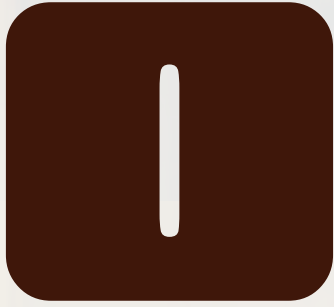


our lives



FOOD & DINING

Wisconsin's LGBT&XYZ Magazine

Wisconsin LGBTQ-owned & operated **restaurant directory**

May / June 2026

THE EXIT INTERVIEW

Governor Tony Evers

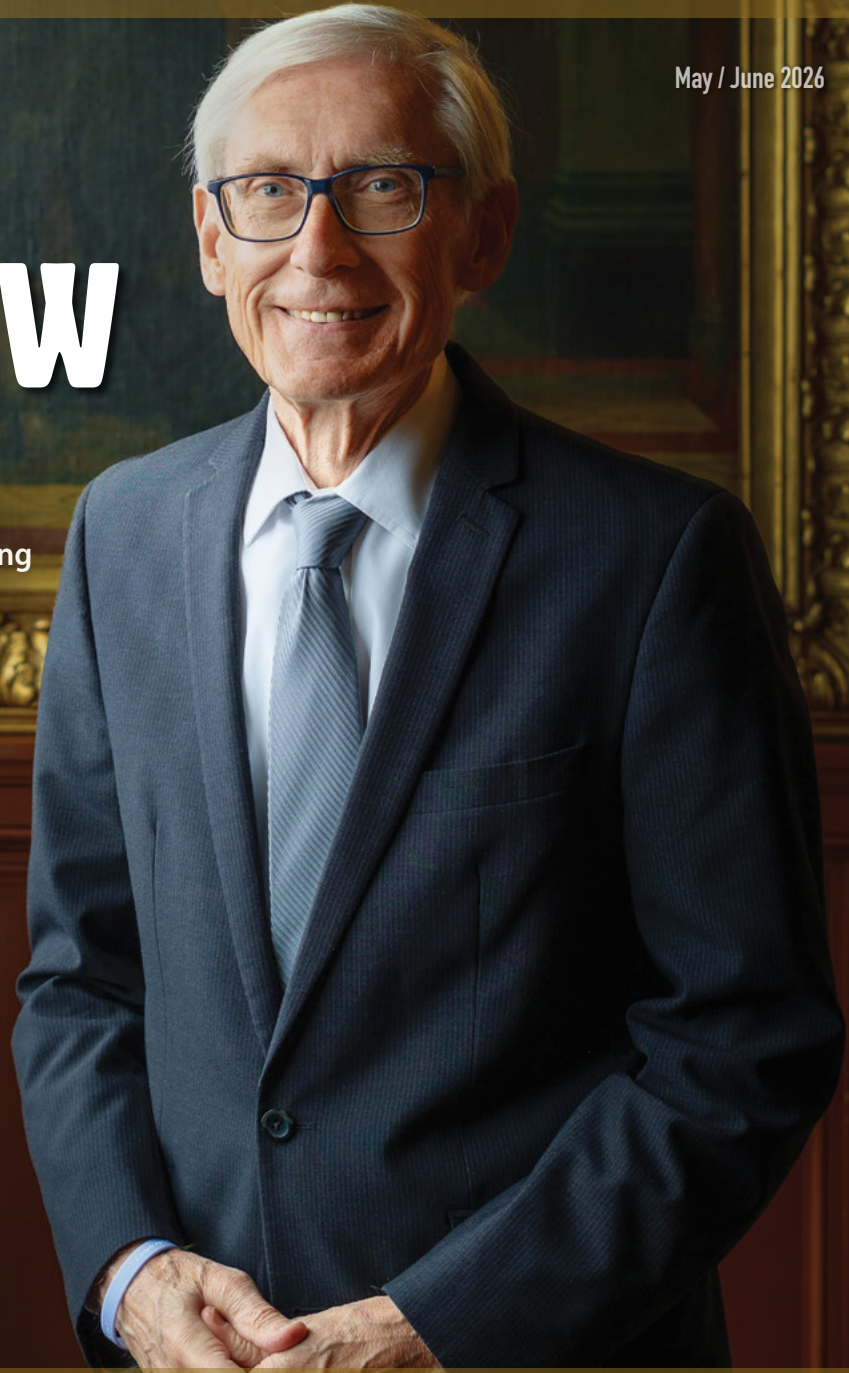
On the occasion of his final Pride flag-raising at the Capitol, Wisconsin's 46th governor reflects on his LGBTQ+ record, lasting impact, and the work still ahead.

CINN CITY SMASH

The story behind the burgers, churros, and community that transformed a simple idea into a Madison success story.

THE TRANS CANARY IN THE COAL MINE

For many transgender Americans, the question is not whether things are getting worse, but how long they can safely stay here.



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La Shawn Banks, "ART", 2025. Photo by Michael Broslow.

"I absolutely swear that hope has a sound."

CASEY AND DIANA

By NICK GREEN

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A theater poster for the play 'Casey and Diana' by Nick Green. The background is a colorful, stylized illustration of a room with a bed, a desk, and a chair. A man in a suit is standing in the center, looking to the right. The text is overlaid on the illustration.

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A vibrant poster for the OutReach Magic Pride Festival. The background is a rainbow gradient. The text is bold and colorful. There are circular images showing people at a festival. The OutReach logo is in the bottom right corner.

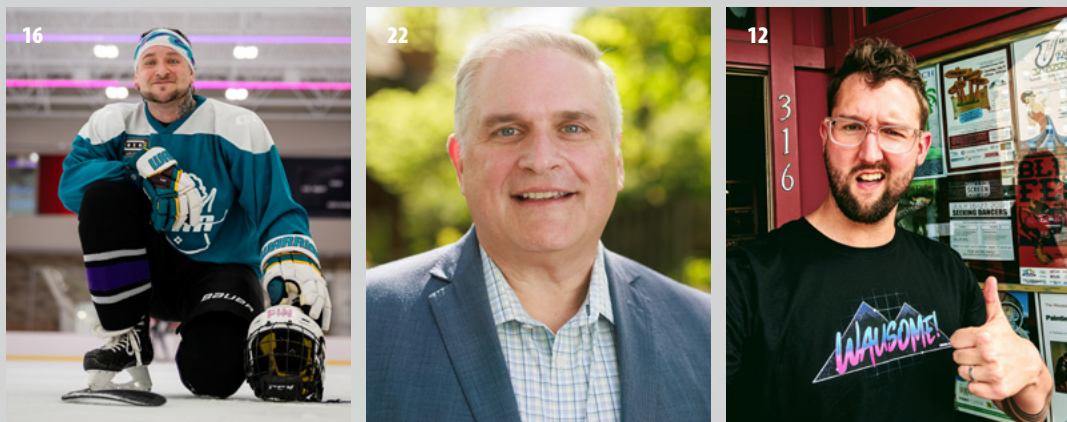


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Wisconsin's LGBT & XYZ Magazine

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Capitol flags photo by **Melanie Jones**
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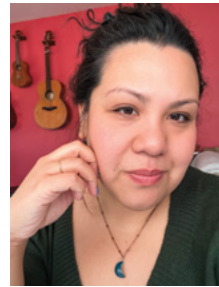
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A SEAT AT THE TABLE



OF ALL THE ISSUES I've helped put together since joining *Our Lives* early last year, this has been one of the most challenging and enjoyable. The stories we have put together for you this month are diverse in their subject matter, perspectives, and methods—you'll find everything from history, sports, and art to profiles on people and community organizations.

Since this is our **Food & Dining annual**, you'll find a number of pieces about food, chefs, and restaurants. And of course, we have again put together our annual directory of Wisconsin's queer-owned food, dining, and drink businesses (which has been expanded this year!). We've also

included a profile on **Cinn City Smash**, one of Madison's newest and most popular food trucks, and one on **The Sow's Ear**, a longstanding Verona business that is a mash-up of café and yarn shop.

But this issue doesn't stop at food. The centerpiece of the issue is our "exit interview" with **Governor Tony Evers**, which appears on the issue's cover. I had the privilege of being able to sit down for an interview and conversation with the governor during which we discussed his career, legacy, and hopes for Wisconsin's future. But the focus of our conversation was the impact his service has had on the LGBTQ+ community of Wisconsin and the many ways he has championed the rights and safety of queer and marginalized people while in office. Accompanying the article, you'll find a summary of the anti-LGBTQ+ laws Evers has vetoed, a list of some of his most notable equality achievements, and a few short profiles on some of the most prominent out LGBTQ+ leaders he has appointed throughout the state.

The opening piece of the issue gives an overview of the recent **controversy in Watertown** that made headlines around the country. Many of us followed that story's progression after the school board voted to ban the high school's wind ensemble from playing, "A Mother of a Revolution!" The instrumental song honors trans activist Marsha P. Johnson and references the Stonewall uprising.

This year has truly been a whirlwind of political discourse and community building. I, for one, am hoping to see that energy last through the summer. ■

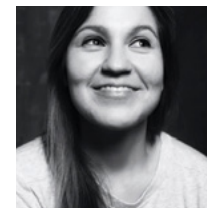
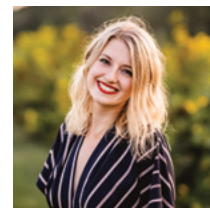


JOSEPH RAY TORRES passed away leaving behind a legacy of advocacy, education, and compassion that touched countless lives. Born on April 16, 1965, in Oneida, Wisconsin, Joseph was the 11th of 13 children and carried with him a deep commitment to preserving Indigenous culture and uplifting those whose voices too often went unheard.

A proud Two-Spirit leader, Joseph dedicated his life to fostering visibility, dignity, and belonging for Indigenous and LGBTQ+ communities. Through storytelling, mentorship, and public speaking, he educated others about Two-Spirit history and inspired people to embrace their authentic selves.

Joseph graduated from the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay in 2023 as a first-generation college student and served as both a Pride Center and First Nations Education intern. He was a Community Advisor and was recently honored as a 2026 Beacons of the Bay recipient, reflecting the profound impact of his work.

Known for his wisdom, humor, and unwavering authenticity, Joseph empowered generations of students, community members, and fellow Two-Spirit people. He will be remembered as a beacon of hope whose life affirmed that identity is not something to hide, but something to honor.



SARA BAILLIES is a wedding and portrait photographer and owns and operates a photography business based in Madison. She is an alumna of UW-Madison. Outside of photography, Sara loves to cook, play board games, and attend concerts.

CHARLES PAYNE is a poet, playwright, and social artist (i.e. someone who aims to use creative skills to spark change) from Michigan. As a child, Payne loved hearing the sound of Paul Harvey's voice. Harvey's innate ability to describe every intricate detail truly inspired Payne to tell stories himself. And, yes, he can't wait to give you the rest of the story.

ILANA NATASHA BAR-AV is a Madison photographer. For nearly two decades, she has worked in portraits, documentary weddings, photojournalism, and commercial photography. She is fascinated by people — why we are the way we are — and photography is one of the ways she explores that. Find her at ilanatanasha.com or on Instagram @ilanabarav.



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"A Mother of a Revolution!"
composer Omar Thomas flew to
Wisconsin to conduct a public
performance after the school board
removed the composition.

The Sound of Censorship

When **Watertown school officials** removed a student symphonic performance honoring LGBTQ+ history, they ignited a statewide debate about fear, visibility, and the political consequences of treating queer identity as inherently controversial.

NEWS | POLITICS & LAW | CULTURE | HISTORY

WHAT BEGAN AS A DISPUTE over a single piece of instrumental music in Watertown has rapidly transformed into one of Wisconsin's most visible recent debates about censorship, LGBTQ+ visibility, education, and the increasingly fragile boundary between "neutrality" and exclusion.

At the center of the controversy is "A Mother of a Revolution!," a 2019 composition by composer and University of Texas-Austin professor Omar Thomas. The piece honors transgender activist Marsha P. Johnson and references the Stonewall uprising, one of the foundational moments in modern LGBTQ+ civil rights history.

The composition was originally scheduled to be performed by the Watertown High School Wind Symphony

during its spring concert. But on May 12, after mounting pressure and public debate, the Watertown Unified School Board voted 7-1 to remove the piece from the program, arguing that its subject matter violated district policies concerning controversial political topics.

CENSORSHIP SPARKS BACKLASH, WALKOUTS

The decision immediately ignited widespread public backlash online locally, statewide, and even nationally, and Watertown students organized walkouts during school sessions. Parents and community members accused the board of censorship, a fact that is especially poignant considering the fact that the composition doesn't even contain any lyrics



or political speech, and there was no classroom activism attached to it.

The district's band director, Reid LaDew, had informed parents months in advance that the piece would be performed. Parents were required to sign permission slips to allow their kids to learn the song, and students were offered the opportunity to opt out if desired. Only one student reportedly did.

But when the spring concert was only days away, the debate had already become larger than the music itself.

THE CONTRADICTION OF "NEUTRALITY"

For supporters of the board's decision, the issue was framed as one of neutrality. Some argued that schools should avoid works tied to political or social movements altogether. Others described the piece as ideological or inappropriate for a public school setting.

Yet critics quickly pointed out the contradiction embedded in that argument: When LGBTQ+ history is uniquely categorized as political while other historical narratives are treated as culturally neutral, "neutrality" begins to function less as fairness and more as selective erasure.

That tension has become increasingly common in school board battles across Wisconsin and nationally. Restrictions involving LGBTQ+ books, Pride symbols, transgender student policies, and classroom discussion are frequently framed not as exclusionary acts, but as efforts to preserve institutional objectivity. The language is often procedural rather than openly hostile. Visibility itself becomes the controversy.

Many Watertown students appeared deeply aware of that reality. Some described the board's decision not simply as a disagreement over a musical composition, but as a message about whose stories are considered acceptable in public life.

BOARD DECISION'S IMPACT ON STUDENTS

Junior Rosalie Draeger, who identified herself as part of the LGBTQ+ community, described the decision as painful and frustrating. Other students questioned why references to civil rights struggles involving LGBTQ+ people were being treated as uniquely inappropriate for educational spaces.

Their frustration reflects a broader truth supported by years of research: Representation in schools is not merely symbolic. Visi-

bility impacts belonging, mental health, and student safety. When LGBTQ+ people appear only in contexts of controversy, censorship, or moral panic, students absorb those messages regardless of intent.

Located between Madison and Milwaukee, Watertown has increasingly become a flashpoint for Wisconsin's ongoing culture war conflicts surrounding schools, public institutions, and LGBTQ+ rights. In recent years, the community has repeatedly drawn statewide attention over disputes involving transgender student policies, library materials, and curriculum oversight.

The rhetoric surrounding this latest controversy echoes older patterns deeply embedded



The raucous Watertown School Board meeting over the composition.

in American history. Vulnerable groups become framed as threats to children. Inclusion becomes recast as indoctrination. Visibility itself is interpreted as aggression.

WATERTOWN'S OTHER ANTI-LGBTQ+ ACTIONS

That historical continuity becomes difficult to ignore when considering Watertown's more recent past. In 2023, Neo-Nazi demonstrators carrying rifles and swastika flags appeared at a local Pride event and drag show, shouting threats and anti-LGBTQ+ slogans. While contemporary Watertown residents should not be simplistically defined by the actions of extremists, communities nevertheless inherit cultural narratives about belonging, normalcy, and who is perceived as an outsider.

However, despite the school board's intention to quietly end the conversation by removing "A Mother of a Revolution!," they inadvertently created a much larger and more visible conversation on the national stage.

On May 13, students organized a walkout in protest of the decision. National media began covering the story. Social media amplified it further. What might once have remained a small local controversy instead became a statewide—and eventually national—discussion about censorship, art, and LGBTQ+ inclusion in public education.

COMPOSER CONDUCTS INDEPENDENT, PUBLIC WATERTOWN PERFORMANCE

After the board barred the piece from the concert, composer Omar Thomas agreed to travel from Texas to Watertown to conduct an independent public performance at Immanuel Evangelical Lutheran Church. The event quickly transformed into something far larger than a substitute concert.

Hundreds packed into the church sanctuary. Audience members spilled into hallways and outside entrances. The performance was livestreamed to viewers across Wisconsin and beyond.

Rather than carrying the atmosphere of a political rally, the evening felt more like a communal affirmation—a collective refusal to allow fear-driven politics to dictate what students and artists are permitted to engage with.

Before conducting the piece, Thomas explained why he chose to center the composition on Marsha P. Johnson rather than commonly referenced figures in LGBTQ+ history. He described wanting young LGBTQ+ people, especially trans youth, to hear music that framed

them not through tragedy or victimhood, but through strength, heroism, and joy.

Thomas described the composition as a superhero origin story. And the music reflects that vision. It moves through tension and danger before erupting into triumphant brass fanfares, surging percussion, and soaring melodies. Thomas explained that the piece intentionally incorporates disco influences to honor queer nightlife, survival, and celebration.

By the concert's conclusion, the audience rose into a standing ovation. Many openly wept. Others embraced. What began as an act of suppression had instead produced one of the most emotionally resonant public arts events Watertown has seen in years, maybe ever.

Throughout the evening, speakers repeatedly emphasized that the gathering was not fundamentally about politics, but about dignity, belonging, and artistic freedom.

Still, the controversy surrounding the piece continued expanding beyond Watertown itself.

MINOCQUA BREWING COMPANY'S ATTEMPT TO CAPITALIZE ON THE MOMENT

Among the more contentious developments was the involvement of Minocqua Brewing Company owner Kirk Bangstad, who publicly announced plans to host a separate performance of the banned composition at his Madison taproom and began selling tickets for the event.

