates, activists, and clergy who are standing in the gap on behalf of those who would be oppressed. ■



**KATIE ROSENBERG** of Wausau is *Our Lives'* editorial board chair. Her advocacy spans time in local elected office, as a marketer for a Fortune 500 organization, and her current work in environmental justice. She holds a master's in strategic communications from George Washington University and a bachelor's in philosophy and religious studies from the UW-Stevens Point.



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# Awake to Himself

What begins as a story about **Tommy Crow's** unprecedented, fully awake top surgery unfolds into a life shaped by relentless truth-seeking, radical self-advocacy, and a refusal to accept "no" from systems never built to say "yes."

**I THOUGHT THE STORY** was going to be about a surgery. That was the premise, anyway. As far as we know, Tommy Crow is the first person to undergo top surgery fully awake under nothing but local anesthesia. There's even a video recording of the entire procedure, with Tommy's voice narrating the experience in real time.

It seemed like a clean story about science and trans health care. But within minutes, it became clear that the surgery was only the most obvious expression of something much bigger.

### TRUTH AS AN ORIGIN STORY

We sat down together in a small study room at a public library. Tommy's boisterous energy was immediately apparent: He had laid out a selection of fizzy waters for both of us, and had set up a laptop ahead of time to record for a podcast.

We got into it pretty quickly: "Just as a way to get into the story, will you tell me a little bit about your background or childhood?" I asked.

"I grew up about 30 minutes south of Madison in the countryside. I was raised in a fundamentalist, religious community and didn't go to school." Tommy told me. He picked the name, "Tommy," at six or seven years old because it reminded him of "tomboy." But at that time, he didn't "identify as a boy," having never conceived of gender in that way. "I just thought I wished I was a boy."

Tommy's community was a set of fundamentalist Catholic families spread across south-central Wisconsin who would meet weekly for church and school.

"It was extremely, extremely bad," he told me. "We're talking, parents in our literature classes teaching that all marriages should be arranged, or that marital rape isn't real because once you get married, your body belongs to your husband."

"I had very limited contact with outsiders, but when I was 11 or so, I remember writing a pamphlet for my secular voice teacher that described why she, a Protestant, was the most likely type of person to end up burning for all eternity in the fires of Hell. It is kind of funny, but at the time, it seemed normal to me. I liked her," Tommy said. "So naturally, I was going to warn her."

"When did it become a mission for you to start seeking information about the outside world?" I asked.

"I was really passionate about Catholicism," Tommy said. "And one thing they taught me was that I should believe things because they're true, not because they feel good. Like they would say, 'we believe in Hell because it's real, not because we want to.' I really took that to heart. In fact, to this day, the only tattoo I have says 'truth.'"

I didn't know it yet, but this dedication to the idea of truth was going to become a theme we kept circling back to throughout our conversation.

"I wanted to be passionate about Catholicism because I knew it was true. So, I started reading the history of the Catholic Church and the



"For the same reason that women typically want to see the birth of their child, this was a huge life milestone for me," he said. "I wanted to see myself becoming a man. I wanted to be there to see this triumph of man over nature."

theological arguments for God. In that process, I uncovered some really thorny questions that Catholicism just wasn't answering."

Tommy's search led him to look outside the texts provided by the adults in his life, something that proved difficult with the limited inflow or outflow of information allowed in his environment.

"We didn't have Google or Wikipedia," Tommy said. "But my mom whitelisted Pinterest thinking it was only for recipes. So, I would go to these recipe posts and write in the comments, 'Hey, I'm in this environment, and I don't have access to the internet. Can you please get me the Wikipedia article about the Exodus in the Bible?' And these old ladies would cut and paste the articles into the comment section for me. It just started falling apart from there."

That sense of curiosity eventually destabilized certainty for Tommy, but the process of interrogation became formative. He briefly ran away from that environment at 17, only to end up returning.

"My parents supported me financially throughout college," he said. "This is an enormous privilege and gift, for which I am forever grateful. Family dynamics are complicated. The good doesn't cancel out the

bad, but neither does the bad cancel out the good." He got his degree in economics at UW-Madison and left permanently.

### RECOGNITION ARRIVES SIDWAYS

At that point in his life, Tommy's experience of his body was less centered on gender, and moreso on physical pain.

"Believe it or not, I decided to get top surgery while I still identified as a woman," Tommy told me. "I was literally disabled. I had triple D's. I couldn't run. I couldn't do anything. Even with the best bra or binder in the world, the weight of them still has to go somewhere. It's just a hard engineering problem."

"I decided that when I became professionally successful, I would get a breast reduction. But I was anxious, like to a weird degree, that they wouldn't make them small enough. And then I thought maybe I just don't like them at all and want them gone."

On the day he decided on a full mastectomy, Tommy remembers a sense of elation that was surprising, almost to an alarming degree. "That day, and the next day, and the next, I was so fucking happy," Tommy recalls. "I would imagine myself with a male-looking chest and involuntarily start to cry about it. Then I would think, 'Well, that's weird.'"

There was the pattern: Reaction first, meaning later. It was a theme that had repeated throughout his life, with dysphoria often registering not as clear discomfort but as sudden, disproportionate emotional reactions he couldn't immediately explain.

"Was there a defining moment where you realized or accepted that you were trans?" I asked.

"Yeah. My partner David said, 'Your reaction of having extreme euphoria to the idea of getting a mastectomy is making me think you're a transgender.' He had been asking me for years if I was trans. I think it was obvious to everyone except me. But in my mind, I just wanted to be a special woman. I was like, 'Well, I'm just a woman who really wants a

dick and to have a man's voice.'"

"But I will say, I don't regret giving 'being a woman' the old college try. I'm actually glad I did that because I really put a lot of effort into it and feel like I did a good job, you know, whatever it means to 'do a good job at being a woman.' Because now I know for an absolute fact that this path is the right one for me. I think that gives me a general sense of confidence in life. I can see that freedom."

In other words, finding truth set Tommy free.

### REFUSING ANESTHESIA

So okay, Tommy had decided to get top surgery, but where did the idea to do it awake come from? As it turns out, that decision was not about bravado. In his constant quest for truth and knowledge, Tommy had taken up the hobby of reading scientific literature for fun. With some pre-existing knowledge of anesthesia, Tommy determined that he was going to get the surgery fully awake, or not at all.

As he explained, "There's a general rule in medicine: You don't want to do unnecessary treatments, and general anesthesia is a pretty intensive treatment. It's hard on your brain and body, and it's hard to recover from. It just happened to be very clear to me, based on the available evidence, that a mastectomy does not require general anesthesia. I was just not willing to undergo unnecessary treatment for the sake of other people's convenience."

But his reasonings extended beyond the physical and practical and into the realm of existential as well. "For the same reason that women typically want to see the birth of their child, this was a huge life milestone for me," he said. "I wanted to see myself becoming a man. I wanted to be there to see this triumph of man over nature."

It is an analogy that sits somewhere between poetic and clinical. To think of embodiment as an event is to understand something that I think we often miss in the everyday rush of late-stage capitalistic life: That

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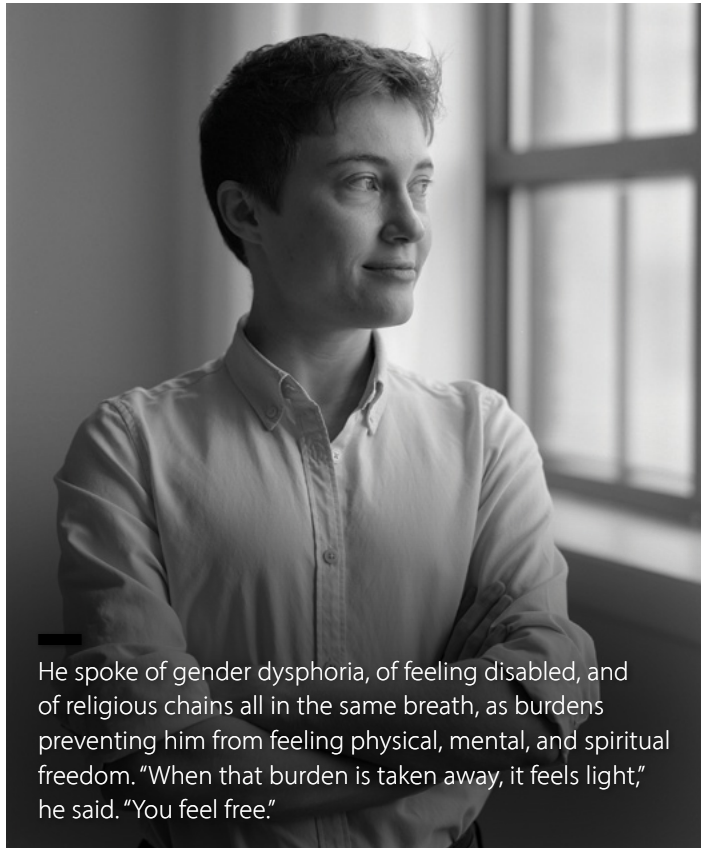
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He spoke of gender dysphoria, of feeling disabled, and of religious chains all in the same breath, as burdens preventing him from feeling physical, mental, and spiritual freedom. "When that burden is taken away, it feels light," he said. "You feel free."

whether we frame it as truth, freedom, innocence, purity, humanity, or authenticity, to live without the burden of our own inward-facing judgment is a privilege.

**RESEARCH AS LIFELINE**

The path to finding a surgeon willing to attempt the procedure was long and difficult. But in many ways, this process was a reflection of Tommy's entire ethos.

"I don't do shit the way that I'm supposed to," he told me. "For example, I spent almost two years being told by every doctor that they couldn't do this surgery, and sometimes being told by big name doctors that it was medically impossible. But once again, I was just reading the existing literature, and what they were saying just didn't add up.

"I feel like in some ways, this makes me a hard person to get along with, but it's also my favorite thing about myself. I am not going to just take your word for it if I'm seeing evidence of something else."

Tommy wants to be right. He wants to believe true things.

"Since doctors were all saying that it wouldn't work, I had to get the information myself and feed it to them," Tommy told me. "I basically studied every imaginable local anesthesia method until I found one I knew would work."

The turning point arrived through the same instinct that shaped his childhood: To find the source. Desperate and at the end of his rope, he tracked down the phone number of Dr. Jeffrey A. Klein, the man who invented tumescent local anesthesia, which Tommy was convinced would work. Now in his 80s and retired, Dr. Klein took Tommy's call.

"He was really excited about it!" Tommy recalled. "We had a nerd moment. He was like, 'You know what? I think I've got a guy for you.'"

That's how Tommy met Dr. Gunnar E. Bergqvist, a plastic surgeon in Florida, who performed the surgery. "He was super excited. I was used to doctors giving me a ton of statements about how this would be extremely painful and terrible and traumatizing, but he didn't do any of that."

