

Qnotes Organization of the Year The Charlotte Mecklenburg Library



Vermelle's Place
offers a safe haven
for those in need of
transitional housing

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How is Habitat for
Humanity helping
the LGBTQ+
community?

-pg 12



Seasons Greetings



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front page

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The focus of *QNotes* is to serve the LGBTQ and straight ally communities of the Charlotte region, North Carolina and beyond, by featuring arts, entertainment, news and views content in print and online that directly enlightens, informs and engages the readers about LGBTQ life and social justice issues.

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Celebrating 50 years: a look at Lambda Legal, the National LGBTQ Task Force and PFLAG

The National LGBTQ Task Force, Lambda Legal and PFLAG celebrate fifty years! The American Psychiatric Association declassified 'homosexuality' as a mental disorder in 1973, the same year these organizations were founded and continue to fight for our rights today.

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Our People: Ra'Shawn Flournoy

In Our People, Ra'Shawn D'Angelo Flournoy talks with Qnotes' writer L'Monique King about coping with homelessness and making a path to life as a minister, author, businessman and Deputy Director of Quality Comprehensive Health Center.

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NC Senate leader endorses Lt. Gov. Robinson for governor

Op-Ed

By Rob Schofield | NC Newsline

The person often identified as the most powerful Republican in North Carolina state government has endorsed the state's current highest-ranking Republican in the race for governor.

As had been expected by many observers ever since the two men shared a stage last April when the candidacy was announced, Senate President Pro Tem Phil Berger of Rockingham County endorsed Lt. Gov. Mark Robinson on Nov. 29.

WRAL's Will Doran reported that in endorsing Robinson, Berger said, "I just think he's got a good head on his shoulders. I think philosophically, he's generally in the right place. I think he has been supportive of many of the things that we've done here at the General Assembly."

Robinson is a fiercely conservative social warrior who first rose to prominence after delivering a fiery endorsement of gun rights at a Greensboro City Council meeting in 2018. Since winning election as Lt. Governor in 2020, he has regularly uttered controversial attacks on LGBTQ people, and made statements widely viewed and condemned as anti-Semitic.

Robinson's candidacy and appeal are rooted in ultra-conservative evangelical churches and the movement often referred to as Christian Nationalism.

As Newsline's Joe Killian reported



Senate President Pro Tem Phil Berger (left) of Rockingham County recently endorsed ultra conservative Lt. Gov. Mark Robinson to serve as North Carolina's next governor. CREDIT: Screen Captures

previously, Robinson appeared in 2022 at multiple events sponsored by the far-right American Renewal Project, in which he made explosive statements that insulted women, higher education and other Christian churches and their pastors, and suggested righteous Christians should follow the violent and confrontational methods now used by neo-Nazi groups and the far-right militia group The Proud Boys. Robinson is a vocal ally of former President Donald Trump.

Robinson's public statements and persona contrast sharply with those of the

Senate leader. Berger is a mostly soft-spoken smalltown lawyer who has amassed immense political power during 13 years as the leader of the state Senate by working almost exclusively behind the scenes. Berger has not made an endorsement in the 2024 presidential contest.

When it comes to policy priorities, however, the two men have much in common. Throughout his tenure as Senate leader, Berger has pursued an aggressive conservative agenda on a wide array of issues, including tax policy, public education, environmental protection, abortion

and the rights of transgender people.

These efforts may have reached their apogee during the 2023 legislative session as Berger helped spearhead a successful effort to override gubernatorial vetoes of a raft of controversial conservative agenda items — many of them championed by conservative culture warriors.

Of interest in light of the announcement is the fact that the 2023 GOP agenda also included several controversial measures that stripped powers from the Governor's office. Robinson has not spoken publicly on those bills.

The latest Meredith College poll showed Robinson running far ahead of his two main rivals for the GOP gubernatorial nomination — State Treasurer Dale Folwell and attorney Bill Graham.

The window for candidates to officially file with the State Board of Elections began Monday, Dec. 4. The primary is scheduled for Tuesday, March 5.

NC Newsline Editor Rob Schofield oversees day-to-day newsroom operations, authors and voices regular commentaries, and hosts the 'News & Views' weekly radio show/podcast. As a QNotes media partner, all material from NC Newsline appears in our pages under a Creative Commons license. Schofield's commentary approved for reprint through CC BY-NC-ND 4.0. ::

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Gay Republican George Santos expelled from Congress

Bipartisan vote removes New York representative from seat



by David Aaron Moore
Qnotes Staff Writer

Openly gay New York Republican George Santos, who served as the US Representative for New York's third congressional district, has been officially expelled from Congress. The action leaves Santos with the dubious distinction of being the sixth member of the House of Representatives to be removed from office in United States history.

An attempt to remove him from office once before was unsuccessful. The final decision came as no surprise, especially to residents of the district on Long Island, which includes such towns as Great Neck, Mineola, Bethpage, Syosset, Oyster Bay and Glen Cove, among others.

"Couldn't come soon enough," Jill Krieger, a voter in the district, told the news department of New York CW affiliate WPIX. "I would have liked this to happen the first time there was a vote but I'm just happy it finally happened. He needs to be out. It's just not good for anyone."

New York State Governor Kathy Hochul now has just under 10 days to schedule a special election, expected to occur in mid to late February. Nominees will then be chosen to run for office from the Democratic and Republican parties.

Although Santos has pleaded not guilty to 23 federal fraud charges that he has not gone to court for yet, the final tally on Dec. 1 was 311 members voting to expel and 114 voting against. A total of 105 Republicans voted to remove Santos from office, while 112 voted against expulsion. Among Democrats 206 voted in favor of removal while only two voted against. Five Republicans and three Democrats abstained from voting entirely, with another two Democrats voting only as present.

In an odd move, house Speaker Mike Johnson (R-LA) voted against the resolution, saying earlier in the week that he had "real reservations" about removing Santos.

Santos got where he is today by concocting a confusing web of lies that even he couldn't keep up with.

Among them, he denied ever appearing



Even though he was kicked out of the House of Representatives, gossip about an appearance on 'Dancing with the Stars' or his own reality show are already swirling. It's unclear who the viewing audience might be. CREDIT: Facebook

in drag, even though a rather fetching photograph of him in stylized makeup, a long black wig and a red dress from a festival in Brazil emerged, contradicting his statement.

The list continues: He claimed to be a Broadway stage producer, a volleyball star and insisted that he was not paid parent during the COVID-19 pandemic on property that he owned, which he did not. He claimed to have attended Baruch University and New York University, although no records of his presence at either school exists.

He has made claims of being a Wall Street financier and investor and working for Citigroup and Goldman Sachs, though both companies beg to differ.

He has claimed his grandparents were Jewish and fled Nazi Germany but documents confirmed they were born in Brazil

and that four employees of an unspecified company that he owned died in the mass shooting at Pulse Nightclub in Orlando, Fla., although a report from the New York Times could find no evidence that any of the 49 victims of the shooting had ever worked for any of the purported companies Santos claimed as his own.

Of all the lies he told, the assertion that his mother was working in an office in the World Trade Center during the attacks of 9/11, and that eventually led to her death from cancer is perhaps the most outrageous. Especially when evidence proves that she was not in the United States at all in 2001.

There's more, of course, but let's take a quick look at the financial misdeeds that led to the felony fraud charges: After a single \$50,000 payment from the cam-

paign to elect Santos, NBC News reported that the "funds were used to, among other things, pay down personal credit card bills and other debt; make a \$4,127.80 purchased at Hermes; and for smaller purchases at OnlyFans, Sephora and for meals and for parking."

Santos had reportedly told a former roommate named Gregory Morey that his motivation for running for office was to capture a lifetime pension and insurance that reportedly came with holding the job for at least a single term. As of Dec. 1, his plan failed.

At the age of 35, he was one of the younger members of the House of Representatives. As a gay Republican with a propensity for ubiquitous falsities and a self-loathing habit of supporting anti-LGBTQ+ legislation, it is unlikely he will ever be embraced by any political organizations in the queer community, and it's a given he has burned all bridges with conservative Republicans.

As of this writing he faces the aforementioned felony charges, which range from identity theft to wire fraud. If convicted he could spend 22 years in Federal prison.

While former members of congress, even those that have been expelled are allowed the lifetime privilege of walking on the secured floor of the house, Santos said he sees no reason to take advantage of that.

"Why would I want to stay here?" He was quoted as saying in an article carried by the New York Times. "To hell with this place."

While his life does indeed look quite bleak at the moment, there are already murmurs of an appearance on "Dancing with the Stars" and a possible reality show in his future.

When questioned about future plans during a press conference the day before he was expelled, Santos was noncommittal.

"Look, I don't know," he said. "The future is endless. I mean, you just never know. You can do whatever you want next, and I'm just going to do whatever I want."

His statement does beg the question: Why does Santos think the future has no end date? ::

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NC sued over redrawn maps

Redrawn North Carolina Senate districts have become the subject of a new lawsuit against the North Carolina State Board of Elections, the president of the state Senate and Speaker of the state House of Representatives, which alleges the new Senate districts violate the Voting Rights Act.

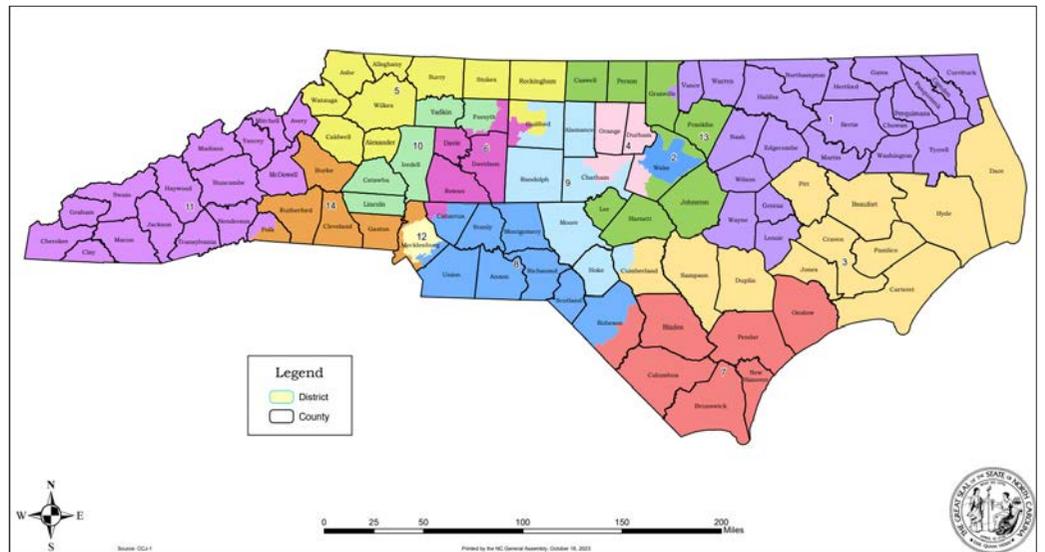
“Despite having ample evidence of racially polarized voting and a history of discrimination in the ‘Black Belt counties’ of northeastern North Carolina, and an obligation under the Voting Rights Act to analyze that evidence before drawing districts, the North Carolina General Assembly adopted a Senate plan that unlawfully deprives Black voters of the opportunity to elect candidates of their choice,” the suit states.

