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STILL QUEERING THE VOTE

Activist Cathy Renna's
decades-long fight for voters

THE FAMILY ISSUE

Stories of love,
loss and belonging

The Queer VOTE Starts Here

Abdul El-Sayed, Jocelyn Benson
and Toni Mua: How are they
shaping the August primary?

By Sarah Bricker Hunt



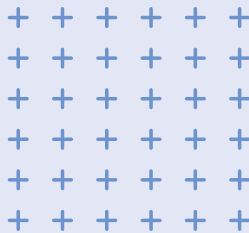
Dr. Paul Benson's



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Dr. Benson and Dr. Bornstein

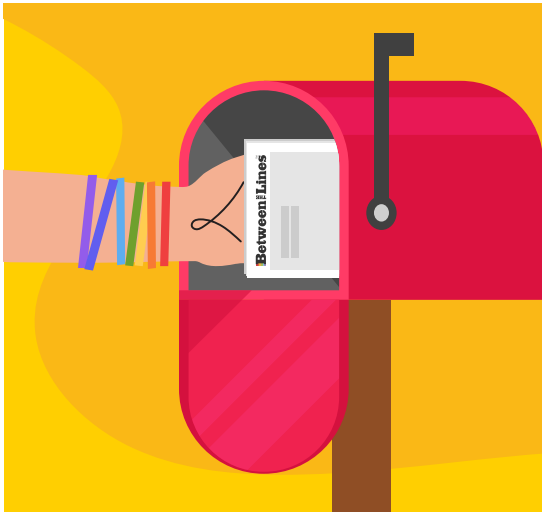


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Abdul El-Sayed. Photo: Abdul for Senate



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5 Queer Things You Can Do Right Now-ish

BY KELLI DUNHAM

The corn may be knee-high by the Fourth of July, but Michigan's summer of queer events is just hitting its stride. Toss sunscreen, a water bottle and a portable phone charger into your fanny pack, gather your favorite people and head out for these five ways to celebrate, connect and discover something new.



Michigan Science Center. Courtesy photo

Game On at Mi-Sci

The cool kids all know: Museums are so much more than school field trips. The Michigan Science Center is inviting adults 21 and over to Mi-Sci After Dark: Summer Games, with a legendary after-hours, LGBTQ-inclusive evening built around friendly competition, curiosity and cocktails. Challenge your friends to trivia, virtual sports and hands-on games, then reward your victories (or console your defeats) with a carefully crafted libation from Byrdie Bar. The evening also includes a one-night-only planetarium show inspired by the original Olympians in the night sky, plus plenty of time to wander the exhibits at your own pace. Don't miss the iconic rainbow escalator!

July 24, 6-10 p.m., Michigan Science Center (5020 John R St., Detroit). mi-sci.org/after-dark-summer-games.



Plan Your Perfect 'I Do'

Wedding planning can be overwhelming under the best of circumstances. The Detroit LGBTQ+ Wedding Expo takes guesswork out of the conversation by bringing together affirming venues, photographers, DJs, officiants, caterers, travel specialists, bakers and tons of other professionals in one welcoming space. You'll leave with fresh ideas, maybe a raffle prize and the chance to meet other engaged LGBTQ+ folks — whether you're looking to expand your polycule or simply swap WhatsApp complaints about the price of buttercream.

July 12, 12-5 p.m., HUB Stadium (44325 W. 12 Mile Road, Novi). rainbowweddingnetwork.com/expos.



Olive Klug. Photo: Instagram/@oliveklug

Escape to Fern Fest

If your ideal vacation includes campfires, drag kings, workshops, dancing under the stars and waking up surrounded by tents full of queer folks instead of pinging phone notifications, now is the time to get your Fern Fest tickets. The six-day festival features music from headliners including folk singers Olive Klug and Autumn Nicholas while creating space for women, trans and nonbinary people and everyone on the spectrum of the feminine spirit. And if your camping experience mostly consists of watching other people do it on television, Fern Fest has you covered with first-timer advice and even a packing list on its social media.

July 28-Aug. 2, Smiling Acres (3060 N. Johnson Road, Trufant). michiganfernfest.com.



Create Across Generations

Sometimes the best conversations come from our hearts when our hands are busy elsewhere, and that is precisely what Bridging Generations: Crafting Connections offers. This month's gathering partners MiGen, Affirmations and Stand with Trans for an evening of vision boards and creativity designed to bring LGBTQ+ people of different generations together. Whether you're 18 or 80 (the event is open for folks 13 and older) you'll have the chance to share stories, swap perspectives and imagine the futures you want to build together. Open hearts, open glue sticks.

July 16, 6-8 p.m., Affirmations
(290 W. Nine Mile Road,
Ferndale). tinyurl.com/MiGenCrafting.



Illustration by Bill Ferenc

Embrace More Pride

If your Pride-bernation lasted all through June, don't despair! You still have time to emerge from your cave and join the celebration:

July 12

South Lyon Pride, McHattie Park
(300 Dorothy St, South Lyon), 12-4 p.m

July 18

Battle Creek Pride Festival, Leila Arboretum
(928 W. Michigan Ave.,
Battle Creek), 11 a.m.-8 p.m.

Flint PrideFlat Lot
(428 S. Saginaw St., Flint),
2-8 p.m.

Ypsi Pride, Depot Town, 2-10 p.m.

July 23-26

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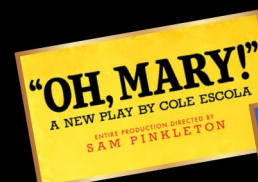
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Abdul El-Sayed Vows to Be a ‘Lion’ for LGBTQ+ Rights in U.S. Senate

Candidate on allyship and why attacks on trans people threaten everyone

BY SARAH BRICKER HUNT

Dr. Abdul El-Sayed isn't running a typical Senate campaign, and at this point it's hard to miss. The physician and former health director for both the city of Detroit and Wayne County has spent the past several months drawing national headlines with an unapologetic case for progressive politics in a state Democrats need to win. He's also been busy racking up the UAW endorsement, bringing Bernie Sanders to the campaign trail and closing the polling gap in the primary race. After State Sen. Mallory McMorrow dropped out of the race on July 5, the field narrowed to El-Sayed and U.S. Rep. Haley Stevens to vie for the Democratic primary seat. The two have been neck-and-neck in recent polling. Maryland Sen. Chris Van Hollen, a prominent progressive voice on civil rights and foreign policy, added his endorsement in late June.

Many headlines focus on El-Sayed's trademark take-no-prisoners bluntness. At the May debate on Mackinac Island, El-Sayed challenged his opponents to raise their hands if they'd never taken a check from Blue Cross Blue Shield. He raised his. They didn't. When Republican candidate Mike Rogers' campaign fired off a cease and desist letter on June 22 demanding El-Sayed stop calling Rogers a pharma lobbyist, his campaign called it exactly what it was — an attempt to silence a surging candidate — and kept right on going.

For many analysts, Michigan's race has become a genuine referendum on where the Democratic Party is headed. We wanted to know where El-Sayed stands on the issues our readers care about most — topics like healthcare, standing up to the Trump administration, the vulnerability of trans rights and what it actually looks like when

a candidate shows up for the LGBTQ+ community, not just when it's easy.

How do you connect your own lived experience with the LGBTQ+ community's insight on performative allyship?

I'm kind of allergic to pandering. I can't tell you how many times we've had politicians come to iftar [the Ramadan fast-breaking meal], and they'll say, "I fasted in solidarity with you." And I'll say, "Solidarity? You think we're hungry? The food's right there. I need your solidarity when our community is being attacked for praying how we pray. I need your solidarity when it comes time to protect people from watching their tax dollars go and bomb people who look like them." It's educated a lot of the way that I try to show up across different communities.

I don't know what it's like to be gay or to be trans, but I do know what it's like to be discriminated against. My job is to show up and be curious and understand what the unique manifestations of that kind of discrimination look like, but also to stand up when it's hard, not just when it's easy. And that's the thing I hope that folks will count on me for.

I'm always going to show up as who I am. I'm always going to be authentically interested in understanding experiences I might not share. And I'm always going to show up when someone attempts to take your rights — because I believe deeply in the kind of America where everybody's rights are respected to be who you are, whether that is to love differently or to identify differently than you were told you were supposed to.

Can you point to a specific example of that work during your time in Detroit and



Abdul El-Sayed. Photo: abdulforsenate.com

Wayne County?

One of the important pieces of our work in public health, both when I was in Wayne County and Detroit, is making sure that all of our resources and services were open and inviting for all of our residents. I ran the state's largest Ryan White program when I was [with] the City of Detroit. And then in Wayne County, I got to work with LGBT Detroit to bring them in to offer some training for our personnel, just to make sure that our services were as open, inviting, accepting and empowering as possible. I just really appreciated their partnership — and I know that the folks on our team really appreciated the opportunity to ask important questions, to understand better from a different perspective, to build community with folks.