**THE SURGERY AS CONVERSATION**

Tommy recorded the entire procedure, and narrated the entire thing. "The main reason that I wanted to record it was because it's a good tool to make sure that you are treated well and have your pain appropriately managed, but I also really value having the scientific record of this," Tommy said.

"So, what were you talking about during the 4.5 hours?" I asked.

"I had a few prepared remarks, like a prayer I had memorized in case the procedure was difficult or scary. I don't believe in God, but I still like the aesthetic," Tommy said. "I spoke about some of the ways that I had gotten here, and some of the people that I was grateful for. But in truth, I didn't really need to do any of that. It was so fun. I was having a blast."

As somebody who had experienced a C-section, 'having a blast' was hard for me to wrap my mind around. I couldn't help but recall my own experiences: Sterile operating room lights, the infamous blue curtain, having no sense of what that tugging and pulling sensation was. But that wasn't Tommy's experience at all. He was lying back in a reclining chair, no curtain, watching every cut and removal for himself.

"I was literally watching him restructure my chest from a female chest into a male chest; watching it literally take form in front of my eyes," he said. "So a lot of the time, I was just looking at the camera and then looking back down and being like, 'This is so cool. This is so cool.'"

I asked if there was any point at which he freaked out watching it.

"You would think so," he replied. "But I never felt nervous or bad. And I'm confident in saying that, because you can watch the footage."



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He laughed. "I think it was largely because I was totally in control the whole time. There was never any loss of autonomy. My doctor related to me so well, and we were having this very egalitarian exchange."

**FREEDOM AND INVISIBILITY**

Post-surgery, Tommy describes a psychological shift that echoes earlier themes from throughout his life. He compared it to the lifting of religious guilt, of freedom.

"I would say it almost feels like a coincidence that I ended up being a trans man," he said. "This surgery did not feel super gendered to me. It felt like getting a surgery that made me not disabled anymore. It's almost like that quote, 'The blind will see and the crippled will walk,' where I'm transcending nature's chains on me, which is pretty a-gendered."

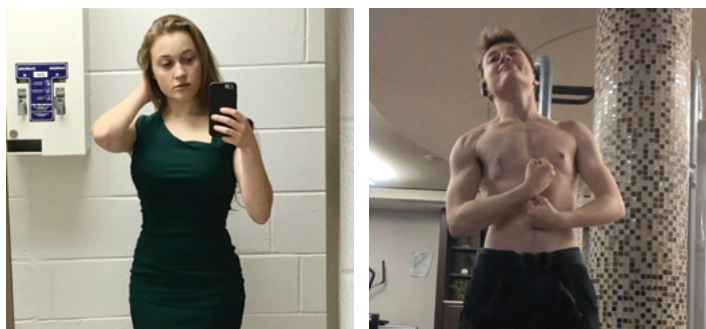
He spoke of gender dysphoria, of feeling disabled, and of religious chains all in the same breath, as burdens preventing him from feeling physical, mental, and spiritual freedom. "When that burden is taken away, it feels light," he said. "You feel free."

"It took about a week and a half after surgery before it was clear that my pain level was already less than my natural chest was every single day. So, it literally took a huge burden of pain off of me," he reported.

"After that, everything was amazing. I remember getting home from my first day of work, and not having to lie flat on my back to recover. That weekend, I sat at my table, scanned my body, and realized there was no pain anywhere in my body. I hadn't felt that since I was 13 years old."

But the surprising thing for Tommy wasn't just the newness of physical ability or the appearance of his body. "I just felt so normal," he told me, "which is weird because I hadn't felt like I needed to be normal."

There it was again: Experience first, meaning later.



"I was honestly expecting to feel really hot, you know?" he continued. "And I do feel hot. But moreso, I feel like there's nothing freaky or unnatural about me anymore. It's just a deep peace, a feeling in my bones that I recognize this body. I feel so at home in it, and I was not expecting that."

"I was honestly expecting to feel really hot, you know?" he continued. "And I do feel hot. But moreso, I feel like there's nothing freaky or unnatural about me anymore. It's just a deep peace, a feeling in my bones that I recognize this body. I feel so at home in it, and I was not expecting that."

His descriptions align with what others have called "gender euphoria," but he never labeled it as such. Instead, he tried to illustrate the experience with words. I wondered how much of that is the natural proclivity of an intellectual personality type? How much can be attributed to having been born in the wrong body, to having dissociated from one's body, or being raised in an oppressive environment?

"Whenever someone I love puts their head or hand on my chest, I feel that deep peace. It's something I will never take for granted, because I went for so long without it," Tommy said. "I didn't really feel any gender dysphoria. Or, at least, I was always surprised when those reactions came up. Something about it wasn't connecting. But then later, after surgery, it was like I could feel my body in a way that I couldn't before."

And then Tommy read something that he had written on his Substack:

"I know what it feels like to be a man on the inside. There is a distinct feeling of being a man and it's just, it's in your bones. It's in your bones and your chest and your shoulders. It feels strong and red and calm and heavy, and like a horse. Like a big, fast, healthy horse that gets angry when you try to break it. And it feels like a stone on your chest, which sometimes crushes you, but usually calms you. It's a sense that your bones are big, and strong enough to bear things, and the burden is actually calming."

We ended our conversation on an appropriately philosophical note: Is it possible to describe the experience of being a gender? Maybe trans people have an unnatural advantage when it comes to understanding that feeling since theirs was wrong. It's kind of like a fish swimming in water: You wouldn't really know what water is because if you're lucky, you've always been in it. And the only way that you would understand water, the necessity of it, is in the absence of it.

**THE STORY BIGGER THAN THE SURGERY**

What surprised me most was not the isolated upbringing or the medical first. It was the coherence, the repetition, the same values resurfacing in different contexts, each time slightly sharper.

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# Service First

From Texas pulpits to Madison politics, **Dina Nina Martinez-Rutherford's** journey—shaped by resilience, humor and a deep commitment to community care—now carries the potential to make history at the Wisconsin Capitol.

PEOPLE POLITICS & LAW TRANS RIGHTS

**DINA NINA MARTINEZ-RUTHERFORD** rarely stops working. Whether she's running Lady Laughs Comedy (which she founded), creating and printing zines about community care, hustling between day jobs, or tending to her duties as a Madison alder, Dina Nina embodies a service-based ethic. These days, she's applying that drive toward a campaign to represent Wisconsin's 76th Assembly district at the Capitol. If she wins, Dina would become the first transgender person ever elected to the Legislature.

No pressure. So far, Dina is doing her best to take it all in stride. In a wide-ranging interview with *Our Lives* in March, Dina reflected on her somewhat unusual and unexpected path to her current campaign for state office. From a religious upbringing in Texas to brushes with comedic fame and the scraping-by hustle of Los Angeles to finally and unexpectedly finding community in Madison, Dina is, overall, grateful and determined.

One of her go-to jokes is to note that, when she first made the move to the Midwest, she was sure she'd either end up "getting murdered or married. Neither has happened, for better or worse." It's a bit of dark humor that's characteristic of her, a piece of armor against a world where transgender women in particular face disproportionately high rates of discrimination and violence.

If she wins, Dina would become the first transgender person ever elected to the Legislature.

What she didn't know at the time was that the secret third option would end up being "go into politics." But Dina has always been community-centered. She believes deeply in the power of regular folks to build a better world for each other. Electoral politics is just one of many tools toward that goal, one that didn't initially feel accessible to Dina. But time, experience, and a supportive community have opened that door to her.

"I have a responsibility to people," she adds from a seat behind her colorfully cluttered desk in a small office on Madison's east side. "None of us know how long we're going to live. But somebody has to do it. And I'm in a place where I could potentially do that. The privilege of that is not lost on me."

**THE UNLIKELY POLITICIAN**

Dina is competing in a crowded Democratic primary to be held on August 11. The winner of that primary will almost certainly go on to win the general election in November, in a district that is about as deep blue as they come. Rep. Francesca Hong, the Democratic Socialist now running for governor, has held the office since 2021.

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Dina's campaign focuses are affordable housing, increasing the minimum wage for regular and tipped workers, funding for public education, and extending Badgercare to any and every Wisconsinite who wants it (you can see her full list of policy focuses at [votedinanina.com](http://votedinanina.com)). She's received the endorsement of 65 current and former elected officials in the state.

Still, there's no clear frontrunner in the race and plenty of obstacles to overcome on the way. She talks openly about her struggles with housing and food insecurity. It's a perspective she believes gives her a leg up as a civil servant—she's lived with those challenges and understands the needs of everyday people. Even so, she says she feels conflicted about asking for campaign donations.

"There are so many other places where money is needed to help people," she notes. "Campaigns shouldn't cost so much. It keeps a lot of people out who would be great elected officials because they just can't afford it."

Regardless, being elected twice to represent Madison's District 15 has clearly shown that plenty of people feel good about supporting her. This wouldn't be her first time making history, either, as she became the city's first transgender person elected to the Common Council with her win in 2023. And despite initially suspending her campaign for reelection in 2025 due to a series of major life changes, constituents reelected her anyway.

"It gave me new momentum and new hope for the future. It gave me more confidence," she says.

There were a series of moments that eventually guided Dina toward getting involved in politics. The final turning point, she says, came in the wake of the Club Q shooting in Colorado in November 2022. It was that



Dina at her campaign launch event in September.

All of her experiences have helped directly shape the issues Dina now prioritizes in office. She sees the ways they impact people differently but how they're all part of the same web of needs.

moment that finally galvanized Dina into action, doing something she'd been urging others to do for years by officially throwing her hat into a run for alder. Then as now, she focused her platform on LGBTQ+ rights and access to affordable housing and other issues especially important for people working in the service and other low-income industries.

"The deeper I get, the more I see the problems in more places than I ever wanted to," she muses. "As someone who struggles, I will say this a million times, I know what it's like to eat rice for an entire month. That's a problem! It's not just trans people that are experiencing it, it's all of us. I want to find ways to make that better."

Statewide office, Dina believes, is the place to make more of a difference on the wide scale needed to meaningfully tackle those issues for Wisconsinites. And after two terms as a Madison alder, Dina says she's learned a lot of valuable lessons about good government and what's possible when people work together that she's excited to apply at the state level.

"When I first became an alder, it was a big learning curve, as it is for anyone. I think I've learned how not to just say everything that pops into my head," she says with a laugh. "I learned that most people just need help wrapping their head around things they're unfamiliar with, and that our communities are important to all of us, you know? But we're not all going to have the same opinion about the best ways to take care of those communities. We need to listen to each other more. I got the chance to really have conversations with constituents and community elders. I learned just how much collaboration it takes to get from point A to point B. It's astounding, the layers to government that you don't consider when you haven't been there. It's intimidating at first, especially when you don't come from a typical political background. But those conversations with people, with constituents and staff and other people who really value our city, it's just beautiful. The good and the bad, the hard and the easy, and I think I value that a lot more than I did when I first came in."