The state Supreme Court has previously rejected similar maps, agreeing the proposed districts went against the state’s constitution as it was deemed “ex-

tensive partisan gerrymandering.” The decision was then overturned by the court’s new conservative majority, claiming partisan gerrymandering can’t be resolved by state courts.

This lawsuit is just another example of North Carolina’s tumultuous history of gerrymandering and redistricting. The General Assembly’s GOP-majority approved maps giving them a heavy advantage in the 2024 election over Democrats. The lawsuit argues the new maps divide predominantly-Black counties, effectively suppressing their votes. As the maps currently stand, North Carolina’s eight majority Black counties are spread over four different Senate districts.

The plaintiffs also argue the General Assembly did not do a Voting Rights Act analysis when planning its 2023 state Senate plan. Legislators could



have made a district with a majority of minority voters, but instead, as currently drawn, the maps hinder and suppress Black North Carolina voters.

“Black North Carolinians, including in the [predominantly] Black Belt counties, are significantly more likely to be improv-

erished than white North Carolinians,” the plaintiffs in the suit said. “They likewise face discrimination in education, housing, employment, and healthcare and are less able to participate effectively in the political process.” ::

—Taylor Heeden

Being gay in public: Tennessee city removes ‘ban’ from local ordinance

Officials in a Tennessee city elected to remove language from its “public decency” ordinance to reverse a ban on being gay in public that was implemented during Pride month. No, your eyes aren’t deceiving you: Murfreesboro’s municipal government passed an ordinance forbidding public acts of affection between same-sex partners in public, and they reversed their decision about four months later.

The ordinance listed “indecent” behaviors and actions, which included “homosexuality” along with “acts of masturbation” and “sexual intercourse.” Language in the policy also prohibits “knowingly” engaging in “indecent behavior,” or subjecting children and teens to “a prurient interest or to behaviors, materials, or events that are patently offensive to pre-

vailing standards in the adult community as a whole with respect to what is suitable material for minors” in a public space. In addition, city funds are barred from being used to broadcast certain materials, such as books, broadcasts or shows.

Murfreesboro’s anti-LGBTQ+ ordinance mirrors a state law looking to ban drag performances for children, defining content “harmful to minors” as that which “appeals to the prurient, shameful or morbid interest of minors” or lacks “literary, artistic, political, or scientific value.”

Critics of the policy claimed it further exacerbated the historic discrimination against LGBTQ+ residents, as well as infringes on First Amendment rights. The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) sued the city over the ordinance on behalf of

the Tennessee Equality Project (TEP), indicating the city was using the ordinance to drive out LGBTQ+ community members, especially drag performers, and to prevent Pride events from taking place in town.

A federal judge issued an order prohibiting Murfreesboro from using the policy to prevent the local Pride parade — BoroPride — from happening. The judge also instructed the city council to remove “homosexuality” from the public decency ordinance, which was done quietly earlier this month.

“We are glad Murfreesboro officials have amended the ordinance,” the team



of attorneys representing TEP said in a statement. “However, we will continue to challenge the remaining portions of this anti-LGBTQ+ ordinance until it is permanently defeated, and all residents of Murfreesboro know that their government officials have no right to censor LGBTQ+ people and our expression.” ::

—Taylor Heeden

Virginia school board rejects \$10K grant from pro-LGBTQ+ organization

Lynchburg City Schools in Virginia rejected a \$10,000 grant from the It Gets Better Foundation after the award received backlash from community members. The board voted 7-2 in favor of not accepting the grant.

“Let me be very clear,” a grandparent of a student said during the board meeting. “The LBGQTQ agenda in schools is about indoctrination and grooming our children into an evil and wicked lifestyle, all while circumventing the rights and responsibilities of parents.

The It Gets Better Foundation awarded the money for students at a Lynchburg high school’s Gender and Sexuality Alliance (GSA) club to create a “quiet room” for students with sensory sensitivities. The proposed room would include white noise machines, sensory friendly lighting, flexible

seating and more.

Other schools across the district have similar spaces, with E.C. Glass Principal Daniel Rule telling the board the sensory rooms have “been shown to promote student self-regulation and are correlated to better student outcomes.”

“Many students, including myself, struggle with mental health,” high school junior Lindley Crosby offered. “School can be overwhelming just by itself, but a lot has happened in the last three or four years, what with the uncertainty of COVID along with the many lockdowns and how those have affected students.”

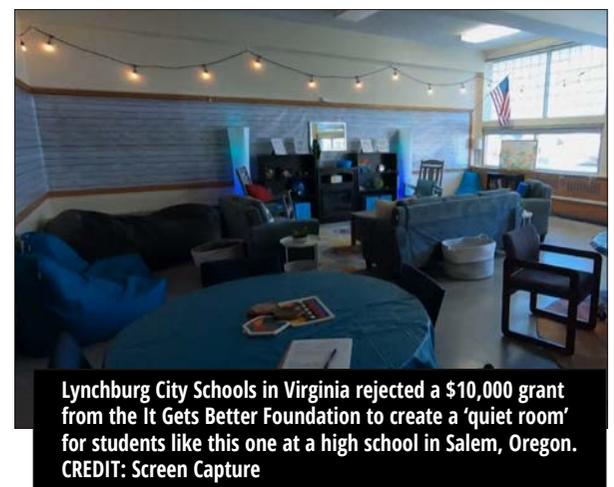
School board members, however, were wary of the association the grant has with a LGBTQ+ organization. One of the board members, Christian DePaul, offered his “re-search” into the It Gets Better Foundation

for the public.

“My point is, and there’s other people on the board who have this opinion, I believe, that this is a group I don’t think should be associated with LCS,” he said. “I cannot support that project with all the things that I’ve seen on their website. I cannot do it.”

The mission statement of the foundation, which is found on its website, states the organization works to “communicate to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender youth around the world that it gets better, and to create and inspire the changes needed to make it better for them.”

Board members also took issue with some of the requirements for the grant, which included signage indicating It Gets Better sponsored the construction of the “quiet room.” The board elected to match the grant from funds within the district’s operating budget, as they did acknowledge there was a need for a sensory-



friendly space.

“The kids need it,” school board chair Atul Gupta said. “Let’s get it done and move on.” Despite Gupta’s sentiments, the Virginia school board maintained their 7-2 rejection of the \$10,000 grant from It Gets Better.

—Taylor Heeden

Surya acquires Mitchell Gold + Bob Williams brand

After closing its operations in August, North Carolina-based Mitchell Gold + Bob Williams (MG + BW) was bought by fellow furnishing company Surya. Products are expected to start shipping out by the first quarter of 2024, according to those familiar with the acquisition.

Mitchell Gold + Bob Williams made national headlines when over 500 employees lost their jobs after the business's closure. CNN reported the closure of MG + BW indicated a "another sign of consumers' pause in discretionary spending," as stores such as Home Depot and Target experienced drops in sales in recent months.

According to Surya President Satya Tiwari, MG + BW will be going back to its "roots and building on its core tenets of craftsmanship, customization, and a design-forward approach."

"We are dedicated to restoring MG+BW to its former glory and beyond, and we

look forward to redefining the standards of excellence in the home furnishings industry," Tiwari explained. "Our acquisition of the MG+BW brand reiterates our ongoing commitment to serve the design community as a complete resource for home furnishings."

According to a press release sent by Surya, the company plans to restart manufacturing and assembly operations at the MG+BW facilities in Taylorsville, N.C. Surya officials say this is a commitment to not only ensure jobs return to the local area, but also underscores Surya's ability to contribute to the economic growth of the area.

Mitchell Gold, one of the co-founders of MG+BW, will serve as an advisor to Surya's leadership team as they navigate a path forward for the furniture companies.

"I am excited that Surya has emerged as the next steward of the MG+BW brand, possessing a profound appreciation for our heritage and a resolute commitment to pro-

pel the brand forward," Gold said. "After navigating through unsettling times, I now see a promising next chapter for the brand we built over 30 years. Surya's deep understanding of the market, alignment with our design philosophy, and proven track record to drive future success creates a winning formula.

"I am enthusiastic about supporting them in any way I can."

When the company closed, it employed over 533 workers who lost their jobs at the three facilities operated in both Iredell and Alexander counties. While it remains uncertain how many people will be re-hired at Mitchell Gold + Bob Williams, there is an excitement about the development from Surya, Gold and Alexander County.

"The really good thing is the ownership and leadership of Surya really care about this business and they want to restore it to the kind of business it used to be in the community," Gold said in an interview with The Hickory Record.

Alexander County Manager Shane Fox replied enthusiastically to the announcement from MG + BW in a released



The high-end furniture company Mitchell Gold + Bob Williams, which was forced to close its doors in August, has been acquired by a new parent company and will re-open in Taylorsville early next year. CREDIT: Screen Capture

statement. "We look forward to the company's revival and the jobs that are to be restored in our county [and] we appreciate Surya's investment in MG+BW, as well as everyone's efforts in making this significant transaction a reality." ::

— Taylor Heeden

Tricia Cotham to run for re-election in 2024

North Carolina State Representative Tricia Cotham announced Nov. 22 she would seek re-election in a newly drawn, Republican-leaning district in Mecklenburg County. Cotham made national headlines earlier this year when she switched her party affiliation from Democratic to Republican, handing the GOP a veto-proof supermajority in the General Assembly.

The Mint Hill Republican announced on X (formerly Twitter) she would seek to become the representative of the more conservative-leaning House District 105 in southeastern Mecklenburg County, which was approved in recently drawn maps.

"After our prayers and talks, I've decided that I will seek re-election to keep representing Mecklenburg County and I look forward to meeting the voters of HD-105," the post stated.

Between 2007 and 2016, Cotham was a Democrat and supported LGBTQ+ equal-

ity, as well as a woman's right to choose, in addition to other Democratic initiatives. Cotham had also previously received endorsements from organizations such as EqualityNC and Planned Parenthood, but after she switched her party affiliation, the new Republican voted to override Governor Roy Cooper's veto on a 12-week limit for most abortions. Cotham has also been a cosponsor for bills to further the GOP's agenda, including a law allowing state tax dollars to offer vouchers to attend private schools. Republicans argue this law allows for parents to have more options for their children's education, while Democrats are concerned the tax dollars going to vouchers could be going into the state's public school systems.

The district Cotham plans to run for leans Republican by a 52 percent to 45 percent margin, and in the last U.S. Senate election, the voters in District

105 picked the Republican nominee, Ted Budd, by a margin of only 1.38 percent.

North Carolina Democratic Party Chair Anderson Clayton has placed the spotlight on Cotham, calling her move to switch parties "a deceit of the highest order." While there hasn't been a challenger named for Cotham, Clayton told the News & Observer in an interview she's hopeful the Democratic Party can flip the seat.

"We know if we run a good ground game and a good campaign, the candidate that we have up for the Democratic nomination is going to be someone who



With maps redrawn in her favor, Democrat-turned-Republican Tricia Cotham hopes to to be re-elected to her NC Senate seat in the Mint Hill area. CREDIT: Screen Capture

has a really competitive shot at winning this district," Clayton said. "We're going to make sure that voters know that Tricia Cotham is someone who's lied to them in the past - and what's to say that she won't do that again?" ::

— Taylor Heeden

Almost one year later, no arrests have been made for Moore County substation attack

Last December, shots rang out at two Moore County electrical substations and over 38,000 people were left without power for days. No arrests have been made, but Moore County Sheriff Ronnie Fields said law enforcement are still working to investigate.

