

QUEER KY





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Queer Kentucky is a diverse LGBTQ+ run non-profit based in Louisville, Kentucky working to bolster and enhance Queer culture and health through storytelling, education, and action. Through our storytelling approach, we give visibility and celebrate the lives of LGBTQ+ people in the great Bluegrass State. Visibility alone is life-saving. Queer Kentucky actively works with organizations and businesses on their inclusivity efforts that enhance the well-being of their employees.

Dedication

To every queer person struggling, and to all those
that have succumbed to their struggles.
Please know you aren't alone.

And to the thriving LGBTQ+ people and allies
working to enhance the lives of our community.

We see you fighting, and we're standing with you.

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Dear reader,

My one wish is that the stories and creations between these pages offer us all hope that a life of queerness is a life worth living. Queer lives are precious and worth saving — I am speaking of my own, yours, and also of those that have caused us harm.

I know things are difficult today, and they might even be tomorrow. Things could be shitty for months. I don't know what your life is like, but I know that mine can be pretty fucking stupid sometimes. And sometimes I don't want life to go on. Most of the time, these thoughts pass and the day moves forward. Other times, these thoughts ripen to rot into the depths of my being. I will isolate and create lists in my head of everybody I know and why they hate me. I will think of how I have failed the queer community and the community at large. I will look in the mirror and tell myself that I am disgusting both on the inside and out. I will tell myself that I do not deserve love.

I offer this with no other agenda other than to say: these are facts I sometimes believe to be true. There are a lot of things that bring me shame today.

Despite the shame I sometimes carry on not-so-bright days, I also know to be true that I am a friend. A brother, son and uncle. I am a writer with miles of empathy. I love ideas and sharing them with community. I love helping others and I love giving back. And when I do love, I love really, really hard.

I don't know your story, but I know a version of mine lives in every story of hope brought to me by someone else that has been through what I have been through. So that means I can offer us both some hope.

This week I was struggling so badly, you know? One of those weeks where I couldn't open my laptop or call someone to tell them I wasn't doing OK. Everything was so fucking heavy and I didn't want to do a goddam thing. Nothing.

But by Sunday, a friend called me to tell me that he knew something was up and that he'd help me by hanging out with me and talking and figuring out a course of action. Then he told me "I care about you, Spencer." It was his way of saying, "I love you, and I don't want you to fucking

die because too many people are out there dying because they're sad, and hurting, and ashamed and struggle to ask for help. I need you, we need you." At least that's how I interpreted his comment.

Maybe my friend saved my life. Or I don't know; maybe I would've crawled out of this hole from pure spite itself. Once again, I don't know your story, but I know my 34 years of living off the spite I cling to from others has made me mighty tired. And I need peace. I can't find peace if I'm surviving through spite.

The point of this is to say: life is often hard. We all have our different types of privileges that make our lives easier at times, and we're all still incredibly flawed humans that need help from other humans that have lived a version of our story.

I know that we as a society push people to ask for help, and then we tell people, "You must not need help or be that bad off if you're not asking anyone for help!" That's bullshit. There are plenty of times where if someone knocked on my door and said, "Open the fuck up, I am here to help you get your shit together," I would've cried in relief and let them inside.

It is so important to check in on your people.

Poor mental health and suicidal ideation are forces unlike any other. Shit, the reason this magazine is in your hands so late is because I couldn't wrap my head around life for months. I was struggling, but I wasn't talking about it.

I don't have the answers to much, but I know you're not alone. I know I'm not alone. And I think if we maybe talked to each other a bit more about what's hurting us, a few more of us will make it to a happy old age.

And on the days when you can get out of bed and you can laugh, do your best to live queer and loud, love those who affirm and love you, and try giving yourself a little extra grace and love because we both deserve it. I know this to be true.

I care about you.

Always,





Queer Kentucky is launching a new partnership with the Foundation for a Healthy Kentucky (FHKY) to improve LGBTQ+ mental health in the Commonwealth.

FHKY's mission is to address the unmet health needs of Kentuckians by developing and influencing policy, improving access to care, reducing health risks and disparities, and promoting health equity. Through this new partnership, FHKY will provide funding of more than \$300,000 to Queer Kentucky to support outreach to the LGBTQ+ community across Kentucky for mental health access and suicide prevention and awareness.

Due to the political climate in Kentucky with legislation like SB 150, simply existing as LGBTQ+ has negative effects on health. Much of the LGBTQ+ community also lacks access to healthcare due to fear of discrimination, "traditional" social support systems (like family), and the community lacks economic stability. These are all factors that negatively impact individual health. At its most extreme, those negative effects don't just make people sick — they can drive them to take their own lives.

According to the Trevor Project, 45 percent of young LGBTQ+ people seriously considered attempting suicide in 2021. That's 45 percent too high.

Over the next year, Queer Kentucky will gather data and create programming related to breaking down the stigma related to mental health care and removing barriers to health care access important to the LGBTQ+ community. This programming includes distributing HIV self-testing kits, offering Mindful Movement (trauma-informed breath and bodywork in an LGBTQ+ affirming space), and supporting Queer Kentucky journalists and publications.

Our platform was built around the foundation of the catchphrase "visibility is life-saving" and the FHKY partnership enables QKY to tell MORE queer stories of hope. More people will be able to pick up a magazine or jump on our website and see people with their experiences.



BLACK SHEEP
Ceirra Evans *she/her*



Like the bluegrass,
I'm moving, breathing,
Checking in from checking out.
June slumbers and turns,
Blessing the filaments to cross my wounds
And heal my scars
The warmth of your light
Gives me the hope to climb
High into the heavens, I
Refuse to fall

Tony Piedmonte *he/him*

COMMUNING WITH THE DIVINE

TRANS FOLK ARTIST
LARAH HELAYNE
HEADLINES 2023
QUEER KENTUCKY X
MILE WIDE PRIDE
KICK-OFF PARTY

Sydni Hampton

she/her they/them

When I first met Larah Helayne (they/he) at a bar during a show I was performing in, I was just drinking up the compliments and praise a drag queen receives throughout the night. I had no idea this random introduction would lead to me ending up being a self-proclaimed STAN of one of Kentucky's brightest songwriters. Before I'm anything else, I'm a huge fan of Larah's. Their music has touched me in ways I can only describe as life-altering. I count myself extremely lucky to call Larah a close personal friend now, because that means I can demand to hear the demos of whatever they're working on.

I discovered his first body of work, "Roots," on Spotify when they followed me on Instagram and I saw in their bio they had a link to the album. I listened to every song, but it was "Roots" that really resonated with me. Helayne is a proud queer Appalachian. "Roots," released in 2018, spoke to me as a fellow Kentucky queer, and someone who champions the importance of Kentucky queers staying in the state to effect change and inspire the next generation of scared queer kids, like us, who'd have been so pleased when growing up to see queer and "othered" adults thriving.

Helayne has been very busy since then. They have since released a second EP, "GOOD RIDDANCE," in June 2022; have toured around the eastern United States promoting the EP; have played South by Southwest; and have most recently wrapped up touring with Paisley Fields. Despite being busy, Helayne never stops creating. Now, they are working on their first LP. One of the new pieces is called "Communing with the Divine." The song celebrates their transmasculine lover and his body as it exists, wishing they could "teach him how to love his body, if only you could see it through my eyes." When I first heard the song, I wept. I'm a hopeful romantic and the song captures so purely the love they feel for their partner, and it feels relatable to anyone who's ever loved someone who experiences dysphoria.

Helayne's songwriting always captures the nuance in existing and loving as a queer person. Rather than simply singing about the pain and hardship queer people experience, he chooses to also celebrate their queerness, their transness, and their roots in the Bluegrass. These themes

continue to be present in what is shaping up to be their best record yet.

I sat with Larah and we talked about their upcoming record, their big move to NYC in pursuit of a label, and challenges they've faced as a trans masc artist in the Bluegrass.

SH: So, diva, what's the tea with this record? When do we finally get to hear it?

LH: Well, I've independently released my records, and it's been very difficult. Everything's done, I've written the songs, I just need help getting into the studio to record everything properly.

SH: What is it that you need? A label?

LH: Yeah, I'm hoping that moving to New York I can find a label or make connections to help me get in the rooms I need to be in.

SH: It breaks my heart to see you go. New York could be the spot for you, though.

LH: Yeah, I love Kentucky, but I've had so many challenges due to being queer, and even more when I came out as trans. I've lost out on gigs since coming out, some that I've worked for years and suddenly I'm no longer welcome. Then there have been others that I've gotten pushback, including the one I wanted you there for. I was told ticket sales were low, but they were not and what really happened is they were afraid of protesting. I think New York will pose fewer challenges for me.

SH: I didn't know all of that. I know there for a time you were doing really well here.

LH: During Pride season, yeah. My favorite gigs are ones where I'm [the only] musician, and I'm surrounded by drag queens and queer people. Those gigs are seasonal, though. When I visit New York, I can line up gigs [like that.]

SH: I am manifesting for you. I hope that you get to make this record. You know I lost it hearing the demos.

LH: I wanted to write a tactful, beautiful depiction of T4T (transgender for transgender) relationships.

Simple Southern Life has a few love songs-

SH: Well, Communing with the Divine is MY T4T anthem.

LH: After this I want to make a disco record.

SH: Please are you kidding? We LOVE the nightlife. We LOVE to boogie.

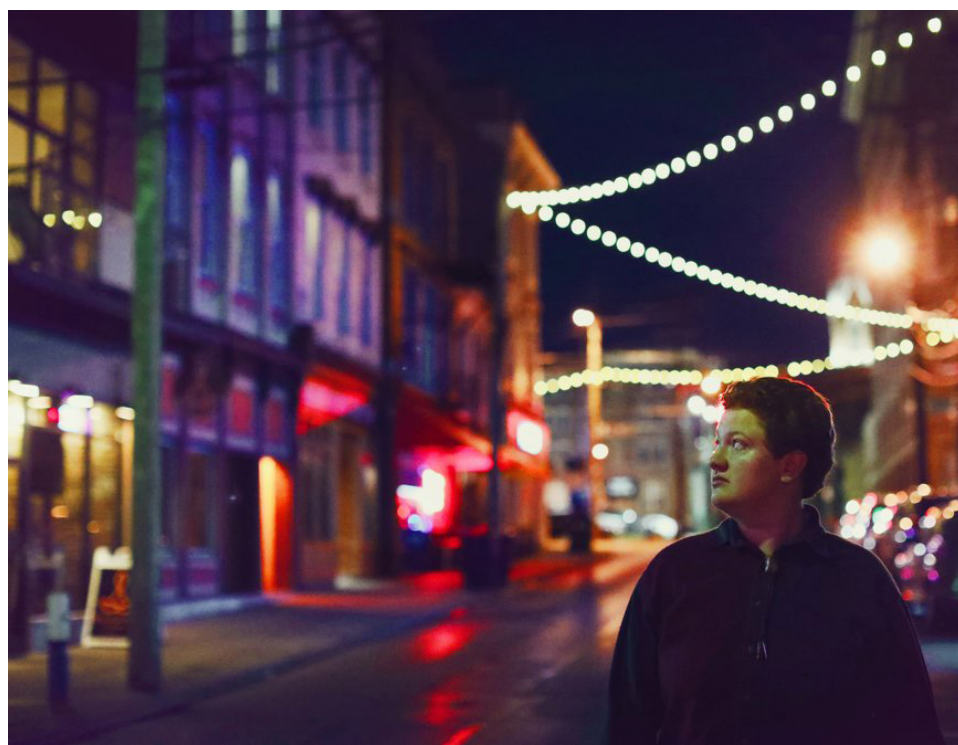
LH: On the disco round. Yeah, a disco record. I have so much I want to do. I want to make the music I want to make, I want to share my connections with other Appalachian artists. I want to just exist and not be scared all the time and start a life with

my partner where we can grow and thrive. I think time away from Kentucky will also remind me of the things I love about it. Touring taught me so much; I made so many friends on tour and now we are all scattered across the country. Part of growing up is figuring out how to exist with your heart torn in little pieces all over the world. I know I'll miss it here. It's true.

Larah and I ended the pseudo-interview here and began making plans to see each other before they came to town for the Queer Kentucky x Mile Wide Pride Kick Off Event, and I did, in fact, cry at 'Communing with the Divine.'

Take a listen to Larah's music at www.larahhelayne.com and if you'd like to support Larah in securing studio time to master this new record, you can donate via Venmo @LarahHelayne.



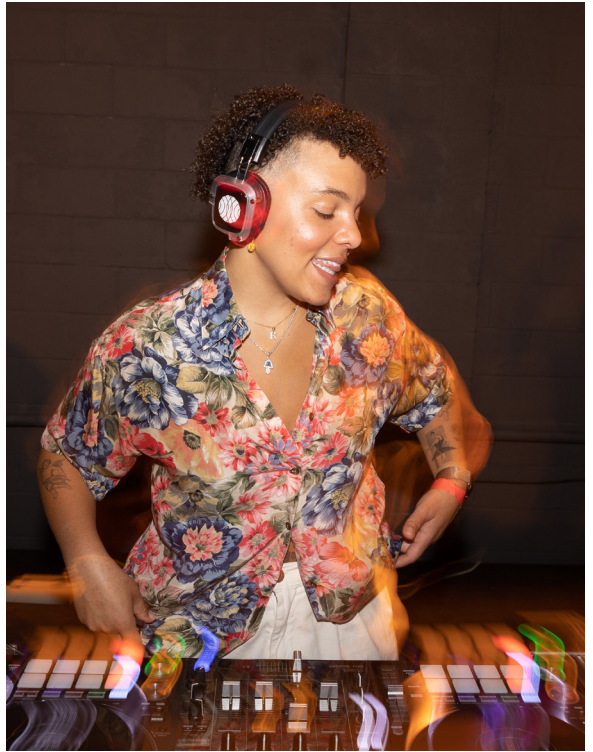


QUEER KENTUCKY X MILE WIDE PRIDE KICK-OFF PARTY

Images by Jason Morales he/him



















THIS MAGAZINE WAS DESIGNED OVER TEXTS,
PHONE CALLS, EMAILS, AND INSTAGRAM
MESSAGES. IT WAS DESIGNED FROM COFFEE
SHOPS, FROM A BOOTH AT STORY, FROM THE
FLOOR OF THE LGBTQ CENTER, FROM MY
HOME OFFICE AT MIDNIGHT, FROM THE SPACE
BETWEEN NEW YORK CITY AND LOUISVILLE.
IT WAS DESIGNED IN PAINSTAKING DETAIL, IN
CHAOTIC ORGANIZATION, IN 'WHAT IF' CREATIVITY,
IN 'ACTUALLY I HATE THAT' ADMISSIONS, IN
PROFANITIES SCRIBBLED ON PROOFS, IN SOS
EMOJIS. IT WAS DESIGNED WITH A LOT OF LOVE.

I HOPE YOU FEEL THAT LOVE WHEN YOU HOLD
THESE PAGES IN YOUR HANDS.

designed by Brackish Creative



Modica Superfoods Cocktail Mix

Sophia Lee *she/they*

Most of us have days filled with nothing but pure and utter stress. Overwhelmed, beaten down, and totally drained from your day, you can't help but crave some sweet delicacy to help you meet your zen. Whether that vice be sugar, alcohol, drugs, sex, is up to you. But for those of us that like to relax and unwind with a good cocktail or mocktail at the end of the day, it is almost impossible to find something that doesn't make you feel like you're gaining ten pounds and going to shit yourself all throughout work the following morning. As we have all experienced, most cocktail mixes are

packed so heavily with sugar and other additives that you wake up feeling sick.

