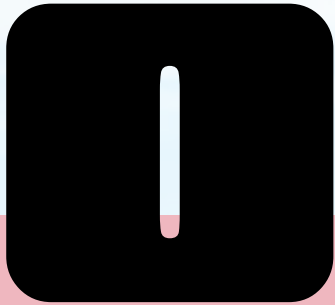


our lives



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FOOD & DINING

DIRECTORY: Local LGBTQ-owned & operated restaurant list

Madison's LGBT&XYZ Magazine

May/June 2022

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LGBTQ-owned destination dining spots that will help you get out of town and take in the sights, sounds, and flavors of small-town Wisconsin.

TERF WARS

A look at Madison's response to a weekend conference of anti-trans activists.

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A ROOM OF ONE'S OWN

How the institutional independent bookstore is settling into their new eastside home.

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OUT PROFESSIONALS

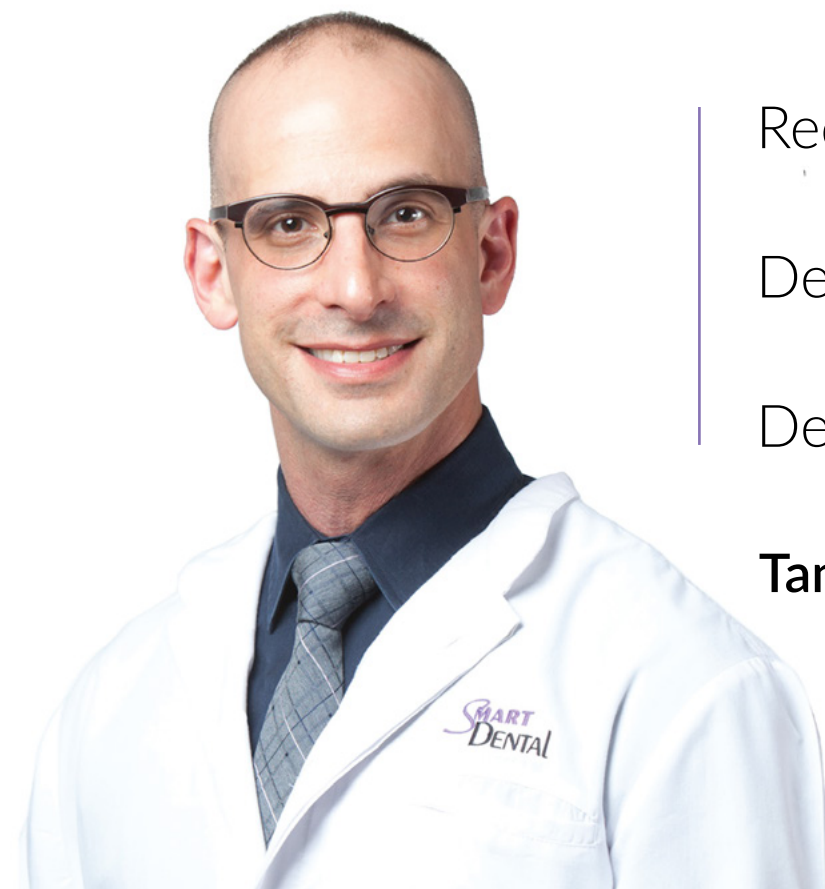
Learn about the next chapter of OPEN, the Out Professional Engagement Network.

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Melissa Pereira & Elizabeth Leda, Cymbeline, 2021. Photo by Liz Lauren.



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Madison's LGBT&XYZ Magazine

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PUBLISHER'S LETTER PATRICK FARABAUGH



FIRST ROE, NEXT OBERGEFELL?

AFTER THE DRAFT LEAKED from the supreme court this month showing the justices are prepared to overturn the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision, I was struck by a few things. First and foremost, shock at the loss of not just a civil right, but of loss of autonomy over one's own body. While the likelihood of this day felt inevitable, that did little to blunt the impact of the news.

Secondly, I was worried about the foreshadowing written into the language of the opinion. In it, Justice Samuel Alito attempts to establish the idea that any right not mentioned in the Constitution must be "deeply rooted in this Nation's history and tradition" to be recognized. It doesn't take a big leap to see that language as an effort to establish precedent that could easily be weaponized in an attempt to overturn *Obergefell v. Hodges*, the case in which SCOTUS ruled that the fundamental right to marry is guaranteed to same-sex couples. There have been a few cases already in southern states since the *Obergefell* ruling that have felt like attempts to put cracks in that decision, and if *Roe* does fall, I have to imagine that it would only be a matter of time before an emboldened right and a conservative SCOTUS would take aim at same-sex marriage.

I imagine for younger generations of cisgender queer people, this has been a sober awakening that our rights will always be up for debate and that perhaps the comfort some may have felt in a post-marriage equality culture has been premature. I doubt you'd need to

Multiple sidewalk boxes for *Our Lives* were hit with anti-transgender propaganda after a TERF conference in April. This has been chronic vandalism for years now.



tell that to the transgender community. When the outcry over the leaked draft started, I saw both in person and on my socials an avalanche of protest from local cisgender queer people. Almost everyone was framing it as a woman's right to choose. My thoughts immediately went to my trans friends, and everyone with uterus, because of the erasure framing it this way creates. How betrayed by their allies and friends they must have felt. While some in our community have been able to relax in a post-marriage equality world, our trans friends have still been deep in the fight and often pushed to the front of the political firing squads.

In April alone, Madison got another dose of aggressive transphobia when a local trans-exclusionary radical feminist (TERF) tried to organize a gathering at the Madison Public Library. It was inspiring to see the community organize a response to the TERFs' attempt to welcome hate in our home. The counter-protest was a beautiful display of community, from the bike ride to the MATA-organized Trans Joy event in Olbrich Park. I'm personally especially grateful to the folks in the community who helped identify and remove the anti-trans vandalism that happened to our sidewalk boxes downtown that weekend. Video shows that it was committed by three women who were attending the TERF conference.

In each issue I try to balance our struggles with our joy, and hope this issue in your hands is a reflection of that. I encourage you to read through, from Emily Mills' account of that weekend of protest, to the journey that drag legend Candi Stratton has been on in her transition. Both are valuable reflections on how far we've come, and how far we've yet to go. ■



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CORRECTION

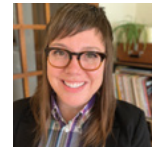
In our March issue we said that **Solace Friends** had raised \$50,000 last year. In fact, with donations from foundations, corporations, faith communities, and individuals they have successfully raised half of their start-up goal of \$500,000. ■

CONTRIBUTORS



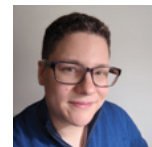
ANKITA BHARADWAJ (they/ them) is an Indian lawyer, legal scholar, and organizer who focuses on intersectional movement-building practices.

They serve on the police civilian oversight board of Madison and chaired the equitable hiring tool task force of the city of Madison. They host, produce, and write content of their WORT 89.9 FM show called "Subtle Desi Traits" which focuses on amplifying voices of South Asian, BIPOC, queer, immigrant folks, and women.



STACY HARBAUGH is a freelance writer and marketing specialist with over a decade and a half of experience in nonprofit communications and advocacy.

She is the Social Media and Community Specialist for designCraft Advertising where she supports the marketing and public relations efforts of local businesses and nonprofits. In her free time she hones her DJ skills by playing polka and vintage soul and pop records, and celebrates the cozier side of our community.



DOUG ROWE is a creative freelancer and holds an MS in Accountancy from the Wisconsin School of Business. They were introduced to peer-

to-peer storytelling-based activism after coming out at a young age and carried that experience into several years of service with Proud Theater. Doug has continued to use art and storytelling to humanize conversations about topics like incarceration, the harm of drug prohibition, depression, and being transgender.



MICHAIL TAKACH is a historian, author, reporter, and communications professional living in Los Angeles. He earned his master's in communications

and history at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. As a fifth-generation Milwaukeean, he supported various non-profit organizations over the past two decades, including Historic Milwaukee, the Milwaukee County Historical Society, the Walker's Point Association, the Brady Street Association, United Performing Arts Fund, and Milwaukee Pride, where he was communications director for 10 years. Michail is currently the curator of the Wisconsin LGBTQ History Project, a not-for-profit, all-volunteer, independent organization devoted to connecting local LGBTQ people with their hidden history and heritage.

The river gave me a message.
She told me it's gonna be okay.



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OBITUARIES



TOBY (RUTH), SIGLE SALDIVAR of Stoughton, WI, age 62, passed away on Friday, March 18 at St. Mary's Hospital in Madison, WI after a brief illness. At the time of her death, Toby was surrounded and comforted by family and close friends.



ROBERT "BOB" CLARK KARLS passed away on April 2. Bob was born on August 18, 1969 to Robert and Jean Karls in Binghamton, NY. Bob's family moved to Waunakee, WI when he was 16 and he called Wisconsin home ever since. He graduated from Waunakee High School and later attended the University of Wisconsin-Madison for his undergraduate degree. Following his graduation, he established a family and community of loved ones in Madison.

He dedicated the entirety of his professional career and over 30 years of service to the soybean farmers of Wisconsin, working tirelessly as an advocate for farmers here in Madison and in Washington, DC. Spearheading countless initiatives, research programs, and education campaigns, Bob truly left a lasting legacy, impacting the many people he worked with and Wisconsin agriculture as a whole.

Bob shared his life with his husband Doug and their cherished dog, Jack. Bob and Doug shared a passion for life and loved many things together, like traveling, cars, and their large group of close friends in both Palm Springs, CA and Saugatuck, MI. Bob was an incredible cook, who loved to entertain his friends and family.

Bob is survived by his husband Douglas G. Zander; step-children: Erica Meier (Jeff), Carrie Zander-Lancaster (John), James Zander (Ellen Weiler), and Meghan Zander; as well as his step-grandchildren: Lauren, Mason Meier, Evelyn Zander and Lyndon Belle Teasdale. He is also survived by his siblings: Jeannie Leibovitz (Mark), Maureen (Gary Kline), Bill Karls (Annie Levihn); and godson Max Levihn-Karls.

Bob's family and friends were the lights of his life. He loved them all dearly, as they did him. The legacy of Bob's loyalty, dedication to his career, and kind spirit will live on through them all. Bob will be missed, but surely not forgotten. ■

OUR READERS

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MILWAUKEE, WI

Jim Lautenbach

I'm celebrating a milestone birthday this year, one of the "new decade" ones that force you to check in and question: Have I done enough? Am I doing enough?

"Overwhelmed" is a word with which I identify. Overwhelmed with work and projects and details, yes. But also: Overwhelmed with inspiration. Overwhelmed with possibilities. Overwhelmed with gratitude. I am active in sports, I had a full life in theater and still dabble, and I'm a musician, a writer, and an artist. I work for the municipal government, where I'm blessed, very blessed, to direct my talents into things that enhance people's everyday lives. I yearn to be the very best at just one thing, but—OMG—which one?

I used to think coming out as a gay man was going to be my defining moment—but then I "came out" as HIV-positive, and then I "came out" as having Attention Deficit (had you already guessed?). I get to a place where it doesn't make sense to keep anything a secret anymore, and I see the uselessness of internalized shame. There is so much power in accepting yourself, as you are. And when we all support each other doing so—together, we fight stigma.

I believe the best part about being queer is that we seem to unlock a secret level where, upon accepting ourselves, the whole world is ours. Nothing holds you back when you break through what you thought was your greatest fear.

What I am working on most as I look to start my new decade is not being too overwhelmed that I miss the sweet, simple moments that, ironically, don't require any effort at all to enjoy: the embrace of a good friend when saying hi or bye, supportive check-ins from my family, cuddles with my pets, and time—the wonderful, precious, simple gift of time. I wish you many moments where you're overwhelmed with the richness of your life and the space to savor them in. ■



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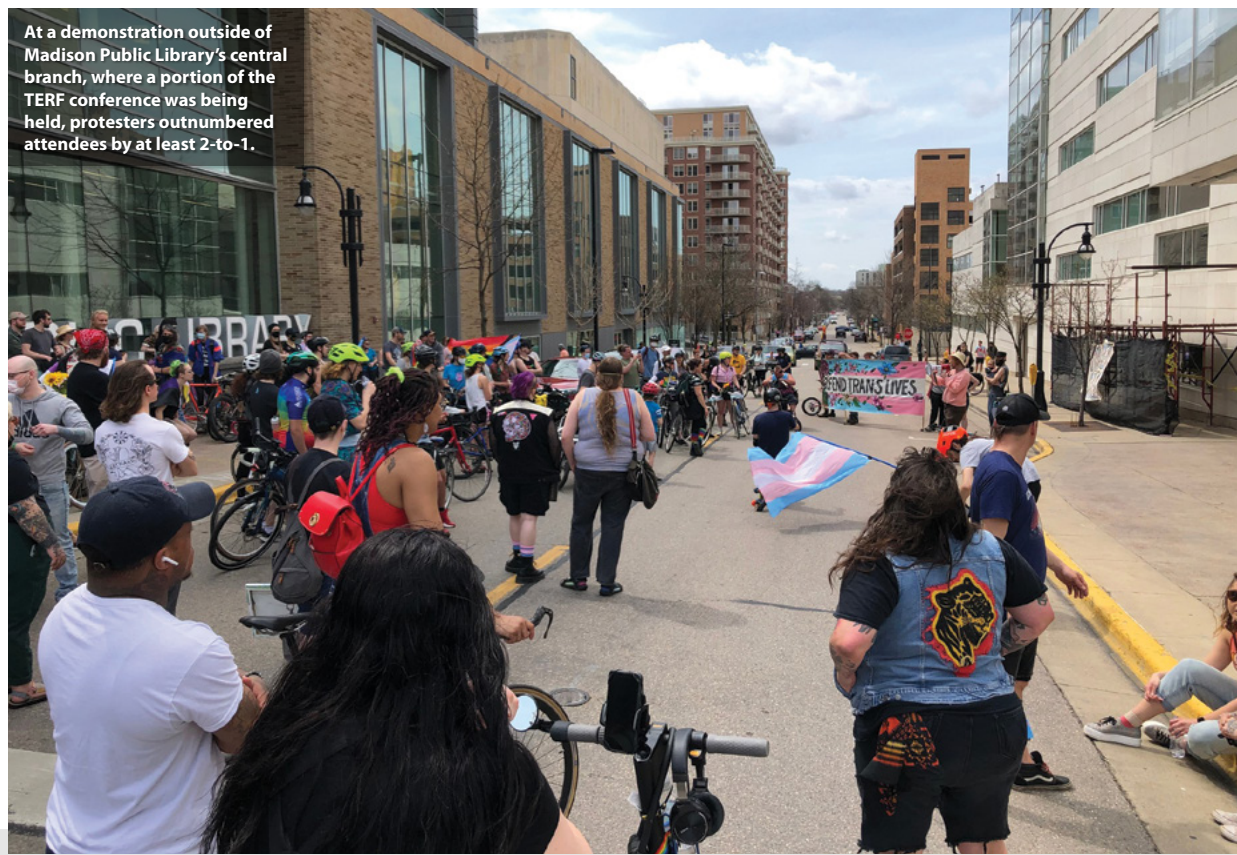


OUR NEWS

Leading News & Local Stories



At a demonstration outside of Madison Public Library's central branch, where a portion of the TERF conference was being held, protesters outnumbered attendees by at least 2-to-1.



Madison counter-programs the TERFs

Transgender people face increasing violence and oppression as the latest target of the far-right and its allies. Madison is no exception.

TRANS RIGHTS | MADISON PUBLIC LIBRARY | MADISON AREA TRANSGENDER ASSOC. | OUTREACH LGBT COMMUNITY CENTER

IN LATE APRIL, a gathering of self-professed “trans-exclusionary radical feminist” activists gathered in Madison for a weekend-long conference, called “Sisters4Sisters,” with the stated aim to “make Madison ours.” The mission has little to do with the aims of true feminism, which is an inclusive and intersectional fight for justice and against proscriptive gender norms. Instead, TERFs largely focus their ire on some of the most vulnerable members of society: transgender and nonbinary people.

The group was drawn here by the call-to-arms of ardent anti-trans musician, radio host, and organizer Thistle Petterson. Petterson has carved her niche in Madison through

the harassment and denigration of transgender people, all while styling herself a martyr to the cause whenever she experiences pushback from the community for her behavior.

Petterson’s actions have included everything from putting up anti-trans stickers in 2021 (an act for which she briefly faced criminal charges, due to video showing her targeting the sidewalk boxes privately owned by *Our Lives*) to hosting virulently anti-trans, anti-sex worker speakers on WORT’s Public Access hour in 2014, 2015, and again in 2018. In 2017, Petterson was dropped from a monthly music residency at the Crystal Corner Bar after members of the public informed the owners about her vocal bigotry. All

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of these are, Pettersen claims, proof that she is the oppressed party and the stated reason for the gathering in Madison.

Thankfully, the TERFs did not end up being the loudest voices in the room when they gathered over the weekend of April 22–24. A wide variety of activities were planned and held to support the transgender community, including protests, bike rides, educational offerings, and joyful gatherings.

The Madison Area Transgender Association (MATA), a program of OutReach LGBT Community Center, instead organized a Trans Day of Joy as a counterweight to the event. Held on Saturday, April 23, the event drew an estimated 400 attendees to Olbrich Park.

The event offered opportunities for local trans folks and allies to come together free of cost for food, resource tables, arts and crafts, a clothing swap, loteria, and community building.

“She said several times that the students in her school would not medically or socially transition under her watch,” El says. The principal of the school has since been notified.

“This event was absolutely amazing,” says Jill Nagler, Board President at OutReach and one of the organizers. “I overheard so many attendees talk about how overjoyed they were simply to be in community with other trans folks! People made friends and memories, and most importantly were able to be their authentic selves without fear. A lot of hard work from us volunteers went into this day, and it was more than worth it as we heard several attendees comment that they hope this becomes an annual event. And considering the success of the event it’s likely we’ll do this again next year!”

MATA was inspired to put together the event after many members of the trans community expressed interest in having avenues for both direct action and community celebration.