"We have pursued hundreds of leads since the start of the investigation and continue to receive them," the sheriff said in a press release on Monday. "We have scoured local businesses and residential areas and have conducted hundreds of interviews in search of any information associated with the attacks.

"Although it is not prudent to share

all the details of this case, we are working diligently to hold those responsible accountable for their actions and see justice served for our communities."

The motive behind the substation attack hasn't been made public, but shortly after the attacks Fields said it was possible the "Downtown Divas" drag show was related. Durham-based drag queen Naomi Dix was one of the performers for the Dec. 3 show. She initially told a local NBC affiliate last year she didn't know if there was a link between the drag show and the power outages, although she shared a different opinion after seeing unconfirmed reports online.

"It would not surprise me if anything was geared or focused on creating issues for the queer community," she explained in 2022. "I'm not going to say specifically for the drag show because we are more than just a drag show, we are a community of people, so it would not surprise me if the attack was focused on the queer community."

Law enforcement have looked into the possible relationship between hate groups and the outage. Shortly after the substation attacks, two white supremacy banners were put on display over Moore County highways. They were later sent into the State Bureau of Investigations to extract any DNA left behind.



Moore County Sheriff Ronnie Fields said last year the shooting that occurred at an electrical substation there could have been related to an area drag show, although the case remains unsolved. CREDIT: Screen Capture

Fields told reporters he's unsure if the banners or protests outside of the drag show were related to the substation attacks. He did say, however, authorities were looking into possible connections. ::

— Taylor Heeden

Charlotte-Mecklenburg Library named Qnotes' Organization of the Year

The library has remained steadfast in its mission to have a diverse collection of books, as well as keep them available to the public



by Taylor Heeden
Qnotes Staff Writer

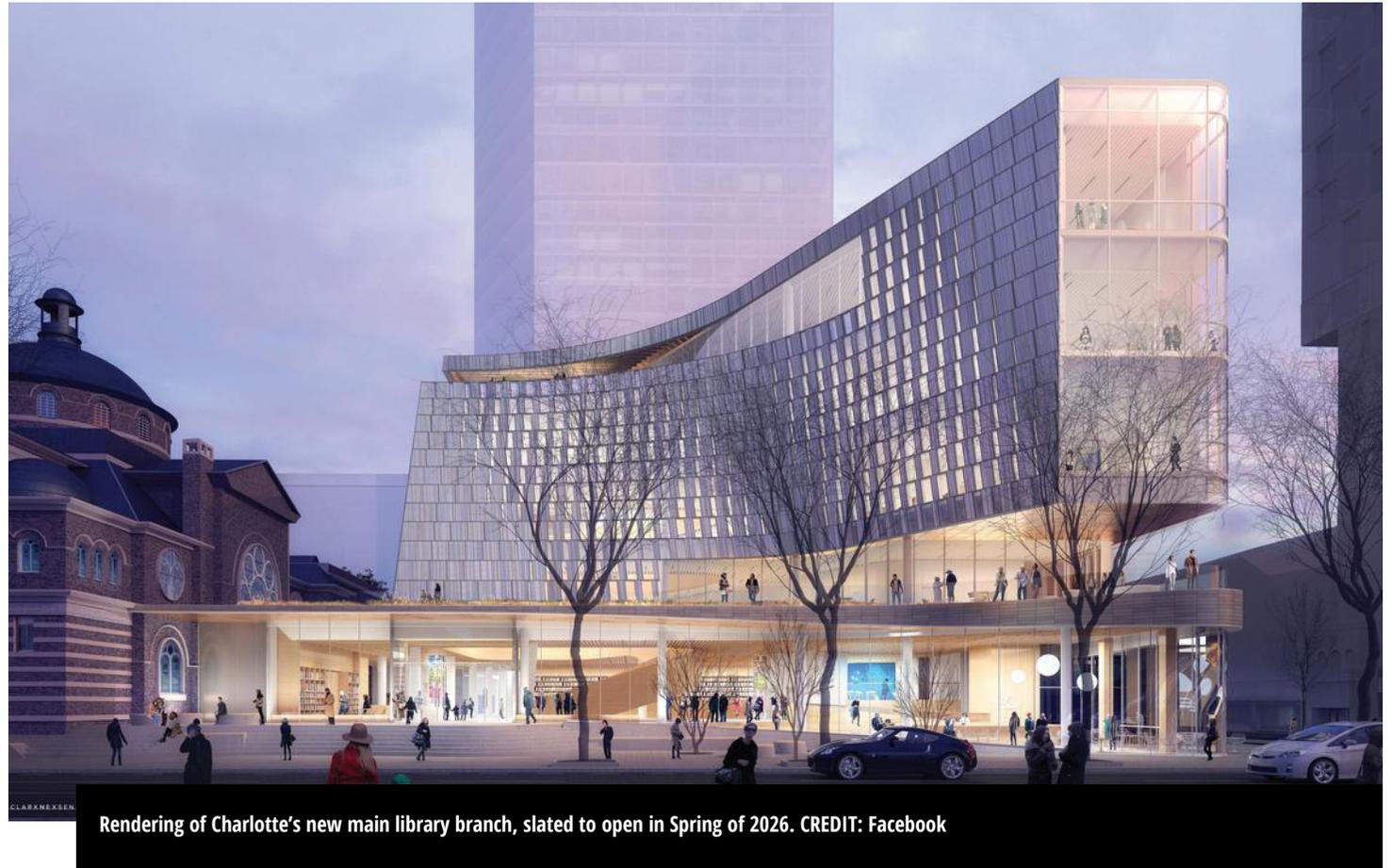
Qnotes is thrilled to announce the selection of our Organization of the Year: The Charlotte Mecklenburg Library (CML). Traditionally, we select a nonprofit to highlight as our organization of the year, but with the current political climate, we feel it's important to highlight the important work the libraries in Charlotte have done to include LGBTQ+ perspectives.

"CML, like libraries everywhere, wants to ensure that our users and communities see themselves and their friends and family members in our collections, programs and events," library CEO Marcellus Turner told Qnotes. "The LGBTQ+ programs, collections and services that we offer serve to educate, inform and reflect the reading interests of all our communities."

The CML was established in 1903 as an original Carnegie Library. It has since grown to 20 locations throughout the area, with the mission of improving lives and building a stronger community. The library has been a champion of representation, particularly in regard to Charlotte's queer residents.

Turner said library staff have made it a priority to include LGBTQ+ resource materials for patrons, as well as programming for all ages. He also said these efforts go beyond recognizing Pride month in June.

"We have had several rainbow storytimes and had our first Drag Queen program this year as well at [Allegra Westbrooks Regional Library]," Turner explained. "It is one of our system-wide



Rendering of Charlotte's new main library branch, slated to open in Spring of 2026. CREDIT: Facebook

goals to make sure all our displays highlight diverse voices."

The CML has also made community outreach a priority when it comes to engaging with underrepresented groups such as Charlotte's LGBTQ+ community. Their service model

includes book clubs, writing pro-

grams, college and career information and much more. The library has also participated in Charlotte Pride and Charlotte Black Pride, as well as partnered with Time Out Youth to offer support to LGBTQ youth ages 13 through 24. There's also a Mobile Library, which allows for youth to check out LGBTQ+ related materials discreetly.

"The Mobile Library has become a safe place for customers, specifically for teens, to check out and request information," Turner said. "Our staff reported that teens stated they felt safe using the Mobile Library to check out material, especially if they have not come out to friends and family."

Libraries have traditionally been an institution of inclusivity and acceptance. Today's political climate, however, has resulted in a movement to ban books related to LGBTQ+ or other deemed "controversial" topics. According to PEN America, 3,362 book bans affecting 1,557 unique titles were implemented, with over 40 percent of them occurring in Florida under Gov. Ron DeSantis' administration.

"Unfortunately, a goal of

inclusion doesn't always mean that resources are available for inclusion or that they are positively viewed the same way now as they were years ago," Turner said. "Equally, over time we've seen an increase in materials that have offered perspectives of normalcy or acceptance compared to what may have been available earlier."

The CML staff has dedicated itself to educating the community about book bans by creating displays and programming to help spread awareness on the topic. Turner said by teaching patrons about book challenges, it in turn allows for there to be an open dialogue about book bans and their implications.

"As with book bans for any type or reason, the library stands firmly in its commitment to

intellectual freedom and a person's or family's individual right to choose/access what they want to read," he said. "We also have a rigorous review of all challenged books to ensure that our decisions are in line with our commitment to intellectual freedom."

In addition to creating engaging and educational programming for patrons, the CML has also completed diversity audits of all its materials to see just how many different underrepresented groups appear in the libraries' collections.



The Mobile Library, provided by the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Library system, serves as a safe haven for LGBTQ+ resource materials, specifically for youth and teens. CREDIT: Screen Capture

"Additionally, we recently completed a diversity audit of our entire print collection and were excited to see that when it comes to LGBTQ+ titles, we were ranked very highly compared to other library systems," Turner offered. "It was reassuring to see the hard work of our selectors reflected in high numbers across all genres and age groups."

"As to the future, we will hold firm that books have a right to be read by those who wish to read them, and our work will remain focused on that."

The Charlotte Mecklenburg Library's Board of Trustees created an intellectual freedom statement that speaks to this commitment, according to Turner. That statement reads as follows:

"Charlotte Mecklenburg Library is committed to protecting the First Amendment's guarantee of free and open access to information and ideas – a principle vital to our democracy and to each individual's search for knowledge. We seek to provide our diverse community with a comprehensive collection of materials and programs providing a wide range of knowledge and perspectives."

The CML has always had LGBTQ+ related materials, including works by such authors as James Baldwin, E.M. Forster and Edmund White, among others. In fact, the CML purchased copies of "And Tango Makes Three" by Justin Richardson and Peter Parnell in 2005. The book is a story of two male penguins who start a fam-

ily with the help of a zookeeper.

"At the time this title was considered controversial and was challenged at many library and school systems," Turner explained. "Even though we had our share of challenges, we kept it in the collection for our customers."

According to Turner, the number of LGBTQ+ materials in the CML system has increased significantly over the last decade, especially as more publishers continue to provide resource materials. The demand has also increased, as people in the service area for CML are looking for more LGBTQ+ stories.

"Staff at branches will often hear from customers how grateful they are to see support during PRIDE months ... one customer this year wrote in to thank us for our pride collections and displays," Turner said. "They shared that it meant a lot to them, especially after the challenges the LGBTQ+ community has faced this year."



Staff of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Library participate in LGBTQ+ events, including Charlotte Pride. CREDIT: Courtesy of Charlotte Mecklenburg Library

"While not every customer is appreciative of our materials, especially when they are highlighted through a display, staff are prepared to educate those who have questions by reminding them that the goal of the Library is to represent everyone in the community."

Libraries are a crucial institution in the United States, as they are the center for many community resources and materials. It's important to protect the right to access, according to Turner, and the best way to do so is to continue to

support local libraries.

"Libraries are all about access and that is why they are important to communities — we provide access to information and technology that they might not have access to otherwise," he said. "Our staff are trained in serving the public with the one goal of helping them find the information they need."