Enter Modica.

We all deserve to indulge as much as we want, but sometimes you just need a little taste of something delicious. Eric Wentworth and JD Mitchell of Modica definitely seem to think so. The name Modica comes from "modicum" which is a small amount of a great thing - like a cocktail or mocktail!



*Pictured:
Eric
Wentworth
and JD Mitchell
Images by
Jessica Ebelhar
she/her*

Modica superfood mixes have managed to find a way to create a healthy balance between healthy and fun. Each mix is made with naturally-sourced superfood ingredients, plus vitamins and electrolytes for an extra boost of well-being. And each serving is just 40 calories or less. No preservatives and nothing artificial. Each bottle makes at least 10 drinks, and there are recipes on the back for a classic cocktail, mocktail, or pitcher – perfect for hosting and entertaining. They launched with three flavors: Cucumber Aloe Margarita, Turmeric Ginger Mule, and Tart Cherry Old Fashioned. And they launched two new flavors this summer: a Cacao Espresso Martini and a Blueberry Lavender Lemon Drop. A mix that I never thought could be obtained, yet, somehow these precious angels have done it.

When coming up with the idea for their business model, the pair wanted to find a steady balance of good for you and fun for you. So, how did these two queers infiltrate the conservative business world here in Louisville? Well, just like many of our other beloved, minority-owned businesses in the community: lots of hard work, and a little razzle-dazzle.

Mitchell and Wentworth met in graduate school in 2016 where both were working on MBAs at the University of Louisville. The two of them had enrolled in the evening program since they both worked all day long. Due to the stress of workloads and life, they would always want a cocktail after their night classes. However, it is exhausting to even think about cooking, let alone making a cocktail for yourself after you've had a full day of work, classes, and social interactions. I mean... that's what takeout and bars are for, right? When the two went to some stores to find a good cocktail mix, they were less than thrilled with what they were able to find: mixers filled with tons of sugar and things they couldn't even begin to pronounce.

This is where their business idea really took off. Coming from completely different backgrounds, they relied on knowledge they had obtained in their business classes to help lift this thing off the ground. And it really worked. Mitchell's background in English and creative writing combined with Wentworth's STEM education and training allowed the entrepreneurs to each bring a unique perspective to their vision for the business.

The company launched in September of 2020 after COVID-related delays. The company has taken off in Kentucky and beyond since their launch. Modica is



currently available in 100 stores across eleven states, and can be shipped almost anywhere. The mixes are also available at several local groceries and restaurants around town, including Paul's, Rainbow Blossom, Haymarket on River Road, and Cultured. There's a store locator on their website, so anyone can find the nearest retailer where Modica is sold.

So, what about the product itself? You would think that surely such a small startup doesn't have the factory capacity to make all these yummy drinks quite yet! Truth be told, you would be right: the co-founders do a lot of the work themselves. They source a lot of their own food products and have been able to develop the flavors and ratios on their own. Sourcing all the products themselves has allowed them to stay away from gross additives and other unnecessary ingredients that can lead to headaches, nausea, and fatigue.

One of the takeaways that they would also love for people to get from their business model is that drinking doesn't need to be strictly for getting drunk. They made all the mixers so that they could be used in mocktails as well for people who don't drink or don't want to drink. For our queer and sober crowd, know that all of their mixes go great with club soda and other alternatives, so this could be a great option for you, too. Modica superfood mixes are for healthy, guilt-free deliciousness - whether that includes alcohol or not is totally up to you.

Modica is excited about everything in store for 2023. In addition to the launch of their two new flavors, they're also looking into distributing their product with some major retailers. Their main goals are to focus on growth and building something that they are proud to own. They also would like for this brand vision to fully integrate within the LGBTQ+ world and help create jobs within the community.

Mitchell and Wentworth started out by bootstrapping the company, and didn't begin raising their Angel investment round until 2022. By December, they'd hit their first goal of \$500,000 and they're continuing to raise investment to support their growth.

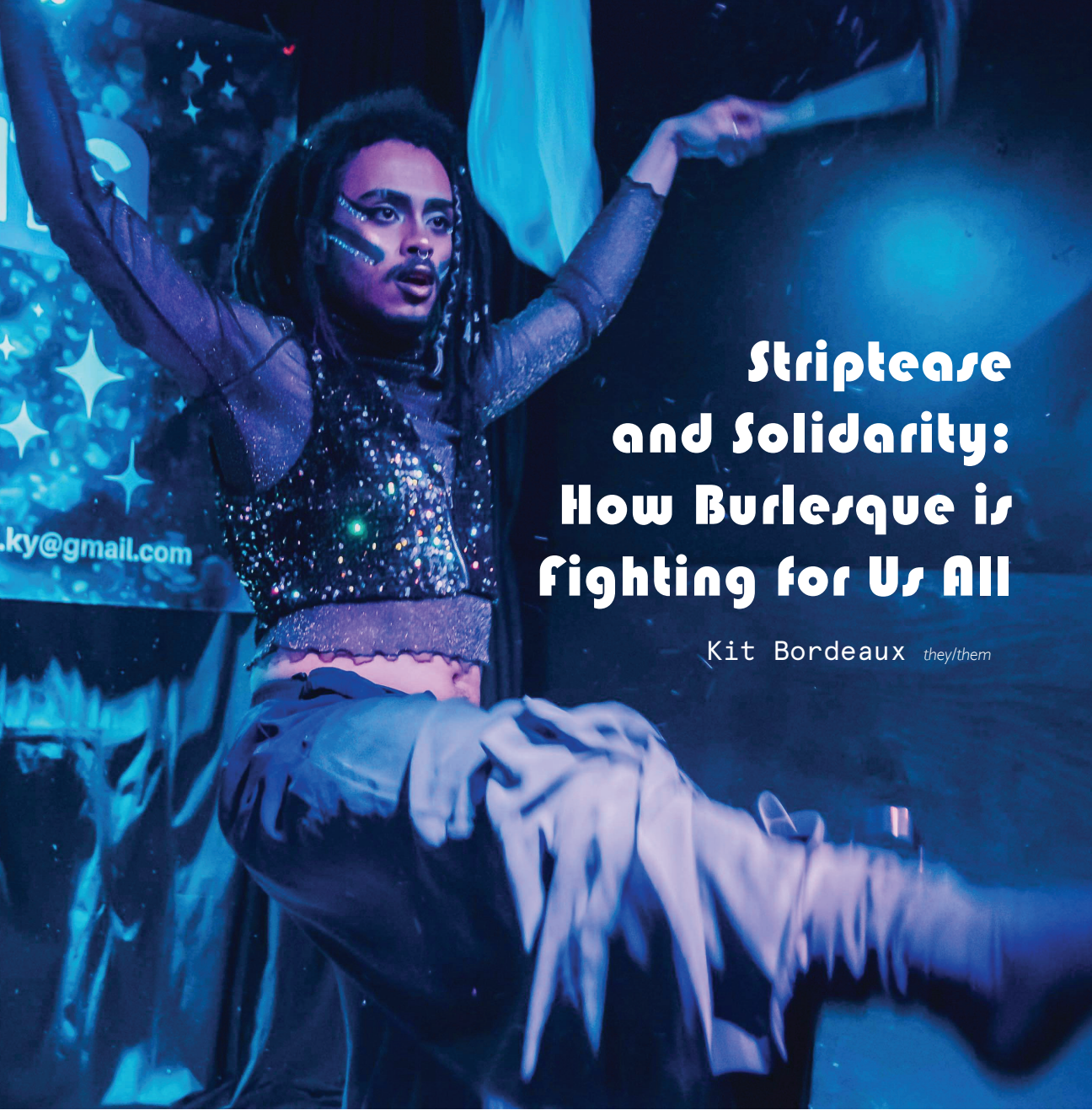
These two co-founders would like to encourage all of their supporters and followers to always think hard about the money they're spending. Who is it going to? Who are they supporting when they do make purchases and investments? And most importantly, why support something potentially sketch when you could support the queers instead? Modica is still a startup company and could use all the media they can get, so go spread the word on social media and continue to support local, queer businesses in Kentucky - always!



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www.queerkentucky.com



Striptease and Solidarity: How Burlesque is Fighting for Us All

Kit Bordeaux *they/them*

The bar was alive. I stood on a booth to see the stage and found myself looking out over a crowd of dancing, smiling, crying faces. My friend and fellow performer, Luna Luz,

was in the spotlight. Her burlesque act was completely different from the one before her, a classic showgirl routine, and the one before that, a dive into the beautifully gothic.

Luna was performing what she called her Ode to Puerto Rico,” a love letter to her heritage. The music pounded, sending the crowd into a pulsating rhythm of hip bumps and shakes. Watching Luna Luz strip off her layers, becoming vulnerable in every way for all of Al’s Bar to see, was electric. Standing above the crowd on my bench, I watched as a mass catharsis swept over the room. It was the closest I’ve ever felt to being religious.

Scenes like this have become a regular, yet still magical, occurrence for myself and my fellow members of the BurLEX Collective in Lexington, Kentucky. Started by Träshique, a professional burlesque dancer and performer with The Tinderbox Circus Sideshow, BurLEX came into its infancy in summer of 2021 through two stand-alone burlesque classes and a pastie-making workshop. However, BurLEX did not have a long wait before bursting from infancy into what it is today. With its newest round of beginner and intermediate classes in full swing and an entire year of shows already planned for 2023, BurLEX is showing no signs of stopping.

While one may never know what to expect from the performers, there is one aspect of a BurLEX show that remains consistent.

At the top of every show, the emcee of the night will get on the mic and lay out three rules:

1. Cheer and tip your performers and bartender.
2. Have fun.
3. Do not touch the performers without consent. Don’t touch anyone without consent. Ever.

The final rule is needed in burlesque due to the vulnerability the performers offer up, and as we see with countless news stories, articles, and personal testimonies, we still need it in everyday life. It’s no secret that the world is dangerous for so many of us, and community is a reliable way for us to protect each other. There is strength in caring numbers. BurLEX, as a community, sees this and runs with it.

Part of being a community and caring for each other has taken many forms in the collective. Be it personal support for individual members or raising money for the greater community of Kentucky, BurLEX is consistent in their compassion. Benefit shows have been a huge draw since the very first student showcase, and attendance has only increased as the collective has grown.

Every student showcase since November 2021 has sent all proceeds to Ampersand Sexual/Violent Resource Center, resulting in over \$10,000 going directly to the non-profit. In September 2022, following the fall of Roe v Wade, the collective came together again to put on a benefit show for the Kentucky Health Justice Network, raising \$2,299 in a single night. The benefit included voter information, emotional acts from dancers and

writers alike, and the call for a united front in the fight for bodily autonomy. When our community was in danger again in 2023 from bills such as SB115 and SB150 targeting trans and nonbinary folk, BurLEX stepped up to the plate yet again with a cast of genderqueer performers from the burlesque and drag communities.

Between ticket sales, auction items, and a bake sale, BurLEX raised \$6,257 in a single night. BurLEX’s total amount raised for charities to date exceeds \$20,000.

Empowerment and autonomy has become a cornerstone of BurLEX. Without even taking the fundraising into account, BurLEX is steadfast in their messaging and activism. Founder and leader, Träshique, will often remind those who think they cannot perform

due to who they are that burlesque is for everybody and every body. No matter the size, race, gender presentation, or sexuality, BurLEX is not exclusionary. The collective proudly platforms people across the gender spectrum sharing their burlesque, drag, and performance art. Audiences have come to shows expecting breasts and rhinestones and, while they do get that, they also will leave having experienced something entirely new and aching to come back for more.

As a member of the collective myself, I would be remiss if I did not disclose my personal experience with BurLEX. Being someone who is queer and nonbinary living in a large body, it can be quite difficult to feel comfortable in my skin. Working with BurLEX has given me a way to find that

comfort and do it with intentionality. I have worked through questions of gender and identity live on stage for a crowd and come out the other side with a greater knowledge of who I am. By joining a community of people who will fight hard for those who need it, I learned how to fight for myself.

If readers would like to experience the collective with their own eyes, they can find BurLEX on Facebook at BurLEX and Instagram at @burlex.ky where all information about upcoming events will be shared. These include the monthly Nauti Nights, student showcases, and other special events that will be announced soon. Träshique and the members of BurLEX hope to see you there!



“ The ability to make others feel good about themselves and at ease is my greatest skill. Growing up in Louisville, I came to value the relationships that nurtured my authentic self and helped me to feel comfortable in my skin. I knew from a young age I could provide that same relationship to others in my future career. I started West Brim to cultivate my creativity, make people feel good about themselves, and provide a space in the community I love where people can feel inspired to be their authentic self. ”

-Tucker Ott
Owner

West Brim SALON

Frankfort Ave. Louisville Kentucky

MASK- ULINITY

Noa August *they/them*



I tried my best to play the role of masculine partner in my relationships. I was stoic, providing, logical, strong, domineering... I thought that if I was this unbothered, mysterious, nonchalant person, I would be identifiably queer. I wholly embraced mysteriousness, assertiveness, decisiveness, independence; and while some of these "masculine" traits are part of my being, they also are only fractions of a whole. Acting that way didn't make me happy, and it wasn't sustainable. I did get more attention from feminine women, yes, but that came with unbearable stipulations. When embracing the expectations that came with being masculine centered/presenting, I was losing freedom of full expression. I traded in my authenticity, and that lovely gray area I really enjoy existing in was lost. I was suffering.

In performing masculinity, I hid the parts of me that were more "feminine;" the parts of me that are fragile, empathetic, nurturing, soft, receptive, warm, sensitive, sweet, sassy, and what my friends would call "sometimes bratty." I didn't feel like I had space to be more than one-dimensional. There was cognitive dissonance, because anyone close enough to me knew I was way more feminine than I allowed the rest of the world to see. I felt pressure to hide those parts of me for a lot of reasons: trauma, the way I grew up, the folks around me, and because of the way the world views masculine presenting folks. Even some of the most progressive people I know hold values that are steeped in heteronormativity.

Conversations with my masc friends can be summed up as, "Nah man, if we are masculine we can't be soft." As if we were supposed to be the, "man" of the relationship. "Bro, am I supposed to expect my girl to take the trash out?" And comments like, "Bruh wtf, because then she is going to start expecting that I want the strap." And while all of this was said in a joking way, we were just kicking back, there was a truthful insecurity underneath those jokes that was so clear to see to me. My reaction to those kinds of comments has always been: "What the hell are we really talking about?"

Why are we using heteronormative ideas as the base of how we relate with one another when we are queer? Yes, she can take the trash out too.

And yes, some of us like internal pleasure, and you can still be the boxer-wearer and receive pleasure without that having to define how masculine or feminine you are. Our conversations would start off with a NEED to protect and hold on to our fragile masculinity, but a few conversations (and drinks) in, it was clear to me that some of us masc-presenting folks actually wanted more space to be soft in, to be vulnerable, to rest in femininity, and to feel taken care of and seen. We wanted the same treatment our feminine counterparts expected from us - shit, I would even say demanded from us.

We don't always want to be the provider. Sometimes we need space for receiving, and to not feel judged when we express anything "femininely."

I started to hold resentment towards the queer community. No matter what I did, I couldn't shake the expectations of what I was expected to talk like, move like, look like, sound like, fuck like, be like... I lived within a constant policing of my expression in a community that is supposed to be open to what is different.

Queerness is "the quality or characteristic of having a sexual or gender identity that does not correspond to established idea." This, I thought, was supposed to be the foundation that connects us all. But when we don't embrace that our connection as rooted in queerness, queerness being the binding element - then what will actually bind us together is fear.