“While this event was primarily intended to be a space to celebrate trans voices, it also served as a demonstration that we will not stand for anti-trans rhetoric,” says James Van Abel, a MATA leadership team member. “When our mere existence is enough to cause rage in people like TERFs, then sometimes the most radical way we can respond is by existing loud and proud. We are going to de-center the TERFs and use our time to uplift the trans community.”

PROTESTERS OUTNUMBER TERFS, COME UNDER ATTACK

The other avenues for expression created by the community included a Critical Mass event, the Ride Against Hate, that saw dozens of people take to the streets on bicycles to fly trans pride flags and provide visible support. The bike ride planned by the TERF gathering that would have coincided with the Ride Against Hate was, ultimately, canceled.

At a demonstration outside of Madison Public Library’s central branch, where a portion of the TERF conference was being held, protesters outnumbered attendees by at least 2-to-1. That didn’t stop attendees from hurling abuse at the largely transgender and non-binary people gathered, including at least one case where an older woman demanded that a teenager pull down their pants to show their genitalia.

“It was a woman from Portland, and...for me it was extremely upsetting and sent me over the edge emotionally so that I needed to briefly walk away,” says El, who helped organize the demonstration. El says that the majority of the conference attendees appeared to have come from out of town. A notable exception, unfortunately, was Melissa Darling, who identified herself as guidance counselor at Allen Elementary in Milwaukee.

“She said several times that the students in her school would not medically or socially transition under her watch,” El says. The principal of the school has since been notified.

Later that afternoon, when conference attendees went to hold a rally at the Wisconsin State Capitol, they were met by protesters and again used conspiracy theories and transphobic and ableist rhetoric in their attacks.

“They had a PA and a long list of aggrieved speakers,” explains Jade, one of the protesters. “The members got increasingly aggressive as they hyped each other up and our numbers dwindled. It involved calling a lot of trans femmes ‘men’ and going around harassing trans people for their bodies. I was sexually assaulted around this time by a TERF that actively violated my boundaries to get on the ground and record me.”

Jade and other attendees also note that the accusations made by the TERFs closely echo the current, patently false fear-mongering that can be heard on FOX News and other right-wing platforms, accusing trans people of being pedophiles and “grooming” children.

Despite the physical and verbal attacks by the TERFs, activists stood up and did their best to both diffuse the situation and counteract the dangerous and false information being peddled.

“At one point, I attempted to provide semi-humorous running commentary on what they were saying to point out that they were ridiculous,” says Connolly, who came from Milwaukee to attend the protest. “Highlights included rattling off a list of hobbies that were better than being a bigot: blacksmithing, macramé, water polo, lawn darts, etc., and telling them ‘it’s never too late to stop being a bigot!’”

PUBLIC SPACES & FREE SPEECH

The decision by Madison Public Library to allow rental of its meeting space by the group was met with pushback, both externally and internally. Thanks to efforts led by the library’s LGBTQ employee group, Sequoya Library hosted an all-ages event that Saturday that featured the TRANScend storytime, an info fair, and a panel discussion that drew a crowd of over 100. The week prior, Central Library hosted the authors of *We Will Always Be Here: A Guide to Exploring and Understanding the History of LGBTQ+ Activism* in Wisconsin as part of the Wisconsin Book Festival (that event is archived for viewing online).

LGBTQ library staff and volunteers were also told that they were not required to work at Central Library the day of the meeting if they didn’t feel comfortable doing so, according to Tana Elias, MPS’s Digital Services & Marketing Manager.

Asked in advance about why the group was allowed to book the room at Central Library, Elias explained, “We consulted with the Department of Civil Rights and the City Attorney’s office, the latter particularly on the hate speech question. What we heard was that the First Amendment’s Freedom of Speech would take precedence over local ordinances. Additionally, they told us that hate speech is hard to prove legally. We relied on the City Attorney’s guidance, as well as our own meeting room policy, which is heavily informed by the American Library Association’s Bill of Rights and MPL’s commitments to freedom of speech.”

“While we’re allowing this group to rent the library space, we do not support the beliefs or stance of the group, and this is in no way a library event other than the space rental,” Elias added. “We value inclusivity, and we hope our track record of active collaboration with multiple community partners will demonstrate our commitment to the LGBTQ+ and particularly the trans communities in Madison.”

A BRUTAL WAVE

The issue is far larger than any one person or event. The conference came to Madison at a particularly dangerous time for transgender people and their rights at the local, national, and global levels. State legislators around

the country have proposed nearly 240 bills in 2022 alone that seek to take rights away from LGBTQ Americans. About half specifically target trans youth and adults, aimed at everything from banning participation in youth sports to prohibiting needed medical care, often under criminal penalties.

In Texas, Attorney General Ken Paxton and Gov. Greg Abbot colluded to pass an executive order targeting parents and other caregivers of transgender children by labeling all trans-specific care as “abuse.” That move has already resulted in agents from Child Protective Services showing up at people’s homes and threatening to take children away from loving parents.

In Wisconsin, a slate of anti-LGBTQ bills only met their end when the clock ran out at the end of the Legislative session, and/or thanks to the assured use of the veto pen of Democratic Gov. Tony Evers. Public hearings on legislation ranging from banning transgender kids from playing sports, preventing the teaching of anything LGBTQ-related in public schools, to trans medical care bans were filled with passionate and often emotional voices of opposition. Unfortunately, few (if any) of the Republican members of those committees seemed interested in truly listening.

It is a perfect storm of fear, misinformation, and hate-mongering aimed at a community that has long faced disproportionate rates of vio-



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lence, misunderstanding, and oppression. That storm relies on some of the very same lies and tropes that were once (and sometimes still are) used against gay and lesbian people. Which is why it is startling that the anti-trans forces include members of the LGB community, and those who claim to be “radical feminists.”

Perhaps unsurprisingly, most of the loudest-spoken TERFS—or the newer label, “gender critical” (GCs)—are white, cisgender women and men. A significant part of the misplaced hatred toward trans people arguably stems from racism and white supremacy, right alongside misogyny. The anti-trans movement contains the potent mix of that hatred and distrust of Black people with the idea that women—especially white women—need protection from men.

Meanwhile, Black and Latine trans women experience horrifyingly high and disproportionate rates of violence and murder. Transgender people are over four times more likely than cisgender people to experience violent victimization, including rape, sexual assault, and aggravated or simple assault. By daring to live authentically and break oppressive gender norms and roles, transgender people are far more likely to face “corrective” violence from patriarchal forces than to benefit from them.

A NETWORK OF HATE

One of the elements that makes the movement against transgender people so strange and so potent, then, is this tale of strange bedfellows: anti-trans women’s and lesbian’s rights groups joining forces with traditionally anti-LGBTQ, anti-choice, anti-women’s rights organizations.

Petterson is the founder of the anti-trans Women’s Liberation Radio News, as well as a

“When our mere existence is enough to cause rage in people like TERFs, then sometimes the most radical way we can respond is by existing loud and proud.”

member of the virulently anti-trans Women’s Liberation Front (WoLF). WoLF claims to be a “radical feminist” group focused on lobbying for pro-choice legislation and women’s autonomy, though there’s little evidence of efforts on either front. Instead, the group is almost exclusively focused on fighting against transgender rights, going so far as to partner with a far-right, anti-choice, anti-LGBTQ group called Family Policy Alliance to create an anti-trans guidebook for parents. They also co-signed a countersuit to Gavin Grimm’s Title IX suit to allow fair access to bathroom facilities in schools (which he won), among other anti-equality efforts.

WoLF also accepted a \$15,000 grant from Alliance Defending Freedom, a well-funded, evangelical Christian non-profit law firm which “seeks to recover the robust Christendom theology of the 3rd, 4th, and 5th centuries.” The organization was founded by James Dobson, who also founded the wildly anti-LGBTQ Focus on the Family, and Alan Sears, author of *The Homosexual Agenda: Exposing The Principal Threat To Religious Freedom Today*. The Southern Poverty Law Center has designated ADF as a hate group. ADF is also directly involved in anti-trans litigation against the Madison Metropolitan School District, in partnership with the right-wing lawsuit factory Wisconsin Institute for Law and Liberty (WILL). In addition, Petterson’s anti-trans activism has earned her some sympathetic

attention from Wisconsin’s leading right-wing think tank, the MacIver Institute.

Notable, too, is that many of the anti-LGBTQ and specifically anti-trans bills being peddled across the country are near carbon copies of one another. Florida’s recently passed “don’t say gay” bill has clones in several other states, including Wisconsin. Bans on trans health care and sports participation are similarly almost identical across the board.

The American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), along with a host of far-right organizations are largely behind the creation of the “model legislation” showing up in statehouses across the country. It’s part of a coordinated effort to roll back civil rights and shift power back to a white, male-dominated, Christian extremist America.

And this network is not limited to the United States. Across the pond in the United Kingdom, transphobia is perhaps even more mainstream, with regular platforms in most of the major media outlets.

FIGHTING BACK

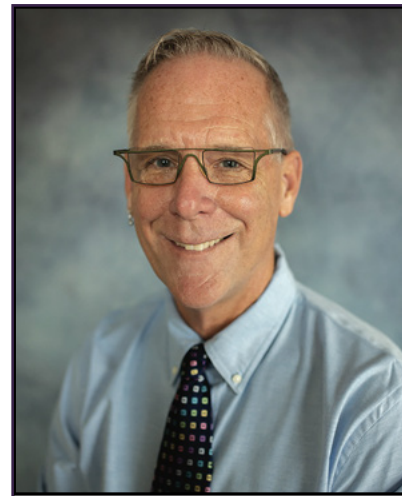
Despite the bleak-seeming legal landscape, transgender and non-binary people are finding new ways to organize, advocate, and thrive. More Americans than ever now say they know someone who is transgender, and the number of Americans who say greater rights for trans people is a good thing has also gone up—though this issue remains divided by political ideology.

Trans people are winning elected office, starring in and creating movies and television, leading businesses, innovating industries, helping to shape better and more inclusive laws, building radical mutual aid networks, and expanding the possibilities for what it means to be human.

For the transgender and non-binary community as a whole, grassroots organizing has generated everything from support groups to sticker campaigns to performance spaces and more. Shepherd Janeway, a non-binary arts teacher, stepped up to run for Madison School Board after the only initial candidate to file was a well-known anti-trans activist, Mary Jo Walters. (Janeway lost to another candidate who threw her hat in to run later on).

“I’ve always been someone who believes very firmly that we have an individual responsibility to do everything we can to ensure that the people who come after us have a better place to be than the place that we entered,” Janeway told Channel3000. By stepping up in such a wide variety of ways, trans and non-binary people—and their allies—are aiming to do just that.

Note: Those quoted under a single name chose to use nicknames in order to avoid further harassment and doxxing, tactics often used by TERFs to threaten and silence trans people and their allies who stand against their hate. ■



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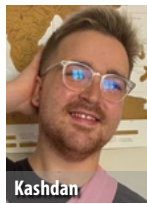


NEWS BRIEFS

WRITTEN BY STACY HARBAUGH & DON SCHWAMB

MIDDLETON HIGH SCHOOL TEACHER CRITICIZED FOR DRAG PERFORMANCE AT STAFF TALENT SHOW

A FRENCH TEACHER at Middleton High School was the target of anti-gay critics after he performed in drag at a staff talent show in early April. In a blue-sequined dress



and purple wig, his high-energy lip sync of “Rain on Me” by Lady Gaga and Ariana Grande was neither racy nor suggestive.

However, the teacher soon became the target of right-wing critics.

Matthew Kashdan, who also performs in Madison drag shows as Jamie Jaffery, told the *Cap Times* that he expected some level

of criticism for his performance. After someone shared a video of his performance with conservative talk show host Vicki McKenna, the right-wing media’s criticism spread across the state and beyond.

The director of information and public relations for Middleton High, Shannon Valladolid, told the *Cap Times* that the school received messages of support for Kashdan, but also received several dozen messages of opposition from both parents and individuals from outside of the school’s community. The school administration intends to screen future staff performances.

Kashdan stands by his choice to perform in drag despite being surprised at how quickly it received

negative attention. He believes that having a pride flag in his classroom and performing in drag are important acts of visibility and equality for LGBTQ+ people of all ages. He describes the reaction from students, teachers, and administrators as being extremely positive. Students passed him notes of support and posted, “We stand with Kashdan” signs.

Before the controversy, Kashdan was already planning to resign from his teaching position in Middleton. He described the negative reaction to the staff talent show as an interesting journey in which right-wing critiques of everything from critical race theory to pride flags and non-discrimination against transgender athletes in sports so quickly became a personal issue.

He emphasized that drag is a valid art form that belongs in schools and libraries in events like Drag Queen story time.

“LGBT MILWALKEE” TO HIGHLIGHT WHERE OUR HISTORY HAPPENED

ONE OF THE CHALLENGES of teaching LGBTQ history is that so little of the built environment remains. From taverns to community centers, from theaters to hotels, from single blocks to entire neighborhoods, much of Milwaukee’s queer history has been lost to the wrecking ball, eliminating their sense of place and space. Sadly, there are no historical monuments or sidewalk markers honoring LGBTQ people, places or events anywhere in Wisconsin.

As a result, it is easy to feel like our community has no historical anchor. That is, until now!

Dr. Brice Smith, author and historian, was inspired by the 2021 Black Nite Commemoration to create something new for the community. Instead of bringing

people to museums, libraries, or even websites to learn about history, why not bring them into the streets—where the history happened?

LGBT MilWALKee launched in January 2022 as an independent organization. Partnering with the Wisconsin LGBTQ History Project, Wisconsin LGBT Chamber of Commerce, Tall Lady Productions, and Wise Owl Productions, LGBT MilWALKee will launch a walking tour app on June 2 with two fully rendered tours and 20 tour sites. Each tour site will have a short documentary video telling the story of what happened



there, including photos, articles, and memorabilia. Future tours are already in development and will be launched on an ongoing basis.

LGBT MilWALKee is currently seeking funding to continue its mission. Donations are accepted at the project GoFundMe page—and all donors of \$100+ will receive special recognition on the app site. In addition, fiscal agent FORGE will accept tax-deductible donations to advance the cause.

Dr. Smith, founder and owner of LGBT MilWALKee, shares with the Wisconsin LGBTQ History Project why he is bringing history to life this summer.

What inspired you to launch this?

Last year, the August 5 commemoration event brought so many of us together, in honor of the people who rose against homophobia at the Black Nite, and the woman who led it. But we were standing in an empty lot that had been empty for 60 years. It made me think about our history,

in general, and how easily it can all be wiped away, and how many people have tried to render us invisible for so long by eliminating public spaces and denying historical records. Oftentimes, it can leave people feeling like they’re standing in the empty lot, with no one around to connect with, and no one who can alleviate the loneliness.

There are so many ways we can share history, through the gift of technology, especially all the history that has been reclaimed in recent years. It is an exciting way of connecting the past with the present, the virtual with the tangible, the community with the individual. By creating the app, I wanted to amplify these stories and reach new audiences. One example: during the Black Nite Brawl, the Mayor of Milwaukee shared that he had lived in Milwaukee his entire life, driven past the empty lot every day, and had no idea that anything historically significant had ever happened there. This really struck me. We are all better the more we know about our history. But it all comes with knowing, and so few do.

We may not be able to rebuild the Black Nite or relive the Black Nite Brawl. But we can keep its story alive.

Any surprises as a first-time app producer?

Everything has been a bit of a surprise because I have never done this before! This is pure entrepreneurship. I did not have a roadmap to do what I wanted to do. Every now and then I ask myself, “Whose bright idea was this, anyway?” But you know, seeing everyone’s excitement about the project has been really inspiring. It’s been one of my greatest motivators. I knew this was the time to do it, we just needed to

figure out how to make it happen. One of my surprises—or more like a lesson learned—is that all this interest and excitement does not translate immediately into funding. I am still trying to figure out how fundraising works. We are on track to have the sites ready for Launch Day. Now, it is all about the funding, so we can continue to scale and grow!

We understand the entire project team is LGBTQ-identified. Why is it important for our community to tell our own stories?

There were actually several goals for this project. One, was to create an app and share our history in a cool new way. Two, was to amplify the existing historical work. Third, I wanted to promote LGBTQ friendly businesses. Last but not least, I wanted to highlight the talents of Milwaukee’s LGBTQ community. Yes, everyone on our team actively identifies as LGBTQ, and I thought it was important that they did so. I hope to invite more work for these talented people.

History is ultimately facts and figures, but there’s also the other side: storytelling. Human beings have been telling stories since the cave dweller era. But our history was always in the hands of people outside our community. Our existence went from being denied, to being debated, to being outlawed, to being underground, to finally being recorded. If not for the arrests of our elders, we would not have known we had elders. If it were not for the gay press operating “bar rags,” we would not know where those bars were! Average LGBTQ life was not documented, only the sensationalized experiences of “criminals.” And it was never us, recording our lives, on our own terms.

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gay and lesbian history until 25 years after Stonewall! It is unbelievable.

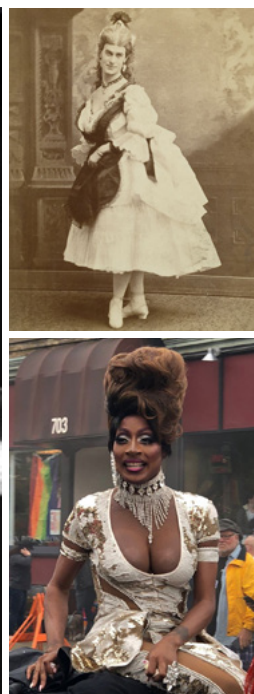
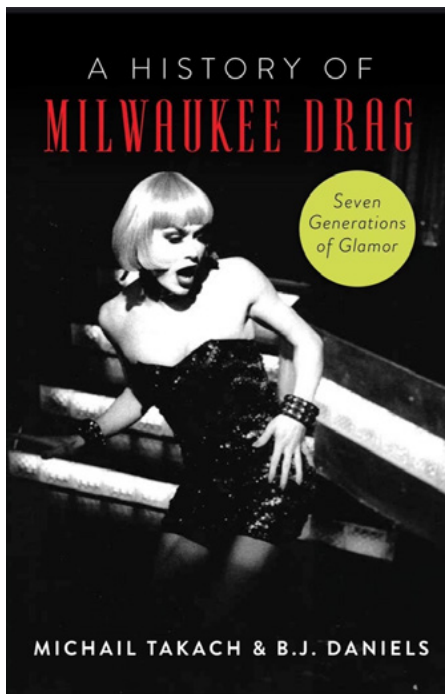
We need to reclaim our own story in every way. We have a lot of catching up to do.