#### THE PATH TO PURPOSE

Born and raised in Texas, Dina's road to Madison was hardly direct. She traveled the country as a small group pastor for non-

denominational evangelical churches and was eventually assigned to Sydney, Australia to "plant" a new church. It became a turning point, as years of internal searching and clashes with church authority opened her eyes to a more authentic path.

"I truly believed and tried really hard, tried to pray that gay away," she says with a rueful chuckle. "There was finally a point where I was just so done jumping through hoops. I was done. I finally was just like, 'I'm just me.'"

Instead of crossing an ocean, Dina headed to Los Angeles, where she spent 10 years building a stand-up career. LA, she says, gave her space to find herself.

"I was far enough away from my family and religion. It was still scary, because there's that voice in your head saying, 'No, that's wrong.' But one day, waiting for a bus, I had this connection with the divine. I realized I needed to be visible—it could help someone in the middle of the country see themselves and not want to kill themselves. It was liberating. I took my first HRT shot in January 2007. And all the things I feared didn't happen. For the first time, I understood myself. I started feeling better about who I was and how I showed up in the world."

At the urging of her best friend, Greg Potter, she eventually moved to Madison. She found community working at Monty's Blue Plate Diner, where she met another trans staff member and built lasting friendships with regulars.

She's since built a mini comedy empire, launching Lady Laughs as a hub for stand-up, improv and sketch, and producing a festival spotlighting women and LGBTQ+ performers in an industry still dominated by white men.

When asked whether comedy helps her navigate politics, Dina's answer is layered.

"When I'm more resourced emotionally, I'm great. Comedy is a craft

and a way of looking at the world. It doesn't make you bulletproof, but it helps," she says. "I'll be honest, though—I do get dark sometimes. There's been a lot of death in my life. I think the main way I get through it is knowing I'm giving somebody else a reason to keep living. Representation makes a difference."

#### THE FUTURE IS CONNECTED

All of her experiences now shape the issues she prioritizes. She sees them not as isolated, but intertwined.

"We talk about things as if they're siloed, but nothing in public life really is. It's all connected," Dina says. She points to how stable, affordable housing leads to better outcomes for children, and how well-funded schools support healthier, more connected communities.

"When we invest in programs that empower the most vulnerable, it becomes less expensive in the long run," she says. "It's the same with health care. Hospitals are closing, especially in rural areas. How can people work or kids learn if they can't stay healthy? When we invest in health care for everyone, we prevent bigger, more expensive problems. When you're healthy, housed and safe, life is better for all of us."

That interconnected view is driving her toward state-level work. Her lived experience keeps her grounded in the realities people face.

Board of Education clerk Ali Muldrow was the first elected official to endorse Dina. "Dina centers empathy in everything she does. She shows up. She listens. She cares," Muldrow says. "Her focus on affordable housing and public education makes her an easy choice to support. I'm excited to help elect this thoughtful leader to the Wisconsin State Assembly."

Time will tell what the electoral outcome will be, but there's no doubt Dina will remain a fierce, compassionate, and good-humored force for good in Wisconsin. ■

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# Home on the Corner

For **Mike Adank**, The Corner Store is more than a business—it's a reflection of resilience and returning home.

PEOPLE | BUSINESSES | FAMILIES | ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

**MIKE ADANK** grew up in Fountain City, WI, a tiny town on the Mississippi just north of La Crosse. And like many kids growing up queer in small towns in the 90s, he assumed he would eventually leave. "It's very small," Mike said, "and I absolutely wanted to get out. There was just no representation here. I didn't even know what the word 'gay' meant until 'Will & Grace' was on TV when I was in high school. I didn't see a future here."

His admission was surprising given the fact that we were sitting down together over a cup of coffee in The Corner Store, an astonishingly quaint and historic soda fountain that Mike had just opened after moving back to Fountain City in 2025.

In many ways, the story of Mike leaving home and eventually finding his way back echoes the story of The Corner Store itself. It's a story of community, transformation, and returning to your roots. It's a story of finding your way home again.

## LEAVING HOME

"Starting over has always been a theme in my life," Mike told me. After high school, he went to UW-Oshkosh for a few semesters. "I wanted to study theater because that was the only community that I had growing up," Mike said. "But my parents and I felt like there were no careers in theater, so I studied communications and Radio, TV, and Film instead."

That compromise came at the cost of passion, and Mike soon found himself lacking focus and struggling to pay the bills.

"I dropped out and moved to Kansas City because I had a friend there," he said. "I knew I would fit in better there, so I just went."

The restart came with its own kind of excitement.

"Kansas City felt like a big city to me," Mike said. "I had a fake ID.

I got into the gay bars, did some partying, and got a sense of what that life was like, and it was great. But the credit card debt started to pile up, and eventually I felt like I was in a rut."

Mike decided to move back in with his parents and give school another try. But with time, he started to notice a pattern emerging for him. What started with weed and partying in Missouri became something darker once he was back in Wisconsin's drinking culture.

"I started going to school at Western Technical College, and I had a 4.0 my first year," he said. "But then I ended up dropping out because I was not even showing up for exams from being hung over."

Then, on November 15, 2009, Mike checked himself into an outpatient rehabilitation program. It's a date he remembers easily because it eventually became a turning point in everything that followed.

## BROADWAY DREAMS

Sobriety brought unexpected opportunities. Within months of completing rehab, Mike received a promotion at the television station where he worked. That led to a transfer to Madison, and then an eventual move to New York City with his then-partner, an aspiring actor.

"Normally, you have to work your way up from a Madison market to a New York City market, but I ended up finding a job at Lincoln Center Theater. That was a blessing. It brought me back to when I wanted to study theater. Finding myself in the Broadway community was like an 'Aha' moment."

As a nonprofit, Lincoln Center was a great way for Mike to learn how Broadway operates. The job was glamorous, chaotic, and exhilarating.

"Broadway is a world, and I was very much consumed by it," he said. "That was my social life. That was my professional life. That was everything. It was always dinner and a show."

And for a while, it felt like the destination he had always imagined.

## A DIFFERENT DREAM

Then, in 2019, Mike started thinking about something else.

"I was single and decided I wanted to become a parent," he said. "So, I got involved with an organization called You Gotta Believe. They specialize in connecting at-risk youth with permanent families. They work with kids in the foster care system who have a harder time being placed, and they place them with unconventional or less traditional families. So that includes single parents, same-sex families, etc."

Mike started taking classes to become a foster parent, and then took a leap of faith by upgrading to a two-bedroom apartment in preparation.

"I just kind of put all my chips on the table," he said.

Then the pandemic hit. Broadway shut down overnight. The industry collapsed into uncertainty, and a year later, Mike lost his job. Nevertheless, he was matched with a 15-year-old refugee named Wilson from Honduras in October of 2020.

"That was exciting," Mike recalled. "The process gave me something to focus on and be positive about. I was creating a home."

In November, he found out the placement was official. Then in February, Wilson ran away.

"It was like losing a kid," Mike said. "It's normal for teenagers with unfamiliar backgrounds or trauma to panic, and that's what he did. He left me before I could abandon him."

"My world collapsed after that," he continued. "I was on a high from becoming a parent, and then it was taken away. I didn't know if I would ever see him again. It was a very low point. I was on the couch crying for a week."

It took a long time to get over that, but the story doesn't end there.

## MEANWHILE

Back in Fountain City, the building that would become Mike's version of The Corner Store was being used as an antique shop, but that wasn't what the space was built for.

"It was originally a soda fountain," said Mike. "In fact, the back bar, the stools, and the tin ceiling were installed in 1926, so they're turning 100 this year. This space has been different things over the years, but no one has ever touched that bar. It's original."

In fact, as Mike explained, the space was run as a pharmacy and drug store back in the 20s. But in those days, a lot of drugstores installed soda fountains because they used the carbonated waters for tonics and medicines.

Mike showed me the space, built-in seating with rattan caning, the alcove behind the bar where the soda fountain goes, and a few other original features, all testaments to a time when the building operated as a community space, not merely a business.

"The previous owners, Mel & Rosie Conrad, upgraded the soda fountain equipment in 1965 and started running it as an ice cream parlor and general store called The Corner Store. Right now, I'm working with a company in Chicago who specializes in those machines. When they finish refurbishing it, we'll start serving ice cream again."

Then Mike told me about his childhood memories of the place. "When I was growing up, half of the building was a laundromat. Where we now have seating and bookshelves are where the dryers used to be.

"The other half was an ice cream and coffee place," Mike said. "The woman who ran it did antiques out of here for a while, but mostly she served regular coffee, ice cream, shakes, and malts. I remember coming in here for the best chocolate malt you've ever had and a friendly face behind the counter. Her name was Fran."

Fran's picture still hangs in the space.

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## Where You Belong

From cabins to boutique hotels, these rural Wisconsin getaways create space for LGBTQ+ travelers to rest, connect, and feel at home.

**FROM THE RIDGES** of the Driftless to the streets of Princeton, LGBTQ+-owned accommodations are redefining what it means to get away. These spaces offer more than a place to stay; they reflect the personalities and values of their owners, creating environments that feel affirming. In regions where visibility hasn't always been guaranteed, they invite you to experience rural Wisconsin on your terms—where belonging is part of the landscape.

### Kickapoo Valley Guest Cabins

Set in the Driftless Area of southwestern Wisconsin, Kickapoo Valley Guest Cabins offers a slower kind of getaway shaped by steep ridges and winding rivers.



Created by partners **Cowboy Joe** and **Cowboy David**, the property features eight standalone cabins blending rustic charm with comfort—king beds, fireplaces, and porches opening to uninterrupted nature. It feels less like a resort and more like staying on someone's land.

Hospitality is personal. Guests

might be greeted with fresh baked goods, while horses and llamas roam the property. Days unfold simply: coffee on the porch, walks through nearby trails, or paddling the Kickapoo River.

Though not overtly branded around inclusivity, its LGBTQ+ ownership is reflected in a relaxed, welcoming atmosphere often noted by guests. In a rural setting, that sense of ease stands out.

For travelers willing to venture off the usual path, the cabins offer a quieter, more grounded way to experience Wisconsin.

### Parlor Hotel

Parlor Hotel reimagines small-town Wisconsin through a design-forward lens. Located in downtown Princeton, the boutique hotel transforms an 1868 building into a space that feels part art installation, part living room.



Owner and designer **Matt Trotter** returned to his hometown to help fuel its creative revival, building an ecosystem that blends lodging, food, retail, and performance space.

The hotel features seven unique rooms, but its heart lies in shared spaces. The lobby acts as a salon where guests can play music, sit at

the piano, or connect.