"True to our mission, our goal is to help people improve their lives and build community. Our work every day proves this." ::

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Pride Builds from Habitat for Humanity could help the affordable housing crisis in Charlotte's LGBTQ+ community

Here's what other Habitat organizations have done, and what can be done in Charlotte to replicate those results



by Taylor Heeden
QNotes Staff Writer

Habitat for Humanity International was established in 1976 with the idea of using partnerships and volunteers to help build homes for those in need. Since its inception, the nonprofit has helped more than 39 million families build safe, stable housing in an effort to create generational wealth in low-income families.

Among those marginalized groups who are disproportionately impacted by the lack of affordable housing are LGBTQ+ people.

According to studies provided by the Human Rights Campaign, over 22 percent of LGBTQ+ identifying people live in poverty compared to 16 percent of heterosexual, cisgender people. To break it down further, almost 30 percent of trans people and cisgender bisexual women, 19.5 percent cisgender bisexual men, almost 18 percent of cisgender lesbian women and 12 percent of cisgender gay men live below the poverty line.

Discrimination could account for why queer-identifying people have a hard time finding affordable housing. In North Carolina, specifically, there isn't a statewide law prohibiting discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, but individual municipalities can elect to pass their own non-discrimination ordinances if they so choose.

Habitat for Humanity in Charlotte has played an integral role in creating affordable housing options across the city, with over 4,000 families in the city receiving help from the local Habitat.

One of the builds from 2016 aimed to partner with a local LGBTQ+ organization known as the Plus Collective — then called the Charlotte Lesbian and Gay Fund — to build a home for a mother of four in the

Lincoln Heights neighborhood.

Since then, the Charlotte Habitat has yet to complete another Pride building project. However, other Habitats across the state have started and continued Pride builds, utilizing partnership models similar to the one between the Lesbian and Gay Fund and Charlotte's Habitat.

The 2016 Rainbow Build

Charlotte's Habitat for Humanity partnered with the Lesbian and Gay Fund, who pledged \$5,000 towards building a home, to bring volunteers from all backgrounds to help build a residential structure. Former Habitat for Humanity employee Bettie Coltrane said in 2016 the Pride Build signified two differing groups coming together.

"I've seen it over and over at Habitat and where two very diverse people come together on a build, and when you are working on the same goal, it tends to bring people together rather than highlight their differences," she explained.

At the time of the Charlotte Rainbow Build, HB2 was at the forefront of the North Carolina political climate. Habitat for Humanity is a Christian, faith-based organization, which has a very different background than most organizations who work with LGBTQ+ folks.

Jeremy Hall is the Director of Development at Charlotte's Habitat, and at the time of the 2016 build, he was with both Habitat and the Lesbian and Gay Fund. He said he felt it was important for Habitat to step up and take on Pride-centric projects, especially given its reputation as a faith-based organization.

"We wanted to say very clearly that we stand with our LGBTQ+ community and we want to help them find home and stability and affordable living," he explained to **QNotes**. "[We felt] participating in a rainbow build will help to dismantle some of those belief systems that keep people from



A volunteer shows off her rainbow fan as she helps Wake County Habitat for Humanity's Pride build. | Courtesy of Wake County Habitat for Humanity

getting involved."

Linda Lawyer, who volunteered with the Lesbian and Gay Fund, called the build a "Rainbow Build," as a direct tie-in to the community it was meant to serve.

"They want to bring in the gay and lesbian community to help build this house," Lawyer said to Spectrum News. "It shows that we can work together — we really want to work with everybody, and what's better than building a house?"

There's a reason Charlotte's Habitat for Humanity hasn't completed another Pride-centric project since the Rainbow Build in 2016. Hall confirms it was able to happen because the Lesbian and Gay Fund provided the \$5,000 grant and since then, there hasn't been an organization who has taken up the initiative.

However, if an organization would be willing to partner with Habitat for a Pride building project, Hall said it would help reopen the doors to doing another Rainbow Build.

"If we found the right community partner, we could certainly move back in that direction, but I think it doesn't make much sense without some kind of community partnership," he explained. "All of our partners are supporting really great things in the community, but the only reason right now we don't have an active partnership for a Rainbow Build is because the right community partner has to help us get there."

QNotes reached out to the Plus Collective, asking for information regarding the 2016 build. A spokesperson from the Plus Collective stated the organization was approached by Habitat in 2016 regarding the Rainbow Build, stating the following:

"It sounds like when we were presented with the opportunity to participate in the build, we were unable to provide volun-

teers on short notice to do so. Additionally, Habitat did not collect [information on] whether the family identified with the LGBTQ+ community as it was a potential prohibited basis from a fair lending perspective — therefore, we don't know if the family aligned with our organization or not."

Other Pride Builds Across the State

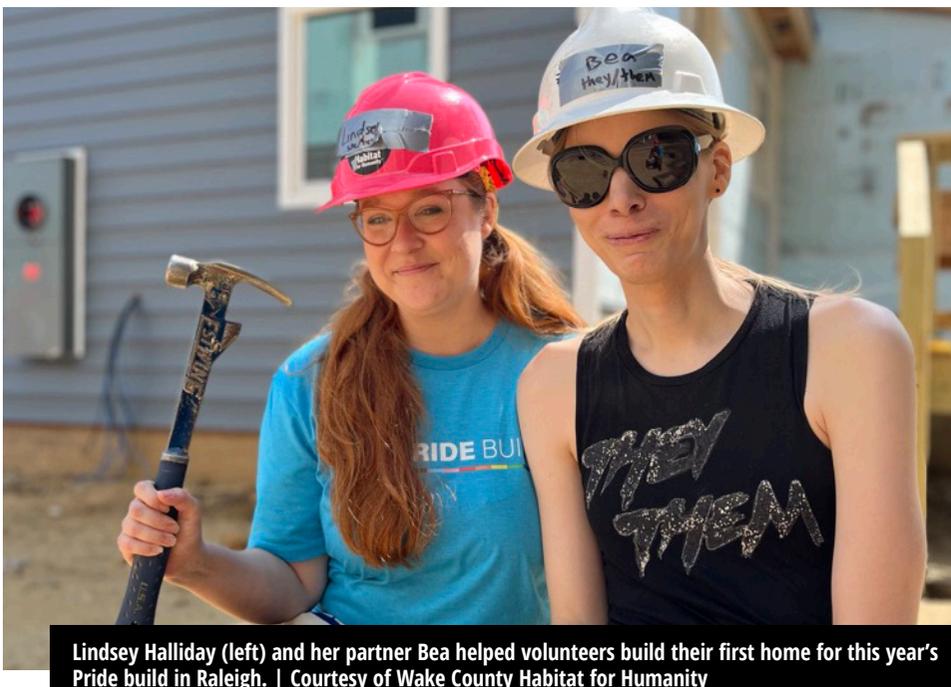
While there isn't much information on Charlotte's Rainbow Build, other Habitat chapters elected to start their own Pride build initiatives. Wake County's Habitat for Humanity built a home on June 9 this year in partnership with Enact and the LGBT Center of Raleigh as a way to "support inclusive, affordable housing," for queer people.

Raleigh's Pride Build took place in a Habitat build neighborhood called Old Poole Place, which is located off of Old Poole Road in Raleigh. Once the neighborhood is completed, it will be an entirely Habitat-built community with a mix of single family homes and townhomes. Habitat also plans to connect the neighborhood to public transportation systems including GoRaleigh stations and bus routes in an effort to connect the neighborhood to the rest of the city.

"Habitat's mission is to bring people together to build homes, communities and hope and that's every Habitat's mission," Olivia Bawler of Habitat for Humanity Wake County told **QNotes**. "How we interpret that mission ... can vary, but for us here in Wake County, we're particularly in the seat of the state government and so we do a lot [of] advocating for policy change that helps people across the continuum access housing, and that's not accessible to everyone right now.

"So we try to influence those other kinds of ends of the spectrum."

Lindsey Halliday and her partner Bea



Lindsey Halliday (left) and her partner Bea helped volunteers build their first home for this year's Pride build in Raleigh. | Courtesy of Wake County Habitat for Humanity

— who've been together for over 15 years — worked alongside over 70 volunteers, building the first home the two ever owned for this year's Pride build.

"There's not a lot of laws protecting discrimination. You can get evicted just for being trans (or) just for being gay," Lindsey explained in June.

Bea, who is transitioning, expressed the couple was always concerned about their landlords discovering her and Lindsey's relationship.

"I don't think our landlord knows anything about us and that's really for the best," said Bea. "It's terrifying knowing at any moment I can lose my job and lose my house with no notice because there's nothing protecting me here."

Bawler said the Pride build came about two years ago after Wake County's Habitat talked to other chapters across the country about what they were doing to address affordable housing concerns in the LGBTQ+ community.

"Working with other organizations who are doing either similar work or working with organizations who have subject matter expertise, like the LGBT Center in Raleigh, are ways that we can kind of extend our reach and have more impact together," she explained.

Wake County's Habitat wasn't the only one in the Triangle holding Pride builds — Durham's Habitat partnered with Gays 4 Good, a LGBTQ+ volunteer organization, to have its own Pride build on June 3. In addition, the Orange County Habitat for Humanity established a new initiative called Building Pride, which aims to "focus on the unique issues faced by LGBTQIA+ and more specifically, trans and gender-nonconforming people."

The Wake County Habitat chapter has

Commerce), for example.

"So we have the benefit of accessing statewide organizations in addition to local organizations, and I think that gives us an opportunity to make it bigger, to raise more money and to raise more awareness for this particular need for affordable housing."

Could Pride Build Initiatives be Replicated?

The short answer to the question is yes, but the long answer is more complicated.

The original Rainbow Build in 2016 required partnerships with community organizations, and other Habitat LGBTQ+ Pride initiatives have been driven through partnerships. Bawler said Wake County's program wouldn't have been made possible without the partnership the Habitat has with the LGBT Center. Education is also an important factor in Habitat's mission, so Bawler said in order for initiatives like Pride Builds to be successful, they must aim to educate LGBTQ+ folks about homeownership and affordable housing.

"For us, community outreach has looked like primarily participating in events that are targeting the audience that we're hoping to also target with our homeownership and home preservation programs — so that might be participating in that rally or it might be interacting with the business community," she explained.

"We'd encourage any Habitat who's interested to start their own Pride Build. Starting to build relationships in the community is an essential first step, and it continues to be something that we hope to grow in as we continue to grow Pride Build itself.

"I think for any Habitat looking to start a build like this, I would say start with key com-

this project back up."

This story is part of 'I Can't Afford to Live Here,' a collaborative reporting project focused on solutions to the affordable housing crisis in Charlotte.



QNotes is part of the Charlotte Journalism Collaborative (CJC), launched by the Solutions Journalism

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Wake County's Habitat for Humanity and its volunteers gathered in June to participate in its second ever Pride build. | Courtesy of Wake County Habitat for Humanity

worked to reach out to members of the queer community through various outreach efforts, including attending Out! Raleigh on June 24 with the LGBT Center of Raleigh. Bawler said she hopes through these outreach opportunities, the Wake County Habitat can expand its Pride build year after year.

"We have more room to engage other local LGBTQ organizations, particularly being in the seat of the state government," she explained. "I think there's several statewide organizations that we've started to work with, including Harmony (NC LGBT+ Chamber of

community relationships."