Are you surprised Milwaukee has such a colorful and well-documented LGBTQ history? Is this unusual for a city of our size?

There is something very special about Milwaukee. I was not born here, but I chose here. I moved here 20 years ago for graduate school. The very first time I came here, I was struck by what a special place it was. Growing up out west, I knew nothing about Milwaukee than Laverne, Shirley, and beer! When I visited, it was amazing. I just loved everything about it. The lake looked like an ocean. The Cream City brick buildings. Genuinely kind, down-to-earth, helpful people. I loved Milwaukee the first time I visited.

Milwaukee became home because this is where I was able to become the man I am today. I was able to realize the dreams I have always had. While researching someone who came before me, Lou Sullivan, I was able to identify as a trans man, and learn through his thoughts and experiences. I would not have had this experience if he had not come before. This is really the power of history.

Something else I love about Milwaukee: we are progressive but not pretentious. Even during the gay liberation movement, we were making progress that even



coastal cities had not done yet. We have a long history of heroism rooted in charity, thoughtfulness and inclusion. I do not know that we have more history than other cities, but we have become experts in reclaiming and documenting our past. Why? Because of the love we have for our city and each other.

What do you say to researchers in other cities who want to start a similar app?

Don't just tell the history like a textbook would tell it. Tell the unique stories of your state: the sordid stories, the colorful stories, the outrageous stories! Tell what is different about you and your people. What we are is so important to who we are. Tap into who you are and create something uniquely yours. I know we will!

"MILWAUKEE DRAG: SEVEN GENERATIONS OF GLAMOUR" DEBUTS JUNE 27

DID YOU KNOW Milwaukee has 140 years of drag history? Since the first drag show on June 7, 1884, Milwaukee has been an incubator for world-famous drag talent even while other cities banned female impersonators and drove cabarets out of business.

For the first time ever, we have a complete history of seven generations of our colorful local talent, thanks to committed co-authors B. J. Daniels and Michail Takach. Milwaukee Drag, their second published book, will be released on June 27. Preorders are now available at Amazon.com.

What can readers expect from the book? B. J. Daniels shared an inside glimpse with the Wisconsin LGBTQ History Project.

Wisconsin LGBTQ History Project: You have been a performer, artist, stylist, fashion icon and more for over 40 years. What was it like to write your first book?

I have always had dreams to be an author—and what better way than to reach into my own life! My approach to the work was to really question how drag became so embedded in the fabric of

Milwaukee life.

Revisiting the Golden Age of Drag had to be very emotional. What memories sprang out of your mind onto the page during the creative process?

It is difficult to go down memory lane, especially with all the losses. Some who are no longer here have helped define the work of so many others, so the tradition continues. It really became apparent to me that drag was a launch pad for many people in the book. Whether to live their life as their authentic self, or achieve other, greater things in their lives outside drag. Drag was just the beginning.

Wisconsin LGBTQ History Project: What is the most important message of the book?

The most important of all messages is that we have always been here. Those who stood outside of societal norms have always found connection with people searching for someone like themselves. Drag has inspired many people of all walks of life through its unabashed presentation of self.

The book covers seven generations of drag. Where will the eighth generation take it from here?

The eighth generation of drag will be unshackled by convention of any kind. However, given the political climate today, the new generation will likely be fighting for the same freedoms their predecessors long ago won.

Why's it important for drag to be seen?

As a post Stonewall person, I honestly did not understand what went before and the struggle that allowed me to be who I am. Ah, youth. But after AIDS and the 1980s, I knew it was so important for upcoming generations to know about what has come before. It gives them the same sense of history that straight folks have always had in school, at home, in church, and everywhere. I knew that I wanted to be a part of telling the truth about LGBT history from a first-hand perspective.

88NINE RADIO MILWAUKEE LAUNCHES LGBTQ HISTORY PODCAST MAY 23

HISTORY IS RARELY anyone's favorite class. However, the Wisconsin LGBTQ History Project has been working with 88Nine Radio Milwaukee to make our history as relatable, accessible, portable and more enjoyable than ever!

"Be Seen," a six-episode season of LGBTQ history lessons, will launch on Monday, May 23. Episodes will be available on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, and all major podcast networks. The podcast presents some of the most frequently asked questions about the local LGBTQ community, answered by members of our own community. With a hyperlocal focus, the podcast is guaranteed to separate the facts from the folklore and leave every listener knowing something new.

Nate Imig, 88Nine Radio Milwaukee content director, shared the vision for the project in an interview with the Wisconsin LGBTQ History Project.

You've been entertaining and educating Milwaukee with local-first podcasts for years. What was it about LGBTQ history that appealed to you and 88Nine?

We are humbled you noticed! We are celebrating our 15th birthday, and one of the ways we are marking the occasion is to expand our podcast offerings. Earlier this year we expanded our "Community Stories" program, previously a short-form on-air segment, to a full-length weekly podcast called "Uniquely Milwaukee."

What's the most surprising lesson you have learned about Milwaukee LGBTQ history during the creative process? Whose stories have really resonated with you—and whose stories do you wish all of Milwaukee knew?

Our first episode centers on a nonbinary individual named Josie Carter who led the first LGBTQ uprising in Milwaukee. This pre-Stonewall event occurred near downtown Milwaukee in 1961, at one of the city's most popular gay bars. When a group of violent sailors attacked the bar, Josie led

patrons to defend the bar and, more broadly, their right to exist in a queer space.

This was a story I first learned about, thanks to the History Project, on its 60th anniversary in 2021. For the podcast episode, we



are revisiting a rare interview with Carter and author and historian Dr. Brice Smith, as well as speaking directly with Smith as

one of the only people to formally interview the late activist and performer in her lifetime.

History Project: Do you think this podcast has the power to reach and affect people who might not otherwise engage with LGBTQ content?

I hope all of Wisconsin—and beyond—feels invited to listen to this podcast. Our goal is to illuminate Wisconsin's LGBTQ history and include all audiences. Wisconsin's LGBTQ history is all our history, and we encourage everyone to learn about it. To that end, Radio Milwaukee will promote the podcast across all platforms, including on the FM signal. Radio Milwaukee listeners are naturally curious and empathetic, so we hope this content will be of interest both to our broad audience, and especially to our LGBTQ community. I hope the community feels proud to see our stories represented.

What can listeners expect in season 1, and what will it take to get a season 2?

Season one will include six history lessons featuring important Wisconsin LGBTQ milestones and events. We will take listeners to a few of Wisconsin's oldest and most significant queer spaces, we will talk about the arrival of HIV and AIDS in Milwaukee and how the community responded, plus we will explore decades of Milwaukee's drag history. Each of the six episodes will be available on Radio Milwaukee's platforms, as well as through the Wisconsin LGBTQ History Project's social media pages. ■

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Welcome to the Gayborhood

After being an institutional downtown business for generations, **A Room of One's Own Bookstore** has set up shop on the eastside and used the move as a catalyst for some restructuring to strengthen and advance their mission.

IN RESPONSE to the tumult of the past few years, many businesses look different now than they did in 2019. This is true for Madison's beloved A Room of One's Own Bookstore, formerly a downtown staple and now a loud and proud member of the eastside's Atwood neighborhood. Their old location a victim of the seemingly endless development downtown, Room is back, open for browsing, and better than ever.

Their move wasn't exactly smooth sailing, however. Emptying a vast store full of books was hard enough, dealing with construction in a new

location and moving during a pandemic meant delays and stress. Meanwhile, orders flooded in from locals and people from all over the country as Covid kept many people still at home and the store closed to browsing. But Gretchen and Wes, the co-owners of the store, didn't dwell on those hardships and were instead ready to move forward with all the possibilities their new store, location, and national reach will allow.

The new location was a bit of a blank canvas, and the staff were able to highlight new sections based on current trends and collective interests such as labor and organizing, abolition, sex work, and disability studies as well as a reimaged queer fiction section. Gretchen clarified that these new highlighted categories were not meant to separate those stories out, but rather provide an easier browsing experience that provides access to the stories we're all hungry for. This was a deliberate use of their smaller space, and they intend to move forward with an eye for tighter curation.

The new Room also has significantly fewer used books than the old store. They simply no longer have room to store used books that will sit for years, and hope to use their connections with other bookstores around the country to pull in used books that the community wants. New book ordering has also gotten a makeover, as they now focus more on intentional, diversified ordering, and having staff members with different areas of expertise "sponsor" different sections. Recent examples of how

that has changed the make up of what is sold include a new Zine section, currently the only one in Madison.

The other big change is that now A Room of One's Own is in a neighborhood. While they are still on a main thoroughfare, they are no longer in an area that is difficult and uninviting for pedestrians. This has shifted their customer base to one of families with children, and they have responded with a larger, more interactive children's section. It has also allowed them to start imagining a patio space in the back for events, and to start thinking more about how to connect and be a part of the larger Madison community. Caide Jackson, the events coordinator, is excited to start hosting events as Covid becomes more predictable and manageable. Zine making, poetry nights on the patio, and Tiny Desk at Room events, a riff on the very popular Tiny Desk Concerts from NPR.

Room also now has an organization relationship manager, a position meant to bolster Room's local and national presence, and further their advocacy. How they further that advocacy depends on the organization. For educational institutions and libraries, such as the Madison Reading Project, the folks at Room might be asked to recommend new LGBTQ and BIPOC reading geared toward children, or might involve helping them receive wholesale discounts with tight budgets. For others, the advocacy is strictly money and fundraising, as is the case for LGBT Books to Prisoners Project and Wisconsin Books to Prisoners Project. Gretchen emphasized being thoughtful as a business to continue to "grow and change in Madison and beyond." They also said that they want to continue speaking against injustice and being outwardly abolitionist and anti-racist in all that they do as a business owner and as a person. While that has brought the store more business (after an initial drop when they decided to lean in and become more vocal through the store), Gretchen emphasized that it was more important to them that they "can sleep at night."

As their advocacy and community work extends out to the neighborhood and nation, Gretchen and Wes also have prioritized a culture of listening to and working with their employees to create a work environment where everyone feels safe and valued. This is especially evident with their Covid protocols. When many stores were reopening to the public, Room stayed shut, even if that meant fewer sales, and have continued to require masking and have set a limit on how many people can be in the store at a time. As Covid wanes, Gretchen and Wes aim to continue to move forward as a group, and they work hard with their employees to build a better culture within. Caide confirmed that they all support one another, and that she has herself benefitted as someone who came in with imposter syndrome and a difficulty in reading for fun. She has learned to love books during her time at Room and laughed that she even loves their employee group chat, a sentiment not often shared in the modern workplace.

All that is to say, A Room of One's Own has been a fixture in Madison for a long time, and now with a new location, a 20-year lease, a better work culture, and increased advocacy, they are poised to become a real pillar in our community and a powerful force for progress, tolerance, and social justice. And they will do so with exuberantly queer joy. ■



Room co-owners Wes Lukes and Gretchen Treu.

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OPEN-ing Up

Since its founding in 2008, **OPEN** has worked to advocate for LGBTQ+ people in Madison-area workplaces. The organization shares how, coming out of the pandemic, it is ready to further that work, expanding what it means to be a professional.

IT CAN BE CHALLENGING to find LGBTQ2S+ professionals in the Madison area. OPEN, or Out Professional Engagement Network, is a welcoming space for our community to connect and build relationships.

"OPEN is the first public space where I came out as transgender," said Jacy Imilkowski (she/they). "I didn't realize that I was transgender until 2021, and I was reserved about being more public, especially in professional spaces. When I engaged with OPEN as a newly out trans person, I felt completely safe and welcome. The president, Heidi Duss, was one of the first non-family members that I came out to about being trans. The support and acceptance I felt was so valuable to me."

In order to be our whole, authentic selves, we need acceptance in our personal and professional lives. A 2019 Human Rights Campaign Foundation study found that nearly two thirds (59%) of non-LGBTQ employees think it's

"unprofessional" to discuss sexual orientation or gender identity in the workplace. There can be a double standard when straight employees talk about their families at work. Something as simple as having pictures of your family on your desk could threaten your career. One-fifth (20%) of LGBTQ Americans have experienced discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity when applying for jobs, and that number increases to 32% for people of color, according to a 2017 NPR study, *Discrimination in America: Experiences and views of LGBTQ Americans*.

STRIVING TO BE AN ORGANIZATION FOR MARGINALIZED PROFESSIONALS IN ALL CAREERS

Challenges face our community at every turn, and even in marginalized spaces, hierarchies can unfortunately still appear. OPEN knows that cis, white men tend to be the most visible in spaces, especially "professional" ones. We're striving to include all queer folx and center the perspectives of BIPOC and trans people, women, disabled folx, and other marginalized identities within our community.

"It's important that we are engaging with all individuals and voices in the LGBTQIA2S+ community," said Heidi Duss (she/they), OPEN board president. "We want members to not only feel included, but a sense of belonging—a place where, no matter how you identify or where you are at



OPEN board and members at an event at Giant Jones Brewing.

in your journey, you can show up authentically."

OPEN started as a grassroots effort by Madison-area LGBT leaders 14 years ago. Originally named "Out Professional Executive Network," the group repositioned itself to "Out Professional Engagement Network" to intentionally include everyone in the workforce.

OPEN members are redefining what it means to be a professional. Oftentimes, trying to be professional affects our appearance, behavior, educational background, and job title. OPEN re-

A 2019 Human Rights Campaign Foundation study found that nearly two thirds (59%) of non-LGBTQ employees think it's "unprofessional" to discuss sexual orientation or gender identity in the workplace.

jects this concept of professionalism as it relates to systems of patriarchy, racism, and elitism. Instead, we see everyone who shows up and engages in a career as a professional. Whether you are working in hospitality, health care, arts, trades, retail, administrative, education, or beyond, you are a professional, and we welcome you at OPEN.

FORWARD CHANGE

OPEN's work toward a diverse, inclusive community continues. It will grow with the help of professionals like you.

In 2021, OPEN launched our online community, a space to share resources, network, and build friendships. "The online community is a more private and safe space to share experiences, give relevant referrals, open up discussions, and be social. It's user-friendly, organized, and serves more like a headquarters for OPEN. I appreciate that OPEN is creating a virtual space accessible for everyone," said OPEN Member KB Bjerk (they/them).

Building this space takes community. We welcome diverse perspectives, experiences, and identities to join the effort. We need your input to deliver programming and services that will help engage, empower, and advance LGBTQIA2S+ voices in the workplace. Additionally, students looking to find a network to help them land an internship or career following graduation, as well as retirees who want to help mentor and share their career insights are welcome! Become a member at openmadison.org today for just \$10 a month.

LGBTQIA2S+ organizations and allied workplaces can use their resources and influence to help further OPEN's mission of inclusivity and advance LGBTQIA2S+ equity in the workplace. Email us at info@openmadison.org to discuss sponsorship opportunities. ■

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TRANSGENDER BLACK MARKET BODY WORK BODY DYSPHORIA DRAG

A Hard Lesson in Transition

After surgery to remove her black market body work, local and national drag legend **Candi Stratton** speaks out against the medical black market and the culture that entices marginalized transwomen into it.



delivered their numbers out in the audience. This worked especially well for Divine, who began her national nightclub circuit here with a weeklong run. The space had previously been owned by actress Barbara Eden, who visited La Cage once while Candi was working.

"I'll never forget the first trans girl I ever saw," said Candi. "Some gay friends leaned over, while she was performing, and whispered to me 'that's a man.' My mouth hit the ground—not because of what they said, but because I knew right there and then, I wanted to be that. I will never forget that moment.

"For me, the drag world was my chance to express my feminine side," said Candi. "I didn't know anything about transitioning at all. I was still living at home. My parents didn't know what I was doing. All they knew is that I was taking dance classes in downtown Chicago.

"Out of the blue, one day, I told my father, 'I want a sex change,'" said Candi. "And my dad was so great. He said, 'Well, let's wait until you're 21, so we know that you're sure. And it gives me time to break it to your mother.'

"I loved working at 219," said Candi. "I loved performing on that stage, hovering high above everyone. The girls were all so creative—and there was no better show in town than ours. That's what people came to see: real productions with an opening, middle, and closing sequence. I was working during the week at La Cage, and on Sundays at Club 219.

"My parents were very religious and very Republican," said Candi, "but I was an adopted child and very blessed to be placed into their arms. I told them I was gay when I was 15, and they went out and got a book to try to learn what gay meant. Now, he was reading books on what it meant to have a sex change. We made it through everything together: all the trials and tribulations.

"It was not easy to tell her," said Candi, "especially after I had already told her six years earlier that I was gay. I wrote her a letter, explaining this is who I have to be, with or without them, and this is who I'm going to be. I thanked them for supporting me so much for so long.

"Her response was so compassionate. She said, 'You must have been hurting all this time,'" said Candi. "There is always a lot of hurt and a lot of tears for parents at this moment. She said, 'I feel like I'm losing my child.' I reminded her that she wasn't losing me, she was gaining the person I was meant to be.

"It was a long road forward from here, but we worked through it. Together."

THE HIGH PRICE OF BEING BEAUTIFUL

Female feminization surgery wasn't offered anywhere when Candi transitioned in the early 1980s. Trans women usually had access to rhinoplasties (i.e., nose jobs) and silicon injections to adjust their facial appearance. These treatments were designed to make them softer, round-

er, slightly plumper, and they were considered essentials.

While doing drag in Chicago, Candi was introduced to someone who offered silicon injections to the performers. She was only 19 years old and very trusting of what she was told. Even so, something about the injection procedure just didn't seem right—even 40 years ago.

