



Person of the Year: Karen Graci

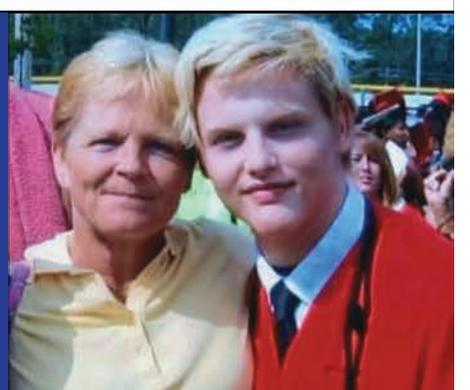


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contributors this issue

Writers: Taylor Heeden, David Aaron Moore, Gregg Shapiro

front page

Graphic Design by Will Kimbrough
Photography/Illustration:

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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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Publisher: Jim Yarbrough

Sales: x201 adsales@qnotescarolinas.com
Nat'l Sales: Rivendell Media, ph 212.242.6863

Managing Editor: Jim Yarbrough, x201,
editor@qnotescarolinas.com

Digital & Audience Engagement Editor:
Chris Rudisill

chrisrudisill@qnotescarolinas.com

Sr. Content Editor: David Aaron Moore,
specialassignments@qnotescarolinas.com

Copy Editor: Bailey Sides

Production: Will Kimbrough, x205,
production@qnotescarolinas.com

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LGBT+ Chamber Annual Awards Gala honors members

The Carolinas' LGBTQ+ Chamber of Commerce annual event awards 20 members in this year's THRIVE celebration. Held at Revelry in Camp Northend, 500 attended the party, which was sponsored by Sonoco, Chase, Per Scholas, and TIAA.

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Six best LGBTQ+ albums 2023

Best LGBTQ+ albums of 2023 includes country/crossover by Brandy Clark, dance music from Jake Shears, soul exploring sounds from Sufjan Stevens, thought-provoking and soulful tunes by Meshell Ndegeocello, among others

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Sen. Thom Tillis endorses Bill Graham for governor over Lt. Gov. Mark Robinson

Tillis cites Robinson's 'virtually no legislative experience' as one of the reasons behind his decision



by Taylor Heeden
Qnotes Staff Writer

Prominent Republican and North Carolina U.S. Senator Thom Tillis announced his endorsement for North Carolina Governor, and his answer may come as a surprise to some. Tillis has put his support behind Salisbury lawyer Bill Graham, making him the first Republican elected official to publicly support another candidate over party frontrunner Lt. Gov. Mark Robinson.

QNotes readers will remember Tillis was one of 12 U.S. Republican Senators to vote in favor of the Respect for Marriage Act, which fully repealed the 1996 Defense of Marriage Act. His vote, along with the votes of others who supported the repeal, now requires all states – even those with state level amendments that bar same-sex marriages – to recognize same-sex marriages performed in states without such amendments and to allow married same-sex couples to interact with the federal government in the same manner as opposite-sex couples.

Said Tillis in reference to Robinson in an interview with the National Review: "Mark Robinson's a good enough guy. I don't know him that well, but he has virtually no legislative experience [and] very little business experience."

"We're a very, very important state and we have to have people with that kind of experience, I think, to continue this track record that we've had since Republicans took control of North Carolina when I became speaker. And so for those reasons, I've decided to support Bill."

Tillis previously helped other Republican candidates unseat radicals within his own party, including in 2022 when he was heavily involved in the race for North Carolina's 11th Congressional District. Tillis provided support to help then-candidate state Sen. Chuck Edwards unseat controversial Rep. Madison Cawthorn, who has since moved to Florida after losing reelection.

Tillis was later censured by the North Carolina Republican Party in a vote at the state's annual Republican Party



Thom Tillis [Right] announced he would support Bill Graham over Lt. Gov. Mark Robinson in the Republican primary for N.C. Governor. CREDIT: Screen Capture

Convention following his vote of support for the Respect for Marriage Act.

