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## MARRIAGE EQUALITY

Michigan Leaders  
Celebrate Respect for  
Marriage Act in D.C.

## HIGHS AND LOWS

5 Headlines That  
Dominated Queer  
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## THE INTERVIEW

Ben Aldridge Talks  
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'Spoiler Alert'

One Last

# Parting Glance

Remembering Beloved Michigan Writer, Artist and Mentor Charles Alexander

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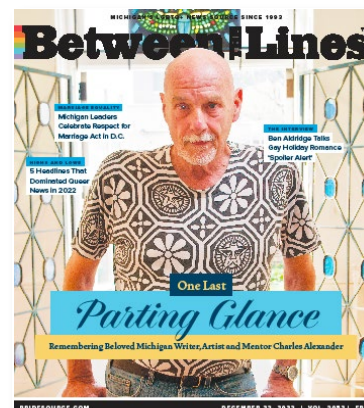
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# 5 **Queer** Things You Can Do Right Now-ish

BY SARAH BRICKER HUNT

Well, you've made it through another year of Super Weird and Unsettling American History. Well done, you! Why not wrap up another year of adventure with a Cirque du Soleil Christmas show or by getting super vulnerable on a stage somewhere? More than ready to leap into 2023 with both feet? Get your tickets now for two not-to-be-missed shows in totally different genres.

# 1



Patty Griffin. Photo: Ann Arbor Folk Festival

## Secure Your Ann Arbor Folk Festival Tickets

Tickets are available now for the 46th Ann Arbor Folk Festival, which returns to a live performance format after a Covid-induced hiatus. The two-day event, set for Jan. 27 at The Ark and Jan. 28 at Hill Auditorium, will feature two distinct experiences. On Friday, expect an intimate, "in-the-round" event, "Banjofest," at The Ark, when performers like Valerie June, Thao, Rachael Davis and Yasmin Williams will entertain guests.

Saturday's main event will feature queer icon Ani DiFranco, Patty Griffin, St. Paul & The Broken Bones, openly queer performer Gina Chavez and more. "The festival delivers the full spectrum of 'Ark music,' presenting a taste of what's happening on the leading edge of acoustic music while delving into the very heart of folk and roots traditions," organizers said in a news release.

*Tickets available on The Ark's website.*

# 2



Janet Jackson. Photo: Preston Meneses

## Look, It's Ms. Jackson Even If You Aren't Nasty

She's back! It's been nearly four years since Janet Jackson went on tour, no thanks to a pandemic pause and, later, cancellation of a planned tour in 2020. Jackson's 2023 tour will bring the timeless (and seemingly ageless), five-time Grammy Award-winning superstar and loyal fans "Together Again" at long last. Jackson and her entourage will stop at Little Caesars Arena in Detroit on May 24 with supporting guest artist Ludacris. The tour will pay tribute to Jackson's 50th year in the entertainment industry and the 25th anniversary of Jackson's seminal album, "The Velvet Rope."

*Tickets for the "Together Again" tour are on sale now at Ticketmaster.*



## Welcome 2023 on a Positive, Cleansing Note

If you, like a lot of other people, had a rough go of it in some ways in 2022, consider shaking off the negative vibes and starting your 2023 on a cleansing note. The Divine Feminine Reconnection: Release, Reset, Renew yoga event, set for Dec. 30 at Bamboo Royal Oak, is a day centered on yoga, journaling, meditation, vision and intention-setting, Afro-Cuban dance and other exercises geared toward helping you bid a fond farewell to 2022 as you welcome the new year on a positive note.

*Event open to self-identified females. Bamboo Royal Oak, 200 South Main St., Royal Oak. Tickets available at Eventbrite.*



### Strut Your Creativity at an Open Mic Night

Share the song in your heart with the world, or at least with a small, friendly audience near you at the weekly Songwriter Open Mic Night, every Tuesday at Planet Ant Theatre's Ghost Light Bar in Hamtramck. The gathering, hosted by Dave Toennies, brings together local songwriters, poets and other creative types for a "night of good vibes and great music," according to organizers. Not ready to share your creativity in public? Listeners are welcome, too!

Is comedy more your scene? Head next door to The Independent, where Planet Ant hosts an open mic comedy show every Friday and Saturday night. Word to the wise: hecklers are encouraged here, so break out the big armor. Performers include local amateurs and touring professionals.

*Songwriter Open Mic Night at Ghost Bar: 2314 Caniff, Hamtramck. 7 p.m. with music at 8 p.m. every Tuesday. The Independent Comedy Open Mic: 2320 Caniff, Hamtramck. Sign up at 10:30 p.m. every Friday and Saturday.*



Cirque du Soleil's "Twas the Night Before..." runs through Dec. 26. Photo courtesy of 313 Presents



### Lean Into the Weirdness of a Cirque du Soleil Christmas

Don't take a new date to a Cirque du Soleil show if you're planning to play it cool, because it's going to be a spectacle. Go ahead, let that mouth hang open as you watch an incredible acrobatic performer zip through the air in a flash of light and that strong, young lad casually race across a tiny, tight rope, likely while casually twirling a baton that's literally on fire. Add Christmas to the mix and you've got a sure-to-be unforgettable, festive night out. "Twas the Night Before..." based on the Clement Clarke Moore poem "A Visit from St. Nicholas," will feature all the trademark Cirque elements — acrobatics, flawless costuming and a hefty dose of weirdness — plus a little holiday magic.

*Cirque du Soleil's "Twas the Night Before..." is showing at the Fox Theatre in Detroit through Dec. 26. Buy tickets at 313presents.com.*

Please check event pages for the most up-to-date scheduling information.



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1936-2022



Charles Alexander. Photo: Andrew Potter

# Parting with Charles

Michigan LGBTQ+ Icon Leaves Behind Major Impact on Local Community

BY JASON A. MICHAEL

Longtime Pride Source and Between The Lines columnist Charles Robert Alexander, also a beloved artist and community activist, died Dec. 10 following a brief battle with pneumonia. He was 86.

Called Bobby as a child, Alexander was born and raised in Detroit's Midtown section as an only child. Alexander attended the then very prestigious Cass Technical High School downtown as a commercial arts major and graduated in 1956. At Cass, Charles befriended other closeted gays and they formed a sort of secret fraternity. After Cass Tech, he earned a bachelor's degree in English from Wayne University (later renamed Wayne State University).

For some time, Alexander worked

jobs ranging from surgical technician at Harper Hospital to public relations for the Detroit Symphony Orchestra. He came out officially in 1959, a rare move for that time and became an early activist. Ultimately, he would work 28 years with the Detroit Public Schools, first as an instructor and later as an administrator.

Recalling the late '50s and early '60s, Alexander said in a 2011 profile in BTL that "back then people really knew nothing about homosexuality. There was a requisite anonymity. You had a nickname. You didn't give any information about where you worked. It was a very guarded existence."

Through the years, Alexander developed a drinking problem. But by the time of his death, he was a recovering alcoholic with more than 40 years of sobriety under his belt.

It was while in rehab that he reconnected with art. A group therapist asked him to cut photos out of a magazine to describe his feelings. Alexander created a collage, a method he would employ for some time before embracing his signature mixed media presentation.

Even before BTL first published in 1993, Alexander wrote for a predecessor publication called "10 Percent." Alexander was a BTL columnist from 1994 until 2021, writing more than 700 columns. He also wrote for other sections of the paper from time to time and for several years created original art to grace the paper's cover for World

AIDS Day issues.

Alexander befriended BTL co-publisher Jan Stevenson while she was still executive director of the then-fledgling Affirmations LGBTQ+ community center. Stevenson and her partner Susan Horowitz would take over the publishing reins of BTL in

*I have lived a very fortunate life. I have, because of my artistic talent and being a first-responder gay, so to speak, for more than 65 years.*

— Charles Alexander

1994. Charles' column was called Parting Glances, initially a take on the end of the millennium and his remembrances of days gone by.

"What gave his column the depth it needed to become the longest-running

See **Charles Alexander**, page 8

Friends, family and admirers attended a memorial service for Charles Alexander Dec. 17 at the Ferndale First United Methodist Church.

One of those in attendance was Thomas Zerasa, who had known Alexander for years.

"It's got to be 45 years at least," Zerasa said following the service. "Once you met Charles Alexander, you had a friend for life. He always allowed himself to be open to everybody. It wasn't just a one-sided relationship. He will be missed."

Julie Sabbath knew Alexander even longer, having met him in the 1950s. "He was always very thoughtful," she said. "He had a new kind of way of thinking, of looking at things."

Michelle Brown first met Alexander a couple of decades back when the two both lived in the Cass Corridor. It was there that she would often run into him in local restaurants and businesses, where he was well known. "I moved away from our beloved Cass Corridor before Charles. I would still sometimes drive him home, savoring his stories of days gone by."

In recent days, others have been remembering Alexander as well, paying tribute to his legacy and recalling fond memories they shared with him on Facebook and through correspondence with BTL.

“

*Charles Alexander was a regular fixture at Union Street Saloon back in my bartending days there in the 1990s. He was always thoughtful and kind-hearted and took an interest in my son and his drawings. I will never forget him. RIP dear one.*

— Deborah McCauley

”

“

*Detroit's gay culture has lost an icon. He was more than an artist, writer, educator... he was an activist for our community in times that most chose to be quiet. We can only imagine the evolution he experienced over the past 86 years of his life. I was fortunate to have time to really get to know Charles when I managed Pete's Place in Ferndale in 2010. Although our paths had crossed over the years, his regular appearance at Pete's, commanding my attention and sharing stories, blossomed into a treasured friendship. Charles exemplified the identity of the gay community here, when we had to be loud, irreverent and step out of the closet. He never held back, exuded an incredibly unique style, and paved the way for so many that have come after him. Never afraid to be flamboyant, he lived a life that was not dictated by the judgment of others.*

— Steven Reaume

”

*“He was a true warrior and kind spirit. He gifted me one of his works for my 35th birthday entitled ‘Third Secret to the Left.’ I’ve hung it everywhere I’ve lived ever since and will treasure it always.”*

— Melissa Frederiksen

“

*Charles Alexander, more than anyone else, was responsible for my past work as a columnist and op-ed writer. When I arrived at Wayne State in 1998, I encountered him at the Potato Place down the street from what was then the Philosophy Department Building. Recognizing him from his weekly column in Between The Lines, I introduced myself. ‘You should write for the paper!’ he said. I demurred, but Charles was persistent, and after several encounters he finally convinced me to try it out. Over the years he frequently offered me sage advice and encouragement. I will miss his bright presence.*

— John Corvino

”