"We went into her office for my first treatment," said Candi, "and she had the 'silicon' in this big, uncovered fishbowl on her desk. As she filled up the needle, I remember thinking to myself, 'Oh God. Oh God. That is going into my face?'"

While planning for a pageant, Candi received her second injection from a world-renowned New York City doctor.

"This time, it was much more formal," said Candi. "I had to make an appointment, discuss my medical history, and sign about a dozen documents saying I wouldn't sue him."

The doctor assessed Candi's first injection and came back with a troubling comment.

"I don't know what's in there, but it's not silicon," he said. "It might be whale oil."

Somehow, the comment got back to the first provider, and she was furious with Candi. It didn't matter so much to her at the time, as she'd found a safer and more reliable doctor—or so she thought.

"My second treatment with him covered my cheeks and chin," said Candi. "Eventually, I had 10 treatments on my face. I never did a nose job, just the silicon. It was \$150 per facial injection."

Facial work was only the beginning. Body work, such as breast or hip injections, cost \$300 per injection. Some girls would opt for double or triple injections to accelerate the transition.

"I remember a nurse who used to do body work," said Candi. "She used to work for a plastic surgeon. People would say, 'Hey, she's not cheap, but at least she's using medical grade silicone.' She traveled around the world pumping girls full of silicone. She did my hips and one silicon treatment in my breasts. Instead of more silicon, I got implants with my New York City doctor. So that one silicon treatment was the only one she ever did.

"Nobody knew back then what we know now," said Candi. "There weren't any wise trans elders telling us what was going to happen to our bodies. There wasn't any trans helpline to tell us what to do or not do. Nobody knew what would happen years later.

"The worst part was, the girls who referred me got a kickback for my purchases. They either got free or reduced services every time they brought someone new in. I was offered a kickback if I referred someone. And so it goes, on and on, and nobody wants to break the circle and lose their fix. Instead, the circle just keeps getting bigger and bigger, increasing the risk of serious medical harm to more and more women."

NEARLY DEADLY DETOURS

Overall, the silicone injections worked fine for Candi. Until they started turning.

"I'd gotten a little dent," said Candi, "and so I had her do a little filler to fix the dent. The dent turned dark on me. Well, I found out that she was using furniture grade silicone, which contains formaldehyde, and is not safe for any human consumption!

"Here she was, pumping patients with HIV, patients with full-blown AIDS, claiming she was putting life, color, and fullness back into them. Their bodies are already fighting a dread disease, and they're being pumped full of something that will harm them even more.

"We got into a fight. 'How dare you?' I yelled. 'How dare you!'"

"You just don't know what you're going to get. They say, 'Oh, it's medical grade,' but let me tell you, Honey. I lived in Thailand and worked in a hospital. I saw what real medical grade silicone looks like, and it doesn't come in a vat, a tub, or a fishbowl! It comes in a tiny vial. Anyone

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HAPPY HOMEOWNERS

"It has been great to know that I could refer to my husband without fearing that weird look people get on their faces when they aren't expecting that." **CHAD & DALE**

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who tells you they're working with 'medical grade' is lying to you."

Despite the facial dent, Candi's body work looked great for years. And then she turned 48.

"I got a nodule on my face," said Candi, "and then my hips started noduling, with these little lumps and bumps. I was really concerned about having orthopedic surgery, especially in both hips. I hadn't told my doctor I was trans, although everyone was telling me I should.

"Finally, I came out with my mom in the room with me. He responded, 'Well, I'm here to do a service, and my personal opinions don't come to work. I'm here to make sure you get better.' What a relief!

"After the surgery, he told me that he encountered the silicon during the incision process, and that it was crystallized with scar tissue accumulating around it. My right hip had a really hard time healing after surgery, and oily, yellow silicone fluid was constantly leaking out. The wound finally closed after a very long time."

Following her mother's medical issues, Candi surrendered to emotional eating that led to significant weight gain and a prediabetes diagnosis. This was devastating news to Candi, who saw her father live with the highs and lows of diabetes after age 45. After being advised she needed to gain more weight to qualify for surgical weight loss benefits—"the miracles of the American healthcare system," she laughs—she elected to pay out of pocket to have gastric sleeve surgery in Mexico.

After losing so much weight, Candi noticed more surprising changes to her body.

"The silicone in my hips fell, and looked like McGriddles stuck to each side," she said. "So embarrassing! I knew I needed to get those out. And my face really fell. There were big lumps everywhere on my face. The silicone looked so heavy. I decided to get a mid-face facelift."

Candi consulted with the well-known Dr. Lazaro Cardenas in Guadaluajara, Mexico on next steps.

"The doctor was completely honest with me: once you pump that in, it's hard to get out," said Candi. "I couldn't have been happier to find someone so honest, ethical, and trustworthy. And it really got me thinking and researching the extent of this problem."

"IT WON'T HAPPEN TO US."

It's not just trans women and drag queens who've fallen victim to unsafe and unprofessional body work. The "filler party" trend has led cisgender women to receive bargain basement treatments in hotel rooms and emerge looking like 1980s trans women. Cis and trans men alike rely on silicone for pec implants, striking cheekbones and masculine jawlines. Girls as young as 13, with parental consent, are showcasing questionable injections on Instagram and TikTok. In response, silicone removal services are advertising on social media around the world.

"Silicone can sit in your face for years," said Candi, "but someday it will start rejecting it. Count on it. It's inevitable.

"Today, you'll see these drag pageant contestants with such uneven, lumpy silicone, and sometimes you'll actually remember this isn't normal," Candi said. "One girl told me, 'I'm Egyptian, I only had one treatment, and the rest is all natural.' As a flight attendant, I've been to Egypt, and nobody looks like that!

"We've just gotten so used to seeing 'that look.' We just say she looks fabulous—and we move on to the next one. The big hips. The little waist. Breasts as hard as boulders. The uneven, lumpy texture of it all. What we should be saying is, 'Girls, stop doing this!'"

Candi points to the life-threatening risks of silicone toxicity. "There are girls who've actually died from bad injections," said Candi. "Scar tissue builds up and causes horrible circulation problems. If this gets into your lungs, the fluid can build up like pneumonia, and they cannot get it out. If this gets into your bloodstream, you will die faster than a stroke. Don't think I wasn't scared while getting my hips replaced that this might happen to me.

"You just don't know what you're going to get. They say, 'Oh, it's medical grade,' but let me tell you, Honey. I lived in Thailand and worked in a hospital. I saw what real medical grade silicone looks like, and it doesn't come in a vat, a tub, or a fishbowl! It comes in a tiny vial. Anyone who tells you they're working with 'medical grade' is lying to you."

"Don't fall victim to Instagram," said Candi. "Don't fall victim to the illusion of a fully filtered life. Do your research. Body work may be cheap now, but it will be very expensive later on. I'm living proof.

"The younger kids say, 'It'll never happen to me. I'll be fine,'" said Candi. "They are directed within their house families to get this done, often as a rite of passage, as a show of commitment to their new self. They're either pushed into it or walked into it themselves. They choose the quick fixes, even though they know what might happen to them. Some girls just don't want to hear it.

"My message is this: Just don't. Do NOT. There is now facial feminization surgery. There are now trans-affirming medical benefits available at many major companies. They will cover everything from electrolysis to FFS to voice. They will reallocate natural fats within your own body to supplement your transition.

"When I was transitioning, you couldn't even find a trans girl work-

ing in a major department store," said Candi. "Not even in cosmetics. Girls today have a lot more options than they do back in the day. There is more available to you than sex work or drag work.

"Nowadays, if you want it, you can get it, and many of the nation's largest employers offer trans-inclusive health insurance. Starbucks. T-mobile. Even McDonalds! They'll pay you, school you, and insure you while you better yourself. Please consider this route before going the quick and easy route.

"I'm very open about my whole journey," said Candi. "I've video blogged on Instagram and Facebook—both my personal and professional accounts. I've been honest. I want to help as many as I can."

Candi recognizes that, for many trans women, the last thing they want and need to hear is someone telling them not to pursue the transformation they've waited their whole lives to achieve. She knows how hypocritical it might feel for someone to deny others the choices they made for themselves.

"I'm not telling anyone what to do, or what not to do," said Candi. "I don't care what anyone else tells you. Just remember this. If you think it's not going to happen to you, think again."

CANDI FINDS HER CALLING

Although she still lived in Chicago, Candi spent a lot of her time in Milwaukee, working at Club 219 and sharing memorable moments with the Club 219 Girls.

"Milwaukee was a magical place for me," she said. "We were young, and frivolous, and carefree, but we were very hard on ourselves at the same time.

"I loved working at 219," said Candi. "I loved performing on that stage, hovering high above everyone. The girls were all so creative—and there was no better show in town than ours. That's what people came to see: real productions with an opening, middle, and closing sequence. I was working during the week at La Cage, and on Sundays at Club 219. I really don't know how I kept up that pace!

"Tony and Del treated us all so great. Back then, it was Ginger, B.J., Gloria, Abbey, Patti. I was Candi Slice, a 'little slice of heaven,' until a promoter told me that he'd never crown Candi Slice. Soon afterwards, I saw Star 80 and seriously felt that I was Dorothy Stratton reincarnated. That's when I became Candi Stratton.

"I was a professional dancer and wanted to be a cheerleader growing up so badly. I practiced and practiced until I could do jumps and splits better than anyone. In fact, I could do 20 spread eagle jumps in a row!

"MTV had just started," said Candi, "and drag hadn't really caught up with it yet. I remember seeing drag shows where everyone just came out and did their own torch song. I remember thinking, 'Please, someone, do something exciting, or I'll slit my wrists.' There was no energy, no vibe. It was like a night at the opera. It was so boring!

"I was a little kid from the suburbs, but I knew I could do better," said Candi. "I said I would perform two weeks for free as my audition. If they didn't like me, I would leave. If they did like me, I would stay and they would hire me. Well, I went out there and danced the whole house down. The crowd went crazy. They'd never seen anything like this before. And I got hired!

"I would try to copy MTV, which had a greater influence on drag that we could ever have imagined. Olivia Newton John 'Physical,' Laura Branigan 'Gloria,' Pat Benatar 'Hit Me With Your Best Shot,' Irene Cara 'What A Feeling,' and of course Toni Basil's 'Mickey' which became my theme song. At one point during my signature number, I would jump up in the air, do the splits, and land in that position. The crowd would scream!" said Candi.



Candi won Miss Continental Wisconsin at 23. It was the first pageant held at the Performing Arts Center, and the community came out for it.

"The stage, the runway, they were both so enormous," said Candi. "Pageants were fabulous back then—a true event!

"What are you going to see today? Just a bunch of performers. Just one drag number after another. People clapping to the music and working the room for tips. What happened to the art form? Everyone's got the same hair. Everyone's painted the same. Where's the individuality?"

"I remember La Cage being super busy," said Candi. "We were popular enough to be featured on the Phil Donahue show. Everything seemed to be going great—and then the IRS shut us down in 1983."

PAULA FINDS HER VOICE

Three months after her gender affirmation surgery, Candi Stratton aka Paula Randall became a flight attendant.

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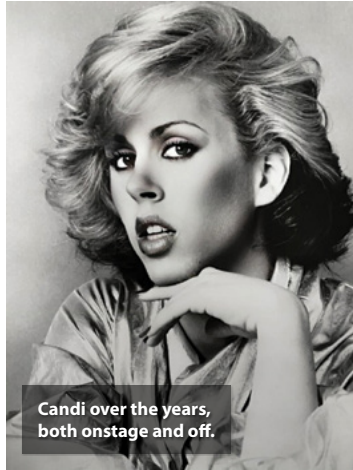
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Candi over the years, both onstage and off.



SECOND FROM LEFT BY DIANA MICALAKAPOUD.

“At that time, you wouldn’t be hired if you were trans,” said Candi. “I always tell people I face my fears. I never let them hold me back. If I did let them hold me back, I’d never have gone through that interview or connected with my dreams.

“I was honest with the first person I interviewed with. They pushed me through because they believed in me. They said, ‘Now you just have to complete the physical examination and the training.’ This was a full hospital gown physical. I said, ‘Great, what does the exam consist of?’ They called the medical center to find out. Thirty seconds later, on speakerphone, someone is asking ‘Do you want to hire this person? Because you know, we don’t hire those people. We steer clear of those people.’ This is the late 1980s! My hiring manager said, ‘She’s attractive, she’s reliable, and she has a great personality. Yes, I want to hire her.’

“From that day, to now, American Airlines has done a complete 180 degree change. They were the first airline to have an employee pride committee in the early 1990s. They’ve done so much for the trans and gay communities. But it was a long road to here. A lot of airlines didn’t hire you if you were trans, and if you transitioned after getting hired, it was nearly impossible to keep your job. If you had a supervisor who didn’t like you, or understand your identity, they’d still get rid of you.

“So, I lived a double life in stealth mode: Paula was my work identity, and Candi was my outspoken trans advocate identity. And that’s how I lived for 30 years!”

OVERSEAS—AND BACK AGAIN

After living in Australia for seven years, Candi was recruited to move to Thailand to work as an on-air personality for a local talk show. She accepted a job as a PR person for Bed Supperclub and hosted an evening at the club. And then, she was asked to be an international ambassador.

“What a journey it’s been. I left Candi Stratton on the stage when I had my surgery, and decades later, I started doing shows again. While I was living in Australia, I pulled my Cher act back, and it took off. I started receiving booking offerings. This was wild to me: according to the “old rules,” you weren’t supposed to do drag anymore after your transition. But Cher took off. Never say never—never think you’re done!”

“Yanhee Hospital is a large, 24-hour hospital in Bangkok that specializes in cosmetic surgeries,” said Candi. “They asked me to be a spokesperson for their plastic surgery program for a year. Bangkok is so cosmopolitan and so fashionable, and I enjoyed the people of Thailand so much, but it’s an entirely different life.”

Candi’s parents had retired to the Quad Cities in 1989. Facing hip replacement surgery, Candi chose to move there in 2016 for recovery. “There’s no way I could have climbed to the fourth floor of my Philadelphia rowhouse,” she said. “My mother was suffering from macular degeneration at the time, and I knew it was time to move closer. I rented a little house and spent a lot of time with mom. After two years, she moved into assisted living.

“I love her, she’s my best friend, but we can’t live together,” said Candi. “I would ask her, ‘What if I would go out and meet someone? What if I wanted to bring a guy home?’ and she’d say, ‘Not at my house, you’re not!’ I loved being a little instigator.

“After two years, she had a stroke, and we moved her into assisted living,” said Candi. “And I decided to stay. My grandparents had lived here, and if you ever told me I would live here, I would have looked at you, laughed at you, and slapped you!”

“I found a storybook home, straight out of Hansel & Gretel. Never have I ever walked into a home and said, ‘I’m in love!’ like I am with this one. Everyone who walks in can feel the same energy. This is the right place for me. It’s got character, charm, and warmth. I’m very happy here.”

LEAVING A LASTING LEGACY

The tagline of Miss Trans USA 2019 was “trans visibility.” This wasn’t lost on Candi, who realized that the time had come to “come out” again—this time, within her workplace. Miss Trans USA was scheduled one day after National Coming Out Day, so she concocted a plan to celebrate her true self.

“Watching kids being so out and vocal has been liberating,” said Candi. “The younger generations are my heroes. They reminded me, ‘Okay Paula, if you’re going to talk the talk, you need to walk the walk.’

“I created a post of myself being crowned Miss Trans USA 2019, and noted, ‘So last night, this happened.’ And here I thought I’d outed myself. Except, people couldn’t see the sash, so they didn’t know what I’d won!

“On Monday, I went back and posted again: Friday was National Coming Out Day, and on Saturday I won Miss Trans USA, and I hope you’ll still love me as a human being. I received such an overwhelming, positive reception. I earned a standing ovation when I entered the crew lounge. My story was shared with 130,000 employees worldwide via our employee website. I was able to speak about my experience, which inspired some parents to reach out to me about their own children.

“When I broadcast this message, I shared it on my Paula page also, so I was completely out and honest with both the straight and cis communities,” said Candi.

“What a journey it’s been. I left Candi Stratton on the stage when I had my surgery, and decades later, I started doing shows again. While I was living in Australia, I pulled my Cher act back out of my hat, and it took off crazy. I started receiving booking offerings. This was wild to me: according to the old rules, you weren’t supposed to do drag anymore after your transition. But Cher took off. My social media accounts took off. Suddenly, I was doing pageants again. Never say never—never think you’re done!

“What’s most important to me is staying vocal on trans issues,” said Candi. “Whether I reach one person, or two, or many, I hope I’ve helped some people. We are human beings with hearts and souls. I hope I’ve changed opinions of who and what we are.

“After all, you can’t say you don’t know a trans person anymore. You know me.” ■

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ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT PHOTOGRAPHY

Peeking Past the Fourth Wall

Blurring the lines between performative and documentary actions, photographer **Lois Bielefeld** offers a modern take on Americana in domestic environments.



The Bedroom.



Lunch Portraits.



Weeknight Dinners.

THE OTHER DAY, my friend Alison complained to me about her piles. The piles, Allie explains, started getting bigger and bigger, and now they are overwhelming. She needs a month, she thinks, to purge herself of them. While she was talking, I looked around my living room and saw stacks of papers and books, but I did not confess that I, too, had too many regrettable piles. In the basement, that I never let anyone enter, I will likely neglect the piles of laundry for yet another plan-filled weekend. I cannot think of anything in my home that makes me feel more self-disdain and guilt than my piles, yet I did not speak a word of them.

When Lois Bielefeld (she/they) and I finally spoke for this article, we had a long, late-night conversation reminiscent of the calls I witnessed my mom having with her friends after she came home from work and started cooking dinner for our family. We chatted like old friends as I chopped veggies, cooked dinner, let the dogs out, and asked all the fangirl questions I have always wanted to ask about the mysteriously powerful bodies of work I have been following for the last decade and the artist who creates them.

After seasoning our “interview” for a few days, it occurred to me that Lois Bielefeld (she/they) approaches the art of photography like they are a sociologist. They observe and document the space of domestic theater, framing everyday lives in a way that invites the viewer to join them in attempting to understand the intimate spaces of human interaction, relationships, and behavior.