However, confusion and criticism quickly emerged surrounding the proposal. Bangstad later clarified that the event would not officially involve the Watertown High School Wind Symphony itself, but that members of the ensemble were invited to play along with volunteer community members and any other interested musicians, and reports indicated it remained unclear whether actual Watertown students would participate at all.

Some parents reportedly objected to the way the performance was initially advertised, which was marketed as the Watertown High School Wind Symphony. But online discussions raised concerns that the situation was becoming entangled with Bangstad's increasingly visible gubernatorial ambitions.

Bangstad, a polarizing figure in Wisconsin politics known for blending progressive activism with aggressive political branding, officially announced his run for governor earlier this year. He has also faced repeated legal and public controversies in recent years involving defamation lawsuits, harassment allegations, and questions surrounding political fundraising tied to his business and affiliated PAC activity.

THE LARGER CONTEXT

For many observers, the episode surrounding "A Mother of a Revolution!" ultimately revealed something larger than a disagreement over a concert program.

It exposed the increasingly unstable line between public education and ideological conflict. It demonstrated how quickly LGBTQ+ visibility itself can become framed as controversial. And perhaps most importantly, it showed that younger generations increasingly recognize these debates for what they are.

For many students, LGBTQ+ inclusion is not abstract politics. It is ordinary life: their classmates, teachers, families, and often themselves. Which may explain why attempts to suppress representation now so often produce the opposite effect: larger conversations, louder protests, and broader visibility than what existed before.

In the end, the question lingering after Watertown's controversy is no longer whether the music will be heard. It already has been.

The more revealing question is why so many people were frightened by it in the first place. ■



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HISTORY ADVOCACY LEADERSHIP COMMUNITY BUILDING

Hometown Pride

Growing up, **Blake Opal-Wahoske** didn't think Wausau was a place where a gay person could thrive. By choosing to stay, and by helping others feel seen and valued, he became one of the most influential civic leaders in north central Wisconsin.



Blake Opal-Wahoske (seated) with his husband, Brett.

LONG BEFORE he became one of the most visible civic leaders in north central Wisconsin, Blake Opal-Wahoske was a young man convinced he had to leave his hometown to be himself.

Like many LGBTQ+ people growing up in small Midwestern communities, he spent his youth wondering how he could ever build a meaningful life in a place like Wausau. In Marathon County, LGBTQ+ people were not often talked about, much less seen, which did not foster a strong sense of belonging.

Today, Blake represents something that he never had: an openly gay leader powerful enough to shape the future of his hometown.

Blake is widely recognized as Wausau's first openly gay community leader to serve in such visible and influential civic leadership roles, helping redefine what leadership can look like in north central Wisconsin.

As co-founder of Wausau Pride, former executive director of the Wausau River District, current executive director of the Marathon County Historical Society, and chair of the city's Historic Preservation Commission, Blake has become one of the most influential civic voices in Marathon County.

"Seeing someone like me tells people they belong here too," Blake said. "They also don't have to leave to be who they are. They can survive and thrive here in their own hometown."

A DIFFICULT PATH

Born and raised in Wausau, Blake grew up surrounded by family roots that stretched back generations. His maternal grandparents came to the Wausau area in the 1970s, and his fiercely independent and hardworking mother raised him while balancing work, family, and responsibility. He graduated from Wausau West in 2007 and pursued a Bachelor of Fine Arts at the University of Wisconsin.

But beneath the surface, Blake struggled during his late teens and early 20s. Like many young queer people grappling with identity, trauma, and isolation, he found himself drifting into unhealthy coping mechanisms.

"At age 22, I hit rock bottom," he said, "and it was the definitive turning point of my life."

Blake committed himself to sobriety at 22, confronting the emotional burdens he had carried for years. He immersed himself in holistic medicine, Eastern philosophies, travel, education, and personal healing. He took a life-changing journey across Costa Rica, where he worked with organic farming communities and completed yoga teacher training.

When he returned to Wausau, he suddenly

began seeing it differently. He rediscovered its arts community, neighborhoods, relationships, and the possibility that he could help shape its future rather than flee from it.

"That's where and when my life restarted," he said. "I fell back in love with my hometown, and that sense of purpose became a foundation for everything that followed."

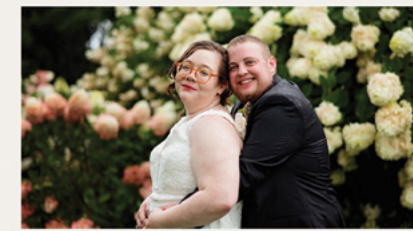
Blake entered civic leadership simply by showing up and continuing to show up. He worked at the Center for Visual Arts gift shop, taught yoga classes, and worked as a barista at La Prima Deli. Long before he was the ambassador of a changing downtown, he was a friendly and familiar face for many.

"I didn't set out with a map for leadership," Blake said. "I started by showing up, building relationships, and caring about my hometown."

People noticed. Among them was Liz Brodek, Executive Director of the Wausau River District, who saw leadership qualities in Blake long before he fully recognized them himself. In 2015, she hired him to help lead downtown programming and events.

"I was always impressed with his consistently friendly demeanor, welcoming attitude, and general way of being," said Liz. "Within a few months, I was hiring for a part-time program director and immediately thought of Blake."

"That was a pivotal moment," Blake said. "It was the first time someone really connected the



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Blake Opal-Wahoske at Wausau Pride.

dots between the relationships I had built and the potential to turn that into something more.”

Blake rose to Executive Director of the Wausau River District. Under his leadership, the downtown revitalization nonprofit earned statewide honors, national recognition, and the prestigious Great American Main Street Award.

“I don’t think I fully processed it at the time,” he said. “I had a lot to learn about city politics. Over time, I was entrusted with more responsibility, which built my confidence, and helped me grow into my role.”

Blake decided to go back to school for his bachelor’s degree at UW-Stevens Point.

“Blake took every opportunity to learn, connect, and grow his interest with our Main Street program, with a focus on historic preservation,” said Liz. “There is no substitute for passion.”

LEADING WITH PRIDE

“Instead of feeling like I needed to have all the answers, I focused on being collaborative, listening closely, and making thoughtful decisions,” Blake said.

That approach led to one of his proudest moments: co-founding Wausau Pride. At the time, launching an LGBTQ+ Pride festival in central Wisconsin felt risky. There was no clear blueprint, and there were legitimate concerns about public resistance.

“Blake really had to stick his neck out to make this happen,” recalled Tiffany Rodriguez-Lee, his longtime colleague and friend, now the president of Wausau Pride. “He was taking a real chance, personally and professionally, to create this experience for the city.”

He and his husband Brett met 13 years ago and were married on July 30, 2016. During their first few dates, they found themselves talking about the kind of life they hoped to build together, sharing dreams of owning a home, raising a family, and remaining closely

“Blake really had to stick his neck out to make this happen,” recalled Tiffany Rodriguez-Lee, his longtime colleague and friend, now the president of Wausau Pride. “He was taking a real chance, personally and professionally, to create this experience for the city.”

connected to friends and family. They were not waiting for another city to create belonging for them. They wanted to help create it themselves.

WAUSAU PRIDE IS BORN

“We wanted to invest in Wausau and make it a place everyone felt welcome,” Blake said. “A place where we felt we belonged, and where others would feel they could belong, too.”

Wausau Pride quickly evolved from a modest local event into a major regional celebration attracting attendees from across Wisconsin. More importantly, it became a public declaration that LGBTQ+ people were part of Wausau’s civic identity, not hidden or isolated from it.

“It’s been wonderful to see the next group of people stepping up, taking over, and lifting Wausau Pride higher,” said Blake. “It’s a testament to how far we’ve come as a society.”

For Blake, however, the real impact isn’t measured in attendance or revenue. He’s seen the long-term consequences of “talent bleed”—when generations of young people leave their hometowns, the entire community suffers.

“Wausau Pride provides a space where people can feel seen and supported,” he said. “That’s what is most important to me at the end of the day.”

“Without that connection, youth have been leaving Wausau as soon as they can, and they never come back,” added Tiffany. “Now,

people are starting to realize they can lead a successful, healthy, queer life here. And it’s because of people like Blake leading the change.”

CONNECTING PRESENT AND PAST

Today, Blake’s work continues through a different but deeply connected mission: preserving community memory itself.

As Executive Director of the Marathon County Historical Society, he believes history is not simply about artifacts or buildings. It is about deciding whose stories are remembered and whose stories disappear. That includes LGBTQ+ histories, immigrant stories, neighborhood histories, and the experiences of people who have traditionally existed outside official historical records.

Since 2025, Blake has been supporting the Wisconsin LGBTQ History Project as a community advisor and Archives & Collections committee member. By connecting people with inspiring stories, Blake hopes younger generations will grow up understanding they were never alone, and that LGBTQ+ people have always existed, contributed, and belonged here.

“Learning that there were people like me in Wausau, way back when, reignited my hometown pride,” said Blake. “I felt a mix of emotions and found myself wishing I’d known this information when I was younger. It’s a proof point, really: This is why we do what we

do as historians and educators.”

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

In 2025, Blake and Brett decided to start a family. They adopted a daughter, Birdie, who has transformed his understanding of patience, purpose, and responsibility.

“We have always committed to growing together, and being parents has brought us closer,” said Blake. “Birdie guides the ship. We do what she needs. Being a parent is a selfless experience that teaches you the meaning of the word surrender. It’s all about the child, 100%.”

After years of leading the org, Blake resigned from Pride to focus on his family.

“Stepping back created space for newcomers to shape the future,” he said. “Healthy nonprofit organizations don’t just encourage turnover; they are reenergized by it. New leaders with new ideas, approaches, and talents keep these organizations healthy.”

Despite his accolades, Blake remains remarkably humble. Friends and colleagues describe him not as someone obsessed with status, but as someone deeply invested in people, relationships, and community care.

“Each step of my career was powered by people who saw something in me before I fully saw it in myself,” he said. “If you want to make a real impact, start by showing up, and never stop showing up.” ■



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PEOPLE SPORTS LGBTQ+ REC LEAGUES

The Season I Didn't Quit

After a pandemic move, political whiplash, and years of hesitation, Madison transplant **Finch Pierce Hawxby** steps onto the ice with the **Madison Gay Hockey Association** and discovers something far greater than a sport.



Hockey Association. Her partner played with the league for a couple of years and had really enjoyed the sport but also the community that came together around the game. I pocketed the idea, thinking it could be something someday, but like so many other hobbies I've been mildly interested in, it just floated into the depths of my subconscious and remained, waiting.

Fast forward to November, 2024 (maybe you know where this is going). I found myself just starting to dig out of the socially desolate landscape of adult life, exploring new places and experiences with my partner and our dog, feeling human again, excitement around us, and then, once more, under the umbrella of a hostile Trump Administration. I knew I couldn't go back to the way I felt during the first term in 2016, and I would not look back. I decided now was the time to explore the idea of playing hockey with the MGHA. I needed a group of like-minded people who were open to discovering community through sport. I had no idea what I was about to get into, but I was ready to make the jump.

In the spring of 2025 I applied, and I got a call mid-summer from a recruiter with the league. He was available to answer my questions, and I had already figured out an excuse not to play. As a kid, I quit every sport I joined. When things got hard, I dipped out fast. That curse was coming back to haunt me. I told the recruiter that I had actually signed up to play scrimmages with a group at the beginning of the summer, and that I had gotten my ass handed to me, and hockey probably wasn't a good idea because as it turns out, I had the desire but not the passion for the sport. Chuck assured me, however, that if I did still want to play, MGHA was the place for me. He said I was brave for jumping into scrimmages and he certainly understood my concerns, but there is a lot of intention that goes into building the teams. Before those summer scrimmages, I had connected with Mason, who handles the gear that the league provides to those new to the sport, so I again had no real reason not to join. Gear? Check. Team? Check.

Out of excuses, I skated onto the ice for evaluations. Everyone has a spot on the team here, this is just a way to make sure teams are built intentionally with all skill levels. I saw people like me on the ice. As a trans person, it was hard to imagine myself on a team, especially in today's environment. (In my youth, this was certainly another factor that kept me clear of sports in general.) USA Hockey has followed the Trump Administration's guidance to try and write us out of existence. Joke's on them. I had never been surrounded by a queer community like this, and it was everything I could ever have asked for. People here just wanted to help me, whether that meant getting the gear I needed, doling out advice on how to be better on the ice, meeting up at rinks for open skills or getting lunch to talk strategy. I was starting to understand what it felt like to be truly involved in a community, in a meaningful way.

I decided now was the time to explore playing hockey with the MGHA. I needed a group of like-minded people who were open to discovering community through sport. I had no idea what I was about to get into, but I was ready to make the jump.

Teams were set, and the future was Teal (Team Teal, that is). As our team came together on the night of Team Reveal, the rink was abuzz. I was meeting the people I would be spending the next 6 months with, playing games almost every Sunday, learning what playing hockey and being part of a team was all about. Those were some of the best six months of my late 30's. There were moments that were terrifying, don't get me wrong. I hadn't committed to playing a sport ever, let alone one that was played on the ice—meaning not only did I have to learn a new sport and the rules that went along with it, I had to know how to skate, too. I had skated a couple of times as a kid, and had played street hockey in front of my house as an eight-year-old, but that was the extent of my sports experience as it related to the MGHA. In the end, though, I made it. I didn't quit. I stayed and played the whole season. My stats were phenomenal! I didn't make one goal. I didn't even get an assist, although my partner swears I got at least two. No penalties this season, either. I've never been more proud of my final stats, those three zeros that read after my name in the team lineup. And I have fallen in love with hockey, but even moreso, the community that comes together around this sport.

I came to know community in ways I couldn't ever have asked for. The league allows you to discover different facets of yourself, and if you're willing to take a jump into the

unknown, you never know what you'll find. In February, the league holds its annual fundraiser for the MGHA Classic Tournament at the end of April, and they ask for volunteer performers for the drag show. I waited a few days, hoping they wouldn't need any more volunteers, before responding to the email. Turns out they definitely still needed performers, so I was gifted a Mentor, and I found myself getting painted in the back room of FIVE Nightclub a few weeks later. I had so many people—not only my team, but my co-workers—who came out in force to show their support for me; I was blown away by this chosen family.

The season ended a month later. I had finished watching *Heated Rivalry*, and the Olympics had just wrapped up. I had no idea how sad I would be that all things hockey, and the season, had come to an end. I had shown up for my team, and for myself. Being a part of this community inspired me to give back, too. I plan on becoming a member this year, and hopefully a board member in the future, and co-captained a team in the April tournament. This league shows you the good that's out there, and how could I not want to be a part of that and give back? Watching community blossom around me took some effort on my part, but I'm so glad to have found this league. To me, the MGHA means hockey AND community, all wrapped up in one sweet package. ■

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MEDIA PUBLISHING ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT WRITING

Behind the Stories: Life as a Queer Publisher

Owner of ASJ Publishing, **Amy Johnson** has spent decades telling Madison's stories through restaurants, artists, advocacy and community voices, while navigating life as an openly LGBTQ+ publisher.



AMY JOHNSON does not particularly enjoy being the center of attention.

Even after nearly three decades in publishing building magazines, managing teams, guiding editorial direction, cultivating advertisers, and helping shape the storytelling landscape of Madison-area independent media, she still describes herself as someone who loves learning and sharing stories about people.

"I purposefully just sort of try to stay as anonymous as I can," Johnson says. "I'm much

more comfortable behind the scenes than in front."

Johnson is the owner of ASJ Publishing LLC and publisher of *Madison Locally Sourced*, a city-wide lifestyle magazine that frequently features restaurants, local artists, advice, events, human interest stories, and hot topics specific to the Madison area. ASJ Publishing also publishes *Second Home*, a senior lifestyle and resource magazine, *Madison Home*, which features design concepts for local

homeowners and renters, and *Greater Green Lake*, a guide to the greater Green Lake area of Wisconsin.

A LIFETIME OF WORK

Johnson grew up in a Madison suburb. "I was not sure what I would do for a career, but worked from the time I was quite young," she recalls. "I was sweeping floors, stuffing flyers into a community newspaper, fixing scoring errors at local bowling tournaments, and clerical work at WPS during the summers. I took every business course available in high school and got a full-time secretarial job at a CPA office my senior year of high school."

Those early experiences shaped both her practical understanding of business and her work ethic.

"My sister was a role model," Johnson says. "She moved to California when I was six and had a successful career in multiple industries. I saw her success come from hard work, which helped me feel that I could do the same."

Another major influence was the CPA she worked for as a teenager. "She had the most influence on my business model," Johnson says. "She was intelligent, hard-working, and caring, having the utmost integrity both professionally and personally."

Johnson still speaks about her mentor with admiration. "Tragically, she died in a car accident. I give her credit whenever I have the opportunity."

Nevertheless, those early experiences laid the groundwork for Johnson to eventually find her way into publishing and sales, a move she never imagined for herself.

"I am an introvert," she says, laughing. "But I was hired for advertising sales at a hotel guest directory publishing company in 1997."

"I was thrown in with no training, which in hindsight, likely helped me succeed. I had to find my way instead of trying to emulate someone else. My technique was common sense: Talk with business owners about reaching visitors to bring them into their businesses for valuable business growth. It was logical and successful."

Johnson's employer quickly recognized her abilities, and after just two years, she was asked to manage sales and production for the company when the owner personally relocated.

"The company was successful, so she let me try new things, including publishing magazines," Johnson says. "I had no experience, the closest thing being co-editor of my high school newspaper, but I had confidence that I could

figure it out. And she let me."

The rest, as they say, is history. In 2004, the company purchased an existing Green Lake tourist publication and Amy launched new publication *Madison Originals*, which later became *Madison Essentials*, and is now *Madison Locally Sourced*.