Parlor openly welcomes guests of all identities, challenging assumptions about rural spaces and offering a version of small-town Wisconsin that is creative and inclusive.

Staying here also means engaging with Princeton itself—walkable and quietly vibrant along the Fox River. Guests can explore shops, galleries, and nearby Green Lake before returning to a space that feels personal.

Parlor Hotel reflects a broader vision of what rural Wisconsin can be: stylish, welcoming, and rooted in place. ■

"It was very important to her that it be a community gathering place because that doesn't really exist in Fountain City, especially for the kids. We have three bars and three churches, but that's it," Mike said.

A number of years ago, Fran had a stroke. The Lettner family started renting the space out. Then about 15 years ago, a gay couple bought it and restored it. They ran an appointment-only antique shop for a while before deciding to move out of town.

"They still own the building, but they told me that more people asked about a soda fountain than the antiques," Mike said. "That's just what this building is meant to be."

And soon, it would be.

### MIKE'S TURNING POINT

In time, the pandemic waned, and Broadway reopened. Mike found a job at the Broadway League, an organization that oversees and organizes many of the parts that allow Broadway to operate as an industry.

"They co-produce the Tony Awards," Mike said. "There has been basically one woman managing the overall Tonys administration for the last 20 years. It's a tightly guarded niche, and I was getting ready to eventually take on that role."

"I was literally the person who got to pin every Tony Award nominee," he said. "It was a really cool time."

But beneath all the glitz and glam, Mike still felt like something was missing. About a year later, Wilson reached out again. Slowly, the two rebuilt contact through texts, phone calls, occasional updates.

"We ended up maintaining a regular relationship, but he was in with the wrong crowd and got into some trouble. He has been in jail for almost two years waiting for a trial, but they keep postponing it."

As Mike explained, the situation makes him feel very helpless. Wilson came here for a better life and opportunity, but we have done nothing but fail him. The immigration system failed him. The foster care system failed him. And now the justice system is failing him.

A little while later, another message arrived, this time from Wilson's younger brother, Maynor.

"Maynor had been released from immigration to a family friend in Texas," Mike told me. "He was 15, but his sponsor had pulled him out of school and had him working full time, which is illegal."

Through translation apps and late-night conversations, Mike realized the situation wasn't safe and contacted refugee services. Because of his connection to Maynor's brother, authorities believed Mike was the safest emergency placement for him.

"We slept in the airport that night," he said. "Then we flew back to New York, went shopping for clothes and groceries, and on Monday Maynor started school. It was a fun, unexpected way to become a dad."

### RETHINKING HOME

"After that, we knew it was time for a change. New York was just getting to be a little too much. After three years of doing the Tony Awards, I felt like I was a hamster in a wheel. I was asking myself, 'Is this really it? Have I reached the top? Is this what I do for the next 20 to 30 years to be happy?'"

It would have been a stable choice, but watching his son long for connection with siblings and extended relatives made Mike reconsider his own distance from family.

"My parents are getting older," he said. "And I realized I had family right across the country that I barely saw. I wanted that big family, especially for my son."

The idea of leaving the city grew slowly. At first, he imagined moving to a quieter suburb. But eventually another possibility began forming: Returning home.



### THE BUILDING ON THE CORNER

The moment arrived almost accidentally. Mike was visiting Fountain City for the Fourth of July when he walked past the old building.

"I was across the street at the Historical Society just digging through old stuff," he says. "And there was a 'For Rent' sign. I hadn't looked inside in decades. Then the idea of the soda fountain just clicked."

As it turned out, the new owners had been waiting for the right tenant before they rented it out again. That tenant was Mike.

On November 14, 2025, Mike legally adopted Maynor, who had just turned 18. The two had opted for an adult adoption so it would be fully Maynor's choice. He even asked to take Mike's last name. It was one of the best moments of Mike's life.

The next day, November 15, 16 years to the day after getting sober, Mike re-opened The Corner Store. The timing felt intentional.

Inside, the space blends past and present. Some items like the milkshake glasses and soda equipment are original to the store's earlier era. Others Mike collected himself. He has filled the shelves with books but doesn't sell them.

"A lot of people ask how much they are," he said. "But I want people to just sit and read."

That philosophy reflects the "third space" that Fran had been trying to safeguard all those years—an idea that Mike also feels committed to.

"We've lost that here," he says. "It's important to have a place where you can just go and connect. That's why we have board games and areas for conversation."

When The Corner Store first re-opened, the reaction from the community surprised him.

"It was like seeing an 80-year-old man walk into a candy shop," Mike said. "You could see the memories flood back into their eyes. They'd just stand there speechless. Then they bring their kids in, or their grandkids," he said. "They pass the tradition on."

Watching those generations overlap inside the store has become one of his favorite parts of running The Corner Store.



Mike with his son Maynor.

### STARTING FROM STRENGTH

Returning to Fountain City might look like a restart from the outside. But Mike doesn't see it that way.

"When I left New York, people thought I was starting over," he recalled. "But I didn't feel that pressure this time. I kept telling myself: I'm not starting from scratch. I'm starting from strength."

That mindset has shaped how he's approached life back home. He joined the local historical society board. He's choreographing the high school musical. He's planning to revive the town's summer theater tradition. He's even running for city council.

"I just kind of threw myself into everything," he says. "So, the pace of life doesn't feel any slower."

Fountain City is still a conservative place. Mike knows that. But he's not interested in confrontation. Instead, he believes something simpler can be powerful. "Just being here," he says, "it's the representation I was missing as a kid."

Coming back to Fountain City has been, in his words, "cathartic."

Home, he has learned, isn't always something waiting for you somewhere else. Sometimes it's something you build with the people who are most important to you. ■



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Glenn Carlson and Michael Childers in their home on the island.

Madeline Island's population swells tenfold during summer, as seasonal visitors join year-round residents, creating a vibrant mix of artistic, musical, outdoor, wellness, and community activities that nurture lasting friendships.

park, celebrated for its scenic trails along rugged bluffs, is an easy seven-mile ride from the ferry dock. Adjacent to it lies Big Bay Town Park, the island's crowning jewel, featuring a pristine sandy beach, nature trails, and campsites. The island's isolation and proximity to the Apostle Islands National Lakeshore contribute to some of Wisconsin's darkest skies, making it perfect for stargazing, marveling at the Milky Way, and occasionally witnessing the mesmerizing Northern Lights. Less commonly known is the authentic spirit of hospitality and courtesy that permeates the island's community, making it remarkable. Like many visitors, our group arrived on Madeline Island via a brief 20-minute ferry ride from Bayfield. Situated roughly 320 miles north of Madison and 80 miles east of Superior, Bayfield serves as the gateway to the island. The ferry crossing itself feels transformative, offering a sense of serenity as sailboats drift by and bald eagles soar overhead.

Upon reaching the town dock in La Pointe on Madeline Island, we took a short walk to our rental. After settling in, we eagerly set out to discover the island's captivating charm.

Madeline Island's warmth was evident from the moment we entered Tom's Burned Down Café, a globally recognized seasonal bar affectionately called "The Burned Down." Though it doesn't serve food, this open-air establishment, built atop an old car, is renowned for its vibrant live music, whimsical signage, and inclusive vibe. I fondly remember spending several evenings there, immersed in the music and the unique energy.

On a whim the day before we departed, we toured the island with a local real estate agent. As destiny would have it, Michael was enchanted by an untouched parcel perched on a rocky bluff overlooking Lake Superior. By the time we returned home, we had convinced ourselves to pursue its purchase. I suggested building a modest log cabin there in a few years. Eventually, we constructed an architect-designed "retreat" in 2006, which was featured in *Our Lives* in 2019.

Just as we were finishing our new home, Wisconsin voted on a constitutional amendment to ban gay marriage. We actively participated in the Fair Wisconsin campaign and found that the welcoming atmosphere we experienced at The Burned Down wasn't an anomaly. The island voted 74% against the ban, closely mirroring Madison's 76% opposition.



# The Island That Chose Us

In the heart of the **Apostle Islands**, **Glenn Carlson** and **Michael Childers** built their life on **Madeline Island**—an island that offers its many LGBTQ+ residents not just acceptance, but a deeply lived sense of home.

TRAVEL | NORTHERN WISCONSIN | RECREATION

**OUR STORY BEGINS** with two Midwest natives who met shortly after moving to Los Angeles in 1990. After enduring years filled with earthquakes, riots, wildfires, and relentless traffic, my now-husband Michael and I sought a more peaceful life by relocating to Madison in 1997 with retirement in mind. In the summer of 2003, we embarked on a week-long getaway with friends from Madison to Madeline Island—a destination none of us had known about, let alone explored, until then. What we discovered is that Madeline Island is a sanctuary of inclusivity and respect nestled within one of Wisconsin's most stunning natural landscapes. The island's splendor is celebrated, and its conservation is owed to its isolation and the dedicated guardianship of Indigenous communities, particularly the Ojibwe. For them, the island holds profound spiritual meaning, partly as the culmination of their ancestral journey. Even today, the ethos of conservation thrives. Thanks to mostly private initiatives, more than one-third of the island remains safeguarded from development.

Madeline Island is the largest and only inhabited island among the 22 that form the Apostle Islands archipelago, with about 428 year-round residents. When the Apostle Islands National Lakeshore was created in 1970, Madeline already had an established permanent community and significant private holdings. Since purchasing and depopulating the island wasn't practical, Madeline Island lies just beyond the boundaries of the designated area. The archipelago acts as a natural barrier against Lake Superior's fiercest weather. During intense storms, enormous ore ships seek shelter within Madeline Island's protected channels. In tranquil conditions, the Apostle Islands' sea caves, coves, and beaches offer a haven for avid kayakers, sailors, and boaters. Geographically, Madeline Island is elongated and narrow, reminiscent of Manhattan Island, though it is accessible only by ferry or small aircraft due to the absence of bridges or tunnels. With 27 miles of relatively flat paved roads, it's a favorite among bicyclists. The state

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20 MINUTES: BAYFIELD, WISCONSIN TO MADELINE ISLAND

After selling our Madison home and relocating to the island, Michael and I became deeply engaged in local organizations. Together, we've served on at least a dozen local boards. Grassroots activism thrives here. Since 2021, I've chaired the Town Board of La Pointe, which administers Madeline Island, running unopposed in each term. In 2022, Michael served as president of the newly formed Harbor Commission, leading successful negotiations to purchase the Madeline Island Ferry Line, the island's essential connection to the mainland.

The Chequamegon Bay region is known for its progressive values. **Angela Stroud, our dynamic, out-and-proud lesbian, State Representative, secured 56% of the district-wide vote in her first election in 2024, with an astonishing 78% support from Madeline Island.** The area hosts active groups like the Neighbors Union and the Washburn/Chequamegon PFLAG chapter. Additionally, key businesses, including the island's top vacation rental agency and a popular eatery, are LGBTQ+ owned.