Robinson, who was elected as North Carolina's first Black lieutenant governor in 2020, responded to Tillis' announcement, calling Graham "nothing but a pawn" for bureaucrats and politicians.

"They don't think that average people should be in government," Robinson posted in a written statement. "They think that only the elites like themselves are qualified to serve, and that those seeking office need to be vetted by them and work their way up the ladder."

Robinson then went on to call Tillis a "RINO," or Republican In Name Only, and then said he has already received other endorsements from more right-wing politicians.

"I am a public servant who feels called to be a voice for the people of my state, and stand up for them," Robinson wrote. "So while the RINO elites plot to take me down, I'll continue to fight, and I'm honored I won't be doing it alone."

Robinson's stance on LGBTQ+ issues has been clear since his first days in office. The elected official has delivered an un-

known number of sermons rife with anti-LGBTQ sentiment. As recently as March 19, 2023, he claimed during a sermon he delivered in a Charlotte Metro area church that he had been called upon by God to fight against the LGBTQ+ community.

"God formed me because he knew there was going to be a time when God's learning was going to be intolerable to the wicked," he announced. "When children were going to be dragged down to go see the drag show. When pornography was going to be presented to our children in schools."

He also took aim at Christian churches that are accepting and affirming of the LGBTQ+ community. "Makes me sick every time I see it," Robinson proclaimed. "A church that flies that Rainbow flag, which is a direct spit in the face of God almighty."

The Lt. Governor has spoken publicly and negatively about other marginalized groups, including Jewish people, Muslims, women and more.

Graham, on the other hand, is using his background to help separate him from the rest of the candidates — marketing himself as a successful attorney with plans on how to tackle issues such as gang prevention, cutting taxes, increasing unemployment and more. According to a report from the news department of the Raleigh based television station WRAL, Graham pledged \$5 million of his own money and is the only candidate with ads playing on televisions across the state.

"Bill Graham is laser-focused on winning a conservative future for North Carolina," Graham's campaign manager Alex Baltzegar told WRAL. "[He] is building a coalition of supporters from all swaths of the Republican Party [and] really appreciates Sen. Thom Tillis's support."

While Graham clearly has more experience in governance than Robinson and may adhere to standards of protocol in a more tempered manner than the often volatile Lt. Governor, he has made it clear as governor of the state, he will be taking aim at the Biden administration. ::



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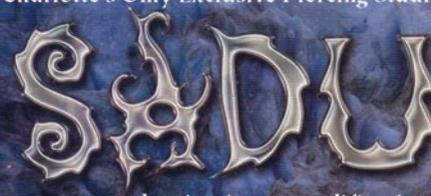


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Democrats across the country invest in state races where LGBTQ+ rights are in danger

Over \$15,000 was sent to various campaigns for the N.C. state house to help raise funds to unseat GOP legislators



by Taylor Heeden
Qnotes Staff Writer

Republicans have held a majority in North Carolina's state chamber for over 10 years. Although political memory is short for many voters, it wasn't that long ago when the Democratic Party controlled the General Assembly – for nearly 140 years – during a time when the state was referred to as “the voice of reason” between Virginia and South Carolina.

Regrettably, things have changed. Earlier this year, and for the first time since they held the majority, Republicans in North Carolina have captured a supermajority, which has allowed them to override Democratic Gov. Roy Cooper's veto power.

Now the national Democratic Legislative Campaign Committee (DLCC) is stepping in to undo the damage with funding that includes \$271,000 spread across six red or mostly red states, including North Carolina. According to multiple media reports, the money will go to state legislature candidate



Return to the 'Voice of Reason:' the North Carolina Democratic party is hard at work trying to reclaim the future of the Tarheel state. CREDIT: Adobe Stock

recruitment, staff hiring, digital investments and field operations.

The hope is that Democratic candidates will be able to use these funds to engage more with potential voters, as well as share information regarding important issues, including reproductive and LGBTQ+ rights.

After the United States Supreme Court overrode the constitutional protection of abortion rights in its 2022 Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization case, North Carolina legislators spent no

time voting to approve a 12-week abortion ban, which limited abortion access even more after the state had recently implemented a 20-week ban.