*“As a 19-year-old budding writer, I would chauffeur Charles into the BTL office a few times a week. On our drives, Charles would give me writing advice, regale me with tales of his old Detroit haunts and tell haunted tales of his old Detroit loves. He’d also retitle most of my columns with eloquent precision — after they were published, of course. ‘You know, Thomas,’ he’d say on the drive home, ‘I enjoyed your column, but I would have called it ‘Little Eyes and Big Ohs.’” His retitlings always smacked with razor-sharp wit, nuance and rhythm that my 19 years of life experience couldn’t have begun to conjure. Though I should have been intimidated (and I was at first), I was mostly in awe. I am lucky to have been able to sit at his feet and soak in some of his wisdom.”*

— Thandiwe Thomas De Shazor

“

*It was over brunch with Charles and Jeff Montgomery that I was encouraged to get off the sidelines and get active in LGBTQ politics. Charles challenged me to write, not just for BTL but supporting my artistic endeavors. A spirited discussion on why women wore high heels — him siding on sensibility and practicality with me on the side of sensual expression — inspired a poem. His inspiration on those of us in the arts no matter the form reached beyond the LGBTQ community.*

— Michelle Brown

”

*“Charles was the kind of person who could keep you on your toes while also making you feel completely at ease in his presence. As a young journalist starting at BTL right out of college, being asked to copy edit his Parting Glances column was like being asked to critique a famous artist— I felt like I didn’t have the right to change his words.”*

— Jessica Carreras

feature in the paper was his ability to tie historical events to the current times,” said Stevenson. “He’d pull on his own experiences or historical references he’d gleaned from his prodigious reading and show how LGBTQ+ issues have shaped our world forever. That context made his column a must-read for thousands of readers.”

Stevenson said Alexander’s column became a critical part of the paper.

“Often when I would be out in the community, people would tell me Charles’ column was a highlight of their week,” she said. “In fact, I often said, and felt, that my one claim to fame was that I know Charles Alexander, the renowned columnist and artist.”

In 2017, a collection of Alexander’s art was produced in book form. “The Art of Charles Alexander” was edited by John Douglas Peters and released by his Treasure Press. All proceeds from the book went to the Scarab Club.

In his official artist’s statement, Alexander explained that “there is little conscious planning as I create my art. I work intuitively and rather quickly.” At one point, Alexander was so prolific he was creating a piece a day. Alexander went on to call his work “whimsical, satiric, metaphysical, convoluted and highly detailed. As much as possible I try not to censor my work but to let it flow from my psyche.”

Trenea Flannery Ericson, gallery director for the Scarab Club, said in the book’s preface that Alexander’s work “is imbued with a fluent energy expressed in a graceful flow of dots, dashes, swoops of color and fragments of letters that seem to be from a forgotten language.”

In addition to raising funds for the Scarab Club, Alexander donated his art to various LGBTQ+ and AIDS-related charities. All told, he raised nearly \$100,000 over the years and was particularly giving to Affirmations, for whom he served as curator of the Pittman-Puckett Art Gallery for eight years.

“Charles has been a lifetime supporter of Affirmations, including being awarded the Jan Stevenson Award in 2008 for his amazing work and contributions to the LGBTQ+ community and beyond,” said Affirmations Executive Director Dave Garcia. “His art, writings and beautiful sense of humor has graced us all and he will be deeply missed.”

Alexander was a member of Metropolitan Community Church – Detroit (MCCD) for over four decades. He enjoyed the fellowship the church provided and was often called upon to

read the scripture.

“The words that come to mind when thinking about Sir Charles Alexander are artist, storyteller, writer and overcomer,” said Rev. Dr. Roland Stringfellow, pastor of MCCD. “If you knew him, the first three descriptors were apparent. The fourth word was reserved for those who truly knew his story.”

Stringfellow said that Alexander conquered many demons in his life, ranging from internalized homophobia and alcoholism to a sense of spiritual emptiness.

“He was happy to brag on his church,” Stringfellow explained. “His spirituality was so very important to him because it was [through that] lens that he saw everything.”

Through the years, Alexander served on the boards of the Detroit Area Gay and Lesbian Council, Affirmations, MCCD and the advisory board of the Triangle Foundation, which was later renamed Equality Michigan. He was awarded the Spirit of Detroit Award from the Detroit City Council in 1994, as well as the Lifetime Achievement Award from the Pride Award Banquet in 1997.

In addition to Affirmations and the Scarab Club, Alexander exhibited his art across Metro Detroit as well as in Chicago and San Francisco. He was also an artist instructor at the Detroit Institute of Arts on multiple occasions.

“What helped him in conquering alcoholism is that he turned to art as a panacea at first, and then as his life’s mission,” said longtime friend and renowned pointillist Jon Strand. “He was both authentic and original, always curious, and because of it, he lived a privileged and interesting life — and he lived it on his own terms.”

Historian and scholar Tim Retzlöff knew Alexander for many years. “Charles leaves a unique and enduring legacy to Metro Detroit’s LGBTQ+ community,” he said. “As someone who came out in the gay bar scene of the 1950s and who endured the trauma of arrest by undercover police at age 23, he served as witness to an earlier era of enforced secrecy.”

“He went on to blend brilliant art with out-and-proud activism,” Retzlöff continued. “We are all heirs to the tremendous, generous gay life that Charles lived.”

*Alexander is survived by his family, including Jan Stevenson and Susan Horowitz, John Floros, Jason A. Michael, Rick Robinson and Jon Strand. Donations may be made in Alexander’s name to MCCD or the Scarab Club. The latter is planning a retrospective of Alexander’s art in the spring.*



White House lights up with rainbow colors after same-sex marriage bill signing. Photo: The White House, via Twitter

# R-E-S-P-E-C-T

## Michigan LGBTQ+ Leaders Attend Respect for Marriage Act Bill Signing

BY SARAH BRICKER HUNT

When President Biden signed the historic Respect For Marriage Act into law on Dec. 13, leaders from key Michigan civil rights organizations were in attendance at the White House ceremony. The bill passed the U.S. House of Representatives last week with the support of just 39 Republicans. The margin was more favorable in the U.S. Senate, where the bill passed by a 61-39 majority.

“Today’s a good day,” Biden said during the ceremony. “Today America takes a big step towards equality.”

Equality Michigan (EQMI) posted to Facebook from the event, quoting speaker Nancy Pelosi: “America has always been about expanding freedom, not restricting it.”

“Today, President Biden signed the Respect for Marriage Act into law. Equality Michigan was honored to be invited to Washington DC for the bill signing this afternoon,” the post continued.

Michigan State Sen. Jeremy Moss also shared his experience at the bill signing on Facebook.

“What an honor to witness President Joe Biden sign the Respect for Marriage Act at the White House today. Michiganders must still work to repeal our outdated 2004 amendment banning marriage equality. Even with the passage of the Respect for Marriage Act, if Obergefell should fall, LGBTQ+ couples would not

be able to wed in Michigan. Love is love and our State Constitution must reflect that,” he wrote.

On Twitter, Michigan House Rep. Laurie Pohutsky wrote, “I’m honored to be in DC today for the signing of the Respect for Marriage Act. Its passage makes it even more clear that we need to pass my and @JeremyAllenMoss’s bills to amend the Elliott Larsen Civil Rights Act in Michigan this term to guarantee protection for all.”

Despite some significant limitations — should the 2015 Supreme Court decision (*Obergefell v. Hodges*) be struck down by the court, the RFMA won’t fully protect same-sex spouses in various ways — the new law is history-making. No matter what happens at the Supreme Court, the RFMA will require every state to recognize same-sex and interracial marriages, a requirement that will supercede any contradictory state laws.

If *Obergefell* is turned over, Michigan would need to codify support for same-sex marriage into its constitution. EQMI shared a recent Pride Source article on this topic and addressed the issue on Facebook

“PSA: The recently passed Respect for Marriage Act \*does not\* protect marriage equality,” EQMI posted. “If the Supreme Court were to overturn *Obergefell v. Hodges*, same-sex marriage would become illegal in Michigan and many other states. That’s why we need to call upon the Michigan Legislature to codify the right of same-sex couples to marry in our state.”

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# 5 Headlines That Dominated LGBTQ+ News in 2022

## Queer Community Experienced Unprecedented Highs and Lows This Year

BY LISA KEEN

There was no shortage of dramatic and consequential events to consider as the top stories for the LGBTQ+ community in 2022, and most of those events threaten to spill over into 2023. As we head into a new year, here are five of the most important LGBTQ+ news stories of 2022.

### Russia imprisons basketball star Brittney Griner

Brittney Griner, a lesbian professional basketball player and Olympic gold medalist, became the focus of months-long world-wide attention after she was detained at a Russian airport, accused of possessing of marijuana. Authorities held her just a week before Russia invaded Ukraine.

Griner acknowledged having a small amount of “hash oil” in her bag, saying it was for medical purposes and that she had meant to leave it at home. Griner had been playing with a Russian women’s basketball team for eight years, earning four times what she earns as an All-Star member of the Phoenix Women’s National Basketball Association team. Russian authorities scheduled

her for trial.

By May, the U.S. government announced it believed Griner was being “wrongfully detained” and Russian media began claiming that a deal was underway for the U.S. to exchange a convicted Russian arms distributor for Griner’s return. Meanwhile, Griner’s spouse, Cherelle Griner, made appearances on national media outlets to pressure President Biden to do more to secure Griner’s release.

Russian officials found Griner guilty during a trial in July. In August, she was sentenced to nine years in prison. More than three months went by before the White House suddenly announced it had reached an agreement with Russian

officials to exchange the arms felon, Viktor Bout, for Griner.

On Dec. 8, Griner was freed and flew back to the U.S. She issued a statement Dec. 16, thanking all the people and fans who provided love and help. She also noted that she will be playing with the Phoenix Mercury again next season.

### Two lesbians elected governor

Two lesbians were elected governor of their states in 2022: Maura Healey in Massachusetts and Tina Kotek in Oregon.

Healey served for eight years as the Massachusetts attorney

general, along the way becoming a popular Democrat in a deeply blue state. Her Nov. 8 victory made her the first lesbian to be elected governor of any state. Healey, who helped lead the legal battle against the federal Defense of Marriage Act and for marriage equality also championed many legal challenges against Trump administration policies.

Kotek was declared the winner of Oregon’s gubernatorial race Nov. 9, a full week after the voting, winning by more than four percentage points.

Jared Polis, the nation’s first openly gay male governor, won re-election to the Colorado governor’s office Nov. 8, meaning three of the nation’s 50 governors will be openly LGBTQ+ in 2023. Bisexual Kate Brown, the departing governor of Oregon, was the nation’s first openly LGBTQ+ governor, finishing out a term of a previous governor and then winning election herself in 2016.