Their work is not completely candid. They acknowledge their influence upon the image. Bielefeld’s signature way of lighting the participants, for example, subtly signals their consent. The photographer and the subjects are collaborating in constructing an image of domestic life. The people in the resulting portraits appear unguarded, but they also seemingly retain their agency. They are clearly allowing the viewer a look into their lives.

One of the wonderful things about Bielefeld’s photographs and films is the way the participants effectively blur the lines between what sociologists might call “front stage” and “back stage” behavior. In other words, it is almost impossible to detect actions and spaces that are performative and actions that they would engage in if a Lois were not present, documenting them for an audience.

The viewer has permission to peer into what another individual’s private life looks like. This process is somehow reassuring. It is sort of like a photographic loving kindness meditation. It is as if looking at the unvarnished presentation of *the other*, one can let down their own persona’s hair a bit and consider their own life with less judgment.

During the pandemic, Lois created a 14-hour film titled, *Dad and Chair* that documented their father sitting in his easy chair doing whatever it was he did that day, all day. The film played at Milwaukee’s Portrait Society Gallery in October of 2021. Matt Wild reviewed it for *The Milwaukee Record*. He watched the whole thing straight through, just as it was filmed. His reflection of Bielefeld’s work was one of my favorite pieces of art writing ever, precisely because his writing captures his psychological process of interpretation, a sort of projective mirroring, elicited by Lois’s work.

I offer you examples from my personal encounters with Bielefeld’s photographs. Take, for instance, an image from the 2012 series, *Lunch Portraits*. It is an portrait of a woman with blue eyes and long blond hair wearing a jean shirt. She sits at a white table, in a white room, with her lunch displayed before her. Lunch consists of an Amy’s black bean and rice frozen burrito, plain yogurt, and a bag of fresh strawberries. Her expression is positive, yet somehow strikingly neutral. I have eaten

that same lunch dozens of times. That could be my lunch. Sometimes when I am eating it, I think the burrito is dry because it has too much wrapper and too little filling. I ponder if the blond woman likes her lunch. What about her job? Why is she eating alone? What does it say about us that we have made lunch a solitary act rather than a communal experience? Finally, I ask myself if she likes her life. The story I make up about her is as much about me, my biases, my worries, my experiences with Amy’s black bean burritos, than her.

Another example from an earlier body of work (2008–2012) called *The Bedroom* depicts an older man sitting on the edge of his bed in a ribbed tank undershirt and a white baseball cap with red lettering forming words I cannot quite make out. His bed might be a made-up couch. He is a foot away from his TV that doubles as a nightstand where he keeps his pill bottles. There is a cross and a picture of a Native American in the background. The man in the photo looks like he might be lonely. But maybe he is content in this room with a TV and a window. Who is the Native American in the photo? Is the man Native American? Is the man’s wife dead? Did he ever have a wife? Did they have children? Where are they now? Will I end up lonely and alone? Would I be able to find contentment in that?

In an image from *Weeknight Dinners* (2013–2015, 2017) a woman of color, a mother I presume, and her two children sit at their kitchen table eating takeout for dinner. There is a cell phone on the table, but it is respectfully out of reach. The mom is drinking a glass of red wine. Do they eat together like this often? How often? Every night? It looks like the mother is providing them a stable middle class life. Do they appreciate her? I think they do. Is it hard for her? She looks like she’s okay. “You have enough,” I tell myself. “You are good enough.” I feel it internally.

It is normal for people to look for faces and to search for narrative



Bielefeld.

structure in art. Perhaps we are completely wrong when we make up stories about the people in the frame, but it really is not about them as much as it is about us. Lois’s work allows the viewer to look forgivingly at the self in the everyday spaces of others. We are most like others, most connected, in the banal and routinized rituals of everyday life: eating, sleeping, making messes, sweeping them into piles, and dismantling the piles.

It amazes me that Lois’s mother allows herself to be recorded on the floor in plank position, holding up her own body weight on her forearms and toes, while reciting memorized bible verses in the film *Thank you Jesus, for what you are going to do* (2020). Lois tells me their parents have always been willing subjects. Though they have very different perspectives on many things, Lois identifies as queer and atheist for example, and their parents are hetero and Christian. One thing their parents seem to agree upon is the importance of Lois’s art. They’re into it. In fact, they’re in on it.

The act of straight evangelical parents and their queer atheist child co-creating meaningful art together in which they subject themselves to the vulnerability of sharing their quirky little rituals and mundane interactions with the entire world, forever, gives me great hope. We are all on one side or another of the issues splitting us in this painfully polarized world. Their obvious love for their child and their unaffectedness is humbling. A few days ago, I could not even commiserate with a dear friend when it meant admitting that my own piles stink. Perhaps there is something liberating in letting go of pretense and sharing one’s own flawed humanity with grace and humility, so that others may see their humanity reflecting in yours.

Piles, Lois tells me ironically at the end of our discussion, is the next subject they will step into. I cannot wait. ■

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Culinary Road Trips

As we come out of our winter (and pandemic) hibernation, here are a few destination dining spots that will help you get out of town and take in the sights, sounds, and flavors of small-town Wisconsin.

SMALL BUSINESS | FOOD & DINING | RURAL DESTINATIONS

SUMMER IS A GREAT TIME to explore what Wisconsin has to offer. The last two pandemic years have been hard for restaurants but great for outdoor recreation. While some of our favorite restaurants along road trip routes have closed or are struggling to stay open, other LGBTQQ+-owned eateries and gathering spots are experiencing new beginnings.

These are the stories of three of those new beginnings. Craig, a longtime bartender at Madison's FIVE Nightclub, and his partner Kong, made the leap and took over a bar in Cross Plains. Brian took a calculated risk to quit his job in the paper industry and start a craft distillery in Plover, which is about to break ground on a new location in downtown Stevens Point. And Courtney and Jen chose to be unapologetically visible in opening a new, radically welcoming cafe in Cambridge.

These places are worth a drive to visit. And, we know they aren't the only LGBTQQ-owned restaurants outside of the Madison/Milwaukee areas. If you have a favorite cafe you visit on your Wisconsin travels, let us know so we can feature them in a future issue, too!



DOTTIE'S BAR & BISTRO

Cross Plains

AFTER MORE THAN 30 YEARS working for a local cable company, Craig Kimball was ready for a change. He'd worked part time as a bartender at Manoeuvres, a gay bar in what is now the Up North on Blair Street in Madison. He continued his part-time bartending job when Manoeuvres moved and became Club 5 on the city's west side. He and his partner Kongmeng Vang talked for years about opening up their own place.

One day, while driving past the old Coach's Club on the main strip of Hwy 14 in Cross Plains, the "for rent/own" sign out front sparked an idea.

"I was literally thinking about starting a restaurant while I was driving down the road when I saw the sign," remembered Craig. "I thought, what's stopping me from calling that number? My finances are in order.



Craig Kimball & Kongmeng Vang, Dottie's Bar & Bistro.



Courtney Sargent & Jen O'Branovich, Millie's Coffee & Eatery.



Brian Cummins, Great Northern Distilling.

I knew it would be a lot of work, and a huge step from the comfort of the job I'd done for decades. But I talked about it with Kong, and we knew it was my time to try something new."

Coach's was a longtime sports bar that focused on both classic Wisconsin sports as well as supporting local teams. But prior owners had struggled with many challenges in recent years. Flooding in western Dane County, a car crashing into the building, and then the Covid crisis forced the pub to close.

With Craig and Kong's new energy and experience, the restaurant was reborn as Dottie's, named after Craig's mom. Their vision for the restaurant shifted away from the type of sports bar that's common in that side of the county. Their welcoming approach to serving the community is reflected in their menu of Louisiana comfort food, and their decor hints at their love of travel to New Orleans. The bar still has sports memorabilia, because this is Wisconsin after all.

Their welcoming approach to serving the community is reflected in their menu of Louisiana comfort food, and their decor hints at their love of travel to New Orleans. The bar still has sports memorabilia, because this is Wisconsin after all.

"I hope people from Madison stop to visit when they are traveling on Hwy 14," said Craig. "If they are on their way to a show at American Players Theater, we can provide boxed meals and to-go wine packages. We have a gorgeous patio that we will get full use of this summer with music and events. We have a bar, but also a dining room and an upstairs banquet room for private events like weddings and graduations."

Most restaurants are struggling with hiring staff. Dottie's welcomed back some of the long-time employees of Coach's and that helped them get a strong start when they opened. Still, Craig observed several changes to the service industry that he's witnessed since he's opened Dottie's.

"After Covid, so many people left the industry and just aren't there anymore. So many people found other work. We're training a whole new workforce and people have different expectations now. The staff we have is fantastic. It's like a family here. But the pandemic showed us how important everyone in the restaurant is. You have to treat people better, and we all expect more from each other. We're also seeing that people just aren't going out as much. You don't have to go to a bar to meet people any more. So bars are stepping up their level of involvement. Now we need to offer more, like karaoke, bingo, or a meat raffle. People want more than to just meet each other; they want entertainment and events."

Craig and Kongmeng both help run Dottie's, though Kong still works a day job as well as helping his family sell vegetables at the farmers' market. He helps with the books and even recruits family members to work at Dottie's when they are short-staffed. The fact that Dottie's is owned by a gay couple doesn't seem to ruffle any feathers in the community of Cross Plains.

"Some of the customers of Coach's are coming back, and we're meeting new people," said Craig. "We've been working on getting our friends from Madison to come out, but Cross Plains is on 'the route' of bars in western Dane County and regulars tend to stay in this area. We went to a local bar a month ago, and a town local waved me over and said, 'Just so you know, it doesn't matter.' I asked him what he meant. 'It doesn't matter that you're gay.' Obviously people are talking about it, or he wouldn't have said anything. But we haven't had any trouble, and we're making new friends and welcoming new regulars as part of the family."

Dottie's is open seven days a week for lunch and dinner.

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GREAT NORTHERN DISTILLING

Stevens Point

A VISIT TO STEVENS POINT should be on the list for any foodies. There are some exciting new ventures for food, coffee, and drinks. One development for downtown will be a new location for the Great Northern Distilling company. Brian Cummins founded Great Northern Distilling in 2013 after a career in the paper industry. He came to Wisconsin after college in the mid-90s to work as a chemical engineer. He got into product development, quality control, research, and marketing strategy.

In 2012 on a trip to Minneapolis, he was inspired by the craft cocktails the city was offering. A friend remarked that he read an article in Popular Mechanics about small-batch distilling.

“It was a lightbulb moment for me,” Brian remembers. “At that point I wasn’t seeing another 25–30 years in the paper industry even being possible with all the mergers and downsizing and mill closures. So I started really exploring what it would take to do this.”

Cummins said he thought about using his culinary palette to start a restaurant, but he wasn’t from that world. He thought about starting a craft brewery, but even by 2012 he felt that the market was too flooded with brewers, particularly with companies that were becoming well established in central Wisconsin.

“Small batch craft distilling felt more like where craft beer making was 20 years ago. So that’s when I decided to jump in, quit my corporate job, and start working on this full time.”

It was a big risk. One of many Brian would take in starting his business. But he had a career that involved doing product research, so taking a calculated risk was something he was confident enough to make.

“I’m a single, gay man, and I didn’t have anyone depending me. So I thought this is worth the risk and a try to see if this can be a thing.”

Success wasn’t guaranteed from the start, but Brian’s company got established and grew over the first six years of operation out of a building that once was a car dealership in Plover.

“The original vision was, and is, to produce spirits of exceptional smoothness out of ingredients we source within 150 miles of our distillery. We’ve largely stuck to that with few compromises.”

When the Great Northern began, there were around 300 craft distilleries around the country. During the first few years of their operation, the number of craft distillers exploded to around 1400 and companies like the Great Northern had to navigate the complexities of working with distributors to vie for shelf space in stores and bars.

“That led us to shift our business model from not fighting for shelf space across multiple states, but rather focus on our own backyard market and onsite sales, including cocktails and advance quality cocktail market in the northwoods.”

Vodka from local potatoes. Gin from wheat and wheat malt with aromatics that include juniper, coriander, rose hips, lavender, and new: fresh spruce tips they harvest every spring. A bourbon whiskey, a rye whiskey, and a brandy in the fall. They make a coffee liqueur made in partnership with Ruby Coffee Roasters that’s a creamery blend with a strong cold brew extract and demerara sugar that makes a good white Russian.

“We make barrel-aged rum from cane sugar, baking molasses, and

black strap molasses. We can’t grow sugar in Wisconsin, but we source the ingredients from organic producers in Florida.”

They are also planning some distillery-only releases such as a jezynowka (pronounced like jen-OOF-ska) or a Polish-style blackberry brandy that should resonate with the Polish heritage of Stevens Point.

When Covid hit, the Great Northern did what they could to adjust to the change. In the early days, they made hand sanitizer and sold to-go bottled cocktails and curbside sales. Then in January 2021, they lost the lease on their building due to changes in the property owner’s plans. A month-to-month agreement forced them to get creative and adapt once again. Downtown Stevens Point was a natural place for a new location.

“We had to figure out what the next 10 years of the Great Northern would look like. We decided to move to downtown Stevens Point where there is a nightlife center. We’ve had a year and a half of transitioning, figuring out how to finance a new building, how to work with the city to get assistance with redevelopment land in the right spot. We’re seeing the same supply chain challenges with wood and steel, so there have been many delays in that project.”

The location of the new building will be at 1011 2nd Street, between 2nd and 3rd Streets on what is now an empty lot north of Center Point Drive. Neighbors will include Emy J’s coffee shop, Kim’s Barrel Inn, and downtown apartments. It won’t have a lot of parking spots, but that will be fine for a location that is walkable to the public square.

The new space will nearly double in size with an event room geared for weddings or medium-sized events. There will be more storage for barrels, a larger tasting room, and an outdoor patio that welcomes dogs.

Unless supply chains create longer delays for construction, Brian hopes to be back in production in the new Great Northern in August with a tasting room reopening in October. He plans for his staff to grow from a team of five to a team of 12–15.

Brian laughs, but isn’t joking, when he says he keeps telling his designer that he wants the new space to be the dimmest bar in town.

“The vibe will be different from our original location, which was sort of a rural, industrial chic with a lot of barn wood and Edison bulbs,” he said. “We’re going one step further to be a lot more polished in our finishes. It will feel like you’ve entered something in Chicago or New York, but here in Stevens Point. It won’t be pretentious—we want everyone to feel comfortable—but it won’t feel like a typical central Wisconsin bar.”



MILLIE’S COFFEE & EATERY

Cambridge

MILLIE’S COFFEE AND EATERY is new to the community of Cambridge, just southeast of Madison on Hwy 12. Courtney Sargent and Jen O’Branovich originally had a vision of opening a supper club, but the Covid crisis caused them to delay and rethink their plan.

“Our introduction to the Cambridge community was after we were transplants from Madison,” Courtney explained. “We both worked at

Cambridge Winery. Jen was the general manager, and I was the bar manager and event coordinator. That’s where we met our friends and our following. We wanted to open a supper club-style restaurant and bar. We looked for commercial properties, but Covid put a damper on both financing and finances.”

In October 2021, they got a call about a commercial space with a small kitchen for rent. Jen and Courtney talked about it and decided the opportunity was a sign to start small and build something new. They created a business plan in a few months, and Millie’s was born.

“We serve breakfast all day,” said Courtney. “Our signature dish is the ‘Classy B,’ or our Classy Breakfast Sandwich that’s served on a brioche bun, one of the ingredients we get delivered fresh daily. We have salads, specials, and even an ‘avo crumpet’ which is like avocado toast. It’s appealing to the eye, but still familiar.”

What’s not on their menu, but definitely baked into their mission, is their approach to radical hospitality. From the start, they wanted their cafe to be a safe space for the LGBTQ+ community, particularly youth.

Millie’s focuses on sourcing ingredients locally, putting a priority on buying from producers led by women, people of color, and LGBTQ+ community members. Big Punch Farm supplies organic produce, and Rude Brew Kombucha supplies probiotic beverages. They explained that the cafe tries to strike a balance between pleasing the traditional meat-and-potatoes crowd while still introducing new flavors to the community. Jen and Courtney like to travel a lot, and you’ll find culinary inspiration in their menu.

What’s not on their menu, but definitely baked into their mission, is their approach to radical hospitality. From the start, they wanted their cafe to be a safe space for the LGBTQ+ community, particularly youth.

“We haven’t gotten any pushback from being an LGBTQ-forward business,” said Courtney. “When we got some free press when we opened, we made it clear we were gay-owned. I don’t look straight at all. We have an all-inclusive flag in our shop. We let the community know at the start that our mission was to employ as many LGBTQ youth as possible, and this is reflected in our staff. Young people have latched on to this safe space.”

Another upside to their approach to employee recruitment and training is that the cafe seems immune to the labor shortages other restaurants struggle with. They said they have a “line out the door” of people who want to work at Millie’s.

Though the Cambridge community is small with just over 1400 residents, the cafe is in a good spot to serve commuters to Madison, bike riders, art enthusiasts, Lake Ripley visitors, and summer tourists from Illinois. The town is growing and changing as it attracts young families who want to buy an affordable home near good schools.

They are planning to extend their hours, offer more happy hours, and welcome comedians, magicians, and other entertainment.

“Drag bingo has been great,” they said. “We were the first to do this here, and the last set of tickets for an event sold out in 13 minutes.”

As they expand, Millie’s will keep focusing on their mission to remain a safe place for everyone. There is training and support for their employees that goes with it. Courtney says it’s not a typical coffee shop experience for patrons or workers alike.

“There is a different atmosphere here depending on who’s working. Everyone has their own vibe and likes their own music.”