The GOP-led legislature also approved SB 49, otherwise known as 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.

North Carolina also passed two other

anti-LGBTQ+ bills — HB 808 and HB 574. HB 808 makes it “unlawful for a medical professional to perform a surgical gender transition procedure on a minor or to prescribe, provide or dispense puberty blocking drugs or cross-sex hormones to a minor,” according to the current language of the bill. HB 574 would bar trans girls from participating on sports teams that correlate with the gender they identify at both the K-12 and collegiate level.

“I think for a long time people felt like their state governments were about broad execution of funding measures and regulation—kind of meaty, wonky things,” says interim DLCC president Heather Williams in a statement. “I've been in legislative politics my whole career. Dobbs felt like a shift on that front where that tangible nature of the impact of your state legislature became just so crystal clear.”

In addition to North Carolina, funding has also been made available and will continue to flow to Democratic efforts to legitimately even out hijacked political playing fields in Michigan, Arizona, New Hampshire, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin. ::

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Wilmington's LGBTQ+ community worried after the New Hanover County EDI committee disbands

The New Hanover County Board of Education elected to disband the Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) Committee at their December meeting, which has since sparked backlash from the area's LGBTQ+ community.

This move comes after the EDI committee met earlier this week to discuss its future plans. The committee's chair, Republican school board member Melissa Mason, signed a "Education Over Indoctrination Pledge" when she ran for office, vowing to "remove 100 percent of CRT, SEL, EDI, and Woke Indoctrination from the curriculum and administration."

"What I really wanted to do was sit down and get your recommendations, get

your concerns, get your thoughts so that I could bring them to the board." Mason said during the EDI's 90 minute conversation, "I will still share your ideas as your ideas because this is your committee not just me."

Democratic school board member and fellow committee member Hugh McManus said he believed Mason volunteered to chair the EDI just to disband it. He called for Mason to resign as chair, which she refused.

"You were placed there to implode EDI and you knew that from the beginning," McManus said.

Fellow Republican board member Pat Bradford said she was disappointed in

the recent meeting held by the committee, claiming the members didn't actually want diversity.

"I came, and I saw, I was very disappointed. I was appalled. I saw no appreciation of diversity of thought, I saw no inclusion, I saw a great deal of hate," she said. "After what I saw and heard last night, I am not in favor of continuing this committee. I will vote to disband it."

Mason also voted to disband the committee she was chair of, claiming the school system already had other resources in place to address the issues the EDI committee was working on solving.

Kelley Finch, the lead pastor of Mosaic United Methodist Church, told local reporters the decision to disband the



During the December 5 meeting of the New Hanover County Board of Education the EDI Committee was shut down. CREDIT 1: NHCS TV/Screen Capture

EDI would harm the students in the New Hanover County school system.

"It's not only scary but it is leading to things that will create a community where we are not safe," Finch said. "Where our young children will not have a voice, where many don't even want to go to school anymore. It is hate-filled and it is ugly." ::

— Taylor Heeden

Rep. Kathy Manning won't seek reelection after redistricting

North Carolina Representative Kathy Manning (D) announced on Thursday she wouldn't seek reelection for her U.S. House seat in what she called an "egregiously gerrymandered" redrawn district.

"I would love nothing more than to continue representing our community in Congress. Unfortunately, the egregiously gerrymandered maps do not make this race competitive, and I cannot in good conscience ask people to invest their time, resources and efforts in a campaign that is rigged against us," Manning said in a statement.

Among North Carolina's Republican-majority General Assembly approved newly drawn congressional maps, the 14 congressional districts are represented by seven Republicans and seven Democrats. The new maps, however, favor Republicans heavily in 10 of the 14 districts.