### Rise in anti-LGBTQ+ legislative efforts

In May, potential Republican presidential candidate Ron DeSantis, governor of Florida,

See **Year In Review**, page 15

## Longtime LGBTQ+ Organization SAGE Metro Detroit Has a New Name

BY JASON A. MICHAEL

A longtime LGBTQ+ organization focused on people over 45 held a coming out party on Dec. 7 to announce a new name and direction. Going forward, SAGE Metro Detroit will be known as MiGEN (short for Michigan’s LGBTQ+ Elders Network). The new MiGEN slogan: Authenticity is ageless.

The organization has been working on the big reveal for several months after the national SAGE USA office announced it would be ending its affiliate model and, thus, its oversight over the Detroit chapter.

MiGEN Executive Director Angela Gabridge said in a news release that the agency’s new name and slogan came about following a community survey that received nearly 100 responses.

The responses, Gabridge said, informed and guided the agency’s work in rebranding. “Early on,” she continued, “the committee identified four words to serve as guideposts in this work and what we felt the organization needed to convey and represent: authentic, vibrant, safety and community.”

MiGEN, Detroit’s only nonprofit dedicated to services and advocacy for LGBTQ+ older adults, first joined the national SAGE movement in 2015.

The group was founded five years before that, in 2010, as the LGBT Older Adult Coalition at Affirmations by Kat LaTosch with assistance from Judy Lewis and Jay Kaplan. The group grew quickly and became one of the largest SAGE branches across the country.

“Here at MiGEN, we believe in safe spaces and community, and we intend to be here for LGBTQ+ folks ages 45 and over, as well as for those who care for them,” said Gabridge. “We are also here to ensure that providers and others across the state of Michigan are trained in culturally responsive care so that, no matter where you live in Michigan, you can receive the care and treatment you deserve.”

Moving forward, Gabridge announced that MiGEN will focus on the trans, non-binary and people of color communities.

Kat Mehrer, MiGen program director, said the organization’s ongoing Transgender Aging Project will include social and educational events for trans and nonbinary folks and their allies, as well as other important endeavors like training specialized volunteers to help with gender-affirming insurance denials. “As a nonbinary person myself,” they said, “it is important to me that we are always looking for new ways to engage transgender and nonbinary older adults, and I’m

excited for this project to continue to grow.”

Jim Whipple, a longtime activist and founding member of the organization that later became SAGE Metro Detroit, said MiGEN’s focus on this segment of the community is a “paramount need for all LGBTQ persons’ well-being.” MiGEN’s activities, he noted, will benefit everyone, with special emphasis on protecting the most vulnerable members of the community.

“Emphasizing solutions for the needs of nonbinary/transgender people will benefit all of us in the end,” he added. Whipple said MiGEN will be able to provide basic human services to a population facing an increased risk of violence.

The agency also plans to expand their social and community programming in 2023.

“We will begin rolling out office hours across several of our partner agency locations, as well as more opportunities for fun and social connection in the form of in-person social and educational outings, health education and vaccination clinics in partnership with Affirmations, the CDC Foundation and others,” Gabridge said.



Photo courtesy of SAGE

The goal is to develop and deliver innovative interventions that make lives better.

“We want to hear from you,” she said. “Visit us on Facebook and tell us a little bit about you and your generation.”

“Have fun with it,” Gabridge added, encouraging visitors to not only share their thoughts but to post a photo. “We would love to feature some of you and your thoughts as we roll out this new name and branding and let Michigan know the face of LGBTQ+ aging is vibrant, authentic and fun.”

For more information, visit [migenconnect.org](https://migenconnect.org).

## CREEP OF THE WEEK

# Senator Mike Lee Is Coming for Your Porn (See What We Did There?)



By D'Anne Witkowski

If you were hoping your 2023 was going to be obscene, lewd, lascivious, and filthy, you're going to be disappointed if Sen. Mike Lee (R-Utah) gets his way.

On Dec. 16, Lee introduced the Interstate Obscenity Definition Act (IODA), which basically seeks to “establish a national definition of obscenity that would apply to obscene content that is transmitted via interstate or foreign communications,” and that includes the internet, according to Lee's office.

Yep, that's right. Lee is seeking to ban online porn. All of it. Now all anybody will be left with is cat videos.

According to Vice, there are already “federal communications standards that qualify ‘obscenity’ as content that's spread with the intent to abuse, threaten, or harass a person.”

And let's be clear, things like revenge porn or secretly recording someone or sexual abuse of any kind is bad. Those things are crimes and should be.

But Lee thinks that the definition of “obscenity” doesn't go far enough. His bill would expand the definition to include anything that “appeals to the prurient interest in nudity, sex, or excretion” and “depicts, describes, or represents, an actual or simulated sexual act or sexual contact, actual or simulated normal or perverted sexual acts, or lewd exhibition of the genitals, with the objective intent to arouse, titillate, or gratify the sexual desires of a person” and “lacks serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific value.”

Sounds pretty cut and dried, no ambiguity there at all. Good thing we have a 51-year-old cisgender white guy with an anti-LGBTQ+ history to define it for us all!

Just this year he sought to put parental advisories on TV shows that contained LGBTQ+ content and opposed the Respect for Marriage Act, calling it “legislation that seriously threatens religious

liberty.” He also tried to help Trump overturn the election. So, gross all around.

According to XBIZ, “If the IODA succeeds, and sexual content loses the free-speech protections that have stood for the last 50 years, that would open the door for the government to prosecute every creator or distributor of adult content.”

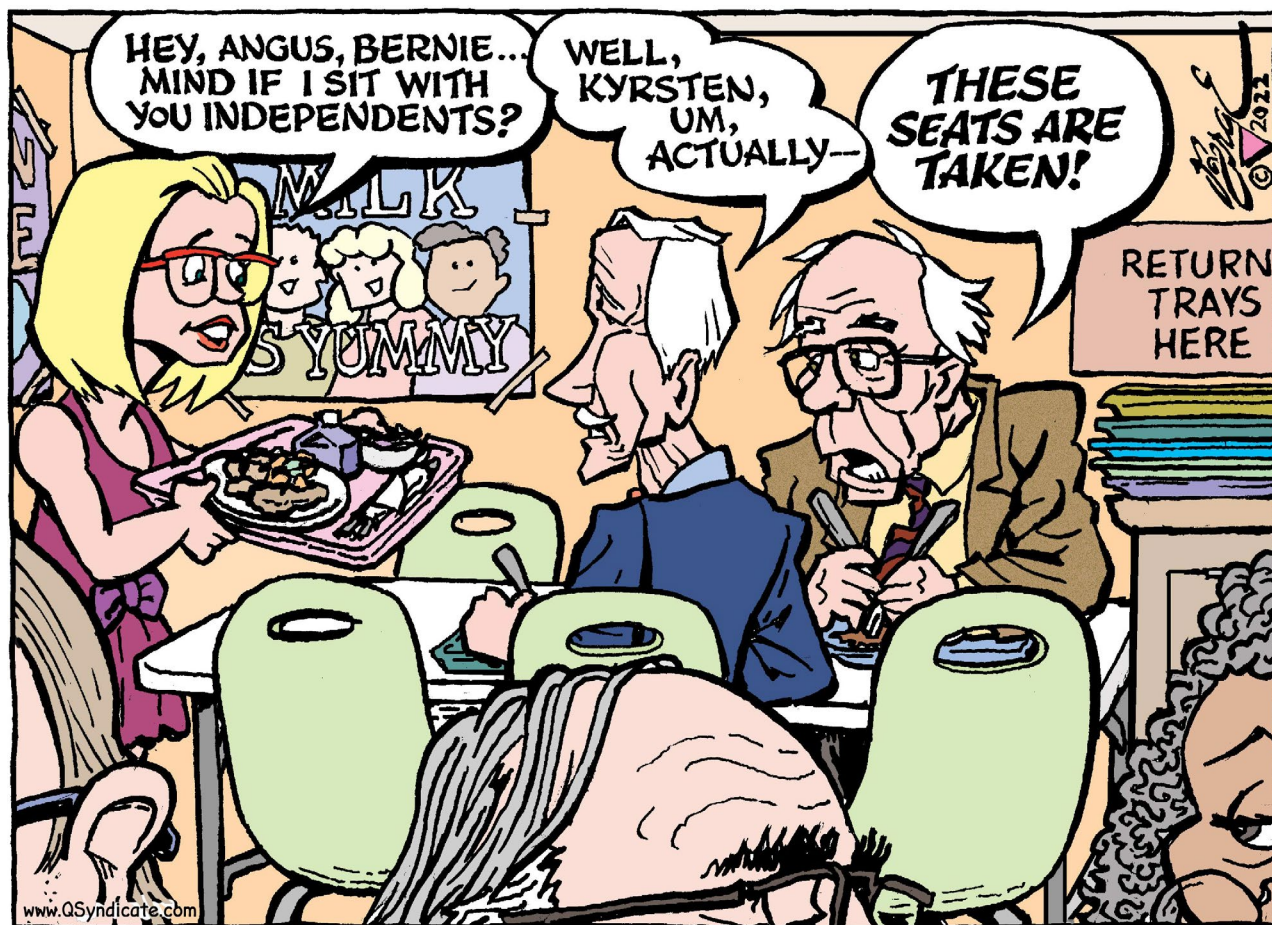
Good luck with that.

IODA is a ridiculous proposition. Scrubbing the internet of porn is like trying to soak up an ocean using paper towels. And I have no doubt that Lee knows it won't pass. But this is “setting the stage” legislation.

“I spend a lot of time in anti-porn and anti-sex work forums, monitoring what's going on in terms of those conversations, and there is obviously a rise in panic around things like pornography and sex education in schools,” Free Speech Coalition Director of Public Affairs Mike Stabile told Vice. “We need to realize and make as clear as possible what they intend to do with the internet, with schools: They want to shut down conversations about sex and sexuality in the public square.”

In other words, Republicans use bills like this to attempt to signal that they are the protectors of moral decency and thus, the protectors of children.

As the New Civil Rights Movement points out, IODA echoes legislation passed



“

*Scrubbing the internet of porn is like trying to soak up an ocean using paper towels.*

in 2018, FOSTA (Allow States and Victims to Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act) and SESTA (Stop Enabling Sex Traffickers Act) laws, in that it casts such a wide net that it drives sex workers further into the shadows, making the work more dangerous.

Sex work is work. Obviously children should not be part of the sex work industry in any way, and we must work to prevent that.