"I established relationships with writers, photographers, and printers, figured out our distribution, worked with my guest directory

That emphasis on human connection appears repeatedly throughout Johnson's work. "You know, if you're talking to a large group of people, you really are talking at them," she says. "But I like to talk with people."

proofreader to expand into full copy editing, and so much more," she says.

She credits her longtime design team and editing staff for making the transition possible: "Kudos to my talented designers who were willing and able to transition to doing both hotel guest directories and magazine productions, and later even more," she says.

Over time, Johnson developed a publishing philosophy centered not around reviews, rankings, or click-driven headlines, but around people.

"When somebody asks me about the magazines, I always just say, 'We tell stories,'" she says. "When we talk to a restaurant owner, we don't do a review. We want readers to get to know that person because we know that is a strong attachment in addition to good food."

That emphasis on human connection appears repeatedly throughout Johnson's work. "You know, if you're talking to a large group of people, you really are talking at them," she says. "But I like to talk with people."

BUILDING SOMETHING NEW

Johnson spent 25 years working for the same publishing company. Then, in late 2022, the company abruptly shut down.

"My employer passed away from brain cancer in 2012, leaving the business to her daughters," Johnson says. "But in November 2022, they decided to shut it down."

The announcement came suddenly, Johnson recalls. "They had expressed interest in me purchasing the company, even signing a letter of intent, but then surprised me, my attorney, and their attorney by announcing to us on that Wednesday that they were closing in two days."

For many people, losing a 25-year career with almost no warning would have been devastating, but Johnson rebuilt instead.

"I had ASJ Publishing LLC in place for consulting work," she says. "So, I took it to

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For my publications, I just want people to feel comfortable exploring our stories, feeling that they have been brought into it as though they were sitting at the table rather than being talked at.

full-time publishing a little over a month later in January 2023. And the team I loved working with came with me. All of them. I cannot emphasize enough that I would not have been able to transition so seamlessly without them. I trust and care about them, and they care about what we do. I have worked with two of them for more than 20 years! It is a rare gift."

Johnson says much of the underlying editorial vision of the magazine publications came from work she herself had created over decades so she created new publications and brands to continue what she loved doing. Today, she still oversees much of the company's creative direction herself.

"I do the sales, I do the assignments," she says. "It's me and my design team, copy editor, and office manager. A lot of times editorial comes just from a conversation and I start thinking, 'Oh, this would be really interesting to talk about from this perspective,'" she says.

Johnson says her favorite part of the work is helping ideas take shape. "If somebody comes to me and says, 'We want to promote this,' or 'We want to talk about our organization, how could we do it?' I'm good at figuring out what could be helpful and what we could do," she says. "That is my favorite thing."

PUBLISHING AS A QUEER WOMAN

Johnson describes herself as open about being LGBTQ+, but not someone who has ever

felt the need to formally announce herself.

"I'm not shy about saying that I am LGBTQ+ but have kind of always lived my personal life more privately because I do not feel obligated to explain it to others. At first meeting you may assume I am a lesbian. I mean, I have very short hair, glasses, and wear very casual gender-neutral clothes. It's me. It also raises an interesting question as to why I do not encounter as much pushback and judgement as others. I recognize and acknowledge it. I have had wonderful relationships with my peers and clients."

Her comments recognize that visibility changes the way people react, and that visibility extends to what people see in print as well. "People form judgments on your exterior," she says. "Without even knowing at what it is they're looking at."

Johnson has spent years thinking about why explicitly LGBTQ+-focused publications like *Our Lives* sometimes receive hostility while her own publications, despite often covering similar topics and sharing similar values, generally do not.

"You didn't even open the cover," she says, describing reactions some people have to LGBTQ+-focused media. "There's often an assumption that we're trying to convince people to be LGBTQ+, which is ridiculous," she says. "That's not the case, and never going to be."

"For my publications, I just want people to feel comfortable exploring our stories, feeling that they have been brought into it as though they were sitting at the table rather than being talked at. We have been able to discuss things that are considered controversial without a lot of pushback."

Her publications have covered LGBTQ+ rights, racism, discrimination, gun violence, voting, political issues, and more, but Johnson says she intentionally approaches those stories conversationally.

She recalls a particularly memorable experience involving a former copy editor who was deeply religious and politically conservative. Years ago, the publication ran a story about GSAFE. The copy editor told Johnson he felt uncomfortable proofreading the article because of his beliefs.

"So, I had a conversation with him," Johnson says. "I finally said, 'Don't you think that all kids should feel safe in school?'" she recalls. "And he agreed, so we had the common ground that kids should never feel targeted, regardless of anything else."

Johnson encourages writers to think similarly when covering controversial issues.

"I always tell them, come about it as an education piece," she says. "You want to talk to people, not at people," she says. "You don't want people to feel like you're lecturing them or saying 'You're wrong. I'm right.' You want to bring them in to read the article and take the information in."

QUIET LEADERSHIP

Despite overseeing multiple publications, Johnson still avoids calling attention to herself whenever possible.

"I can go to something and talk with people and things like that, but yeah. I'm more comfortable putting other people in the spotlight," she says. "But I do what I do because I like telling stories. I don't know how to do it in any other way than to put something out there that I think is interesting."

Even so, her leadership style has created loyalty among her staff and collaborators.

"It is important that I pay my team living wages and provide benefits," she says. "Paid vacation and holidays, and health insurance. But also that we're not in this for the money. I can go to any of my clients and they know this is me and are accepting of that. I worked really hard, and wherever I worked, I tried to learn new things so I could do the things I wanted to do. I like that part of my job. If we see something we want to do, we get to say, 'Okay, let's figure out how we do it.' And we make it come to life."

Now 60, Johnson has started thinking about the future of ASJ Publishing.

Johnson is the owner of ASJ Publishing LLC and publisher of *Madison Locally Sourced*, a lifestyle magazine that features restaurants, local artists, advice, events, and human interest stories specific to the Madison area. ASJ Publishing also publishes *Second Home*, a senior lifestyle and resource magazine, *Madison Home*, which features design concepts for local homeowners and renters, and *Greater Green Lake*, a guide to the greater Green Lake area of Wisconsin.

"My hope is to grow and do more, then eventually find someone to take over my role and the business to continue the work I started and set new goals. I would like to remain involved for a while as a contributor, but gradually scale back so I can contribute to the community in other ways. I also want to ensure that my team is part of the business's future for as long as they wish. Anyone would be lucky to work with them!" she says.

CREATING YOUR OWN FUTURE

Johnson says the most important advice she can give to people considering breaking out on their own is to, "Create your future."

"Do not expect others to create it for you. Be willing to enter a company at an entry level position, then be a sponge to grow while you are there. If you enjoy the work and continue to grow, it should not matter if you are at a job for two years or ten. I have had three jobs as an adult, and each one led to me being able to create my own business. I was never stagnant, and it benefitted me and my employers."

For Johnson, success is ultimately about what you leave behind.

That philosophy feels especially urgent to her now as LGBTQ+ rights increasingly face renewed political attacks nationwide.

"I feel the push-back on LGBTQ+ rights, and we must stand together," she says. "Our rights are human rights."

At the same time, Johnson remains hopeful about Madison and the community she has spent her life serving.

"While the Greater Madison community is not perfect, as no community is, it certainly has support that some other communities do not," she says. "Have the vision for what you can do, and do what you can to achieve it," she says. "Do not rely on others to offer a path, but instead find your own path." ■

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PEOPLE POLITICS & LAW EXECUTIVE LEADERSHIP

Leading in the Open

As Wisconsin's Secretary of Revenue, **David Casey** safeguards taxpayers' most sensitive data. As the state's first openly LGBTQ+ leader in the role, his journey to authenticity reveals a quieter story about leadership, belonging, and the power of being seen.

WHAT KEEPS YOU up at night?

That might be a loaded question for some. If you're David Casey, Secretary of the Wisconsin Department of Revenue and resident of Madison, you already know your answer.

"I'm responsible for securing the tax data of every citizen in the state of Wisconsin," said David. "Some of the state's most sensitive information rests on my shoulders."

As would be expected with a job like David's, he has a heavy portfolio overseeing

everything from fiscal policy advocacy to tax program management to taxpayer collections to the Wisconsin State Lottery. In recent years, he's led groundbreaking initiatives to modernize tax processing, data security, fraud detection, and digital compliance.

But David is not just bravely leading the department into the future. He is also making history as the first openly LGBTQ+ Secretary of Revenue in the state.

Beyond the data, the budgets, and the ev-

er-present risk of cyberattacks, he's found not only a deeply satisfying career, but a comforting "bubble of acceptance" in Madison.

Today, David's life is deeply rooted in the Midwest, but his origins trace back to the West Coast. When he was growing up in California and Oregon in the '70s and '80s, LGBTQ+ people were invisible in mainstream culture. Although his parents were fundamentally liberal, open, and accepting, he lacked the language and context for his own feelings.

"I didn't even know what I didn't know," said David.

It wasn't until he enrolled at Grinnell College in Iowa, which he describes as "extraordinarily open, supportive, and liberal," that he first encountered openly gay people his own age. While this sparked some reflections on his own identity, David did not actually come out until he was 25.

Following graduation, David relocated to Portland, Oregon, where he began to venture into the local social scene. However, the definitive turning point arrived when he moved across the country to attend graduate school at Carnegie Mellon University. Viewing this transition as a fresh start, he made an empowering decision.

"I'm going to a brand-new environment filled with brand-new people, and I'm going to be who I am."

He came out and started introducing himself as a gay man, finding the experience remarkably seamless. When he formally came out to his family, their reaction was entirely supportive, wondering only why he had waited so long.

"It was more of a battle with myself than a battle with anybody else," he said.

Since graduate school was a significant expense, David pursued a career in the fast-paced world of technology and strategy consulting. This choice set his career path in motion, but it also exposed him in the late 1990s and early 2000s to homophobia.

His very first consulting project was with the Kansas Department of Revenue. On his first day of work, Casey encountered a hateful protest organized by homophobic Reverend Fred Phelps of the Westboro Baptist Church.

"I was like, what have I gotten myself into?" he recalls. "Seeing this happening in Middle America was like stepping back 20 years."

His co-workers were welcoming, supportive, and equally embarrassed by the protest, but this jarring experience was a red flag that taught him to keep his guard up.

"As a consultant traveling across 18 states

and a dozen countries, I learned not to tell them who I was," said David. "I took the time to carefully study the culture, so I knew what to expect from them."

The most transformative chapter of his adult life happened in the most unexpected of places. He lived in Chicago but traveled throughout the country on a regular basis. While visiting a "really bad gay bar" in a Tallahassee, Florida, strip mall, David struck up a 20-minute conversation with a new friend, Kevin.

The two agreed to a proper date and scheduled it for several weeks later.

That first date? September 11, 2001.

With all flights grounded after the national tragedy, David found himself stuck in Tallahassee for five days. His extended stay in Florida was an unexpected blessing, as he spent time with Kevin, which he may have not otherwise.

Nine months later, Kevin Hubbard graduated from college and relocated to Chicago to build a life with David. And they have been together ever since.

The couple established themselves in Chicago's Boystown for five years, but David's consulting work frequently took him to Madison. Kevin began joining him for weekend visits, and the couple quickly fell in love with the city's charm. In 2006, they made Madison their permanent home, and they are approaching their 20th anniversary in the city this fall. Madison offered them what they had been seeking all along: a profound sense of belonging that had escaped them in larger, more transient cities.

"We've got a real tight-knit community, so much so that our next-door neighbors on either side of us are couples that were friends of ours that we recruited to move to our neighborhood," he said.

David and Kevin visit the Dane County Farmers' Market every weekend and take full advantage of their proximity to the UW Arboretum. They go for hikes, run, and cycle, inspired by Kevin's time working for Trek and his dedication as an Ironman triathlete.

As David laid down his roots, he also connected on a deeper level with his community. Having spent years traveling and leaving town on Mondays only to return on Fridays, he loves being present in his hometown seven days a week. Today, he serves on the investment board for the Madison Museum of Contemporary Arts Foundation and is an active member of the Downtown Madison Rotary Club.

In 2018, the couple married in the University of Wisconsin Arboretum, a space that has always had special meaning to them. After frequent visits over 20 years, his parents retired to Madison to be closer to the couple and the Wisconsin charm.

Tired of the relentless travel of consulting, David submitted his resume to newly elected Governor Tony Evers's administration in 2019. His decades of specialized experience immediately caught the attention of the administration, leading to his appointment as Deputy Secretary of Revenue under Peter Barca.

"I finally got to put into practice what I've been telling other people to do for 30 years," he laughed.

After a brief stint in the private sector, David returned when Barca stepped down, accepting Governor Evers's invitation to become the Secretary of Revenue. Today, David leads an agency defined by the very values that have shaped his life journey: inclusivity and empathy. He navigates the complexities of data security and public policy with the humble perspective of a man who had to make strategic choices about his own authenticity.

"I frequently ask my team to take my official photo down from the DOR website," he said.

Despite the discomfort of being recognized as a public figure, David takes immense pride in his team's tremendous progress, proving that true leadership thrives in the light.

"This is an impressive place to work, just an incredible agency," David said. "I'm very, very proud of what we've built and what we are building for Wisconsin's future." ■



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Our Voices Milwaukee, December 2025.

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT CHORAL MUSIC SOCIAL

Finding Harmony

Our Voices Milwaukee Artistic Director **David Hein**, board member **Patrick Grayshaw**, and singer **Tom Sielaff** share their thoughts on the organization's growth, its mission, and what it means to be part of this evolving musical family.

IN MILWAUKEE, a chorus is doing far more than making music. Our Voices Milwaukee (OVM) has grown from a small, largely unknown ensemble into a thriving, intergenerational community rooted in connection, expression, and joy.

TO START AT THE BEGINNING—HOW DID THE CHOIR COME TO BE, AND HOW HAS IT EVOLVED OVER TIME?

David: The choir is in its 15th year, and it was seeded by the choir that already existed in Madison at that time: Perfect Harmony Chorus. There was a small group in Milwaukee interested in starting a similar choir, and some people from the Madison chorus committed themselves to driving weekly to help them succeed.

In those early years, the choir hovered between about 15 and 25 people until the pandemic. We performed our first concert in May of 2022 with even fewer than 15.

From that point forward, I really worked with the members at that time to do everything we could to reach out and make ourselves known. We were really like this best kept secret; nobody knew we existed. It was a challenge to just get our name out there.

Patrick: I met with David early on to talk about how it was reasonable for a city the size of Milwaukee to have 50 members. David did some great groundwork early on to lay the foundation because the next year, 40-something people showed up. And now, we've grown to nearly 100 people. It has become a real space where people can feel safe, and people can feel like themselves.

WHAT CONTRIBUTED TO THAT GROWTH, ESPECIALLY POST-PANDEMIC?

David: There's little doubt that the direction the country was heading

on a political level was making people feel the need to find one another and use that sense of community as a point of strength from which to then go out. It's a way to state our case, to be present, and to unapologetically say who we are.

Patrick: Also, people are here because of our mission. They want to see their friends and family in a safe space, and they want to feel the connection to music that has a purpose. I was really happy that within a year and a half of talking to David, our numbers have really grown. Fifty was too low. We're sustaining much higher numbers now, which just shows the testament of people being invested in an organization like this.

WHAT KIND OF MUSIC DOES THE CHOIR PERFORM?

David: We definitely are doing a mix, which has been very intentional on my part. As a musical director, I'm always weighing the question of whether we have the right balance of singers to be able to do certain pieces. But aside from those things, I'm trying hard to make sure the scope of the repertoire is broad.

That includes traditional choral repertoire, but then I'm also looking at music that connects to social justice and music related to folk traditions. And a sizable part of our repertoire also would connect to shows and theater and musical theater. And finding repertoire from that genre that speaks to the experience of particularly gay men, but LGBTQ+ people in general, is another one of my goals.

Patrick: One challenge David has is that he's programming for an audience full of individuals as well. We have allies and family and friends and even people off the street. You have a message you're trying to send to them, but then there is the LGBTQ+ community that we're trying to connect with and show solidarity with. Plus, you want it to be an enjoyable experience. So it's a challenge.

David: Yeah, I also think it's important that the audience feels they are gaining something through this experience, even if it's not super obvious. I'm always trying to reconcile what's going to help develop the chorus with what the audience needs, and how lovely it would be if they stand up at the end of the concert and feel somehow changed.

WHAT KIND OF MUSICAL BACKGROUNDS DO MEMBERS TYPICALLY HAVE?

David: It has widened in both directions. We have some people who actually have some incredibly honed musical skills, people who did mu-

sic majors in college, people who are professionally doing music now, or are very active in regional performing groups. And at the same time, we also have a good number of folks who have walked through the door with great fear and trepidation in their eyes and said, "I have never sung before in my life, but I think I want to try this."

This is one of the things that I love the most about this group is that we have somehow managed to set a tone with everybody who's involved that we want that breadth. And the people who maybe have more musical ability, I don't really find them to hold that over anybody. And in fact, they really step up and kind of give of themselves. They're leaning over and whispering things into people's ears to help provide guidance when maybe that guidance is needed. And so it has been this community of learning in addition to being a community of support.

IT SOUNDS LIKE THE CHOIR IS MORE THAN JUST A MUSICAL GROUP. CAN YOU SPEAK TO ITS SOCIAL ROLE?

Patrick: As we've grown, it has created a space where any fear you might have is dissipated. You're not the only person singing, and I think that that has helped create a really safe space.