According to her House webpage, Manning has served as a representative for North Carolina's Sixth Congressional District – generally referred to as The Triad – which includes Guilford and Rockingham Counties and parts of Forsyth and Caswell Counties. She identifies as an ally of the LGBTQ+ community and co-sponsored H.R. 5, also known as The Equality Act. If it had passed, it would have amended the Civil Rights Act of 1964 to prohibit discrimination on the basis of sex, sexual orientation and gender identity in employment, housing, public accommodations, education, federally funded programs, credit and jury service. The Senate companion bill did not gain enough support to overcome a filibuster and H.R. 5, regrettably, died in committee Feb. 23, 2021.

Manning isn't the only legislator who was gerrymandered out of her district.

Former state senator and current congressional Rep. Jeff Jackson decided to not run for his congressional seat after he was gerrymandered out of his district.

"House Democrats are dropping like flies and choosing not to run for reelection with Joe Biden and their shared extreme record on the ballot," Delanie Bomar of the National Republican Congressional Committee (NRCC) said in a statement. "After today's announcement by Kathy Manning, House Republicans just grew our 2024 majority by one seat."

Manning said while she wouldn't run for her current seat, she is still open to running for office again in the future. She said "if the impending lawsuits are successful and the General Assembly is forced to draw fair congressional districts, I will seek to continue my service to our community."

"Rather than draw Congressional districts that are compact, include communities of interest, and promote the democratic value of allowing voters to decide who they want to represent them – the previously stated goals of the redistricting committee – Republican lead-



Rep. Kathy Manning said she is still open to running for office in the future "if the General Assembly is forced to draw fair congressional districts, I will seek to continue my service to our community." CREDIT: The Office of Kathy Manning

ers have put their partisan self-interest above the people they're elected to serve," Manning said. ::

— Taylor Heeden and David Aaron Moore

North Carolina Democrats approve Jewish Caucus after failed first vote

North Carolina's Democratic Party voted to officially recognize a recently formed Jewish Caucus after a vote a few weeks prior was unsuccessful in doing so.

"It was incredibly important to us to call this meeting to ensure the Jewish Caucus gets official recognition," N.C. Democratic Party Chair Anderson Clayton said. "In a time of divisiveness and heightened emotions and fear, I am proud that tonight we made sure to go into 2024 united. The North Carolina Democratic Party stands against Islamophobia, anti-semitism and any form of hatred against marginalized communities."

The previously failed vote to recognize the Jewish Caucus drew national criticism, as well as some backlash from prominent North Carolina politicians. The original vote took place on Nov.

12 and saw a 17-16 vote to deny the caucus formal recognition, with 16 other board members abstaining from voting. Ryan Jenkins, president of the party's Progressive Caucus, told WFAE members of the Jewish Caucus had "done nothing but whine and play the victim and attack people."

After the denial, several North Carolina politicians came forward criticizing the Democratic Party's decision, including Democratic gubernatorial candidate Josh Stein, who is Jewish himself. He, along with members of North Carolina's congressional delegation, called for the state's Democratic Party to have another vote and establish the caucus as soon as possible.

Republican gubernatorial candidate Lt. Gov. Mark Robinson, who has made anti



semitic statements in the past, also called out the decision, saying it was "another example of North Carolina Democrats' "refusing to stand with Israel and the Jewish people against terrorism."

The board met again to vote on the caucus on Dec. 3, this time approving it in a 31-4 vote.

"Every North Carolinian has value and something to contribute, and the North Carolina Democratic Party welcomes all," Stein said.

The president of the Jewish Caucus Jeffrey Bierer released a statement after

the vote, saying he was glad the caucus was finally approved, standing against antisemitism "during a time that has become very fraught for the Jewish people around the world."

"Our values as Jews — in such areas as reproductive rights, fighting voter suppression, combating global warming, supporting reasonable gun control, opposing Muslim bans, and favoring a robust immigration program — are reflected in the platform of the Democratic Party," Bierer explained. ::

— Taylor Heeden

Asheville LGBTQ+ organizations file Title IX complaint over 'Parents' Bill of Rights'

Three LGBTQ+ advocacy groups — Youth OUTright, PFLAG Asheville and Campaign for Southern Equality — have started the process of filing a Title IX complaint against the Buncombe County Board of Education in response to policies passed to adhere to the state's new "Parents' Bill of Rights."