The Trump administration has been explicitly anti-LGBTQ+, and especially anti-trans. As a senator, how would you fight back?

I think it's really important both to stand up with and for the community's rights and to be a vocal advocate — that we will not stand by while some people are thrown under the bus, that we demand that everybody has equal rights to be who they are. We need more federal protections on the books, particularly when it comes to healthcare.

Your campaign has drawn comparisons to New York City Mayor Zohran Mamdani's — another progressive insurgent who won by running a very unique kind of campaign. How do you feel about that comparison?

Every community is unique — I was born and raised here. We're running a campaign centered

on the unique needs of our state. It's always flattering when people compare you to a winning politician — whether it's Barack Obama or Mayor Mamdani — but I'm really focused on how to meet the needs of our state and to do so the best way I can in the Senate. I love this state. I'm grateful to serve here, whether leading health departments in Detroit and Wayne County or hopefully leading for our state in the U.S. Senate.

“I'm always going to show up when someone attempts to take your rights — I believe deeply in the kind of America where everybody's rights are respected to be who you are, whether that is to love differently or to identify differently than you were told you were supposed to.”

You have a public health background that most senators don't. How does that shape your approach to the health-specific ways LGBTQ+ people are being targeted right now?

The Trump administration has tried to weaponize government against LGBTQ+ folks in a space that I know really well, which is health. You think about pulling funding for an HIV vaccine. You think about pulling funding for PrEP support. You think about a lot of the research that was being done at places like the CDC and funded through the NIH that had

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Toni Mua. Courtesy photo

This Trans Candidate Has Faced Bricks and Ballot Challenges. She's Still Knocking on Doors.

For Toni Mua, the 2026 race for Michigan's District 9 is personal

BY SARAH BRICKER HUNT

When Toni Mua first ran for Michigan's state legislature in 2022, she put her deadname on the ballot. She didn't make a big deal of it — running as a trans woman in a district that also covered the Grosse Pointes felt like enough of a challenge. This year, she decided she was done with that compromise and filed under her name. Almost immediately, someone challenged it.

“I was just really confused because I'm like, who is this man? Why do you have a problem with me running now?” she said. The challenge was denied, and Mua says she expects an appeal. In the meantime, she's still knocking on doors.

Mua, 29, is running as a Democrat for Michigan's 9th House District — a majority-Black seat she knows from the inside, having grown up where her family put down roots

decades ago. The race looks different from her 2022 bid, after redistricting pulled the boundaries of what is now District 9 into Detroit proper, where her previous District 10 had stretched into the Grosse Pointes. Mua says the old boundaries brought more hostility her way.

Mua is one of three trans women seeking Democratic House nominations this cycle, alongside Joanna Whaley in District 2 and Aaron Bailey in District 92. The trio grew out of a group of four candidates who dubbed themselves the “Dollhouse” earlier this year; the fourth, Kali Scales, has since withdrawn from the District 5 race. Michigan has never elected an openly trans state representative.

Her roots in the community she's asking to represent run deeper than her campaign. Mua was 14 or 15 the first time she showed up at Motor City Pride — the only queer person in her family, looking

for a community she couldn't find at home. She kept coming back, volunteering more each year, and by the third year, a single-day shift had stretched to four. She eventually rose to volunteer coordinator, putting systems in place she says made the operation smoother and kept volunteers returning. “I found so many folks that I now call family,” she told BTL. It's a pattern that has followed her ever since: She shows up, sees what needs fixing and ends up running things.

When the District 9 incumbent announced a run for a different seat, Mua jumped in, nudged by constituents who'd been coming to her anyway for help navigating programs and resources their elected officials weren't connecting them to.

“There isn't leadership that's

See **Toni Mua**, page 17

Jocelyn Benson's Plan to Protect LGBTQ+ Rights in the Race for Michigan Governor

How Michigan's secretary of state has used her role to advance queer rights — and how she plans to continue the fight

BY SARAH BRICKER HUNT

With the August primary weeks away, Michigan Secretary of State Jocelyn Benson is deep in the race for governor — and she's making the case that she's ready to lead on LGBTQ+ issues in an era that has been defined by devastating, anti-equality actions taken by the federal government. After all, she's been at the forefront of a momentum that has ushered in real change for our community, some of which has been decades in the making.

When Michigan expanded the Elliott-Larsen Civil Rights Act in 2023 to include protections for sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression, Benson directed her department to update every policy in her office to reflect the new law. It wasn't the secretary's first move for the community. In 2019, early in her tenure, she was scrapping the medical documentation requirements transgender Michiganders had long faced when updating gender markers on their IDs, replacing the whole process with a simple self-attestation form. Two years later, she added the "X" gender marker option to state identification.

She's also been a visible part of the team that has made Michigan one of the more protective states in the country for LGBTQ+ people. Alongside Gov. Gretchen Whitmer and Attorney General Dana Nessel, Benson has shown up at Pride events and bill signings as part of a coalition that outlawed the "gay panic" or "transgender panic" defenses and created the state's first LGBTQ+ Commission. For many queer Michiganders, the trio has represented sustained visibility and vocal support in a state where MAGA Republicans have repeatedly attacked the community through proposed anti-LGBTQ+ legislation and sustained negative rhetoric.

Michigan's next governor will oversee a state that voted for Trump in 2024 and where MAGA-backed Republicans have gone after marriage equality (which has not been codified in state law), same-sex parenting rights, transgender high school athletes, introduced "Don't Say Gay"-style laws and more.

The fight continues, and BTL readers are asking whether Benson can carry that energy into the state's top office — and whether she's ready to lead on LGBTQ+ rights and visibility like Gov. Whitmer has.



Secretary of State Jocelyn Benson at the 2025 Motor City Pride parade. Photo: Andrew Potter

In a recent interview with BTL, Benson insisted that she's more than ready to pick up the baton. She's pledged to codify same-sex marriage protections in state law, push for LGBTQ-competent healthcare providers statewide and invest directly in LGBTQ-owned small businesses. And when the Trump administration sued her over voter data and House Republicans voted to hold her in contempt over election documents, she fought both and won.

By contrast, her likely Republican opponent, U.S. Rep. John James, has refused to support legal protections against discrimination, campaigned against marriage equality and aligned himself with the Trump administration's attacks on LGBTQ+ people.

With the Aug. 4 primary on the horizon and the RealClearPolling average showing her well ahead of Democratic challenger Chris Swanson — and the likely winner in the general election — Benson spoke with

BTL about Whitmer's legacy, her own record and what she plans to do with a much bigger stage.

Whitmer, Nessel and you have worked together as a visible, vocal team for LGBTQ+ Michiganders. As governor, can we expect that same energy and commitment?

Ensuring that I'm working closely with the LGBTQ+ community in Michigan to make government more inclusive and respectful and responsive is a hallmark of my leadership and has been at the Secretary of State's office. That's how we worked to revise outdated policies and train staff so that same-sex couples don't face any barriers or exclusion in our office, and how we modernized our state's ID policy to be more inclusive and welcoming to the community.

My goal has been to not only ensure

everyone who interacts with our office is treated with respect and equity, but also to show up in the community to make sure everyone knows they have a place on our team and a direct line to me in sharing their concerns, their worries, their hopes and their dreams. I'll continue to do that as governor, working directly with our LGBTQ+ Michiganders to change policies that protect everyone's rights and affirm identities and address the unique challenges the community faces. To me, this is about building a state where every person feels safe, seen, supported and welcome. That's the Michigan I believe in, and that's the Michigan I'm fighting for.

Gov. Whitmer expanded Elliott-Larsen, outlawed the panic defense and created Michigan's first LGBTQ+ Commission. What's your role in

continuing that legacy — and where do you go from here?

Governor Whitmer has been a champion for our community, and I'm proud to have been part of that work as secretary of state. The expansion of Elliott-Larsen and the creation of the LGBTQ+ Commission represent the kind of systemic change we need. As governor, I'll continue that work by ensuring our laws protect everyone's rights and affirm identities. I'll work directly with our LGBTQ+ Michiganders to identify and change policies that address the unique challenges the community faces, and I'll make sure that everyone who interacts with state government is treated with respect and equity.

Will you push to codify same-sex marriage in state law?

Yes, we need to protect marriage equality from any misguided and wrongful attacks. Certainly it's a policy we've worked to make real in our state and we'll have to continue to ensure it is protected.

How does affordability specifically impact the LGBTQ+ community, and what's your plan?

Our state should be a place where it doesn't matter who you love or where you live, you have the opportunity to build a life where you can thrive and make ends meet. Far too many families are struggling, working multiple jobs and still having to make difficult choices between food, medicine and rent.