Millie’s will only add more diversity and charm to Cambridge as they gear up for events and the summer season. ■

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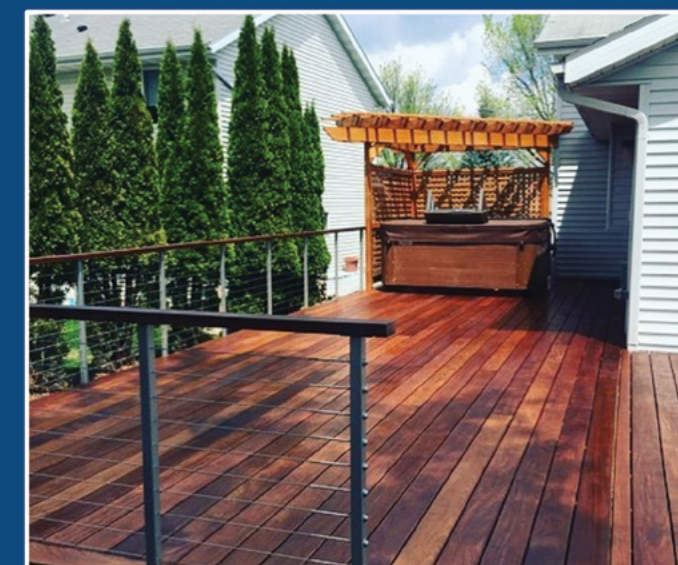
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COME OUT & SEE US

RESTAURANTS CAFES BARS FOOD TRUCKS CATERING PROVISIONS BAKERY

If you have been waiting for an invitation, here it is. These **queer third spaces & other food-related businesses** are ready to bounce back.

Madison-area LGBTQ-owned Food & Beverage Businesses

Restaurants & Third Spaces

The Baked Lab
Cafe Social
Caracas Arepas & Empanadas
Cargo Coffee
D'Vino
Daisy Cafe & Cupcakery
Delta Beer Lab
Fair Trade Coffee House
FIVE Nightclub
Fromagination
Giant Jones

Greenbush Bar
Harvest & The Old Fashioned
Java Cat
Mediterranean Hookah Lounge
Michael's Frozen Custard
Migrants
Mariner's Inn; The Nautical;
Betty Lou Cruises
The Shamrock Bar & Grille
Square Wine Co.
Willalby's Cafe
WOOF'S

Other Businesses

The Baker's Table
Chef Scotty
D-Bar Bakery
Simply Served Personal Chef
Stubborn Mule Catering

Restaurants & Third Spaces Around the State

Bee Charmer
Big Punch Farm
Dotty's Bar & Bistro

Grassroots Farm
Great Northern
Hamburger Mary's

Luna Circle Farm
Millie's Coffee & Eatery
Todo Postres

FOR LGBTQ+ INDIVIDUALS, third space locations provide an opportunity to be ourselves in a way we don't always get to be in other areas of our lives. Over the past two years of folks staying closer to home, many of our third spaces have weathered the storm and managed to stay afloat—buoyed by a combination of innovation, government loans, and vital community-driven support.

The locations on this list have done their best to balance public health risk with personal safety. For some, that means you can now purchase their products in various locations, online, or in-person. For those of us with situations that require us to continue using accommodations such as drive-thru, pickup, and services received in isolation, businesses are still working to meet those needs.

If you are ready to tip-toe back into meeting, dating, dancing, and experiencing the arts and culture that adds enjoyment to life in a city, please use this list to start with LGBTQ+-owned and managed businesses in the Madison area and beyond.

ESTABLISHMENTS

THE BAKED LAB 100 S. Baldwin Street, Madison On the third floor of the Madison Enterprise Center, in a surprisingly small and unassuming studio space, is the Baked Lab. It is the brain- (and sweat-) child of Shawn Bolduc. Cooking feels like a mysterious art to a lot of folks but Shawn is on a mission to correct that problem. The other part of Baked Lab is the "Lab" portion where those interested can sign up for classes that seek to offer lessons and also good times.

CAFE SOCIAL 102 N. Bedford Street, Madison Partners Omar Lopez and Doug Swenson co-own the coffee shop on the ground floor of the Lark building on Bedford Street, just on the edge of UW-Madison's campus. They specialize in single-origin Arabica coffee beans sourced from family farms in Armenia, Quindio, Colombia. The farm can be visited on one of their all-inclusive Colombian coffee tours.

CARGO COFFEE 750 East Washington Avenue & 1309 South Park Street, Madison Lynn Lee co-owns Cargo Coffee with his twin brother, Lindsey. Their globally sourced coffee beans are locally roasted, and the shop's decor reflects a vintage charm with oversized maps and aviation/culinary themed antiques.

D'VINO 116 King Street, Madison Traditional Italian fare is on the menu at D'Vino. They are open for indoor dining with a standard menu during the week and brunch offerings available on Sundays. Reservations can be made on their website.

DAISY CAFE 2827 Atwood Avenue, Madison Kathy Brooks co-owns the cafe in Madison's Atwood neighborhood. The menu includes gluten-free, vegetarian and vegan options. It's a great place to meet for lunch or brunch where you can get one of their specialty egg stratas with varieties including french toast, chorizo pepper jack, or a seasonal offering.

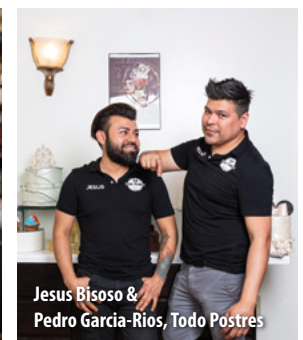
DELTA BEER LAB 167 East Badger Road, Madison Tim "Pio" Piotrowski was inspired to open his own brewery during a 2019 hike along the



Lynn Lee, Cargo Coffee & Ground Zero coffeehouses



Anna Alberici, Greenbush Bar



Jesus Bisoso & Pedro Garcia-Rios, Todo Postres



Tommy Hanna, Mediterranean Hookah Lounge & Cafe



Oscar Villarreal, Migrants

Appalachian Trail. His vision includes mixing ingredients as much as mixing people together in a laboratory that celebrates flavor and a commitment to community. The taproom is a space for all where the rule is "change" as the name Delta would suggest. Their passion for public-interest causes hasn't wavered, and they have a monthly non-profit partner you can support while enjoying a brew.

FAIR TRADE COFFEE HOUSE 418 State Street, Madison The coffee shop was purchased by co-owners Casey Thompson and Thomas Beckwith-Thompson in 2017. It is both a hub for students studying and an evening gathering place that's an alternative to bars. They prioritize serving fair trade certified coffee, baked goods, and light fare.

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

FROMAGINATION 12 South Carroll Street, Madison Fromagination is Madison's downtown cheesemonger, owned by Ken Monteleone. The specialty cheese shop features dozens of artisanal Wisconsin cheeses and more from around the world. Customers can use the website to access virtual cheese classes, online shop tours, and ordering of cheeses, lunchtime sandwiches, cheese boards, gifts, and catering options.

GIANT JONES 931 East Main Street, Madison Jessica and Erika Jones started their brewing company in 2018 to bring big beers to Wisconsin's brewing scene. Their craft beers are certified organic and pack a punch at 7% or more ABV. You can find on their website a sizable list of places to enjoy their brews on tap or to-go. Their own taproom has reopened for tasting events.

GREENBUSH BAR 914 Regent Street, Madison The basement bar in the Italian Workmen's Club in Madison's Greenbush neighborhood is steeped in Sicilian family history. Owner Anna Alberici has shared her family's recipes in the cozy basement restaurant since 1993 where you can find pizza, pasta, and cocktails. A development proposal



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Tricia Bross,
Luna Circle Farm



Dino Maniaci,
D'Vino & WOOFs



Tim 'Pio' Piotrowski,
Delta Beer Lab

made in March 2022 for the 800 block of Regent Street may leave this establishment as a last vestige of the Italian citizens who were pushed out for progress in the 60s.

HARVEST & THE OLD FASHIONED 21 & 23 N Pinckney Street, Madison Harvest owner Tami Lax focuses on Wisconsin food and seasonal fare in these neighboring restaurants on Madison's capitol square. The Old Fashioned, managed by Lax's partner Jennifer DeBolt, has a 'Scennie-casual menu that features famous cheese curds. Since 2000, Harvest menus have centered farm-to-table dishes in an upscale atmosphere. During the Covid crisis, Harvest restructured as Harvest Go but that was later discontinued as the restaurant is pursuing utility upgrades and remodeling. While you wait for them to reopen, try the brandy slush next door because you won't get that just anywhere.

JAVA CAT 3918 Monona Drive, Madison The cozy coffee shop owned by Renee Raspiller sits on the edge of Madison and Monona and supports local artists and nonprofits. Their coffee is fair trade, organic, and roasted in Madison. Their indoor space is now open, so go in and enjoy soup, sandwiches, chocolate, toffee, and baked goods including the Madison Sourdough. Grab a growler of cold brew to go!

MARINER'S INN; THE NAUTIGAL; BETTY LOU CRUISES 5339 Lighthouse Bay Drive & 5360 Westport Road, Madison In 2000 Robert von Rutenberg joined his brothers Jack and Bill to carry on the family businesses of waterfront dining and boat tours on Lake Mendota. In June 2020 the family announced that they would close Captain Bill's in Middleton and concentrate on their Westport businesses. In Winter 2021, they also closed up shop at NauTiGal for the winter but plan to reopen it along with Betty Lou Cruises in June 2022. The Betty Lou boat 'Bella has gotten a facelift for the season including new carpet, wood flooring, countertops, tables, and a new bar.

MEDITERRANEAN HOOKAH LOUNGE 77 Sirloin Strip, Madison Lebanese culture and a chill atmosphere are the core of the culture co-owners Tommy Hanna and brother Simon bring to the Capitol View Heights neighborhood where you can find belly dancers, hookah in assorted flavors, karaoke nights, and authentic Lebanese cuisine. During the Covid crisis, the kitchen offered curbside pickup, but currently due to staffing they are offering appetizers in the lounge and have limited hours (Thursday-Saturday evenings). While we will miss the full dinners, for now you can go in on a Friday or Saturday night for karaoke with over 18,000 songs available that can be viewed on their website.

MICHAEL'S FROZEN CUSTARD 3826 Atwood Avenue & 5602 Schroeder Road, Madison Michael Dix has been making frozen custard for more than 30 years. His custard shops have a vintage soda shop vibe and offer cones, sundaes, and shakes as well as burgers, dogs, and fries. Before

the Covid crisis, Michael closed the Monroe Street shop after the government denied his partner, Sergio De La O Hernandez, reentry to the United States due to challenges with US immigration. Later during Covid, Sergio was able to rejoin his family in Wisconsin, and Michael reopened the Monroe Street location. The shop made the news again when the landlord who owned the building declined to renew the lease. Lucky for us, there are still two locations to enjoy.

MIGRANTS 2601 W Beltline Hwy, Madison If you have been missing Fuegos, this is a stop for you. Executive Chef Oscar Villarreal's menu offers tacos, burritos, vegetarian, vegan, and brunch items, and an array of salsas in a variety of textures and heat. A side order of his queso sauce is a flavorful treat that's unlike anything in Dane County. The name of the restaurant is a nod to a familial history of migrant farmers who traveled from Texas, through the Midwest, and back again doing the work needed to supply America with produce.

SHAMROCK BAR & GRILLE 117 West Main Street, Madison The Shamrock is technically Madison's oldest gay bar. The original bar began in 1985, and since 2013 owner Bob Mahr has worked to keep his downtown bar's drink specials affordable and the food menu accessible, including a popular brunch menu that features the "Shamosa" that's more turbo-charged than a classic mimosa. Yes, it is a gay bar, but that doesn't mean you can't go there for some classic Wisconsin pastimes—happy hour (3-7), Friday fish fry, and Packers games are all on tap.

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

WILLALBY'S CAFE 1351 Williamson Street, Madison Owner Nate Prince took over Willalby's in 2010 after working there for a decade. The diner is a long-time institution on Williamson Street known for its vegan-friendly breakfasts and giant buttermilk pancakes that are among the best in town. You can expect things to be a bit more like before at this stage in the pandemic (although some still miss the late-night dining).

WOOFS 114 King Street, Madison Dino Maniaci's King Street bar has served patrons since 2008 and with an industrial vibe unlike anything in the city. It offers a variety of activities and events as well as dart/pool leagues and leather nights. If you are already downtown, do as their website suggests and stay downtown to check them out.

OTHER BUSINESSES

THE BAKER'S TABLE Sun Prairie Gavin Logan is the baker behind pies and treats you can find at local restaurants like D'Vino and Salvatore's Tomato Pies. Since winning a Channel 3000 food photo contest, orders have been coming in. Logan does not have a brick-and-mortar location but the goods are made in a commercial kitchen and available for order via the website. You can also frequently find him selling at the Sun Prairie farmers' market with help from his foster sons.

CARACAS AREPAS & EMPANADAS Madison Caracas Empanadas and Caracas Arepas are food carts owned by Luis Dompablo and his partner in life and business, David Piovanetti. Priding themselves on fresh,



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Gavin Logan,
The Baker's Table



Nate Prince, Willalby's Cafe



Doug Swenson & Omar Lopez,
Cafe Social



Bob Mahr,
Shamrock Bar & Grille



Mary Celley, Bee Charmer

local, authentic ingredients, they produce delicious products from Dompablo's Venezuelan culture (including addictive and mouth-watering sauces like their green guacaca). You can purchase their food weekdays on Library Mall or Saturdays on East Main Street. Looking ahead, they are among the local producers selected as founding members of Madison's future public market (planned for 2023).

CHEF SCOTTY **Madison** Scott Wagner, also known as "Chef Scotty" is a man who has seen and done it all, seemingly, in food. He has built successful empires of restaurants, cafes, and nightclubs, catered to the rich and famous, and been awarded countless awards and commendations for his work. Now Chef Scotty is here, back in his Wisconsin roots and hoping to reconnect with family and friends to build something new.

D-BAR BAKERY **Madison** D•Bar Bakery is a home bakery settled conveniently in Madison. Dustin Barman loves bringing your ideas and creative thoughts to life in a way that builds community and enhances your gathering. Offerings range from light summer tarts to traditional tiered wedding cakes or beautiful, themed cakes for any occasion.

SIMPLY SERVED PERSONAL CHEF **McFarland** J Moe prepares meals, offers cooking lessons one-on-one or for groups, serves food for special events, and sources seasonal ingredients for omnivores or those with gluten-free or vegan palates. As a personal chef, J does everything from shopping for ingredients to preparing food in your home, cleaning the kitchen, and storing meals in your fridge or freezer.

STUBBORN MULE CATERING **Madison** Co-owned by Ryan Meueller, Stubborn Mule Catering focuses on creating unique events. Menus are always different, and they bring fresh ideas to catering large events or personal chef services. When possible, they source ingredients from farmers' markets and base menus off of local, seasonal ingredients. Currently all staff are fully vaccinated and will mask as requested.

AROUND THE STATE

As we look to have a more statewide stance, we are including locations outside of Madison. Want to see your business on our list? Let us know at contact@ourliveswisconsin.com.

BEE CHARMER **Brooklyn** Ask Mary Celley anything about bees, and she will bring her many years of experience and education in horticulture to explain why different honey has different flavor or how you can successfully keep bees at home. The honey bee enthusiast has been known for selling raw organic honey, candles, and beeswax at the Dane County Farmers' Market. This year, you can find her on Main Street selling

customer favorite heirloom tomatoes alongside pumpkins, squash, and ambrosia sweet corn in addition to the honey products.

BIG PUNCH FARM **Edgerton** Liv and Wendi are queer farmers farming on small land in a small town. They are passionate about growing fresh, organic, and affordable veggies and addressing food insecurity where possible. Wendi faces disabilities that make it impossible to hold a typical job, and Liv faces chronic pain issues. They find that their love for one another and farming accommodates them so they can value personal health while retaining some financial independence.

DOTTIE'S BAR & BISTRO **1200 Main Street, Cross Plains** After more than 30 years working for a local cable company, Craig Kimball was ready for a change. He and his partner Kongmeng Vang talked for years about opening up their own place, and a vacancy at the former Coach's Club in Cross Plains gave them that opportunity. Named after Craig's mother, Dottie's mixes Louisiana comfort food and decor with Wisconsin sports memorabilia. Make it a destination, or stop by on your way to American Players Theater. You can also rent the upstairs banquet room for private events.

GREAT NORTHERN DISTILLING **1011 2nd Street, Stevens Point** There are some exciting new ventures for food, coffee, and drinks in Stevens Point. One development will be a new location for the Great Northern Distilling company (opening in the fall). Brian Cummins founded the distillery in 2013 after a career in the paper industry. He thought about using his culinary palette to start a restaurant or brewery, but he felt that the market was too flooded with well-established brewers. Bottles include Vodka from local potatoes, gin from wheat and wheat malt with aromatics, bourbon, rye, coffee liquor, and a barrel-aged rum made with organic sugar.

GRASSROOTS FARM **Monroe** Even before the pandemic, farmer FL Morris of Grassroots Farm thought a lot about food security. For years she has been committed to leading a more equitable and just way of growing and sharing food. Whether it's packing vegetables in boxes for community supported agriculture members or driving crops to restaurants or farmers' markets, she's always wondered how she could help to tighten up the connections between farmers, laborers, and customers. Since she purchased land with her mother in 2007, FL has grown just about everything, from her first garlic crops to squash to peppers, and most recently, hemp for CBD production.

HAMBURGER MARY'S **730-734 South 5th Street, Milwaukee** Hamburger Mary's is a burger joint with a one-of-a-kind menu and entertainment. Known for an open-minded atmosphere and eclectic drag shows,



Jessica & Erika Jones,
Giant Jones
Brewing



Dave Eick,
FIVE
Nightclub

Mary's has become a staple of the LGBTQ community since the first restaurant opened in San Francisco in 1972. It now has locations across the country. The stars of the Mary's menu are the gourmet half-pound burgers with your choice of beef, chicken breast, or Beyond Burger.

LUNA CIRCLE FARM **Rio** It's easy to spot the stand with the purple awning at the Dane County Farmers' Market. Owner Tricia Bross brings a lifelong experience of farming to her work along with more than a quarter century of experience specializing in organic vegetables. This MOSA-certified farm grows an array too wide to list including the tomatillos found in the tomatillo salsa kits sold at the Willy Street Co-op. Bross also holds a Masters in Accounting so when you buy from her, you can be sure that prices are set sufficient to pay fair wages to those who work her farm.