The complaint, filed by the Buncombe County Title IX coordinator, alleges the policies enforced by the Parents' Bill of Rights singles out LGBTQ+ students, stigmatizing and alienating them from their heterosexual or cisgender counterparts.

Supportive Schools Director at the Campaign for Southern Equality Craig White addressed the school board shortly after the complaint was filed.

"We file this complaint more in sor-

row than in anger," he said. "It was clear that the BCS policy committee did what they could to reduce the harm caused to LGBTQ young people by S.B.49. But less harm is not no harm, and after hearing the testimony of students, families and educators, it was clear that we have to take all possible steps to prevent the provisions in this discriminatory state law from going into effect in Buncombe County."

SB 49, also known as the Parents' Bill of Rights, was passed into law in August, and it censors LGBTQ-related content from school curriculum, as well as forces educators and staff to "out" LGBTQ+ students to parents. The Buncombe County Board of Education met on Dec. 7 and passed several policies to comply with the new state law, which goes into effect

in January.

The complaint filed by the three organizations requests the school district to delay the implementation of its new policies until a determination is made on whether the law violates Title IX. Title IX is a federal law that prohibits discrimination "on the basis of sex," and according to the Buncombe County filing, the groups plan to file a federal Title IX complaint with the U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights in January.

"SB49 ... is a cruel attempt to stigmatize and marginalize LGBTQ children, faculty and their families in the state," PFLAG Asheville Board member KT Morales said. "The policies passed recently in the Buncombe County School Board violate our children's rights to a safe and non-discriminatory environment in schools.

"Asheville PFLAG will continue to



PFLAG Asheville, Youth OUTright and Campaign for Southern Equality start process to block SB 49 from going into effect. CREDIT: Adobe Stock

advocate alongside the Campaign for Southern Equality and Youth OUTright to ensure the civil rights of our families are upheld." ::

—Taylor Heeden

Russian police invade Moscow gay bars after Supreme Court ruling labeling LGBTQ+ movement 'extremist'

Law enforcement in Moscow descended upon gay clubs and bars on Friday night, less than 48 hours after the Russian Supreme Court banned the LGBTQ+ movement, labeling it as "extremist." The places raided include a nightclub, a male sauna and a bar that hosted LGBTQ+ parties.

Eyewitnesses to the raids told journalists patrons of the establishments had to hand over their papers to be documented by law enforcement. Management was also able to warn people before police arrived at the scene.

This comes as a response to a lawsuit filed by the Justice Ministry and is a part of Russian President Vladimir Putin's quest to emphasize "traditional family values," something he has advocated for during his 24 years in power. The Supreme Court ruling resulted in the closure of many pro-LGBTQ+ business

establishments, including St. Petersburg's gay club Central Station.

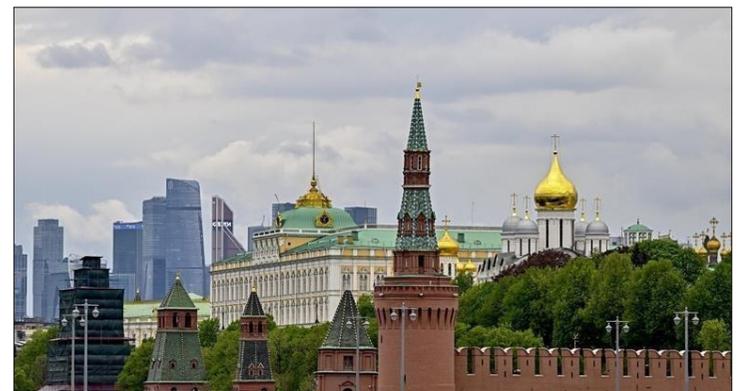
"In practice, it could happen that the Russian authorities, with this court ruling in hand, will enforce (the ruling) against LGBTQ+ initiatives that work in Russia, considering them a part of this civic movement," Max Olenichev, a human rights lawyer who works with the Russian LGBTQ+ community, told The Associated Press.