For our LGBTQ+ community specifically, we need to make sure doctors and nurses have the appropriate training on how to provide competent care and address health disparities. We also need to ensure we have providers in the state who will advocate for services that are specific and needed by the community. Housing is another key piece — we need to increase the supply of affordable housing and hold accountable corporate investors that are buying up properties and driving up rents.

You spoke at the Equity in Bloom: COLOURS Spring Business Summit hosted by the Detroit Regional LGBT Chamber of Commerce. How does LGBTQ-owned small business fit into your economic vision?

Small businesses power our economy and

shape our communities. I was excited to visit businesses like Motel Bear Lake in Manistee County earlier this year to see how important it is to invest in local enterprises that create economic opportunity and provide safe places for our LGBTQ+ Michiganders.

Making it easier to start and scale up a small business is critical to diversifying our economy. That comes particularly by ensuring women-owned, LGBTQ-owned businesses can build their future in Michigan and help us create more vibrant and welcoming communities. I was proud to speak to the Detroit Regional LGBT Chamber of Commerce about my plan to invest in LGBTQ-owned small businesses and invite business owners from the community to help advise me.

What are your three main goals as governor — and how does protecting LGBTQ+ rights fit into the broader picture?

The job of the next governor is to drive down costs, increase access to well-paying jobs and grow our economy, and protect our citizens and their rights and freedoms no matter where they may be — whether in schools



Jocelyn Benson speaking at an Affirmations event related to her push to enforce Michigan's updated law related to gender markers on state ID. Courtesy photo

or at the ballot box or in the workplace. Governors are the guardrails over our rights, our freedoms, our economy and our democracy.

I'm ready to protect all of those things, especially when we see the ongoing abuse of power and lawlessness of the Trump administration trying to interfere with citizens' rights or intimidate local and state officials into bending to their will. I will always be proud to stand up to even the president of the United States if he would try to interfere with the rights and protections that every resident in the state should be afforded.

Michigan's primary election is Aug. 4. Find your sample ballot at vote411.org.

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A photograph from the play Emma's Wedding(s) showing two women in wedding dresses. One woman is in a white dress, and the other is in a pink dress. They are both looking at each other with expressions of surprise or shock. A QR code is visible in the bottom left corner of the image.

PurpleRoseTheatre.org | 734-433-7673 | 137 Park St. Chelsea, MI

The Power of a Free Mom or Dad Hug at Pride

For LGBTQ+ people who've lost family support, a stranger's hug can mean more than expected

BY KELLI DUNHAM

At Pride festivals across Michigan this summer, you'll find many expressions of queer joy: drag performers, food trucks with penis-shaped bagels, vendors with dolphin-shaped sex toys and organizations that support the LGBTQ+ community in all its forms, from transmasculine plumbers to lesbians who juggle.

You might also find something much simpler: a parent standing in a brightly colored T-shirt offering a free hug.

For some LGBTQ+ people, that hug is a fun photo opportunity. For others, it is something much bigger — a brief experience of acceptance from someone who looks like the parent they wish they had.

The national Free Mom Hugs organization began with Sara Cunningham, an Oklahoma mom who struggled to accept her son's sexuality after he came out. Raised in a conservative Christian community, she spent years trying to reconcile her faith with her love for her child. That search eventually led her from rejecting LGBTQ+ people to standing beside them. She wore a "free mom hugs" pin to an Oklahoma pride event on June 20, 2015 and the response was so great (both in person and then later online) that by 2018 she had established an official non-profit. Eight years later, there are representatives in all 50 states and nearly 40,000 volunteers; the organization has inspired other efforts like Stand In Pride, which provides support for weddings and other significant life events.

Nonprofits like Free Mom Hugs and their less structured counterparts have become a familiar presence at Pride celebrations, staffed by volunteers who offer hugs, encouragement and conversation to anyone who wants it. Their work may seem small from the outside, but for many LGBTQ+ people navigating family rejection, estrangement or complicated relationships, those interactions can carry surprising emotional weight.

For me, the idea hits close to home.

When I came out (at that time, as lesbian) in the late '90s, my mother responded by ripping up my birth certificate and mailing the pieces to me. I told my therapist that



this seemed a little passive-aggressive and she replied “No, I think that’s aggressive-aggressive.”

It was not a short or easy journey, but we eventually reconciled and we became something that looked like friends. But I still remember the feeling of losing parental approval in an instant. Many LGBTQ+ people never get the second chapter I did.

That reality is what motivates volunteers like Arleta Greer, who is the state chapter leader for Free Mom Hugs Michigan. Greer attended her first event in Ypsilanti in 2019, expecting to volunteer for a few hours before heading home. Instead, she found herself changed by the experience.

One young person laughed as they received a hug.

“Why are you laughing?” someone asked.

“I’m just so happy,” the teenager replied.

Later that same day, Greer watched three teenagers repeatedly return to the booth to show off stickers, earrings and other Pride treasures they had discovered. But as the event started to wind down, the teens’ mood shifted.

The teens removed their Pride flags, wiped glitter from their faces and packed everything into backpacks before heading home. “They weren’t out at home,” Greer said. “They had to hide all this that had happened.” What struck her wasn’t only the sadness of concealment. It was the joy their parents were missing.

“These kids had an incredibly fun afternoon,” she said. “The parents can’t even know about it.”

That first event launched what Greer describes as a second full-time job. Today she helps coordinate volunteers across Michigan, serves on the national organization’s board and spends countless hours staffing events, organizing logistics and providing educational programs for workplaces, churches and community groups.

While the public often associates Free Mom Hugs with mothers, the volunteer base is much broader. “We have moms, dads, uncles, pet moms — whatever,” Greer said with a laugh. The mission, she explained, is not merely about hugs. “It’s really important to me to let people feel like they’ve been seen, even if it’s just for a moment.”

That theme surfaced repeatedly in conversations with volunteers.

Ken Long, a Michigan chapter leader who often wears a “Free Dad Hugs” shirt at events, became involved after watching

family members navigate the challenges of coming out in conservative evangelical circles. His own daughter later came out as transgender.

“We already knew the statistics,” Long said. “We already knew that one supportive adult can lead to a reduction in harmful behaviors and suicidal thinking.”

Like many volunteers, Long discovered that the people seeking hugs span generations. At one Pride event, a man stopped him on the way to his car. “He said, ‘I’m 70 years old, and my dad never hugged me.’” Long hugged him. “It wasn’t a huge emotional scene,” Long recalled. “But he said, ‘Wow. Thank you. I appreciate that.’” The interaction reinforced something he has learned repeatedly: that the need for parental affirmation doesn’t disappear with age.

Long says some visitors immediately burst into tears when he greets them with a

“It’s really important to me to let people feel like they’ve been seen, even if it’s just for a moment.”

— Arleta Greer, state chapter leader,
Free Mom Hugs Michigan

simple phrase: “Happy Pride. I’m so happy you’re here.” Others stop themselves before reaching him. “I’ve had attendees come by, see the moms, give them a hug, see me and say, ‘I can’t do it. I’m not ready.’”

That reaction helps explain why Free Dad Hugs can carry a particular emotional charge. Greer notices it, too. “If we have a dad at the booth, the line is out the door,” she said. As Mike Whetstone, who offers free dad hugs on his own at Cincinnati-area Pride fests, says, “Everybody needs a hug... some more than others.” He’s happy to be the person to offer one.

Long believes many men were never taught that emotional support could be

See **Free Pride Hugs**, page 26



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Florida Congressmen Are Busy Doing Their Job of Targeting One Single Teenage Dancer



BY D'ANNE WITKOWSKI

I just plugged “Is Riverdance Irish dancing” into a search engine. Turns out the answer is yes.

Do you remember the Riverdance craze? In the late '90s, people could not get enough of this traditional (probably?) style of Irish dancing, often performed in tap shoes and without arms.

Wait, that's not what I mean. I don't mean that the dancers didn't have arms. They did, they just kept their arms to their side much of the time as their feet skedaddled and went clickity clack.

And people loved it. I did not because I was in my late teens and was too busy kissing and wanting to kiss girls. But to each their own.

As far as I'm concerned, dancing is for anyone who wants to do it. Granted, people need to know their limitations. There's a big difference between cutting up at your cousin's wedding and trying out for a ballet company.

“

This is laser-focused harassment and discrimination. It is unconscionable.

But dancing can be a fun thing to do.

As I'm sure I've made clear, I don't know much about dancing. Which is fine because, one, I'm not a dancer and, two, I don't make decisions about who can and can't dance.

That decision is apparently up to U.S. Reps. Randy Fine and Greg Steube, both Florida Republicans, who have taken a keen interest in the North American Irish Dance Championships that took place in Orlando July 1-7.

And what makes them so interested in this particular dance championship? Are these men competitors? Professional dancers? Dance coaches? Scholars of Irish dance? Or even huge Irish dance fans?

No, as far as I could find. Neither of them appears

qualified to call the shots about who can and can't participate in this competition.