But if Republicans really care about sex trafficking so much, then they should spare no expense to lift children out of poverty and protect children who live in abusive situations, including LGBTQ+ children who are rejected by their families and

end up homeless at unconscionable rates. Instead they demonize poor people, claim LGBTQ+ people are inherently damaged and perverted, and yell about a cabal of Satan-worshipping Democrats and Hollywood elites who are actually lizards masterminding an enormous child sex trafficking ring in underground tunnels, an enterprise only Donald Trump can stop.

But, hey Republicans, do go on about how you're the party seeking to protect children even though that apparently starts with forcing pregnant people to give birth against their will and stops with keeping kids away from drag queens.

# In Praise of Finding Comfort Within Queer Found Family



By Ellen Shanna Knoppow

Just ahead of the 2018 midterms, I was attending a GOTV prep meeting for Mallory McMorrow's first state Senate campaign when I received a text from my sister's eldest. A college student, they asked if I was OK. Did I need to talk? Nothing registered. Soon I determined their message was in response to the notorious Tree of Life massacre, now recognized as the most devastating antisemitic hate crime perpetrated against the Jewish people in the U.S.

Suddenly, I was at a loss. Raised an observant Jew, I no longer practice. Years ago, I made peace with my inability to believe. Yet at that moment, in that room, among political allies, I felt alone. People spoke; only their lips moved. I felt a deep urge to be with "my people." To be clear, my immediate family still practices all the traditions that I have shed and eschew. But somehow, this avowed atheist retains a phantom Jewish limb.

A vigil was hastily organized, as they often are. It would (naturally!) be held at the synagogue in which I was raised, in Oak Park, Michigan: Beth Shalom, a Conservative shul. That is to say, Conservative by comparison to Reform or Orthodox. I'll simplify to add I spent many Saturday mornings at services, survived my pre-teen bat mitzvah and have a lot to say about curious customs like keeping kosher that I may or may not care to explain. (It's OK to ask.) But I hadn't been inside that particular building for a ceremony in a good long time.

Uncomfortable alone, I asked a friend to join me. A friend from the community. Now, when I say, "the community," as I have written for nearly six years for BTL, I don't have to explain. Like sisters, she and I have our differences: For example, she's not Jewish. And I'm not Italian. Or trans. I'm also a generation older. And she's always game for an adventure.

The sanctuary was packed with congregants — long before Covid. Religious leaders from all walks spoke. Hymns were sung. The crowd dispersed.

My friend who is always "game for an adventure" was with me when I learned of the latest massacre, this time in Colorado Springs, a hate crime committed against queer people. We were having brunch, because, well, we're queer and it was Sunday. I responded to a notice on my phone; she had already learned the news. Later, a text from another close friend, about a vigil to be held at Affirmations Monday night. Hours earlier I had posted that on my timeline. Would I attend? With some effort, I did.

I'm not one to respond to attacks with anger, but with fear and anxiety. When Roe fell, first I hollered, then grieved deeply — and still do — despite our own state's recent good fortune.



The fallout from Justice Thomas' comments is clear: No one is safe. They're coming for us. All of us queer folk — we have targets on our backs.

That brings me to that room, at Affirmations, the gallery space. I can't estimate crowd size, except to say the event was well-attended, and to please ask the police present for an estimate. Affirmations' Dave Garcia drew us together before the speakers took the microphone. They included various community leaders and a heavy contingent of law enforcement — perhaps overly. Later, Dave explained to me he invited leaders from the LGBTQ Community Centers Network, some of whom were in attendance, others were not. I saw many Affirmations regulars, but there were also many I didn't see. I felt like I was where I needed to be at that exact time. This was my community center, too. And that brings me to Michael.

Michael Sharp is part of an LGBTQ+ radio collective who hosts a weekly show. He's also an original board member of Affirmations who now lives in the D.C. area. Michael and I have spoken exactly once, in 2018. It was maybe a year after I began writing for BTL. For a while, I was exceedingly scrupulous about accepting friend requests on Facebook from people unknown to me in real life. Somewhere in Michael's profile was a reference to Affirmations and our friend in common was Jan Stevenson, former Affirmations executive director and former publisher of *Between The Lines*. He seemed safe enough.

I don't remember how a stranger and I ended up speaking on the phone, since I tend to be reserved. But he said a few things that stuck with me. One, he was sure we'd have eight years

of the grifter-in-chief. I protested, but he sounded confident. When we meet in person, I intend to remind him he lost a bet.

Mostly, though, his message was about family. Michael is rightfully proud of his husband and their son, and I encourage anyone to ask him to show you photos because they're not only an attractive family, they appear genuinely happy. What Michael said to me went something like this: Isn't it remarkable that of all communities, the LGBTQ community is the most diverse? We exist and have existed among all ethnicities, religions, political beliefs and so on throughout time. Yet we're all one family. All of us. One family.

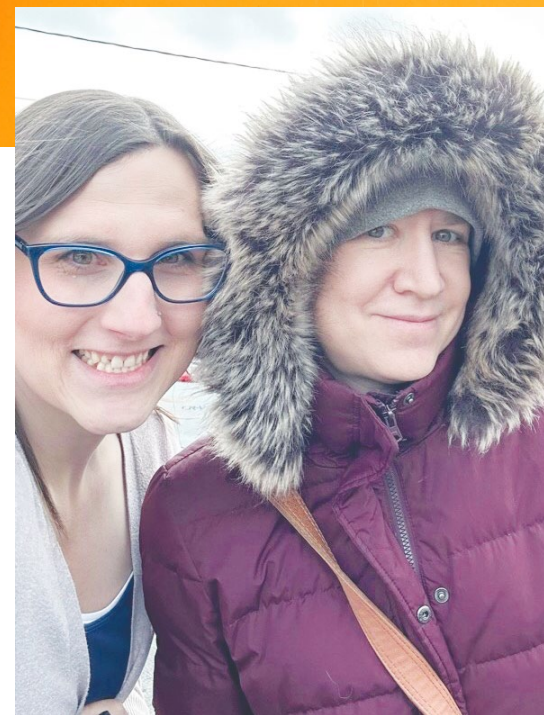
Yeah, Michael, sure, I thought. I could think of a number of individuals I wouldn't invite to my birthday party. I understood the sentiment. But it didn't ring like a bell.

Recently, after the Club Q shooting, I arrived in the crowded space at Affirmations and located my brunching friend. We hugged. I give her a lot of credit for her tireless part in making the Hate Won't Win campaign a success, and her ability to chat up anyone who doesn't slam the door in her face. And to always leave you with something to think about.

As the speakers began, I found a comfortable spot near a wall.

From a friend I had looked for, a text: "Nobody told me. I would have come."

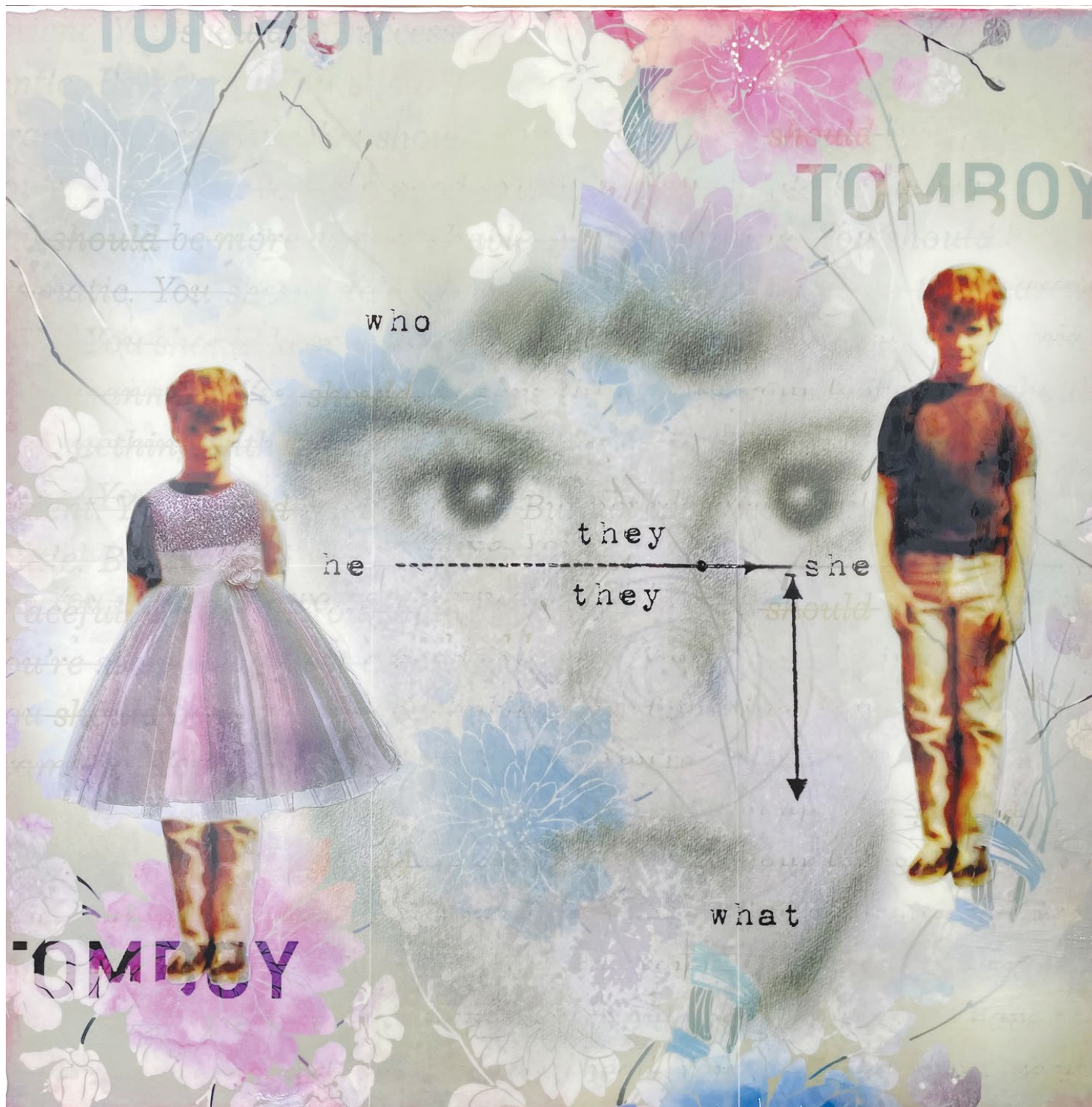
Some expressed anger. Others, fear or grief. Vows were made by legislators and law



Emmie Zanotti and Ellen Knoppow, Nov. 20, Royal Oak. Courtesy photo

enforcement. The community cried out for our leaders to do better. Stop the violence! Do we need more active shooter drills or is it time to arm ourselves? What about the epidemic of violence against and murder of trans people? Let's circle the wagons instead of shooting at one another.