MILLIE'S COFFEE AND EATERY **214 W. Main Street, Cambridge** Courtney Sargent and Jen O'Branovich originally had a vision of opening a supper

club, but the Covid crisis caused them to delay and rethink their plan. They serve breakfast all day with brioche sandwiches, salads, avocado crumpets, and specials. Millie's focuses on sourcing ingredients locally, putting a priority on buying from producers led by women, people of color, and LGBTQ community members. Big Punch Farm supplies organic produce, and Rude Brew Kombucha supplies probiotic beverages. The cafe is in a good spot to serve commuters to Madison, bike riders, art enthusiasts, Lake Ripley visitors, and summer tourists from Illinois.

TODO POSTRES **958 West Oklahoma Ave, Milwaukee** Pedro Garcia-Rios & Jesus Bisoso run a Latin bakery offering traditional items as well as custom sweet temptations for all occasions. They say a picture is worth a thousand words, so their Tik Tok could practically fill volumes. Check it out to see their mouthwatering flan, tres leches, and beautiful cakes made for an eclectic clientele.

OTHER NOTABLE CHANGES

IN 2018, KATIE MILLER used a masters in nutrition and dietetics to guide **The Good Table's** pop-up dinners for Madison's LGBTQ+ community. When Covid shut things down, Katie decided to pursue training as an OBGYN physician's assistant at UW-Madison as a different way to support all aspects of health for the queer community. The Good Table events have officially come to an end, but they encourage people to continue to share meals together as they are able.

Roots Chocolates of Wisconsin Dells also announced that they will be ceasing operations as owner Lisa Nelson is moving on to new adventures. ■

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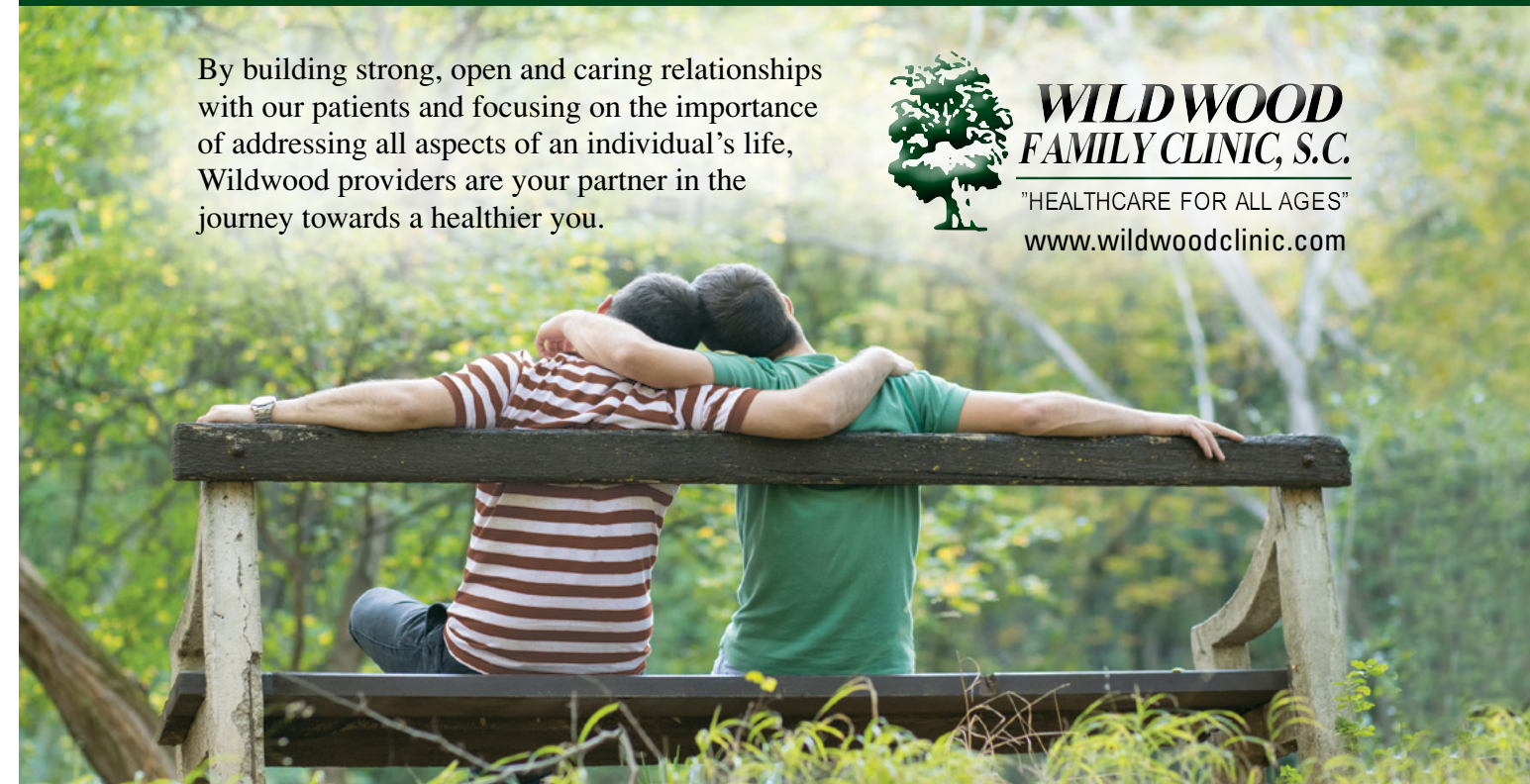
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EDITOR'S NOTE: Is there another business you want to see included? Please let us know at contact@ourliveswisconsin.com.



ORGANIZING SOCIAL JUSTICE CONFLICT RESOLUTION

Doing the Work: In-community harm, accountability, and healing

How do we hold others accountable who cause harm, and what does that accountability look like? **Jill Nagler** charts a path that leaves space for intra-community healing.

ORGANIZING, ACTIVISM, and even interpersonal relationships are difficult to navigate when conflict and harm occur. Whether the conflict and/or harm is due to unfulfilled expectations or more severe forms of harm and manipulation, we are often not given the tools needed to address problems before they escalate. Holding people accountable requires a great deal of emotional labor and responsibility. It can be difficult to want to put in the work of addressing the behavior of our friends, fellow organizers, and community members while simultaneously fighting systems of injustice and oppression. It is also difficult to please everyone involved. Some folks will think that measures are too punitive while others will think that anything less than punishment is coddling.

If we want to build better worlds that don't treat people as disposable, then we must view the accountability process as a way of transforming the harm—both by supporting those most impacted by the harm, as well as supporting those who committed harm.

The absence of perfect systems of accountability has led to avoidance as the normative and acceptable response to conflict and harm. Additionally, since accountability processes are often left unaddressed or unfulfilled, we are not always willing to put in the labor required or even able to know what our needs are in order to resolve conflict and harm.

This creates a dilemma in which the simplest response is to do nothing to confront the harm, or utilize systems of punishment to make decisions on behalf of those impacted, which are generally not centered in justice and can lead to creating more barriers between those most impacted and those who are creating conflict and harm. These conditions make accountability especially difficult and laborious, as we have to create individual, context specific, and community-centered processes.

Admittedly it is difficult to know what the best course of action is to hold people and systems accountable, especially as most accountability measures require the community most impacted by the harm to come up with solutions. And anyone who has been involved in organizing and activism knows that getting folks to work together, even in the best of circumstances, is difficult, let alone when the work is complex and nuanced. Especially when calls for accountability are often met with resistance, defensiveness, and deflection.

Resistance and defensiveness are understandable reactions when conflict and claims of harm arise; however, these responses should not be accountability killers. Unfortunately these responses are often where conversations end. And while we expect these accountability killing behaviors from corporations, politicians, and others with power and privilege, this also occurs more often than not when community members, organizers, activists, and organizations that claim to uphold values of accountability and justice have been harmful. Predictably this usually leads those community members, organizers, and activists involved to either disappear completely from community involvement without recognition of the harm they caused, or vehemently deny reports of harm and carry on with business as usual, causing further harm. Sometimes a shallow apology is offered and sometimes those involved in the harm caused do some performative work to try to appease the community. Rarely are folks voluntarily, transparently, and humbly involved in accountability processes that break cycles of harm, leaving those who were most impacted to deal with their pain, and any misplaced retaliation from the general public, while those who may have enabled harm to occur are rarely held accountable for their participation in causing or enabling harm.

Why does this matter? Because we as members of the LGBTQ+ community are still fighting for our rights to exist, still fighting against violent legislation, and we still experience sig-

nificant divisions within our community. It is simultaneously true that the greater LGBTQ+ community is generally safer and more accepted than we have been in the past, our safety is not secure in all situations and in all contexts. And intra-community harm is still prevalent in the LGBTQ+ community in both interpersonal contexts as well as in social services and political contexts. Namely, the greater lesbian and gay community has never been completely safe for—nor inclusive of—transgender, nonbinary, and gender-expansive folks. Regardless of the repeated assault aimed at the entire LGBTQ+ community, some members of the cisgender lesbian and gay community continue to be actively violent towards transgender, nonbinary, and gender-expansive people. And some cisgender lesbian and gay folks refuse to advocate for the transgender, nonbinary, and gender-expansive community, despite the reality that the liberation of our entire LGBTQ+ community is deeply intertwined—which is crystal clear considering the legislative bills that have been introduced which are aimed at censoring any mention of gender AND sexuality in schools, specifically aimed at LGBTQ+ people.

The lack of cross-identity advocacy in the LGBTQ+ community is also true of other intersections and overlapping identities. Calls of unity, inclusiveness, and collective liberation end as soon as those with the most power and privilege gain even limited liberation. And trying to hold folks accountable for harm or create safer spaces for folks who do not have broader safety within the LGBTQ+ community is seen as an affront to the entire LGBTQ+ community, even though we all understand the importance of safety and community. Safety is pitted against in-group loyalty, but not considered for folks who do not have access to power and privilege. This often means that those who are most in need of resources, services, and support are driven away from the generally scarce resources and services available to the most vulnerable members of the LGBTQ+ community. We need to do better, we can do better, and we deserve better.

A PATH FORWARD

If we want to build better worlds that don't treat people as disposable, then we must view the accountability process as a way of transforming the harm—both by supporting those most impacted by the harm, as well as supporting those who committed harm.

How do we recognize that accountability is both simple and complicated? That it requires

the willingness to expend emotional labor, and that the emotional labor is worth it to prevent further conflict and harm? And how do we let go of judgment and perfectionism while also challenging folks to be better? Can we hold people accountable with compassion and care while also ensuring that they are committed to resolving conflict and/or the harm they caused? How do we create a shared understanding of accountability when our expectations for accountability are disparate? Are we committed to transforming the toxic systems we were born into, or are we just looking to place blame? And when has accountability been achieved? Who gets to decide when someone has fulfilled the requirements of an accountability process?

Unfortunately, there is no prescriptive formula that can be applied equally to every situation, in every context that calls for an accountability process. However, maybe we can start asking the questions posed above, as well as try to apply the following ideas to our own interpersonal and community relationships:

- Listen when someone tells you that they are hurt, and not just to respond;
- Know that we all hurt people, and that intentions don't lessen the impact of harm, but we can do better;
- Be ready to apologize and to do the work to change behavior that led to hurt;
- Try to be less defensive when people make sugges-

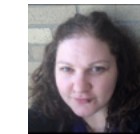
- tions on how you can be more accountable—especially if you are a leader;
- Understand that holding people accountable requires establishing relationships and supporting those who are harmed, as well as supporting those who have caused harm;
- Consider that accountability is an opportunity for growth—it is an opportunity to deepen your interpersonal relationships and your community;
- Include people in your accountability measures—build systems of accountability proactively so that there are less opportunities for conflict and harm to occur;
- Understand that we are all accountable to one another in various ways as a matter of the interdependence of being part of social systems, as a matter of being human—we all know how we would like to be treated better, let's apply that to how we treat others;

If you are a leader of any kind, please be humble and lead by example—which means recognizing when you have caused harm and apologizing;

We need to also be accountable to ourselves—which may be the most difficult, as it requires us to examine our relationships with others as well as reflecting on our relationship with ourselves.

Despite knowing how new systems are needed to combat the systems of oppression that perpetuate the cycles of violence in the

queer community, especially intra-community violence, we can find all the reasons in the world not to work toward just and compassionate accountability measures. It's difficult work to constantly be fighting injustices personal, political, and systemic. It can be easy to think of some people as unworthy of our time and energy. And in the cases where there is nothing that can be done to transform the harm or to satisfy those who are most impacted, it feels impossible to know how to move forward because we have to build these systems that center justice from scratch. But for those of us who believe that prison abolition is achievable, that a police-free society is possible, and that we can work through harm outside of the systems of punishment that are status quo, we have to be willing to put in the work to reimagine all systems of harm and punishment and how we can respond in ways that humanize everyone impacted. Our community, our communities, and our liberation are worth it. ■



JILL NAGLER is serving their second term as President of the Board of Directors at OutReach where ze has brought a focus to issues of racial justice and representation in the LGBTQ+ community, including co-founding and facilitating Reading Antiracism: An OutReach Book Club.



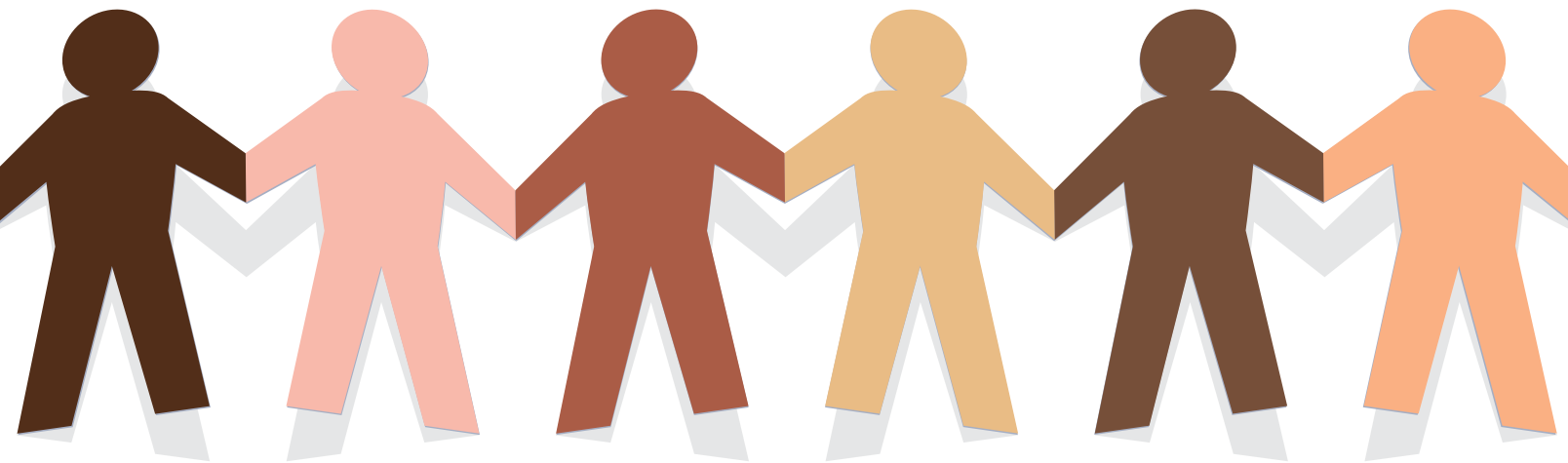
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QTBIPOC RACIAL JUSTICE RADICAL LIBERALISM

Going Beyond the Racial Justice Binary

South Asian immigrant **Ankita Bharadwaj** unpacks ways that the modern left's approach often reduces racial justice to Black and white, and how that harms other people of color.

WHEN I FIRST LANDED in America in 2015, I hoped for a more liberal and free life for myself. I thought it had to be better than India. After all, they call this the land of the free. I was wrong. A few weeks after my arrival I was called a “sand n*****” on State Street and a “free-loader” on campus. A year after my arrival, I was subjected to unequal standards at my co-op by being assigned more house chores while I was recovering from a hip fracture. When I obviously failed to do them, I was “voted out” by a house full of

“When you go back to the roots of it all, you see that the same system that is putting our environment under threat is the same system that gave us the racialized hierarchy, the idea of a white race, a Black race, and everything in between.”

white people where I was the only person of color and an immigrant. Later I was “voted in” at another co-op. I thought my life had to get better. After all, how much hate can one receive? I was wrong again.

Within five years of my arrival, I'd twice been subjected to housing insecurity by white majority systems who claimed to house low-income, marginalized folks on their tax forms. Add verbal assaults on the streets

and on campus to that. And in 2020, while America burned for racial justice and called for radical change, the same co-op system quietly found ways to discontinue housing for the Nepalis and the Indians, the Hindus or people from the country India, that lived there. What followed for me and others was immediate homelessness. But it wasn't before I was told by advocates of “community policing” that I should put my body between the cops and a now convicted abuser, when they came to arrest him, that I realized the movement has gotten this all wrong. They said this after knowing full well that this person had also beaten up South Asians in a bar after insulting Islam. He was charged with a hate crime, which was later dropped by the court in exchange for a less serious felony charge of disorderly conduct. The harm on those folks was downplayed. Asian hate was not only taken seriously but a precedent was set for future cases like this one.

I am telling you all this for two reasons. The first is that I want you to see America from the eyes of a South Asian person, a perspective that desperately needs more visibility. Second, so that you can see how the current system, as well as the systems that “leftist radicals” are proposing, do not work. This is obvious from the fact that co-op living, which is often called a “radical push-back against Capitalism” embarrassingly fails

in the face of real and inclusive racial justice. It allows and gets away with violence against those of us who are often left out in the “Great Western Racial Justice Movement.” This is also evident from the fact that brown Asian immigrant lives matter less as we are often expected to give more than we receive. Expecting me to put my body and my life on the line to protect a domestic abuser and a person who beat up my brown South Asian brothers for their color and religion is not only reprehensible, but also hangs those of us out who do not fit the narrative, out to dry. But what narrative am I talking about?