They are, however, experts in anti-trans bigotry. And the fact that there's a trans dancer in the competition is something they cannot let stand.

Why? Because Florida has anti-trans laws on the books to “protect” women and women's sports by discriminating against trans people. And these three grown men want very much for the Irish Dance Teachers' Association of North America (IDTANA) to kick out a specific trans child.

And this is why inclusive anti-discrimination policies are important. Not that they change the minds of anti-trans bigots, but they do clearly show people where you stand, which I imagine means a lot to a trans dancer and their family.

“As a core value, IDTANA is committed to preserving and promoting Irish Dance in an environment that is inclusive and free of discrimination and harassment,” reads the

statement in the event's syllabus. “We support a culture where every dancer, family, teacher, and volunteer feels safe, respected and valued through creating an environment that provides dancers, regardless of age, ability, ethnicity, gender, gender identity, income, race or sexual orientation, opportunities to learn and grow as dancers and people.”

Of course, Reps. Fine and Steube take issue with this policy because the IDTANA is not practicing the kind of discrimination and harassment they claim is required by Florida law.

“Your inclusivity policy has allowed a trans-identifying male to repeatedly steal titles and placements from his female

peers, including at competitions in Florida,” reads a letter to IDTANA signed by both Fine and Steube. They then proceed to call out this dancer by name and misgender her over and over again.

Regarding this dancer's achievements, they write, “This outcome involving the male dancer comes as no surprise, as we have witnessed male athletes dominate women's sports by virtue of biological advantages.”

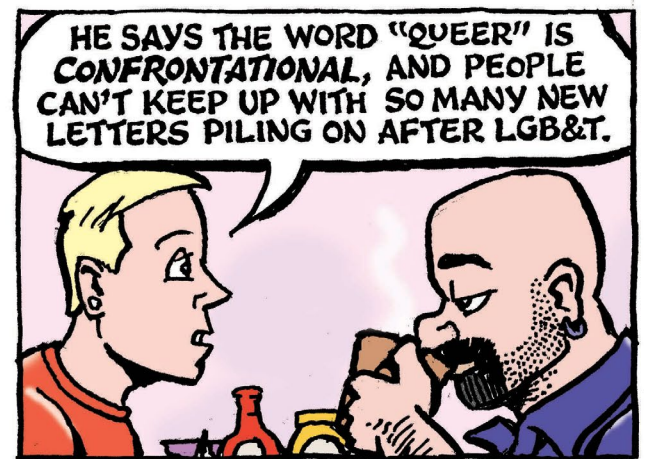
To hear Reps. Fine and Steube tell it, male athletes dominating in women's sports is something that happens all of the time. The amount of attention this issue has gotten by Republicans in Congress and at the state level across the country would lead one to believe that trans athletes are coming out of the woodwork to steal titles away from girls and women.

That is, however, not the case. First and foremost, transgender women and girls are women and girls. Full stop, fuck you. Second, the trans athletes being targeted by men like Fine and Steube are largely children and are few and far between. In fact, one of the cases that the U.S. Supreme Court just decided regarding trans student athletes was centered on a single child. One kid. With the full force and fury of the most powerful people in the country aimed directly at them, personally.

This is laser-focused harassment and discrimination. It is unconscionable.

I don't know what happened at the 2026 North American Irish Dance Championships. The event had yet to conclude at the time of this writing, but I couldn't find any news that it had been impeded by the grown ass men incensed by a trans teenager daring to dance.

To these three men and everyone who agrees with them I say with all sincerity: Cry me a Riverdance.



Mallory McMorrow Suspends Michigan Senate Campaign

.....

State Sen. Mallory McMorrow, the Royal Oak Democrat who built a national profile as a fierce LGBTQ+ ally after her 2022 viral floor speech defending queer youth, suspended her U.S. Senate campaign July 5, narrowing Michigan's high-stakes Aug. 4 Democratic primary to a two-person race.

"I may be suspending this campaign, but I am not leaving the fight," McMorrow said in a statement posted to social media, though she did not endorse either of the remaining candidates. "The energy is there. People are crying out for change. And we owe it to them to listen," she added.

McMorrow, who spoke with Between The Lines earlier this year for our Ally Pride issue, had led the field in first-quarter fundraising but struggled to maintain traction in a splintered field as recent polls showed her fading.

The exit leaves U.S. Rep. Haley Stevens, the race's establishment favorite, facing former Wayne County health director Abdul El-Sayed, who is running from the progressive wing of the party with the backing of Sen. Bernie Sanders. The seat, rated a toss-up by major election forecasters, is considered one of the most consequential — and unpredictable — in the country for Democratic hopes of flipping the Senate in November.

Get your Aug. 4 primary sample ballot and find your polling place at vote411.org.



Mallory McMorrow. Official State of Michigan portrait

Daughters of the American Revolution Rejects Trans Ban

.....

The Daughters of the American Revolution voted against barring transgender women from the historic organization on June 26, formally rejecting a proposed change to the membership definition of "woman." The 1,481-984 vote followed years of pressure from conservative members seeking to exclude trans women.

The DAR, a nonprofit historical society for descendants of Revolutionary War soldiers founded in 1890, had clarified in 2023 that trans women could join and participate as full members, prompting backlash from some members. "Transgender Americans are patriots, family members, volunteers, historians and descendants of Revolutionary War ancestors just like anyone else," one member wrote in a Facebook response.

Queer Authors Take Center Stage at Pride Royal Oak

.....

Pride Royal Oak returns Saturday, July 25 with a full day of events throughout downtown,

including a queer author panel presented by Sidetrack Bookshop. The discussion features Peter Marra ("Queer Slashers"), Lisa Peers ("Love at 350"), Caroline Huntoon ("Going Overboard" and "Skating on Mars") and Rose Bousamra ("Frizzy," a Newbery Honor winner).

The authors will discuss their work, creative

processes and the queer writing community. Beyond the author panel, the festival features live music, drag performances, community vendors and food throughout the day. The event is free and open to the public. Learn more at prideroyaloak.com and check pridesource.com for info about other Michigan Pride celebrations in July and beyond.

Fundraising Detroit's First Women's Sports Bar

.....

A crowdfunding campaign to open Detroit's first women's sports bar has raised over \$79,000 toward an initial \$125,000 goal. Bar IX, named after the 1972 federal law expanding student athletic opportunities for women, is the brainchild of Detroit's Alissa Graff, who spent years hosting watch parties in her living room before deciding the city needed something permanent. Bar IX would join similar venues that have recently opened nationwide. Learn more at bar9detroit.com.

Madonna Is Back and Critics Are Obsessed

.....

"Confessions II," Madonna's first album in seven years and a sequel to her landmark 2005 record "Confessions on a Dance Floor," dropped July 3 to near-universal critical acclaim. Rolling Stone declared it her best work since the original, writing that she "proves how complex, how dramatic, how ecstatic a dance floor can be." The 64-minute DJ-set-style album weaves grief, motherhood and pre-fame NYC nostalgia alongside collaborations with Sabrina Carpenter and daughter Lourdes Leon.

Victoria Cruz, Trans Rights Pioneer, Dies at 79

.....

Victoria Cruz, a beloved Puerto Rican trans activist who was present at the 1969 Stonewall uprising, died June 25 at age 79. Cruz spent 17 years counseling LGBTQ+ survivors of violence through the New York City Anti-Violence Project and became widely known through David France's 2017 documentary "The Death and Life of Marsha P. Johnson." In 2012, she received the National Crime Victims' Service Award from the U.S. Department of Justice.



Victoria Cruz. Photo: New York City Anti-Violence Project

Queer Parenthood, Imagined



Joseph Osmundson. Photo: Ted Ely

Biologist Joseph Osmundson asks what happens when the future we planned never arrives

BY CHRIS AZZOPARDI

How do you define “child” when you’re a queer boy who can’t carry one but wants to anyways? Growing up, Joseph Osmundson loved the women in his life (“mothers are a poppy seed cake, a lemon drizzle; fathers catch and release”) so much he could imagine fully stepping into their nurturing roles. Like them, he imagined not just raising a “queaby,” or a queer baby, but carrying one himself, in his belly, with Kay, a queer friend he met in college who stayed close into adulthood. He imagined their little one licking batter off the beater, just as he had. He named the kid Fry before there was a kid. Then everyone grew up: Kay partnered with Jaime, and the two asked Joseph to be their sperm donor. All three imagined a future with Fry. Then Kay and her wife ultimately decided they wanted to pursue parenthood in a way that reflected their own racial background, and the future they had imagined with Fry disappeared.