Like any family, the LGBTQ+ community continues to grow and evolve. We can't even agree on what to call ourselves. We respond to triumphs and tragedies in different ways. So if you plan to memorialize the five who were murdered in Colorado Springs, do what is most meaningful to you — whether that means lighting a candle, offering a few dollars or kicking up your high heels with your fam. Or, like me, stepping out from behind those bifocals to express yourself.



"Gay TomBoy" by Ruth Crowe.

# Facing Her Past, One Journal at a Time

Ruth Crowe's Moving Exhibition Encourages Viewers to Self Reflect

BY SARAH BRICKER HUNT

It's not possible to truly peer inside the mind of another person, but Ruth Crowe's "The Journal Project" art installation comes close to simulating such an experience. On display through January at CultureVerse Gallery in Ann Arbor, the project allows visitors an opportunity to take a long stroll through the most

intimate chambers of Crowe's heart and mind thanks to an exploration of her personal journals.

Crowe has been keeping a journal for more than 43 years, accumulating 72 handwritten volumes teeming with her life's heartaches, accomplishments, embarrassing moments and the many times she's triumphed in the face of adversity. The journals, she says, were her

constant companions throughout the decades of her life when she lived in multiple states, including when she served in the U.S. Army at a time when coming out as a lesbian would have brought her participation to a screeching halt. The journals were there to record her experiences on the L.A.P.D. during the Rodney King riots and times when she found (and lost) love.

Some of the entries Crowe selected for The Journal Project are more mundane — the stuff of everyday life. It's here, perhaps, where visitors might see themselves reflected back in the pages, but Crowe hopes her project inspires more than a brief, passing emotion. "I really want people to think about their own lives and have that introspection and realize that it's the most important thing in life," she says. "You only have one, and you need to try to pay attention."

Crowe grew up in West Michigan, attending Allendale High School and a year at Grand Valley State University before she transferred to Texas Woman's University, which appealed to her because of its strong softball program. She went on to become a collegiate softball coach (and a nationally ranked athlete in multiple sports) before serving in the Army and as a police officer — a collection of careers that took Crowe all over the world and connected her to people who hailed from different places and experiences.

If there's a constant to be found in Crowe's richly varied background, it might be a pattern of risk and reward that has propelled her to one of the riskiest moves she's made — stepping away from the expected path and going all in on becoming a full-time, working artist.

"It's so hard to make a living selling your art," she acknowledges. "If you'd said to me I was going to be in galleries or selling art or doing something like The Journal Project, I don't know if I would have believed you. I didn't foresee that. I just knew I needed to try to pursue it. It's really who I probably should have been all along."

Still, Crowe says, "I honestly believe all of those things that happened to me when I was younger, that I talk about in this project, really helped me become the artist I am now."

Figuring out how best to display The Journal Project was a monumental task. Crowe knew she wanted her entries to be displayed alongside her unique artwork, which focuses on a dreamy multimedia aesthetic that weaves together vintage photography and ephemera with the written word and other warm, evocative touches. Deciding how to really immerse viewers into an experience that went beyond the obvious — paging through her journals — was a challenge, but CultureVerse helped Crowe with high-tech tools to create a seamless, visually striking exhibit available online and in person.

The final product meshes Crowe's written and visual art with her soothing, clear-voiced narration for each entry, followed by a snippet of a song selection and a quote inspired by the entry. The entire show is available online as a virtual exhibit at the CultureVerse website ([bit.ly/3WuVrhO](http://bit.ly/3WuVrhO)).

The events Crowe documents in the project include dark moments. One entry, "Walk of Shame," describes the morning after Crowe was raped by a male colleague. Waking up, alone, in a freezing cold apartment building clubhouse, Crowe walked the three miles home and never sought medical help, a regret she shared in her journal. "I never went to the doctor — I should have," she narrates. "I had to wait to see if I was pregnant until my next period and lucky for me I wasn't. The shame of this event lasted longer than any pregnancy." Crowe selected the song "Walk of Shame" by Pink to accompany this entry.

Other entries detail Crowe's childhood, including a terse relationship with her mother, who, Crowe writes and narrates, was never really comfortable raising a gay daughter. Later in life, she and her mother reached a better place, but the sting of childhood rejection would weigh heavy on the artist for decades. The entry "Lo Siento, Madre" is one of several entries that touch on this strained relationship. "Forgiving is not forgetting. And forgetting is not forgiving," she writes. "...Her early rejection was something I carried with me like a touchstone in my pocket, rubbed smooth from the years of resentment." Crowe selected a quote from motivational author and speaker Mel Robbins to accompany the entry: "Forgive others not because they deserve forgiveness, but because you deserve peace."

Pouring over her 72 journals was a laborious, sometimes painful process. "Typically, [the entries] were things that were not very happy or that I was struggling with," Crowe recalls. "I needed to write it down because I felt like it allowed me the opportunity to really see I was trying to figure myself out, like 'Am I really being honest with myself?' It was this constant questioning of what was going on in my life. That's hard to read later on."

Crowe was surprised by how frequently she mentioned suicide. "The thing about suicide is that it's like we can't say the word," she notes. "[At times], I just felt like there was no point, but I was more worried about who was going to get my journals. I wrote that on many occasions: 'If I do this, who's going to get my journals?'"

Reading the journals allowed Crowe to see she's spent a lot of time being very hard on herself. "We beat ourselves up so much about who we are and how we're not what someone else really wants," she says. "When I got a divorce right around the pandemic, I blamed myself to an extent. 'What is it that stops me from maintaining a long-term relationship?' I was with this person for 13 years, the longest I'd ever been with anybody or lived anywhere. I'm kind of like this rolling stone, and I really wanted to address that."

This revelation led Crowe to what may be one of her most pivotal "a-ha" moments. "I realized that's kind of how I learned to survive, all along the way," she says. "I existed, and I survived on my own because I didn't feel like I had that connection to my mother, certainly, but even with my family, I was a part, but apart." Crowe's

journal entry "A part Apart" explores this topic.

"And so for me now, at 63 years old, looking back, I realized that had shaped and influenced everything in my life. And it was interesting to learn that finally and really accept it, like 'It's OK because it's who you are. It's how you learned to survive. And you are not all of a sudden going to become this other person.'"

Crowe would like for The Journal Project to become a traveling exhibit. "I want people to talk about these things," she says. One particular topic on her mind is LGBTQ+ youth. She's noticed there's a perception that gay kids today have it easy. "But no," she says. "These kids are still being bullied. Gay teen suicide is still at an all time high. In some respects, things are different, but overall, no, it's still very difficult."

Case in point: the challenge Crowe has faced in bringing an educational program related to The Journal Project to her alma mater, Allendale High School,



Ruth Crowe. Courtesy photo

where she was added to the school's Hall of Fame a few years ago in honor of her time as a softball pitcher on a team that won a state championship. "It went in front of the school board, whether or not they were going to allow me to come in," she says. "There were people in the community adamantly opposed that I was going to be coming there to speak, because I think they think I'm going to come there and recruit, like set up this little table and recruit." The board did vote in favor of bringing the program to the school, by a 5-2 margin.

Crowe isn't sure what kind of restrictions might be requested from the board, but her focus for the educational program is about the power that can be found in journaling, especially psychological benefits — she is partnered with a mental health group located in West Michigan, Arbor Circle. "It's about mental health, finding a creative outlet. To me, that's what the whole project is all about," she says.

*The Journal Project is on display in person at CultureVerse Gallery (309 S. Main St., Ann Arbor) through the end of January and online at [bit.ly/3WuVrhO](http://bit.ly/3WuVrhO). The show will also be on display at the Saugatuck Center for the Arts from Feb. 10 to May 12, 2023. Find more details at [sc4a.org](http://sc4a.org).*

## Year In Review

Continued from page 11

encouraged and signed into law a bill that severely curtails teachers from discussing sexual orientation or gender identity in schools. Copycat "Don't Say Gay" bills sprung up around the country, including by Republicans in Congress who introduced a similar bill in the U.S. House.

This was part of a nationwide barrage of anti-LGBTQ+ legislation and governors' directives. DeSantis took another dramatic step in December, bypassing the Republican-controlled legislature to issue an order blocking transition medical care for transgender minors.

In May, the Texas Supreme Court upheld the governor's order to direct child welfare workers to report any instances of gender-confirming health care for children. Arizona passed a bill to prohibit transition surgery for young people and to ban transgender girls from participating in girls' sports. Alabama passed a bill to make it a felony to offer gender-affirming health care to transgender people under the age of 19. Other states followed suit, filing similar legislation, much of which is now pending for the 2023 session.

Human Rights Campaign President Kelley Robinson told a U.S. House hearing in December that the "onslaught" of anti-LGBTQ+ bills in 2022 totaled at least 344 bills in 23 states.

"More than 25 of these bills were ultimately enacted across 13 states — 17 of which have a disproportionate or targeted impact on transgender people."

## Club Q shooting part of larger anti-LGBTQ+ violence trend

A 22-year-old male in November shot and killed five patrons and injured 17 at Club Q, a Colorado Springs bar popular with LGBTQ+ people and their allies. The killer opened fire with a modified AR-15 style rifle until a patron at the bar, a U.S. military veteran, knocked the gunman down and, with the help of one of the club's performers, subdued him.

A Nov. 30 bulletin from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) warned of potential additional attacks on LGBTQ+ bars. It noted that, after the Club Q shooting, the DHS observed messages "on forums known to post racially or ethnically motivated violent extremist content

praising the alleged [Club Q] attacker." Club Q had operated in conservative Colorado Springs for 21 years without any threats or attacks.

A Human Rights Campaign report in November indicated at least 32 people had been killed thus far in 2022 because of their sexual orientation or gender identity. Sixty-five percent of those victims were black transgender women.

In Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, police arrested 31 men in their 20s in June in connection with a plot by the white nationalist group Pride Front. Reports said the police found the group waiting in a U-Haul, carrying metal pipes and wearing riot gear, with a plan on how to disrupt the family-friendly festival there.

In December, the Human Rights Campaign issued a report showing a "highly organized attack" was being waged against more than two dozen hospitals which provided gender-affirming care.

## President Biden signs Respect for Marriage Law

Earlier this month, President Biden signed into law a federal bill to repeal the now-defunct Defense of Marriage Law and to require states to recognize any marriage, including a same-sex marriage, licensed by another state.