Hall said he hopes for the Rainbow Build to return one day in partnership with LGBTQ+ advocacy groups in the Charlotte area.

"There's some things that straight couples have that makes it easier for them to have access to equity and affordable homes," he explained. "There's just such a need there and I thought it'd be a great way to show up in the housing space ... [when] the day comes we find the right community partnership, I would personally love to pick



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Carolina LGBT Chamber to

The foundation will provide
LGBTQ+ folks go

The Carolina LGBT+ Chamber of Commerce is pleased to announce its latest venture, the 628 Foundation. The official unveiling of the foundation will take place at the chamber's annual gala on December 12.

The 628 Foundation, a charitable arm of the Carolina LGBT+ Chamber of Commerce, will help folks through two different avenues:

Funding via micro grants, loans and scholarships

Educational sessions and programming to teach future entrepreneurs the fundamentals in economic stability.

"The foundation was originally discussed pre-COVID before we announced regionalization into two states," Chamber President Chad Turner explained. "But it came to fruition once we put together an inaugural board for that particular organization. Our goal is to begin foundational work in January of 2024."

LGBTQ+ entrepreneurs often struggle to secure funding for their businesses more than their heterosexual counterparts. According to the Center for LGBTQ Economic Advancement & Research (CLEAR), 46 percent of LGBTQ+ business owners didn't receive funding via grants or loans they applied for, which is a stark difference from the 35 percent of non-LGBTQ+ entrepreneurs whose applications were also denied.

The 628 Foundation aims to help address these disparities by directly providing funding to LGBTQ+ entrepreneurs, according to founding Board Chair Tiffany 'Tip Jones' Keaton. "The goal is direct funding, and that's not something that

the Chamber currently does," she said. "We can start generating donations from large corporations, and eventually be able to provide micro grants and other funding and financial empowerment to the LGBTQ+ community."

Zach Anderson is a board member of the Carolina LGBT+ Chamber of Commerce. He said in his own experience as a LGBTQ+ business owner, he has always struggled to secure funding.

"Just the hoops that I had to go through because of lack of information, lack of clarity, missed deadlines, the amount of stuff that I had to provide, it almost wasn't lucrative enough for me as a business owner to focus on," he explained. "The chamber gives you a seat at the table and opportunities for networking and advocacy, but the foundation side is economic mobility, being able to get money into your hands easier, being able to get cash to fund your business and having working capital and things like that."

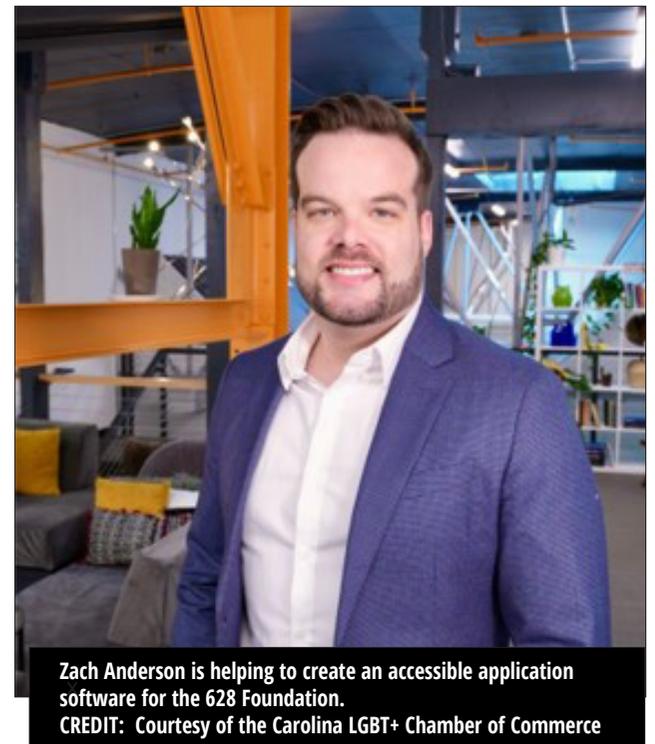
According to Turner, the chamber will select board members to serve in the available positions for the 628 Foundation as seats become available. The chamber has already chosen the first board chair, Keaton, and she will continue to serve in that role.

Turner also said the two organizations' operating budgets would be separate and would allow for more assistance and support for LGBTQ+ business owners across the Carolinas.

"Minority and LGBT-owned businesses are usually at the end of the line for other funding programs due to lack of understanding the process and also not readily having the



needed paperwork for the application... and by the time they get all that information together, the programs have already expended all the funds," Turner offered. "So we want to be able to be the solution to that problem, at least on a smaller



Unveil new 628 Foundation

the funding opportunities for going into business



CAROLINAS
LGBT+ Chamber of Commerce



Founding chair of the 628 Foundation, teaches courses on economic stability and how to reach their full potential for business pursuits. CREDIT: Courtesy of the Carolinas LGBT+ Chamber of Commerce

so it's one encompassing system," Anderson explained. "We're able to show the data if a company donates a certain amount of money, or if it goes to this amount of people, and we can just keep track of that more sustainably."

Keaton said this application would allow for applicants to utilize different methods for responding to questions, providing documentation and more. She said instead of trying to "weed out" people who may try to take advantage of the foundation's mission, she wants to focus on providing aid to those who genuinely need it.

"Let's be in partnership with these folks as opposed to trying to weed out those who are just trying to game the system," she said. "We're trying to focus on those who are actually presenting a need, and want to be in business for themselves and be successful."

Turner said a foundation like this could be "revolutionary" in changing the LGBTQ+ entrepreneurship landscape in the Carolinas. In fact, he said the new organization will allow the chamber to better serve its population.

"This is going to better the way we operate," Turner said. "Having a source of funding that is steady and intentional towards education and programming provides our members and our partners the ability to have quality initiatives and educational opportunities through workshops, seminars, workforce development, things of that nature."

A key to getting this foundation off the ground is secur-

ing funding from corporate partners. Turner said they are currently working on securing those partnerships, but Keaton said it's going to take some work to reach the goals she has.

"I'm a huge goal setter, and I take all no [responses] as not now. So while it might not be timely for our local corporations to join the army behind this effort yet, we are hoping that we can raise funds with corporate partnerships," she said.

The goal of the 628 Foundation is rooted in the name itself. The Stonewall riots took place on June 28, 1968, and that sparked a movement to work toward equity for LGBTQ+ people across the country. Turner said the foundation challenges people to "pick up their bricks" and use them to build a better future for their businesses and lives.

"It goes back to the idea of the brick being thrown at the original Stonewall riots — we're asking our corporate partners, our community partners, and those who would donate large gifts to the foundation to pick up their proverbial brick and throw it, instead of building a wall," he explained. "We're going to throw the brick, and we're going to make something happen because when you throw it back to that day at the Stonewall riots in New York, that first brick was thrown to begin building what you see today as the LGBTQ community."

Those interested in donating to the foundation can email the chamber at info@clgbtcc.org and include in the subject they are interested in the 628 Foundation.

—Taylor Heeden



Keaton says she hopes to educate those involved with the foundation about possible challenges LGBTQ+ entrepreneurs may face. CREDIT: Courtesy of the Carolina LGBT+ Chamber of Commerce

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Vermelle's Place opens its doors to those facing housing insecurity

The transitional housing program will help people across Charlotte 'get back on their feet'



by Taylor Heeden
Qnotes Staff Writer

Lisa Wigfall always wanted to make a difference in her community, which is part of the reason she founded the Quality Comprehensive Health Center. But she wanted to do something more. When Wigfall and her mother Vermelle Matthews put their heads together, they came up with another idea and a new way for the Charlotte community to help those in the most need: a transitional housing community.

That dream came to fruition in October when Vermelle's Place opened its doors to those facing housing insecurity across the Charlotte area. The facility is located in a former motel, which was renovated to serve as new transitional housing.

"[We] really wanted to try to provide transitional housing for those in need," Deputy Director of Quality Comprehensive Health Center Dr. Ra'Shawn Flournoy said. "We're providing the healthy transitional housing that allows us to be able to have better accessibility for our patients and for them to be able to receive the care programs for mental health services, HIV, or even our medical practice for primary care."

Vermelle's Place, located off Freedom Drive in West Charlotte, has 90 beds and offers a wide array of services, including case management services, group activities, financial management, career coaching, accountability groups and more. Chaka Mouzen, who serves as the housing manager at Vermelle's Place, said the home is meant to serve as a "beacon of hope" for its residents.

"Every day is a different day," she said. "This is a place where you can feel the love, the genuine support and compassion of clients and people who are willing to change



Interior shot of a room at Vermelle's Place, which opened its doors in October to those in need in Mecklenburg County. CREDIT: Facebook

their lives."

The home is a safe haven for people who are experiencing hardships, including substance abuse disorder or mental health disorders, as well as assisting low-income marginalized groups, including LGBTQ+ residents. The home also offers different programming for each resident's needs, from access to support groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous to free healthcare and mental healthcare.

"There's activities that are on site that will take place where we partnered with local churches and food pantries for volunteer opportunities," Flournoy said. "Some residents may qualify for our peer support training, which will allow them to be trained to become certified peer support specialists, [and become] certified community health workers as well. So we have so many different programs that allow them to get the treatment they need and get the support they need."

A day in the life at Vermelle's Place is different for each resident, according to Mouzen. Some residents attend courses on substance abuse or will help keep the former motel clean. However, the common thing she sees is the empathy the residents show for one another.

"They're always saying 'How can I help somebody to get to the next level? How can I help myself get back to the next level and rebuild my life?'" Mouzen explained.

There are currently nine residents residing at Vermelle's Place, and the facility is still taking applications, according to its website. The cost to live at Vermelle's

Place is \$650 a month, and that includes all of the programming and healthcare provided on site. Because of the affordability and desirability, Mouzen said the facility is growing fast.

"Because of the way we're filling up, it's going to be a shared living situation for our residents," she explained.

Because Vermelle's Place is dedicated to making a real change in the lives of its residents, it has a zero tolerance policy for alcohol and drugs on its premises, according to Mouzen.

"We are here to help you as you help yourself — we will stand by you through thick and thin," she said. "We are passionate about helping you get to your next level and rebuild your lives and getting back the stability that you want."

The facility also utilizes community partnerships to help provide holistic care, according to Flournoy. One of the most crucial partners for Vermelle's Place has been Atrium Health Services, which has offered grants to sponsor some individuals to be able to be a part of the program for three months.

"If it wasn't for our community partners, we wouldn't be where we're at today," he said. "What makes it really great is that community partners can work together, identify the needs and work off of everyone's best practices and strengths to collaboratively make for a better community at large."

The future of Vermelle's Place is optimistic, as administrators are looking for ways to expand programming to include educational opportunities, financial literacy courses and more. In order to complete these goals,

however, the facility needs to have more volunteers and community partners step up to the plate.

"We really wanted to make Vermelle's Place like a community hub, so that other organizations that may have a greater strength can be able to help our community together, whether that be [with] education [or] services that we may not provide at Quality," Flournoy said. "We want to be the anchor in the community to provide a place for many folks to be able to know they can be able to live again, dream again and be able to accomplish everything they thought they wouldn't be able to."