However, it's important to recognize that not all residents share the same political views. About 20–25% lean conservative, with some Trump supporters among them. Despite differing opinions on national and state issues, the island maintains a remarkable sense of harmony. The key to this coexistence is both simple and profound.

After all, Madeline Island is an island, and a strong sense of “we're all in this together” unites its residents.

For example, nearly everyone relies on the ferry for daily necessities. The ferry schedule dictates routines. After Halloween, the community speculates when the ferry might cease operations due to thick ice—a famously unpredictable event. If the ice doesn't support an ice road, people leave cars on both sides and use a “windsled”—an airplane-propeller-driven craft resembling a covered flat-bottomed boat—for crossings. These shared experiences build a sense of camaraderie,



Bay Bay State Park.

**Key businesses, including the island's top vacation rental agency and a popular eatery, are LGBTQ+ owned.**

reinforcing the idea that we're all in the same boat. Notably, residents unanimously supported the town's purchase of the ferry line.

Madeline Island's population swells tenfold during summer, as seasonal visitors join year-round residents, creating a vibrant mix of artistic, musical, outdoor, wellness, and community activities that nurture lasting friendships.

Beyond its appeal to tourists, Madeline Island is an exceptional place to live, especially for young families. This holds particularly true for parents with remote work flexibility. In 2013, the island gained gigabit-speed full-fiber broadband service.

The island's public elementary school boasts a rich history, operating continuously since the late 1800s. With two multi-grade classrooms and a gym/cafeteria, the school typically enrolls 10–20 students, fostering close relationships and personalized attention. While it may not meet size criteria for a standard state report card, most island students excel academically and consistently make the Honor Roll throughout their middle and high school years on the mainland.

St. John's United Church of Christ serves as the island's spiritual heart, hosting activities including a vibrant food shelf, weekly winter community dinners, the Woods Hall Gallery and Studios, recovery meetings, a Little Learners group for preschoolers, and a Full Moon Circle for women. Last summer, the congregation unanimously voted to be designated as “open and affirming,” though this commitment was evident long before the official decision. I had the honor of serving as church council president for four years about a decade ago.

The island also proudly holds the highest per capita taxpayer support for a public library in Wisconsin. This cozy library acts as the island's “living room,” offering diverse educational and recreational programs, including a makerspace and a popular summer children's series.

The island is fortunate to have its own full-time police force, a dedicated volunteer fire department and EMS team, and a small clinic handling routine health care and vaccinations. In emergencies, a ferry remains docked to transport patients to mainland hospitals, primarily in Ashland, 20 miles away.

We continue to cherish our life here. We launched a small retail business across from the town dock, selling our handmade soy candles, premium fudge, apparel, gifts, and souvenirs. Michael works remotely as the Chief Financial Officer for Senator Tammy Baldwin's campaign committees and is wrapping up a six-year term as a Sanitary District Commissioner. I continue to serve as Town Board Chair and a member of the Harbor Commission.

So much for retirement! ■

## Island Essentials

Your guide to the beaches, trails, shops and creative spaces that define Madeline Island.

**SET APART BY WATER** but connected by community, Madeline Island blends natural beauty, creative energy and small-town charm. From sandstone cliffs and quiet beaches to locally owned shops and galleries—including LGBTQ+-owned businesses—the Island invites you to slow down and experience a place where recreation, art, history and community intersect.

\* denotes LGBTQ+-owned/operated businesses

### Recreation

- Swim and relax at **Big Bay Town Park** or **Joni's Beach**.
- Hike the **scenic boardwalk** from Town Park to Big Bay State Park.
- Rent **bicycles** or **mopeds** from **Motion to Go**, located near the ferry.
- Experience **guided kayak** and **boat tours** at **Adventure Vacations** (adv-vac.com).
- Enjoy public **tennis** and **paddleball courts**, freshly paved and painted.
- Participate in annual competitive events, including a **running marathon/half-marathon** in May, an **inline skate marathon** in June, and a **2.2-mile open water swim race** from Bayfield to the Island in early August.
- Madeline Island Trails** (madelineislandtrails.org) maintains hiking and groomed cross-country ski trails, subject to snowfall.

### Shopping

- Woods Hall Studios and Gallery** operate as an artists' cooperative beside St. John's UCC, offering woven rugs, ceramics, and jewelry.
- Dockside Gifts\*** is a unique shop located at the ferry dock.
- Bell Street Gallery** is located across from Tom's Burned Down Café.
- La Pointe Center Arts Gallery** is a nonprofit gallery adjacent to the Chamber of Commerce office.
- Adventure Vacations** and **La Pointe Provisions (Mission Hill Coffee)** also sell apparel, gifts, and souvenirs.
- WOW Art Gallery & Studio**, featuring abstract artist Steve McHugh, is open daily from May to October on Benjamin Boulevard, seven miles from

- downtown, and offers live music on Monday evenings during the season.
- Ricky Rocks and JEM** showcase a collection of stones, rocks, and jewelry.
- Madeline Island Yacht Club Marina Store** provides marine supplies, hardware, clothing, and refrigerated goods for sailors.
- Madeline Island Candles\*** creates and sells soy candles, premium fudge, apparel, local preserves, and distinctive souvenirs.

### History

- Madeline Island Historical Museum** is a recommended first stop. The museum presents an engaging 20-minute film about the Island's history.
- Madeline Island Historical Preservation Association** has assembled several historic buildings near the museum.
- Madeline Island Wilderness Preserve** maintains trails throughout the Island and hosts educational lectures at the museum and other locations.
- The Flicker House** (flickerhouse.org) is an emerging Indigenous cultural center on Main Street and hosts cross-cultural events year-round.

### Music/Island Vibe

- Tom's Burned Down Café** is an iconic spot on Madeline Island, renowned for its live music evenings and summer fun atmosphere.
- The La Pointe Center for the Arts** hosts live music on Thursdays during the summer at the Harry Nelson Recreation Center.
- Madeline Island Music Camp** attracts many of the country's most talented, classically trained young musicians for spring and early summer concerts. Its scheduled and pop-up performances are just another facet of the Island's plentiful and deeply creative culture.

### General Information

- The **Madeline Island Chamber of Commerce** (madelineisland.com) website provides links to Chamber member businesses and request forms for Visitors Guides to help plan your visit.
- The **Island Gazette** has been published by the same Island family for over sixty years and serves as an invaluable resource for visitors. Free copies are widely available at the post office and around town.
- Lakeview Laundromat** is the only public laundromat, offering 24/7 access.



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Past and present Wausau gay bar owners. Left to right: Bill Jones, Sue Buska, Vicky Hasko and Cole Bruner.

# The Bars That Built Wausau

The secret, raucous, and resilient history of **Wausau's Gay Nightlife**.

HISTORY NIGHTLIFE CENTRAL WISCONSIN

**FOR MORE THAN 50 YEARS**, Wausau has been home to queer spaces that served as regional sanctuaries for the people of northern Wisconsin. From the crowded, untamed, underground energy of Vicky Hasko's The Pit in the 1970s to the modern, upscale, aspirational vibes of Cole Bruner's The Emerald today, Wausau's nightlife history is a timeless testament to the human need for hometown belonging and the pioneers creating space so their people can be seen.

## WAUSAU IN THE 70s

Vicky Hasko & The Pit (1973–1982)

**VICKY HASKO** was born and raised in Wausau. In 1973, when Vicky was just 18, she and her brother took over the lease on the Hotel Central bar, which their parents had run throughout the 60s.

"I knew a lot of people in Wausau," said Vicky. "I was born here, raised here, and went to three different high schools here. And everyone started coming down to The Pit. Well, I was gay, so of course a lot of my friends were gay. Over time, the Pit went from straight, to mixed, to gay. It was a wild little bar."

Even the story of the bar's name is wild.

"As a dump truck driver, I used to go down to the quarry pit to get the truck loaded with asphalt and granite," said Vicky, "so I decided,

'I'm going to call it The Pit. We're in the basement. And if you come down here, you can get loaded, too!'"

The Pit was a very cozy space: Only 550 square feet, with 12 bar stools, a picnic table, a jukebox, and a pinball machine.

"We just packed that place," said Vicky. "People would fill the stairwell because they couldn't get downstairs. They'd pass money



Vicky Hasko at the former location of The Pit, now a parking lot at 100 Scott St.

through the crowd to the bar, and people would order and pass them drinks back. You'd never see anything like that today."

"The police finally came down in the late 70s and asked us what our capacity was," said Vicky. "We'd never really thought about it. There was no other place around, and we were trying to serve as many people as we could."

But some people didn't think The Pit belonged in Wausau.

"I don't think the city fathers were really thrilled with us. We got a little police harassment here, a little police intimidation there. They'd set up police cars near the bar. They would follow people, stop them, check them for operating while intoxicated, and search them for drugs," said Vicky. "It wasn't the whole police force, just a few guys who got real upset about gay people for some reason. It was the 70s. This was just the crap we had to put up with."

"Being gay wasn't open, especially up north. It was frowned upon. Most straight people thought something was wrong with you. They might not say anything, but you knew they thought it," she said. "We wanted to create a place where none of that mattered, where you could just be you."

For nine years Vicky ran The Pit, creating "a great big family" in the process. Then in 1982, she sold The Pit and moved to Colorado.

Jim Christiansen reopened the bar in January 1983 as The Pendulum, a spiritual sequel to The Pit. He was hoping to keep the crowds, but the business sold again within a few years.

"Two young guys bought the bar and moved it upstairs," said Vicky. "And that sure killed the Pit and the Pendulum vibes!"

After fires in 1986 and 1989, the Hotel Central was razed.

In recent years, after retiring, Vicky and her wife Juliette returned to Wausau. She was glad to see that her hometown still has a gay bar—more than 50 years after The Pit opened.

## WAUSAU IN THE 80s

Debbie McCarty & The Lark (1983–1986)

**DEBBIE MCCARTY's** journey began with an act of defiance. When she turned 18 she planned on going out and celebrating. Her brother gave her a clear warning: "Whatever you do, don't go to The Lark or The Pit. Those are the gay bars."

"So, on my 18th birthday in 1975, that was exactly what I did," McCarty recalls. "And the first bar I ever went to was The Pit."

That night, she met Vicky Hasko, a kindred spirit, who introduced Debbie to her circle of friends.

### A PLACE FOR US

Around 1983, a friend contacted Debbie with an urgent plea. "Listen, a friend of mine bought this bar, and he has no clue what



Debbie McCarty at the former location of The Lark, now a parking lot at 131 Scott St.

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Bill Jones at the former location of OZ, now The Emerald at 320 Washington St.

packed, just absolutely packed,” said Debbie. “The shows had a really loyal following.”

