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No Answers Three
Months After His Murder

THE FUTURE OF MARRIAGE EQUALITY
Why This Michigan Couple
Married Out of State

A RISING PLAYWRIGHT
Will Street Brings 'Radical Act
of Normalcy' to Planet Ant

GAY IN THE RING

**PRO WRESTLER ANTHONY BOWENS HEADS TO MICHIGAN
WITH MAJOR WINS FOR QUEER VISIBILITY UNDER HIS BELT**

By Chris Azzopardi



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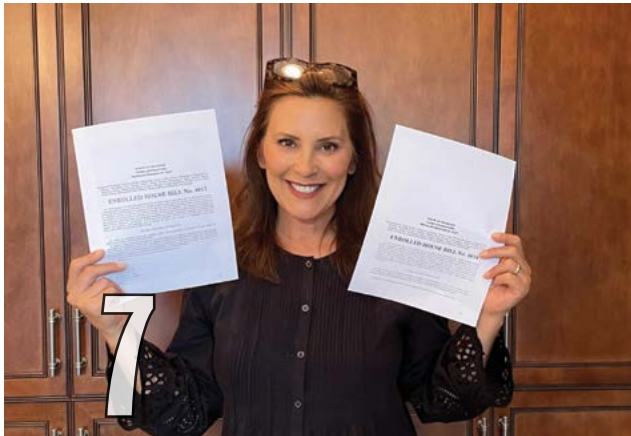
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Photo: AEW

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By Chris Azzopardi

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By Jason A. Michael

Date Officially Set for Season 3 of Detroit's Own 'Bargain Block' on HGTV

By Jason A. Michael

Char Davenport, Dead at 67, Remembered as Trans Activist Who Took on College After Being Fired

By Jason A. Michael



Beyoncé performs in Detroit on July 26. Photo: Julian Dakdouk

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

BY SARAH BRICKER HUNT

As you sashay toward the final third of 2023, don't miss the season's final Pride events. Both Ann Arbor and Royal Oak will roll out the rainbow rug for Pridegoers during the first weekend of August. Beyond fashionably late Pride fests, you'll find opportunities to have unique, queer-imbued adventures like a "queer scouting" event in Lansing, a chance to learn about Canadian Queer History right across the Detroit River, a sexy pool party and a workshop for young adult trans folks.



Alyssa Edwards. Photo: Facebook

Attend Royal Oak Pride

Keep your Pride alive all summer long at a late-in-the-season event like Royal Oak Pride on Aug. 4 and 5. The 2023 event features performances by "RuPaul's Drag Race" stars Alyssa Edwards and Brooke Lynn Hytes and gay singer-songwriter Vincint. Puddles Pity Party will also be on hand to perform his unique brand of satirical musical comedy. Other highlights include a Donna Summer tribute, a Metro Detroit drag show and a Michael Jackson cover show performed by Bobby Miller. The family-friendly event will also offer vendors, food and entertainment throughout the two-day festival. Get the whole lineup at royaloakpride.com.

Aug. 4, 3-11 p.m. and Aug. 5, 11 a.m.-11 p.m. Downtown Royal Oak.



Become a Queer Scout

It's not too late to become a scout, even if you missed (or avoided) the opportunity as a kid. Queer Scouts, a series of workshops for LGBTQ+ people of all ages to learn various outdoor, handicraft and applied skills, meets regularly at Lansing's Salus Center. Scouts earn badges as they acquire skills and can participate in a wide range of activities, including an upcoming American folk dance workshop on Aug. 6 and a camping trip to Manistee in September. Troop Leader Izzi will lead participants through the three main types of "formation dances" (lines, squares and English Country) and an introductory lesson on waltzing. "Folk dancing isn't just historical or monocultural," Izzi writes in press materials for the event, "it's modern and diverse and has radically changed as I've grown up, with people from all over not just this country, but the world, bringing their own flavors and perspectives to it. I want to help reassure some who only know folk dancing as something hokey, gender-locked, heterosexual and for old white people that it really, really isn't."

Aug. 6, 4-6 p.m., Salus Center (408 S. Washington Square, Lansing). Learn more at facebook.com/SalusCenterMI.



Hit the Pool

Soak up that summer sun while it's still shining down on all the scantily-clad partygoers at the last two Parasol Pool Parties of the year on Aug. 13 and 27 at Common Pub's pool in Detroit's Midtown neighborhood. The music will be thumping at both events, which will feature DJs, drag appearances, go-go dancers, drink specials and surprises for all. Pre-registration is required — grab your tickets at bit.ly/3QddwkJ.

Aug. 13 and Aug. 27, 1-7 p.m., Common Pub (5440 Cass Ave., Detroit).



Join a Queer Canadian History Tour

Ever been curious about queer Canadian history? Head across the mighty Ambassador Bridge (or shimmy through the tunnel if you're into that) for a queer history driving tour of the Windsor-Essex region on Aug. 6. This two-hour guided bus tour explores local 2SLGBTQAI+ history, supplemented by a smartphone app featuring historical photos and informational text. The tour kicks off at Windsor Market Square, and you'll need to reserve space ahead of time at bit.ly/43RkwXn. Don't forget your passport!

Aug. 6, 11 a.m., Windsor Market Square (2109 Ottawa St., Windsor, Ontario, Canada). Reserve tickets and learn more at bit.ly/43RkwXn.



Learn How to Do Life with Stand with Trans

Stand with Trans' How to Do Life series helps young adults (ages 12-24) develop practical life skills. The upcoming installment, a self-care workshop at Welcome Home Yoga and Wellness Aug. 13, touches on topics like Vinyasa yoga, guided meditation and sleep hygiene. "Many trans youth don't have the support they need at home and are at a higher risk of parental abandonment, abuse and neglect," explains Logan TJ Harding, a research librarian for Stand with Trans' Lifeline Library. "Because trans youth may not have a supportive adult in their life to teach them what they need to know, we're hoping to help fill in those knowledge gaps." Upcoming workshops include Adulting (October) and Financial Literacy (December). Lunch is provided at each workshop and participants will receive certificates of completion and a gift card.

Register at bit.ly/3Odxqtg or email logan@standwithtrans.org for more information.

Please check lgbtdetroit.org for the most up-to-date scheduling information.

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Miriam (left) and Kendra Saperstein. Photo: Laurie Tennent

What You Need to Know About the Future of Marriage Equality in Michigan

Why This Queer Couple From Michigan Married Out of State

BY ELLEN SHANNA KNOPPOW

When Miriam and Kendra Saperstein exchanged wedding vows before 100 family members and friends at a synagogue in West Bloomfield on June 11, it wasn't the first time the couple tied the knot.

The Sapersteins originally married last fall in a simple ceremony in Pennsylvania where the two native Michiganders reside while Kendra attends rabbinical school. With the possibility of Obergefell v. Hodges being overturned and same-sex

couples losing the ability to marry in the U.S., they decided to act fast.

Introduced by a mutual friend at the Jewish High Holiday services of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur in 2019, the two had another reason for wasting no time: As Kendra aged out of their parents' health insurance, they wanted Kendra to be covered under Miriam's employee healthcare plan. Miriam is a writer who works in communications.

"The main concern we had was after Roe was overturned, we were not really sure what was next on the docket for the Supreme Court and

wanted to make sure that we were legally married as soon as possible in a state that legalized same-sex marriage," Kendra said.

In the 2022 Dobbs v. Jackson decision that overturned Roe v. Wade, Clarence Thomas expressed interest in revisiting other precedents like Obergefell, alarming marriage equality activists and everyday citizens alike. In Pennsylvania, same-sex marriage became legal in 2014 when a 1996 ban was struck down by a federal judge.

Because of Michigan's 2004 ban on same-sex marriage, the Sapersteins

opted to wait until they moved to Philadelphia to make it legal. Nearly 20 years ago, Michiganders voted 59-41 for Prop 2, which amended the state constitution to define marriage as a union between one man and one woman. Should Obergefell fall, this currently unenforceable marriage ban would go into effect and same-sex couples could no longer marry in the state. This would create an untenable situation when it comes to things like parental legal rights and healthcare decision-making for ailing partners, among other highly impactful issues.

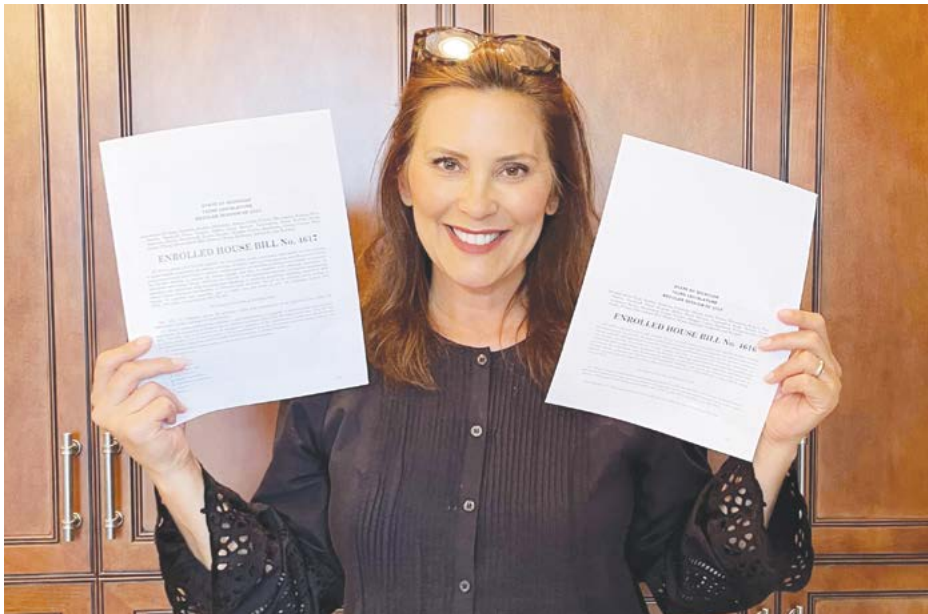
If he has any say in the matter, Rep.