Mouzen said Vermelle's Place is more than just a home for those in need: it's a place where hope is found.

"We are committed to seeing each resident or client reach their goals," she said. "We stand by our residents, we let them know that they're not in this walk alone."

"As we offer you these holistic approaches to wellness ... we're going to ensure that you get what you need to go to the next level. We're gonna' give you tools to build on for a lifetime."

People interested in volunteering at Vermelle's Place can go to <https://www.signupgenius.com/go/10C084EA4AE28A1F5C70-vermelles#/to sign up>.

Applications to live in the facility are located at <https://my.innago.com/a/73u4GY26pes>.

Vermelle's Place accepts donations through an Amazon Wishlist, which can be found at https://www.amazon.com/hz/wishlist/ls/29U14IY5A0MCK?ref_=wl_share.



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Celebrating 50 years: a look at Lambda Legal, the National LGBTQ Task Force and PFLAG

All three organizations were founded in 1973, the same year the American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality from its list of mental disorders

By Taylor Heeden and David Aaron Moore

The year 1973 was monumental in the fight for LGBTQ+ rights. The American Psychiatric Association declassified homosexuality as a mental disorder, and the events that followed made the year a key time for the community that validated queer identity.

In the same year, a number of LGBTQ+ advocacy groups were established, three of them – PFLAG, Lambda Legal and the National LGBTQ Task Force – recently celebrated their semicentennial, commemorating 50 years of advocacy and looking forward to the future.

The History of Lambda Legal, the National LGBTQ Task Force and PFLAG

Lambda Legal is an American Civil Rights organization. Their focus has and remains to center impact litigation, education and policy work for LGBTQ+ communities, as well as people living with HIV.

The organization held their first official meeting on Nov. 10, 1973. Among those present for that historic moment were founding attorney William J. Thom and other founding members E. Carrington Bogan and Michael J. Lavery. Lambda Legal also elected their first board of directors at that meeting, among them Rodney L. Eubanks, Shepherd Raimi and Nicholas Russo.

Over the next two decades, the organization's growth expanded quickly, right along with the pace of the developing LGBTQ+ movement. In 1974 Lambda Legal had their first go at fighting for the rights of LGBTQ+ students when an organization at the University of New Hampshire began sponsoring events on campus. When the state's Governor threatened to cut all funds to the univer-



Lambda Legal, the National LGBTQ Task Force and PFLAG celebrated 50 years of LGBTQ+ advocacy in 2023. CREDIT: Adobe Stock

sity, Lambda Legal sued and won, allowing the gay and lesbian student's group to hold meetings and organize the same way other groups did.

By 1991 Lambda Legal took on what was likely the most prominent LGBTQ case in its history at that time:

Guardianship of Sharon Kowalski. Kowalski and her partner Karen Thompson had been together for four years when a car accident left Kowalski paralyzed. Her parents refused to acknowledge her partner, moved Kowalski to a nursing home 200 miles away and barred Thompson from having any contact. Following an eight-year battle and a Lambda Legal Amicus brief, Thompson eventually won the right to bring her partner home.

With the arrival of the 21st century, Lambda Legal, more solidly established than ever before, made groundbreaking history with the 2003 Lawrence v. Texas case, which overturned all sodomy laws across the

country. But there was more to come! In 2015 Lambda Legal's involvement with Obergefell v. Hodges, led to a decision that secured marriage equality for all same-sex couples in the United States.

"Since 1973, Lambda Legal has fiercely advocated for the LGBTQ+ community and, since the 1980s, for everyone living with HIV. No matter what effort has been launched to force us back into the closet or to undercut our fully lived equality – we have beaten back those efforts in the court of law," said Kevin Jennings, CEO of Lambda Legal. "Now more than ever, the LGBTQ+ community must and will stand up and fight for our rights. We vow to keep fighting for the next 50 years to protect and advance our rights and freedoms."

The National LGBTQ Task Force was founded in New York City in October 1973 by a group of activists who were crucial in post-Stonewall advocacy. The founding members included Dr. Bruce Voeller, Barbara Gittings, Frank Kameny, Dr. Howard Brown, Arthur Bell, Ron Gold, Nathalie Rockhill and Martin Duberman. The task force played a critical role in the removal of homosexuality from the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders in 1973. From there, they continued to make

strides toward ending the stigma associated with queer identity.

In March 1977, the task force met with then President Jimmy Carter's Assistant Margaret Costanza, marking the first time queer activists met at the White House with a leading official to discuss gay rights in American History. Six years later, co-founder Voeller led an effort which successfully reclassified what was then called Gay-related Immune Deficiency Disorder (GRID) to Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS). The AIDS Pandemic devastated queer communities during this time, and most of the world's medical experts and governments were doing minimal work to intervene. The task force established the AIDS Action Council, the United States' first advocacy group focusing on public policy and funding for AIDS research.

Among other accomplishments, the Task Force was one of the main organizers of the 1987 March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights, which over 200,000 people attended. The march served as a protest against the federal government's inaction up to that point regarding the AIDS crisis and the Supreme Court's decision in the Bowers v. Hardwick case, which upheld Georgia's sodomy laws.

The organization is also responsible for the first National AIDS Memorial Quilt, which has continued to be a symbol of those we've lost to AIDS.

"Now more than ever we have the power to define the future we want; a world where every LGBTQ person can be themselves without any barriers," former Executive Director Rea Carey said. "We have worked hard for decades to create this momentum. Let's seize this opportunity, let's be ourselves fully, and let's make a future together that's worthy of our struggle."

PFLAG was founded at a time when the majority of psychiatrists considered homosexuality to be a mental disorder – gay and lesbian bars were still being raided, queer people were institutionalized and laws were passed criminalizing same-sex relations.

Jeanne Manford, one of PFLAG's founders, went to the Christopher Street Liberation Day march with her son Morty in 1972. She carried a sign with the words "Parents of Gays: Unite in Support for Our Children," and she soon became known as the first parent to walk in a Pride march.

Prior to marching in 1972, Jeanne received a call from the police when Morty was arrested after being beaten and thrown down an escalator by a firefighter when he was protesting a meeting of a homophobic parody group. Morty was hospitalized for days after this, and while there, he asked his mom if she would march with him in two months at the



Kevin Jennings, CEO of Lambda Legal. CREDIT: Facebook

Christopher Street Liberation Day march, which she agreed to.

"They screamed! They yelled! They ran over and kissed me. 'Would you talk to my mother?' 'Wow, if my mother saw me here.' ... They just couldn't believe that a parent would do that," Manford said in an interview years later.

Those interactions at the march inspired Manford to collaborate with her son to create a support group called Parents of Gays, or POG, in a church in New York's Greenwich Village. Around 20 people attended the first meeting in 1973. The organization then rebranded itself as Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays, and then eventually, it was shortened to PFLAG.

Now, there are over 400 chapters of PFLAG across the country.

"For 50 years, people have walked into PFLAG meetings worried about their loved ones. There, they learn that the people they love are still the same people they always knew and loved," Jeanne's daughter Suzanne Manford Swan said at PFLAG's 50th anniversary GALA. She called the organization "a beacon of hope, love and acceptance for millions of people around the world." She also called on members to "recommit ourselves to the work that still lies ahead."

Where They Are Today

After numerous victories for the LGBTQ community, **Lambda Legal** continues to fight against cruel, sustained, despicable and ignorant attacks on the LGBTQ+ community and especially transgender, nonbinary and intersex people, as well as those in other marginalized communities.

Following many legal successes, other notable pending cases include Dekker v. Weida, Florida's anti-transgender health care rule; Doe v. Abbott and PFLAG v. Abbott, which challenges the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services' attempt to investigate and charge parents who work with medical professionals to provide their children with medically necessary gender-affirming care (and other similar cases in multiple states around the country); BPJ v. West Virginia State Board of Education, which bans girls and women who are transgender from participating in school sports; and Roe v. Critchfield, where Lambda



Jeanne Manford, the founder of PFLAG, with her son Morty in the Christopher Street Parade in 1972. CREDIT: PFLAG National/Facebook

Legal is representing an Idaho transgender student challenging the school's discriminatory ban on trans students using school facilities consistent with their gender identity.

"Make no mistake, Lambda Legal is ready and prepared, and has no illusions about the fights ahead," stated Jenny Pizer, Chief Legal Officer of Lambda Legal. "For 50 years, we have confronted bigotry and opportunistic ignorance in many forms, defending our community and steadily establishing ... breakthrough precedents in courts nationwide. Our litigation strategy in the coming decades will continue to be proactive and determined [and] we will continue to call

on the American public and our elected leaders to reject the extremists working to impose their narrow, self-serving orthodoxy on all of us..."

The National LGBTQ Task Force continues its advocacy work in a political environment where queer people have been demonized by legislators, public policy and more. Their website currently has four different areas the task force focuses on: democracy, equity, faith and power. There are three separate initiatives the task force established to advocate for public policy addressing LGBTQ+ issues, including voter mobilization (Queer the Vote), reminding people to participate in the Census (Queer the Census) and networking hundreds of organizations to lobby for policy change (FedWatch).

These initiatives all are working toward the organization's mission statement, which states:

"The National LGBTQ Task Force is dedicated to achieving freedom and justice for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer people, and their families through proactive, targeted, change-inducing initiatives. As a progressive racial, economic, and social justice organization, the Task Force is working to help build and sustain a society that values and respects the diversity of human expression and identity and achieves equity for all."

More than 400 local chapters of **PFLAG** across the country continue the organization's mission of educating parents and families of queer folks about

allyship. Charlotte has its own chapter, with Karen Graci as its executive director.

"Our mission is to create a caring and affirming world for LGBTQ+ people and those who love them," Graci explains. "We do that through peer support, education, and advocacy."

The local chapter hosts workshops and peer support groups to educate loved ones of LGBTQ+ identifying people to help them learn about the community and what allyship looks like. PFLAG Charlotte uses four locations in its surrounding communities to reach out to families, queer folks and anyone interested in learning how to be a supportive ally to LGBTQ+ people.

"What that peer support looks like is we meet people right where they are in their journey, so for the most part, people who are showing up in our peer support spaces are parents or caregivers or grandparents, and they come from a variety of perspectives," Graci shares. "What we find is after that educational program, a lot of parents, caregivers, grandparents, whoever was there might end up actually showing up again in a peer support space just to learn more, or because they appreciated the sense of community that they started feeling in there."

PFLAG Charlotte's work has been crucial, especially after the North Carolina General Assembly passed anti-LGBTQ+ legislation including the "Parents' Bill of Rights," which prohibits the instruction of LGBTQ+ history and issues in grades kindergarten through four and forces teachers to "out" students who divulge their sexuality or gender identity.



Karen Graci, executive director of PFLAG Charlotte. CREDIT: Facebook

"What the data shows is for LGBTQ+ youth, support has a direct impact on life outcomes," she explains. "That can look like support from the family, from school and support from other community organizations. We have worked with a number of area schools on programs for faculty and staff ... with the whole goal being to take a deeper dive into why this matters and how you respond in school to your LGBTQ+ youth does directly impact their outcomes." ::



National LGBTQ Task Force members showing off the new flag during NYC Pride. CREDIT: Screen Capture

Qnotes collection of holiday recipes from gay icons

Tasty Table Treats

By Qnotes Staff



Patti LaBelle's Sweet Potato Pie

Originally published in The Splendid Table

Patti LaBelle isn't just one of the queens of soul, but she's also a queen in the kitchen. Her famous sweet potato pie recipe has been a staple in many homes across the country. Between the sweetness of the pie and LaBelle's sweet attitude towards her LGBTQ+ fans, it's hard to not give this holiday classic a try.