A professor of microbiology at New York University and the author of “Virology,” the critically acclaimed essay collection exploring our relationship with infectious viruses, Osmundson sorts through a deeper, more unspoken grief in the science-meets-memoir book “Spawning Season: An Experiment in Queer Parenthood.” This new work asks a fundamental question: How do you grieve what never was? What makes Fry’s absence complicated is that Osmundson is grieving not only a child, but a version of queer family-making that he once believed was possible. To explore that loss, and how he arrived at the name Fry, he reaches for science — specifically, the life cycle of the salmon.

“For every two hundred fry, ten will survive and become smolts,” he writes in the book, reflecting shortly thereafter that the name started as a joke and then became “a way for two queer kids to say we loved each other without having to say it.”

“A part of writing the book was filling the void,” he tells me recently, explaining why he frequently returns to writing about Fry as a baby fish, using the salmon life cycle to give symbolic shape to his thoughts: spawning, eggs, survival, return, loss. “The grief, in this case, was the absence of a child. And so it felt really important to make an object of that loss — something that could be material in the world.”

“To be able to hold it in my hands,” he says

about the book's existence, "in the way that I both can, but also can't, hold Fry in my hands."

Osmundson wrote 400,000 words of fish research for the book — facts, maps of the Columbia River Basin, details about dams, hours spent immersed in the biology of particular Pacific salmon species. It was, he admits, a way to delay confronting what the water represented: a future he wanted but couldn't have.

"I would wake up on Saturday and Sunday morning, and the quietness, the silence of my home was oppressive, because I had been planning on spending weekend days in a home with a child," he says. "I was looking for answers in the rational world to what was functionally an irrational experience, which is grief."

It is the death of possibility that is being grieved. But for years, even naming that loss felt impossible. Before writing the book, Osmundson struggled to talk about Fry with close friends, worried that putting the experience into words would somehow take away from it.

"If I shared my relationship with my almost-child, she would disappear or wouldn't be real to me anymore."

That fear became one of the emotional stakes of writing "Spawning Season." To put Fry onto the page was to risk exposing something deeply personal — not just the imagined child, but the depth of the grief attached to her. The chapters with Fry, he says, felt "very, very vulnerable" to write. Lonely, too.

"One of the reasons I wrote the book is that I was so isolated through the experience," he says.

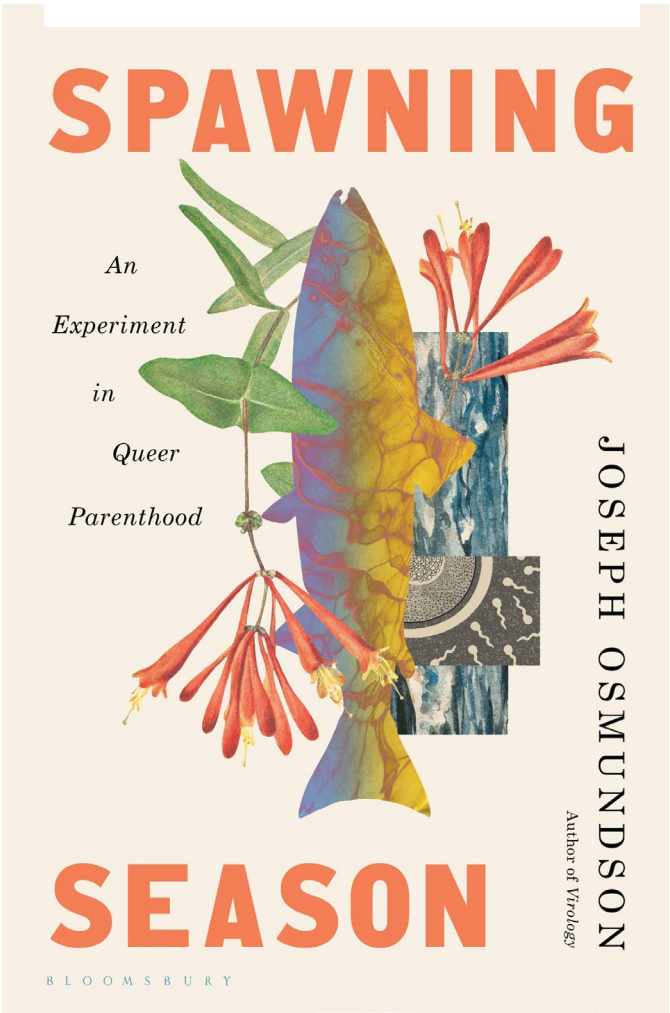
But publishing the book revealed something he didn't fully understand while living through the loss: that his grief was not as singular as it felt. Readers and strangers began recognizing pieces of themselves in his story — in the children they couldn't have, the futures that changed, the lives they had imagined differently.

"It turns out that a lot of people see fractures of that experience in their own lives. And it's actually not lonely at all — it's just something that we are often taught not

to talk about publicly."

In hindsight, would it have helped him to be more open about Fry with, at the very least, more of his friends? Osmundson responds without regret, with the kind of self-compassion that comes from having

"It turns out that a lot of people see fractures of that experience in their own lives. And it's actually not lonely at all — it's just something that we are often taught not to talk about publicly."



moved through the experience rather than simply beyond it.

"Life throws you a lot of really difficult experiences," he says. "And frankly, I wasn't sharing with people because I was in denial, and I was bargaining. And so I couldn't accept the loss in myself, and therefore I couldn't go to anyone to help process that loss. It was a loss that I wasn't ready to believe was actually happening. I'm really tender to the person that went through this experience in the past."

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Cathy Renna Has Been Shaping LGBTQ+ Media Narratives for Decades

From Matthew Shepard to today's anti-trans political attacks, the longtime LGBTQ+ publicist reflects on activism and why media representation still matters

BY TRACY E. GILCHRIST

Scan the news stories of the most consequential LGBTQ+ moments of the past three decades and the name Cathy Renna, a publicist who's been on the frontlines since the early 1990s, repeatedly comes up. A publicity guru who's worked with towering queer nonprofits including GLAAD and the National LGBTQ Task Force, Renna has been a force in ensuring LGBTQ+ stories make mainstream headlines and are told fairly and accurately.

Archival news footage shows Renna on the ground in Laramie, Wyoming, in 1998 speaking at a press conference on behalf of GLAAD in the days following the murder of a gay university student, Matthew Shepard. Five years later, in 2003, she fought to bring awareness to a hate crime that garnered less national attention, the murder of Sakia Gunn, a Black butch lesbian, in Newark, New Jersey.

Humble and always shouting out to those who've stood beside her throughout her career, Renna will say she's "relentless" in pushing intersectional queer stories to the fore, but the truth is she's one of the best at her job.

"I remember thousands of people filling the streets for Matthew Shepard, but nobody could get on the PATH train to Hoboken and go to Newark for this kid [Gunn] because she was a Black butch lesbian. Like that's the bottom line," Renna recalls. "I did the same thing I did for Matt," she says, crediting members of Gunn's family with pushing for her story to be told.

"I've had the opportunity to be a publicist for the queer community, all of the queer community. That's my driving force," Renna adds. "News doesn't just happen, or the way it's covered doesn't just happen. So, you need someone who understands how the media works and to demystify the process for others, and how to create the space to tell stories."

A native New Yorker, Renna grew up in Queens before moving to Long Island. The daughter of an Italian immigrant father and a first-generation Italian American mother, her family was accepting when she came out in



Cathy Renna. Courtesy photo

college. To this day, family, friends, food and travel (she spent summers in Italy when she was young) are some of the outlets that help her balance the onslaught of anti-LGBTQ+ messaging she counters daily at her job as the communications director for the National LGBTQ+ Task Force.

"They call it self-care now, but I have a life. I don't let this take over my life. I have friends. I have family. I love my family here. I love my family in Italy. [Her wife] Karen's family and children," Renna says. "I'm like the best aunt in the world because I'm a little kid at heart. I still play video games. I still like to go to the movies. I collect Pokémon cards."

At the Task Force's annual Creating Change

summit, a multi-day event of community and coalition building rife with panels, parties and inspiring speeches (often from the Task Force's president, Kierra Johnson), attendees will find that Renna's role reaches beyond the seamless communications initiatives she and her team create. Always affable and up for a laugh, she's a connector of people across generations, socioeconomic status, experience, abilities and identities. It's easy to imagine the activist who began volunteering for GLAAD in the early 1990s, spearheading campaigns against hate, also standing in line for an hour when new Pokémon cards are released, as she says she routinely does.

Activism wasn't always top of mind for

Renna. A biology major in college, she attended New York City Pride a few times in the 1980s, but it was another chapter in Renna's life that included a move to Washington, D.C., to attend medical school at Georgetown University that ignited her activism. Though she realized med school wasn't ultimately her thing, the move to D.C. was pivotal when she and her girlfriend at the time happened upon a flyer for a panel discussion on lesbian invisibility in the media. They attended the talk, packed with about 150 people for a panel that included Ann Werner, who was the co-chair of the "newly minted GLAAD chapter in Washington, D.C., which was called the GLAAD NCA for National Capital Area," Renna explains.