But I want to be nuanced. I want to live in the grey area. But every time I tried to step out of the typecast of masculinity, I felt ostracized by my own community; like my fluidity made others uncomfortable because they couldn't understand why a "woman" in Timbs and boxers walked with a little sashay in "her" step.

When I began my healing journey, I was ultimately led back towards the balance that I really desired. Masculinity and femininity don't have to exist in opposition to one another, and both of these

energies can and do coexist within me. I learned that in not expressing and experiencing the world with the full fluidity of my being, by not living in my truth, the only person actually being hurt was me.

I also found that if I showed all of myself without giving a fuck, and allowed folks to see me as I am, it actually helped me weed out the folks who are not here for me, and inspire those who were. Stepping into the full spectrum of gender expression was a great opportunity for me to assess compatibility in my relationships, and to let go of the folks who wanted to box me into what felt safe for them.

So, I stripped away each piece one by one of the costume I was wearing; I took off my hyper-independence hat and started to receive more. I started shaking my ass more when I went out with my friends instead of posting up on a wall, because, yes, what I actually want to do when my song comes on is wind my hips and feel sexy and free. Restricting myself to fit in felt like a cage, so fuck what was expected of me because of the clothing I prefer. The fact that me and my homies walked in this club with baggy pants, Jordan 1's, and fitted caps on wasn't about to get in the way of me having a good time.

So I am writing this as an exploration that hopefully reaches some shadowy parts of at least one masculine-presenting person so that they feel seen, heard, or just more confident to be all of who they are. I am writing this because I love masculine women, and I want them to reflect on what it might look like to embrace a softer side of themselves alongside their masculinity. I want them to know that the #SOFTLIFE is not reserved just for fems, but something they deserve to opt into



as well. My hope is that masculine Black women find this and feel more confident playing with the fluidity of their gender expression. And I know that is so hard to do sometimes. Being soft is such a privilege and can be so vulnerable, especially for Black folks, because the world has proven itself time and time again to not hold safe space for us.

Queerness is an act of liberation from established ideas of sexuality and gender; it is going against the status quo; it is living in opposition to societal norms.

This is personal.

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WHEN YOU WERE HERE: IMANITWITAHO ZACHEE WAS A LIGHT TO EVERYONE

Denny Agassi *she/her*

Queer Kentucky has partnered with Reckon to tell this story. Reckon is an award-winning national news organization that covers the people powering change, the challenges shaping our time, and what it means for all of us. Reckon publishes QueerVerse, a curated newsletter that highlights the diverse experiences of queer people in the U.S. through joy and resistance — today and throughout history.

Imanitwitaho Zachee was born in the Gihembe Refugee Camp in 1997 not long after her parents fled Congo the year before, where the border between Rwanda and Congo had been genocidal due to the First Congo War.

The average altitude of Congo is 700 meters while the refugee camp in Rwanda, located in the Gicumbi District, has a soaring altitude of nearly 2,300 meters. I picture Zachee's parents in 1996, who fled by foot, trekking uphill, uncertain by the circumstances of their lives and yet hopeful for something safer and more livable.

Zachee's refugee camp consists of Congolese refugees and is home to over 12,000 people. The Gicumbi District contributes nearly 85% of

agricultural production in the entire district, with tea being the main cash crop, and I wonder how Zachee likes her tea—if at all. Some of the district's artisanal activities include hairdressing, and I also wonder if young Zachee fantasized about getting her hair done like the women around her, the way I used to envy my aunt's hairstyles as a young trans girl in Indonesia.

Back in Rwanda, Zachee and her family applied for resettlement in the U.S. After her family was approved for resettlement, which is a grueling and rarely-successful multi-step vetting process that currently takes an average of two years, they were assigned to Catholic Charities of Louisville, a Kentucky-based nonprofit with a mission of serving people in need.

The case of Zachee's family was assigned by Catholic

Artwork by Abbey Crain she/her

Charities' national office to help find Zachee and her family housing, as well as assisting the family in applying for public benefits like Medicaid, SNAP, and TANF. They also provided Zachee and her family "cultural orientation", which included things like grocery store recommendations, how to write a money order for paying rent, English classes, and more.

Having moved to the U.S. in 2019 at 22 years old, Zachee sought employment, which was how she met Becky Burnside, the employment and benefits program manager at Catholic Charities. Burnside would often take Zachee to job interviews along with a translator.

"There was always a language barrier," Burnside told me over the phone. "But I do remember the ways you can communicate without language." Burnside said that given Zachee's identity as a non-English speaking Black trans woman, she had already faced a great deal of struggles prior to moving to America. Burnside's job, then, was to try to make Zachee's job search as easy and comforting as possible.

"[When] taking her to a job interview, I just remember seeing her and always trying to catch her eye and share a smile. I definitely remember her big smile," Burnside said. "Making that eye contact and sharing that smile, [I hoped] that [I was able to] communicate a lot through that interaction."

One of the first jobs Zachee got in Louisville, Ky. was a warehouse job where she packed orders for an athletic clothing brand. In one of their last interactions, Zachee had reached out through WhatsApp to Burnside again, looking for a different job. Initially failing to recognize Zachee, Burnside was able to tell through Zachee's profile photo—wearing a red and gold dress with a red headwrap atop her big hair—just how much she had grown into herself since she first moved to the states in 2019.

"[She looked like] she came into herself," Burnside said. "She was just so bright and colorful, and [that] brought so much joy to know that she got to a place where she felt comfortable to be herself." Her last job was at JBS Pork Production Facility, a meat-processing plant.

At the vigil, Burnside met a coworker of Zachee's, who shared a story of her complimenting Zachee's height, telling her she could be a model. Although Zachee couldn't understand much of what was said, she lit up when the coworker said the word "pretty."

Zachee's uncle John Sebazungu, tells me in Swahili—with the help of his 16-year-old daughter Baraka Keza's translation—that Zachee always looked after her family, helping her mom pay the bills. Keza herself shares a moment of awe during this past New Year's party at the church they all attended.

"[Zachee] was very cheerful, saying hi to everybody, taking pictures," Keza recalls. "[She] had good energy around everybody. [She] could vibe with anyone, get along with anyone. It didn't matter if you were a kid or not."

Although Zachee was never explicitly out as trans to her family, her uncle Sebazungu never had any issues with Zachee's gender exploration, ever since she was a toddler. "I never told Zachee 'Don't do this, don't do that,'" he says in Swahili. "I let Zachee do [her] own thing. We were just two people respecting each other."

Watching Zachee dazzling in that New Year's party at the church, Keza reminisces about an interaction she wished she had with her cousin, who she recalls being the life of the party and the star of the evening.

"In the [brief moment] I saw Zachee at the New Year's party, I wish I [had told her] that [she] was a light to everyone."

Denny is a writer, actor, and musician who has co-starred in POSE (FX) and New Amsterdam (NBC), and will appear in the upcoming series City On Fire (Apple TV). Aside from The Grammy, Allure Magazine, PAPER, and more, her recent writing—"He Made Affection Feel Simple"—was published in The New York Times' Modern Love.

This piece is part of When You Were Here, a series commemorating trans people whose lives were taken this year. Rather than centering their murders, our stories incorporate memories from people who loved them to illuminate the times when they were alive—when they were here.





QUEER-LED APPALACHIAN ARTS ALLIANCE TRANSFORMS HAZARD

Jaime Lazich *they/them*

Hazard made a decision in 2013: they wanted more art in their community, and an arts organization to spur it on. With recent funding from the Foundation for Appalachian Kentucky, they had the means to make it happen.

“The arts in the schools were dwindling every single day,” Tim Deaton - Executive Director of the organization that came to life out of this consensus - recounts the formative steps taken to build up the art scene: “A group of concerned citizens wanted to see the arts thrive in the community. They wanted a place for the arts to have a house.”

The Appalachian Arts Alliance was formed, but fell into a rut of stagnancy over a few years’ time. Deaton, originally a member of the Board of Directors, moved to the position of Executive Director in 2019. He’d noticed the lull in programming and sought to revitalize things. Despite a paycut and a lack of nonprofit know-how, he knew it was the best move. “[I thought] ‘I should just resign and take this job myself.’ I wasn’t expecting other people to say, ‘You know, you’re right.’”

As soon as Deaton took on his new role of Executive Director, the pandemic hit. Along with nearly every other business and organization at that time, the Appalachian Arts Alliance had to shut down. In response to this road block, Deaton sank all his energy into working on the dilapidated Artstation building, where the bulk of AAA's programming takes place: "I'm an extreme extrovert. I like to be around people and be busy.

Through COVID I came to the building every day and worked with the construction crew."



The work paid off. On July 11, 2020, the Artstation hosted an open house to 150 people in their courtyard. There was an unmatched fervor for the programming on deck.

"The timing of it was the biggest catalyst. People were feeling so scared and alone because of the pandemic," recalls Deaton. The isolation brought on by COVID stirred up an increased demand for intracommunal activity. "The citizens in the community showed up and showed out."

Deaton helped breathe new life into the Appalachian Arts Alliance - a once immobile arts org, spinning its wheels, in debt over a ramshackle building. It now serves as a busy hub for learning, creativity, and connection: "It's grown and grown. We are now out of capacity to host anything else. Between our individual events for the community, classes, and office hours, we have zero space."

But the AAA does not work single-handedly. It is integrated within Hazard, acting as a bullhorn for its residents. Deaton explains their multi-faceted approach: "[There are] so many different ways that our programming comes about. Sometimes it comes from someone walking in off the street and saying 'Hey, have you heard of this type of art? I would love to do that.' We'll look for people across the state who do that type of art or craft, and if we don't find someone, we learn it and teach it ourselves. We ask our community a lot: what do

you want more of? Visual art? Community events? This kind of class?"

They are a conduit for fostering new ideas, while also serving as host - providing infrastructure for new visions to take life. The benefits reaped by this kind of robust arts programming are innumerable. The Appalachian Arts Alliance tethers the communal fabric of Eastern KY together. They offer a bridge to the history of Hazard. They conjure self-esteem in shy, curious kids. They inject color and life into the city's streets.

When asked how art changes a community, Deaton doesn't miss a beat: "We are prolonging our heritage and passing that on to other generations. We also work on developing confidence in children. Having a student who is doubting themselves or is confused or uneasy and having them work through that and develop confidence has the ripple effect of developing initiative [for them] to do bigger and better things."

AAA sees the Artstation as a place where all are welcome, an inclination toward self-expression need be the only prerequisite for admission. Deaton - gay himself - recognizes the importance of providing support for marginalized folks who may often feel ostracized.

"If you're in the LGBTQ community, you've [probably] been hassled, and it can be scary to be comfortable in your own skin. One of the biggest things that I preach is: it doesn't matter what you do or say, we are here to accept you as you come. There is zero tolerance for any harassing or bullying - anything but love or respect. And if you can't get down with that then that isn't the place for you."

AAA facilitates a space where belonging and creativity lock in side by side, and from there, a special magic can unfold: "Through that we've kind of become the place for weirdos. No matter what line you come up in an improv or song you sing, we are going to applaud you at the end. A lot of orgs focus on perfection or extreme discipline, that's not what we do here. [We want you] to be comfortable in your learning and be comfortable with what you share with us. We're all human and none of the other stuff matters."



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I think some would say I had a unique experience growing up as a queer Appalachian atheist in rural Kentucky. I've always presented masculine of center despite being born a biological female. I'm a textbook transgender man, but my relationship with religion is undeniably intertwined with my identity just as much, if not more, than my LGBT status.

A lot of the cynicism I display that people attribute to my atheism really comes from my lived experiences, and particularly, my proximity to death. I was raised in the back of a funeral home because my stepdad was a mortician—yet somehow I never saw one damn ghost the entire time we lived there! Trust me, I went looking, too. I've also watched so many family members pass away from cancer. My home county ranks #22



MY LIVED EXPERIENCE AS AN ATHEIST IN THE COMMUNITY

Killian Bowen *he/they*

for highest cancer rates in the nation. My father struggled with suicidality for most of his life. A few times, I even witnessed his attempts on his life. All of this has made for a very complex relationship with death - and thus, religion.

Religion arose to help us cope with our mortality. People have prayed to gods for centuries for the promise of Heaven, or everlasting life after death.

As an atheist, there's not a day that goes by I don't wish I could believe in something to give me comfort in knowing my life would go on after death.

I don't believe de-conversion, or the loss of faith in a religion, is an event we always have control over. I think it happens to us. A lot of people have asked me, "What would it take to make you believe?"

And at some point in my atheism, I accepted that nothing could convince me. Perhaps I haven't hallucinated enough to be sure of my position.

Another way I battle with this idea is that I'm aware I'm free from divine persecution for being queer, but I will never get a chance to experience everlasting life. I've seen so much suffering occur before my eyes, yet I can still see an inherent preciousness about life that I can't quite explain. I cling onto life from the sheer unlikelihood of it, yet sometimes being aware seems like a burden I didn't ask for. For these reasons, my atheism comforts and terrifies me in the same breath.

There are pros and cons to being both theistic and not. All that aside, theism affects us all differently. I'd say my journey was a bit off the beaten path. Though my stepfather was a Cherokee native, he still believed in a deity. After his death, my mother, a lifelong Southern Baptist, was roped into the Pentecostal church, which is very popular in my neck of the woods. Though they have some very charming features, their services can be a bit intense and jarring to some. To 11-year-old me, it was just another Tuesday. Once I got away from Eastern Kentucky, I learned how outsiders see them.

While I was in the throes of God's wrath, my relationship with religion was shaped by my queerness. I hit puberty around the time my mother really got into God. She would often mail off her last dollar to a televangelist who promised blessings that would never come. Even as a child, it infuriated me that someone would profit from someone else's grief and hopelessness. These experiences, oddly enough, gave me a sense of

empathy for the vulnerability that fundamentalists prey on. I understand why my mother flocked to it. Her husband had just died, and we were in financial ruin—about to lose everything. She was reaching up for hope because she couldn't find it by reaching out.

In the midst of all this, we were all discovering Something Wasn't Right about me. I was increasingly masculine acting and presenting. I remember my older sister telling my mother once that she thought I was gay, and my mom scolded her for the suggestion. I remember being so attached to the idea of being a man. I often dreamt about it and woke up sorely disappointed. For a period, the Pentecostal church managed to stomp that out of me with the fire-and-brimstone mantra. I often wish there was more I could do to stop this religious trauma from occurring.

Unfortunately some things we can't change, but I want to change what I can. I do that by stepping out of my comfort zone with my activism. I'm generally not a very extroverted individual, but if telling my story helps someone relate to growing up queer in the South, I think I can say I've done something.

When I think of the atheist experience in relation to queerness, it's not some hyper-intellectual explanation that I think of. My perspective comes from a place of resilience, and I think a lot of queer folks can relate to that. Rejecting the popular notion that we should hate who we are is a radical act. Sometimes this gets overlooked when we focus on the falsehood of religion rather than the actual harm it creates.



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Between giving the poverty-ridden hillbillies of Appalachia false hope and preaching the young into conformity, religion made my environment toxic. Leaving it behind is liberating beyond comprehension when you come from a place of oppression. Once I traded the lies for real hope, it really changed things for me. I was able to propel myself forward while I watched everyone around me being held back.