U.S. Rep. Jerrold Nadler (D-NY), a longtime friend of the LGBTQ+ community, introduced the legislation to the House in July, and it passed the House right away on a 267 to 157 vote. It was after midterm elections that it finally started moving in the Senate, where it was led by openly lesbian U.S. Senator Tammy Baldwin (D-Wisc.). There, it passed 61 to 36 (three not voting, including Georgia's Democratic Senator Raphael Warnock, who was locked in a Dec. 5 runoff election against Republican nominee Herschel Walker). The New York Times gave much of the credit to former President George W. Bush's now openly gay campaign manager, Ron Mehlman, and a group of other Republicans for lobbying Republican senators to secure the 11 GOP votes they needed to pass a procedural hurdle to take a vote on the measure.

The Respect for Marriage Act originated in 2009 but was refurbished by Nadler this year after U.S. Supreme Court conservatives made clear many of them were eager to revisit the landmark Obergefell decision in 2015 that had struck down state bans on same-sex marriage.



Cole Escola. Courtesy photo

# Just Happy to Be Here

## ‘Please Baby Please’ Star Cole Escola Loves a Good, Wacky Role and a Sassy Line

BY CHRIS AZZOPARDI

On Cole Escola’s Instagram page, the 36-year-old nonbinary comedian and actor describes themselves as “One of Grindr’s Fresh Faces.” That’s true, of course, on and off gay social apps. Escola, who continues their ascension in film and TV, is known to show up when you least expect them to — sometimes as a face, sometimes as a face wrapped in a white veil, and sometimes as just a voice.

Escola has lent their talent to the voice of a gargoye on “What We Do in the Shadows,” to Amy Sedaris in her craft room, to a kidnapper known as “the twink” on “Search Party,” to a sassy waiter in “Difficult People,” and to Bridget Everett in a cabaret show, playing a fetus. With seemingly a no-limit rule on the outrageousness of the characters (or things) they play, Escola’s two-role part in writer-director Amanda Kramer’s new film “Please Baby Please,” now available to rent or own via all digital/VOD platforms, makes perfect sense.

In the film, about the influence of misfit queers on a newlywed couple that evokes old Hollywood films like “West Side Story,” we meet one of two Escola characters, a weepy, colorful drag queen, tucked into a phone booth, their eye makeup running onto their grief-stricken, white-powdered face. Channeling old Hollywood glamor in a flower-adorned headdress wrapped in a white veil, Escola sings The Skyliners’ 1958 classic “Since I Don’t Have You” into the phone. It’s a scene that could have been interpreted entirely

differently on the page, but Escola envisioned it exactly the way it looks.

“Amanda and I were just both on the same page in terms of the tone of that,” they say during a recent Zoom interview. “It’s so satisfying to see something look exactly how you imagined it would look.”

Later in the film, Escola appears dressed in a cowboy costume, as Billy, a role, like a lot of their roles, written specifically for the actor. Both of the actor’s parts in “Please Baby Please” are small, and Kramer initially intended they would go to different actors. That was until Escola, who connected instantly to the film’s old Hollywood aesthetic, pleaded a case for both roles because, they say, “I was just so excited.”

“I appreciated that I got to play a character that was bored and annoyed by their exploration of their fascination with gender roles,” Escola says. “Amanda was really aware of that. It was intentional that Billy was rolling his eyes the whole time at them. I appreciated that point of view.”

In another scene, Billy won’t divulge his “perfect theory” on sexuality to the newlyweds, Arthur (Harry Melling) and Suze (Andrea Riseborough), because, the actor explains, he’s been “exploring and rejecting gender norms and roles probably his whole life.” Billy is just so over it.

“For these two squares to all of a sudden be like, ‘Wait, men can be different and women can be

See **Cole Escola**, page 20

[www.PrideSource.com](http://www.PrideSource.com)



"Bargain Block" stars Shea Hicks-Whitfield, Keith Bynum and Evan Thomas. Photo: HGTV

# HGTV's 'Bargain Block' to Showcase Detroit's Fitzgerald Neighborhood

## New Season of Beloved Show to Debut in Summer 2023

BY JASON A. MICHAEL

Even as winter makes its official debut in Michigan, at least HGTV has given us something to look forward to.

That's right, the hit Detroit-based series "Bargain Block" is officially returning for Season 3. The upcoming 10-episode season will feature queer couple and home-flippers Keith Bynum and Evan Thomas taking on nine new homes on Detroit's northwest side.

The homes, purchased from the Detroit Land Bank for an average of \$6,500 each, are in what's called the Fitzgerald neighborhood. Fitzgerald, basically bordered by the Lodge freeway between Livernois Avenue and McNichols (Six Mile) Road, is just south of the Pembroke neighborhood the couple worked in during the show's first two seasons.

"We're just kind of moving down Livernois," Bynum told Outlier Media. "We wanted to start working here a while ago because prices were rock bottom. But there was no resale value. That's changed recently."

Bynum and Thomas never make a large profit off of their flips. That's not even the goal. Instead, the couple strive to bring life back to neglected neighborhoods and, in the process, help revitalize the city at large. The Fitzgerald homes will still be a hard sell at first. But with each house the renovators flip in the neighborhood, appraisal values in the area will rise.

Though initially run down — in some cases,

pretty much ready for the wrecking ball — Bynum and Thomas transform the houses quickly, taking them down to the studs before turning them into stylish, fully furnished homes. Often, the finished project attracts first-time homebuyers with the aid of local real estate expert Shea Hicks-Whitfield.

"'Bargain Block' fans tell me everyday how much they enjoy this series," said Loren Ruch, group senior vice president, programming and development for HGTV in a press release. "Keith, Evan and Shea's passion for revitalizing homes in Detroit shines in every episode as they turn forgotten properties into uniquely beautiful homes that feature Evan's craftsmanship and Keith's remarkable custom art and design style."

Starting with Season 2, Bargain Block seemed to incorporate the city, itself, into the show, showcasing Detroit landmarks such as Hart Plaza and MotorCity Casino, perhaps in an effort to show that Motown is much more than just its near-abandoned neighborhoods. To date, the couple has rehabbed and resold more than 30 homes.

"There's just a whole different world that exists in Detroit on the creative side and it is fascinating to see," Bynum told BTL earlier this year. "It's been one of the biggest inspirations of being in the city, to be able to literally just look everywhere and find amazing art, amazing food and amazing architecture. It's chock-full of beautiful things."

*at Hodges...*

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Bob the Drag Queen, Eureka and Shangela in HBO's "We're Here." Photo: HBO

# There Might Be a Better Way, But This Is the Queerest Way

## Bob the Drag Queen and Eureka on Promoting Equality Through Drag

BY EVE KUCHARSKI

**G**litz, glam and, oh, just the small matter of changing hearts and minds. That's a tall order for anyone, and the basic setup of every episode of the HBO show "We're Here." But of course, once again in Season 3, drag queens Shangela, Eureka O'Hara and Bob the Drag Queen use their skills to deliver on that recipe and then some.

On the surface, "We're Here" is a show about drag queens teaching their craft to queer and allied people in small, conservative towns across middle America. However, look past all of the costumes, makeup and dance numbers, and it becomes clear there's a deeper message of acceptance running through each episode.

Drag becomes the conduit for the queens' drag kids to not only build

up, and sometimes actualize, their confidence in deeply anti-LGBTQ+ environments, but it calls attention to the intricate and nuanced realities of small-town life for queer people — all while putting on a once-in-a-lifetime show in the unlikelyst of places.

Bob the Drag Queen and Eureka O'Hara, two-thirds of the iconic drag trio, joined BTL for an interview about the show's latest season. They discussed the importance of giving

patience to those who want to listen, how spirituality and queerness can intersect, the political environment during each season, and much more.

**Every time you head into a new town there is a bit of resistance, but I felt like this season it was especially bad. There were hostile threats on social media, and then there was the Utah council that was working to cancel**

**your filming permit. Did you feel that way?**

**Bob the Drag Queen:** We've had resistance before. I mean, we even had the cops called on us in Season 1. Several times, actually [laughs]. And having a whole town try to shut us down, I don't know if that's a reflection of where we are now or if it's a reflection of where we were at the time, physically. But the political climate has changed. Each season has been a different world. Season 1 was pre-pandemic; Trump was still president. Season Two was a very tumultuous election year, and we were in the middle of an election year. And now, [with] Season Three, we were ramping up to midterms, we had a new president and we are getting back out into the world in terms of coming out of lockdown.

**Eureka O'Hara:** Yeah, I agree. Bob hit it on the nose.

**Maybe some of the resistance you faced this time around was partly because more people are aware of the show than before.**

**Bob:** Well, I still wonder if they watch our show. What the hell do they think we're doing? What are you protesting? What do you think is going on at these shows? Do you think that it's some kind of orgy? What do you think is happening on stage? Who could protest this?

**Eureka:** That's true. It's wild. It's just people being misinformed and not understanding. Misunderstanding is one of the biggest causes of discrimination. Honestly? I find most of the time that the people that fight against our show the most have not seen an episode of our show. They've just heard rumors or they see drag and they automatically make assumptions. There's no facts behind their fear tactics; it's all assumptions. I would love to test these people and say, "Why don't you watch an episode and see what we're showcasing before you combat us?"

**Eureka, at the Fourth of July parade in Granbury, Texas, there was a man holding up a sign with anti-LGBTQ+ scripture and he said, "I just want to show that there's two sides of the story here," and you were clear that queer people see his message every day.**

**Eureka:** Yeah, I'm like, in your

See **We're Here**, page 26

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What a Feeling!  
Puzzle on page 25



Cole Escala in "Please Baby Please." Photo: Music Box Films

◀ Cole Escala

Continued from page 16

different?,' he would be like, 'This is so boring. You're so boring.' Billy tells them he doesn't believe they're being honest with themselves or each other about their sexual desires. Suze insists he share that theory, prompting his spectacularly hissed retort: "Moo, you bossy little cow." When Escala read that line in the script, they were instantly on board with the film.

"I, like a true actor, only read my parts first and I was like, 'Yeah, I want to say that,'" they say. Another favorite line of theirs is one that directly quotes Greta Garbo in the 1932 film "The Grand Hotel."

"I just like all of Amanda Kramer's references," Escala says. "I was like, 'You seem cool. I want to work with you.' It was really just the lines that I got to say, like a true self-involved actor."

Then, of course, there's what the movie says about gender and, for Escala, it's somewhat of a reminder that queer people investigate gender much earlier than most.