Before long, Renna was volunteering with the media watchdog GLAAD, clipping articles out of *The Washington Post* with scissors and writing letters to the editor.

"Back then, I joke, there were like five of us doing this stuff," Renna says, laughing.

Illustrating the climate for queer people in the early '90s, Renna was there for protests against "The Silence of the Lambs" (1991) and "Basic Instinct" (1992), films with harmful depictions of trans and bisexual identities, respectively. Renna recalls the 1993 March on Washington, where she first met activists from the Task Force, including the towering activist Urvashi Vaid, whose position as communications director Renna now holds.

"This was a very interesting time to get involved in the movement because we were still reeling from the HIV pandemic. AIDS, literally on a weekly basis, you would be at a funeral or a wake," Renna recalls. "We had a resurgence of [activism] with Queer Nation and ACT UP, but also, groups like GLAAD and the Task Force and the Human Rights Campaign."

Toward the end of the decade, Renna was deployed to Laramie on behalf of GLAAD in the wake of Shepard's murder, where she

See **Cathy Renna**, page 18



Toni Mua (right) at a political rally in Detroit in 2026. Courtesy photo

◀ Toni Mua

Continued from page 7

giving them the resources they're looking for," she said. "Or they just haven't connected them with the right folks."

District 9's needs are concrete. It's home to a high concentration of seniors, and Mua says the flooding along Detroit's riverfront has been the defining, still-unaddressed crisis of her adult life — one she's experienced firsthand. "Over the past 10 years, there have been a record number of floods. I know my house has flooded at least seven times within the last decade. And there's no state help when it comes to that." Recent coverage of flooding near Alfred B. Ford Park, which falls within the district, has brought some visibility to the problem. Mua sees her role as forcing that conversation into Lansing.

She's also clear-eyed about what her candidacy means to people who'd rather derail it. In 2022, bricks came through her window and hostile letters arrived at her home address, which had inadvertently been listed on campaign materials instead of her P.O. box; she involved police. This cycle, the hostility has moved online. Meshawn Maddock — the former Michigan Republican Party co-chair who was among 16 people charged in the state's 2020 fake electors scheme — posted about trans women candidates on social media this cycle, part of a pattern of attacks Mua has learned not to let land.

"I used to be worried," she said. "And then I had a really good conversation with a friend, and we came to realize that I've been fear-mongered the entirety of my life." She traces that perspective to growing up as a tall, Black teenager during the Trayvon Martin era,

learning early that public space carried danger and moving through it anyway.

The deadname challenge mirrors what Whaley has faced in her primary, where fellow Democrat Frank Liberati filed a complaint challenging her ballot access over her legal name change — one the Wayne County Clerk has since rejected. Mua describes the similar challenge to her candidacy as part of a pattern by someone with a long history of election-

"I used to be worried. And then I had a really good conversation with a friend, and we came to realize that I've been fear-mongered the entirety of my life."

related filings in Michigan.

"This isn't the first time I've run, and last time I did have to put my deadname on the ballot, which I didn't have a problem with," she said. "But this go-round I did just want to focus beyond my identity."

She'll make that case in a crowded Aug. 4 primary — eight Democrats total are on the District 9 ballot. For Mua, the path forward looks the same as it always has: constituent by constituent, door by door.

"The attacks just put more fire under me to go out and knock on these doors."

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Abdul El-Sayed (center) with supporters. Courtesy photo

◀ Abdul El-Sayed

Continued from page 7

been targeted and brought offline. Those are lives that could be saved that might not be saved because of this heinous disinvestment in basic science. My hope is to use my specific expertise in the Senate to make sure that I'm undoing a lot of the worst things that the Trump administration has done when it comes to targeting LGBTQ+ health.

Gov. Gretchen Whitmer told BTL earlier this year that she's noticed formerly vocal allies going quiet on trans issues. You seem to be taking the opposite approach.

One of my trans endorsers told me something I'm never going to forget — it's important for us always to be inclusive, and if they're taking aim, don't show them where to fire. There's a reason that if I'm asked, I always say that I support trans rights because I believe in all rights. I want folks to see their own rights in the plight of a trans person who's being discriminated against.

The real question here isn't about whether or not we can discriminate against one group or another. The real question is whether or not we want a government that can discriminate against anybody at all. A government that is told that it's allowed to discriminate against some people and not others will eventually discriminate against any and all people for whatever reasons it chooses.

We are all in the fight for an America whose government does not discriminate against any of us.

I say that as somebody who puts my face on the ground many times a day praying in the way that I pray as a Muslim. Not everybody has to understand why I do that, but I damn well expect that they're going to stand up for my right to do it. And similarly, you might not understand somebody else — but you work for their rights. We cannot build the relationships and love and community we need when government is weaponizing against any of us.

Is there anything else you want our readers to know?

I want the community to know that I intend to be a lion for rights. When somebody's coming for you, I intend to stand in the cut to protect you. We have to answer this broader question: Do we want to live in the kind of America where we leave some of us behind, or do we want to live in the kind of America where we understand that government of the people, by the people, and for the people means all the people?

My job as a public servant is to stand up for folks. It's what motivated a lot of my efforts in Detroit and Wayne County to make sure that our services were deeply accessible and empowering of LGBTQ+ residents — and it's why I take the idea of protecting all of our rights so seriously.

Visit vote411.org to find your sample ballot and check your voter registration.

◀ Cathy Renna

Continued from page 16

moderated a press conference and helped navigate people through interviews as the nation watched. It was there she also met Shepard's parents, Judy and Dennis Shepard, who would go on to fight for recognition of diverse victims of hate crimes throughout their lives. To this day, she's still called to do talk-backs for "The Laramie Project," Moisés Kaufman's 2000 play about the events following Shepard's murder.

"It's interesting because what I did there is what I've done everywhere else in many ways. It's just that it was magnified countless times in terms of the level of visibility," she says. "I did what I always did, which is, someone was in trouble and they needed help."

After years as the news director with GLAAD, she eventually worked for a publicity company before co-founding Target Cue in 2006.

"I just felt like the community needed a PR firm for the queer community, but one that they could frankly afford for the level of comms work that they needed," says Renna, who's supported trans organizations including The GenderCool Project and Gender Spectrum.

"I was perfectly placed to start doing what I did at GLAAD, right? But doing it as an entrepreneur. So doing consulting."

When Covid hit in March 2020, Renna, who had contracted with the Task Force under Executive Director Rea Carey to help with Creating Change and on queering the census and the vote, came on as the interim communications director during the shutdowns. "I hadn't had a real job in 15 years," she says, adding that at the end of the year, she was asked to come on full-time.

"I was looking in the mirror and saying, 'Can I take like next week off or whatever?'" she says.

"I have such a deep love and respect for [Task Force President] Kierra Johnson and her leadership and her approach that our movement really needs that I said 'yes.' And that was now five years ago," Renna adds.

The public relations veteran calls the Task Force her "political home," one that meets the moment. Early in the pandemic, with the 2020 presidential election on the horizon, Renna worked on the Task Force's "Queer the Vote" and "Queer the Census" campaigns, ensuring that LGBTQ+ people are counted.

Creating Change was in full swing in Las Vegas in January 2025, the week of Donald Trump's re-inauguration, when he almost immediately signed the executive order titled "Defending Women from Gender Ideology Extremism and Restoring Biological Truth to the Federal Government." Fear and

trepidation were in the air at Creating Change, along with the queer joy the gathering fosters.

"To be honest, I was worried. I am worried less about myself because I know that when they come for trans people, they're coming for all of us, of course, but it was very clear who in our community was in crosshairs," Renna says. "Literally, the first 48 hours, we were dealing with anti-trans executive orders. ... I had this feeling in the pit of my stomach that this was really gonna hurt people that I care about."

Renna describes herself as "running around like Sonic the Hedgehog" during the multi-day event, but she gleaned hope from a quiet moment watching the crowd at an intimate conversation on the Creator's Stage in the exhibit hall, where artists and influencers shared their stories.



Cathy Renna (left) at Creating Change in 2023. Courtesy photo

"If you looked at that crowd, the thing that's always most striking to me about working with the Task Force is it's everybody," she says. "It's intergenerational, it's multiracial, it's multi-gender. And in that way, I felt a little comforted and reassured that people were in it. We were in it together."

Now, more than 15 months into the second Trump term, Renna emphasizes collaboration and the interconnectedness among social and political movements as well as the work of providing political education, which she says is not always "super visible."

"In 2025, people felt helpless, and that was partially because people didn't understand the process, what was happening. Does an executive order mean it's the law?" she says. "[Political education] happens at state houses, at gatherings we put together with partner organizations. It doesn't necessarily happen under the bright lights, but it's really important because it's helping people understand that no matter their background, their experience, they can all be helpful, can all be a part of the process of fighting back."