Jason Morgan won't let that happen. With plans to marry his fiancé in October, the Ann Arbor Democrat has introduced a package of bills that would, among other things, repeal the hateful amendment and replace it with the affirming language of Obergefell, thus codifying marriage equality in the state constitution.

"I'm introducing this package because I am genuinely concerned that the U.S. Supreme Court could overturn our right to be married in

See **Marriage Equality**, page 8

Michigan Becomes 22nd U.S. State to Outlaw Conversion Therapy



Gov. Gretchen Whitmer. Photo: Equality Michigan

BY SARAH BRICKER HUNT

The outcome of last November’s election continues paying big dividends for progressive voters as Gov. Gretchen Whitmer officially prohibits state-sanctioned conversion therapy performed on minors. The governor’s signature on House Bills 4616 and 4617, introduced by state representatives Felicia Brabec and Jason Hoskins, makes it illegal for state-licensed providers from engaging in the debunked mental healthcare practice that aims to steer queer and questioning individuals toward heterosexuality. Michigan is the 22nd U.S. state to outlaw the practice on minors.

“As a mom of a member of the community and a proud, lifelong ally, I’m grateful that today we’re banning the horrific practice of

keep working to expand our fundamental freedoms and fight back against any and all forms of discrimination.”

In a news release, Equality Michigan Executive Director Erin Knott writes, “Equality Michigan proudly commends Governor Whitmer for her decisive action in ending this harmful and discredited practice in the state of Michigan. With 15% of Michigan’s LGBTQ+ youth reporting being threatened with or subjected to conversion therapy, signing this legislation into law is a vital step toward protecting some of the most vulnerable members of the LGBTQ+ community.

Every young person in our state deserves to grow up free from the damaging effects of conversion therapy. By affirming that LGBTQ+ youth should be embraced, supported, and loved for exactly who they are, Michigan is paving the way for a brighter and more inclusive future for everyone who lives, works, and visits here.”

The governor has recently signed several other pieces of legislation, as well, including a new budget that will provide free

breakfast and lunch to all 1.4 million Michigan public school students and significantly expand a program that provides free preschool for thousands of Michigan families.

“

We are taking action to make Michigan a more welcoming, inclusive place.

— Gov. Gretchen Whitmer

conversion therapy in Michigan,” Whitmer wrote on Instagram, referring to her openly lesbian daughter Sherry. “In doing so, we are taking action to make Michigan a more welcoming, inclusive place. Let’s

Dr. Ziyad Iskenderian, MD, is an Internal Medicine physician with the Ascension Medical Group in Ferndale and Lathrup Village.

He provides primary care with a focus in weight loss, obesity management, diabetes, hypertension, and congestive heart failure.

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Justice at Last

Trans Activist Kelly Stough's Murder Trial Finally Begins, Ends Almost Immediately When Killer Takes Plea

BY JASON A. MICHAEL

Kelly Stough was 36 when she was shot to death by a so-called minister, Albert Weathers, 46, of Sterling Heights. The heinous crime was committed in the early morning hours of Dec. 7, 2018. Now, over four and a half years later, Weathers has accepted a plea deal, confessing to the killing. He faces between 10 and 16 years in prison, plus an additional two for possession of a firearm, and will be sentenced on Sept. 8, according to Julisa Abad of the Fair Michigan Justice Project, who was in the courtroom when Weathers entered the plea July 27.

Stough was a trans woman and a sex worker. Prosecutors allege Weathers shot Stough when a disagreement about rates escalated. For his part, Weathers, who initially cried self-defense, later changed his argument and traded it in for an accidental shooting defense.

"It was not self-defense so much as it was an accidental shooting," Attorney David Cripps said during Weathers' preliminary hearing on March 29, 2019. "This isn't an intentional shooting. I would ask the court to look at this as an accidental shooting."

No matter how the shooting occurred, there is no debating the fact that Stough's body was discarded and dumped by Weathers and left in the street near the intersection of McNichols Road and Brush Street in the Palmer Park area. Police found the body after Weathers eventually

called to report the shooting after showering and showing up for work.

"She was disposable," Wayne County Assistant Prosecutor Jaimie Powell Horowitz said at the hearing. "He threw her out like trash and left her to die in the streets."

Horowitz has since left the Wayne County Prosecutor's Office and the case was set to be tried by Kam Towns, special prosecutor for the Fair Michigan Justice Project. As the trial approached, those close to Stough said it was important people fill up the courtroom in support, as Weathers allegedly had a large group of supporters who had planned to attend for as long as the trial lasted.

"It definitely would be good for people to show up and support because she did matter," said Jey'nce Poindexter Mizrahi of the Trans Sistis of Color Project and the Ruth Ellis Center, who both planned to have supporters in the courtroom ahead of the original trial date. Mizrahi said she's been disappointed as the case unfolded. "It's been eye-opening the way things have almost changed in his favor. Early on, the decision to lower his bond and for him to be released on a tether. Just given the facts of the case ... I thought it was being handled very lightly."

Mizrahi knew Stough for many years and considered her a friend. "I'm showing up to continue to stand with her and for her. But also to let them know that no matter how long

this stretches out or how long it goes on, we are still right here and ... still expecting the system to work."

Jessica Williams, Stough's mother, had also planned to be at the courthouse every day.

"I'm just really hoping for justice," she said. "I want to let people understand that Kelly wasn't just a statistic. She was someone who was loved and had a typical life, if you will. She was raised in a two-parent home, graduated high school. She's just not whatever society looks upon or their understanding of trans women of color or the LGBTQ+ community."

Williams said trans women, particularly those of color, are often looked down upon.

"These individuals are educated," she said. "If society would give them a chance or let them be productive in the community, it would be different. We all have to live."

Stough, said Williams, was a wonderful daughter.

"I want to let people know she was a good person," she said. "She was a beautiful person and I'm proud of her for being her true self"

Abad and the Fair Michigan Justice Project has been keeping a close eye on Stough's case

as it has moved through the justice system.

"It's unfortunate the violence that trans women of color go through in our society when a community is marginalized or the violence toward them is not taken seriously," she said. "It sets the tone of how the community interacts



Kelly Stough. Photo: Facebook

with us."

As the trans community continues to be the target of so much vitriol and disdain, Abad said it's "important for people to know we're not asking for more rights than anybody else. We're simply asking for the same opportunities and the same quality of life. We are loved. We are human. And we have families that love and support us."

◀ Marriage Equality

Continued from page 6

Michigan," Morgan said. "And I firmly believe that no couple in our state should have to live with the fear that their marriage could be put in jeopardy." A similar package was introduced in both 2020 and 2021 by Morgan's friend and predecessor, Rep. Yusef Rabhi. Because repealing the amendment via a joint resolution requires a two-thirds majority in both House and Senate, Morgan conceded it was a "heavy lift." Short of that, a ballot proposal could be in the cards.

The other part of Morgan's initiative is a 51-bill package that would eliminate gendered marital language from all state statutes to

reference "spouse and spouse" instead of "husband and wife." That kind of language appears in everything from tax documents to agricultural laws, laws that were made at a time when legalizing same-sex marriage was unheard of.

Both Sapersteins are trans and use they/them pronouns. Neither is wife nor husband. For their own casual, joking purposes, they've come up with the endearing term "wifeguy." "Spouse" sounds too formal, so they've opted for "partner." They both gave thought as to what it means when laws that should apply to you are lacking in representative language.

"I'd feel a little worried just not knowing how that would affect any legal decisions," Miriam said. "Or it just would make me worried about discrimination that might be still kind of in a

gray area."

Kendra said they feel similarly. It's not so much being seen by the government; it has more to do with having the right to access whatever they need to in terms of their government-recognized union. "So usually, I think about it in extreme moments, where it's like, God forbid we should get a divorce," Kendra said, or if one of them had a life-threatening condition. They want a guarantee as a couple and as individuals they'll be regarded equally under the law.

With the Democrats having scored a trifecta in the last election for the first time in decades, it's likely what should have been a no-brainer all along will finally come to fruition. As Rabhi told BTL in 2020, "Because this is purely technical in nature, I don't see any reason why this should not pass."

Yet Morgan points out that even if the gendered marital language is stripped from state law, should marriage equality fall, it really doesn't protect the LGBTQ+ community. While important for those who have recognized marriages already, unmarried same-sex partners wishing to marry in Michigan would be out of luck.

"When I first brought this package up a few months ago," Morgan said, "some folks asked me why it was necessary and said the Supreme Court would never possibly take down the right for gay marriage. But if anybody is watching, they're trending in that direction. I don't care how unbelievable somebody thinks it is. I do not believe there's any limit to how far the right-wing U.S. Supreme Court will go these days to roll America back to the 1950s."