That's why I think it's so important that we reach into these rural communities and give them the tools and resources they need to create space for these stories to be told, for these conversations to be had. I started a chapter of the Secular Student Alliance at my college, Morehead State University. It was distinctly different from other groups by being more of a support group than an academic or activist group. A lot of the people who came to our meetings were healing from a lifetime of

religious trauma. This created a tight bond among us that I didn't really see in more urban groups. The differences in experiences among queer atheists are stark and deserve to be acknowledged. It can never hurt to spread a sense of empathy in our communities whether it be for one group or another. I think if I had to have a goal in writing this, it would be that. I know I'm always hungry for a new perspective, and atheists are typically curious individuals. All this to say it's a changing world. Let's make it change for the better.

Killian Bowen is a Grant Accountant at the only HBCU in Kentucky. They became involved with American Atheists in 2017 while organizing against the homophobic Kim Davis with the Secular Student Alliance in Morehead, Kentucky. In 2019, he was awarded Diversity Program of the Year at Morehead State University. He continues to be involved in local activism with Lexington Atheists, and Frontrunners Lex, an LGBTQ+ run/walk group.

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THE ICONIC DJ SYMONNE

Aaron Thomas *he/him*



A LOUISVILLE LEGEND

How does one become an ICON? There are many extremely talented DJs, drag performers, and emcees. However, there is only one Syimone.

Over the years, the self-made local superstar has earned herself many titles, accolades, and accomplishments in almost every facet of the trade. She was recently crowned overall Best DJ in the city by the people in the widely coveted Leo Weekly Reader's Choice Awards in 2022. I often refer to her as the hardest working human in the business.

In 2006, Syimone began her DJ journey where the two of us worked together at The Red Lounge (R.I.P. baby). In the early to mid-2000's, this neighborhood LGBTQ+ friendly bar was infamous for its club music bumping out of the open garage doors and vintage porn playing on the TVs...on a weekday. The Red Lounge Tuesdays and Thursday soul parties became staples in the queer scene, and these music sets eventually paved the way for many other gay week night events that followed in their footsteps. In the Louisville, Kentucky entertainment industry, these parties were the high heels.

She already had established a huge following from years of success as The Diva Extreme: Syimone: her high energy, one-of-a-kind drag persona at The Connection nightclub. I can still hear the announcer introducing her name over the theater's sound system now. "I am what I am because of that place, which was an institution for 30 years." She declares, "My fans have followed me wherever I go with anything I'm a part of ever since." The songs she performed were like no one else's because she edited and mixed all her own shit. It was such a breath of fresh air when she came on stage. At every performance, the usually packed house would go wild and line up in droves to shower her in cash. This was a legend in the making.

Over the years, she has managed to stay relevant in her line of work, even with new waves of folks on the 1's & 2's arriving every week it seems. "Look, you have to move with the times." Syimone claps her hands together and delivers some knowledge. "If you want to be successful in any market, you have to continue to keep moving or you won't survive." Thriving is way more like it. The wildly successful artist maintains her huge presence in the queer community via gigs at Big Bar, drag brunches at The Hub, Chik'n & Mi, and others, and as the hosting emcee for both Louisville and Kentuckiana Pride festivals.

SYIMONE IS
ALWAYS AT THE
TOP OF EVERYONE'S
LIST FOR TALENT.
SHE IS LITERALLY
EVERYWHERE.

Her DJ gift has also since extended its reach to mainstream establishments and events such as Baxter's 942 Bar & Grill, Tin Roof, The Pearl of Germantown, The Belle of fucking Louisville, and she even recently scored a big contract with Derby City Gaming.

Often times, an artist's presence on stage is magnified and carries a more significant importance as a reflection of the social and political climate of the times. As a transgender woman, and simultaneously the most recognizable DJ/performer in the city of Louisville, Syimone says she often feels the need to "carry the torch," so to speak, for her community. Even though she has branched out in the entertainment world, Syimone remains a beacon of hope to those of us that identify as LGBTQ+, and especially those in the transgender community. The recent proposal and eventual passing of Senate Bill 150, banning all gender-affirming medical care for trans youth, was a catalyst for our leader to speak out, as it struck a very personal and traumatic chord for her. "Being transgender has always been a part of the world we live in. Throughout history, in some communities, specifically Indigenous ones, they were praised as healers, gods, and goddesses," she informs me. She then shares some memories of a dangerous time in her life, emphasizing the crisis SB150 will create for today's transgender youth. "I was buying hormones from some shady people when I was a teenager. No one should have to go through what I went through, but I was hopeless. I had to do what I had to do to stay alive," she recalls.









Anytime I've ventured to see her out at a bar, restaurant, or venue, I know before I arrive that it is a safe space for me to exist and to comfortably be myself. That's intentional. She makes sure of it. "If I am playing somewhere, I will always have the conversation with the owners of the establishment to let them know my intentions and expectations. If you are coming to see me, it has to be a safe space for you, or I won't do it." Syimone has quite the flock of adoring supporters, and these businesses understand they will bring in some serious loot.

Syimone is now booking shows and DJ gigs out of town: Cincinnati, Indianapolis, and now Chicago! The sky is most definitely the limit for our fearless queen. I have personally known Syimone for a long time and let me assure you, she has no intention of slowing down. The world needs to see that representation, not just the LGBTQ+ community, but everyone, especially in Kentucky, especially the youth of Kentucky. Exposure breeds acceptance, and Syimone is at the forefront of the movement for change. She does so through both her entertainment and activism on a daily basis.

Cheers to you my friend, a literal living legend. Dare we say: ICON.



THE LIFE OF A QUIET ACTIVIST

Queer Kentucky Staff



At a nonchalant, three-sided bar in the 1970s, David Williams was “born again” after his first night at The Badlands, a Louisville gay bar with a lighted dance floor that rivaled even Saturday Night Fever.

Beyond the small entryway, on the dance floor and at the meat racks across from the bar, was where Louisville’s gay congregation met to whore-ship, and David’s first few weeks at that bar were a “real revelation.”

“I found Jesus. Except he was sitting at the end of the bar having a drink,” Williams said.

Nowadays, Williams can be found at home in Southern Indiana with husband, Aaron Bingham, the couple’s 3 cats, and remnants of the Willams-Nichols Archive, thought to be one of the country’s largest LGBTQ+ primary source archives.

A self-proclaimed pack rat, Williams started the collection in 1982, and it has grown to include thousands of books, periodicals, and journals, as well as videos, photographs, and audio tapes on top of other historical LGBTQ+ items.

Before Williams moved to his home in Jeffersonville, Indiana, the historian lived in Old Louisville, amidst the boxes of queer memorabilia. The Williams-Nichols collection, named for Norman Lee Nichols, the activist’s late lover, had taken up so much space in his home that he moved it into storage.



In 2001, Williams got in touch with Delida Buie, who works with archives and special collections at the University of Louisville, and Williams started taking van loads of the collection to be housed at the William F. Ekstrom Library.

But the archives aren’t Williams’ only contribution to recording Louisville’s gay history. Williams is a “living, breathing” personification of what queer activism looked like throughout the city’s history.

“I am the archives,” Williams said.

The life of a quiet activist

“Kentucky Republics Wary of Hate Crimes Laws for Gays”

“Harassment Forces Gay Businesses to Close Early”

“Louisville Gay Bars Lead Protest Against Right Wing Activist”

Those are a few of the headlines from stories published in “The Letter,” an LGBTQ+ publication that circulated monthly in Louisville and surrounding areas during the 1990s. Williams wrote for The Letter for four years.

After the publication parted ways with a few different editors, Williams was hired on for the job in 1994, where he would spend the next 9 years accumulating dozens of bylines about politics, snippets of gay culture, and notable features about contributors to the LGBTQ+ community.

“I took to it like a duck to water...” Williams said. “This was what I was born to do.”

Even before Williams worked on The Letter or met Jesus at the end of a gay bar, the journalist demonstrated a proven track record for quietly turning the gears toward progress regarding equality for LGBTQ+ Kentuckians.

In 1981, Sam Dorr told his boss at First National Bank he was going to run for president of the Louisville chapter of Dignity/Integrity, a Christian gay rights group he was secretly involved in. Dorr was offered two choices: take a new position at the bank, where he had worked with the public for over 40 years, or quit. Dorr sued the bank for discrimination. He lost the trial in just two days. However, Dorr ultimately went on to win the case with help from the Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund.

Enter Gays and Lesbians United for Equality (GLUE), a social group Williams was part of that eventually turned into a hub for political activism.

Dorr was also running for the Board of Aldermann, a predecessor to metro council, and was President of GLUE at the time, Williams said. But the group didn’t initially want to get involved in Dorr’s campaign.

“We were just kind of feeling our way in the public sphere,” Williams said of the group’s early days. People were afraid of “very fearful of losing their jobs or getting evicted from their apartments.”

After Dorr’s death, however, GLUE became decidedly more political and would go on to help spearhead the gay rights movement that swept over Louisville in the 1980s. Eventually, the group would help secure support for what would become Louisville’s Fairness Ordinance, an order by the city that would protect LGBTQ+ people from employment discrimination.

Before it’s foray into activism, GLUE hosted a half-hour cable television show during the 80s called All Together Now. Williams became heavily involved with its production and even directed a few episodes. The show featured a news segment and skits about gay life.

Activists from GLUE, members of Lambda Louisville, a gay man’s social club that Williams wrote for, the Greater Louisville Human Rights Coalition, and other groups also formed an annual AIDS walk to bring awareness to how devastating the effects of AIDS was on the gay population during this time. Eventually, this led to AIDS Crisis center was built in the Urban Government Center downtown to combat the ineffectivity of the Reagan Administration’s treatment of the epidemic.

The 80s continued to see gay rights activism thrive via newsletters, like “The Letter,” where Williams’



would advertise his growing collection of queer history, and “The Lavender Letter,” a lesbian publication in Louisville, which featured headlines like “Blood Sisters of Louisville,” about lesbians who assisted gay men during the AIDS epidemic. The Williams-Nichols collection saw a boom in donations, and its significance couldn’t be ignored.

Williams could be found in crowds of protesters during the 80s and 90s as well, especially when it came to passing the Fairness Ordinance. Williams even recalled cheering on a lover giving a speech at such an event.

The disparate groups involved in the early 1980s activism gave way to attempts to further organization during the 1990s. At that time, the Fairness Campaign was born with a mission to continue the work started by groups who first organized for the original Fairness Ordinance. The Fairness Campaign continues to act as a crucial LGBTQ+ rights group in the city today.

In between protests, script writing, and getting cruised at the meat racks, Williams’ collection grew, and it represents the experience of every queer person through time.

But Williams is ready to pass the torch, so...

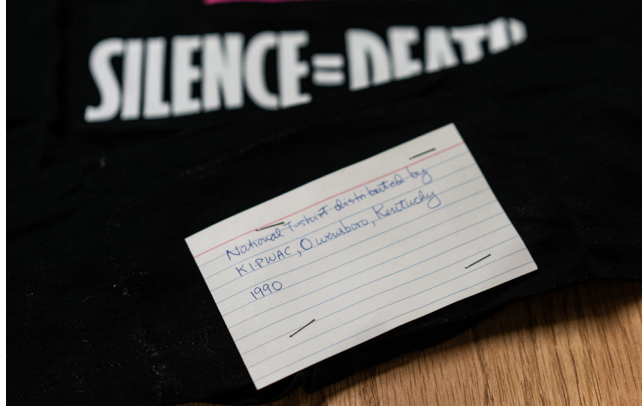
Where do we go now?

“Ohio drag queen storytime canceled amid armed protests by far-right groups”

“Tennessee moves to the forefront with anti-transgender laws”

“Anti-trans ‘bathroom ban’ proposed by Kentucky lawmaker seeking reelection”

Those are headlines from regional publications from the last 2 years – eerily similar to the ones written by Williams in the 90s, if you ask us. Scores of anti-LGBTQ+ and anti-trans headlines



and discourse surrounding queer identity beg the question: where do we go from here?

For archivists like Williams and Buie, the answer to combatting hate speech lies in the collection’s thousands of pieces of LGBTQ+ memorabilia.

The Williams-Nichols collection is available to researchers and students at the University and can be useful for “historic research,” Buie said.

“One of the things that this collection can do is to give people who want to argue back and engage hate speech with the information that they need to present a clear and cogent argument,” she said.

As much hate is mounting from the far right, queer folks seem less fearful about reacting to mistreatment than have been in recent history, Williams said.

The queer struggle for acceptance comes in waves, Williams said, but the most “gratifying” thing to him is how each new generation of queer activists reinvents themselves. We’re looking at you, Gen Z. “There’s no telling what they’ll do,” Williams said.

Williams said Gen Z isn’t the only one ready for the spotlight – the journalist wants to bring more attention to what he considers his “legacy.”

Williams hopes the new year will let him go beyond the current “paper board” and elect a group to make decisions about what will happen to the collection. That requires raising money, but Williams is in talks with donors about raising the remaining \$75,000 they need to kickstart the project.

In the meantime, Williams continues to index and deliver boxes of LGBTQ+ memorabilia to the Ekstrom Library, building the community’s living legacy for the next generation of queer activism.



I'M A GAMER (DEROGATORY)

Exploring my Trans Identity Through Gaming

Anya Lee *she/her*



There's a stereotype that goes around about a certain type of transgirl – the introverted, striped socks and oversized hoodie, techie kind – and unfortunately, that demographic has long included me.

Long before I swallowed my self respect and made swallowing a hobby, I found myself sheltered from the outside world and protected by a screen that often displayed some girl with pink pigtails wrecking monsters. I was constantly wrapped in the vision of gaming, and while it isn't something I particularly talk about, it has long since been a special area of interest for me.

When I was a child, I had a particular life filled with unease and constant moving. These experiences made me very quiet. I was poor at socializing and making friends, which is hard to believe, as I've evolved into such a loud person who never shuts up. I often found myself unable to properly communicate or navigate situations, and was often bullied because of how bizarre and uncomfortable I was. My horrible attempts at playing with other boys got me called slurs and usually beaten until I started biting people! At times nonverbal, at other times inexpressive, I had to undergo empathy-focused therapy sessions with other boys my age (mostly because of the biting and a few other maladaptive behaviors — I was a chair thrower too.). My home life was mostly quiet as well, with my single mother being largely absent because of working, or passed out on the sofa when she wasn't screaming at me for being such a little freak at school.

I first manifested signs of depression **that** early, becoming an irregularity amongst my family. One of my cousins, not really knowing what else to do, sat me down in front of his SNES and let me play his copy of Final Fantasy IV from his save file. I was immediately stuck, unable to even progress past the first encounter (which was a very sexy snake lady who consistently beat my ass). I wasn't familiar with the words present or anything on the screen but it was the most fun I had ever had at that point. Noticing this, my mom unleashing a slew of video games into my life that probbaaaaaably shaped me and probbaaaably lead to me recovering from a lot of trauma and shaping my ability to write (since the games were so text heavy and consistently required me to learn new words and remember plot details).

"I used the video game
avatars as a method
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straying away from
games that wouldn't let
me play as a girl."

Anya Lee



The first game I played intently was Final Fantasy VIII. I found myself in love with the brooding and incredibly mean (but very sexy!!) protagonist, Squall, which was definitely what developed my attraction to toxic men, and obsessed over the female characters and their designs. It was nice to escape from the rather unfriendly world I had to live in. Long before I learned to manipulate people by being sexy or actually developing a personality, gaming was something that absolutely saved me from a life of pure introversion. I was able to relate to other boys through consuming media, especially Japanese, which later blossomed into a love of anime and Japanese culture.

I expressed my femininity through these games, consistently picking and maining female characters in whatever it was. I used the video game avatars as a method of self expression, developing a favorite girl in literally anything I played, and straying away from games that wouldn't let me play as a girl. The characters I almost always related to most were female, and that instilled a jealousy in me as someone who believed I was bound to my physical reality as a male. I believed I'd never be cute, or a heroine of a story.