What's next for Renna and the Task Force? "The foot is on the gas for the November elections, the midterms," Renna says, adding that there's hope with recent gubernatorial elections in New Jersey and Virginia.

"We have to keep people organized, and organizing, and fighting, and showing up in November. That's the biggest challenge politically," Renna says.

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Kieron Moore in “Blue Film.” Photo: Obscured Releasing

Sundance Rejected It. Kieron Moore on Why ‘Blue Film’ Is Finding Its Own Way.

In the film, the British actor delivers a raw, complicated performance as a gay cam performer — and he has a lot to say about how he earned it

BY CHRIS AZZOPARDI

For queer audiences who know what it means to feel unseen, British actor Kieron Moore’s performance in “Blue Film” offers a rare kind of recognition: a character who isn’t reduced to his wounds, his sexuality or his mistakes, but allowed to be fully human.

In the film, now available to stream on VOD, Moore stars as Aaron Eagle, a charismatic gay cam performer whose carefully controlled online persona begins to unravel when an

unexpected connection from his past (played by Reed Birney) forces him to confront desire, intimacy and the emotional distance he has cultivated from the people around him.

The provocative new drama, written and directed by Elliot Tuttle, has courted controversy for its explicit content, taboo subject matter and difficulties securing acceptance at major film festivals despite strong audience reactions. And Moore’s role demands vulnerability and a willingness to sit inside uncomfortable questions rather

than provide easy answers. So much rides on his performance that, if the audience doesn’t believe that Aaron (whose real name is Alex) is a fully realized person, the whole movie falls apart. It’s a different kind of challenge for Moore, who portrayed Nicholas Slovacsek, a violent, deeply homophobic criminal, in Netflix’s acclaimed series “Boots.”

Recently, Moore spoke about stepping into a queer story as a straight actor, the conversation and controversy surrounding “Blue Film,” and the surprising parallels he sees

between Aaron and Nicholas — two seemingly opposite characters who, in Moore’s view, reveal different facets of performative masculinity.

How much pressure did you feel carrying a character who has to hold so many contradictions at once?

It’s a luxury, really. It’s definitely made it harder now for me when I’m navigating the next job. I think Elliot’s writing is so strong that so much of it was already there, but it had so much

room for me to paint my own picture and bring my ideas to it.

A lot of writers feel quite protective of their characters that they write. Elliot obviously was with Aaron and Alex, but he just handed them over. That’s a real relief as an artist. You go, “OK, I’m trusted.” It’s so relieving now to hear that people are having this interpretation of my performance. Of course, there’s conflicting opinions from different audience members, but that just makes it, for me, all the more fruitful.

Did you have any idea how controversial this film would be when you got the script?

Honestly, naively, I didn't. Looking back now, that was idiotic. I just immediately was like, "This is such a strong piece of writing." I'm very lucky to play the characters I've played, but I know that none of them had the opportunity to be exploited in this way, for the camera to sit with me as much as it was going to sit with me as Aaron. So, I think I was just so magnetized to that opportunity of like, can I do this? It wasn't until we started to submit to film festivals where I was kind of like, "Oh yeah, we've done this thing that is terrifying to people."

When Sundance rejected the film — I'm assuming because of the content itself — what did that feel like?

I've always said that the process has always been the point for me. It made me feel like, "Well, maybe this is just the journey." I just had a feeling it would all work out, and it seems to have been carving its own way now. Audiences are going "Who are these people to tell me that this movie wasn't OK for me to watch?" That's quite exciting. It's its own success story now.

As a straight actor working with a queer director, what was the most valuable insight that Elliot gave you about Aaron and the world that he inhabits?

There were different stages. When they first offered me to do it, I really challenged Elliot: "Are you sure?"

A good question that every straight actor should ask at the beginning of a production like this.

Absolutely. Obviously, I'm very lucky that I've got a lot of friends in the gay community, and I've been so welcomed by the gay community, but to step into these experiences and to try and live through it is no small task. It's a big honor. I pleaded, "You're going to have to defend this choice, that's something you're going to have to be OK with."

And [Elliot] never ever shied away from that. He would give me certain pieces of music to listen to, to understand where he thought Aaron sat, and then it was all about my interpretation. We bonded a lot on books and our own tastes, and a very specific book, which means so much to me: "Nausea" by Sartre. Elliot loves that book too, and it was kind of like, "OK, I know this person, I know where his brain sits."

When I met Elliot, I knew that there was a lot of Aaron in him. There's an extension of himself in that character. So, once I met Elliot, I was like, "I think I've got my final colors to add to this painting now." So, it just morphed into this thing. Where I tried to crack [into] Alex, Elliot just sort of held my hand the whole time. It was really intimate, in a beautiful way. Elliot wouldn't watch from the monitor; he'd be in the room. And I've always said this: I know a lot of actors talk about the audience, and the audience is the reason why we make films, and the reason I get to do this. But as far as filming goes, my audience is the director. The director can worry about the audience at that moment. If I worry too much about the audience when I'm

doing it, I'm going to be so in my head.

In this film, there is unexpected tenderness that caught me off guard. When did the emotional parts of the story hit you?

The script is special, and my imagination is strong enough from the amount of reading that I do that I saw this movie whilst I was reading it. But then when you do it, it becomes this whole other beast. It's fascinating because as Kieron, the story impacts me way more, and I was really struggling with my sympathy as Kieron. Because Reed is so phenomenal as an actor and such a kind human being, when he was performing, I found myself struggling to cling to Aaron's stubbornness and dismissiveness of this man in ways. Kieron wanted to embrace him and be like, "I wish I could hug you."

I think if you truly listen to this piece on what's being said, or you truly sit with it and try to be as unjudgmental as possible, which is a real challenge, it's quite hard to deny that it moves you. It's interesting because it highlights our own sort of moral limitation, but in a way we can also strengthen our own understanding of it.

That first scene really grabs you. How much research did you have to do to really understand gay camboy culture and sex work?

Thank you, because that first scene was my most challenging scene, for different reasons. So, I'm glad it sells. You do know what you're getting, and you're kind of

See Kieron Moore, page 24



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Marilyn Monroe's Choreographer
Puzzle can be found on page 25

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What Happened to the Buttigiegs Touches Old Family Fears

The false abuse allegation against Pete Buttigieg recalls a painful history of LGBTQ+ families fighting to keep their children

BY DANA RUDOLPH

Former Secretary of Transportation and Michigan resident Pete Buttigieg was separated from his 4-year-old twins for a day in late June after a false allegation of child abuse — a heinous act made more so because it echoes a long history of people trying to take children from LGBTQ+ parents. Many others have covered the incident in detail; here, I want to look at some of that history.

We should note first, though, that we don't yet know the real reason for the accuser's action. On his Substack (petebuttigieg.substack.com), Buttigieg called the incident “a cruel, politically motivated hoax that harmed our family.” That feels true — but was it purely political, based on Buttigieg's policy stances and/or political actions, or was there anti-LGBTQ+ animus involved? Buttigieg is still one of the most visible LGBTQ+ parents in the media, making it possible — even likely — that the perpetrator had some level of anti-LGBTQ+ bias. As Buttigieg himself acknowledged, “It's not lost on me that this happened soon after we shared photos of our family on social media for Father's Day. Or that this occurred during a month meant to make families like ours feel welcome and safe.”

Indeed, the incident hits on old biases and fears familiar to far too many LGBTQ+ parents. Starting in the 1960s, for example, when many LGBTQ+ parents began leaving heterosexual marriages, courts would often find against them in custody hearings, because of groundless fears that “being raised with lesbians and gay men harmed children in some way, socially, emotionally, psychologically, or sexually,” as Daniel Winunwe Rivers explained in “Radical Relations,” his history



Pete Buttigieg. Photo: Facebook/@petebuttigieg

of lesbian- and gay-headed families.

Queer parents were forcibly separated from their children at other times, too. In 1985, Massachusetts couple Don Babets and David Jean had their foster children removed from their care by the Department of Social Services (DSS) on the same day that the Boston Globe published a piece saying that some of their neighbors were opposed to the boys' placement, WBUR reported. Mere weeks later, the state instituted a policy that made it nearly impossible for gay and lesbian people to become foster parents. Babets and Jean sued with the help of GLAD Law, and although they never got the boys back, “in 1990 as a result of the case DSS returned to a ‘best interests of the child’ standard for foster care rather than focusing on the sexual orientation of the parents,” GLAD Law has noted

(gladlaw.org).

In another headline case, the mother of Sharon Bottoms (later Sharon Mattes) in 1993 sued for custody of Bottoms' child after Bottoms began a relationship with another woman. Much of the court hearing centered on what the women did in their bedroom, which the judge said was “illegal and immoral,” making Bottoms an unfit parent. The court granted custody to Bottoms' mother, although Bottoms claimed she had been molested by her mother's live-in boyfriend when she was a teen. Bottoms appealed, but after three years, stopped the custody fight, wanting to spare her 5-year-old son more turmoil, per Carlos Ball's history book “The Right to be Parents.” She continued to challenge a restriction preventing her from visiting with her son if her partner was present, but in 1999, the Virginia Court of Appeals upheld that as well.