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Main Street in Ann Arbor will be the site of this year's Ann Arbor Pride. Courtesy photo

Ann Arbor Pride Prepares for Debut on Main Street

2023 Fest, Set for a Post-Covid Comeback on Aug. 5, Will Keep Spirit of Jim Toy Alive

BY SARAH BRICKER HUNT

Ann Arbor Pride, set for Aug. 5 along Main Street, is getting back to its roots as one of the preeminent festivals focused on the local LGBTQ+ community. There's a renewed focus on headlining entertainment, and organizers have been making an effort to involve the whole city in planning a weekend that promises a return to pre-Covid normalcy (with several nods to the wonderfully weird vibes unique to Michigan's most liberal city).

Pedro Coracides, assistant director for Ann Arbor Pride and secretary for the Jim Toy Community Center board of directors, has been working behind the scenes for months to get the festival ready. "There are a

variety of reasons you're noticing a renewed sense of enthusiasm," he says. "It's our first festival back in person since Covid. Like most aspects of life, we lost an opportunity to connect with others, and wanted this year to make up for that."

The team has worked to bring Ann Arbor Pride to Main Street for the first year because, Coracides says, it's an already vibrant district that felt like the ideal spot for the colorful, vibrant festival.

Jadein Black, Ann Arbor Pride entertainment director and popular local drag performer, put together a fresh lineup that includes big names



Jim Toy. Courtesy photo

like Heidi N Closet, a "RuPaul's Drag Race" Season 8 contestant who also appeared in season 12's "All Stars" installment. Heidi will share the stage with national drag performer Laganja Estranja in a

show hosted by Black and Avalisa Davenport.

Festivalgoers can experience a variety of musical entertainment throughout the day, as well, including performances by trans musician Baddie Brooks, Alise King, Out Loud Chorus, Redi Choi, Kayden Kendall and J. Santino. Unveiled Bellydance will also perform.

Coracides says the organizers wanted to include a mix of acts and attractions appealing to a wide-ranging audience, including many family-friendly options like drag queen story times. The group worked closely with Main Street

Ann Arbor to develop a Dine and Shop Guide featuring merchants that will donate portions of proceeds sold during the festival to Ann Arbor Pride and the Jim Toy Center.

Toy's legacy will be felt throughout Ann Arbor Pride, Coracides says. "Jim was ahead of his time with intersectionality," he says. "He never saw the LGBTQ+ community as a monolith and advocated for queer folks across race and ethnicity, religion and other social identities. Our hope is to be welcoming and inclusive of various intersecting identities and needs for all who want to engage with the festival and through our work in the Center."

Ann Arbor Pride is set for 12-9 p.m. on Aug. 5 along Main Street. Learn more at annarborpride.com.





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Southeast Michigan's Favorite Art Fair - Metrotimes Survey



BelleIsleArtFair.com

Right-Wingers Wrestle With 'Barbie' Movie's 'Woke' Propaganda



BY D'ANNE WITKOWSKI

When my twin sister and I were in the third grade, a large, wrapped present sat under our grandma's Christmas tree for at least a week before Christmas. My mom told us that the gift was a vacuum for our grandma and we did not question it. But when Christmas Day arrived, it turned out that the vacuum was actually a Barbie Dreamhouse. A gift for me and my sister... who weren't exactly Barbie-type girls.

Thankfully this was before everything Barbie became pink or my sister and I might have rejected it outright. I remember the house having a dark orange roof with yellow and white accents.

We also got WWF wrestling figures that Christmas and the Barbie Dreamhouse soon became a club house for Hulk Hogan, Andre the Giant, Greg The Hammer Valentine and Brutus Beefcake.

My little sisters played with Barbie dolls and my brother once made a video in high school in which he burned one of these dolls at the stake to the tune of Carmina Burana. It was honestly hilarious, but my little sisters didn't think so.

It was not hilarious when Ben Shapiro did the same thing to protest Barbie being 'woke.' Shapiro was upset that the movie included a transgender character who was 'treated normally.'

It was not hilarious when Ben Shapiro did the same thing to protest Barbie being "woke." Shapiro was upset that the movie included a transgender character who was "treated normally."

Shapiro is talking about trans actress Hari Nef who plays one of the Barbies in the film.

Nef sees her inclusion in the film much more positively, as one would expect. "As much as there's a celebration of femininity and being a girl in ['Barbie'], I think there's also an encouragement of letting go of the checklist we ascribe to living and living your life and being in your body your way, on your own terms," she said to Out magazine.

That's a pretty beautiful thing, unless you're

a hateful rat like Shapiro, who seemed shocked that people were mad about the burning Barbie video.

"I take, like, a match and I light the Barbie stuff on fire — and this is apparently terrible," said Shapiro. "The reaction to me burning a Barbie car with, like, a Barbie and Ken in

it, is like the reaction of the Islamic world when someone burns a Quran in Sweden. It's totally crazy."

Leave it to Shapiro to include something Islamophobic in his response.

Ted Cruz also had a beef with the movie, claiming that it's Chinese communist propaganda. Because a cartoonish map shown in the film supposedly shows a depiction of the "nine dash line," which, on some maps, depicts China's claims to territory in the South China Sea. However, there are only eight lines on the "Barbie" map and in a very different shape than the typical depiction of the disputed territory.

"I'm not sure this map, which you'd miss if you blinked at the one-minute mark in the third trailer, is admissible in the International Court of Justice. It's cartoonishly unrealistic," wrote Toronto Sun columnist Vinay Menon. "Where is continental Europe? New Zealand? What do the sailboats represent? Is that a jester's crown atop Iceland?"

Cruz remains unconvinced. "China wants to control what Americans see, hear, and ultimately think, and they leverage their massive film markets to coerce American companies into pushing propaganda," a spokesperson for Cruz told the U.K.'s Daily Mail.

Wild if true (it isn't true).

Another person upset is Ginger Gaetz, wife of U.S. Representative and accused sex offender Matt Gaetz (R-Florida), who tweeted



photos of herself and her husband posing together in front of a Barbie backdrop at a Barbie themed pre-party along with the message, "The Barbie I grew up with was a representation of limitless possibilities, embracing diverse careers and feminine empowerment. The 2023 Barbie movie, unfortunately, neglects to address any notion of faith or family, and tries to normalize the idea that men and women can't collaborate positively (yuck)."

You know, like how Matt Gaetz positively collaborates with women when he tweets stuff like, "How many of the women rallying against overturning Roe are over-educated, under-loved millennials who sadly return from protests to a lonely microwave dinner with their cats, and no bumle matches?"

Feminist icon, that guy.

Ginger Gaetz also complained about "Disappointingly low T from Ken," the T being "testosterone." In other words, Ken, a doll who has no private parts, didn't have enough big dick energy for her tastes. And given who she's married to, her taste is very, very bad.

I haven't seen it. My wife said she'd like to see it "a little bit" and our 14-year-old son shrugged and said, "maybe." I felt the same.

But now that I've learned that "Barbie" has triggered so many extremist conservatives, I'm more motivated to see the damn thing. Because I love to make right-wingers mad.

So get in, losers. We're going to see "Barbie." I mean, eventually. Probably.

About That Jason Aldean Song: The Art of Weaponizing Silence in Small-Town America



BY SARAH
BRICKER HUNT

I grew up in a small town in rural Southern Ohio, and like so many of the people we interview here at BTL, I often feel I escaped from something I can't quite define but can instantly recognize when I meet people with similar backgrounds. Because while I am from a small town, I'm not sure I was ever of "that same small town," to quote the OG John Mellencamp small-town song.

Jason Aldean didn't actually grow up in a small town, though he sang defiantly about leaving one that sucked in his 2018 lament "Rearview Town." The MAGA darling hit screaming up the charts, "Try That in a Small Town," written by someone else, doesn't speak to his personal experience, either, but he's got the story right, according to the Very Loud People of the Internet. And maybe his screed does get it right, for certain people in certain small towns. But as someone born and raised just outside a town of 850 people, a place where my progressive-minded parents were constantly getting ahead of the things I'd hear in the back of the bus every day, I'm here to tell you he doesn't get it right for those of us who didn't align with the "you ain't from around here" crowd.

My small-town hometown is quaint, quiet and very friendly, as long as you're not making waves. When I was growing up, you could fly under the radar as long as you kept your mouth shut when good ole boy behavior happened, like the n-word being used liberally behind closed doors or date rape being incredibly common. And maybe that sentiment and those behaviors aren't exclusive to small towns, but once you're branded as a slut or a (gasp!) queer person in a small town, your story is written and the consequences are immediate and forever. There's an irony in how big the megaphone is, the smaller the town.

But I was a good, quiet girl and, for the most part, I went unnoticed, which

was fine by me. I'd love to think that if I knew then what I know now, I'd have never kept my mouth shut when a friend told me her boyfriend, a kid in our Spanish II class, had held her down and raped her in his car after a football game. I'd have delivered some kind of cinematic monologue on race relations and embracing LGBTQ+ people right in the center of the cafeteria (to wild applause, no doubt).