The Lark became a hotspot for Northern Wisconsin’s queer community. Customers traveled significant distances—from Milwaukee, Rhinelander, Tomahawk, Marshfield, and Rice Lake—all drawn by the promise of community and celebration. Debbie ensured the bar was a place of pure entertainment throughout the week, setting the stage for the Sunday revelry. She hosted live bands, pig roasts, sports events, and even an early karaoke system.

But the freedom offered by The Lark came at a steep price, and there were constant reminders of the hostility outside the front doors. As word of the drag shows got out, Debbie saw a backlash. Many straight customers stopped coming to The Lark, neighboring businesses weren’t especially supportive, and financial pressures mounted.

“My business just started to tank,” McCarty recalls. “I did well on Sundays, but Sundays just could not keep me going.”

Debbie, her staff, and her customers all experienced ongoing verbal abuse during that time. She was even the victim of homophobic violence when three women jumped her and fractured her ribs after accusing her of making a pass at one of them.

Debbie was always very cautious about her customers’ safety. Since The Lark was located at a high-traffic downtown intersection with a stoplight, customers often had to make careful choices.

“They waited until all the cars passed before they would open the door,” Debbie said. “If cars were stopped at the intersection, they’d just keep on walking right past The Lark, and then double back when the coast was clear.”

“Looking back, the drag shows weren’t really the smartest thing I could have done, financially, even though it was very important to me personally,” said Debbie. “I wanted to create a place where people could feel free. I guess freedom was more expensive than I expected.”

#### THE LIGHTS GO OUT ON SCOTT STREET

By 1986, the combination of declining weeknight business, escalating expenses, the Reagan Era, homophobia, and the AIDS crisis were catching up to the bar. Despite rebranding The Lark twice: First to “House of Whit” and later to “Primetime,” and hiring a bar manager to be the front face of the bar, weekday business was shrinking.

“There’d be nights we’d have three or four people in there all night,” said Debbie. “It’s like, ‘Where did everyone go?’”

“And then, our landlord wanted to raise the rent to \$1,700 a month,” she remembers. “That was an insane amount of money for any tavern space in the mid-80s. There was no way in Hell we could ever afford that. No one in Wausau could!”

McCarty was forced to close The Lark, leaving Wausau without a gay bar. Other queer spaces, including Camp, Masquers, and Mad Hatter would follow in its wake.

#### NEW MILLENNIUM WAUSAU

Bill Jones & OZ (1997–2025)

**IN 1997**, Kevin Graco and David Nolan purchased Mad Hatter and rebranded it as OZ, in an ad reading “David and Kevin would like you to join them in their new venture.”

David passed away just three years later, and OZ went up for sale. Enter Bill Jones.

Bill grew up on a farm in Irma, Wisconsin. Growing up in a rural area meant he felt he had to keep quiet about his sexual identity.

“Customers would come to Wausau for the weekend just to be around their people. OZ was the only gay bar for 100 miles. We served

people from Stevens Point, Marshfield, Eagle River, and Minocqua all the way out to the Minnesota and Michigan state lines.”

“Buying OZ was a big, big step for me,” said Bill. “I was freshly out of the closet. I’d just gone to my first gay bar (Switch in Milwaukee) a few years earlier. I was so uncomfortable at that first gay bar that I left quickly with money still on the bar. And now, I owned a gay bar!”

But it wasn’t always easy. Jones recalls some ugly moments: Someone vandalizing the building with a paintball gun, people shouting insults through the front door, customers name-called and harassed on the sidewalk. He also faced opposition from closed-minded city officials who made the operation difficult.

He’s grateful for the ever-changing perception of the gay community.

“It’s crazy to think about now,” said Bill, “but when we opened, some people seemed to think a gay bar was just a wide-open sex club. Customers—both straight and gay—worried they’d be molested the minute they stepped inside. I have no idea where they got this idea, but it took us three or four years to overcome that. Newcomers started coming in, looking around, and saying ‘Hey, wait a minute, this place is actually really nice.’”

“Looking back, the drag shows weren’t really the smartest thing I could have done, financially, even though it was very important to me personally,” said Debbie. “I wanted to create a place where people could feel free. I guess freedom was more expensive than I expected.”

As a result, OZ’s clientele has become very mixed, sometimes up to 50% straight. Jones appreciated having a wide mix of customers, because he always wanted everyone to feel they belonged.

“We’d have an older cocktail hour crowd,” he laughed, “but as soon as the DJ showed up and the music got loud, they were out the door. We had the best dance floor in downtown Wausau.”

Thanks to strong community support, OZ survived the pandemic to see its 25th anniversary. However, after thinking about it long and hard, Bill decided it was time for him to retire.

“Twenty-five years is a very good run for any small business, much less a gay bar,” said Bill. “But I also knew it had to stay a gay-friendly space, because it was important to me that Wausau have one.”

#### THE WAUSAU OF TOMORROW

Cole Bruner & The Emerald (2025–)

**COLE BRUNER** was born and raised in Wausau.

“A few years back, I’d met Bill Jones, the owner of OZ,” Cole said. “Bill is probably one of the nicest and most good-hearted people I’ve ever known. During one of our first conversations, he said something really jarring to me: ‘This may or may not be the last time you ever see me, because I’m dying.’”

Bill explained that he’d been battling an undetermined illness for several years.

“Bill WAS OZ, and OZ was Bill,” said Cole. “OZ wouldn’t exist if it wasn’t for Bill. He bartended almost every night, and he just loved it.”

Suddenly, OZ was up for sale, and Bill was insistent that the buyer had to maintain an inclusive space. That contingency considerably shrank the buying pool.

“My mom and I made Bill an offer,” said Cole. “June 7, 2025, wasn’t just our first day of ownership, but also the opening night of Wausau Pride 2025. We decided to call our first party ‘One Last Night in OZ.’”



Cole Bruner with his mom (and business partner) Sue Buska inside The Emerald, formerly OZ, at 320 Washington St.

Cole’s opening party became the official Wausau Pride afterparty. Afterwards, OZ closed for eight weeks of renovations and reopened as an entirely new experience: The Emerald Night Club.

“Although we’re very much structurally the same, the interior is unrecognizable,” said Cole. “It’s the biggest change in this space in over 20 years. We’ve introduced this Great Gatsby meets Art Deco theme with beautiful light fixtures, loud wallpaper, and comfortable seating. We’ve redone the drink menu with craft cocktails and fun mocktails. We really wanted to infuse the space with a brand-new vibe and then elevate that vibe sky-high.”

Bill was able to attend the grand reopening celebration in person. “OZ has always been a comfortable space for me,” said Cole. “I wanted to make sure that we could keep that space. I had the means to make a difference, so I made one.” ■

he’s doing. Can you help him?”

McCarty immediately said, “Sure,” and that’s how she became involved with The Lark.

The Lark, located at 131 Scott Street, was a tavern long before Debbie’s arrival. Formerly known as The Surplus Store, the retail space was converted into Prieve’s Tap in 1956. Cecil Charbonneau bought the business in 1961 and opened The Lark as a family tavern. His son, Curtis, got involved in the early 70s after returning from Vietnam. The liquor license was in his name by 1973.

But between 1974 and 1983, the space changed owners a few times, changed names, and even sat empty for a few years.

“That’s funny because people still called it The Lark,” said Debbie, “even years after they stopped using that name.”

Bill Mathiesen reopened as The Lark in 1983, and Debbie was going to help continue the tradition. She restructured the bar operation, trained the staff, and poured her energy and expertise into turning around the business. And it was working.

“It just got to the point where I was putting in so much time that I finally said, ‘You know what? I want part ownership.’”

#### CREATING A SPECTACULAR SCENE

Realizing the need to do something bold and different, Debbie launched a groundbreaking tradition.

“I closed the bar down on Sunday nights and opened it just for drag shows,” she explains. “The Lark was the first place in Wausau to have them, and it was just a blast!”

These Sunday extravaganzas made the bar famous. “We were

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# Fairy Prairie: A Queer Eden in the Driftless Region

Vance Baker describes how his patch of restored prairie became a sanctuary of queer pride, chosen family, unapologetic pleasure, sequins, and liberation.

CULTURE WESTERN WISCONSIN NATURE HISTORY

“ACT MORE LIKE CHER!!!” screamed the crowd. The Cher medley lip-synched by men in black wigs and short sleeveless sequined dresses was four minutes longer than the attention span of the drunken hecklers. Drag shows had become a staple at the Fairy Prairie gatherings during the zenith years when up to 35 men camped out on my land for a weekend jamboree of fun, laughter, food, drinking, hikes, swimming, and sex. The stage was the front porch of the cabin as well as the brick walkway leading up to the front door. Music blasted on the porch, and headlights from a car parked in the yard acted as floodlights for a variety of acts: The above mentioned Cher Medley; Queen Latifa lip-synching, “When You’re Good To Mama, Mama’s Good to You” while sporting more than ample boobs with twirling gold tassels; a hillbilly star Kitty Wells singing the refrain, “Flee the downward path kindle not his wrath or he’ll set your fields on fire;” a trenchcoated flasher doing a perverted rendition of Lili Marlene: A famous Marlene Dietrich and WWI song with the love object being, “*mein große schvantz*,” which was just a huge dildo flopping out of a trenchcoat.

One particularly popular number consisted of a duo in Hawaiian grass skirts, hips swaying while sporting coconut bras and lip-synching Israel Kamakawiwo’ole’s iconic Hawaiian version of *Somewhere Over the Rainbow*. They were flanked by tiki torches, mock plastic Easter Island Figure Heads, and two gorgeous muscle men sporting loin cloths.

One of the raunchier acts consisted of a pregnant hillbilly in a wedding dress who assumed a Lamaze position and birthed a pig on the picnic table in front of the cabin while singing an old bluegrass tune.

## FAIRY PRAIRIE’S HUMBLE ORIGINS

The gatherings started in the early days when there was just the tipi. Three to five gay friends of mine would come out for a weekend every summer. It stayed a rather tame and intimate affair until the cabin was built. Water was hauled from a neighbor’s spring, lights were kerosene lanterns, the bathroom was an outhouse, and the kitchen an outdoor area with a Weber grill, a Coleman cook stove, and coolers filled with ice.