"I think queer people, they feel the discomfort of gender roles so early that they're forced to look at them," they say. "Even just the well-tread queer youth narrative of wanting to play with dolls or walking through the Barbie section at Target. Not turning your head to look at the Barbies, but just keeping an eye. The fact that's part of the learning or understanding the mask of gender, like, 'OK, I have to wear this one even though it's not who I am.'"

Escala was born and raised in Clatskanie, Oregon, where being queer was what you might expect in a less-than-urban setting. "If you saw what my queer youth was like on a TV show, you would be like, 'This story again?' It's just that rural. Small

town. Two gay adults."

Growing up, they remember watching "Will & Grace" in middle school and seeing campy queer icon Paul Lynde on "Bewitched," but they say they "always related more to character actresses."

Fast forward to today, Escala played a part, albeit admittedly minor, in bringing one of the most spectacular women roles to TV, with Jean Smart's Deborah Vance on HBO's "Hacks."



"I was just a part of a three-week writer's room before the actual writer's room. Just sort of concept, like big blue sky," they say. "I don't know how or who decides what credits those things are [on IMDB], but it definitely makes my role in 'Hacks' seem much bigger than it actually is."

Acting wise, Escala always seems to relate to whoever and whatever they play, be it that gargoye or that fetus. These are roles that just come their way. Maybe it's because no one else will play them, but maybe it's also because no one else could, at least not like Escala, with so much irreverent, screw-ball style. (It probably says a lot that Escala grew up admiring Amy Sedaris in "Strangers with Candy.")

In the latest season of Netflix's animated series "Big Mouth," they voice Montel, the nonbinary child of hormone monsters Maury (Nick Kroll) and Connie (Maya Rudolph). Not only did Escala get another musical number, singing opposite Rudolph for a song called "The You That's In Your Heart," but they tapped into their own personal beliefs on gender as part of their performance.

As for their other parts: "I didn't audition for the gargoye, I didn't audition for the fetus," they say, cocking a smile, "but I knew in my heart exactly who those characters were and are."

"I've been a fetus," they continue. "I tapped into that."


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Jim Parsons and Ben Aldridge in "Spoiler Alert." Photo: Focus Features

# A Familiar Place to Be

'Spoiler Alert' Star Ben Aldridge Came Out in 2020.  
Now He's the Leading Gay Man in Two Big Studio Films.

BY CHRIS AZZOPARDI

This is Ben Aldridge's moment, and that's no spoiler alert. The Los Angeles Times already made that call in a recent profile of the 37-year-old English actor, writing that Aldridge is "on the cusp of stardom."

And so it seems, as Aldridge, an established London theater actor who came out publicly as gay in

2020, thrusts himself into leading-man roles in two major studio films after a recurring role in "Fleabag" and a more substantial part, as Thomas Wayne, in HBO's "Pennyworth."

On the big screen, the actor can currently be seen in the new romantic tragicomedy from Focus Features, director Michael Showalter's "Spoiler Alert." In the film, Aldridge portrays Kit Cowan, a photographer whose romantic relationship with real-

life pop culture journalist Michael Ausiello, played by Jim Parsons, is suddenly challenged when he's diagnosed with cancer (the film is based on Ausiello's 2017 memoir of the same name).

In early 2023, Aldridge will try his damndest to survive M. Night Shyamalan's apocalyptic horror film "Knock at the Cabin," portraying another gay character, this time alongside "Looking" actor Jonathan

Groff. Aldridge and Groff lead the Universal Pictures project, out Feb. 3, as gay dads vacationing at a remote cabin, which ends up not being much of a vacation at all when they're taken hostage.

From the Park Lane Hotel in New York City, Aldridge spoke about how it feels "invigorating" being a gay actor playing gay characters, his reaction to Sally Field portraying his onscreen mother and the "wave of

progress" in LGBTQ-led content.

**What was it like to tell such an emotional story that really happened in "Spoiler Alert"?**

I think exactly that. I think it was emotional. It was intense, but kind of intensely wonderful. I feel like this is the kind of acting role and piece that you dream of doing. From falling in love, to the diagnosis, to the tragedy of Kit's passing, it's

really a full life lived over 14 years in the film. And that's kind of a dream come true, to be able to play someone that experiences all of that. I felt really honored, and sometimes daunted and overwhelmed, that I had been given the responsibility of telling the portion of Kit's story in the film. It was a privilege from start to now. Still talking about it feels like a privilege.

**I imagine that you and Jim had a lot of work to do between the two of you to really make this feel authentic to Michael and Kit's story.**

I really felt like my performance wouldn't have existed without Jim's. I felt so informed by him at all times and so much empathy for them as real people. But then that kind of just concentrated itself into me feeling specific empathy for Michael and Jim playing Michael that it just really felt like everything I did was influenced by everything he did the whole time.

In terms of chemistry, we just started emailing. So as soon as the film came together and I was signed on to do it, Jim emailed me and the subject header said, "Let's start." We just started this pen pal-ship of these long letters. Sometimes about the project, but not very often; mostly just about ourselves to get to know each other. And we'd ask each other questions about acting, maybe, but more about our lives and our partners and all sorts, really. And there was still a leap of faith in that. We were very lucky that we've formed a real friendship, which I think definitely helped us just to know each other and trust each other in the scenes. And I think it helped with that chemistry.

Our guide really was the material in the book and it is so detailed, and it's so rich, and so full. It was always tethering it back to that. And Michael Ausiello was there on set as an exec and had really lived this. So I think we were just really lucky.

**I read that you used Kit's actual camera in the film, and then I wondered what kind of role Michael had in helping you portray Kit. Had he shared with you some details about Kit that brought you closer to who he was to play him?**

Yeah, he did. As soon as I finished reading the book, I emailed Michael and he then emailed me back and just made himself a very open resource for anything Kit-related, him-related, relationship-related, including artifacts and specific things. It felt very powerful to hold that camera on set and to think that I was doing the thing that Kit did with it. There was something just very sacred in the object itself. Other things I asked him questions about, and that really helped me.

He has an active Kit Cowan Archives on Instagram and also his Flickr account. I'm surprised at how much that gave me an insight into the way he viewed the world. And he was a documentarian, so just very quirky observations. There's a lot of humor in his work. The things that he captured were very specific to the way he saw the world. And

Michael told me that, really, Kit's camera was Kit making sense of the world and of himself. He also took a lot of selfies, probably in a time where not many people did, but lots of famous photographers have done that as well. I just really enjoyed poring over the photographs. They helped me in a way that I didn't think they would.

**There's the moment where there's this de-gaying of Kit's place right before his parents come over. It's funny because I feel like that's relatable to every gay person. Did you relate to that particular experience?**

Yeah, definitely. I think something the film does very subtly is show us the journey of... as gay people, until the moment our parents find out about our true selves, we are very used to managing their handle on the truth and what they know about us. And I think it can keep a distance between you and your parents, and certainly I could relate to that.

What happens in the film, once [Kit's parents] Marilyn and Bob know and are accepting, there's just such an honest exchange. I think it just deepens the parental relationship for them to really know who you are. I did really relate to that. And I think the de-gaying of the apartment, I can relate to almost de-gaying myself a little bit when going home when I was younger, and maybe potentially dressing differently or just being more conscious of that. I'm glad that element of the book is represented in the film.

**I love that Kit had "Beaches." And not just "Beaches" on DVD, but the special edition.**

Those DVDs are very specific. Sara K. White, the [production] designer, [made] everything in the apartment so specific to the book. But then things outside of the book, we shared several emails back and forth about what I wanted there. Certain books and art books. If you look at all those films, they all make a lot of sense. And again, there were things of Kit's in there. So yeah, it was very cool.

**What was your initial reaction when you found out that Sally Field would be playing your mother?**

So she was attached before I became part of the conversation, before I met Michael [Showalter] and Jim. So I knew that was always the deal. But of course, I was so excited. But also definitely a healthy amount of intimidation, just to think that I would be looking into her eyes and saying lines and hoping that she believed me. And yeah, that was a good nervous energy. But it was wonderful, and I could just marvel at her.

All of us were really free to improvise and she did a lot of improvisation. And sometimes I'd be just in a scene, of course acting with her, but being a bit like, "Wow, she's so amazing." And Bill [Irwin, who plays Kit's father] too. Such wonderful actors. And they both have gay children themselves. So I think there

See **Ben Aldridge**, page 24

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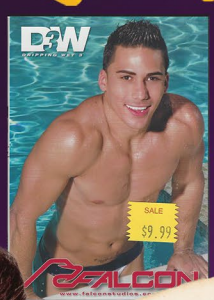
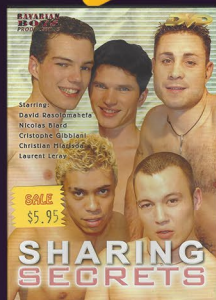
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Jim Parsons and Ben Aldridge in "Spoiler Alert." Photo: Focus Features

## Ben Aldridge

Continued from page 23

was a real understanding and a real care. They had so much care over us and over playing parents to gay children. I just really felt that from them. They're both wonderful in the film as well.

**Was "RuPaul's Drag Race" actually on in that scene with Sally? Did you really watch "Drag Race" with Sally Field?**

Definitely knew we were watching "Drag Race." I can't remember if it was actually on the screen. Because there's a funny thing about actually playing stuff [on TVs] and filming, so I don't know. But we definitely knew we were watching it. But also, Kit at that moment is so almost in and out of consciousness. It was a really special moment because, I mean, I never watched "Drag Race" with my parents, and I wonder if they would understand it or not. But I just love that in our story that they sat down with their parents. It was just a really nice moment, cuddled up next to Sally Field. There was something really tender and gentle about [that].

**Is this your first gay character?**

No. I played a gay character on stage in a play called "The Lyons" in my 20s. And then I had done a UK detective series ["The Long Call"] just before filming this where it was apparently the first ever gay detective on UK screens. But yeah, that was very, very personal. I'm not a detective, but it really reflected my own life. And it's been really nice over the last three years, and something I've craved and wanted to do is to play people that I really identify with.