More recently, too, parents with trans and nonbinary children have faced allegations of abuse and been investigated by CPS simply for affirming their children's identities. This has been most prevalent in Texas, where Gov. Greg Abbott (R) issued a directive in 2022 that medically necessary healthcare for gender dysphoria should be considered a form of child abuse. The ACLU has two cases, PFLAG v. Abbott and Doe v. Abbott, that are challenging that policy.

None of the situations above is identical to that of the Buttigiegs, but they show some of the context through which LGBTQ+ families may be viewing the family's situation — we know how vulnerable our families have been to false accusations of improper conduct.

Things have gotten better for LGBTQ+ parents and our children over the years; courts

now almost never deny custody explicitly because of a parent's LGBTQ+ identity (though they may exhibit bias in more subtle ways), and even nongestational and nongenetic parents have access to a greater range of legal protections. But the United States overall is now moving in a more anti-LGBTQ+ direction, so it pays to be vigilant and to ensure one's legal parentage is as secure as possible. (See lgbtqparentage.org for a brief guide from GLAD Law and me.)

We should remember, too, that the Buttigiegs were likely targeted because of their high profile. I do not believe LGBTQ+ parents as a whole should fear CPS knocking on our doors right now. There is, however, an awful history of racism in CPS investigations and a conflation of poverty with neglect that means some families have more reason for concern than others. Parents of trans and nonbinary children, too, particularly in Texas and other conservative states, have extra reasons to take precautions. Regardless of your situation, though, know that LGBTQ+ families are strong and resilient, and there are people and organizations who have your back.

I hope that whoever targeted the Buttigiegs is caught and faces justice. I wish the Buttigiegs safety and peace. And I hope we can all work towards a day when no LGBTQ+ parent or parent of an LGBTQ+ child has to fear that their children will be taken away because of anti-LGBTQ+ bias.

Dana Rudolph is the founder and publisher of Mombian (mombian.com), a two-time GLAAD Media Award-winning blog for LGBTQ+ parents, plus a searchable database of over 2,000 LGBTQ+ family books.



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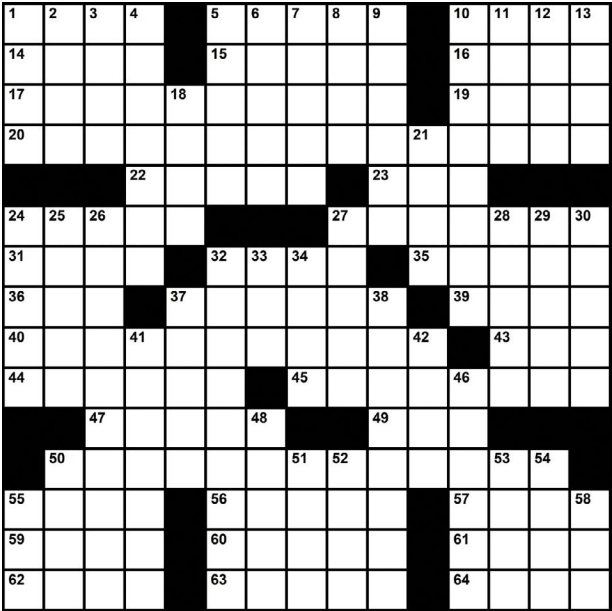
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Marilyn Monroe's
Choreographer

Across

- 1 Look tickled pink
- 5 Leather band
- 10 New corp. hires
- 14 What a hoar!
- 15 Wishful words
- 16 Auberjonois of "Star Trek:

- Deep Space Nine"
- 17 Having an equal chance
- 19 Townshend of The Who
- 20 With 27-Across, Jack Cole worked with Monroe on this 1953 film
- 22 Sites for dates
- 23 "So, it's YOU!"
- 24 Rainbow-colored fish
- 27 See 20-Across
- 31 Rubber vessel, perhaps
- 32 Stud site
- 35 Napped leather
- 36 Tooth care org.

- 37 Pulling along
 - 39 Cry of pride
 - 40 How to Marry a ____ (Cole/Monroe film of 1953)
 - 43 Tiny Dickens character
 - 44 Earhart and others
 - 45 Tattletales
 - 47 Witch hunt town
 - 49 Noted Warhol subject
 - 50 Cole/Monroe film of 1959
 - 55 Hatcher of "Desperate Housewives"
 - 56 Change "doing" to "doin"
 - 57 Like some sexual expression
 - 59 Part of APR
 - 60 Words before "well" or "forgiven"
 - 61 Ward of "Once and Again"
 - 62 R. Nureyev's land, once
 - 63 Boneless cut
 - 64 Hammered obliquely
- balls
 - 18 Strip under the futon
 - 21 Greek consonants
 - 24 Disney canine
 - 25 Lines in circles
 - 26 From every variety
 - 27 West African republic
 - 28 Taxes' proverbial companion
 - 29 "Frasier" pup
 - 30 Baseball stitching
 - 32 Type of binder
 - 33 "A League of Their ____"
 - 34 Antigay prejudice, e.g.
 - 37 Sir, to Elton John
 - 38 Least clean
 - 41 Having richer soil
 - 42 State, in France
 - 46 Any one of the Queer Eye guys
 - 48 One thousandth
 - 50 Sailors cruise on them
 - 51 "To ____ a Mockingbird"
 - 52 Falco of "The Sopranos"
 - 53 Spread it and lick it
 - 54 Maupin story of the city
 - 55 Capote bio
 - 58 Young boy

Down

- 1 Kinnear of "As Good As It Gets"
- 2 Vidal's "____ from Golgotha"
- 3 Dire sign
- 4 Had a night on the town
- 5 Gay.com, and others
- 6 Unifying idea
- 7 Wanders aimlessly
- 8 What you do at the other end
- 9 Foreign correspondent, perhaps
- 10 Well-dressed goober
- 11 Bone to pick
- 12 Kick off a poker hand
- 13 One who looks into crystal

See p. 21 for answers

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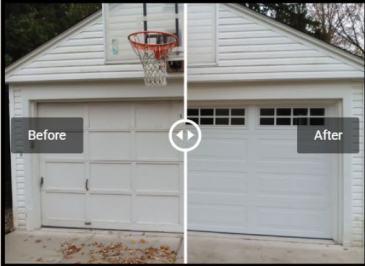
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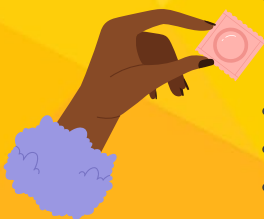
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Free Pride Hugs

Continued from page 11

part of fatherhood. “We think it begins and ends with playing catch or teaching someone how to change a tire,” he said. The idea that a father figure might simply offer unconditional acceptance can feel surprisingly radical.

Volunteers emphasize that every interaction is based on consent. A hug is only one option. Visitors can choose a high-five, a fist bump, finger guns or simply a conversation. “Everything we do begins and ends with consent and permission,” Long said.

As Pride celebrations continue across Michigan, thousands of people will walk past booths offering information, merchandise and resources. Many will also encounter a volunteer in a brightly colored shirt offering something much harder to quantify.

The Free Hugs volunteers are not

there to offer political messaging, advice or even a gentle reminder to “eat your vegetables.” The hugs simply represent a moment of connection and a reminder that somebody sees them.

And sometimes, especially for people who have spent years wondering whether they are worthy of love exactly as they are, that turns out to be more powerful than expected.




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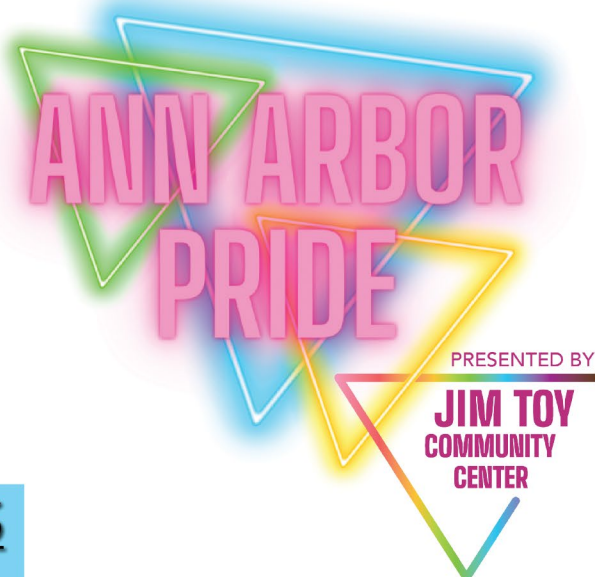
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