Being only 4.5 miles east of Ferryville, a rivertown on the Mississippi River where before the Blackhawk Bridge was built in 1931 a ferry connected Wisconsin to Lansing Iowa, it was a no-brainer to name the land with its prairie restoration project, Fairy Prairie. I embellished this double entendre by telling people Fairy Prairie was between Ferryville and Gays Mills. Gays Mills was to the east and was located on the Kickapoo River. The dam and associated mill that was located there to process grains in the early 1900s, was owned and run by the Gays brothers. The name Fairy Prairie was also paying homage to the Radical Fairies. This group, which was founded in 1979 by

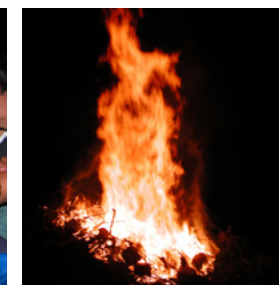


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activist Harry Hay, arose out of the liberation movement of the 70s and reclaimed the derogatory term Fairy and owned it as a source of pride. The group was a decentralized, counterculture spiritual movement for queer people. Its goal was to explore a deeper, nature-based spirituality beyond mainstream gay liberation. It incorporated elements of paganism, anarchism, and environmentalism. Gender fluidity and community were other founding principles. They held radical fairies’ gatherings throughout rural America that provided safe spaces to find community. I was familiar with them through subscribing to their quarterly newsletter RFD, so named because of the post office policy of rural free delivery in the early 1900’s.

## HOSTING A SUPPORT GROUP LEADS TO FRIENDSHIP

Queer gatherings at Fairy Prairie started to gather steam when a support group from the Milwaukee AIDS Project led by an Ojibwe facilitator started having annual healing sweats there. By then I had a one room cabin although the lack of infrastructure remained the same. The first year they went into the woods above the cabin and cut aspen saplings to be used in constructing the sweat lodge. I wanted those removed anyway as part of restoring that area into an open oak woodland, so their efforts helped me as well. They built the lodge by bending the saplings into a half dome structure about 12 feet in diameter.



## DISPLAYS OF PRIDE

It was then covered with multiple layers of blankets. It was situated along the banks of Sugar Creek, the cool trout stream traversing the land and below a bird-shaped effigy mound constructed by the Ho-Chunk people who colonized the driftless between 800 and 1300 AD. The settlement associated with the mound was across the stream and county road where a fourth-generation Norwegian farmer lived at the time.

After a week of ceremony, making strings of spirit figures, and hydration, the sweat was held. Carefully selected stones 6 to 8 inches in diameter were placed on a huge pile of burning oak logs. The sweat consisted of 12 rounds. For the first round, one sparkling, glowing red-hot stone was brought into the lodge and placed in its center pit. For the second round, two stones were brought in, for the third, three stones, and so on until finally 12 stones were brought in. Participants told of heat so intense they would lie on the dirt floor rubbing cool mud on their faces.

I was honored to have this activity occur on Fairy Prairie, and we all became good friends as the sweat became an annual event. When the group broke apart after about four years, most of the participants still wanted to visit every summer. Add to that group a few of my friends, both local and from Milwaukee, and the tradition of an annual gay gathering began at Fairy Prairie.

Given that the cabin was up a winding quarter-mile gravel driveway, I marked the entrance on County Trunk C with a large rainbow windsock. Not only did that mark the entrance for revelers, it also was a way of expressing pride. Although many locals were reasonably accepting of gay men, homophobia was far from absent, so a public statement of pride seemed necessary. In addition, I took an old tipi pole and nailed it to the farmer panel where the power hook up was for the cabin and put a gay pride flag on its top. For the next 30 years, that flag and its replacements, when weather and wind rendered it tattered and torn, overlooked the cabin and yard, marking the space as a queer haven.

With the cabin at that point just being one room it was a camping event with tents set up in the yard or down by the creek. Meals were a communal potluck affair. I never had to worry about food. Participants never failed to bring more than enough great dishes to pass and share. Mealtimes were when everybody was together, sharing, building community and forging new friendships. Back then the wood-fired hot tub was located down by the creek, so much of the social activity was located there. Spontaneity was the rule, and one could never predict what would happen next. One year what I assumed were two

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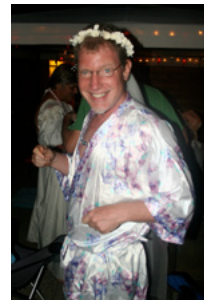
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very stoned men embarked on a free form Twyla Tharp-like dance performance. It was beautiful, organic, and free form. One of the participants went on to start a dance company, the other still talks of it 30 years later as one of his favorite artistic moments.

There was nude swimming and sunbathing by day, hot tubbing and lots of sex by night. One year, the afternoon agenda was spiced up by a nude raft race down the creek with the participants floating on pink and orange flotation devices from Walmart. The dozen or so participants were cheered on by a gallery of men screaming and laughing their way along the banks, cocktails in hand.

The lighting of a huge 12-foot-high bonfire was a tradition. I spent decades clearing boxelder trees from along Sugar Creek, so every year there was a bonfire that shot dancing tongues of flames twenty feet or more into the night sky. Dancing, uproarious laughter, shouting, and mooning of the fire all ensued. Yes, we mooned the fire. Although everybody began thinking it was strange and possibly uncomfortable, the fact is that dropping your pants, bending over with your buttocks facing the fire and slowly moving in as close as was comfortable felt sooo good that nobody resisted doing it a second time. The warmth of the fire on your bare buttocks was soothing in a way that truly shocked everybody. At least once each bonfire, a line of bare arses would circumvent the flames, and joyous laughter would echo across the valley.

#### IMPROVEMENTS TO THE CABIN

A few years in, electricity, a well, and a bedroom were added to the cabin, so the hot tub was moved to the yard. Moving the tub was a task that required a lot of people, so I had saved this job for a Fairy Prairie weekend. Gay boys love a manly task, so 10 of them circled the tub and lifted it onto a trailer while 20 more cheered them on with cocktails in hand. The only vehicle that had a trailer hitch that fit the ball of the trailer was a buddy's Lexus, a very meticulous Lexus owner at that. We pulled it off flawlessly, thus one of the epicenters of activity became closer to the cabin. Men soaking in the tub was now part of the view as one looked out over the yard, toward the prairie to the north and hills beyond. It was a wood-fired tub, with a submersed wood stove occupying a quarter of the space, so I was always tending to its various needs. Heating it up, then keeping the water level constant with a hose and regulating the temperature. There were always two-to-five guys in it along with some sitting around the tub, drinking and rotating in and out. Most years, the bonfire was by the creek where the tree clearing was going on, but some years I did enough clearing near the cabin that a second bonfire was in the yard by the cabin.

#### FAIRY PRAIRIE GOES REGIONAL

As the years progressed, and word got out, people from La Crosse, Madison, and Chicago started showing up. Some I knew, and of those I didn't, many eventually became friends. It was during the zenith years when 30 to 40 guys showed up that the drag shows became a staple of the Saturday night lineup. The tote full of drag costumes was kept on the front porch all weekend so Saturday afternoons, before or after

creek time, groups of men gathered in the yard in front of the cabin and sat in the sun, laughing, eating, drinking, and wearing whatever they decided to grab from the bin of drag paraphernalia. A string of pearls here, a skirt or sundress there highlighted with the occasional coconut bra, pink boa, wig, or pair of high heels. Mixed with various degrees of nudity, thongs, and body types, it made for a visual potpourri that embodied the free spirit of Fairy Prairie and demanded a smile.

Although in general this was a BYOB affair, I provided a lubricant to either get things going during evening cocktail hour, or in the case of Saturday afternoon, to bite the hair of the dog. In another double entendre my Queen of the Prairie punch, which was so named for myself, the de facto Queen of the Prairie, as well a beautiful prairie plant by the same name that showed off its cotton candy style plum of brilliant fuchsia pink flowers in mid-July.

#### AN IDYLIC NATURAL SETTING

The setting of the cabin was idyllic to say the least. The main valley that Sugar Creek ran through ran east and west. The morning sun illuminated the dew drops from the night before on the prairie like thousands of sparkling crystals. The golden evening summer light shown across the valley and illuminated the elderly cottonwood trees lining Sugar Creek mimicking huge green, billowing, cumulus clouds. At night the moonlit prairie's soundtrack was a cacophony of either frogs or crickets and katydids, depending on the season. Sugar Creek traversed the property and ran swift. Its spring-fed waters were cool and refreshing. Multiple swimming holes up to 6 feet deep were scattered along its course, making hot summer days a delight rather than something to bear.

As the years progressed, and word got out, people from La Crosse, Madison, and Chicago started showing up. It was during the zenith years when 30 to 40 guys showed up that the drag shows became a staple of the Saturday night lineup.

Fairy Prairie gatherings were not only festivals of gay pride, they also presented an opportunity to be immersed in nature. Walks through the woods where logging trails were kept open and mowed involved hiking up the steep 300-foot hillsides to the bluff tops overlooking the valley. I tried to time the gathering with the prairie's peak bloom from late July through early August. I delighted in conducting evening walks through the prairie, when, with cocktails and joints in hand, my guests received a lecture of where the restoration project was to date, what was planned in the future, and a quick course in botany as I identified species of prairie plants and told each one's story as to how they came to be there, where the seeds came from, and how long it took for them to become established.

Although the majority of people slept in tents, some stayed in the tipi,

and for a few years we had an RV crowd complete with the obligatory rainbow-covered lights strung up across the drop-down awning.

One year my partner Jack designed a t-shirt with a bonfire, tipi, and dancing figures—inspired by those on the side of the tipi—on a sky-blue background. It was a great design, and a great memento for all involved. I still have mine 30 years later; I'm not wearing it or washing it to preserve this artifact of Fairy Prairie's glory days.

#### STAR VALLEY CAVE CRAWL

For a few years, I led a group of interested partygoers into a local cave. Star Valley cave was located on private land a 10-minute drive away. Its entrance was a two-foot-high slit at the bottom of a 5-foot-deep hole. It was a very dramatic entrance and the ten yards one had to crawl on hands and knees before the cave opened up, made for quite the adrenaline rush, especially for first-timers. It added an adventurous, butch activity to the weekend that was frightening enough to be fun and left those involved feeling like spelunkers at the end of the day.

Fairy Prairie was a Bacchanalian event full of copious amounts of food, pot, alcohol, and sex. Years later when talking with attendees, I've heard of who had sex with whom and where. I think it's safe to say that my partner Jack and I were the only two people not involved with these frolics in the prairie, woods, hot tub, and tents. I was a bit inhibited sexually in those days and besides, I assumed that Jack would be upset if I engaged in these activities. It is only recently in talking with him that we both realized we would have been more than happy had the rules of our relationship been suspended once a year for three days!

#### SLOWING THE PACE & CONTINUING TO HOLD SPACE

As we aged the festival dwindled. Sleeping in a tent became less attractive and young newcomers became scarcer, making it less exciting

for the old timers! Nevertheless, gatherings of friends of a smaller nature continued to be a staple at Fairy Prairie. For a couple years, I even hosted a lesbian weekend organized by my Milwaukee girls. "Pussy's Galore" had its own signature dark purple baseball cap with the silhouette of a black cat on the front. That event also deserved a proud announcement, so by the driveway entrance there was a windsock of the same design. The local gay boys, who numbered about a dozen, helped Fairy Prairie maintain its queer mojo by coming down most summers for a potluck and evening of bonfires and hot tubs. The tradition didn't completely die. Fairy Prairie remained an affirming space.