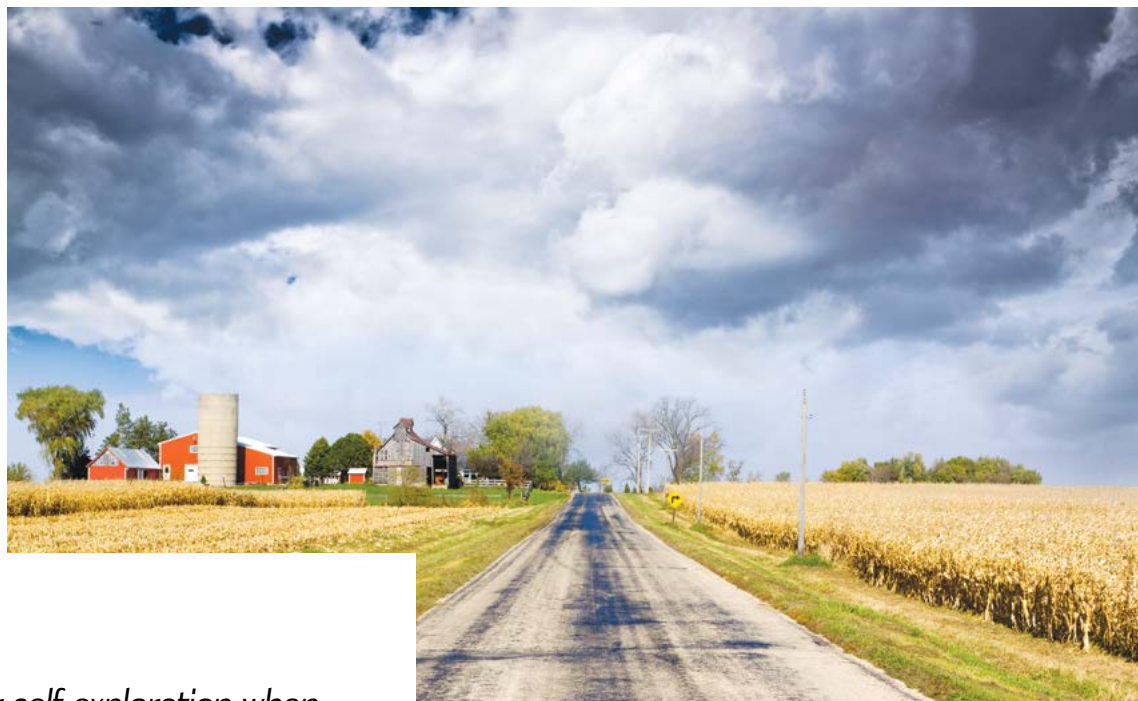
But I did nothing. Essentially, all of us who knew better in that small town did exactly nothing.

So it's maybe not a surprise that the people dishing out the abuse and the racism and the queerphobia continue to feel emboldened and that their

"There's no room for self-exploration when self-preservation means survival, and that's what can happen in small towns where the 'you ain't from around here, are you?' mentality goes unchallenged."

behaviors have continued devolving and festering into something that feels almost like a parody. And maybe it's not shocking that these people feel so shocked, themselves, that the wider world out there isn't buying what they're selling. It's shocking to discover, perhaps, that even though all the people around you seem completely fine with your 1950s viewpoints, that much of the rest of the world has woken up to the fact that every person deserves agency, even the ones denigrated for so long and so deeply that it's become part of the actual culture in some small towns.

What I do know for sure is that my fellow classmate Bobby likely wouldn't identify with some of these small-town people out here on TikTok, the ones sobbing that the Aldean song proves "someone gets us." Bobby was



sweet, way more stylish than most of us (probably more than most of our county), and he had an instantly recognizable affectation that put him squarely in the crosshairs of our high school bullies. It was nothing to hear him openly called a faggot, including in front of smirking teachers (many of whom grew up there, too). And being gay — even closeted but assumed — was about the worst thing you could be in our small town in the late '80s and early '90s. The kids I found out later who were also queer had stayed safely in the closet.

Bobby may have fared better than the one Black kid I recalled joining our school district for less than a year before his family essentially fled in the night. And probably a bit better than the family that had crosses burned in their lawn in the next town over for harboring a teenage daughter who,

rumor had it, had dated a Black kid ("from the city!" no less). But the taunting often turned physical, and as far as I know, Bobby got far away as soon as he could. Lots of us did, and it wasn't the economy, as much as many conservatives like to claim.

Bad things happen everywhere, but it would be missing a compelling part of the narrative to pretend like what happened to, as one example among many, Matthew Shepard, didn't happen in rural Wyoming. When he "tried that" ("that" meaning "literally existing as a gay man") in a townie bar in Cheyenne, they showed him, all right. It's similar to what happened to Brandon Teena, Billy Jack Gaither, Roxanne Ellis and her partner Michelle Abdill, Army Private First Class Barry Winchell and the list goes on. All targeted for being a part of the LGBTQ+ community over the past few decades in small places where that's all it took to become a target. No doubt, there were good, quiet people living in those towns, too.

It's a very bad '80s movie vibe, this look back. A moment frozen in time that I feel wholly disconnected from in 2023, mom to two queer children and decades of introspection behind

me that make it very clear that had I grown up away from this place, I'd have realized long before I did who I really am, myself.

There's no room for self-exploration when self-preservation means survival, and that's what can happen in small towns where the "you ain't from around here, are you?" mentality goes unchallenged — when all the quiet folks are assumed to be in agreement and who allow their towns to go unchecked for breeding and bleeding hate for the perceived Other.

Aldean isn't singing about a perceived threat by outsiders who want to take on small-town folks just living peacefully. He's singing about a threat to a way of life that doesn't fly in much of the country in 2023 for some very good reasons. This year, we saw a record-breaking number of Pride festivals organized by young adults in small towns in Michigan, often drawing ire from local officials and residents alike. Perhaps Gen Z isn't buying what Aldean is selling, either. Maybe this generation will be defined by gathering up the strength to stop being quiet and to shine a spotlight on ugly, long overlooked behavior.

Who Killed Dr. Devon Hoover?

Three Months After He Was Found Murdered in His Detroit Home, the Question Remains



Dr. Devon Hoover. Photo: Facebook

BY JASON A. MICHAEL

It's been just over three months since Dr. Devon Hoover was found slain in his historic \$1.2 million Boston Edison District mansion and no arrests have been made. Few details have been released, and frustrated friends and family are seeking answers.

So far, developments in the case have centered on actions taken by friends and family left behind versus new information about the brutal murder. A GoFundMe campaign raised to offer a reward for information raised more than the \$20K funding goal. And recently, volunteers canvassed Hoover's neighborhood and handed out fliers seeking any new information to help solve his mysterious murder.

Hoover, 53, was a renowned neurosurgeon and, BTL has confirmed, part of the LGBTQ+ community. He had lived alone in his 13,000-square-foot home since purchasing it 15 years ago, meticulously restoring the turn-of-the-century property, known as the

Benjamin Siegel House. The home, built in 1915 for Siegel, owner of the downtown Detroit department store B. Siegel, was designed by famed architect Albert Kahn.

Hoover's case drew national attention, and a story in *People* magazine alleged he felt "nervous" and "concerned" about living in the massive house in Detroit alone. The article quoted a former neighbor as the source. But other friends of Hoover's have taken to Facebook, via a Justice for Devon Hoover page, to say the claims are erroneous.

"Devon was NOT concerned about living alone in his home," Jordan Medeiros, who identified himself as a friend of Hoover's, posted to the Facebook page. "And the neighbor's quote buried in this article does not support that statement."

Carol Rodgers Gove, one of those who helped set up the GoFundMe page, agreed in another post. "He was never concerned about living alone," she echoed.

What is known for sure is that Hoover failed to show up in Indiana for a scheduled family visit in April.

As the result of a requested welfare check, Hoover's body, naked but for one black sock and wrapped in a blanket and a comforter, was found in his attic on April 23. He had been shot twice in the back of the head, according to the autopsy report.

While police initially interviewed a subject, he was allegedly released without arrest. Now, they continue to be tight-lipped as time marches on with no arrests being made.

"There are no new developments in the case," Sgt. Javaris Reed of the Detroit Police Department Homicide Division told BTL. "Evidence for the case is being gathered daily and reviewed. These types of cases take time to prosecute. We must be able to prove beyond a reasonable doubt that the person responsible is guilty. We are taking our time to find the right person so that when we prosecute, he will be sentenced for a long time."

Since the death and, without an arrest, speculation has run rampant. Some say that the slaying could be a hookup gone bad. Others have theorized that the suspect was someone Hoover had known for

some time. On the Justice for Devon Hoover Facebook page, which has over 7,000 members and where theories run rampant, someone recently posted photos of Detroit gay bars Gigi's and Menjo's and said the alleged killer was known to frequent those spots.

"We cannot go into detail as to the motive for the homicide as we are still investigating the crime," Reed said, adding they were not looking at these bars as of now. "These bars, at this time, are not a part of our homicide investigation. I believe this is speculation as we haven't released the person of interest's name and/or description."

Hoover's friends and family continue to be pained as the weeks and months pass by without an arrest. "Devon was a generous, smart, delightful human being who was funny, sometimes unintentionally so, and full of life," his friend John Corvino told BTL. "We, his friends, are still in shock."

The LGBTQ+ community at large remains shocked and on edge, as well, with some lamenting that the still-at-large killer could have been motivated, at least in part, by Hoover's sexual orientation. Questions abound and, three months later, answers remain few.