My desire to dress as the female characters of series I liked spurred me to try on a Japanese school uniform a cosplayer friend of mine constructed, and it was the first time I ever felt invested in myself, or close to who I could be. I admired my appearance for the first time, forming a new goal with my new reality.

Gaming provided a safe place for my gender expression. Among other gamers of the specific genre of game, LGBT inclusion was quite common in fandom. There was a particular safety for "traps", as we were referred to in the 4chan era, as being accepted in the ingroup and in media. Yuri, yaoi, and other homosexual media were extremely popular, and my group of friends were actively consuming anal sex heavy materials, even in our youth, and that made me feel safe, seen, and heard. I knew my friends, who were familiar with these things through the media we explored would never judge me.

I don't think I'd be myself if I didn't have gaming — I may have slogged into an unaccepting world, hiding my ambitions and self from everyone as I tried to enter and pretend I fit into other circles of people. Gaming, however, always had my back. I've sunk thousands of hours of my life into gaming, attempting to burgeon through every JRPG on the PS2. In a previous article, I describe how much Japanese games (despite their misogynistic origins) embraced a kind of delicate femininity I wanted to portray. I learned what kind of girl I wanted to be, and took the steps to get there because of gaming, a hobby which still keeps me company to this day. I definitely regressed back into being a ~gamer~ during COVID era, playing Persona 5 Royal and Strikers and hesitating to finish both because it felt like the cast had actually become my friends, which is in fact as delusional as it sounds — but hey, I liked the narrative.

Games have always been a huge aspect of Pride and LGBT identity to me as one of the hobbies that feels to exclusively have a niche within all descriptors of queerness.

It was the first place I and many of my other queer friends felt safe. It was the first place where I knew who I wanted to be, and it was the first place that let me be it. I'll always remember and cherish the heroines I got to play as: the princesses, the dancers, the magicians and knights, and of course the high school student who awakened mystical powers. I was able to live the fantasy before I knew what the fantasy was, and I'm thankful the industry continues to expand and make more safe places for similarly queer people. I'll always have gaming at the end of the day, no matter how lonely or introverted I may become, and no dick has ever compared to the joy I experienced the first time I beat a Final Fantasy (which, to be specific, was VII.)

Except, maybe, the joy of giving my female avatar a dick in Cyberpunk 2077.

A close-up portrait of a woman with long, wavy brown hair, smiling warmly at the camera. She is wearing a white, draped top and large, gold-colored hoop earrings. The background is dark and out of focus.

Coming Home

LESBIAN
CONNECTION AND
REPRESENTATION
IN KY

Jessica Carner
she/her

I'm what you might call a late bloomer; a "later-in-life" lesbian. It's a thing, y'all. Even though my first romantic relationship was with a woman, when that young love died on the vine I pushed those feelings aside and conformed to what was expected of me. In hetero-land that means: have boyfriends, work toward meeting a man to marry - rinse, repeat.

I've come to understand that this wasn't because I was unsure of myself or my feelings. It wasn't because I feared coming out to my parents or siblings who have always shown me unconditional love. It was because I had no real examples of what it looked like to live out and proud as a lesbian. I didn't have openly gay friends growing up. I didn't see same-sex romantic stories on TV or in movies. And I most definitely did not have a social space where I could meet and interact with others in the queer community. What a difference that might have made.

A lot has changed in Louisville since those days 30 years ago. We're fortunate enough to have programs like Louisville Youth Group, established in the late '80s by local community members and PFLAG to provide safe and affirming space for Kentuckiana's LGBTQIA+ youth. And for adults, we've seen some great social spots come and go. The Connection, closed in 2016 after nearly 30 years in business, was a club that provided a safe space for queer people to just be themselves; a place where you were welcome and accepted in a city where you might not always feel that same sense of belonging. I remember seeing my first drag show there, and sensing something come alive within me. But it would still be years before I could embrace myself fully, like I saw patrons and performers doing there.

More specifically as a lesbian or queer femme, there have not always been spaces in Kentuckiana where we can find each other and build relationships. I can't speak for others, but I have always felt like I was trying to weasel in when I visited the gay bars in town - Tryangles, Teddy Bears, and the like. As queer femmes, we often find ourselves squeezing into spaces alongside our gay male brethren, but sometimes feeling as if we're interloping. I remember once being kicked out of Tryangles for accidentally going into the "men's" restroom. It didn't exactly give the welcoming vibes that you would hope to find in a queer bar.

Louisville lesbians have had some great spots in the past (see Tinks, Purrswaytions, even The Monkey Wrench) but the last of those closed in 2019, leaving us with a total lack of spaces we could truly call our own. Unless you have frequented the local bar scene as a queer femme, you might not think twice about how unsettling it can be to be leered at or hit on by cis men, or to feel like everyone is staring as if they know you don't really belong here. Sometimes it can feel downright dangerous - especially for more gender non-conforming folks. On the flip side, you might not really understand how nice it is to walk into a place and just feel totally at ease. It's a feeling I can't really describe, except to say that you can just feel it in your bones. It's like taking off a heavy coat after a long day. It's something like coming home.

So what's a girl to do?

The lack of social spaces where one can be herself and feel at ease can take a toll. The US Surgeon General released a report this May, raising alarm about the devastating impact of the "Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation in the United States." The report is a good read - "Even before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, approximately half of U.S. adults reported experiencing measurable levels of loneliness. In fact, loneliness and isolation increase the risk for individuals to develop mental health challenges in their lives, and lacking connection can increase the risk for premature death to levels comparable to smoking daily." Couple this with the challenges the LGBTQIA+ community already faces, and it can feel like a death sentence.

I don't mean to disparage the Louisville queer bar scene - it has grown and evolved so much over the decades, and I am proud of the spaces we have. Spots like Play, Chill BAR, Big Bar and others now brighten up the nightlife in welcoming, affirming ways for LGBTQIA+ folks. We are fortunate in our little blue-dot-in-a-red-state - queer folks elsewhere in Kentucky might not have these same outlets. But it does sometimes leave me wanting more. If you're not into flashing lights, loud music, and hanging out centered around alcohol, where can you go? Maybe the trope that lesbians like to stay home, curled up on the couch instead of going to bars is precisely because there aren't any spaces where we can go and actually fully enjoy ourselves. How might our community look different if those spaces existed?

Thankfully, Louisville is currently hosting monthly Lesbian Tea Dances - recently covered by Sarah Gardiner for Queer Kentucky. She writes, "The founders made sure to stress that this is in no way out of a desire for exclusion of our lovely male counterparts, but rather a hope for monthly inclusions for queer women to feel at home." It feels like a lovely start and a beautiful venture to create space where women and queer femmes can make new connections and feel welcomed. With any luck, this will grow into something more permanent -perhaps even a brick and mortar establishment just for us.

I think back to my teenage self and I just want to hug her. I want to tell her it's going to be okay. I want to make sure she knows that just because she doesn't see herself represented in media or popular culture or the local social scene, it doesn't mean she is "wrong." It doesn't mean she is the only one. If I could wave a magic wand, I would create a connection between all of us who feel that we can't really be ourselves. But, since I don't currently possess a magic wand, I will continue to support and invest in those special local places that strive to make space for that connection to grow and thrive. Showing up as our authentic selves is a gift - to others and to ourselves. Here's to more spaces where we feel safe and supported enough to do just that.

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FROM STONEWALL TO SMOKETOWN

QUEER LEADERS WHO AREN'T FUÇKING AROUND

Adrian Silbernagel *he/they*



"The first Pride was a riot." This slogan went viral in June of 2020, after countless white queer Louisvillians were activated by LMPD's murder of Breonna Taylor and the growing global uprising against police brutality. Its primary use was to agitate the ruling class Gays™ who were critical of the Black Lives Matter protests by reminding them that there would be no Pride month, and no gay rights, were it not for Stonewall, and Black trans women destroying property and throwing bricks at cops. This Pride month, as legislators continue their assault on trans rights, more and more queer organizations, influencers, businesses, and platforms are adopting revolutionary messaging. But how many of them are actually serious about revolution?

All through March of 2023, Kentucky queers and LGBTQ+ allies took time off work to drive to the state capitol and fight a losing battle. They'd wait in line for an hour or more to pour their hearts out to disinterested politicians, then gather on the lawn or in the rotunda to listen to queer community leaders preach to the choir and cry into their megaphones. Meanwhile, representatives carried out business as usual, passing the anti-trans omnibus SB150 and then overturning Governor Beshear's veto—just like everyone anticipated.

If Louisville's queer orgs are one thing, they're consistent. Every year, like clockwork, they rally: without a strategy, without leverage, using the same tired tactics, at the total mercy of their opponent. Why do they continue this way, when nothing has changed? Not because their leaders are lazy, dumb, or incompetent. Rather, it's because their organizations exist to reinforce the existing power structures. If they changed their tactics and dismantled those structures, they'd be out of a career.

On March 29th, while all the other protesters rallied out of earshot of the power-holders legislating trans people out of existence, a group of twenty working class queers erupted into chants inside the chambers, locking arms and refusing to be silenced while the judge and capitol staff tried helplessly to restore order. We disrupted the proceedings for twenty solid minutes, continuing to yell our chants as the Kentucky State Police pried us one at a time from our seats and arrested us.

After we were released from jail, we learned that various queer liberal organizations who had no part in the action had been reporting updates on our arrests to their platforms, and even making demands of the governor on our behalf. If you didn't know better, you'd have thought they had organized the action. The problem was not that they were stealing our limelight, but that they were stealing our power, and using it to advance their personal and organizational interests.

Marsha P. Johnson famously said that there can be "No pride for some of us without liberation for all of us." Given how mutually-entrenched the nonprofit and for-profit sectors are in this stage of late capitalism, it can be tough to know which organizations are serious about winning liberation for all of us, and which ones are simply capitalizing on the posthumous fame of a Black trans femme revolutionary. Figuring this out requires understanding what power is, and how it moves.

Power is a neutral force. It is simply the ability to act and make things happen. For a lot of us, "power" carries negative connotations. This is especially true if our only experience of power has been at the receiving end of abuses of power—by landlords, employers, corporations, the police, etc.

There are two main kinds of power: paper power (money) and people power (power in numbers). The working class has a claim on the latter. The ruling class, which includes employers, landlords, and anyone who profits off of the exploitation of workers, has a claim on the former. Queer culture in Louisville, from the media to commerce to the political sphere, is currently owned and run by the ruling class. Corporate sponsors pay for our festivals, wealthy developers fund our media outlets, and our employers pay us a fraction of the value we produce for them, which if we are lucky is just enough to feed ourselves and pay our landlords' mortgages.

Capitalism is propelled by the profit motive, which demands maximal profit, and therefore maximal exploitation, at any cost. Because capitalism is propelled by exploitation, extreme inequality is its logical consequence. Hence, anyone who is serious about liberation is organizing (building people power) to dismantle capitalism and replace it with

a system that is not propelled by the profit motive, or by exploitation. This is all that a revolutionary is. Anyone who is serious about liberation is a revolutionary.

While most queer organizations today do not recruit or create revolutionaries, all queer organizations know that queer history is revolutionary history, and that the most important figures in queer history were revolutionaries, a.k.a. anti-capitalists. They also know that there is social capital, and profit potential, in that history. This is what bourgeois queer organizations are trying to cash in on when they quote Marsha P. Johnson, or align themselves with the Kentucky20.

Even while co-opting revolutionary actions, symbols, and people, the ruling class attempts to forestall the revolution by construing our “activism” as a sequence of isolated spontaneous actions, as opposed to the strategic, militant, long-term project that it is. Admittedly, a Black trans woman in the 1960s throwing a brick at a cop is a breathtaking image, and fully deserving of its own holiday. But Marsha P. Johnson did a lot more than that. In fact, the bulk of her “activism” was actually organizing: developing poor and working class queers into powerful revolutionary leaders equipped to take down the system.

Together Johnson and Rivera founded the Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (STAR), a revolutionary political collective consisting of queer and trans youth, drag queens and trans women of color, and survival sex workers. STAR opened the first-ever shelter for unhoused queer and transgender youth. Their manifesto was built on socialist principles such as free healthcare, and food and social services for all people. They held regular meetings, coordinated fundraisers, and organized campaigns. Most notably of all, they recruited, trained, and invested in queer revolutionaries.

Like many Black trans women even today, Johnson and Rivera relied on survival sex work to meet their immediate needs. They hustled for food, clothing, and shelter. They were constantly thinking about how to source their next meal, what to do if one of “their kids” fell ill, and how they would protect themselves if a client became violent.

Over fifty years have passed since Stonewall, and queer and trans BIPOC are still burdened with material insecurity, struggling daily to meet their immediate needs, and relying on sex work and other high-risk work for their survival. This glaring lack of progress is indicative of powerless leadership: leadership that’s not organizing to win. Looking at our local queer orgs’ campaigns and demands lists (or lack thereof), it’s no wonder why SB150 passed in Kentucky, and why so few of us can break out of survival mode. Visibility, representation, and public education are all important, but what are these orgs doing about Louisville’s affordable housing crisis? That’s what Black queer scholar and tenant organizer, Jessica Bellamy, wants to know.

In 2019, Bellamy (any/all) co-founded the Root Cause Research Center, a community platform and base for subversive scholarship that works to eliminate social problems such as poverty and houselessness by attacking their root cause: racial capitalism. In the simplest terms, subversive scholarship is an organizing tool. When Bellamy and their partner Josh Poe aren’t organizing, they’re providing scientific data to steer that work - in real time. The first time I encountered subversive scholarship was in 2020, on RCRC’s website, and my mind was blown. And then I read Bellamy’s story.

Bellamy grew up in the Smoketown neighborhood in a small shotgun-style house. They describe the early years of their childhood as being rich with family and community. When they were six years old, Bellamy’s father was murdered, and their family made the painful decision to leave Smoketown by the time she was eight. Bellamy now owns the house they grew up in, but is still unable to live there due to classist and racist lending barriers, rising property taxes, and the skyrocketing costs of construction.

Like countless queer and Black Louisvillians, Bellamy is a victim of gentrification: a process whereby wealthy developers use public resources and taxpayer dollars to buy up properties in poor and working class neighborhoods, driving up the cost of living, and ultimately pricing residents out of their homes. But like her queer predecessors, Johnson and Rivera, Bellamy is fighting back, and she is fighting to win.

Bellamy is one of the authors of the Historically Black Neighborhood Ordinance: Louisville's first anti-displacement policy, and the first anti-displacement policy in the South. When it passes, the Ordinance will do three things: 1) prevent the city from giving away public resources to development projects that would increase the cost of living in HBNs; 2) ensure that HBN residents get priority access to city programs (like the Downpayment Assistance program, the Home Repair program, and the Small Business assistance program); and 3) create a pathway to restore land that was wrongfully taken from families by the government.

Sponsored by Councilmen Jecorey Arthur and Kumar Rashad, the HBN Ordinance has gained significant support in all 26 of Louisville's voting districts. Over 1,000 Louisvillians and nearly 50 local organizations have signed a petition in support of the Ordinance.

A petition isn't just an organizing tool: it's also a litmus test. A petition tells you where someone's loyalties lie, and whose self interests they're aligned with. Orgs that are serious about liberation for all—including workers, poor people, trans folks, BIPOC, and those who exist at the intersection of these identities, won't just sign the petition: they'll

use their power, connections, and resources to make sure that it passes.