Tom: When I joined, I was the only new person at that rehearsal and I was walking in by myself, so it was a little nerve-racking. Whereas now, we get a bigger group each time we start a new cycle. But what has helped is that we have started creating social opportunities before the season even starts. We'll usually meet in an outdoor space during the summer about once a month. It's a way to invite folks in that want to join but might have some questions. So I think really people's journey starts with social events, and then the music kind of comes after.

It's like an added bonus that we get to all create music together.

WHAT HAVE YOU OBSERVED ABOUT PEOPLE WHO ARE NEW TO SINGING OR PERFORMING?

Tom: I have noticed that it encourages folks who have not done something like this before to be a little more invested. We have our rehearsal intensive each cycle, which is basically like an all-day rehearsal with breakout sessions. Those are helpful for folks who don't have as much music background coming in.

Patrick: One thing David did was host a "background to music theory," session, and the reviews were things like "I want more of that." A lot of people were really hungry for that musical knowledge, and they're doing it in this space that they feel comfortable.

The other thing is that we have a wide range of ages. We have people who have a lifetime of experience singing in a community or church choir, but they don't have musical theater experience. Then there are some younger members who come right from their college production rehearsals to join our rehearsals. So there's also a breadth of experiences. I always hear people learning things from each other.

David: We were incredibly fortunate to stumble upon another assistant who has now become part of our staff. And we hired an assistant artistic director, Lee Stoval, who is also a high school choir director. With both he and I being teachers, the lens through which we are addressing the chorus is very educational. We're intentional about not making assumptions about what people can or can't do.

IS THERE A LIMIT ON HOW BIG THE GROUP CAN GET BEFORE YOU HAVE TO SPLIT INTO TWO CHORUSES?

David: Everybody keeps asking me that question. We were fortunate to begin our relationship with Milwaukee Youth Arts Center, which is the arts facility on the near north side of downtown Milwaukee. It's an incredible facility whose entire purpose is to support the performing arts. The room we're currently using holds about 150 people. So, we can have as many people as we have space for in the rehearsal space.

People are here because of our mission. They want to see their friends and family in a safe space, and they want to feel the connection to music that has a purpose.

Another consideration is how many people can fit on the stage where we perform. And in fact, that's one thing we're seeing from our peer choruses in other parts of the country. New York City, for example, limits their choir to 300 because the stages that they're performing on can hold only 300 people. But beyond those practical space considerations, I'm not terribly concerned about limiting this experience.

Patrick: As we grow, that personal connection gets harder to maintain, so we're exploring a mentor system for new members to just be that friendly face. For example, we create spaces for non-drinking socialization as well to help balance things.

WHAT WOULD YOU SAY TO SOMEONE CONSIDERING JOINING?

David: We try to get away from the term "audition." It's more of a placement conversation. We're not saying you're not going to make it.

Patrick: This exists. You don't have to wait for that one spot to open up in an ensemble of 16.

Tom: It's been so nice. I'm so glad that I found Our Voices Milwaukee.

A LIVING, BREATHING COMMUNITY

What emerges from this conversation is a portrait of a choir that functions as both a musical ensemble and a living, breathing community. Our Voices Milwaukee is about harmony between people, experiences, and identities. Whether someone walks in with years of training or none at all, what they find is a space that invites them to belong, to learn, and to be heard. ■



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Governor Tony Evers at the Wisconsin State Capitol in May 2026, shortly after vetoing five Republican-backed anti-trans and LGBTQ+ bills and one month before his final Pride flag-raising as governor.

Our Governor

As Wisconsin's 46th governor, **Tony Evers**, prepares to leave office, he reflects on years spent defending LGBTQ+ Wisconsinites, advancing equality through policy and appointments, and the unfinished work he hopes will define his legacy beyond the Capitol.

PEOPLE POLITICS & LAW PUBLIC SERVICE LEGACY

DESPITE HAVING GROWN UP in Madison, I had never been in the Governor's suite of rooms in the Capitol building. The conference room where one of Governor Tony Evers' aides had me wait was opulent, richly muraled with gold, marble, and dark red beams framing the windows and paintings everywhere I looked.

The formality of the setting along with the symbolic and historic significance of the moment had me a bit nervous: We were drawing close to Governor Evers' final Pride flag raising ceremony over the Wisconsin Capitol building before he retired from life as a public servant, and this conversation was to serve as a kind of exit interview, a chance for us to talk about his time in office and how his leadership had affected the LGBTQ+ community. No pressure.

Gov. Evers walked in after a few minutes, took one look at the admittedly large strobe light and its softbox that our photographer Ian had brought, and asked, "What the hell is that?"

"My knowledge as a teacher, even back then, was that kids that are LGBTQ+ were just struggling," Evers said. "You know, it's hard for any kid, but especially a kid who feels different"

The quip eased the tension in the room as we all laughed. Gov. Evers has become known for this down-to-earth style—the "like you could get a beer with him" charisma that has been helping him connect with people around the state throughout his career.

Long before he occupied the governor's office, Evers' engagement with LGBTQ+ issues was shaped in classrooms and school hallways. He was a teacher in the Baraboo School District early in his career before he went to work for the Department of Public Instruction, ultimately becoming State Superintendent. As he recalls, his early exposure to the struggles of LGBTQ+ youth did not emerge from policy debates or ideological frameworks, but from direct, human encounters.

FROM EDUCATION TO THE GOVERNORSHIP

I began our conversation by asking about his time as a teacher and how that informed his understanding of LGBTQ+ issues.

"My knowledge as a teacher, even back then, was that kids that are LGBTQ+ were just struggling," Evers said. "You know, it's hard for any kid, but especially a kid who feels different. Whether it was meeting directly with them or hearing from their parents, it became

clear that it was something that had to be addressed in a way that was thoughtful and met the needs of those kids.”

Evers’ concerns translated into efforts to foster more inclusive school environments where queer, transgender, and other marginalized students could feel recognized and protected. He championed efforts such as the Bullying Prevention Program, establishing safe and respectful schools, and supporting the Speak Up, Speak Out (SUSO) Wisconsin Tipline, a 24/7 anonymous telephone service for reporting school safety concerns such as bullying, threats, self-harm, and other safety issues.

Those early experiences would go on to inform not only his policy priorities but also his broader worldview. The emphasis on listening to students, families, and community leaders became a defining feature of his approach.

When Evers transitioned from education leadership to the governorship in 2019, he carried those lessons with him. While the scale of responsibility expanded dramatically, his focus remained on understanding the lived experiences of people across Wisconsin.

“So much of my knowledge around these issues has been formed by people,” he said. Specifically, “people that struggle.”

That grounding shaped his administration’s approach to LGBTQ+ rights, even as the political terrain has grown more contentious. Wisconsin, like many states, has experienced sharp divisions over issues such as trans health care, school policies, and anti-discrimination protections. Throughout his tenure, Evers found himself navigating competing pressures from both sides of the aisle. Conservative lawmakers have consistently pushed restrictive measures while progressive advocates demanded more expansive action.

Evers’ responses to that tension have been characteristically measured. “You have to accomplish what you can accomplish,” he says. “Especially with LGBTQ+ issues, the last thing you want to do is put kids in a position where they’re being harassed because of me.”

The comment reflects a careful balancing act of advancing protections without inadvertently increasing the vulnerability of the very communities those policies are meant to support.

“I think we have a good track record,” said Evers, “especially as it relates to making sure that rights are becoming part of our world. But at the end of the day, we have so much more to do, especially for trans kids because now [taking away] their rights are becoming a national issue, which is horrific.”

One of the more defining elements of Evers’ perspective is his insistence that LGBTQ+ experiences in Wisconsin cannot be reduced to a simple urban-rural divide.

Asked whether he observed significant differences in the struggles of LGBTQ+ youth in schools between cities like Madison or Milwaukee and smaller communities around the state, Evers stated definitively, “No. It’s everywhere whether you’re in Plymouth or Elkhart Lake or Madison.”

This observation challenges a common narrative that frames LGBTQ+ life as primarily urban. While larger cities may offer more visible communities and resources, Evers’ point acknowledges that support systems can vary widely. Larger communities may have more established networks, but the fundamental need for acceptance and safety remains universal.

GOVERNING IN A STATE DIVIDED

Evers’ record on LGBTQ+ issues cannot be separated from the political realities of Wisconsin’s divided government. For much of his tenure, Republicans have controlled the state legislature, limiting the administration’s ability to pass new laws. As a result, Evers has



ABOVE: Governor Tony Evers participates in his final Pride flag-raising ceremony at the Wisconsin State Capitol. BELOW: Evers vetoes five anti-transgender bills on Transgender Day of Visibility in 2026.



“There has to be somebody sitting in this office that’s going to protect those rights,” he said. “If someone is trying to pass something horrifically impacting kids, trans kids, LGBTQ kids, or folks in general and you’re not going to veto that, you shouldn’t run this office.”

relied heavily on executive actions and, perhaps most notably, his veto power to block legislation he views as harmful.

“It’s very frustrating, but it’s changing,” Evers noted. “As time has gone on, Republican legislators understand these are issues they also have to attend to. They’ll pass some horrific legislation knowing full well that I’m going to veto it. So, it’s a bit of a weird dance.”

That “dance” has become a defining feature of his governorship. While critics have sometimes framed vetoes as reactive rather than proactive, Evers sees them as essential tools for protecting vulnerable communities, particularly in the absence of legislative alignment. Nevertheless, Evers believes Wisconsin has made meaningful progress during his time in office, particularly in terms of social acceptance for LGBTQ+ youth.

“I meet with groups of kids every year all across the state, and they do struggle, yes, but I think and feel that they’re in a much better place than where they were several years ago in terms of acceptance, having friends, and those kinds of basics,” he noted.

It is a modest but significant benchmark, but for LGBTQ+ kids, the ability to form friendships and feel accepted can have profound implications for mental health and well-being. At the same time, Evers is clear-eyed about the limits of that progress. “Is everything perfect? Hell, no. And it’s always going to be a bit of a struggle.”

He points in particular to the intensifying national focus on transgender issues. The politicization of trans identities, and especially in debates over health care and education, has created new challenges regardless of the fact that broader acceptance has grown both culturally and socially.

“I think we’re in a better place with trans kids,” Evers said. “But it just drives me nuts, the crap that comes out of DC.”

When asked about where he is hearing the most ardent support for

trans rights, Evers said, “I’d say the medical community is in a good place all across the state. A lot of times, it’s the medical folks that everybody listens to.”

While not an “unexpected” ally, healthcare professionals have played a crucial role in grounding discussions about transgender rights in evidence-based practice. Their voices, Evers suggests, can carry weight even in more conservative areas.

At the same time, he acknowledges the difficulties faced by providers in certain regions. “If you’re a physician in northern Wisconsin, and you’re advocating, that’s tough,” he says. “But you can count on it. I think that’s critically important, especially for children to have advocates wherever they live, whether it’s a small town or wherever.”

Those difficulties include threats from the federal government to cut funding to healthcare providers who offer gender-affirming services. However, as of May of this year, that threat was struck down by a federal judge. Nevertheless, while individual providers may often try to do the right thing, or at least offer good medical advice and advocate for their patients, their ability to act and provide services is often limited by policy, regulation, and/or bureaucracy.

Among the other most notable shifts Evers has observed during his career is the evolving role of parents.

“Parents who have trans kids or LGBTQ kids are becoming more active positively,” he says. “No question about that. I’ve talked to enough parents on this issue that I’ve seen a huge change. It started out years ago with a lot of parents saying things like, ‘I don’t know what to do,’ or feeling scared. And now, all of a sudden, it’s more like, ‘Why don’t we let kids be who they are?’ They have come to this ‘A-ha point.’ So, I think parents have played a huge role in creating more acceptance.”

For Evers, this shift has been both significant and somewhat unexpected. While parental support might seem intuitive, he notes that it often takes time and exposure for families to reach that point.

“I’ve seen that in a much larger way, over time,” he says. “Parents are more accepting and helpful. I think over time, they understood that if they pushed back, they wouldn’t want to be on that side of their kid. Now it’s much different than it used to be. I’m pleased with the way parents are advocating for their kids.”

This change, he suggests, may be one of the most important drivers of progress. While laws and policies can establish protections, cultural acceptance often begins at home.

When asked where Evers found the most resistance to his efforts and agenda as governor, he said, “Madison’s a pretty liberal place, but there’s pushback. In fact, I think sometimes it’s even more difficult here because the pushback is so strong. It may not be a majority of people, but it’s people that feel it’s very important for them to lay out where they stand on some issue.”

He describes a vocal minority that feels strongly about opposing LGBTQ+ initiatives, or on the opposite side, those who feel that support must look and be written in extremely specific ways, sometimes creating tensions even within broadly allied communities. This complexity underscores the reality that progress is rarely linear. Gains in acceptance can coexist with pockets of resistance, requiring ongoing engagement and dialogue.

A GOVERNING PHILOSOPHY: “DOING THE RIGHT THING”

So how does one navigate the murky middle amidst criticism coming from all sides? Evers returns to a deceptively simple idea:

“This is stupid, but it means doing the right thing,” he said.

Far from dismissing the phrase, he emphasized its centrality. “No matter what the issue is, if you feel that you’re doing the right thing,

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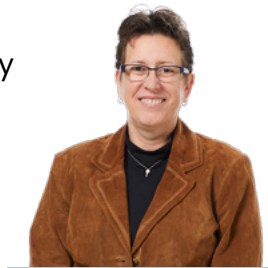
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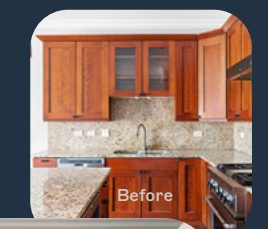
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Tony Evers' LGBTQ+ Legacy

From historic appointments to high-profile vetoes, Evers spent eight years reshaping Wisconsin's relationship with its LGBTQ+ residents.

SINCE TAKING OFFICE in 2019, Tony Evers has worked to quietly reshape state government. On his first day in office Evers signed **Executive Order #1** prohibiting discrimination in state employment, public services, and contracting on the basis of sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, and other inherent characteristics like race, age, and religion.

While much of the public attention surrounding Evers' LGBTQ+ record has focused on vetoes of anti-trans legislation and support for Pride events, he's also appointed members of the LGBTQ+ community in historically significant state positions. His appointments have helped expand LGBTQ+ representation within influential state institutions ranging from the courts to cabinet agencies.

Notable Out LGBTQ+ Appointments



James Bond became the first openly LGBTQ+ person in Wisconsin history to lead a state cabinet agency in 2023, a milestone widely celebrated by LGBTQ+ leaders and Democratic lawmakers.

Bond is a U.S. Marine Corps veteran who served during Operation Desert Storm and later built a long career in veterans advocacy and public administration. Before joining the administration, he worked with the Wisconsin Department of Administration and served as chair of the Governor's Interagency Council on Homelessness. He has been known for advocating for veterans, housing access, and equity in state services.



Sandie Giernoth, an openly lesbian prosecutor, was appointed to the Washington County Circuit Court in 2020. Giernoth spent years as a practicing attorney in private practice, focusing heavily on family law, municipal law, and civil litigation. Before joining the bench, she also served as a municipal judge and

became known for her involvement in community organizations and legal education efforts in southeastern Wisconsin.



Mario White was appointed to the Dane County bench in 2020. White previously served as an assistant district attorney in Dane County and later worked as an attorney with the Wisconsin State Public Defender's Office. Widely respected in Madison legal circles, White has built a reputation for emphasizing

fairness, rehabilitation, and community engagement within the justice system.

you can make it happen.”

In practice, that philosophy has translated into a focus on fairness, pragmatism, and incremental progress. It has also informed decisions that extend beyond LGBTQ+ issues, including his efforts to address education funding, public health, and electoral reform.

One example he highlights is his work on fair legislative maps, which is an issue he views as both foundational to long-term political change, and as one of the achievements of which he is most proud.

“Having fair maps is probably the most important thing that makes a long-term political difference,” he said. “And you know, I got a lot



David Casey was appointed in 2024 to lead the Wisconsin Department of Revenue after previously serving as deputy secretary. Casey spent decades working in Wisconsin state government, including leadership roles in tax administration, state finance, and agency operations. Colleagues have described him as a steady institutional leader with a strong focus on public service modernization and equitable administration.

Major Vetos

2023

Assembly Bill 465 / Senate Bill 480 — A ban on gender-affirming care for minors would have prohibited doctors from providing gender-affirming medical care to transgender minors, including puberty blockers, hormone therapy, and certain surgeries.

In his veto he said the legislation would harm LGBTQ+ youth and interfere with medical decisions between families and physicians.

Assembly Bill 377 — A transgender student athlete ban would have barred transgender girls from participating on girls' sports teams in Wisconsin K–12 schools.

Evers vetoed the measure in 2023, arguing it targeted vulnerable students and could conflict with federal anti-discrimination law.

2024

College Athletics Transgender Athlete Ban — Republican lawmakers passed a bill extending restrictions on transgender athletes to University of Wisconsin and technical college sports.

Evers vetoed the legislation, calling it discriminatory and harmful.

2026

ON MARCH 31, 2026 — International Transgender Day of Visibility — Evers vetoed five separate anti-LGBTQ bills at once.

Assembly Bill 100 — K–12 Trans Athlete Restrictions Would have required school sports teams to be designated by “biological sex” listed on birth certificates. Effectively barred trans girls from girls' sports in K–12 schools.

Assembly Bill 102 — College Trans Athlete Restrictions Applied similar restrictions (to AB 100) to University of Wisconsin and Wisconsin technical college athletics.

Assembly Bill 103 — Pronoun and Name Restrictions in Schools Would have required schools to adopt policies governing students' names and pronouns. Critics said it would effectively force schools to out transgender students to parents.