Ingredients:

For the pie crust:

- 1 1/2 cups unbleached all-purpose flour
- 1/2 teaspoon salt
- 1/2 cup chilled (see Patti's Pointers) butter-flavored vegetable shortening
- 1/2 cup ice water, as needed

For the filling:

- 2 1/2 pounds orange-fleshed sweet potatoes (yams), about 5 medium, scrubbed but unpeeled
- 1/2 cup (1 stick) unsalted butter, melted
- 1 cup granulated sugar
- 1/2 cup evaporated milk (See Patti's Pointers below)
- 2 large eggs
- 1 teaspoon freshly grated or ground nutmeg
- 1 teaspoon ground cinnamon
- 1/4 teaspoon salt

Directions:

Crust: Sift the flour and salt into a medium bowl. Add the shortening. Using a pastry blender or two knives (drawing them apart in a crisscross pattern), cut the shortening into the flour until the mixture resembles coarse crumbs with a few pea-sized bits. Stirring with a fork, gradually add enough of the water for the mixture to clump together (you may not need all of the water). When you press the dough together, it should be moist and malleable, without cracking, so add a bit more water if need be. Gather up the dough and press it into a thick disk. Wrap in plastic wrap or waxed paper and refrigerate for 30 minutes to 1 hour. The dough is easiest to roll out if it is chilled but not hard. (The dough can be refrigerated for up to 1 day. If the dough is chilled until

it is very firm, let it stand at room temperature for about 10 minutes to soften slightly before rolling it out.)

Filling: Unwrap the dough and place it on a lightly floured work surface. Sprinkle some flour over the top of the dough. Roll out the dough into a 12- to 13-inch round about 1/8 inch thick. Fit into a 9-inch pie pan. Trim the excess dough to make a 1/2-inch overhang around the edge of the pan. Fold the dough over so the edge of the fold is flush with the edge of the pan. Flute the edge of the dough. Pierce the bottom of the dough about a dozen times with a fork. Freeze the dough for 20 to 30 minutes.

Position a rack in the bottom third of the oven and preheat the oven to 375°F. Line the inside of the piecrust with aluminum foil. Fill the foil with pie weights, dried beans, or uncooked rice. Place the pan on a rimmed baking sheet.

Bake until the exposed dough looks set

and is beginning to brown, 12 to 15 minutes. Lift up and remove the foil with the weights. Continue baking the piecrust until it looks dry on the bottom, about 10 minutes more. (If the piecrust puffs, pierce the crust with a fork.) Transfer to a wire cake rack.

Meanwhile, make the filling: Pierce each sweet potato a few times with the tines of a fork. Place them, in a spoke pattern, on the turntable of a microwave oven. Cook on high (100%), turning the sweet potatoes over after 4 minutes, until they are tender, 8 to 10 minutes total. Let cool for a few minutes. If necessary, return the oven temperature to 375°F. Using a kitchen towel to protect your hands, split each sweet potato and use a spoon to scrape the flesh into a medium bowl. Mash the sweet potatoes—you should have about 2 cups. Using an electric mixer set on medium speed, beat in the melted butter. Add the sugar, evaporated milk, eggs, nutmeg, cinnamon, and salt and beat

on low speed just until the sugar is dissolved. Spread the filling evenly in the pie shell. Place the pie on a baking sheet.

Bake for 15 minutes. Reduce the oven temperature to 350°F. Continue baking until the filling is set and doesn't jiggle when the pie is gently shaken, about 30 minutes more. Transfer the pie to the wire rack and let cool completely. (The pie can be covered with plastic wrap and refrigerated for up to 1 day. Let stand at room temperature for 1 hour before serving.)

Slice the pie and top each serving with a dollop of whipped cream.

Elton John's Favorite Rice Pudding

Originally published in Pigtails and Froglegs: A Family Cookbook from Neiman Marcus

Elton John is one of the most legendary LGBTQ+ performers of all time, and what better way to celebrate the holidays than with one of his favorite desserts? While not traditionally made in the American holiday meal, rice pudding is a favorite dessert in the United Kingdom, where Elton John is from. This recipe can be enjoyed by people of all ages.

Ingredients:

- 4 cups of water
- 2 cups of rice
- 1 stick of cinnamon
- 2 cups of sugar
- 1/2 teaspoon of salt
- 1/2 gallon of milk
- 2 tablespoons of ground cinnamon
- 1 cup of raisins (optional)

Directions:

Mix water, rice and cinnamon. Let the mixture stand for about an hour until the rice is tender. Cook the mixture over low heat for 25 minutes. When the rice is cooked, add the sugar, salt and milk. Continue cooking for about 40 minutes until the rice gets sticky. Pour rice into a baking dish and bake at 375 degrees for 25 minutes. ::



Celebrating the holidays across North Carolina

A guide to some highly anticipated events across the state



by Taylor Heeden
QNotes Staff Writer

Thanksgiving is behind us, and the holiday season has kicked into high gear. With it comes various events to commemorate the season. QNotes has scanned the state, collecting some of the most exciting holiday happenings across North Carolina — from Wilmington and Durham, to Charlotte and Asheville. For more details and links to event websites, check out the QNotes homepage.

In Wilmington

At the Children's Museum of Wilmington the annual event known as Winter Wonderland will start at 9 a.m. on Dec. 16 and run until noon, allowing guests to "wander through the Museum and discover how various cultures and regions celebrate winter holidays." There will be games, winter-themed crafts, activity stations and more for people of all ages.

The historic Bellamy Mansion Museum will play host to Nights of Lights, Dec. 20-22 at 503 Market St. Experience the Bellamy decorated with period appropriate Christmas finery and enjoy a casual stroll through the mansion and the lush Victorian decorations. This annual event showcases Christmas decorations throughout: adorned mantels, gas lit chandeliers and several ornately decorated Christmas trees. The mansion will include historically accurate decorations and the uppermost bedroom level features the creativity of the Bellamy's many volunteers. Volunteer docents in each room will give visitors a brief explanation of the space, and the tour follows a specific path. Baked goods and hot chocolate will be sold in the carriage house after visitors exit the main house.



CREDIT: Adobe Stock

In the Triangle

Durham's annual Holiday Parade will take place Saturday, Dec. 9 starting at 10 a.m., led by city Mayor Leonardo (Leo) Williams, who was elected to office in November. The parade will feature hometown bands, drill teams, schools and community groups as they make their way down Main Street, with special guest Santa Claus ending the event. The parade is free to attend and viewers are encouraged to bring their own chairs and blankets.

The North Carolina Symphony Orchestra will play a series of holiday concerts throughout the month, including its annual Candlelight Christmas concert on Dec. 22 at 8 p.m. and Dec. 23 at 3 p.m. The audience will enjoy a presentation of holiday tunes, complete with a children's choir and full orchestra.

Wool E's Winter Wonderland kicked off last month at the Durham Bulls Athletic Park at 409 Blackwell St. in Durham. The fun continues throughout the rest of December. Patrons can look at holiday lights, go snowless sledding, shop the holiday market, visit the Jingle Bell Bistro and more. Tickets are available starting at \$11 and can be purchased through the seasonal event's website.

In Charlotte

Charlotte and the surrounding metro area will be the home for many holiday festivities, including many concerts. Check out our website for the QNotes published guide to holiday shows across the Queen City, some of which include A Very Darren Crissmas, Charlotte Gay Men's Chorus' performance of Gloria, the Trans-Siberian

Orchestra: The Ghosts of Christmas Eve and more.

In nearby Concord, the annual North Carolina Christmas Festival will take place from 1 p.m. to 5 p.m. on Dec. 16 at the Cabarrus Arena & Events Center at 4751 State Hwy 49. The free to attend festival will include pictures with Santa Claus, a free toy giveaway for the kids, gift wrapping, Christmas coloring and word searches, ornament decoration and more. Parking at the arena will be \$8 per car.

The Carolina Holiday Light Spectacular is also making its return this year, currently running through Dec. 30 at Ballantyne's Backyard at 11611 N. Community House Road. The outdoor walking experience is jam-packed with over one million holiday lights, hundreds of Christmas trees and several larger-than-life installations. Weekday admission starts at \$15, and tickets can be purchased through the event website.

In Asheville

In Asheville, Mountain Pet Rescue is hosting its Ninth Annual Uncommon Holiday Market, which starts at 10 a.m. on Saturday, Dec. 9 and Sunday, Dec. 10 at Mission Health/AB Tech Conference Center. The market is one of the rescue's largest dog adoption events, and it brings artists, vendors and curators of antique and vintage finds together, with puppies. The event and parking are free.

Just a few days before Dec. 25, a 21+ cabaret show — Homo for the Holidays — will take place at 5 p.m. at Pleb Urban Winery. The one-woman show will feature Asheville's own Divine, who will share stories of Southern childhood holiday shenanigans, as well as some sing-a-long sessions. Tickets are available through the event website. ::

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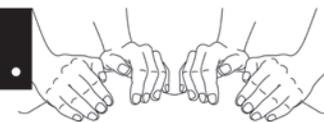

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LGBTQ+ groups in Charlotte capture local media props

Organizations, performers, artists and businesses recognized for their accomplishments



by David Aaron Moore
Qnotes Staff Writer

Charlotte Magazine has long been a stalwart culture maven for the Charlotte Metro area. While the publication has often carried well written investigative pieces and profiles on local residents, it rarely veers outside of heterosexual mainstream culture and coverage.

They've dipped their toe in the water with their latest best of issue, which includes a list of 2023 Charlotteans of the year. Among the picks this go round: PFLAG Charlotte, named Advocacy Group of the Year.

The magazine offered a tip of the hat to several Charlotte PFLAG members, with a portrait that includes Pamela Mefferd, Karen Graci, Lisa Dudzik, Doug Cooper, Dorie Charnin, Kirsten Wrinkle and Anne Sutton. The accompanying story takes a look at the organization's various activities and activities, including three groups across Mecklenburg and Union county, as well as a virtual online group and a Spanish language group to connect parents with multiple resources and organizations. They've also hosted workshops on gender affirming healthcare for a family members and health-care professionals since 2017.

The reason for the recognition isn't particularly complicated: what started years ago as small meetings in workplace break rooms now fills auditoriums with an ever-increasing crowd of participants. Congratulations PFLAG!

Over at Queen City Nerve, they're celebrating what they call the 2023 Best of the Nest Awards. QC Nerve often covers queer culture and news, so it comes as no surprise they've included recognition where it's due in their latest end of the year homage.

Included in their critic's list: the LGBTQ+ Life Center, which opened in early 2023 under the guidance of Carolinas Care Partnership and Transcend Charlotte. In the category of Best Activist/Advocate organization, QC Nerve chose the Charlotte Center for Legal Advocacy, which offers free legal consultations to the booming immigrant community in the Queen City.