Has your favorite queer or “progressive” nonprofit signed in coalition with the HBN Ordinance? What else are they doing to combat gentrification, displacement, the affordable housing shortage, racist and classist lending practices, and the houselessness impacting so many in our community? Are you willing to make a phone call, or send an email, and find out? Feel free to use the template below. If they say they haven't signed, ask them why, and lean into the tension. Remember: it's their job to serve your interests, and you don't need paper power to hold them accountable.

Hello [],

My name is [], and I am writing/calling to inquire about whether [] has signed the petition in support of the Historically Black Neighborhood Ordinance.

Gentrification has devastated Black communities in Louisville, KY, and the most vulnerable members of the queer community - queer and trans BIPOC, queer and trans youth, and queer and trans poor people - are among those most directly impacted.

The HBN Ordinance does three things:
It prevents Louisville Metro Government from giving away public resources such as money, land, and staff support, to development projects that would increase the cost of living in Historically Black Neighborhoods. It creates a pathway to prioritize residents of Historically Black Neighborhoods in gaining access to city programs, such as the Downpayment Assistance program, the Home Repair program, and the Small Business Assistance program.
It creates a pathway to restore land that was wrongfully taken from families by the government.

As a member/ally of the LGBTQ+ community, and as someone who believes that, to quote Marsha P. Johnson, “There can be no pride for some of us without liberation for all of us,” it's extremely important to me and my community that you show your support of the Ordinance and sign the petition.

Thank you for your time.
[]



QUEEN OF THE ROPEO

ENTREPRENEUR OPENS CUSTOM
CLOTHING SHOP - VELVET OUTLAW

Sophia Harris *she/they*

Miranda Deaton started Velvet Outlaw out of her natural-born desire to defy the odds and test the limits. The local clothing brand made its official debut in late April 2022 and Deaton's Nudie inspired suits have been popping up all around the city ever since. Whether featured in local magazines or TikTok fashion trends, Velvet Outlaw has staked its claim as an unconventional, atypical clothing line that caters to all.

"It has been a journey. I have always said, 'I'm gonna do what I want.' As if I was born with this defiant gene in my body. And it has served me well. And it has not served me well. But it has led me to this point," Deaton expressed, explaining how her passion for fashion arose.

Deaton's grandfather owned a monogramming business that he ran out of his basement. As a child, she often was around to observe and assist him in much of the process.

"He would pull the clothes off the monogramming machine, and I would get the little snipper scissors and cut all the little strings. I was so fascinated by the machines and how they could create a million different words and initials," she described. She shared that she has always been an artsy person, and loved to paint and draw from a young age.

Deaton grew up near Detroit, Michigan. She

moved to Louisville for school, completing her undergrad at Bellarmine University, where she studied psychology and art, and a master's degree in social work from the University of Louisville. After years of fighting to become a social worker within the legal system, Deaton found a position where she could work with both her passions for social justice and fashion.

"A lot of my clothes and the things I make are loosely based on Nudie suits, which are rhinestone suits that the old country Western singers wore. They are very much coming back now. I grew up listening to country and Bluegrass music and seeing these musicians on a PBS special that my dad would play. Elvis had his whole thing going on, and then Dolly Parton too. There are so many examples of what it looks like. But on the other side of it all, when you take away the singers wearing the suits, you have Mexican culture wearing what we know as 'mariachi suits' which come from the deeper tradition of Spanish culture from when Spain colonized Mexico. So, it's a derivative of that, which we see. And I'm interested in the story and the culture behind this," Deaton reflected upon her interest in the entangled histories behind Nudie suits.

Nudie Cohn, a Ukrainian Jewish immigrant born in Kyiv, is one of the original contributors to staple these rhinestone-covered suits. Other designers





who contributed to this concept for Western wear include Bernard “Rodeo Ben” Lichtenstein and Manuel Cuevas.

Learning these stories inspired Deaton to take the risk of creating Velvet Outlaw for herself and her community.

“I think I’ll be coming out for the rest of my life, and maybe these clothes will help some people do that as well. Or maybe you don’t want to, but you want to wear stuff that makes you feel good; that’s representative of who you are. And that’s for me, too. I remember telling one of my friends that Velvet Outlaw is the only job I’ve ever had that feels like the most authentic expression of how I feel on the inside,” she said.

In December 2021, Deaton met Madison Fields of MadKind Design, a local brand design company, who helped push her to create the brand’s name and image. At first, Deaton was unsure about Velvet Outlaws’ perception, but she knew she wanted to do Nudie suits since no one else was doing them at an accessible and affordable price point. After brainstorming “western adjacent” but uniquely styled names, “Velvet Outlaw” came into existence.

Deaton spoke passionately about her desire to find a safe and suitable space for her vision and her customers.

“All parts of me can show up as me in this space. I hadn’t been able to do that in other places. I hope that when people come into this space or wear these clothes, they can do that too. Once you leave, you can do whatever you need to, but in these four walls, you can be exactly who you are.”

Deaton plans to have a spot blocked off in the shop where she will produce everything custom-made. The front will be a store and showroom where customers can buy pre-made items or design their custom garments. Her current plan is to have a display wall with all the options for fringe, rhinestones, and



fabrics. Customers can come in, mix and match, and visually see it together or peruse through a rack of thrifted bases they can build upon. Customers will have options for jackets, pants, dresses, and more in an array of inclusive sizes.

Deaton also expressed her dedication to inclusivity and body positivity. “My body has changed so much just over the last two years, and I’ve had to learn through patterns how to make the rise of the pants different so that they can be higher to accommodate body shapes or different parts of the body. If you have uneven breasts, how do you change the shirt to accommodate that? This is part of what sets me apart from the other designers that do this. I’m more focused on size 14 and up. I have smaller sizing, but the priority of my custom work is mid to plus size,” she offered. Her designs have been featured in various magazines, as well as Kentucky’s Derby Diversity Fashion Week 2022 and Austin Fashion week 2022. Currently, the wait for garments is about three to six weeks.

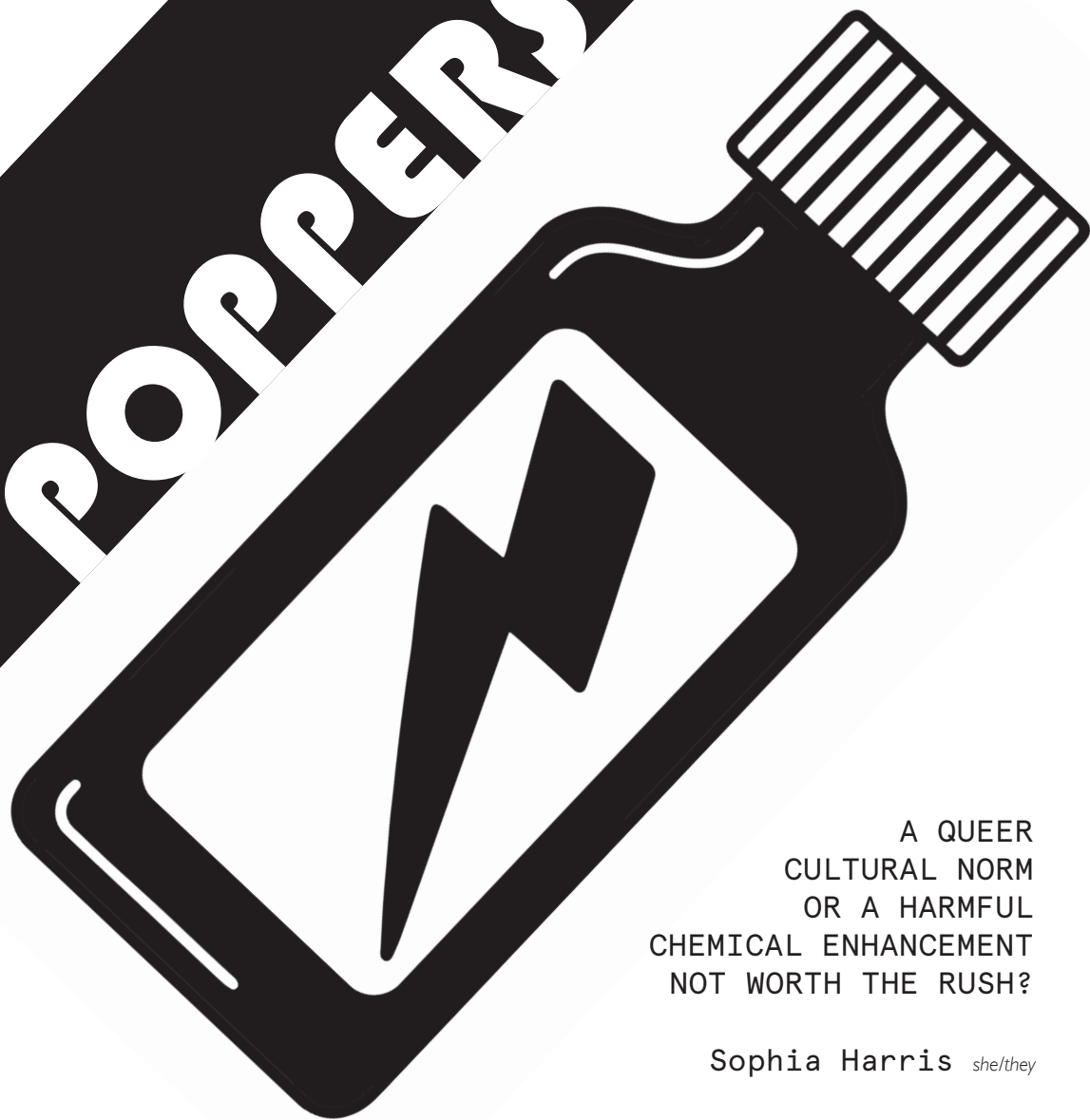
“As a queer person, seeing that one of the most famous people to wear a rhinestone suit is a straight white man is like – He can wear rhinestones and be shiny and fun, but then if a drag queen does it, it’s somehow something else. What is the intersection of that? What are the parallels? And how can Velvet Outlaw expand and teach people about that? That’s also very important.” Deaton continued.

The official clothing storefront is now open at Mellwood Art Center in Louisville, KY. If you can’t make it into the shop, you can check for updates, request custom clothing, or look through available styles via the brand’s Instagram account or website.

“Just because we’re putting rhinestones on it, making it pretty, doesn’t mean that we’re not going to acknowledge all the things that it took to get here - with me, with them, with understanding the culture of these clothes and the backstory, all of this will always be a part of Velvet Outlaw.”



poppers



A QUEER
CULTURAL NORM
OR A HARMFUL
CHEMICAL ENHANCEMENT
NOT WORTH THE RUSH?

Sophia Harris *she/they*

If someone told you that there was a drug that could completely enhance your sexual experience, would you try it? Would you even think twice or would you dive right in?

Most people would probably take a step back and consider the factors here. What is it exactly? What does it do? How long does it last? Or, if you're like me, you'd just give it a shot because you're vibing on the dance floor with seventeen twink, a couple of butch daddies, and some throuples flailing about to Cascada. The drug in question here is poppers.

Belonging to the chemical classification of alkyl nitrites, poppers were first synthesized in 1844. They were primarily used as medicine to treat people with angina, chest pain caused by reduced blood flow to the heart. The drug slowly became popularized in club culture during the 1960s, especially from within the gay community. People soon discovered that experimenting with poppers provided muscular relaxation and sexual enhancement. Once they hit, they really hit. Resurfacing again in the 70's disco scene, and, once again, in the 90's rave scene. Ever since then, they've been here and they've been queer. But how much do we really know about them?

Poppers are marketed very similarly to energy drinks and, often, sold as cleaners or solvents. Rush, Jungle Juice, Liquid Gold, and Double Scorpio, just to name a few, are all very popular brands. The FDA has officially stated that “ingesting or inhaling nitrite poppers can cause severe injury or death,” establishing the drug as being unsafe. If you've ever done poppers, you've probably experienced some side effects such as drop in blood pressure (causing headaches for some) and a possible shortness of breath. The FDA also reports adverse effects to poppers, including difficulty breathing, extreme drops in blood pressure, decreases in blood oxygen levels, seizures, heart arrhythmia, coma, and death. While you've probably never heard of anyone dying from poppers, there has been an increase in hospitalizations from the drug usage, prompting a warning against inhaling or consuming poppers, but not altogether banning them.

A close friend of mine, Warren, used to consume poppers on a daily basis for about 3 years of his life and still does on occasion. As a local expert, Warren knows the primary basics about poppers and how they operate in our bodies. I went to him for a few questions about his usage and the potential risks.

“I know that they are...nitrites,” he said. “And they work through your bloodstream and lower your blood pressure.”

Coming from a healthcare background, Warren informed me of the potential dangers of using poppers with certain medications, such as blood pressure medicines, heart medication, and

vasodilators (aka Viagra). He also pointed out that, even though most do, you probably shouldn't drink while using them as well. He brought up some common side effects he's heard of from people while using poppers. Long-term, repetitive usage of poppers, for some people, can induce erectile dysfunction and similar symptoms. The most common side effect that we had both heard of from people is headaches; however, Warren stated that he's never experienced this before.



“Oof. Does that mean I have high blood pressure just like all the time?” he questioned.

A couple other friends I talked to also experience the headache sensation that typically occurs in the comedown. While Warren did not even try poppers for the first time until 2016, he says that he used poppers on a daily basis from 2017 to 2020. When asked why he used them so frequently, he responded that he started using them to relax himself during sex. He shared that because he gets really anxious, poppers helps him feel more in the moment, giving him some of the best orgasms of his life.

He says he primarily buys them online, but has also bought them in various places around town before.



"You used to be able to buy them on Amazon," he said.

"If poppers were to disappear or become less accessible, how would that impact your life?" I asked.

"I feel.. I hate to say it, but I feel like it really would impact my life. I feel like it has given me a lot more sexual liberty. Not that I'm dependent on it, but it really would make things a lot more difficult. And I could definitely see a potential risk with a possible rise in other types of drug usage to make up for the loss." Potential for new street drugs?

The rising restrictions being put on the drug brings up just as many issues as improper consumption does.

For one: LOTS of unsatisfied gays, that's for sure. The increase in restrictions and regulations on the drug has been referred to as a 'war on bottoms' by PinkNews, in a piece discussing the crackdown on poppers in Australia and how it's affecting the gay community. When I asked my other friends about the drug, I pretty much got an array of answers - anything from "I can't live without them," to "I've never had them and don't ever plan to."

When we think of poppers, we often go to gays and bottoming, right? But something you probably haven't heard of is poppers being used for female sexual pain. And it absolutely makes sense, given the body relaxation effect. The gays are onto something, for sure, but let's reassess the dangers.

One study done from Gregory M. Taylor, D.O. at IU Health Ball Memorial Hospital suggests that

poppers can be extremely dangerous in excessive amounts and for people with underlying health conditions.

"The patient was picked up in an adult novelty store after employees noted he kept falling, looked ill and finally collapsed to the floor shortly after checkout," the study said. The patient was a 69 year-old male with a long history of hypertension who was experiencing methemoglobinemia. Methemoglobinemia is a blood disorder where an abnormal amount of methemoglobin, a form of hemoglobin, is produced. With methemoglobinemia, the hemoglobin can carry oxygen, but cannot successfully release it to other bodily tissues. While the patient was struggling to breathe and basically passing out in the store, he was out of the emergency room within two days, thanks to treatment provided by the Indiana Poison Center.