"The person who committed this crime is still walking around," Brian Douglas, an acquaintance of Hoover's, told WDIV Local 4. "This community is still vulnerable — that means this community, the Boston-Edison community, and also the gay community."

In addition to his LGBTQ+ friends in Michigan, Hoover's patients are also in mourning.

"He was a wonderful human being, and this is so tragic," Dana Collar, a former patient of Hoover's told WDIV. "The lives that he has

touched. Every person should aspire to be like him, his kindness, his bedside manner. They should have a 'Dr. Hoover class' for physicians for bedside manner because he was perfect."

Indeed, it's difficult to find anyone with anything bad to say about Hoover. Family, friends — even his neighbors — are grieving. Hoover was known around his upscale neighborhood for hosting lavish parties and showing off recent purchases and upgrades to his house. He bought a fresh flower arrangement for the entryway every Saturday at Eastern Market. He also recently had a greenhouse built on the property, to replace the original one that had stood there many years before.

That something so horrific could happen to someone so kind and beloved is a hard pill to swallow for Hoover's inner circle. Still, someone must know something. And the



Dr. Devon Hoover (center) with friends John Corvino and Mark Lock. Photo: Facebook

DPD is asking that person to come forward.

"If someone is suspected of committing the murder and/or someone is a witness to this crime, it would be imperative that they reach out to the detectives to give a statement so that we can bring justice to the family of Dr. Devon Hoover," said Reed. "They can also reach out to Crime Stoppers to relay that information."

Crime Stoppers can be reached at 1-800-SPEAK-UP.

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Miss Gay Michigan America Pageant Promises Grand Glam

Event Will Send Winner to National Miss Gay America Competition



(Left to right) Lavender LaRue, Jennifer Foxx, Katrina Alexis Monae. Courtesy photos

BY JASON A. MICHAEL

The Miss Gay Michigan America pageant is returning to the state after a 30-year absence.

Though the pageant system is 50 years old this year, there's been no Michigan qualifying competition for the last three decades. Producers and pageant owners Robert Beaton and his husband Scott promise this revamped pageant will feature all of the glam and grace of the national version.

"It's very grand," said Beaton. "Miss Gay America is the oldest pageant line. It's parallel to Miss America. They have the same kind of rules. It's very proper, down to they can't even drink out of a glass when they have their gown on. They have to use a straw."

Beaton promises his new pageant will be "unlike anything we've seen in Michigan." To achieve that goal, he is bringing four former Miss Gay Americas on board to "make sure that it gets kicked off properly. Usually, the reigning Miss Gay America is always there to oversee things. But to make sure that we get it done the right way, we have four coming to our pageant."

While Beaton is new to the pageant world, he is not new to the world of drag. "We are huge advocates and drag enthusiasts," he said. "We travel all around the world to see them. Some people travel for beaches or for dining. We like to travel for drag shows."

Drag queens, Beaton said, have always been at the forefront of the LGBTQ+ rights movement. Now, he said, it's time to support them and lift them up. "Being an older guy, I remember when HIV and AIDS came out. The drag queens were the loudest and most compassionate voices for our community,

when everyone else was not welcoming and turning their backs on us."

More recently, Beaton said the drag community was just as active in the Black and Brown Lives Matter movement. "They were right out there screaming and hollering and advocating for our community again. Now you see that they're the ones who are under attack. So, my husband Scott and I thought it was going to be our chance to give something back to the community we've gotten so much out of over the years."

The idea to get into the drag pageant business, said Beaton, occurred to him when he attended a Miss Gay America pageant in Little Rock, Arkansas. "When we got there, we couldn't believe what a big, huge pageant it was. They had representatives on stage from all over."

But not Michigan.

"There were almost 50 queens but there was none from Michigan," Beaton said. "It was quizzical. We thought, 'Where is Miss Gay Michigan America? Why isn't there a Miss Michigan?' We couldn't understand that because there's so much going on in the drag community in Michigan."

The first and only Miss Gay America from Michigan is Jennifer Foxx. She took home the crown in 1982, and she will be in attendance at this year's pageant. "I was fortunate to be crowned at the 10th annual pageant in Dallas, Texas at the Dallas Convention Center," said Foxx. "It was the first time that contest was covered by the media. About 2,500 people were in attendance, which was unprecedented for anything drag."

Foxx recalled competing against 41 other contestants. "They were the best in the country," she said. "My mom was there, and she came up on stage and she

hugged me. The UPI was there, so I got photographed hugging my mom, and the next day it was on 100 covers of newspapers across the country."

After her win, Foxx said she tried several times to establish a preliminary competition here in Michigan. "But to be done correctly, you have to have capital. ... So these gentlemen come along and go, 'We have a little bit of money and we want to do this.'"

Now, Foxx is thrilled. "I'm elated for several reasons," she said. "Some of it is ego, of course. There's been no Miss Gay America here for all these decades. So my luster has dimmed over the years because I couldn't say, 'Well, our representative this year that we're sending is ...'"

Foxx said that what she appreciates about the Miss Gay America system is that "from the beginning, these were guys who did illusions of women. And they adhere to that. I like the true theater that is Miss Gay America, where there's no body augmentation."

There are 10 contestants vying for the title of Miss Gay Michigan America this year. Among them is Katrina Alexis Monae. "I've been wanting to do a national pageant for a really long time and there were no preliminaries in the systems that I wanted to do in Michigan. So when I saw Miss Gay America come up, I was like, 'Oh my god.'"

Monae, a former Miss Gigi's, had been considering traveling to another state to participate in a preliminary pageant. "It's a system I've always admired. I love the excellence that comes along with Miss Gay America. It's the pinnacle of drag pageantry."

Lavender LaRue, also a former Miss Gigi's, said much of the same.

"I wanted to compete for Miss Gay Michigan America because I feel that drag pageants in Michigan are fading away," she said. "I have been doing drag for just over 12 years now ... and I want to inspire the younger generation of queens. Let them know that pageants are important within our community and there is more to drag than what is in our hometown."

The Miss Gay Michigan America Pageant will take place Saturday, Aug. 12 at Saint Andrews Hall, located at 431 E. Congress St. in downtown Detroit. For tickets or more information, visit missgaymichiganamerica.com.



Heidi N Closet. Courtesy photo

Heidi N Closet Sashays Our Way

'Drag Race' Star Set to Perform at Ann Arbor Pride

BY JASON A. MICHAEL

Heidi N Closet is both a Southern Belle who won Miss Congeniality on season 12 of "RuPaul's Drag Race" and the inspiration for an adult toy. That's right, she allowed a mold of her famously gap-toothed mouth to be used for a sex toy.

Heidi also co-hosts her own podcast, "Hall & Closet," with Season 12 winner Jaida Essence Hall. Lately, she has been preparing for her appearance on a new gay cruise and filming a new documentary. The film, based on the formation of a gay-straight alliance at her high school alma mater, will be released next year just as the presidential race heats up. Heidi, who proudly told us she was one of the first out kids in her high school, told BTL that "drag is a hot topic and I'm very excited about how the documentary is going to pan out."

Next up, Heidi will take to the Ann Arbor Pride stage Aug. 5. The star recently chatted with BTL about her upcoming performance

and where she sees her career heading. She also dished on why she abruptly left "Drag Race All Stars" in the middle of season 8 — spoiler alert: she has exactly zero regrets. There are other upcoming projects she coyly told us she couldn't speak about just yet, but no topic was off the table, so tuck in as Heidi spills the tea.

Hey Heidi. Thanks for speaking with us. It's early morning for you in California, where you live now. How does Los Angeles compare with Ramseur, North Carolina, your hometown?

Hi darlin'. It's definitely a big difference. Fortunately, I moved during quarantine. L.A. was shut down mostly and I was here when it was slowly opening back up. So it wasn't a big culture shock to me. But I'm also never here very often. It's cute. The weather is usually nice.

Let's go way back to the start. You first appeared on "Drag Race" in Season 12, and I

understand it was your first time auditioning for the show?

It was my first time auditioning. I wasn't going to audition for Season 12. I waited till the last minute. It was like two days before everything had to be turned in. I just felt that everything was going right for me at that time. So I threw myself in the ring and there I was.

There are folks who've auditioned for years before making it on the show, if they ever did. Did you feel special when you got on after your first try?

I don't know if I'd say "special." It was more like confirmation that I was feeling all the right feels. The stars were aligned. It felt good.

Take me back to the beginning. A small-town girl arriving in the Werk Room. How did you feel walking into it and meeting your co-stars?

I remember, especially during Season 12, I felt like I wasn't good enough. There were a lot of times I'd look around the Werk Room and be like, "These girls have this and these girls have that." I just dug my heels in and said I had to do my best.

Let's fast forward now to "All Stars 8." How did you initially feel about returning to the show?

I was excited. I was ready to show an updated version of my drag. That was mostly the main thing when I was called back. Let's show the world what I do now.

You left the show suddenly, of your own volition, for the protection of your mental health. Do you still stand by that decision?

One-hundred percent. We don't talk about mental health very often but not just me, many people. Even a lot of the girls in the Werk Room that I was with struggle with mental illness. Me choosing to put myself first was the right decision for me. More people should put themselves first. It tears them up inside, and when they reflect on it later, it's even worse.

You've mentioned struggling with depression. How are you doing today?