In Consumer Culture, the critic's pick

for Best Pop Up is Thick Threads. The company offers restored and reclaimed plus size clothing at easily affordable prices and promotes body positivity regardless of your size. Run by couple Beaux Bennet and Angel Medina, the idea for the consignment shop came about when Medina grew weary of the challenges plus size individuals face when looking for fun, fashionable clothing. For more details on these guys and upcoming pop-ups, check out their Instagram account.

The critic's pick section for arts and entertainment boasts Brandon Hilton as the Best Fashion Designer. Hilton calls himself many other things, too, including singer, model, pig farmer, podcast host, drag queen, actor and the force behind the fashion line The House of Mann, which he launched in 2018. His designs have been featured in Vogue, Harper's Bazaar, Paper Magazine and seen on the television series "RuPaul's Drag Race," as well as HBO's "Max's Doom Patrol."

From the Nerve reader's pick list, it comes as no surprise that Plaza Midwood would be chosen as the best area to live and NODA would be the runner up. Both are home to the largest concentration of LGBTQ+ residents between Atlanta and Washington DC.

Also from the reader's list of best churches: Wedgwood Community Church and Myers Park Baptist Church, both affirming and welcoming churches for the LGBTQ+ faith community.

White Rabbit in Plaza Midwood captured the winning title of Best Adult Toy Store. While the goods are definitely in stock, the store also sells a wide selection of unique gift items and personal attire for men and women. Owner Jim Yarbrough is also publisher of *Qnotes*.

In news, politics and entertainment, politician Jeff Jackson was chosen as best hero. Although he's hetero, Jackson worked hard to repeal the anti-LGBTQ+ "bathroom bill" known as HB2. Runner up in the same category: Candelario Saldana, an openly gay and highly accomplished lawyer known for his work as an advocate in the LGBTQ+



Don't miss the latest issues of Charlotte Magazine (left) and Queen City Nerve for a bevy of high queer praise. CREDIT: Screen Captures

community. Among his accomplishments: a National LGBTQ+ Bar student leadership award and a National LGBTQ+ Bar 40 Best Lawyers Under 40 award. He is also listed as a board member of the National LGBTQ+ Task Force and president of the Pauli Murray LGBTQ+ Bar association.

Another one from the reader's list: the best local festival. It's Charlotte Pride. Years in the making and the largest annual festival in the city, an estimated 260,000 people crammed into uptown Charlotte for the event this year. Despite a small smattering of protesters that have hung around for years, it looks like there's no stopping Charlotte Pride from throwing the best party in Uptown.

Then there's the best local podcast. Nerve readers chose Dishing with Buff Faye and Fun Size. Since June of 2022 through August of this year, local drag diva Faye (aka Shane Windmeyer, founder of Campus Pride) and co-host Fun Size have (and often comedically) explored numerous topics related to the LGBTQ+ community.

In the social media category, readers chose as the winner the Charlotte Gaymers Network. Founded in 2020 by Jonny Saldana

and Zack Smith, the organization offers an inclusive environment of individuals from across the spectrum of life (everybody in the LGBTQ+ community, as well as allies) into all things gaming. That includes board, video and tabletop games, as well as social events. Charlotte Gaymers also captured the best Instagram account and the title of Best Local Facebook group.

In the Community Engagement and Social Justice category, Cameron Pruetto captured the title of best local activist, with Candelario Saldana receiving another runner up recognition. Pruetto is likely one of the most busy activists in town. He's the director of Intersectional Initiatives at the Freedom Center for Social Justice and the president of LGBTQ Democrats of Mecklenburg County.

Queen City Nerve wraps up their reader's Best of the Nest list with the winner of the Best Event for a Good Cause captured by the Charity Drag Brunch at The Artisan's Palette (which also captured the Best Site to hold an Event award); a Best Support Group thumbs up for Transcend Charlotte and another gold star for the Charlotte Gaymers Network: Best non-profit organization. ::

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Our People: Ra'Shawn Flournoy

A local Bishop and CEO speaks on being homeless and finding success through humility and personal growth



by L'Monique King
Qnotes Staff Writer

Bishop Dr. Ra'Shawn Flournoy has been a Charlotte resident since relocating from his hometown of Spartanburg, South Carolina, in 2012. These days, he's a busy individual, and has his hands in a little bit of everything.

As a youth, he began his education in special needs classes. As an adult, he has gone on to earn a doctorate degree and capture praise and respect for his community service and successful entrepreneurship. Despite the challenges he faced in his early years, Flournoy has a comfortable sense of self-assurance and he's happy to share his story with QNotes.

L'Monique King: Now that you've been in the area for over 10 years, do you see yourself relocating away from the Carolinas?

Ra'Shawn Flournoy: No. I love it. I love the diversity of Charlotte. I feel like this is home for me. I do wish I could bring downtown Greenville to Charlotte though. It's beautiful – but you can't put a park and a river in the middle of uptown <chuckles>.

LMK: Let's talk a bit about your success. Talk to us about your journey from struggling to a relatively comfortable life. More specifically, how does a formerly homeless Black gay man from a small town go from spending nights sleeping in his car to becoming a Bishop, an author, property owner and business mogul?

RF: In 2017 I left the non-profit I was working for to go work for a community clinic. I didn't like it very much. So, I quit, without a plan or anything. When my money ran out it resulted in homelessness, initially sleeping in my car and then living in the church where I was pastor – [and founded in 2012] until I could figure it out. To this day many people don't know [I did] that. As a pastor, I've never taken a salary. I wasn't going to have the sheep taking care of the shepherd. I don't agree with that. My job as a leader, as a pastor, calls for me to be there for my congregants. So, even in my situations of homelessness, while I was sleeping in the church, I still felt I was called to empower folks.

But for me, I guess I would say, part of my homelessness was by choice. Let me explain that. I came from a family that would most definitely give me the world [monetarily]. But during that homelessness journey I didn't want to depend on anyone but me to get me out of it. So, I took that opportunity to work on my credit. [In doing so] I thought, this needs to be a business. So, I started a credit repair business, offering others the tools to repair and establish credit and a book to guide them in their process of debt recovery. The credit business then grew into what is now Flournoy Enterprises, a capital investment enterprise that is comprised of several different companies and social enterprises with community give back.

LMK: As the owner of multiple businesses, what would you say is the biggest



Dr. Ra'Shawn Flournoy – Bishop, author, businessman and Deputy Director of Quality Comprehensive Health Center CREDIT: Jeremiah Drummond

or most frequent mistake most folks make in starting a business?

RF: Not having a strong business plan. We have lots of people who are visionaries, which is great. But it's also about how you implement the vision you have, having the resources and willingness to make the sacrifices required to grow a business.

LMK: Let's switch gears to one of your more personal positions, fatherhood. With so many options now available for starting a family, we've just got to ask, how'd you become a dad of two?

RF: <Chuckles> It was God sent. As a little girl, my daughter Eymiah was a member of my church. She gravitated towards me. She called me her dad. Moments like those were very precious to me because growing up I really didn't have a true father figure in my life. I too saw my pastor as my father, but even he let me down – never attending my school events or special moments. So, when Eymiah was still in elementary school I attended father-daughter dances with her and other activities. Being there for her was an easy decision for me because I never wanted to let a child down like I had been.

My youngest, Javion is my special blessing. He came into my life in a way I would have never imagined. I was going through a separation from my [then] husband at the time. Separating created a place of loneliness for me. I was in a very sad place. But I was also transitioning [emotionally] into a space rediscovery; once again trying not to focus on pleasing others and taking time to love me. And then there was Javion. [I discovered] part of loving me was loving my son. Javion brought peace to me and my home.

LMK: You and your ex-husband pastored Rehab Church together. Was the separation the reason why you stepped down from regularly preaching at your church?

RF: I haven't really fully stepped down. I'm co-pastoring with Justin, my ex-husband.

It's been about a level of maturity and humility. Showing it's not so much about our personal relationships as it is about what we're called to do. So, we're able to put our personal differences aside and cohesively work together to pastor an amazing group of people.

LMK: That's impressive. You wear many hats. As a clergy member, community organization Deputy Director, CEO and father, what's the hardest thing about being you?

RF: I think the fact that a lot of people don't see or understand the sacrifices made behind the scenes. They just see what's produced. It's a lot of sleepless nights. I'm always trying to serve, trying to do something for folks. So, I think the hardest thing is for Ra'Shawn to take time for Ra'Shawn.

LMK: Describe the worst day you've ever had?

RF: My mom telling me that she was going to die and that I wasn't allowed to tell anyone. Growing up, I was raised with my mom [showing love by] buying us things. Her love language was gifts – because she never received any [as a child]. But she was never the type to say I love you. I can literally count on one hand how many times in my life she's said, "Shawn, I love you." So, when she was diagnosed with breast cancer and was in ICU she told me that she wanted me to plan her funeral <long pause> and I told her, "I just want you to be proud of me" – she said, "I've always been proud of you."

LMK: That must have meant a lot to you. It must have been comforting to hear in the midst of processing losing her.

RF: Oh, it did. When I came out, during ministry my mom wasn't proud. She stopped talking to me for two years. So, her words of affirmation at the moment where all I ever wanted, as a child and an adult. It was big for me. When she told me she loved me – I cried in her lap like a baby. I knew I

wasn't going to have her much longer and that I had to embrace that reality and step up as a man on my end. This is why I have the mentality of having to live for me and not caring what anyone else says.

LMK: When you think about what brings you joy, how would you describe the best day you've ever had?

RF: Honestly, the day I returned to working back in the non-profit sector, returning to it again and fulfilling my purpose.

LMK: Since you've become Deputy Director at Quality Comprehensive Health Center (QCHC/Quality) change has been rapid and expansive. What's your secret to the new and burgeoning success of Quality and what's next?

RF: Ooooooh, that's a good question. Identifying and making sure you have the right people in the right seats. Part of that is making sure that they can carry humility, passion and drive – long term. The more humble you are...I've seen so much success birthed out of that. I think that Mecklenburg County is going to be really surprised to see the comprehensive services that we're offering. Long term, we're looking forward to opening multiple locations and a training facility where we can assist other organizations in duplicating our best practices.

LMK: How do you keep up with it all? What drives you?

RF: For sure, I'm driven by passion and my passion for [positive] change. One of the things I've been determined about [in my role with Quality] is telling our story. A lot of Black led organizations struggle with effectively telling their story. I'm not sure why, but you can't truly exemplify the work you're doing as an agent of change if no one really knows what you're doing.

LMK: Speaking of change, what's your favorite season and why?

RF: Christmas <laughing loudly> I know it's not a season but it's one of my favorite times of year. It helps provide comfort for me, reminding me of my youth. My mom was big on Christmas. She had multiple trees. Hers was a massive tree we weren't allowed to touch or decorate and [there were] three others. My dad had his own and my sister and had one we shared. My sister is a warrior. She's carried on a lot of my mother's traditions, it's just amazing. My mom loved to decorate, and so do I, but my sister has taken it to the next level with an event venue in Gaffney, S.C., where she hosts and decorates for parties and events.

LMK: Who's the one person from the past you'd like to have dinner with?

RF: Obviously, Martin Luther King, Jr. because he's always been someone that I'd want to be like. He was a huge advocate for our people. That's how the Dream Center [the space that houses Rehab Church and a few local businesses are housed] came about and was named. It was inspired by his "I have a dream" speech. I always wanted to honor that and be part of continuing that Dream. ::



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