In a different study conducted by Daniel Demant from the Australian Centre for Public and Population Health Research, popper usage was examined among 836 Australian gay and bisexual young men aged 18 to 35 years to learn more about their risks and side effects. The study concluded that among this particular group of individuals, poppers had proven to be pretty harmless over all. "A regulation of poppers with a harm reduction approach

may present a valuable public health intervention." But is regulation a reasonable reality when poppers have played such a huge role in club scenes for decades now?

A national anti-drug advisory service developed by



the Department of Health and Home Office of the British government explains the impact of mixing poppers with other drugs, alcohol, and Viagra or other erectile dysfunction medication. The risks listed on the site describe the drug as being most harmful when mixed with other substances, or when consumed by people with underlying conditions, specifically those related to heart conditions and blood pressure issues.



Another problem associated with the drug is how people often use it: namely, the duration in which people inhale them, as well as the repetitive consumption of it within short periods of time. Homoculture writes, "Popperbating is the perfect solution when you need a wank, but don't feel like getting hookup ready." Although popper porn (interactive porn videos designed to watch while using poppers) has been taken down from the majority of porn websites, if there's a will, there's a way. Warren said popper porn is something he used to be

extremely interested in, stating that most of the videos were about an hour or longer. Gay lifestyle publication, Homoculture, says that when watching and indulging in popper porn, there is a possibility of your lips and fingernails turning blue from consuming the drug for prolonged periods of time. It can also cause shortness of breath, prolonged dizziness, and headaches. They suggest "taking a break" to recenter and doing them for shorter periods next time.

Overall, it seems as though poppers definitely can be harmful, depending on your lifestyle and usage of them. However, just like any other drug, there is tremendous stigma around the usage and lots of misunderstanding surrounding the actual facts. If you'd like to know more about the past, present, and future life of poppers, check out *Deep Sniff: A History of Poppers and Queer Futures* by Adam Zmith.

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Lessons from the Orange Juice Queen

May O'Nays *she/her*

I first encountered Anita Bryant in a grad school gender and women's studies course called "History of Feminist Thought." One week, our content area was conservative activists of the mid-twentieth century. These women spent their lives pushing back on the contemporary feminist movement, advocating for traditional [read: white, middle class, American] ideas of womanhood. That's when I saw my first image of her. Anita Bryant stood at a podium in a black and white, her perfectly coiffed, maternal hairdo standing out against a backdrop of protest signs reading, "Protect Our Children."

Anita Bryant had turned her Second-Runner-Up status in the 1959 Miss America Pageant into a thriving career. The Oklahoman's buttery singing voice landed her work in the jingle and spokeswoman field. Between 1959 and 1977, she came to represent the most trusted American products in the nation, including Kleenex, Coca-Cola, Tupperware, and most famously, Florida Orange Juice. Orange juice consumption in the 1960's and '70's was directed by the wholesome Anita Bryant. Her commercial success and ongoing partnership with the Holy Grail of breakfast juices eventually led her and first husband, Bob Green, to relocate to Miami Florida, living in a swanky waterfront mansion.

In 1977, Miami-Dade County passed an ordinance to grant protections for LGBT people in housing and employment. In response, conservatives launched a full scale campaign to overturn the measure, electing Anita Bryant as their fearless spokeswoman - a role with which she was intimately acquainted. She became the face of the Protect Our Children campaign, which claimed the ordinance would allow gay school teachers to teach homosexuality to their children and "recruiting" them into their "lifestyle", codifying the grooming myth.

Anita and the Save Our Children Campaign successfully overturned the Miami-Dade gay protection ordinance. Emboldened by her success, Anita and husband Bob traveled the country lending support to conservatives in other cities seeking to combat similar protections for queer folks. Their campaign is credited with spurring an entire generation of previously politically inactive queer people into action.

Since seeing the image of Anita in my feminist thought course, I knew I wanted to portray her...in drag, of course. I didn't see a clear course for a storyline until the unthinkable happened. It was revealed in 2021 that Anita has a queer granddaughter who announced her intentions to marry another woman. Like a bolt of lightning, I knew it was time to be Anita.



Unfortunately for Anita, her close business associations with American products became a liability. Queers and progressives led a nationwide boycott of any product Anita had endorsed, specifically her beloved orange juice. Gay bars across the country stopped using orange juice in screwdrivers, favoring pineapple juice instead. Anita was ridiculed on television programs including *The Match Game* and the *Carol Burnett Show*. And in an ultimate humiliation, Anita was pried in the face on live television by a gay activist. Look it up on Youtube. It's amazing.

The boycotts worked. Anita lost her sponsorships, her home, and eventually even her husband. The right wing Evangelicals keeping her afloat saw her as damaged goods and also abandoned her. Miami ended up reinstating their gay protection ordinance. Anita lost everything gambling on hate.

The first years of the 2020s have seen a surge of legislative attacks on queer people, specifically trans folks. Florida, under the leadership of human bowl of rice pudding, Ron DeSantis, continues its anti-gay legislative agenda with the "Don't Say Gay" bill. Kentucky has recently passed its own anti-trans legislation, SB 150: a bill aptly termed the most oppressive in the country. During these times of increased attacks on the lives of queer people in our states, Anita serves as a powerful lesson. Boycotts work. Resistance works. It's time for action.

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granddaughter who announced her intentions to marry another woman. Like a bolt of lightning, I knew it was time to be Anita.

In an interview from 1977, reporter Barbara Howar asked Anita, "Suppose you found out in some way one of your children was a homosexual, what would you do?" Anita responded, with her signature composure, "I would love them and not disown them."

In the fictionalized version of reality we create in my latest one-woman show, "Anita Do-Over," we ask a question based on one assumption. Assuming Anita wants to attend her granddaughter's wedding—maybe a stretch, but not impossible after years of softening and aging—what would Anita be willing to do to get an invite? In this imagined world, Anita's granddaughter says Anita can attend the wedding if she tours gay bars across the country asking for forgiveness.

With heaps of dumb humor, Anita tries to grapple with her past. Can her lasting legacy of demonizing queer people as child predators be softened by acts of atonement? Probably not - but it's fun to watch her squirm.

"Anita Do-Over," co-written by Rev. Tara Dactyl and myself, produced by Drag Daddy Productions, has extended its initial run, being invited to participate in the 2023 Louisville Fringe Festival, August 18 & 19th.

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THREE GENERATIONS OF TENNESSEE PRIDE-FUL DRAG

Emma Koenig *she/her*

Kentucky is one of many states that are working to pass anti-drag-performance bills, which by no coincidence negatively impacts transgender people and may lead to further oppression of entire LGBTQ+ communities. Kentucky's Senate Bill 115 describes drag as a "live performance involving male or female impersonators [...] that appeals to a prurient interest in sexual conduct [...] and as a whole lacks serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific value."

But these bills are attacking much more than drag performances; at its core, drag is a pillar of queerness, queer journeys, communities, and LGBTQ+ Pride. The intention behind Pride can change when the rights of entire communities become threatened. In response to recent anti-drag and anti-trans bills, many are seeing this year's Pride as more than just a celebration, but as a way to be heard, seen, and stand up against these bills. Many younger folks are relying on their elders to guide them in the fight we, unfortunately, keep fighting.

To better understand the impact of this legislation, I spoke with three generations of drag queens and kings, past and present, to describe how dangerous these bills are, how we are seeing history repeat itself, and how the community is becoming more unified as a result.

Desmond Napoles, a 15-year-old, former drag kid, used drag as a helpful tool to express themselves at a young age. Through drag, they gained confidence and embraced their identity. Because of it, they can now dress and express themselves authentically. Bills similar to Kentucky's SB 115 frame drag as a universally dangerous, sexual, and inappropriate performance that can harm children, without defining what harm they're referring to. Desmond did not see their experience as a young drag kid as dangerous. Oppositely, as a child who explored drag and performed as early as nine years old, Desmond shared how exposure to diversity within the community helped them navigate their feelings of confusion with their personal identity. It was important to observe how many options there were to being genuinely oneself. They described drag as, "an art form, and art should not be restricted as long as it is not hateful."

"Drag is not limited to one type of person; it has many forms, anyone can do it, and there is not one type of show. Art can't be limited to a certain sex, gender, (or age); anyone can do drag. It is not just men doing it; there are women, trans people, nonbinary people, straight men, gay men, lesbian women, and drag kings."





Aries Alxndr, a 25-year-old Atlantan drag king, sees that when people and governments threaten the drag community, a unique closeness occurs. "There is often a bit of a divide between the babies and those who have been around forever [...] but we are seeing a resurgence of bridging between generations with information and knowledge sharing." Similarly, Cordelia Facade, a 23-year-old Tennessean drag queen, reflects on the incredibly extensive network of sharing within the scene. This cross-generational learning and influence amongst the drag community can be as simple as sharing makeup techniques, or as complex as understanding the different generational perspectives and intersectionalities within drag.

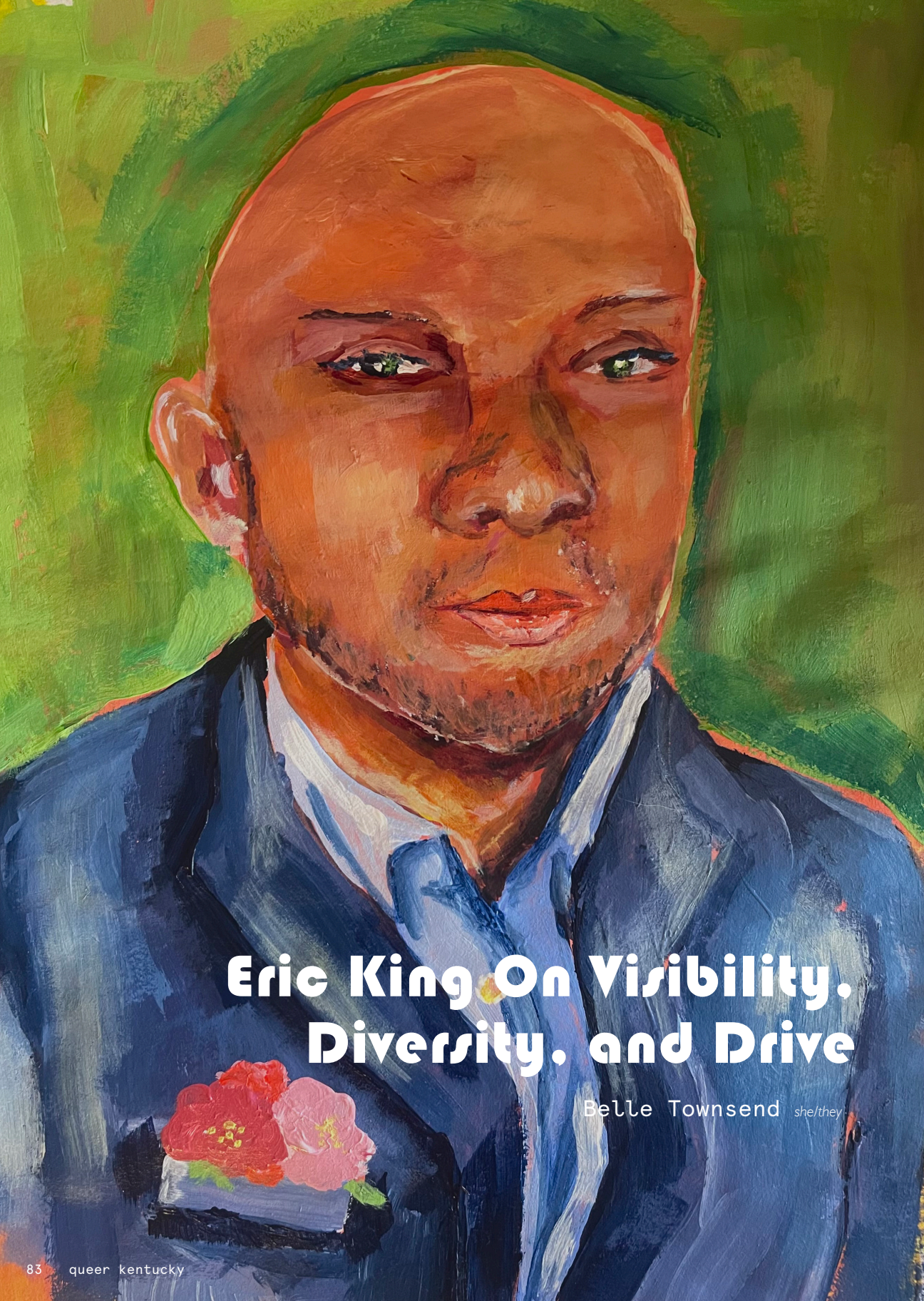
Vivica Steele, a Tennessee-based 40-year-old drag queen, says it is not her first time seeing bills like this oppress people. "As a queen of color, this is nothing new to me. As a Black man, this is nothing new to me. As a gay man here in the south, this is nothing new to me."

She knows these bills go well beyond "protecting" the community as they are framed as doing. "It's not about the children - there are laws put in place to protect children from environments like that [...] this is taking marginalized communities, criminalizing them, and taking away their rights to vote." Pride often represents diverse groups coming together and learning from each other. Cross-generational conversations about past and present oppression allows us to make changes. Support can be as simple as, "being open to having discussions with our older and more mature community so they can have an opportunity to understand without feeling like they're offending you or being attacked for trying to understand you."

For many younger generations, Pride has been a way to honor Stonewall, celebrate, bring people together, show respect and strength within the community, and be loud and proud about who you are. For younger folks, Pride has often been about acknowledging and thanking others for their fight and celebrating it. Many people in the middle and older generations see Pride as representing their many past struggles, all of the previous times they've stood up, and the lives that were treated unfairly and ultimately lost while standing up for queer rights and equity. "Older generations are sick and tired of fighting this fight because they already have, and why do they have to do it again? While younger generations heard about people fighting in the past and are asking why it is necessary again. [...] We are coming together out of anger" (Alxndr).

Steele reminds lawmakers, "if you want to see change, mess with the LGBTQ+ community." We aren't going anywhere, and will continue to fight for our right to exist.





Eric King On Visibility. Diversity. and Drive

Belle Townsend *she/they*

Eric King, a Murrow and Emmy award-winning journalist, has 20 years of on air experience. He is from Bardstown, Kentucky, and he is a graduate of the University of Louisville. A journalist and broadcaster with a love for traveling and storytelling, King uses his perspective in news to challenge and educate.

On the topic of identity intersecting with his career, King shares, “I am a Black guy from Kentucky. That’s how the world sees me. The gay thing... some people see it, and some people don’t. Being Black, though, that’s the first minority checkmark that people see. My job has forced me over the years to live all across the country, and then I’ve tried to travel on my own. I’ve lived in the whitest, smallest towns in America, in some of the Blackest cities in America, and in some of the largest cities in America. In those spaces, I have always felt like I did not fit in. But when I started to embrace my own backstory and recognize the things that drive me, it got easier to navigate different spaces and move around the country and world.”

King has indeed made it across the country, with his career taking him from Montana, to Mississippi, to the city of Dallas, Texas. He continues, “In broadcasting and journalism, when you’re able to bring your full self to the table, you’re better in all capacities. I’m a better writer than I’ve ever been. I’m a better speaker, a better thinker. That’s what drives the stories that I do and the news that I anchor, because I think that when we are smarter – we are better. Part of our job is to create an educated electorate, and I think over the years, we [journalists and broadcasters in general] have failed at that, especially in recent years. So, what drives me from the minority perspective – Black, gay, what have you, is recognizing that we are always trying or having to prove our value. We are consistently forced to prove that we deserve to exist fully. And, the more people see us doing that, the more people understand and become less afraid around us or of us. Those efforts don’t always feel successful, especially lately, but I really believe that the more exposure you have to different people, different cultures, different thought processes... the better we all become.”