Assembly Bill 104 — A Gender-Affirming Care Ban for Minors Would have prohibited most forms of gender-affirming health care for transgender minors.

Senate Bill 405 — Lawsuits Against Gender-Affirming Care Providers Would have allowed patients to sue healthcare providers for gender-transition procedures later in life. ■

of crap from my own side on that, too. But this is just an example of how it all works. The Supreme Court was given three options of maps, and one of them was mine. The other two were developed by others. The others were a little too far, I believe, but I thought mine was in a good position. I also knew that mine would get some Republican votes, and we would have something approved by the Legislature. Because if they would have picked either of the other two, it would have gone to the U.S. Supreme Court because the Legislature would never have approved them, and the U.S. Supreme Court would have thrown them out. We know because they had already done that.

So, we would have been stuck with the old maps for another six or seven years. So, to me, it had to be something we could get through that had enough Republicans and Democrats behind it to pass. And we did it. It was a lot of work, but I got it done.”

The redistricting process, often overlooked by the general public, will have significant implications for representation and policy outcomes for decades to come. By advocating for maps that could gain bipartisan support, Evers sought to break the cycle of entrenched partisan advantage that has plagued the state for so long.

LOOKING BACK AND LOOKING “FORWARD”

As the conversation turns to legacy, Evers frames his hopes in both immediate and long-term.

“There has to be somebody sitting in this office that’s going to protect those rights,” he said. “Right now, it’s to the point where, if someone is trying to pass something horrifically impacting kids, trans kids, LGBTQ kids, or folks in general and you’re not going to veto that, you shouldn’t run this office. It’s as simple as that. That’s critically important.”

At its core, his vision is less about personal recognition and more about ensuring that the work begun during his tenure continues under future leadership. It’s an understandable concern. Governor Evers has done a lot—arguably more than any previous Wisconsin governor—to protect the rights of LGBTQ+ Wisconsinites during his time in office. Some of the most notable efforts have included:

- **Executive Order #1** (2019) Protects state employees from discrimination or harassment based on race, religion, color, sexual orientation, national origin, age, or gender identity, which effectively protects transgender state employees from discrimination.

- **Vetoing anti-LGBTQ+ legislation** [For full list of vetoed anti-LGBTQ+ legislation, see sidebar.]
- **Executive Order #121** (2021) Directed cabinet agencies to implement gender-neutral language in external state documents to foster more inclusive work environments.
- **Executive Order #122** (2021) Banned the use of federal funds allocated by health, corrections, and family services departments to be used for conversion therapy for minors.
- **Executive Order #264** (2025) Ordered the Progress Pride Flag to fly over the East Wing of the State Capitol Building, and authorized state buildings and any jurisdiction of the State of Wisconsin to fly the Progress Pride Flag during the month of June.
- **Appointing countless out LGBTQ+ staff, judges, secretaries, state representatives, and other executive appointments** including two cabinet members and many members of the governor’s senior staff and some of his closest advisors. See the sidebar for some specific names.
- **Hosting Pride Month celebrations** and receptions at the Wisconsin Executive Residence during June along with First Lady Kathy Evers.

The story of LGBTQ+ rights in Wisconsin, like the story of Tony Evers’ governorship, is still being written. Progress has been real but uneven, and shaped by shifting political dynamics and evolving cultural attitudes. The conversation is one of steady incremental change driven by educators, parents, medical professionals, and young queer people themselves.

Evers’ role in that process has been, in many ways, consistent with his broader approach to leadership: pragmatic, grounded, and guided by what he sees as fundamentally right. In an era of heightened polarization, that simplicity may be both his greatest strength and his most enduring legacy. ■

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What Happens When You Say Yes

A simple challenge to think bigger set **Cinn City Smash** on a path from food truck startup to **Madison Public Market** vendor.

FOOD & DINING | FOOD TRUCKS | LOCAL BUSINESSES | MADISON PUBLIC MARKET

WHEN I MOVE to a new city, the first thing I do is become a regular. Not casually, and not everywhere. I seek out the diners, drive-ins, and dives where the regulars feel earned, routines are established, and relationships shape the room. For me, as a large cisgender Black man in an unfamiliar city, having a standard seat or an overfamiliar order offers a kind of stability. It becomes an entry point. A way of belonging.

After arriving in Madison in 2018, that process unfolded quickly. Within weeks, I was no longer anonymous because the workers recognized me. In my experience, there is no faster or more reliable way to understand the trajectory of a city than by listening to the people who have been feeding it for years.

I've moved more than a dozen times from my 20s into my 40s, and this strategy has served me well each time. In Madison, one of my earliest and most influential stops was Willalby's Cafe.

Since opening around 2000 and later coming under the ownership of Nate Prince in 2010, Willalby's has functioned as a true neighborhood diner. Artists, city employees, students, longtime residents, and first-time visitors sit side-by-side at the counter. The food and coffee are exactly what a diner promises and delivers: straightforward, unfussy, and consistent. The grill sits within view, and the dishes arrive prepared with the kind of practiced familiarity that suggests nothing has been reinvented unnecessarily.

When I was approached several weeks ago to write about a food truck called Cinn City Smash, I had no idea that co-founder Maximus "Noodle" Perdomo also had a meaningful connection to Willalby's Cafe, having worked there as a short-order cook earlier in their career.

A BURGER, A CHURRO, AND A TRUCK

Cinn City Smash was born out of uncertainty, stubborn loyalty,

late-night pacing, financial fear, and a friendship subjected to the ultimate stress test: 14-hour workdays inside a food truck with no air conditioning. And yet, somehow, it does exist. The business is thriving, evolving, and now stepping into a new chapter as a brick-and-mortar operation at the new Madison Public Market.

The early concept phase was loose and playful. It started with breakfast churros: fun, indulgent, unexpected. From there, the idea expanded to breakfast and lunch. And once lunch entered the conversation, smash burgers were inevitable. They were obsessed with smash burgers at the time.

To understand how Cinn City Smash became one of Madison's most talked-about food concepts, you must start before there was a name, a truck, or even a plan, back when its co-founder Noodle wasn't even sure they wanted to do it.

THE QUESTION THAT CHANGED EVERYTHING

After more than a decade in the service industry, Noodle was comfortable with the idea of creating another Willalby's Cafe, which holds a distinctive and outsized significance in Madison for its approachability and deep-rooted food culture. So, when Noodle approached their best friend Rutger Schiesser, the idea in its first conception wasn't a reinvention. Willalby's worked well. It was proven.

"Technically, it started with me asking Rutger if they'd open a second Willalby's with me," Noodle says. "Of course, with Nate's blessing."

Rutger's response was simple, and it landed harder than expected: Why not open your own restaurant?

The answer came fast—no. Willalby's felt safe. Familiar. Opening something new felt overwhelming and risky. But the question lingered.

That night, it wouldn't let Noodle go. At home, Noodle imagined what it would look like to build something on their own. What would it feel like to walk into a space that existed because they made it happen?

By morning, the idea had taken root. When Noodle returned to Rutger, things shifted quickly. They weren't opening another Willalby's Cafe. They were starting a new concept from scratch.

BREAKFAST CHURROS & SMASH BURGER OBSESSION

Deciding to do it was one thing. Figuring out what to do was another.

The early concept phase was loose and playful. It started with breakfast churros: fun, indulgent, unexpected. From there, the idea expanded to breakfast and lunch. And once lunch entered the conversation, smash burgers were inevitable. They were obsessed with smash burgers at the time.

"We still are," they admit.

There's just something honest about smash burgers. They're stripped down, with no hiding behind excess. Just ingredients, technique, and repetition.

Rutger had been scheming food truck ideas for years—five or six, depending on who you ask. They'd even considered opening a dessert-focused concept using Rutger's father's Dutch recipes.

But clarity came when they simplified everything. They would serve two things: burgers and churros. They took the essence of Willalby's café and flipped it into something leaner, more attainable, and, unintentionally, far more demanding.

A NAME, A MONSTER, AND A CITY

Once the concept was settled, everything clicked.

During a shift at Willalby's, Noodle's creative mind went into overdrive. Noodle walked in, sat down, and immediately got hit with a fully formed idea.

"What if there was this giant burger monster and this giant churro monster," they said, "and they're fighting each other over Madison, blazing through town, trying to conquer the city?"

It was ludicrous, loud, and lasting. Now they just needed a name. "Smash City" came close, but something was missing. The churros. The cinnamon. The city.

Cinn City Smash.

It held everything: the cinnamon, the city, the burgers. Sure, most people would assume they were from Cincinnati. But that didn't matter if they knew what it meant.

THE BURGER TRIALS

Rutger, a longtime mechanic, had done half the work, building the truck, fixing it, and keeping it alive. If Rutger was the truck, Noodle was the food.

Noodle called the early development stage "the burger trials." They tested everything from the buns and beef blends to the smash techniques and onion cuts. They documented even the smallest changes in a notebook that still exists. When the final version came together, time stopped.

"We all looked at each other and knew," Noodle says. "This was something."

The 14-hour days of prep, service, and cleanup were brutal. And when you're doing that alongside your best friend, someone you've known since childhood, everything gets tested.

"We joke that we basically got married because of it," Noodle says.

The stress tested their patience, communication, and trust. But every day, they showed up, and that kept Cinn City Smash moving forward. But nothing prepared them for their June 15, 2023 grand opening.

"The first day. I can't describe the feeling of creating a menu, and then hearing people, for the first time, ordering off that menu," Noodle remembers. "I kinda was feeling like I was having imposter syndrome. Seeing a line down the block, standing outside of our creation, it was just hard to believe it was our new reality."

NEXT STEPS

For a long time, a brick-and-mortar location wasn't part of the plan. "We had a couple opportunities before," Noodle says. "But they never made sense to us. We didn't have any plans on becoming a brick-and-mortar before this. It kind of just fell into place with the Public Market. We've been calling it 'right place, right time.'"

The Madison Public Market is a long-anticipated, city-backed food and culture hub designed to bring local businesses, diverse cuisines, and community life together under one roof.

"We don't even know what it'll turn into yet," Noodle laughs. "But we'll find out."

And they will, along with a core family of people in on the operation. Friends weren't enough to describe the people involved. In addition to Noodle and Rutger, there's Sydney, Noodle's soon-to-be wife, who offered to help close and clean the truck the very first night they met. At the time, Noodle had no idea how vital Sydney would become.

"We wouldn't have survived the second year without Sydney," Noodle says. "Sydney went through the trenches with us."

Now, as the company grows, Sydney has officially joined full-time as Director of Marketing and Operations bringing vision and structure to the next phase.

The extended family also includes longtime friends Sarah and Robert, who worked through brutal summers before the truck had air conditioning. Rutger's cousin Ethan is now joining them at the Madison Public Market. And Rutger's wife Hannah, was recently hired as full-time prep.

"It's a family business," Noodle says. "Truly."

WHY IT MATTERS

Cinn City Smash isn't just a burger truck or a churro stand. It's a story of obsession turned craft. It began as a question that almost got brushed off, but turned into something that now feels inevitable.

In Madison, places like Willalby's endure because they do more than serve food. They hold memories. It's not entirely surprising, then, that Cinn City Smash would emerge from that same ecosystem. Both are built on the belief that familiarity matters, that showing up every day and doing something well is enough to earn trust. ■

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WISCONSIN QUEER FOOD, DRINK & DINING

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Our yearly roundup of **queer third spaces** and other food & beverage related businesses in the Madison area—and around the state.

FOR LGBTQ+ INDIVIDUALS, queer owned-and-operated third spaces provide an opportunity to be ourselves in a way we don't always get to be in other areas of our lives, with restaurants, cafes and coffee shops doing most of the heavy lifting. For years we've been curating a list of LGBTQ-owned spaces that would love your support. **As hard as we try, a truly comprehensive list is impossible without your help.** If you know of any businesses that aren't on this year's list, please let us know about them! Email us at contact@ourliveswisconsin.com.

MADISON-AREA LGBTQ-OWNED FOOD & BEVERAGE RESTAURANTS & THIRD SPACES

- Baked Lab
- Bernell's
- Cargo Coffee
- Cash & Olive's Pub
- Cinn City Smash
- D'Vino/Dinotto
- Delta Beer Lab
- EVP Coffee Company
- Fair Trade Coffee House
- FIVE Nightclub
- Fromagination
- Giant Jones
- Herbiary Brewing
- Java Cat Coffee House
- Judith & Jane's Bakehouse
- Michael's Frozen Custard
- Millie's Coffee and Eatery
- Oasis Cafe
- Ollie's
- The Shamrock Bar & Grille
- The Sow's Ear
- Square Wine Co.
- The Old Fashioned
- Waffle Daddy
- Willalby's Cafe
- WOOF's

OTHER BUSINESSES

- Bee Charmer
- Crossroads Community Farm
- D-Bar Bakery
- Driftless Market & Deli
- Generations Beef
- Luna Circle Farm
- Stubborn Mule Catering
- WestFam Farms LLC
- Wonderfarm

MILWAUKEE-AREA LGBTQ-OWNED FOOD & BEVERAGE RESTAURANTS & THIRD SPACES

- Amilinda
 - El Batey
 - The Final Girl
 - Flour Girl and Flame
 - Fruition MKE
 - Las Virellas
 - Lumpia City
 - Midwest Sad
 - MOXIE Food + Drink
 - Mother's
 - North Shore Boulangerie
 - Ono Kine Grindz
 - POP
 - Style Pop Cafe
 - Todo Postres
- ## AROUND THE STATE
- Alley Cat Coffee House
 - Allen Creek Coffee House
 - Cash & Olive's Pub/Millie's Coffee and Eatery
 - Chandler House Bakery
 - Coddiwomple
 - Commerce Street Brewery Hotel
 - The Corner Store
 - Ecotone Herbs
 - Get Real Cafe
 - Great Northern Distilling
 - Horseradish Kitchen + Market
 - Kris' Kitchen
 - Napalese Lounge & Grille
 - Paradigm Coffee and Music
 - Pyramid Event Venue
 - Tuk-Tuk Fusion
 - Wicked Willow
 - Wolf River Roots

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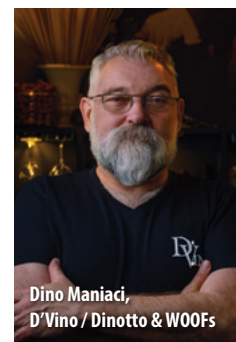
MADISON-AREA LGBTQ-OWNED RESTAURANTS & THIRD SPACES

THE BAKED LAB 2044 Atwood Ave, Madison Founded by pastry chef Shawn J. Bolduc, Baked Lab is a modern pastry shop blending classic techniques with innovative flavors and modern vibes. Specializing in creative pastries, wedding desserts, and hands-on baking workshops, we bring a fresh, contemporary twist to the bakery experience.

BERNELL'S 2513 Seiferth Rd, Madison Named for Wisconsin women's sports pioneer Bernell Hooker, Bernell's was created by her wife, Rita Adair, as both a tribute and a continuation of Hooker's lifelong advocacy for women's athletics. Located on Madison's east side, the bar was envisioned as a place where women's sports are celebrated rather than treated as an afterthought.



Tamí Lax, The Old Fashioned



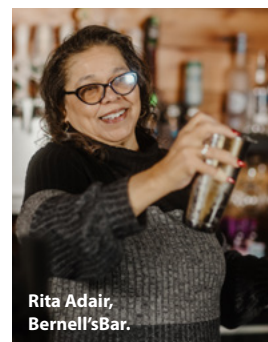
Dino Maniaci, D'Vino / Dinotto & WOOFs



Lynn Lee, Cargo Coffee



Tracy Danner, EVP Coffee



Rita Adair, Bernell's Bar



Shawn Bolduc, The Baked Lab

CARGO COFFEE 750 East Washington Ave, Madison & 1309 South Park St, Madison Lynn Lee co-owns Cargo Coffee with his twin brother, Lindsey. Their globally sourced beans are locally roasted, and the shop's decor reflects a vintage charm with oversized maps and aviation/culinary themed antiques. The East Washington location continues to host a wide array of musical acts.

CASH & OLIVE'S PUB / MILLIE'S COFFEE AND EATERY W9535 US Hwy 12, Cambridge Cash & Olive's (owned and operated by wife-duo Courtney Sargent and Jen Obranovich) offers made-from-scratch dishes, craft cocktails, and a dog-friendly patio. Millie's Coffee Drive-Thru serves espresso drinks and made-to-order breakfast 6:00–11:00 a.m.

CINN CITY SMASH Food truck – Madison area Owned by Maximus (Noodle) Perdomo and Rutger Schiesser, Cinn City Smash is truly a smash. This eye-catching purple truck is hard to miss. Known for their burgers, churros, and truffle fries, they've also crafted a menu for everyone. Whether you're vegan, gluten-free, veggie, or part of the LGBTQ+ community, Cinn City Smash has something for you. And with their fast-paced, efficient service, you'll never have to wait long to dive into their tasty creations.

D'VINO / DINOTTO 116 King St / 106 S Webster St, Madison Traditional Italian fare is on the menu at D'Vino with a standard dinner menu, brunch on weekends, a Sunday supper, and now open for lunch on Friday. An additional location, Dinotto, now open around the block at 106 S. Webster St, M–F 10:00 a.m.–2:00p.m., features imported Italian deli meats and cheeses, housemade sandwiches, salads, sauces, and desserts. Or take a little bit of D'Vino to go with Take-N-Bake items; lasagne, stuffed shells, eggplant/chicken parmesan.