I'm doing really good. I woke up this morning not six feet under, so I'm doing great. I've been talking about mental illness since season 12, how I struggle with anger issues and mental health as well.

Is there anything that helped you get to this point?

I have an incredible support system, friends and family. They've been there for me even in my darkest times. That's definitely been the biggest help, for sure.

See Heidi N Closet, page 18

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◀ Heidi N Closet

Continued from page 17

Part of your exit had to do with Kandy Muse implying that Jimbo needed to be voted off the show since she was a clear frontrunner and a favorite of Ru's. Now, you're hosting a cruise with Jimbo, Kandy and Jessica Wild and touring with Kandy on a Christmas tour. Is that difficult at all?

No, it was a year ago. There was some feelings we got out before the season aired so we're good. We're great. We're trying to make our money. So make sure you get your tickets for the cruise at biggaycruise.com. Just throwing it in there.

I've read you were worried about how your final show would be edited. What do you wish the fans would understand about reality TV versus reality when it comes to you and your relationship with other queens?

That inside those four pink walls, the things that we do and say, yes they're real, but we decided to leave it in the show. And we have a life and connections outside of the Werk Room and the TV that allows us to still be friends on the outside. We are still allowed to feel those feelings of the show once it's over. It's because when you go through, you come out and you deal with it then. Then you have to watch it and those emotions come back, and you have to deal with it all over again.

Thanks to the show, you've had many unique

opportunities, such as the Heidi N Closet Quickshot made by Fleshjack. How did that come about?

They actually approached me and they were wanting to do a collab with some of the queens. I was actually nervous at first. That wasn't really my type of brand or my type of thing. So I thought about it and decided if I was going to do it, it had to have two things. One, it had to be classy because I'm a classy girl. And it had to have a gap.

You've worked with WOW productions, but also worked with Here TV. Opportunities are popping up all over. How do you feel about the body of work you've done since "Drag Race"?

Honestly, the thing is, I'm gagged that I've been afforded so many opportunities. I'm a Black, gay boy from Ramseur, N.C. People like me don't get opportunities like this very often. Everything I've done, I'm proud of and I stand by it, and I can't wait for the future because there's going to be so much more coming up.

You're coming to Michigan to play Ann Arbor Pride. How does playing a Pride festival differ from playing a nightclub?

You definitely have to be age-friendly just in case there's some children out there, for sure. It's always a sense of community at Pride festivals that I love. It's so many people coming from so many walks of life. When you go to clubs sometimes, it's the same people all the time. But you get so many people you might not see all the time at Pride. It's like a family reunion.




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The Playwright That Didn't Get Away

Will Street's World Debut, 'Round Midnight,' Set to Premiere Aug. 11

BY SARAH BRICKER HUNT

Planet Ant director Darren Shelton didn't plan to produce a new play this year. Still resetting after Covid shut down the theater and arts center for an extended period and with many behind-the-scenes projects recently launched, including the reopening of the space's Black Box Theater, it felt prudent to shift into a lower gear for a bit.

But, in the words of Robert Burns, the best-laid plans of mice and men often go awry. In Shelton's case, the plan went awry when playwright and poet Will Street appeared, seemingly out of nowhere, with his script for "round midnight//i got it bad (and that ain't good)," a play Shelton knew he couldn't risk losing out on directing.

"I was telling myself, 'Don't do a new creative project on top of everything you have to do right now,' but Will sent me this script..." Shelton says, pausing to find the right words. "And well, it's weirdly heartbreaking and optimistic at the same time. I think the message, at its core, is that this is a play about self-love. The trials and errors and mistakes and betrayals that really lead this character, Elijah, to the conclusion that self-love is the only real way forward with how he wants to live his life. That just resonates a lot with me."

It was more than just the elements of the story, though, Shelton says, that drew him to the material. "Will is a poet. He has this cadence and this way of writing his dialogue that's so beautiful, and as we traded notes, I realized this is a guy who is going to put his heart and soul into it, just like the way I work on my own creative projects," he adds.

"Round midnight" is a beautiful, beautiful story told in this intimate storytelling way in a space that is special," Shelton says. "It's the same place where I directed and wrote the play I acted in as my first play, and it's a very special place to a lot of people over the past 30 years and I'm very excited that this is the show we're coming back with. It does 30 years of history at Planet Ant justice."

At 23, Street is a young playwright, but he's from a generation that has come of age at a tumultuous point in history. He draws from those experiences in his work, though he tends to steer away from explicit political messaging. "What we're seeing in theaters now, I don't think it's necessarily a bad thing, but there's a lot of heavy-handedness that happens — a lot of political statements, and I'm not a politician, and a lot of theaters would ask me to betray my own artistic tendencies to be political," he explains.

Planet Ant, he noticed, focuses on the kind of



Will Street. Photo: Chris Jarvis

programming that feels more in line with what he wanted to do with "round midnight." "I knew they would allow me to just write what I want to and that they would see the value in that, knowing that I already live in a very political body," he says. "This play happening here in and of itself is a piece of radicalism," he adds, referring to Planet Ant's home in Hamtramck, which has recently made national headlines for banning the Pride flag on public property.

The play, which runs for about an hour without an intermission, tracks closely to Street's personal life, though it isn't truly autobiographical. The production focuses on Elijah, played by Street, who is going through the grief of a recent breakup and recounting the stumbles of past relationships. Some have been tumultuous, even torturous, while others bring up "really fucking funny" memories. "I would tell audiences they're gonna feel the range of emotions and probably see themselves on the stage through this character I conjured up," Street says. "But ultimately, it's this betrayal of self that happens to people in relationships — we have these voids and want to fill them with the next person."

"Here's what Will won't tell you because he's modest," Shelton interjects, "but this play, it

ranges from beautiful and romantic to heartbreaking and everything in between. You will laugh, and you'll laugh some more, and then you'll cry. And then by the end, the message that comes out is really a beautiful one."

One thing that audiences won't be hit over the head with, both Shelton and Street agree, is that this is a "gay play." "It's not necessarily a production about gayness," Shelton says. "Yes, it's a show about a gay man and his life, but gayness isn't the drama of it. It's love and relationships and the universal truths of heartbreak and betrayal, infidelity, first love, nostalgia, and there's even a Sam Smith throughline here."

"The way I put it," Street says, "is that this show is just a radical act of normalcy. It's simply relationship dynamics but told through the homosexual lens, and I think, as a community, we deserve those stories."

Street notes that there have been several big movie productions in the past several years focused on heavy themes like slavery. "And not every movie featuring a Black person needs to be a slave movie in the same way that not every

"This show is just a radical act of normalcy. It's simply relationship dynamics but told through the homosexual lens, and I think, as a community, we deserve those stories."

gay show needs to be chock full of trauma. I don't talk about the social importance of being gay here as the main theme."

That said, Street is quick to pay homage to the gay and queer ancestors who came before him in the theater world. "This is the product of the work of generations of sacrifices and I think I wouldn't be doing those who came before me justice to only harp on that shit because they went through it so I wouldn't have to," he says. "I do think my perspective is a privilege given to me from Marsha P. Johnson, from Stonewall rioters, from generations of queer Detroiters. I'm just grateful to be able to carry the torch in a way that I think, honestly, truly honors my queer ancestry."

The world premiere of "round midnight//i got it bad (and that ain't good)" is set for Aug. 11-26 at Planet Ant's Black Box Theater (2320 Caniff St., Hamtramck). Ticket link at planetant.com.



Ryan Gosling and Margot Robbie in "Barbie." Photo: Warner Bros.

Just How Gay Is 'Barbie'? It Depends Who You Ask.

Apparently, It's At Least Queer Enough to Piss Off Conservatives

BY CHRIS AZZOPARDI

Let's face it: "Barbie" was going to be gay. Maybe not gay enough, according to some gays. Maybe too gay, according to anti-gays.

The fact is, this is a movie about Barbie, and wherever Barbie goes, some inherent queerness will go, too. As a kid, I remember wanting to be Barbie's best gay friend — I imagined we'd have some pretty fun sleepovers in her Dreamhouse. I also imagined some pretty fun sleepovers with Ken.

So now that "Barbie" is a splashy, pink-soaked blockbuster, director Greta Gerwig serves up a feminist fantasia in which a diverse group of Barbies, including several played by LGBTQ+ actors, reclaim their world from their Ken-ruling counterparts. As a gay boy led into gay adulthood by

strong women, I am on board with all that girl power in Gerwig's "Barbie."

I also appreciate that the film, starring Margot Robbie as the leading Barbie and Ryan Gosling as the leading Ken, is full of queer subtext that has sent right-wingers into a anti-queer meltdown because, god forbid, dolls should be for everyone. Fox News reported that a Christian news site "warns" that the film "forgets core audience" in favor of trans agenda and gender themes."

Let them have their bigoted feelings while the rest of us admire "Barbie" for what it is: a coming-of-age film that lets underdogs come out on top. Here are five queer things to love about "Barbie."

See **Barbie**, page 26



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Anthony Bowens. Photo: AEW

GAY IN THE RING

Pro Wrestler Anthony Bowens Heads to Michigan with Major Wins for Queer Visibility Under His Belt

BY CHRIS AZZOPARDI

Queer people everywhere are experiencing heightened discrimination, but if there's hope to be found, it might just be in, of all places, the wrestling ring. That's where Anthony Bowens recently experienced a tremendously heartening show of allyship during Pride Month, when the openly gay Black pro wrestler was showered with support from thousands of wrestling fans.