Emma Dabiri, a Nigerian-Irish Lecturer in the UK who holds in her book “What People Can Do Next” said in an interview with *Time* that “When you go back to the roots of it all, you see that the same system that is putting our environment under threat is the same system that gave us the racialized hierarchy, the idea of a white race, a Black race, and everything in between.” She is right. This narrative centers whiteness as some sort of a yard stick to compare oppressions of non-white folks, and it definitely pits non-white folks against each other. And while I refuse to fall prey to this narrative, I have painfully acknowledged that people around me might. I want to emphasize that race is a social construct with political and economical implications and has nothing to do with the physics behind chromatics. We are people. Not electromagnetic waves. Comparing oppressions is white supremacy.

Sadly, this narrative is what drives the Western efforts towards racial justice. I have seen white folks who marched for Black Lives stay silent on Asian hate crimes. I have seen white socialists who marched for #AbolishIce lecture immigrant Asians how we do not belong in the movement. I have seen

white leftists call Asians “privileged” as they ironically group us together as a homogeneous group of people, while conveniently forgetting their own. Recently when some Asian students were at the receiving end of hate crimes, Madison's supposedly leftist news outlet refused to write about it. The reason cited to me was, “We cannot believe the police reports.” The only way they could write about it was if the students came forward to talk about it while making themselves vulnerable by exposing themselves, or if a video of the incident went viral. Both options are not only unreasonable but also puts the onus of proving the hate crime on the victims, ie. the Asians. Western leftists preach that victims should be believed and protected. The irony was not lost on me. This also showcases that Western leftists fetishize opposition to the police system.

A famous diversity and inclusion author, Robin DiAngelo, has contributed much to raise awareness about subtle and overt racism. She even coined the word “white fragility” to describe the defensiveness that white people resort to when held accountable. If you read her work and watch her talks and interviews, you will see a race-conscious and woke white person using her privilege to educate other white people. But if you go deeper, you'd see a white person defining race as she sees it. She centers her experiences and her narrative. She further portrays race as a binary concept: Black and white. She dives deep into police brutality on Black folks while conveniently forgetting about more numerous Native murders as she stands on stolen native land.

Yes, I know I told you I won't compare oppressions. But this repetitive narrative makes me wonder, why is this propaganda propagated all over the West? Why is the left so insistent on creating a binary racial discourse? Why is there so much emphasis on creating a color “spectrum” that centers whiteness? I firmly believe it is because whiteness has committed so many crimes against humanity that it cannot bear the burden of dealing with all of the intense resultant trauma caused. I also believe that the sheer number of atrocities



ANKITA BHARADWAJ (they/them) is an Indian lawyer, legal scholar, and organizer who focuses on intersectional movement-building practices. They serve on the police civilian oversight board of Madison and chaired the equitable hiring tool task force of the city of Madison. They host, produce, and write content of their WORT 89.9 FM show called “Subtle Desi Traits” which focuses on amplifying voices of South Asian, BIPOC, queer, immigrant folks, and women.

whiteness has caused and continues to cause makes one resort to the comfort of self-righteous Marxist or a leftist ideologies. It drives whiteness to paint a narrative that suits its self-preserving agenda. After all, Karl Marx was a rich white man who had the luxury to be heard and seen. He has the opulence to be revered as an anti-capitalist hero by modern leftist wokes, even after his death.

She is right. This narrative centers whiteness as some sort of a yard stick to compare oppressions of non-white folks, and it definitely pits non-white folks against each other.

The real tragedy of the “Great Western Racial Justice Movement” is that major racial justice movements have been found around Marx's philosophy. The West reveres a man who famously said, “Is it a misfortune that magnificent California was seized from the lazy Mexicans who did not know what to do with it?” And while the “left” and “woke” West religiously follow an extremely flawed binary racial justice discourse and worship a white man who had the privilege to be heard and seen even after his death, the “in-betweens” remain invisible to the “Great Western Racial Justice Movement.”



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ORGANIZING SOCIAL SERVICES EVENTS & NETWORKING

Checking in: An OutReach Update

Madison's LGBTQ community center is about to resume in-person programming. LGBTQ+ Senior Advocate **Linda Lenzke** details what's coming down the pipe.

IN THE LAST ISSUE of *Our Lives*, I wrote about the impact of social distancing and isolation on our LGBTQ+ community, due to both the pandemic of the past two years and our Midwestern winters. As I write, it's late April and winter seems to have lingered like a bad mood. The good news is that there are warm and sunny days ahead, and the OutReach LGBTQ+ Community Center in Madison is planning for the return of our community members.

We'd like to introduce our Program Advocates: AJ Hardie, our new Transgender Advocate; Kristi Mason, our LGBTQ+ Senior Advocate; and me, our LGBTQ+ Alcohol and Other Drug Abuse (AODA) Advocate. We've been impatiently waiting to welcome our community's return. We hosted the Celebrate Trans Joy in Community event on April 23 at Olbrich Park, and we're planning both the Chip-in-Fore Community Golf Outing, a fundraising event to benefit Willma's Fund on June 4, and the Magic Pride Festival at Warner Park on Sunday, August 21.

The OutReach LGBTQ+ Community Center is open, and we've expanded our offices, leasing additional space for our administrative staff, including our new Administrative Assistant, Becca Vines. We are relaunching support and social groups and have continued facilitating both virtual Zoom meetings during the pandemic and recently in 2022, hybrid meetings. New support and social groups are in the works, and as we learned from our survey last year, our LGBTQ+ community members are eager to return and participate in in-person events and groups again. We're also recruiting volunteers.

We couldn't do the work we do without the donations of our community members, the generous corporate sponsorships of our events, and the grants we receive from the City of Madison, Dane County, the State of Wisconsin, and community partners. Lastly, a thank you to our Executive Director, Steve Starkey, our board members, volunteers, and the administrative staff that supports the work we do on behalf of our community.

Most importantly—there's you—our



community. We've missed you, and we look forward to seeing you again. Following are introductions from our program staff in their own words.

OUTREACH PROGRAM DIRECTOR

First, we say goodbye, good luck, and thank you to our former Program Director, Mark Long, who in April made the decision to finish their doctorate and explore other opportunities. Mark led the programs the past two years, navigating the pandemic while serving our community members virtually and in-person when it was safe.



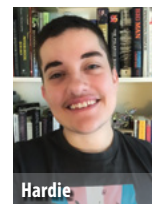
Long

Watch for an upcoming job announcement on the OutReach LGBTQ+ Community Center website when Steve Starkey, Executive Director, begins accepting applications and scheduling interviews. Here are the amazing people you'll work with on behalf of our LGBTQ+ community.

AJ HARDIE, TRANSGENDER ADVOCATE

I am a queer, trans masculine nonbinary person and use both he/him and they/them pronouns. I chose to work at OutReach and specifically with the trans community because I believe that our way forward is based in collective action and mutual support. Being trans has never been easy, and right now my

community is facing unprecedented, coordinated legal and social attacks around the world. I feel that it is my responsibility as a person with racial, educational, and economic privilege to elevate the voices of members of my community without the same access to power and to provide assistance where and when it is wanted. I can be reached at ajh@lgbtoutreach.org.



Hardie

My work as the Transgender Advocate at OutReach includes peer support, advocacy, and community education. More specifically, I'm here to listen and provide support for people in discussions of gender identity (transitioning, coming out, safe sex, or other topics) and connect people with businesses or service providers that are trans friendly.

I am also involved in community education efforts, helping individuals and organizations better support the trans community by providing training that covers things like what it means to be trans and/or gender expansive and how to create an affirming environment and be an effective ally to the trans community. I also work closely with the Madison Area Transgender Association, supporting the group and its members however I can.

LINDA LENZKE, LGBTQ+ AODA ADVOCATE

I identify as a lesbian and my preferred pronouns are she, her, and hers. I'm the LGBTQ+ AODA Advocate for the OutReach LGBTQ+ Community Center. I've been in recovery for over 35 years from alcohol, substances, and behaviors that no longer serve me. I share my lived experience with community members that I support and facilitate LGBTQ+ 12-Step AA and AI-Anon meetings. I recently completed Wisconsin Certified Peer-Specialist Training.



Lenzke

Prior to becoming the LGBTQ+ AODA Advocate for OutReach in 2020, I was an OutReach volunteer for many years, as an emcee and producer for the GALVANize Pride March entertainment, I co-facilitated the Women for Women (W4W) social and support group, and I was a founding member of the LGBTQ+ Activist-Writers Group.

In my role as an AODA Advocate, I network and collaborate with other social service and community partners and with our OutReach Advocates and design and conduct educational workshops and presentations. In April, as part of OutReach's "The Road Forward" initiative, I moderated a panel with Dr. Kathy Oriol of Out Health, called "Protecting Our Health," which featured a panel of LGBTQ+ clients

who discussed the challenges faced with accessing healthcare services.

Also in April, advocates Kristi Mason, AJ Hardie, and I presented a workshop at the NAMI Wisconsin Conference. I serve on the Dane County Ending Deaths from Despair Task Force, and I'm a board member of the Dane County Alliance Against Corporate Tobacco. Contact me at lindal@lgbtoutreach.org.

KRISTI MASON, LGBTQ+ SENIOR ADVOCATE

As the LGBTQ+ Senior Advocate, I work with LGBTQ+ individuals over the age of 50. This sector of the LGBTQ+ community is poorer and has less access to resources than those under the age of 50. We also share the common experience of having been deeply closeted during the decades in which it was illegal to be openly LGBTQ+.



Mason

In my role as LGBTQ+ Senior Advocate, I assist LGBTQ+ seniors in connecting to the resources and services that will provide the best quality of life possible.

I also work with senior-serving agencies in Dane County to ensure they are welcoming and knowledgeable regarding the needs of LGBTQ+ seniors. Together with Linda Lenzke, LGBTQ+ AODA Advocate, and AJ Hardie, Transgender Services Advocate,

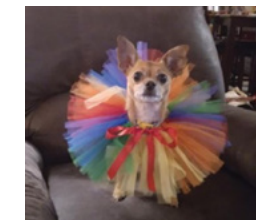
we offer trainings to community organizations. The most popular training is "LGBTQ+ 101," an introduction to LGBTQ+ terminology, identity, and culture.

Finally, I act as the OutReach Liaison on the LGBTQ 50+ Alliance Committee, a joint venture of OutReach and the Madison Senior Center. The LGBTQ 50+ Alliance offers educational, social, and recreational activities to LGBTQ+ seniors. Currently, the 50+ Alliance offers Gay, Gray and Beyond, a general discussion group, and Spirituality Group. The 50+ Alliance is in the process of developing an on-going relationship with SAGE USA, a national senior advocacy organization.

I earned my Master's in Social Work from UW-Madison in 2014 and became a Wisconsin Certified Peer Specialist in September of 2020. My pronouns are she, her, and hers. Email: kristim@lgbtoutreach.org.

MAGGY THE RAINBOW DOG

I'd be remiss if I didn't introduce our program staff mascot, Maggy the Rainbow Dog, who rocks a tutu. Maggy's person is Kristi Mason, our LGBTQ+ Senior Advocate. ■



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Chef's Kiss

After a career catering to the likes of Justin Bieber, Matthew McConaughey, Kobe Bryant, and others, **Chef Scotty** has returned to the Madison area to reconnect with family and friends and build something new.

SCOTT WAGNER, also known as “Chef Scotty” is a man who has seen and done it all, seemingly, in food. He has built successful empires of restaurants, cafes, and nightclubs, catered to the rich and famous, been awarded countless awards and commendations, and just last year he was so busy with wedding catering that he frequently worked 70–100-hour work weeks. He lives and breathes food and flavor.

Also, he is tired.

When I met him he was a flurry of activity as he immediately began staging the table scene, placing piles of fruit, each more colorful than the last, with an ease and eye for style as I stood in awe. Large handfuls of leafy greens, colorful citrus, bright red spices and peppers, and a large beautifully orange papaya, cut in two and faced expertly towards the camera, were all arranged in a matter of minutes as he started talking about his life for the past 15 years. Years of success and accolades all came tumbling down in San Diego when it came out that his business partner had embezzled more than a million dollars. Scott, unable to get a loan to rebuild, had to reinvent himself, turning to highend catering in the Bahamas to the likes of Justin Bieber, Matthew McConaughey, Kobe Bryant, and other rich and powerful people. Hoping to get a juicy tidbit about someone famous, I asked him what that was like. “The famous people are almost always super-nice,” he said, to my slight disappointment. “It’s their friends and entourage you want to be wary of,” he said with a wry smile.

Now Chef Scotty is here, coming back to his Wisconsin roots and hoping to reconnect with family and friends and build something new. He lamented that he’s missed every wedding over the past dozen years, and missed watching some of his nieces and nephews grow up. Ironically though, when his wedding catering business took off, he saw them less than when he lived across the county. During the peak season, he worked 62 days without a break. Taking a step back to reflect on where to go from here, he’s at a crossroads, trying to learn how to prioritize family and connection and working to recover from burnout, both creative and

physical. “I am usually a one-man show,” he sighed. He wants to start thinking about retirement, and spending time with his parents. One hundred-hour work weeks and single-handedly creating multi-course meals every night is not sustainable in the end. So, he continues to look for the next thing, hoping to build out of it a solid crew and business that can run itself and allow for more personal freedom.

Chef Scotty is looking to potentially purchase and set up a wedding venue in New Glarus. He’s also looking to create an organic product line where he can build the recipes, develop the product, and eventually allow people to bring some of his vision into their home and cooking.

As people are craving local connections, slower food processes, and an answer to heavily processed food of unknown origin, Chef Scotty is thinking about how he can answer that call. “Food starts with the ground, farmers, ranchers, and then goes through the chef to honor the person on the other side, the consumer,” he stated as he expertly sliced a mango.

Chef Scotty is also tired of the “smoke and mirrors” of Food Network and competitive chef culture. “We have bigger problems, like how to start thinking about cutting out fish and beef, and how to use the best ingredients,” he continued. “The environment is the most important thing for all of us.”

So what’s next? Chef Scotty is looking to potentially purchase and set up a wedding venue in New Glarus. He is also looking to create an organic product line where he can build the recipes, develop the product, and eventually allow people to bring some of his vision into their home and cooking. He’s here to stay, and the Southern Wisconsin food scene is all the better for it—although he doesn’t rule out keeping the private chef job in the Bahamas for the winter to escape the snow and ice. Ultimately, he is learning how to let go, be happy in putting out a great product, and living life out of the fast lane for a while. ■

Chef Scotty doing what he does best.



www.willystreet.coop “Progress” Pride Flag designed by Daniel Quasar.



QTBIPOC ACTIVISM

A Space for Conversation

After coming out in a conservative area, **Harshman Sihra** has used open dialogue and activism to revive their high school's GSA and engage in wider community activism.

I CAME OUT to my parents through a newspaper article. Yup, you read that right. Growing up in India, LGBTQ+ identities were often met with ridicule, laughter, at its extremes—perversion, but most of all—they were met with silence. Talking about anything that didn't fit the norm was simply taboo and just not entertained. That's why it took me years to come out to my parents. Maybe in our ever-progressing world, my fear was unreasonable. But I'm glad I waited to do it because of the shift our world is making as a whole.

With recent homophobic and transphobic legislation popping up all over the nation, including Wisconsin, I imagine many of you will disagree with my attitude. However, I still do believe that our society is progressing toward acceptance—and a big part of that is activism by our youth.

Activism is about turning something bitter into something sweet. And I've done that with my activism. As I came to terms with my identity during my teenage years, it was tough coming out to friends who were from conservative families. It's super-hard to respect people's opinions when it disagrees with your literal sense of self.

My very first interaction with this tough situation involved an extremely close friend I had gotten to know during Covid. We hung out nearly every day and had formed a bond that I thought would last a lifetime. As we got to know each other more, she would at times make jokes about LGBTQ+ people, and I'd simply laugh along to make sure I didn't reveal myself. Then, as our friendship grew closer, I realized I couldn't do that anymore. On a trip home from Starbucks, I came out to her as bi and non-binary. It was really difficult. She said some pretty hateful things. And we both distanced away from each other for a while for our own well-being. After some time had passed, I knew I didn't want to lose this friend. She had stood by me for quite some time, and I had to reach out to her. We began talking again, and through many conversations and group hangouts, her stance changed. While she won't be showing up at the next pride parade anytime soon, the hate she carried within her wasn't there anymore.

This interaction is really what began my journey in LGBTQ+ activism. I saw that if I could change my friend's mind, maybe I could do that for other people, too. I decided to bring back my school's GSA after it had evaporated because of Covid. Bringing it back during quarantine and virtual school wasn't easy, but I saw a need for a safe haven, and I built it. Today, the Brookfield Central GSA is one of the largest clubs we have on campus. We host bi-weekly discussions about current events relating to the LGBTQ+ community, organize drives and events—including a picnic with three schools and more than 60 attendees—and most important of all, we get to know each other better.

During my time in high school, I've organized food drives for the Milwaukee LGBT Center, spoken at a panel advocating for the Equal-



I wish I could go back to my 5-year-old self, who loved playing with dolls and wearing his mom's jewelry and makeup, and tell him not to listen to what the Indian culture defines as masculine.

ity Act in Wisconsin, interviewed with journalists over my activism, volunteered for the Human Rights Campaign, phonebanked to pass legislation in Wisconsin and beyond, and so on. But my journey is just beginning. I won't rest until we have true equality in this country. That begins with passing federal legislation that protects disadvantaged populations from persecution. Eliminating biases from our legislation will take time, but it can be done—and I will be a part of making it happen. Nelson Mandela once said "To deny people their human rights is to challenge their very humanity." I plan to continue speaking out against that challenge to our rights throughout my life, as a college student, medical student, and future womxn's health physician.

I wish I could go back to my 5-year-old self, who loved playing with dolls and wearing his mom's jewelry and makeup, and tell him not to listen to what the Indian culture defines as masculine. Or go back to my 12-year-old self, who had his first crush on a guy and would cry himself to sleep over his "abnormality," and tell him not to listen to his culture's rejection of sexualities. I can't turn back time, but I can contribute to creating an accepting world that doesn't suppress identities, so no other kid has to face what I had to face. ■



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