DELTA BEER LAB 167 E Badger Rd, Madison Delta Beer Lab serves as a community destination and brewery, owned and operated by Pio & Speedy. We strive to expand community through quality, local craft beer without barriers to gender, race, or sexual orientation. Delta brews beer, operates a vibrant Taproom (with much more than just beer), and distributes to bars, restaurants, liquor stores, and grocery stores in Dane, Green, Rock, Columbus, Sauk, and Iowa counties. Drag Queen Bingo is on the 3rd Tuesday of each month. Weekly Trivia is every Wednesday, and themed trivia programs are offered once a month and are very popular.

EVP COFFEE COMPANY Four locations in Madison EVP Coffee Company, owned by Tracy Danner, has been roasting and serving freshly roasted coffee and coffee beverages at its four locations in the Madison area for more than 27 years. EVP has a kitchen where scones, breads, muffins, granola, and savory food items are made with lots of love and care. Serving in the spirit of Love, Kindness and Respect is foundational at EVP.

FAIR TRADE COFFEE HOUSE 418 State St, Madison The coffee shop, purchased by Casey Thompson and Thomas Beckwith-Thompson in 2017, is both a hub for students studying and an early evening gathering place that's

an alternative to bars. They prioritize serving fair trade certified coffee drinks and also have cold brew, baked goods, a selection of sandwiches for breakfast or lunch, smoothies, and other desserts. The owners also purchased Oasis Cafe in 2024.

FIVE NIGHTCLUB 5 Applegate Ct, Madison Since 1998 FIVE Nightclub, owned by Dave Eick, has served patrons drinks and entertainment in the club just off Fish Hatchery Road. A community-supported revival in 2015 rejuvenated the club and it remains a central hub of LGBTQ+ celebrations. They host groups and hold various events including karaoke, drag shows, pageants, Latin Night, line dancing, fundraisers, and variety shows.

FROMAGINATION 12 South Carroll St, Madison Fromagination is Madison's downtown cheesemonger, owned by Ken Monteleone. The specialty cheese shop features dozens of artisanal Wisconsin cheeses and more from around the world in addition to donating to various causes. Customers can use the website to access ordering, class registrations, cheese boards, gifts, and catering options. Lunch can be ordered through EatStreet.



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Courtney Sargent & Jen O'Branovich, Millie's Coffee & Eatery and Cash & Olive's Pub.



Nate Prince, Willalby's Cafe



Andrea Hillsey, Square Wine Co.



Debra Errington, The Sow's Ear



Mary Celley, Bee Charmer

GIANT JONES 931 E Main St, Madison Jessica and Erika Jones started their brewing company in 2018 to bring big beers to Wisconsin's brewing scene. Their craft beers are certified organic and pack a punch at 7% or more ABV. Their taproom is open Wednesday-Saturday evenings. In collaboration with ORIGIN Breads, they now offer pizza nights in the tasting room every Wednesday. View their website for a sizable list of additional places to enjoy their brews on tap or to-go.

HERBIARY TAPROOM 2015 Winnebago St, Madison Nia Ryan was inspired by her herbal studies to brew beer with herbs beyond hops. With a taproom in the Schenk-Atwood neighborhood since 2023, Herbiary features a menu of herbal fermentations from beer to zero-proof beverages with ingredients sourced from local farms. Open Thursday-Saturday and more for events that feature our creative community and vibrant local food system.

JAVA CAT COFFEE HOUSE 4221 Lien Rd, Madison The coffee shop, owned by Renee Raspiller, offers coffee that is fair trade, organic, and roasted in Madison by Just Coffee. Along with sandwiches, salads, and baked goods, they serve housemade gelato, strong coffee drinks, and tea. Their sizeable cafe includes meeting space and a large back yard for enjoying the outdoors.

JUDITH & JANE'S BAKEHOUSE 10 W Mill St in Poynette/Dane County Farmer's Market Based in Poynette, owners and wives McKenzie Propp and Ava Wilkerson started Judith & Jane's Bakehouse in the legacy of Chris and Lori's Bakehouse in April of 2026. They sell at the Dane County Farmer's Market, as well as the Westside Community Market in Madison at 505 Rosa Road. During June, Chris and Lori would bake rainbow sugar cookie hearts and have a portion of their profits go toward LGBTQ+ organizations in the Madison area. We can't wait to carry that tradition on!

MICHAEL'S FROZEN CUSTARD 3826 Atwood Ave, Madison Michael Dix has been making frozen custard for more than 30 years. His restaurant has a vintage soda shop vibe and offers vanilla and chocolate custard along with a flavor of the day in cones, sundaes, and shakes as well as burgers, dogs, fries, and

other trimmings. Also available: Blue Crown Coffee offers hot and iced items that are made from single origin USDA Certified organic coffee along with bagels and a daily assortment of pastries.

OASIS CAFE 2690 Research Park Dr, Fitchburg Oasis cafe was purchased by Casey Thompson and Thomas Beckwith in 2024 and serves a variety of locally roasted coffee and espresso, bakery items, along with made-to-order breakfast and lunch items, and Madison's own Paul's Pel' meni.

OLLIE'S 2951 Triverton Pike, Fitchburg Chef Dave originally opened the restaurant at this site 19 years ago named for his first child. When that child came out as trans, he renamed and remodeled the restaurant to honor that new name and identity. We strive to celebrate the unique individuals of our staff and customers and everything that makes them who they are. Our restaurant is intentionally designed to feel welcoming for all of our guests. We offer multiple ways to order and interact with serving staff, a menu to accommodate dietary restrictions and allergies, equally fun nonalcoholic and alcoholic beverages, as well as items like fidgets, coloring, and noise-reducing headphones to increase comfort for guests who utilize those tools.

THE SHAMROCK BAR & GRILLE 117 W Main St, Madison The Shamrock is technically Madison's oldest gay bar. The original bar began in 1985, and since 2013 owner Bob Mahr has worked to keep his downtown bar's drink specials affordable and the food menu accessible. Yes, it is a gay bar, but that doesn't mean you can't go there for some classic Wisconsin pastimes. Open 7 days a week with happy hour (3-7 p.m.), Movie Mondays, Friday fish fry with RuPaul's Drag Race, and Packers games are all on tap.

THE SOW'S EAR 125 S. Main St, Verona For 25 years (and counting!) The Sow's Ear has proudly been a space where everyone is welcome to create and connect through fiber arts and coffee beans. At The Sow's Ear, community is everything. They source their yarns, notions, ingredients, and more from local, ethical partners who share their values of inclusivity and integrity in crafting. Discover exclusive colorways and fair trade supplies for all aspects of your crafting journey.

SQUARE WINE CO. 1 East Main St, Madison Andrea Hillsey's enthusiasm for wine is equal to her depth of knowledge about the vintages she carries from small family growers around the world. She's committed to teaching consumers about wine appreciation and pairing. You can join them for Friday night tastings (RSVP required) or sign up for the wine club for a monthly bottle with an accompanying food pairing recipe.

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Jessica & Erika Jones, Giant Jones Brewing



Mike Adank, The Corner Store

THE OLD FASHIONED 23 N Pinckney St, Madison Owned by Tami Lax and Marcia Castro, The Old Fashioned focuses on cooking Wisconsin food and seasonal fare on Madison's capitol square. Opened in 2005 and managed by Lax's partner Jennifer DeBolt, they have a 'Sconnie-casual menu that features famous cheese curds. They are open lunch through dinner; closed Sundays.

WAFFLE DADDY 1522 Longview St, Madison Years in the making, local home baker Luke Andersen has launched Waffle Daddy, a Madison micro bakery specializing in artisan sourdough toaster waffles. Combining a pillowy soft interior with a crispy crust, Waffle Daddy waffles are made ready to be toasted fresh in the comfort of your own home. With five signature flavors (Original Recipe, Cinnamon Sugar, Chocolate Chip, Everything Bagel, and Garlic Herb), there is a flavor for every sweet or savory craving! Available Summer 2026 for porch pickup!

WILLALBY'S CAFE 1351 Williamson St, Madison Owner Nate Prince took over Willalby's in 2010 after working there for a decade. The diner is a long-time institution on Williamson Street known for its vegan-friendly breakfasts and giant buttermilk pancakes that are among the best in town.

WOOF'S 114 King St, Madison Dino Maniaci's King Street bar has served patrons since 2008 with an industrial vibe unlike anything in the city. It offers a variety of activities and events as well as dart/pool leagues and leather nights.

MILWAUKEE-AREA LGBTQ-OWNED RESTAURANTS & THIRD SPACES

AMILINDA 315 E Wisconsin Ave, Milwaukee Amilinda is owned and operated by Chef Gregory León, who you can find in the kitchen cooking every night. Chef León is a four-time James Beard Award nominee. Annually, the community celebrates Pride with brunch at Amilinda. Additionally, chef León hosts a fundraiser every year for Vivent Health—a national organization dedicated to ending HIV/AIDS by providing integrated, personalized and judgment-free health care, social services, and effective prevention strategies.

EL BATEY 1003 W National Ave, Milwaukee El Batey is an exclusive tapas and cocktail lounge where tradition meets innovation. Led by wives and entrepreneurs Mildred and Carolin Virella, the concept focuses on classic mixology reimagined with a Puerto Rican twist, elevating the island's rich culture and gastronomy. Our space is designed for those seeking sophisticated cocktails and bites inspired by our roots, offering guests a unique cultural atmosphere and exceptional hospitality in the heart of the city.

THE FINAL GIRL 7546 Sheridan Rd, Kenosha Chelsea Vecchione is the sole owner of The Final Girl, a horror-inspired bar in Kenosha. Chelsea is a part of the LGBTQ+ community and offers a safe space for all walks of life. The Final Girl hosts monthly drag shows, drag king bingo, and burlesque shows.

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April & Charity Chandler,
Chandler House Bakery



Ken Monteleone,
Fromagination



Renee Raspiller,
Java Cat Coffee House



Jesus Bisoso &
Pedro Garcia-Rios, Todo Postres



Samantha Klimaszewski & Alexa Reyes,
Lumpia City

FLOUR GIRL & FLAME 8121 W National Ave, West Allis Flour Girl & Flame, a women-owned restaurant and mobile pizza catering company is part of the LGBTQ+ community. Our mission is to foster a sense of inclusion by supporting women growers, LGBTQ+ producers and farmers of color. You'll find us in our shop during the winter months and out at various pizza farms, festivals, and weddings during the warmer season.

FRUITION MKE 819 N 27th Street, Milwaukee Fruition MKE's mission is to cultivate a vibrant and inclusive community of innovators, creators, and entrepreneurs by providing a dynamic space where collaboration, creativity, and community thrive in the near-west side neighborhood. They take great pride in offering a delightful selection of beverages featuring Colectivo Coffee and Rishi Teas. Their cafe offers local beverage brands like Soul Brew Kombucha, Lavender Lemonade, BKlear Alkaline Water and the signature cookie of A Goodman's Dessert.

LAS VIRELLAS 636 S 6th St, Milwaukee Led by owners Mildred and Carolin Virella, Las Virellas Food Truck is a family-owned business specializing in authentic Puerto Rican cuisine. Located at the vibrant Zócalo Food Park, the food truck stands out for its use of fresh ingredients and artisanal recipes, offering a vibrant gastronomic experience that captures the true essence of "boricua" cooking in a dynamic and welcoming atmosphere.

LUMPIA CITY 315A N Milwaukee St, Waterford Lumpia City was born in San Diego when Alexa and Sam decided to share their passion for Filipino-American fusion cuisine with the world. What started as a pop-up has grown into something bigger. Now based in Waterford, they're on a mission to bring their unique flavors to mainstream audiences—all while honoring the culture-blending spirit that started it all. Lumpia City offers dine-in and takeout at their Waterford location. They also sell frozen packs, have a food cart, and can be found in grocery stores and at other retail locations.

MIDWEST SAD 601 S 6th St, Milwaukee Midwest Sad is a Milwaukee bakery offering nostalgic treats with a focus on ethical practices, fair wages, and local partnerships, aiming to build community and spread joy through food. Midwest Sad enjoys mixing emo nostalgia and decadent desserts. The result is a comforting combination that anyone can relate to.

MOXIE FOOD + DRINK 501 E Silver Spring Dr, Whitefish Bay MOXIE, the North Shore's premier upscale-casual restaurant, is owned by wife/wife team Anne Marie and Tamela. MOXIE features inspired American comfort food—steaks, seafood, and pasta—in a warm and welcoming atmosphere.

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contact@ourliveswisconsin.com

NORTH SHORE BOULANGERIE 4401 N. Oakland Ave, Shorewood North Shore Boulangerie is one of Milwaukee's finer bakeries and cafés, serving desserts, breakfast pastries, and coffee from Paris' Cafés Richard, and a full lunch menu in authentic French tradition. We also provide wholesale bakery delivery to the metro area's finer restaurants, hotels, and markets. Our kitchen and dining room are available for catering services and hall rental.

ONO KINE GRINDZ 7215 W North Ave, Wauwatosa Hawaiian food is not a familiar food option here in the dramatically colder upper Midwest, but Ono Kine Grindz and its passionate taste of the Pacific has been converting folks and expanding horizons. The Tosa restaurant's menu features items ranging from the Kalua pig—traditional Hawaiian pulled pork—to Chinese style barbecued chicken to ahi tuna to saimin—ramen done Hawaiian style—and more.

POP 124 W National Ave, Milwaukee POP is a bright, spacious, and colorful bar with fast casual comfort food, drag shows and bingo, karaoke, music parties, and tons of other events. Head in for a Packers game, RuPaul's Drag Race viewing party, or check out one of their pop icon album release parties.

STYLE POP CAFE 934 S 5th St, Milwaukee Style Pop Cafe is a coffee, coffee-cream brand, and cafe located in the vibrant neighborhood of Walker's Point. Their goal is to encourage people to find their purpose and/or what drives them over THEIR experience with coffee. They're also a co-working space and event space, and they offer catering.

TODO POSTRES 958 W Oklahoma Ave, Milwaukee Pedro Garcia-Rios & Jesus Bisoso run a traditional Latin bakery offering items as well as custom temptations. Check out their social media to see their mouthwatering flan, tres leches, and beautiful occasion cakes made for an eclectic clientele. They host a talk show broadcast live with guests every Thursday at 7:00 p.m.

OTHER BUSINESSES

BEE CHARMER Dane County Farmers' Market stand Ask Mary Celley anything about bees, and she will bring her many years of experience and education in horticulture to explain why different honey has different flavor or how you can successfully keep bees at home. The honey bee enthusiast has been known for selling raw organic honey, candles, beeswax, heirloom tomatoes, pumpkins, squash, and ambrosia sweet corn at the Dane County Farmers' Market.

COWBOY DAVID'S SPECIAL ORDER BAKERY E11761 County Road P, LaFarge Owned and operated by the gay cowboys, Joe & David (of The Kickapoo Valley Guest Cabins), Cowboy Joe's was named 2025's LGBT Business of The Year from The Wisconsin LBGT Chamber of Commerce. They have also won several other awards over the years for their amazing flavor profiles, products, and wedding designs. They are known for the most incredible cookies, cakes, cupcakes, SuperMuffins™, brownies,



Cassie Wyss,
Crossroads Community Farm



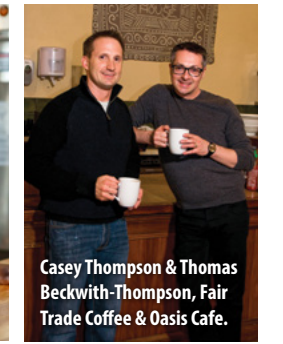
Dana Spandet,
Flour Girl & Flame



Chef Gregory León,
Amilinda



Rosha Brister,
Style Pop Cafe



Casey Thompson & Thomas
Beckwith-Thompson, Fair
Trade Coffee & Oasis Cafe.

and candied confections with flavor profiles like no other—perfect for your special day or just because it's a Tuesday and you need sweet treats. Plus, they ship!

CROSSROADS COMMUNITY FARM 4144 Cty Road J, Cross Plains Crossroads Community Farm is a certified organic operation co-owned by Cassie Wyss. They purposefully grow high-quality, organic vegetables to give away to those who are struggling with food insecurity locally. They also run a CSA program in which members can receive produce boxes from June through October. This work is funded by sales to customers as well as community donations. They are proud to have won Best in Madison two years in a row in 2024 and 2025!

DRIFTLESS MARKET + DELI 95 W Main St, Platteville Driftless Market & Deli focuses on organic and locally sourced food and art. We offer catering, full-service grocery, and in-store dining. Queer and female owned, we also act as a safe space for those on the fringe.

GENERATIONS BEEF 387 County Road H, Mount Horeb Generations Beef is a fifth-generation family farm in Mount Horeb producing premium American Wagyu and Akaushi Cross beef for customers across the region. Owned and operated by Darren Kittleson, Generations Beef is proud to be an LGBTQ-owned business bringing high-quality, pasture-raised beef directly from farm to table. Our focus is simple: Raise exceptional cattle, produce incredible beef, deliver it directly to people who care where their food comes from. As an LGBTQ-owned farm, visibility matters. Agriculture has not always felt inclusive. We are changing that by showing up, building community, and creating a brand that welcomes everyone to the table.

LUNA CIRCLE FARM Rio It's easy to spot the stand with the purple awning at the Dane County Farmers' Market. Owner Tricia Bross brings a lifelong experience of farming to her work along with more than a quarter century of experience specializing in organic vegetables. This USDA-certified Organic farm grows an array too wide to list.

STUBBORN MULE CATERING Madison Co-owned by Ryan Mueller, Stubborn Mule Catering focuses on creating unique events. Menus are always different, and they bring fresh ideas to catering large events or personal chef services. When possible, they source ingredients from farmers' markets and base menus off of local, seasonal ingredients. They offer weekly meal prep with meals cooked and delivered on Sundays and can accommodate vegetarian, gluten-sensitive, dairy-sensitive, and KETO diets (processing facility has gluten and dairy present). They are now also the in-house caterer for the Wisconsin Masonic Center in downtown Madison, an LGBTQ+ friendly venue.