Several Russian Human Rights organizations criticized the lawsuit from the Justice Ministry, calling it discriminatory and a violation of Russia's constitution. The Kremlin adopted legislation restricting LGBTQ+ rights in 2013, and from there, more policies were enacted to slowly chip away at queer Russians' rights. Some of this legislation included the "gay propaganda" law, which banned endorsement of "nontraditional sexual relations" among

minors, as well as outlawing same-sex marriage in 2020.

After entering conflict with Ukraine, the Kremlin's attacks on LGBTQ+ people continued to escalate. A law was passed banning "propaganda of nontraditional sexual relations," essentially making public acceptance of LGBTQ+ people illegal. Just this year, the government also banned gender affirming procedures and healthcare for trans Russians.

Russian law enforcement denies any form of LGBTQ+ discrimination. In fact, the Deputy Justice Minister Andrei Loginov was quoted as stating "the rights of LGBT people in Russia are protected." Loginov also gave a report for the U.N. Human Rights Council in Geneva where he said "restraining public demonstra-



Gay nightclubs and bars were raided by Russian authorities on December 1, after the government declared the LGBTQ+ movement 'extremist.' CREDIT: Facebook

tion of nontraditional sexual relationships or preferences is not a form of censure for them."

"It is clear for us that they're once again making us out as a domestic enemy to shift the focus from all the other problems that are in abundance in Russia," Olga Baranova, director of the Moscow Community Center for LGBTQ+ Initiatives, said. ::

—Taylor Heeden

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Person of the Year: Karen Graci

Honoring an ally's love and dedication for equality



by Taylor Heeden
Qnotes Staff Writer

At the end of each year, Qnotes staff reflects on the extraordinary work completed by people in our community to select our annual Person of the Year. Many amazing individuals stand out as accomplished leaders and advocates, urging the importance of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) in Charlotte and beyond. This year, the staff chose to recognize a woman who's been instrumental in growing allyship and educating the public about the importance of acceptance and support for LGBTQ+ folks as the 2023 Person of the Year.

Arriving in Charlotte from Connecticut in 1995, Karen Graci originally came to North Carolina to be the Human Resources Director at the Deloitte consulting firm. As a mother, Graci always worked hard to be there to support her kids regardless of what the circumstances might be. When her daughter came out to her eight years ago, Graci knew she had to step up and educate herself on LGBTQ+ issues and learn how to be the best ally to her daughter.

That journey led Graci to PFLAG Charlotte, one of several chapters of the national organization PFLAG. Since those first meetings she attended, she went on to become the executive director of the Charlotte chapter until she recently stepped down in September of this year.

In recognition for her devotion to educating the community and advocating for queer people in Charlotte and beyond, Qnotes caught up with Graci to talk about her time spent with PFLAG and her advocacy for the LGBTQ+ community.

Taylor Heeden: When did you first come to Charlotte?

Karen Graci: I was an HR professional, doing work around specifically women in the workplace at that time in the '90s. A job opportunity came up with Deloitte and my husband had just finished his graduate degree in finance, so we said this would be a good time for us to move. We were ready and hoping then to start a family, and we felt like this would be a



Words of wisdom: 'I've really leaned into ally ship because of everything I learned through PFLAG. - Karen Graci.
CREDIT: Facebook

good place to start a family.

TH: So, how did you go from HR to advocacy work?

KG: When our youngest child came out as a member of the (LGBTQ+) community, it just felt like the right time to really acknowledge how much learning and educating I needed to do. There was this void of education and support opportunities for families to try to learn and support and understand their loved ones. So it seemed like the right time to go to PFLAG. We found PFLAG because a therapist we knew from the West Coast said "you need to find your local PFLAG chapter." I've really leaned into ally ship because of everything I have learned through PFLAG.

TH: What were those first meetings you went to at PFLAG like?