On the topic of representation and visibility of diverse media perspectives, King continues, "I don't have a coming out story. I don't have a cathartic moment. That wasn't my journey. But, I know what it's like to grow up in a small town and not understand what gay is, and to be afraid of it. I look back now, I was born in the '70s, so I grew up in the '80s and '90s in the height of the AIDS crisis. But, I look back now, and I did not consider myself gay. My understanding was- if you have sex with a man, you get AIDS. That was my childish understanding at the time. And we have to understand that there are still people out there with these archaic thoughts, and those thought processes are informing fears, and those fears can lead to legislation.



Ignorance breeds discrimination. I believe, the smarter we get, the less of that regulation we will see."

Further to King's point that media can be used to shift perspectives, media is highly regulated and only certain voices are able to be heard. On being able to share stories that highlight diverse perspectives, King shares, "I

think the struggle that I have had to accept is that me being able to do what I do now is the result of experience. I went to U of L, and when I finished school, I moved to Montana. I was the only Black person anywhere around. I did not have a say in what I did – my perspective did not matter. I was a worker bee. There was no conversation beyond that and it was that way for years. I'm able to write these stories now [referencing coverage on queer and Black perspectives] because of experience and support from my team, and I work in a newsroom that has pioneered diversity in newsrooms for years. So, I am allowed to do what I do because my management trusts I'll do it well. That was not the case 4 or 5 years ago."

He continues, "My approach now is, if I think it's interesting, other people will too. If I have struggled with it, other people have too. But, the reality is that I am doing this because I am allowed to. There are several Black journalists and gay journalists, right now, in this city, that are not given that opportunity."

On how he has gotten here, King humbly offers, "There is nothing unique about me. I think I'm the least unique person in any room. But, I think my talent is identifying the stories that other people have, and writing them in a way that makes them think, 'wow, I never thought of myself like that.' I love challenging people's perspectives both on themselves and on situations in general. That is what drives me most now."



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Sapphic-held Spaces Created for and By Sapphic-Minded People

Belle Townsend *she/they*



"It's important that sapphic-minded individuals have safe spaces, even if it's just one day a month of saying, 'Hey, we're going to get together and meet each other,'" shared Lussi Brown Coffee Bar Owner, Sarah Brown.

She continues, "There's more than a handful of us. There's a whole lot of us, and we come from different places. We each bring a lot to the table. Our community... it highlights there's a lot of us here, and we have a lot of good to do – together."

Brown, the co-founder of the coffee bar, is a sapphic person who seeks to foster an inclusive community that is "trans friendly, and not just for women who love women." Brown continues, "We are here for each other, and we need support right now," referencing the cultural attacks on the LGB(TQ+) community.

Lexington Lez Night was started pre-COVID by Brown and friends as something of a "bar hop" to lesbian-owned businesses in downtown Lexington: Lussi Brown Coffee Bar, gay bar Crossings, and Sam's Hot Dog Stand, a business that has since closed. Since the social restraints of COVID have loosened, Lez Night came back, and it has grown. Brown, "noticed a need for a queer space for women and a night to hone in on sapphic people."

This started from Brown constantly being asked, "Where do you meet queer women in the city?" She repeatedly did not know how to answer. She realized the space did not exist, and she thought to herself, "Well, we have the power to do this. So, let's make it happen."



She reports that they had over 100 people in attendance at their last Lez Night event. In addition to Lez Night, Brown shares that she “has a tabling event every month for a queer organization or sapphic-owned business to show that there is something more to support or get involved in.”

Lussi Brown Coffee Bar initially opened in June of 2017, when Brown felt that, “As a queer person and someone that’s been involved in the community long before opening, I knew the importance of safe, queer spaces. The local queer community helped us become who we are. So as much as I want these things to happen, they only happen because the community wants it to happen. When the community shows up to our events, it is this cohesive thing that shows communal effort for queer, safe spaces,” Brown shares.

Louisville native Fawn Wujick also shares about the need for a sort of sapphic gathering. Fawn and friends Sarah Havens and Elizabeth Jent were feeling nostalgic about lesbian bars that “used to be.” In an attempt to create that sense of community, they held their first event in April of 2021, where they had 30 attendees at their first Lesbian Tea Dance. Since then, they have used Facebook, business cards, and word of mouth to expand to over 1,500 Facebook members and an average attendance of 200 people. Attendees are from small towns and big cities in Ohio, Indiana, Kentucky, Michigan, and others.

Wujick shares that their goal for Lesbian Tea Dance was to “be able to offer a safe place for lesbians to meet at least once a month for 3 hours.” Despite “some ‘slack’ from gay men and I

or 2 lesbians,” Wujick wants to remind folks that they just want “3 hours out of every month, and that is not a lot to ask for.”

On the growth of Lesbian Tea Dance, Wujick shares, “I personally have enjoyed seeing how happy the ladies are to have a space again. They are meeting new friends and reconnecting with ones from the past.”

Wujick continues, “The event does not have a ‘clique’ feel to it, and the ladies are extremely welcoming to first timers.”

“It began as our vision, but it took the community of lesbians to make it what it is today. We wanted a safe space and a sense of community, and I believe we have arrived.”

With these two special spaces being held in Lexington and Louisville, there is a joint effort to cultivate inclusive spaces for queer, sapphic minded individuals to come together. Wujick shared that the community has coordinated to promote one another’s events and to coordinate the events to be on the second week of each month. During that week, you can find Lex Lez Night on Thursday in Lexington; Friday is Desert Hearts Club at Birdie & Vi’s in Louisville; Saturday you can attend the Lesbian Tea Dance in Louisville; Sunday is PickleBall for the Not So Straight in Louisville; and Lexington has Coffee Time hosted by Lesbians of Lexington and Beyond.



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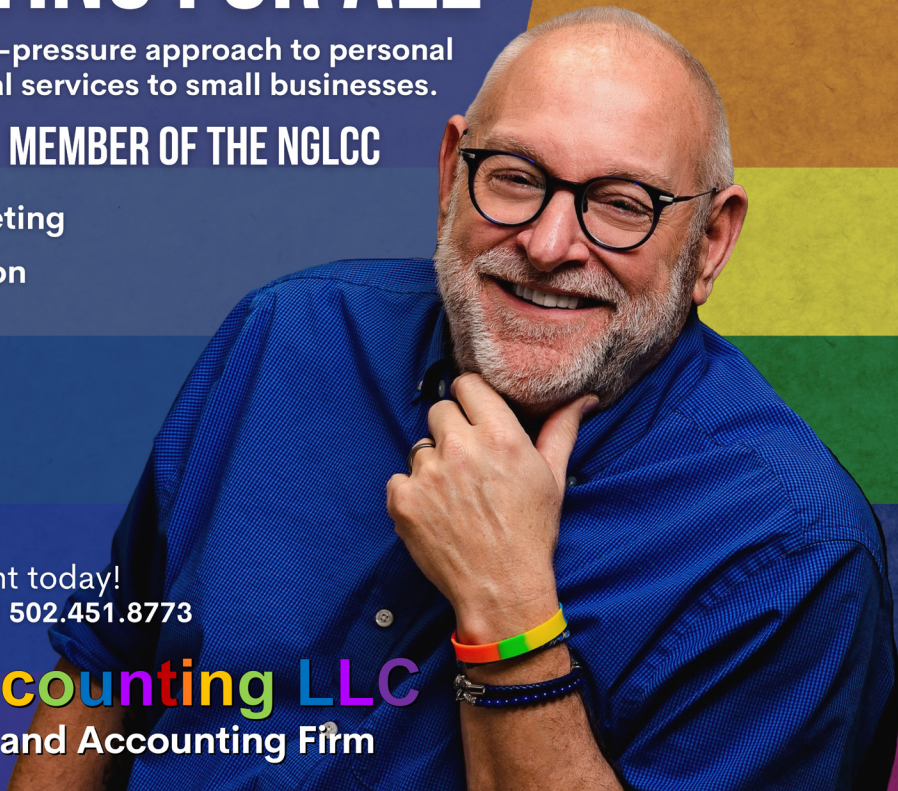
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Matthew Truett *he/him*



Matthew Truett, a former seminary student who was expelled for being queer, provides this firsthand account of the damage that Southern Baptist Theological Seminary causes:

Southern was, for lack of a better word, a total mind-fuck. The October before I moved to Louisville to go to Southern, I had officially come out to my family and friends. Their disdain was actually what drove me to enroll at Southern, because I wanted to make them proud and make them look at me like I wasn't dashing their dreams of a "committed missionary for Christ." So, I consciously decided to go back in the closet in order to make Southern work, and it was hell. I lived on campus, worked on campus, and went to classes on campus. I only left campus in order to go to church (Sojourn) or small group. Southern was my entire Louisville life - until it wasn't.

When you enroll in classes at Southern (in 2014), you had to sign the Honor Code first. You couldn't even get to the online form to register for courses without first signing the Honor Code. The Honor Code had your standard "no drinking," "no drugs," "no porn or sex before marriage," and "no going to bars" (you could not even enter a bar without being at risk for being in offense to the Honor Code). They had statements making you agree that you would not file a lawsuit against anyone while being a student and agreed to non-legal, Christian/pastoral mediation for legal matters. You could not get divorced while enrolled at Southern. As you guessed it, you could not be gay or engage in homosexuality (sex, relationships, marriage, etc).

At that time in American history, this was before the landmark Obergefell case, so gay marriage was illegal in Kentucky anyway, but even identifying as LGBT made you ineligible for enrollment. Of course, I lied, registered for classes, and started my grad program. In fairness, in Evangelicalism, Southern is pretty prestigious, and their president Al Mohler is highly influential in Evangelical social circles. If I was going to sacrifice my very sexuality, I wanted a top-notch education from one of the pinnacles of American Christian education, so Southern was my one and only choice for my Mdiv program.

As the national conversation started ramping up regarding the possibility of a federal marriage decision for queer people, other students' blatant disgust and homophobia ran unchecked. Gender roles are very strict at Southern (women cannot take preaching classes because women cannot be ordained in the Southern Baptist Convention), and even men who enrolled in the Biblical Counseling tract were mocked because that was what female students traditionally studied. Seminary dorm life makes "locker room talk" look like child's play. I knew who I was and what I was sacrificing to even be able to sit in the same common spaces as these men, so I kept a lower profile.

My internal struggle of sequestering myself, as well as my own growing disgust for the men around me, drove me to begin asking questions such as, "Would it really affect straight marriage if gay

marriage was legalized?" This raised many red flags amongst the dorm life leadership (who were also fellow students), and, quickly, my name was taken to the Dean of Students. I was called into the Dean's office, and he asked me frankly, "Are you a homosexual?" I answered honestly and said yes. With this "yes," I was swiftly evicted from my dorm room, fired from my on-campus job, expelled, and left homeless in a new city.

It's clear from Matthew's story that leadership at Southern is trained to identify the "signs" or "red flags" of homosexuality and report them as soon as they are detected: the textbook definition of a witch hunt. In Matthew's case, it backfired, because after they left Christianity they discovered Paganism, and now they are a literal witch. We love to see it. But in all seriousness, I'm just glad they lived to tell their story. Not everyone does.



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THE LASTING LEGACY OF THE HOUSE OF SWEET EVENING BREEZE

Josh Porter *he/him*



Mother Of Us All, John Ashley, 1972. Collection of Faulkner Morgan Archive.

As caretakers of Kentucky's LGBTQ+ history, we at Faulkner Morgan Archive find it imperative that we continually remind ourselves and our communities of the long-lasting legacy of queer people in the Commonwealth.

One of the most prominent ways to do that is by sharing stories of our queer ancestors who paved the path for us to be where we are today. The history of Kentucky drag is one place that holds countless stories of individuals creating a space of freedom and self-expression for LGBTQ+ people. Drag "houses"

often became core support groups for drag queens, gender-bending performers, and trans individuals with drag “mothers” forming and leading the house.

One drag mother, Sweet Evening Breeze, and her drag house left a particularly strong mark on the city of Lexington. As early as the 1920s, Sweets strolled through Lexington’s downtown in her feminine attire, with a parasol in hand. Before the 1970s, Sweets would have probably been the first, if not only, openly queer person many Kentuckians knew. While Sweet Evening Breeze is the best remembered of the Black, gender-ambiguous folks in Lexington, she was actually just one member of a vibrant community. Other queer individuals and drag queens began to make a name for themselves through the 1950s and 1960s as drag performances rose in popularity among Lexington’s queer community.

One drag queen and trans woman, Leigh Angelique was from the house of Sweet Evening Breeze. She would often perform at The Living Room, which is now known as the Bar Complex located on East Main Street. However, on April 8th, 1970, a Wednesday night, Lexington Police raided The Living Room and arrested four queens, including Tiffany Ross and 22-year-old Garland Hanley, better known as Leigh Angelique.

After Leigh was booked for the crime of “wearing a disguise,” she sought refuge at the home of Sweet Evening Breeze. Enraged by the injustice, Sweets called the judge assigned to sentence Leigh. Sweets told the judge it was “in his best interest to drop the charges.” The judge complied. In the words of Leigh, “I don’t know what Sweets had on the people in this town, but she had something.”

This was the last time Lexington Police raided a gay bar for simply being a gay bar. For years after, Sweets and Leigh celebrated the date as their “Bastille Day,” when they dismantled a prejudiced law and its unjust enforcement. This is just one example of the impact that Sweet Evening Breeze had in the city. In a time where being publicly queer meant being faced with





harassment, violence, and even imprisonment, Sweets became a powerful force to be reckoned with.

Another one of Sweets' drag daughters was Miss Joyce, also known as Charles Dansby, who was Lexington raised, and lived most of his life in the house that his great-grandfather built (and where Charles was born) in the predominantly Black neighborhood of Spiegel Heights. Charles' drag career spanned decades, and when he passed in February 2020, he was the last known "drag daughter" of Sweet Evening Breeze, whom he had known since childhood. Charles met Sweet Evening Breeze at the Walgreen's lunch counter on a Saturday trip downtown with his mother.

Charles was one of many interviewees in the documentary *The Last Gospel of the Pagan Babies* by Jean Donohue.

The life and legacy of Sweet Evening Breeze and her "drag daughters" is still inspiring and impacting Kentucky's queer community. In 2022, The Faulkner

Morgan Archive held a dedication for the "Mother Of Us All" mural of Sweets painted by GAIA located prominently in downtown Lexington. Sweets is also the namesake of Sweet Evening Breeze, a Louisville organization that is working to end LGBTQ+ young adults homelessness. It is important to remember our shared queer history and the impact of icons like Sweets. We must now carry on their legacy and fight to leave a better world for future queer people.

The Faulkner Morgan Archive is a grassroots community archive with a mission to share Kentucky's LGBTQ history. Our collections span 200 years of history, representing individuals, events, and institutions across Kentucky's diverse LGBTQ spectrum, creating a rich resource for activists, scholars, artists, museums, and the curious. We believe sharing our history can change our future. You can find us online at FaulknerMorgan.org or on Facebook and Instagram @FaulknerMorganArchive.

"Mother Of Us All," Painted by GAIA. Located at 161 N Limestone, Lexington, KY, 40507.

Top: Sweets with Tiffany Ross at The Living Room, early 1970s. Collection of Faulkner Morgan Archive.; Middle: Sweets at an event; Bottom: Miss Joyce (far left) attending a Miss Gay Lexington pageant, late 70s or early 80s, Collection of Faulkner Morgan Archive.



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