WESTFAM FARMS LLC Shiocton/Farmer's Markets WestFam Farm LLC is a charming small farm dedicated to organic practices. We cultivate gardens

to provide fresh, unique produce and raise animals with care. During the summer and fall, we host exclusive farm-to-table events, accessible by ticket only. Visit our Facebook page for upcoming events and immerse yourself in the best of sustainable farming while enjoying our seasonal delights!

WONDERFARM 8579 Klevenville Riley Rd, Mount Horeb Wonderfarm raises heritage-breed pigs and laying hens on pasture and follows organic standards to produce delicious pork products and eggs. We aim for sustainability and regeneration, and apply permaculture and agroecological principles to provide the best lives possible for our heritage breed pigs and chickens. Wonderfarm is owned and operated by a queer woman of color and has been producing food since 2016. We offer on-farm pickup and Madison-area delivery!

AROUND THE STATE

As *Our Lives* looks to have a more statewide reach, we are including businesses we are aware of outside of Madison. Want to see your business on our list? Please let us know by contacting info@ourliveswisconsin.com.

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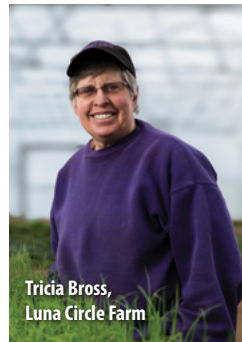
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Jillian Macson & Eli Wedel, Pyramid Event Venue



Tony Justich, Tuk-Tuk Fusion



Tricia Bross, Luna Circle Farm



Matt Trotter & staff, Horseradish Kitchen



Tommy Hanna, Allen Creek CoffeeHouse

ALLEY CAT COFFEE HOUSE 213 W Main St., Hortonville Alley Cat Coffeehouse is proud to serve rotating breakfast items like Loaded Avocado Toast featured on Ciabatta bun, cottage cheese, avocado, crispy bacon bits, and chili oil. Kids love the fidget offerings of Needohs and brain teasers. Popping Boba Pearls are available for summer lemonades, italian sodas, and fruit smoothies. The old bank building located at 213 W Main St was lovingly renovated 10 years ago by the owner/operators, Jane Jarvis and Grace Abitz.

ALLEN CREEK COFFEE HOUSE 137 E Main St, Evansville Seated next to Allen Creek in downtown Evansville, Allen Creek Coffee House has espresso and specialty coffees featuring beans from Rusty Dog Coffee in Madison, sandwiches, and fresh baked goods. They also added a service bar with alcoholic craft cocktails and beer. They are open Monday–Thursday 6:30 a.m.–2:00 p.m., weekends 8:00 a.m.–2:00 p.m. From April through September, they will have a farmers’ market on Sundays.

CHANDLER HOUSE BAKERY 411 E Main St, Watertown Chandler House Bakery has weekly favorites and rotating flavors, so there’s always something for everyone! Cheesecakes, cupcakes, cookies, bars, muffins, quiche, macarons, and so much more await you in historic downtown Watertown. Open Fridays and Saturdays. LGBTQ+ and women-owned/operated.

CODDIWOMPLE 121 Spring St, Lodi Our mission is to provide high-quality, thoughtfully crafted, culinary-inspired coffee, refreshers, and unique beverages. Our menu is driven by local produce and extensive relationships with Wisconsin farmers. Other services we provide are catering, private chef, community service events (ooh La La pop-ups), and teaching classes (DelecTable). We always tell our customers and clients, if you can dream it up, we can make it happen. My life partner Lindsay and I embarked on this journey together three years ago and have a beautiful 22-month old-son Skaid, who is in the middle of it all.

COMMERCE STREET BREWERY 23 Commerce St, Mineral Point Commerce Street Brewery Hotel (formerly Brewery Creek Inn) offers beautifully appointed lodging accommodations above an intimate European-styled brewpub. The hotel features five guest rooms, all with loads of space, oversized whirlpool bathtubs, and fireplaces, housed in an 1800s-era registered landmark. The pub features house beers (brewed on-site), craft cocktails, hand-selected wines, and tasty pub fare designed for easy sharing (if you’re feeling social!). All in the heart of the Driftless region—historic Mineral Point.

THE CORNER STORE 25 Main St, Fountain City A community gathering place, this 100-year-old soda fountain along the Great River Road has been recently restored. Serving “Fountain Floats” with hand-crafted sodas and premium ice cream, espresso drinks, and a curated selection of local and regional gifts.

ECOTONE HERBS 9921 Barton Rd, Mount Horeb Lauren Virnoche farms and forages as Ecotone Herbs. They offer fresh and dried herbs to apothecaries,

brewers, chefs, and distillers. They also run an herbal CSA program and workshops on herbalism, foraging, and fermenting. Their work is rooted in resilience—on farming with organic practices and in community through mutual aid. You can find Ecotone Herbs products at Herbiery Taproom.

GET REAL CAFE 43 S Madison Ave, Sturgeon Bay Get Real Cafe is situated in a 100-year-old building in Sturgeon Bay. Open for breakfast and lunch, the menu emphasizes food options for almost every palate and most dietary preferences. Made-from-scratch meals, bakery, refreshing smoothies and juices with bottomless organic coffee can satisfy every craving.

GREAT NORTHERN DISTILLING 1011 2nd Street, Stevens Point Proprietor Brian Cummins is now celebrating 13 years of operation at a new location. They have a tasting room and dog-friendly patio where you can enjoy their grain-free vodka from local potatoes, gin, bourbon, rye, coffee liquor, barrel-aged rum, and a small annual run of brandy made by distilling wine from neighboring Sunset Point Winery.

HORSERADISH KITCHEN + MARKET 505 W Water St, Princeton What started in 2015 as the cutest little yellow awning-clad food truck serving specialty sandwiches has evolved into a brick-and-mortar restaurant with a full kitchen. Matt Trotter describes the food as “lighter, fresher, healthier” fare. June through August, “The Sunday Sessions” brings live music to the deck where you can view the Fox River and adjacent nature preserve.

KRIS’ KITCHEN 102 S Main St, Eastman In the amazing small community of Eastman, Kris’ Kitchen offers homemade breakfast and lunch specials, full coffee and alcohol bar. Named after Andy’s mother who passed away in 2003, Kris’ Kitchen offers a spot where you can get an excellent meal with friendly staff, have a drink or coffee and purchase baked good and home decor. Open Thursday through Tuesdays 7:00 a.m.–8:00 p.m.

NEPALESE LOUNGE 1351 Cedar St, Green Bay Napalese has a full menu from pizza, to fried foods, to our widely loved burgers, plus an incredible Fish Fry! We feature drag shows every weekend, trivia night on the 2nd & 4th Wednesdays, and Drag Bingo every third Thursday.

PARADIGM COFFEE AND MUSIC 1202 N 8th St, Sheboygan Established in 2006, Paradigm is a community empowered restaurant and venue that strives to bring exceptional food, beverage, and music to the greater Sheboygan area. With a focus on locally sourced ingredients, environmentally responsible practices, and a socially progressive foundation, Paradigm offers a menu stocked with vegetarian, vegan, and gluten-free fare.

PYRAMID EVENT VENUE 117 S Main St, Lake Mills Childhood besties Jillian and Eli started this business to bring a little piece of city living to Lake Mills. Pyramid provides live entertainment nearly every evening including monthly drag shows and drag bingo, karaoke, Nerd Trivia, and a full range of live



Kate Krause, Paradigm Coffee & Music



Brian Cummins, Great Northern Distilling

music in every genre. The location has housed a pizza business for many years, and they continue to offer award-winning pizza baked in a well-seasoned, 40-year-old oven, plus pasta and salads. The Pickle Pizza has now replaced the Spicy Cheese Curd pizza as their most popular dish.

TUK-TUK FUSION PO Box 412, Ashland/Food Truck Proudly BIPOC and LGBTQ+ owned and operated, our food truck and catering service brings expertly crafted Asian Fusion with a Native American twist. Helmed by a Culinary Arts-trained chef, Tony Justich’s menus weave his Native American heritage with the culinary traditions of the East. Deeply rooted in our community, we are honored to serve Pride events across the state—from Lavender Graduations and Interfaith Services to Milwaukee Pridefest. Catch us at events around the Chequamegon Bay area, or book us to cater your next big celebration anywhere in Wisconsin. We will gladly roll our truck up to a Pride event near you!

WICKED WILLOW 1137 Main St, Stevens Point Wicked Willow has been slinging vegan comfort food for more than 8 years and has been queer owned for more than two years, providing a safe space for all!

WOLF RIVER ROOTS W1702 WI-64, White Lake Amidst the tranquil beauty of Langlade County stands Wolf River Roots, a beloved gathering place for locals and visitors alike. Set in a historic church, it offers a cozy retreat with delicious breakfasts and lunches. Experience the hospitality of this charming coffeehouse before exploring the area’s abundant recreational opportunities.

NOTABLE CHANGES

COWBOY DAVID’S SPECIAL ORDER BAKERY E11761 County Road P, LaFarge Cowboy Joe’s was named 2025’s LGBT Business of The Year from The Wisconsin LBGT Chamber of Commerce. Congratulations!

CROSSROADS COMMUNITY FARM 4144 Cty Road J, Cross Plains Crossroads won Best in Madison two years in a row in 2024 and 2025! Congratulations!

HAMBURGER MARY’S 730–734 S 5th Street, Milwaukee Hamburger Mary’s, a burger joint with a one-of-a-kind menu and entertainment, is currently closed but is hoping to open again soon.

MOTHER’S 2900 S. Kinnickinnic Ave., Milwaukee Mother’s closed suddenly on June 22 after one year of business in the historic White House building in Milwaukee’s Bay View neighborhood. ■

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Kim, Josie, and Kimi, Milwaukee.



Garth, Milwaukee.



Kate, Madison.



Max and Terry, Milwaukee.

The Queer Elders Project

Through portraits and personal histories, photographer **Alyssa Lentz** explores the often overlooked parts of love, family, and quiet acts of care that shape the lives of LGBTQ+ elders across the state.

CULTURE AGING ART & ENTERTAINMENT PHOTOGRAPHY

I WALKED THROUGH THE HOUSE, my wife’s hand at the small of my back, and pointed to a yellowed watercolor landscape hanging on the wall. “My great-grandpa painted that,” I said, as we drifted from one bedroom to the next. I was looking for clues; two parallel indentations on an empty bed, matching water glasses on opposing nightstands, a set of gold bands left in a porcelain dish. Anything that might suggest that I was standing inside an everyday love story.

I visited this house as a child, too. Each wall is appointed with art, all hand-selected by my great aunt, who had been a school teacher. Before we came, my dad told me that she was a *collector*, and I knew from his tone that I should be impressed by this. Her collection was an eclectic mix of local artists and curious antiquities, and to be clear, I was impressed. But more than anything, I was struck with a pang of abject wonder that she shared this home with another woman; a gym teacher that she’d met when they were both college students. Prior to this moment, I had not yet considered that two women could buy a beautiful lake house and fill it with objects gathered across a lifetime together. I would revisit this revelation occasionally in my adolescence, often

when I considered what kind of future could be in store for me.

As a budding Christian fundamentalist, I was quickly learning that the innate truths of my identity would prove incompatible with the future my conservative family imagined for me: marry young (and marry a man), then devote my life to ministry and motherhood. While I did my best to adhere to the rigidity of their expectations, there was a lingering resistance in my heart, and this is where the memory of my great aunt’s idyllic life-partnership lodged itself.

Though their relationship—spanning more than six decades—has only ever been declared platonic, I spent the afternoon of my great aunt’s memorial service hoping to find evidence to the contrary. What I was really looking for, I suppose, was confirmation that I was not the first of my lineage to betray the rules of heteronormativity.

So many older LGBTQ+ people came of age in a world that demanded discretion from them—where love was encoded in gestures, lifelong companionships, and stories told sideways. The summer before my great aunt’s passing, the same impulse that sent me searching her home for hints of a lesbian romance had also prompted me to begin a

If you would like to be included in my ongoing photo series of Wisconsin’s LGBTQ+ elders, please send an email with your age and city of residence to alyssa@alenzphotography.com. I’m honored to preserve our community’s rich history for the edification of future generations.

photography series documenting queer elders from across the state. I wanted to witness them fully and to preserve the texture of their lives before it could be softened by time or omission. I wanted to create irrefutable proof that they had been here, had created vibrant and dynamic worlds for themselves.

I began my series with Kim and Josie, a Milwaukee couple with 20 years together under their belts. We were joined at their Riverwest home by Kimi, who met Kim at a Michigan gay bar in the mid-80s. Now each in their 60s, they reflected on their respective journeys to the communal queer life they now share. While Kim came out at just 18 and Josie at 28, Kimi’s path to the LGBTQ+ community was more winding. In her late 20s, she joined a church that pushed her to choose between her sexuality and her eternal fate, and for close to two decades she chose the latter. She married a man and built a family with him. “As my kids started to get older, I realized that I couldn’t legitimately tell them that I would always love them no matter what kind of life choices they made, if I didn’t extend that same love and care to myself.” After years of living what she describes as a “half-life,” Kimi made the decision to dissolve her marriage and pursue something that felt

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liberating and whole. The three friends now spend most days together, walking their dogs, sharing meals, and finishing projects in Josie's basement workshop.

On a rainy April day, I met Kate along the shore of Lake Mendota. Originally from Nebraska, Kate has planted deep roots in Madison; the city where they met their late partner, Sashe. While attending a workshop, a femme in a shimmering pink beret caught Kate's eye. The pair would eventually fall in love, a mutual passion for grassroots organizing compelling them to devote their lives to community activism. Together, Kate and Sashe would advocate for disability justice, fat liberation, and the broader needs of LGBTQ+ people all the way until Sashe's death in 2022. Walking through the mist at Tenney Park, Kate shared stories of their work to save Drumlin Farm, visiting The Land in its early festival days, and the heartbreak of losing their beloved partner. Kate considers the queer community to be their refuge, saying, "We are so amazing when we take care of each other...so beautiful and strong."

Garth, a retired teacher living in the Fox Cities, has spent recent years exploring state and national parks with his loyal companion, a scruffy white dog named Bear. The two began their travels after the passing of Garth's husband and have been crossing scenic destinations off their list ever since. Like Kimi, Garth initially settled in a straight coupling, but eventually came out as gay at age 50. "Being gay," he says, "allows an individual to be empathetic, show humility, and question teachings and beliefs from the world around us." Walking the shores of Lake Michigan with Garth and Bear, I found myself thinking of beloved poet Mary Oliver, her partner Molly Malone Cook, and the many small scrappy dogs they shared. Both Garth and Mary Oliver became caretakers when their partners fell ill, and in their bereavements, each turned to the natural world not as an escape from grief, but as a place to carry it gently.

Through Josie and Kim, I was connected with Angela, a lesbian in her 80s who settled in Milwaukee after a life of international travel. Originally from Germany, Angela once worked for an airline, jetsetting through her younger years. In her dining room, she showed me a portrait of her that painted by an artist while she visited Mexico City. Her home was full of treasures like this; a veritable trove of memories overlooking her small garden and an orange tabby purring in the her bed. She posed for me in a wooden rocking chair, a petite bespectacled woman sitting beneath a canvas of Marilyn Monroe clad with a glowing pink neon light. Unassuming as she may be, there was a palpable sense of how unabashedly she had created a life of color for herself.

At the LGBT Center of Milwaukee, Max invited me to his home to photograph him with his husband, Terry. In a deep voice that sounds the way that black coffee tastes, Max told me how he met Terry while working at a local hotel. Terry would visit him in the lobby, where Max supplied him with day-old pastries and conversation. They were married after *Obergefell v. Hodges* was decided; Max proudly showed me a glossy printed photograph of the two of them at their wedding, noting how beautiful the day had been. Though time has not been gentle with Terry, Max has. He tenderly watches over him, keeping tabs on his medications and appointments, smoothing his graying beard with soft hands, ensuring there's a steady stream of old westerns to watch from their couch. My time with Max, as well as Garth and Kate, reminded me of how often queer lives are built not around convention, but around the small ecosystems of care we create for one another.

I found no viable clues at my great aunt's house that day. No hint of long-rumored lesbian conduct, no rainbow flag tucked away in a drawer. Instead, I left her home hand-in-hand with my wife, snowflakes falling on our cheeks, filled with gratitude that our love will never disappear into implication. ■



Angela, Milwaukee.

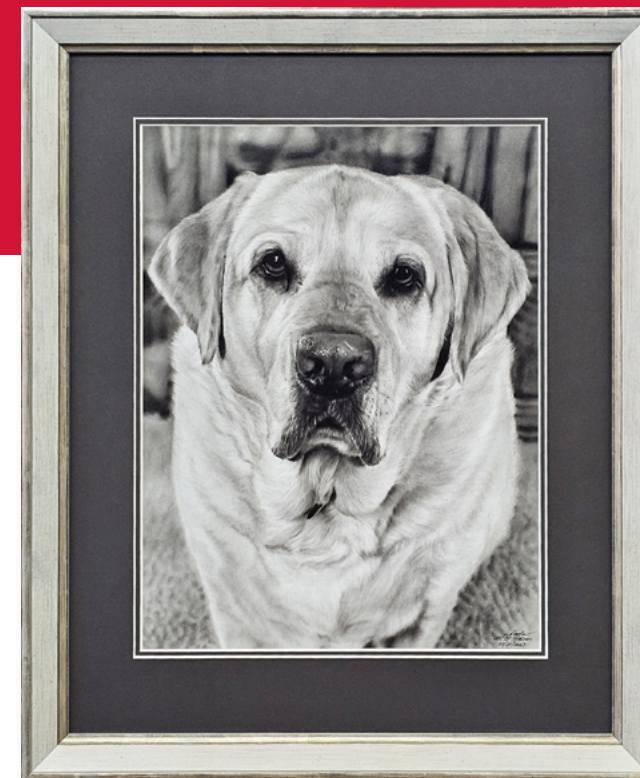


Max and Terry, Milwaukee.