During an All Elite Wrestling (AEW) Rampage event in June, Bowens responded to QTV on-air personality Harley Cameron, who suggested that Bowens couldn't resist her if he tried, by telling her she must have been "kicked in the head too many times by a kangaroo" as a kid. It took her a minute to figure out what he was alluding to — that he's gay, ladies, and coupled with his boyfriend of seven years, Michael Pavano. Then, a full crowd

showed their solidarity with Bowens when they chanted "He's gay!"

Bowens, who came out as bisexual in January 2017 and then later as gay, made history in 2022 when he and Max Caster, a tag team in AEW (a rival of WWE) known as The Acclaimed, won the company's world tag team championship for the first time. The win made Bowens, 32, the first openly gay wrestler to win an AEW championship. His raw, tearful emotions were captured after their victorious moment on video, when Bowens offered hope to those struggling with who they are: "I never thought I'd be able to have a moment like this. I never thought I'd be able to live my dream because there was a time when I was very confused and I didn't know how to accept myself," he said at the time. "And now I cry because I'm a champion."

Before The Acclaimed appears at WrestleCon Aug. 4-5 at Huntington Place in Detroit, Bowens

spoke about being surprised by the recent pro-gay chant, his vastly different experience in the locker room these days and being the example he wished he had as a kid.

When I watch the "He's gay!" chant, it gives me hope for the queer community and for this next presidential election — maybe there are fewer homophobic people than I think.

It looks grim, but at the same time, it's not. A lot of people have humanity, they're human beings. They appreciate, respect and love other people. But that segment was something very unexpected because I had never approached it in that way before. My type of activism is, I show up and I am trying to be as visible and successful as possible and to try to lead by example. I've always been that way. When I played baseball, I was never the team captain,

but I was a team leader. I showed up, I played hard, I contributed, I supported everybody. They supported me. And then I go home. I figure that's just who I am as a person, and that's how I do it every single week on TV. I try to represent as best as I can.

But I also don't want to shoehorn anything. I want it to be something fun and something special. And when they presented that to me in this particular scenario, I was like, "Absolutely." This seems like the perfect time to do it. It was Pride Month. I didn't know how people were going to react. I thought it would just be like a "cool." But to have an entire arena chanting at you, "He's gay," in a positive way, it was so much fun. It was unexpected. But I think the aftermath of it was the best part because it touched so many different people. I was expecting it to be, excuse my language, a shitshow of just negativity considering what's been going on in the world.

So much positivity, so many messages from other athletes, from just other people in general that looked at that as a moment of hope for them. Something that I really didn't have when I was in the closet and trying to figure out my sexuality and trying to figure out if I had a space within professional wrestling if I came out. So I am honored that I could do something like that for other people. And hopefully it's something that will connect with them and they can understand that there are doors and avenues available to them to live your dreams, whatever that may be.

What are some of the reactions that you received after the chant?

A lot of gratitude and a lot of thank yous. Because no one's ever said it in a wrestling ring. No one just ever said it. And I found that, now that I think about it, kind of strange. I don't know if it's out of fear of what the reaction would be or if they just didn't want to cross that bridge, but it's like, "This is who I am." Everybody can be themselves in any other way possible every single week, so why can't I, and why can't everybody else?

So now that we've crossed that bridge, hopefully there's a lot more doors open for a lot more LGBTQ athletes in professional wrestling. We're in a lot better place than where we were when I first started, because there's a ton of open LGBTQ wrestlers out there. Some on television, a lot of thriving [ones] on the independents. So hopefully we continue to grow and get more in, because there are a lot more in other sports and entertainment.

Some wrestlers, like Nyla Rose, the first openly trans woman to sign with a major pro wrestling company, have been met with some vitriol. Wrestler Rick Steiner, for instance, went on a transphobic rant and was banned from WrestleCon. It seems you're having a different, more positive experience, but as somebody who's part of the community you must also be aware that not everyone's having that same experience.

Absolutely. I always say that I am lucky in the sense that I could navigate a lot of parts of life without worry, because sometimes people don't know, and other people don't have that privilege. If I give a piece of advice to somebody who may not be living in an area where being LGBTQ+ is welcome, that advice could potentially harm them. And I don't want to put anybody in that kind of position. So it gets to be very hard.

I can't speak to Nyla, I don't know what her experience is, but I do know that there are always horrible people out there. And I'm not clear from hate either, because two years ago in Long Island somebody was yelling out, calling me the F-word. I didn't hear it in the ring, but it came out over the broadcast and it caused a bit of a hoopla. But he got reprimanded, and I believe he was escorted out. A lot of people now are policing that when they hear stuff like that. There's plenty of independent shows where somebody's yelled out something homophobic, and fans are just like, "Get out. You're not welcome here."

Did you ever expect your "Scissor me, daddy ass" catchphrase would become the phenomenon that it has?

No. It's something that I said on a whim live on television. I just thought of it five minutes before I said it, and the next thing you know it just exploded. And I cannot believe the amount of scissors that people create themselves. They spend all night creating custom scissors to bring to the arenas, and we got the foam finger. It's crazy.

How much will scissoring play into your appearance here next weekend?

I think there will be a lot of scissoring next week. That's kind of one of the most fun things that Max and I and Billy [Gunn] get to do. It will just be Max and I at WrestleCon because Billy is retiring, but for the most part, we scissor everybody all day long. People, sometimes, they don't even want to talk to us. They just want to scissor.

What's your earliest memory of how you felt watching wrestling?

It was about the pageantry and the aura that it had around it. It's a different kind of energy and a different kind of vibe than any other form of entertainment. You have a live audience and you've got physicality, you have athleticism, you got millions of people watching you at home. You've got different characters, you've got storytelling. I loved everything about it. And did I know I was going to be a wrestler one day? No. Did I think it was possible? Also no, because I didn't know how. I just knew that I loved it, and it's just a very unique form of entertainment. When I started questioning my sexuality, there wasn't much to relate to in terms of what I was watching.

Did anyone help you feel that you could be a wrestler?

Really no one. Darren Young came out I believe in 2013, and I had just started wrestling then. Other than Darren, there wasn't anybody really, because a lot of times, anything that was remotely LGBTQ was used as comedic fodder. So there wasn't really much, which is all the reason why ... that's what kept me in the closet a lot longer. It drove me even more to be successful because I would like to be that example. And I'm fortunate enough to do that every single week now. The community needs somebody to look toward in this particular space.

Knowing your struggle, what did it mean to you when you became the first gay champion in AEW history?

It's mind-blowing. It was one of the best nights of my life, to be honest with you. The one thing that stood out after I won was, throughout all the confetti and all the people cheering, I was able to look up and somehow saw my dad cheering me on. It was a great night, and it meant a lot to me, and it meant a lot to a lot of people.

And I still have a ton more goals that I'd like to

See Anthony Bowens, page 24

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Anthony Bowens

Continued from page 23

achieve because there's never been a gay world champion, and hopefully one day. Max and I are doing a lot of cool things together as The Acclaimed; maybe we'll be a tag team forever, maybe there might be a time where we split off. I have no idea. But if that does ever happen, that's what I'm gunning for.

What does it mean to you to know that a younger LGBTQ+ generation is looking to you as an open door? How do you process that?

It means a lot because I may not have went through what other people have gone through, but what I went through was shitty. A lot of mental anguish, a lot of feeling like the weight of the world was on my shoulders. A lot of stress. A lot of fear, a lot of anxiety. I just wish I could go back and tell younger Bowens that everything will be OK. All I could do was cry. I didn't know what my future would be like. I'd pulled into my garage and I just sat in the car for 30 minutes and just wept. I felt like it was hopeless.

How old were you?

I was in college, probably about 18, 19 years old, maybe 20. I had a great support system around me, my friends and my family, but none of them can truly relate to what I was going through, none of them are LGBTQ. So it was a very, very rough time. But again, I wish I could go back and tell my younger self that. And also I hope that I could help people not feel that way. So hopefully this journey continues to connect and reach people across the world so they can feel a little less hopeless than I felt.

As a closeted gay kid, the locker room in school was one of the scariest places for me. For you, what is it like sharing a locker room with other wrestlers and being open about your sexuality?

I've had zero issues. I think that was one of the things that impressed me most about All Elite Wrestling before I signed — how inclusive the locker room was. We had [trans and genderfluid wrestler] Sunny Kiss there and Nyla Rose that were already contracted before I arrived. And it impressed me so much how much they walked around judgment-free, and they were just themselves. They weren't altering their personalities at all to fit in. They were just themselves. And I thought, "Wow, this is cool." So I've never had an issue with anybody on

the roster. I feel very comfortable. I was very comfortable talking about my personal life. I could talk about my boyfriend and about past experiences, and everyone welcomes it. And I don't feel out of place at all.

In the past, maybe when I first started wrestling in the independents 10 years ago, the locker room talk was very different [and it] would make me feel uncomfortable to even bring anything up.

You mentioned your boyfriend, Michael, who joins you on a YouTube channel called "Michael & Anthony," where you parody a lot of trash TV together. How did that start, and what is it like to work with your boyfriend?