Gatherings of friends are fun and necessary for everyone, but for me and most in my generation, gatherings of gay men had a special significance. The explosion of the gay rights movement post-Stonewall released a whole generation from homophobia and oppression. We formed our own world which, although centered on the gay bars, also extended to all walks of life. For decades, my entire social world involved queer people and queer spaces. I had had enough of straight people, and even though many had become advocates and allies of queer folks, being in a space, in a world, where all fears of homophobia were absent, and acceptance was guaranteed, was intoxicating.

Fairy Prairie Gatherings provided a weekend free of any judgement or restraints imposed by the straight world. In addition, the setting provided an experience immersed in the serenity, beauty, and magic of the Driftless, or The Shire, as the local gay boys called it. Companionship, affirmation, frivolity, laughter, debauchery, connection with the natural world; these were the fruits of this heartfelt tradition.

All these decades later, whenever I meet someone who had been involved with the gatherings, I am surprised to hear what a meaningful and important experience it was for them. Looking back, what an honor it was for me to have been able to hold this space. ■

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FOOD & DINING STREET FOOD

# A Taste of Home, Rolled and Fried

Lumpia City's Alexa Reyes and Sam Klimaszewski are championing Filipino food across Wisconsin by infusing both traditional Filipino flavors and inventive fusions into a common street food form.

**HAVE YOU EVER** tried a lumpia (LOOM-pee-uh)? Alexa Reyes, co-founder of Lumpia City along with her wife, Sam Klimaszewski, are betting you haven't.

"Lumpia is a popular Filipino fried spring roll," she explains. "It's a big street food over there. You can find vendors on the street all over the Philippines frying them up."

Reyes started Lumpia City with her now-wife back in 2015 in Reyes' native San Diego.

"California has so much Asian and Filipino food," she says. "So at first we wanted to be different and do unique fusion flavors." They started as a pop-up from Reyes' parents' garage with three flavors: Beefy mac and cheese, sriracha pork, and savory beef and potato. "We popped up in a couple farmers' markets to start; we wanted to test it out and see how people would receive us."

It's safe to say people received them well, because soon Reyes and Klimaszewski quit their day jobs to focus on Lumpia City full time.

"We wanted to give everything to the business," Reyes says. "We kept getting booked for more events in San Diego, and we did that for about a year." Their event bookings kept snowballing, but San Diego's high cost-of-living started to catch up with them. "It's so expensive there, and the city started to change the rules and weren't going to allow pop-ups at places like breweries that were big money-makers for us. You had to have a food truck." That's when moving to Wisconsin came up.

FROM THE WEST COAST TO THE FRESH COAST

Klimaszewski is originally from Milwaukee. "Sam said, 'I know if we brought this to Wisconsin it would be a big hit,'" Reyes says. So they decided to make the move in 2016.

With lower costs, they were able to quickly buy a food truck and start selling in Milwaukee. "I very quickly realized there wasn't a big Filipi-



no presence here," Reyes says. That was part of the reason their strategy at first was to keep focusing on fun, unique fusion flavors rather than authentic lumpia. But she quickly realized that the gap of Filipino food here presented a business opportunity.

"I avoided doing a traditional Filipino lumpia for years because I was afraid that people who do know Filipino food would be very particular and say 'this isn't real lumpia.'" But after relocating to Milwaukee, they decided to try and replicate Reyes' grandmother's lumpia recipe.

"It's a traditional lumpia we call the Shanghai recipe based on my grandma's recipe," Reyes says. "My grandma didn't write any recipes down. She knew everything by heart." She says that's the fun part about cooking — adding this or that to try and recreate a recipe that evokes the taste of her grandma's food. "But I also wish she had written down her recipes because she made amazing food," she says with a chuckle. "My favorite part is when a Filipino person will try our lumpia and say, 'This tastes like home.' That's the best," she says. Reyes' grandmother came from the Philippines in 1967, bringing Reyes' mother and aunts and uncles along with her.

FINDING SUCCESS IN THE MIDWEST

Lumpia City isn't just isolated to the Milwaukee area. You can find their products in the frozen aisle of grocery stores across Wisconsin (see a full list here). You can also get lumpia served hot at six locations across the state, from Milwaukee to Waupaca to Kenosha.

We have our kitchen in Waterford where we make everything," Reyes says. "Every lumpia is hand rolled," she notes proudly. "You can also buy frozen from our retail shop in Waterford where we have freezer packs with up to 10 or 12 different flavors."

Reyes has noticed that despite Filipino food having little recognition in Wisconsin, lumpia has been a connecting force. "We'll often hear people say, 'Oh my gosh I used to work with a Filipino lady, and

she would always bring lumpia to our potlucks, and it was my favorite thing.'" Reyes notes how lumpia tends to bring people together. "It's a versatile food you can eat with anything. You can eat our chicken enchilada lumpia with salsa and a salad, or our mac and cheese flavor with a bowl of tomato soup. We love hearing how people get creative with how they eat our lumpia."

Speaking of creativity, Lumpia City has won a few awards for their unique creations. Last year, the company won the coveted Sporkies prize at the Wisconsin State Fair with its ube butter banana French toast lumpia. It featured a brown sugar-coated banana, a strip of French toast and a pool of deep-purple ube butter — all wrapped like a spring roll and deep-fried. "It was basically a caramelized banana rolled up," Reyes says. "And it was delicious."

LGBTQ+ LIFE IN WISCONSIN VS. CALIFORNIA

Despite her business succeeding, getting used to life in Wisconsin after growing up in California was a bit of a challenge. "But even in California I had family that disagreed with me coming out," she says. "I grew up Christian, so I had family members that didn't accept me at first."

Reyes says most of her family has changed their views, but she still worries about what they think. "I'm grateful for my family who've grown and accepted me, but there are some that, even if they act like they're okay with me, I know deep down they don't accept gay people."

"That's a challenge," she says. "But I've learned to create my own community." Reyes has noticed, even in her last 10 years in Milwaukee, that things have grown and progressed. "There's more of a general air of acceptance in the last couple years that I didn't feel as strongly as when I moved here a decade ago."

In San Diego, Reyes says she took for granted the bigger city vibe and the more prominent gay community. "But we love it here," she says. They've even sold at Pridefest and plan to do so again this year.



Lumpia City founders Samantha Klimaszewski (left) and her wife Alexa Reyes.

THE JOYS (AND CHALLENGES) OF OWNING A SMALL BUSINESS WITH YOUR SPOUSE

Reyes feels lucky to be in business with her wife. "It's nice working with her because we both know what each other goes through," she says. "It's not always perfect, of course, and we have our moments, but we've learned how to work on things together to get the best outcome for our relationship and business."

Reyes and Klimaszewski have been together for 11 years, but married in 2024. For others considering starting a business with their significant other, Reyes has some advice: "There's a lot of support you can find if you just look for it. Stay open-minded and open to collaboration. It's so important to stay connected!"

As a 34-year-old, Reyes has spent a third of her life on Lumpia City. And she's not slowing down. Reyes says to look for them this spring and summer at Milwaukee's Zoo A La Carte and the Wisconsin State Fair — and at the Minnesota State Fair for the first time. "Starting this business was scary, but I wouldn't have it any other way," she says. ■

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## Time Capsule: Ten Years of Bathroom Bills

In **April 2016**, Wisconsin voted down the first of what would become many anti-trans “bathroom bills.” **Ten years later**, the fight looks surprisingly similar, but with a few key measures of progress.



**RIGHT:** Republican Rep. Jesse Kremer of Kewaskum, author of the bill, speaking at the legislation’s public hearing, calling it the “Student Privacy Protection Bill.”  
**ABOVE:** Mandela Barnes emerged as one of the strongest voices against the legislation in the same public hearings.

**IN 2015**, as national conversations about transgender rights accelerated, Wisconsin found itself on the front lines of a culture war that would define the next decade. Assembly Bill 469, introduced by Republican lawmakers in late October, marked the state’s first major attempt to regulate where transgender students could use the bathroom. Though it ultimately failed in April 2016, its legacy still echoes today.

### THE MOMENT THAT LED TO AB 469

To understand AB 469, it’s important to look at the broader national climate. Visibility for trans people was rising, driven by media representation, legal challenges and Obama-era federal guidance expanding civil rights protections. At the same time, visibility sparked backlash.

In Wisconsin, AB 469 proposed requiring public schools to designate restrooms and locker rooms strictly as “male” or “female,” mandating use based on sex assigned at birth. The bill included “reasonable accommodations,” such as single-user restrooms, but critics argued this would stigmatize transgender students.

Supporters framed the bill as a matter of privacy and safety. Opponents—including LGBTQ+ advocates and many educators—warned it would increase harassment and isolation.

### A BILL THAT FAILED, BUT A MOVEMENT THAT DIDN’T

AB 469 did not reflect the full reality across Wisconsin. By late 2015, more than 60 school districts had already adopted more inclusive policies. Meanwhile, federal agencies were signaling that discrimination based on gender identity could violate Title IX. In many ways, the bill was a reaction to those shifts.

Though it failed to pass in April 2016, the effort marked the beginning of a broader wave. That same year, North Carolina passed its sweeping bathroom law, and similar proposals spread nationwide. Bathroom access became a flashpoint, framed through fear-based narratives.

In Wisconsin, statewide legislation stalled, but local governments moved forward. Cities like Madison and Milwaukee expanded nondiscrimination protections, creating a patchwork system that still defines the state today.

### TEN YEARS LATER: PROGRESS AND PUSHBACK

A decade later, the picture is mixed. Public awareness of transgender identities has grown, and many institutions now have explicit protections. Courts and federal agencies have, at times, affirmed that gender identity discrimination falls under existing sex discrimination laws.

But progress has been uneven. Since the early 2020s, hundreds of bills targeting transgender people—particularly youth—have been introduced nationwide. These extend beyond bathrooms to include health care, sports and education.

In Wisconsin, newer proposals targeting transgender athletes and health care access have emerged, with some passing the legislature but being vetoed by Gov. Tony Evers. With Evers not seeking reelection, the future of such policies remains uncertain.

### WHAT AB 469 TELLS US NOW

Bathroom bills are less dominant than in 2016, but they haven’t disappeared—they’ve evolved. Many are now embedded in broader legislation or framed around parental rights.

The rhetoric, however, has changed little. Claims about safety persist despite a lack of supporting evidence, while transgender people continue to report high levels of harassment.

Looking back, AB 469 was both a warning and a preview. It showed how quickly trans rights could become politicized—and how schools would become ground zero. It also demonstrated the power of organized opposition. Advocacy from students, parents and allies helped stop the bill, and that same energy will continue shaping the fight ahead. ■



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