Garth, Milwaukee.



Kate, Madison.



Charcoal drawing of Charlie Parker by Warren Sadac

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HOMES SAFETY POLITICS & LAW TRANSGENDER

The Canary's Forced Migration

As anti-trans policy escalates across the U.S., **Vivienne Andersen**, a Madison-based REALTOR® documents the growing, painful trend of trans Americans quietly preparing to leave their communities, their states, and their country.

“YOU KNOW, you can opt out of my crap. But you shouldn't have to leave America because the president's making the block too hot for you,” said Dave Chappelle in a recent NPR interview in reference to the Republican party doing their level best to make the United States as unwelcoming and unequal as possible for transgender Americans. “I'm team TERF,” also said Dave Chappelle, during his 2021 “comedy” special. You know something is wrong in the country when one of the most outspoken, most caustic transphobes in the world thinks the Republicans are overdoing it.

As a transsexual lesbian REALTOR® in Madison, I have another way of knowing. If there is one conversation trans folks have when we get together, is what our exit strategies are. As a REALTOR®, people who can go now are asking me to sell their homes.

CANARIES IN THE COAL MINE

Trans people, trans women in particular, are American society's canary in the coal mine.

Before I get to that, however, it might be appropriate to go over the state of the union for trans folks right now. The zone has been flooded for everyone in Trump's second term, but it has been unusually bad for trans folks.

On his first day in office Mr. Trump issued

orders designed to erase trans folks from American life, stipulating that there are only two genders, and that they correspond immutably to one's sex assigned at conception (I know). The orders restrict our ability to safely travel, to safely pee in public restrooms, and to have accurate identification documents. He also cut funding for research or public aid that mentions gender in any way, causing disruptions in public sector funding larger than anyone could have anticipated. Medicare funding for any organization providing medically appropriate health care to trans youth was threatened. (UW dutifully complied in advance.) Trans members of the military have been expelled. This, of course, is ironically excused as “defending women,” fighting “gender ideology,” and “restoring biological truth”—whatever that means. It obviously isn't based in reality.

ANTI-TRANS BILLS

There are now too many states in the country where many of those executive orders are backed by law. There were over 745 anti-trans bills introduced in state legislatures in 2025.

The Supreme Court continues to play Calvinball (from the *Calvin and Hobbes* comicstrip) with civil rights. In the recent *Skrmetti* decision, the justices argued that trans health

care can be curtailed by states as long as the laws restricting care are restricting specific procedures and not restricting health care from a specific class of people. Yet, I'm sure they'll find a way to allow cis women to get breast augmentation on demand—Calvinball, like misogyny, has no rules. What makes this even worse is that it is the position of the American Medical Association, the American Psychiatric Association, the Endocrine society, the World health Organization, the American Academy of Pediatrics, and the World Professional Association for Transgender Health (among MANY others) that transition and associated medical interventions and ongoing care is safe, effective, and medically appropriate.

We are currently enduring a moral panic about trans women having the audacity to play sports. The red herring is always a claim to want to protect women and girls. The fact is that trans women are no more likely to do anything in a ladies room than any cis woman is. The fact is that anti-trans laws invariably end up hurting cis women more.

I wish I could say this is all of it. In 2011, the National LGBT Task force issued a report on transgender discrimination. It was titled “Injustice at every turn.” Things are much worse now. But this isn't an article about the indignities trans folks in America suffer in the current day. This is a about how some of us are responding.

TRANS FAMILIES LEAVING THE COUNTRY

In May of 2025, I received an email from a couple, one of whom is trans, that said, essentially “Come sell our house.” This was a beautifully cared-for 1912 4-bedroom folk/farm home on a double lot that the owners had put countless hours into. I think they were more heartbroken to leave their extensive garden than they were their beautiful home. They had hoped to spend the next several decades here. When I asked them why they felt they had to leave they told me, “We were very concerned that access to trans-related care for our family was going to be eroded, the laws being passed in many states, corporate hospital systems capitulating to political pressure, Donald Trump's statements during the election, and his executive orders after it. We knew the process could take over a year, so we could not wait until things got 'really bad' to make a move. And while we hoped (and continue to hope) that the U.S. does not fall further into repeating 1930s Germany, we knew that we needed to start making plans soon after the election.”

These are not wealthy people, just fortunate to have dual citizenship, which made the move

possible for them. “After Trump was elected the first time, we got the process going for getting dual citizenship for our kids,” they told me. “But it wasn't something that we were seriously considering until maybe much later in life given the financial impact it would have on our family, and the loss of community.”

The winner of the Bad Timing Award has to go to the trans couple who bought a condo with me in October of 2024. In their defense, they were moving to Wisconsin from Iowa, fleeing that state's oppressive civil rights legislation, which has only grown more immoral since then. They were some of the more than 400,000 other trans people who have moved to safer states since the president was elected. They planned to stay indefinitely in Wisconsin, near family and not too far from family in Iowa. Instead, in June of 2025, they reached out and said—as I was becoming accustomed to hearing—“Come sell our house.”

When I showed up, I knew why they wanted to move. They knew I knew. They told me anyway. “We wanted to move to a country where we had civil rights and access to health care.”

Fortunately for them, one of them is a nurse, and because of a shortage of nurses in Canada (just like here) they were able to use the express entry pathway, which made the process significantly easier, but by no means easy. I asked what the process was like.

“It took 10 months to work through all the bureaucracy of immigration. It was expensive and labor intensive. I had to take an English test, provide proof I didn't have a criminal record, proof of my education, license, and employment history. I had to get a British Columbia nursing license. I had to secure a job in British Columbia. We all had to do special medical exams, official fingerprinting, and we had to show we had substantial savings. We had just moved and bought our condo. We didn't have substantial savings. So we cashed out our retirement accounts. And those were not the only big sacrifices we made. We sold the condo that we'd lived in less than 1.5 years. We lost proximity to our family and friends. We lost our whole support system and moved someplace where we didn't know a soul.”

As one of those left behind, I wondered if the move had been worth it. “Now we live in a place where we are safe and welcome. We live by the sea. And we have every reason to believe we can take care of ourselves and be safe. In British Columbia we have civil rights, abortion rights, and universal health care. School shootings are an anomaly here. There's real parental leave after having a baby. There is subsidized daycare. We are making new friends. We feel a deep and profound sense of relief and safety being permanent residents of

Canada. We are very grateful to Canada for having us. In addition to being trans, we are an educated professional couple with no criminal history. We are good parents raising a great kid. We are good friends and neighbors. Iowa and the United States are missing out on us.”

Coincidentally, if you are a healthcare professional considering leaving the United States, “Canada's Healthcare Infusions” are a group of ordinary folks prepared to help you make the task more manageable: engageq.notion.site/infusionhosts.

HUNKERING DOWN

Not every trans person is moving away. Some folks are moving here. As I alluded to above, lots of trans folks are moving from states like Texas, Florida, Kansas, Arkansas, Mississippi, Oklahoma, Iowa, and Idaho where they have fewer rights and even less physical safety, to better states like Wisconsin. Or at least to Madison, despite our well-documented TERF problem.

When I showed up, I knew why they wanted to move. They knew I knew. They told me anyway. “We wanted to move to a country where we had civil rights and access to health care.”

I recently sold a home (a 4-bedroom diamond in the rough on the bike path) to a trans woman who is planning to stay in the U.S. and, in her words, “hunker down” instead of leave. It isn't that she isn't aware of the same issues that others are, but she has a different perspective. She grew up in a conservative state, and not too many years ago graduated from a college in Florida. She told me, “Madison feels like a really special hidden gem and an exception to a lot of the chaos.”

I would agree. Madison is famous for being 70-square-miles of sanity, after all. There is another issue that also informs this particular woman's choice, and that is her confidence that her employer, a well-known medical technology firm, is able and willing to provide her with a transfer to an international location if that should become more important. That is a level of security few of us are able to match.

This is in contrast to a trans woman I have sold two homes to, who grew up in the former Soviet Union and immigrated to the United States as an adult. She told me that while she is tired of having to merely survive in the United States, she also feels unsafe traveling, stating that if she has to leave the country, she expects that it will be a one-way trip. She told me she believes that because of her age, employability, and savings, “It has to get bad enough that I

would be willing to explore refugee status.”

There is also a friend of mine from graduate school who has dual citizenship with Australia. She is a trans woman, an unabashed member of the clergy, and like the folks who sold their condo, a recent transplant from Iowa after that state removed gender identity protections from the Iowa Civil Rights Act—protections that had been a part of Iowa law since 2007. She told me that after the election, she made sure that her Australian citizenship documents were current “just in case.” I asked her about life in Iowa, where she still has family, and why she felt she had to leave.

“Iowa used to be a good place. It no longer is,” she said. “The number of anti-LGBTQIA laws and restrictions that have been enacted in recent years have made life there very difficult. Just trying to use a public restroom has become a legally risky act.”

The block is indeed too hot, due in no small part to folks like Dave Chappelle, J. K. Rowling, and Caitlin Jenner. People are having to leave the country. Those who haven't left have contingency plans. Many of our legal protections have been lost. We are far too often at the mercy of the kindness of strangers during a time of unprecedented, unimaginable, and ignorant cruelty when such mercy is almost guaranteed not to exist. Certainly not for us.

The canary is gasping for breath. ■



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

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Owner Debra Errington



FOOD & DINING COFFEE SHOPS LOCAL BUSINESS CRAFTING

Yarns Told, Yarns Sold

At **The Sow's Ear**, a cozy cafe-yarn shop in Verona, a Pride flag, a free crafting library, and a commitment to community have turned a small business into a haven of creativity, inclusion, and everyday resistance.

"WE USUALLY HAVE our pride flag up, but because of the storm last night we had to take it down. We still have our flag up when you walk inside, above the front door."

This is the first thing Deb, co-owner of The Sow's Ear, mentions to me as we sit down together outside her combination cafe and yarn shop. The cafe itself has been in the same location since 2000, but Deb and her family bought it in 2006.

"When we first put out the Pride flag, we did lose a few customers," Deb continues. The folks in question who left when they put out the flag must be small in number, because it is already past 9:00 a.m. on a rainy Tuesday morning, and the place is still bustling.

"Do you think you were able to welcome more people when you put out the flag?" It is a silly question to ask as we are having to raise our voices to chat while a crowd of younger-looking customers laugh as they walk in.

"Oh yes. We have such a diverse group of folks who visit. We have a lot of support from

the community and try to provide a really safe space where everyone can be themselves."

The cafe is settled nicely on the corner in quiet-but-busy downtown Verona. Like other small businesses in the area, such as the Garden Wall bookstore, her cafe is situated in a charming old Victorian home. An adorable sow, the cafe's mascot, is painted on the sign leading into the building holding a steaming cup of coffee and a pair of knitting needles and yarn. The lettering below the picture reads, "Yarns told, yarns sold."

Deb moves from speaking about the folks who frequent her business to listing all the businesses that The Sow's Ear supports. The transition is second nature to her: a symbiotic relationship that she is so accustomed to talking about because it is all a part of the ecosystem of their cafe. With rapid-fire precision, she lists off their suppliers. The first of which she makes sure to mention is a small, women-owned micro-green farm. She also mentions Vitruvian Farms and Bavaria Sausage

in Fitchburg.

The cafe makes sure to donate a portion of its revenue to various local charities, organizations that support giving books to kids and help stand up against mass incarceration. In April, according to the Sow's Ear Instagram account, they also shared that they were donating a portion of their yarn sales to causes helping folks in Minneapolis during the height of the ICE raids in the city.

They donate a portion of their food and beverage sales to local causes as well. In January of this year, they used their themed drinks board to customize the theme of "Dragged in the New Year": with beverages like the "Yass Queen," the "Showboat," and "Fierce" ("Nothing says fierce like a mocha with cayenne"). A portion of profits from this theme went to Friends of the State Street Family, which "provides help, hope, and friendship to neighbors in Madison struggling with the challenges of homelessness."

The themed drinks bring whimsy to patrons who often stop and take photos of the menu board. "One of our most popular themes was from two months ago...it was from a hockey show? People loved it." She pauses then to try and recall the name. "*Heated Rivalry!* Oh God, people were coming in just to take pictures of the board."

The Sow's Ear hosts a Queer (and Ally) Crafting Club the first and third Friday of each month from 5:00 to 7:00 p.m., and the second and fourth Thursday of each month from 3:00 to 5:00 p.m. The club isn't limited to just yarn and fabric arts, though. Participants can bring any kind of project that they are working on. "We have a big group of folks who attend, usually around 8 to 15 people, sometimes up to 20," said Deb.

Staff member Mara and her wife run this group, while many other staff members juggle multiple creative roles, spending time both slinging coffee and sharing their talents with everyone who visits. Deb overflows with love for the people she works with, seemingly unable to say enough kind and inspiring words about them. "They are all so creative and they all bring their unique skills to the table. It's a lot of fun. Basically, I see my staff as family. Right now, I want to say is probably my most dedicated, amazing staff I've ever had. It's a joy to be around them." When asked how she was able to find such amazing staff, she shrugs and says simply: "Luck."

On their website you can find events listed every day. Plenty are free to attend, includ-

ing the Queer and Ally Craft Club, but some classes and workshops require a fee. "We want to make crafting and community accessible for everybody," she noted.

Deb gets excited talking about the new "Free Crafting Library," which sits towards the back of the store: a beautiful arrangement of used knitting needles and crochet hooks are displayed with signs telling customers to take what they need, with supplies overflowing out over the sides of the table and even into mugs and baskets on the corners. Below the tools, there is a mini library of books and patterns, and even a fairly large collection of half-used (but high quality) yarn. "Folks can just grab free crafts off of the library and just, you know, come and hang out with friends."

They even partner with the local public library to host a children's storytime. There is a special stuffed sheep toy hidden among the racks of yarn in the back, and as people check out their items at the counter, staff snag the sheep off the shelves to bring a little joy to the storytime event. "There is a girl who always comes in, and one day the sheep was missing. The girl thought it had run away," a glint of mischief sparkles in the eyes of the staff member working the yarn shop in the back, who recounts this story. "I had to tell her he was just leading the storytime!"

The staff takes great pride in how they

source both their yarn and their menu. "When we are looking for new products, we obviously look for what people want first," Sara, the store's yarn buyer, explains after Deb motions her over to chat with us about all things yarn. "But then, if I know a specific product type, I'm going to look at what's in Madison first, then what is in Wisconsin, the Great Lakes, the Midwest, and kind of move out from there in that order. Then, I'm always looking at who owns it. Where do they get their stuff from? What are the ethics behind their business? What are they standing for? Thankfully, being the size that we are, we're able to be really picky like that. We like to tell people that we can stand behind any yarn here, ethically.

It's not very hard to find really great people out there to work with. We're really lucky."

When you get hungry from all that crafting, the food menu offers something for everyone, with seasonal options and even a new vegan option. Aptly named the "Yahara," it comes toasted on Madison Sourdough with chickpeas and locally sourced greens. For smaller-sized clientele, they make sure to have a full array of options, and according to Deb the "Half Verona Sandwich" (a play on a caprese sandwich) is very popular with the kids who visit. "We gotta

give the kids a little credit that they might have a more advanced palette." Adults with an advanced palette are also sure to be satisfied with the "elevated comfort food" offerings.

The cafe itself is colorfully decorated with artwork, much of it in the fiber arts category. Deb explains that their art coordinator, Amber Mars, is very active in the local art community and is an artist and librarian herself. Deb also holds a bachelor's in studio art and museum studies. This summer, she will be spending the summer in Italy studying art. In her spare time, she also enjoys hiking and taking care of her three dogs. They help her practice patience, she says, as they can be very energetic.

It seems unbelievable that Deb needs any help in that category, though. After the interview, she immediately folds herself back into the beautiful chaos of the shop, getting ready for storytime and chatting with her staff. The yarn and the cafe blend together so well, and it's obvious that the staff are having fun (and working hard) to make the place feel like something from a cozy fantasy novel. You would never know Deb was the coordinator behind the scenes, curating this little magical world that brings art and community together so seamlessly. ■



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EVENTS PRIDE MILWAUKEE

Milwaukee Shows Up for Pride

From unforgettable performances at **PrideFest** to the colorful spectacle of the **Milwaukee Pride Parade**, the city's annual celebration brought tens of thousands together in community.

MILWAUKEE ONCE AGAIN demonstrated why it remains home to one of the Midwest's most vibrant LGBTQ+ celebrations as thousands gathered for PrideFest and the Milwaukee Pride Parade. Despite rainy weather to start the weekend, PrideFest drew an estimated 41,305 attendees over three days, with Saturday setting a new single-day attendance record. Six stages featured more than 500 performers alongside dozens of community organizations, health and wellness resources, and local businesses, reinforcing Pride's role as both a celebration

and a gathering place for advocacy and connection. The festivities culminated Sunday as thousands lined the streets of Walker's Point for the Milwaukee Pride Parade, where colorful floats, marching groups, nonprofits, businesses, and community members filled Second Street in a joyful display of visibility, resilience, and belonging. Together, PrideFest and the parade served as a powerful reminder that Milwaukee continues to set the standard for celebrating LGBTQ+ community, culture, and pride across Wisconsin.



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