The YouTube channel was actually kind of the catalyst to helping me come out in the first



Anthony Bowens. Photo: Joshua Shelton

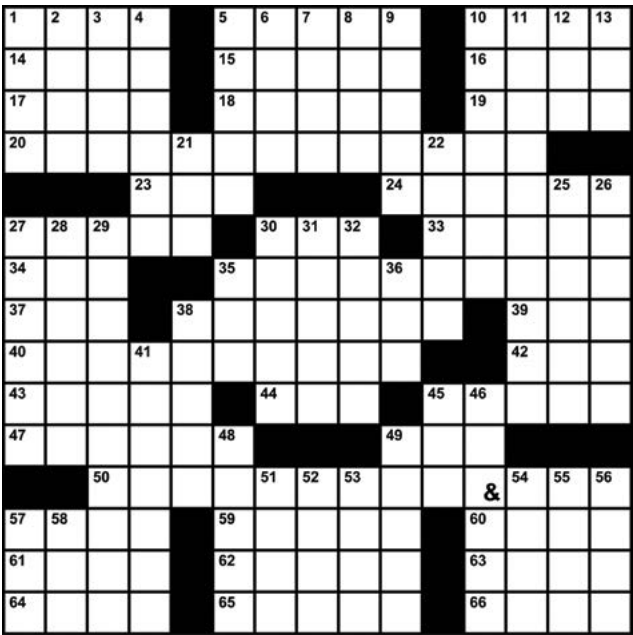
place. We made a little video back in 2016 that went viral and it helped grow the YouTube channel. We would do couples vlogs for a while. We just couldn't figure out what our niche was content-wise. And then the pandemic hit, and we were watching a show called "Love Is Blind." Michael's very good at impressions, and he was making fun of one of the people on the show, and he was like, "Why don't we make a parody of this and put it on YouTube?" And I was like, "That sounds fun. We have

nothing else better to do, we're stuck indoors." So we put that up and it got a million views. So we thought, "Huh, well this is maybe something that we should go to."

We've kind of backed off it a little bit. We're in here in Los Angeles, and he's really starting to get his acting career jump started. So he is really focused on that. And I've been traveling ridiculously. We just bought a home together.

Now that you've broken major ground with your career, what would you like to see as the next frontier in wrestling when it comes to visibility for queer people?

I think more representation in general in sports, because I think that would be the best thing for moving things forward. Because everyone, they love sports, they love soccer, they love football. It's such a massive thing. And if we had a lot more out successful athletes that are just proud of being themselves, and we can normalize this experience as opposed to it being this whole big ordeal of coming out and then, "Well, can they adjust?" Of course they can adjust. We're great athletes; we just happen to be gay or bi or whatever. It doesn't matter.



Lesbian Films,
Happy Endings

Across

- 1 Roddy McDowall's planet peers
- 5 Liberace's minks, e.g.
- 10 Cry before getting off
- 14 Byron poem
- 15 "Thou shalt not ___ adultery"
- 16 River of Michelangelo's land

Q Puzzle

- 17 Miss for Cole Porter
- 18 Send, as to a specialist
- 19 Winslet of "The Reader"
- 20 Korean swoon film of 2016
- 23 Frat hazing prop
- 24 Trial copies
- 27 Game with two men that are queens
- 30 Spot in Vegas
- 33 Black key for Elton John

- 34 Put the whammy on
- 35 Chinese swoon film of 2004
- 37 Dadaist Jean
- 38 His mother made him a heterosexual
- 39 Keep out
- 40 Swoon film trilogy of 2021
- 42 Fussy excitement
- 43 Jazzman Hines, contemporary of Billy Strayhorn
- 44 Playwright Albee and poet Field, for short
- 45 Rubbers on rims
- 47 Butterfly, to Bruce Hayes
- 49 Prince Valiant's boy
- 50 2005 swoon film about a bride and her orientation
- 57 Moby Dick chaser
- 59 Mushroom source
- 60 Cather's "One of ___"
- 61 Ballet skirt
- 62 Prada wearer
- 63 Java vessels
- 64 Is unlike Dorian Gray
- 65 Tennessee, but not Williams
- 66 Stadium level
- 8 "___ yellow ribbon ..."
- 9 "Take it off!"
- 10 Begin a journey with Earhart
- 11 Where healthy lesbians hang out
- 12 Earnings at gfn.com
- 13 One of "them"
- 21 Sympathetic sounds
- 22 Races like a queen?
- 25 Brave front
- 26 Pool parties?
- 27 Teases
- 28 Contract adverb
- 29 Gertrude Stein, for one
- 30 Frida's father
- 31 Covered with vines
- 32 Ethel Merman had a set of them
- 35 Get hard
- 36 Testacle, in slang
- 38 Port in the land of samurai
- 41 It has one more side than a triangle
- 45 Threesome for Marcella Hazan
- 46 1997 Kevin Kline flick
- 48 "Great Caesar's ghost!"
- 49 Stroll along
- 51 Skeptic's response
- 52 Blazing star
- 53 Do a nocturnal activity
- 54 Soviet leader Andropov
- 55 Writer Sarah ___ Jewett
- 56 Where to find a Russian river, once
- 57 One ___ time (no threesomes!)
- 58 Bear embrace?

See p. 17 for answers

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1. LGBTQ+ actors play the dolls

Queers actors are among those portraying the Barbies and Kens in Gerwig's *Barbie* Land. I'd say that's remarkable, but that kind of casting, where queer people are just in the mix of onscreen talent, should be the norm in *all* films. In "*Barbie*," it is, however, especially meaningful seeing the iconic but historically heteronormative dolls portrayed by openly queer actors (to be fair, no characters are straight or gay since dolls, according to Robbie, don't have sexual orientation because they all just have plastic nubs down there).

Scott Evans, who is Chris Evans' gay brother, is a Ken, while queer "Love, Simon" actress Alexandra Shipp plays a Barbie (excuse me, Dr. Barbie), and Kate McKinnon is "Weird Barbie," who emanates some real lesbian vibes (McKinnon herself is openly lesbian) particularly when she offers Robbie's Barbie some more practical, everyday footwear — those being Birkenstocks.

2. Ken's queer energy

It would be a shame to feature Ken as prominently as this film does without at least winking at the queer boys, such as myself, who loved him. Thankfully, this fact is realized in Gerwig's "*Barbie*," which suggests that Ken is both an object of desire for men, including other Kens, and that he may even be chasing Barbie for reasons that aren't exactly amorous in nature. Maybe Ken needs Barbie like Jack needs Karen?

The Kens in this movie, after all, are confused about who they should be, spending so much time proving their masculinity because they are convinced that is how they should act. That societal pressure alone is a familiar stress to any gay man, but "*Barbie*" does loosely put Ken somewhere on the spectrum of queerness, whether that be a quick cameo from Magic Earring Ken, modeled on gay fashion and also known



The Kens during a homoerotic musical moment. Note the colors are the same as the trans flag. Photo: Warner Bros.

as "Cock Ring Ken," or by showing Evans riding a horse stick in a way that doesn't exactly register as totally straight. Meanwhile, Gosling's Ken gets kissed on the cheek by two other Kens, including Evans, during a homoerotic ballet sequence that includes the lyric "put that manly hand in mine." He does not seem to mind.

3. Gender-neutral bathrooms

One of the most obvious displays of queer inclusivity in "*Barbie*" involves just a few

words spoken by Will Ferrell: "gender-neutral bathrooms." I nearly applauded when Ferrell, beloved for potty-humor comedies that surely attracts those who have issues with transgender people using whatever bathroom they want, was running down the list of what you'd find at the Mattel headquarters. At Mattel, people pick whatever bathroom best suits them. For one of the biggest films of the year to be given the stamp of approval from a giant corporation that makes products for children, some of the same kids these anti-trans bathroom bills affect, that's a small victory.

4. The Indigo Girls

When I first saw the trailer for "*Barbie*," I couldn't help but feel a sense of vindication for the Indigo Girls, whose work is often referred to in mainstream culture as "lesbian music" for the mere fact that duo Emily Saliers and Amy Ray are lesbians. Suddenly, here was Barbie, a beloved commercial figure, flipping the script on that stereotypical notion, driving her pink Corvette and belting out "Closer to Fine" as she leaves Barbie Land for the real world.

"You don't imagine a folk lesbian duo to be in this hot-pink Barbie movie," Tig Notaro

told Trish Bendix at The New York Times. "Kind of just selfishly and personally, I feel like, 'Yeah, we were onto something all these years,' you know? It's validating. Obviously it's been a huge hit forever, but this is so next level." Perhaps as a way to emphasize this union of commercial and queer culture, openly gay Grammy winner Brandi Carlile and her wife Catherine cover the song on the soundtrack's expanded edition.

5. Allan

Always an Allan, never a Ken. If Ken was the object of so many queer boys' affection, Allan was the doll many of us could relate to — when we weren't daydreaming about being Barbie, that is. Allan, portrayed by Michael Cera, is the awkward doll version of me at 13 years old, avoiding all the Kens at the bus stop while I exclusively shuffled between women artists on my Walkman. In "*Barbie*," Cera's Allan, who wears a crocheted button-down with colors that resemble a rainbow and whose body isn't tan and chiseled like the Kens, is right at home with the Barbies himself, not so much the Kens and all of their abs and swaggering machismo. For those reasons alone, Allan is the outsider in all of us.

“

Maybe Ken needs Barbie like Jack needs Karen?



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