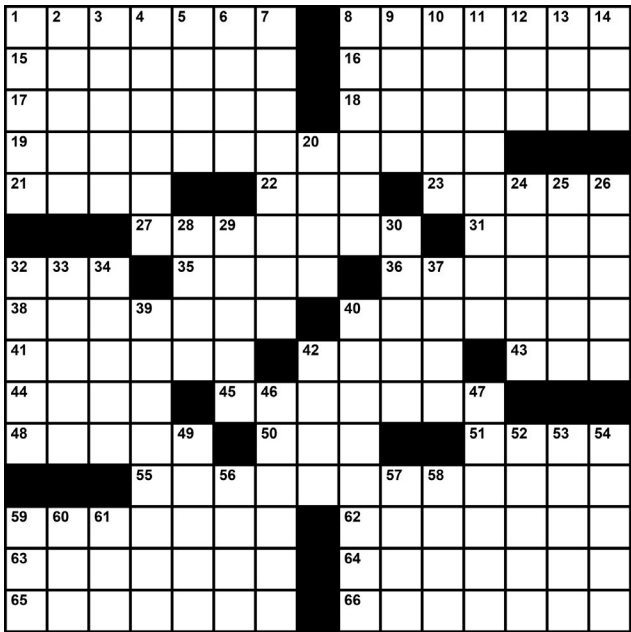
My 20s [as an actor] was about escaping. I was playing lots of straight romantic parts, which I love doing. But it was about escaping something. I think more recently I've wanted to do a deeper dive on myself and meet myself in the projects that I'm doing and really emotionally understand. We're in a wave of progress where there's more quick content, and I feel really excited and privileged to be getting to play these characters.

**To see your identity reflected in these characters on screen in kind of a big way, what does that mean to you?**

Yeah, it's a very personal experience. It's strangely relieving to be on a set and being witnessed by a crew. It kind of feels like taking your skin off a little bit and being the most unguarded you've ever been. Even though you are still playing something, it feels invigorating, it feels life-affirming, it feels emboldening. And as someone who really struggled with their identity and a lot of shame in my teenage years and throughout my 20s, there is something... I feel very privileged to be doing it. And I feel like I'm part of riding a wave of progress. And I'm very pleased to be there and really glad that we're getting more stories about ourselves that are not just connected to tragedy in the way that we've been represented before.

Love is at the center of [this] film. And yes, tragedy strikes, but it's a real story that really happened. We're not immune to the reality of life. What we should be calling for is real reality and real stories about us. And that also should contain the spectrum and the breadth and diversity of our community as well.

*This interview has been condensed and edited for clarity.*



### What a Feeling!

#### Across

- 1 Fit to be tied
- 8 Hay for a stallion, perhaps
- 15 Blatant deception
- 16 "Fifty \_\_\_\_ Frenchmen"
- 17 Insurrections
- 18 NASA used to shoot them off
- 19 Title song of Irene Cara's 1982 debut album
- 21 Angry in., for example

### Q Puzzle

- 22 Product to combat crabs
- 23 Where priests come together
- 27 Confederacy members
- 31 Either new spouse at some weddings
- 32 Hosp. area
- 35 Jelly not for bread
- 36 Locust tree
- 38 With 40-Across, Irene Cara hit written by Lesley and Michael Gore
- 40 See 38-Across

- 41 Conductor Toscanini
- 42 Erotic opening
- 43 Pop music's \_\_\_\_ Lobos
- 44 Stretches the truth
- 45 Loads of erotic activity?
- 48 Puts into piles
- 50 Hebrew letter after lamed
- 51 "I Could \_\_\_\_ Danced All Night"
- 55 Irene Cara song from "All Dogs Go to Heaven"
- 59 Noah Webster, for one
- 62 Eagles, at times
- 63 Taking home
- 64 One way to baptize
- 65 Body of troops.
- 66 Rope-winding device

#### Down

- 1 Haul ass
- 2 "To \_\_\_\_ own self be true" (Hamlet)
- 3 Emma Stone's beard movie
- 4 Melodic, to Bernstein
- 5 "Death in Venice" author Thomas
- 6 Jumping-off place
- 7 Paint a picture of
- 8 Bearer of "Married ... with Children"
- 9 Jagger feature in art
- 10 Titanic sinker, and more
- 11 Narrow passage
- 12 Like a one-incher, in Dogpatch
- 13 B.D. Wong memoir "Following \_\_\_\_"
- 14 Part of Q and A (abbr.)
- 20 Baldwin staffer
- 24 Actor Williamson

- 25 "Sands \_\_\_\_ Jima"
- 26 "Giant" James and family
- 28 Glenn Burke, formerly
- 29 Current coins of Amsterdam
- 30 Holy, to Frida
- 32 Pieces of Porter's fuel?
- 33 Queer souvenir
- 34 Out-and-out
- 37 "Get yer ass in gear!"
- 39 Getting a move on
- 40 Network that celebrates LGBT recording artists
- 42 Discharges, in slang
- 46 Come out
- 47 English counties
- 49 Songwriter Rutstein
- 52 What straight soldiers do with their eyes in the shower
- 53 Word after vice
- 54 City of Hirschfeld's land
- 56 Hawk in the bleachers
- 57 Caesar's city
- 58 Drag queen on the make
- 59 Young lady coming out
- 60 Stud site
- 61 Da. that the Stonewall riots began

See p. 20 for answers

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Bob the Drag Queen, Shangela and Eureka in HBO's "We're Here." Photo: HBO

## ◀ We're Here

Continued from page 18

home, you say these things every day. The people that you live with already know you feel this way. People in your world know this is how you're feeling. It just frustrates me because I'm like, "No, you want to create this circle of innocence around what you're doing." And you want to be like, "Oh, I'm just doing this because of the grace of God." Well, I also do everything in my life, as a Christian person, as a spiritual person, by the grace of God as well — she's a Goddess. She's the God that I believe in, and I was raised Southern Baptist Christian, and I still believe very heavily in that faith. And how dare you tear me down for how I decide to live and for how I decide to praise? It just goes against everything you say you believe in.

**Bob:** And as someone who is absolutely not religious in any regard, I want you to know that if you're reading this, you do not have to justify your life based on anyone's religion.

**Eureka:** Work! And the reason that me, as a spiritual person, is on Bob's side when he says something like that is because that's the truest and most honest way of thinking:

allowing people to have their own free will. I'm not God. I don't get to play that part. I don't get to judge and pick and choose.

**That's an interesting point, and at least those people actually stopped to try and listen to you, Eureka. Bob, you were just trying to cross the street in one of the episodes, I think you were looking for ice cream—**

**Bob:** [Laughs.]

**And this guy just started shouting at you.**

**Bob:** Yeah, and that's when I realized that guy didn't actually want to talk. It wasn't about God. It was about him. It was about his ego. And even if it was about God, I don't believe in that, so why do I care? [Laughs.]

You can't come at me with your religion, telling me that I need to live my life by some rules that you don't even know what they are. You and your own parishioners can't agree, and now you want me, someone who doesn't even believe in it, to go by a set of rules that y'all motherfuckers can't come up with? [Laughs.] I don't have as much grace for religious bigots as Shangela and Eureka do. I have actually no grace for religious bigots. None whatsoever. I want to say, "Fuck you, don't tell me who to believe

in. Mind your fucking business," but I didn't say that on television. [Laughs.]

**This show got me thinking about the social pressures that exist in small-town communities and the niceness to your face but the lack of overall kindness to those who are outside the status quo. Do you think that's why even large and vibrant queer communities are forced to be silent even within their own spaces?**

**Bob:** I always ask myself, "Do you want to be a nice person, or do you want to be a good person?" And every good person isn't nice, and every nice person isn't good. You know what I mean?

**Eureka:** True.

**Bob:** I think that a lot of times, people do feel completely silenced in these communities, especially because it's even harder to combat hate when it's thinly veiled as love. Because people say, "Well, we just want to protest because we love you and we don't want your soul to go to hell." And then you think to yourself, "Wait. Is it really because they love me? Are they really here just to save my soul?" And then you have to take a step back and you go, "No, no, no. That's none of their business."

**Was there something positive about meeting these lovely queer and allied people that you were surprised by this season?**

**Bob:** There's always something surprising to me. I'm always shocked and gagged when I see the amazing things that our drag kids can do. You know, everyone is remarkable at something. Isn't it wild? Not just kinda good, but remarkable at something. And sometimes we get to see that not just on stage but in their communities, and in how their fellow townspeople see and revere them.

I got to see it with my drag kid, Micah, in St. George, Utah, where the community was just like in awe of how remarkable of a person they were.

**Eureka:** Same, honestly. We got a chance to work with some really interesting youths, the people that are the new generation. Especially this season, I had an experience with several young people who are a part of the generation that's coming behind us that wants to create change and they want to promote progression and equity. It just gives me so much hope in the world.

**It's really hard to go into communities that don't accept you even when you're trying to spread love. Bob, you said that it's not really about the drag, but it's about giving voice to these queer people. Is that what motivates you both to come back to "We're Here" season after season?**

**Bob:** Let me be very clear — I sound like Obama, "Let me be clear." There has got to be an easier, softer way than rolling into a town with a bunch of drag queens [laughs], putting on a show, making costumes, blood, sweat and tears. This is not the easiest way to be doing what we're doing. I don't

even believe that it's necessary that it has to be this. It doesn't have to be this, it could be something else. But this is what we do. This is what me, Eureka, and Shangela do and happen to be very, very good at. I don't want to be egotistical and say, "It has to be this, and it has to be us," because there's a lot of people doing a lot of stuff. But I know that what we're doing is effective. People tell me all the time, "I watched the show with my mom, and my mom used to be extremely homophobic, extremely transphobic, extremely racist, and now we're actually having conversations about it." And goddamn it, I like doing it this way. [Laughs.] It's fun and it's glitzy and it feels fantastic, quite frankly.

**Eureka:** And Bob just loves saying goddamn it.

**Bob:** Goddamn it.

**Bob, lastly, I loved the dichotomy of you being out and proud in "BLACK" and the very demure and controlled version of your responses to hate in "We're Here."**

**Bob:** Well, thank you, and I would love for you all to go and check out my music video for "BLACK." I'm really, really proud of it. It's me, Basit, Ocean Kelly, and it's directed by Marvin Brown, one of the creative directors of "We're Here," and I love it. Check it out.

**Eureka:** Sponsored by Eureka, too, with two big thumbs up, honey. It is big, old, fat, white, pussy-approved, honey. [Laughs.]

**Eureka, anything that you'd like to leave readers with?**

**Eureka:** Send love to everybody, let them know that [my new song] "Big Mawma" is coming out, and it's about caretaking for others and lifting each other up in need and it's about celebrating each other, and it's about body positivity. And, more than that, it's celebrating the big, fat, juicy heart of big Mawma and also celebrating me and my voice and the gender expression in my voice. I used to be really afraid to sing with my male vocals because I always wanted to be feminine and I really celebrate my natural male talents as far as stereotypically male vocal talents. And it opened my eyes to loving another little piece of myself, so, hopefully, the [audience] can, too. Everything's always so much deeper with me. I'm like a poet and didn't know it, you know?

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