KG: There was a small group of us who were all parents of kids that were identifying as community members in some way. Some of them were young kids, some more teens like mine, and we just realized that there was this void in our community. So, that is really when what we call "PFLAG Charlotte 2.0" happened in 2014-2015. We asked, "what can we do to help grow this organization?" Honestly, it was just providing more help, support [and] resources that people didn't know about, and also bringing more [of] all those types of opportunities and awareness to the Charlotte area. There was a lot of good stuff happening, but there was space for an ally organization.

TH: How did your work evolve over your time at PFLAG Charlotte?

KG: When we first said there's an opportunity here in the community to bring education to families, we were specifically focused on the healthcare space. We partnered with the local medical society in the county and through that and Atrium Health to bring educational programming to healthcare providers, because it really wasn't happening in med schools. This is very, very specific information. It's so important to just heighten awareness and education for healthcare providers on serving the LGBTQ+ community, specifically for trans folks or gender diverse folks whose needs might be different than other members of the community. That was really our focus for the first couple of years.

We realized that education is so important and many spaces need this, so we expanded our educational programming beyond just the healthcare [environment] to bring these spaces to schools. We've done education and our family support has continued to expand, which was always the core of what we do.

TH: So let's talk about that peer support. What is the typical approach?

KG: It's meeting individuals and families right where they are. We can walk with them at a pace that works for them so they can fully support and advocate for their loved one as needed. Peer support has always been really the core of what we do, and that started when we were formed here in 1989. It was in 2015 through 2018 [that] we really leaned into educational programming on



She's our person of the year: former PFLAG Charlotte Executive Director Karen Graci.
CREDIT: Facebook

peer support.

TH: It seems like education is a critical part of the work you do. What would you say are the biggest accomplishments you had while working at PFLAG?

KG: We have so significantly expanded our peer support opportunities, and we have been much more intentional about specifically reaching communities of color. Our programs are very focused and what I liked is the balance of education and data, coupled with experiences of community members and parents, depending on who we are speaking to.

We launched our corporate partnership program and we have applied for a lot of grants. So from a funding perspective, we were really, really intentional about growing our organization. Our budget has grown tenfold in about a five year period.

I think now the next chapter is honestly inviting people to lean into advocacy in the way that works for them. Whether it's voting, sharing your story, bringing educational programs to companies, organizations or social circles that people are part of, there's so many different ways people can really become advocates. In 2024 we're going to need that in ways like we've never ever needed it before. It's so important.

TH: You mentioned part of the reason you got involved in advocacy was because of your daughter. Can you reflect on that time in your life and what you were feeling?

KG: One of the first emotions I felt as a parent was just profound sadness. Because I think kids in particular are very good at masking, pretending everything's fine when it's not. We are an incredibly close knit family. There's four of us, but how did I not see my child was really struggling? How had I not seen that? Connecting with as many parents as you can through PFLAG and talking

to health care providers and mental health providers to understand helped me, and [so did] seeing how I can take whatever skills that I may have and putting them to work for the broader good for the community.

TH: What is your advice to parents who are in the same situation you were in with your daughter?

KG: The first thing you should say to your child is thank you. They have shared their deepest truth with you, and that's huge. Then listen and keep listening and keep listening. Remind them you love them for who they are and [that] isn't going to change. But also say, I might have some learning to do on this.

If I could do it again, I would say I am so proud of you, thank you and how can we support you? I think that as a mom, or dad or just as a parent or as a sibling, knowing that you're there to support in whatever way [you] can sends a huge message.

TH: Reflecting on your time with PFLAG Charlotte and what might be ahead for you in the future, what are your thoughts?

KG: This experience has been so life changing and transformational. For me, it's been such a gift to just be a part of it. I know I have given what I can for PFLAG [and] I'm so excited for the next leader for this organization.

Allyship and advocacy can look different for each person, and part of this is giving ourselves the gift of time to honestly listen to the community and what it needs. The universe has ways of guiding you, leading you towards what's next; it is a pause with intention to reflect and discern, and that's the beauty of life. My own journey as an ally will always continue, and I think part of that is giving yourself time to breathe and truly listen as you [discover] what is next ::



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Reflecting on Pride This Holiday Season

by Liz Schob (she/her), Communications Manager

Dear Friends,
As the dawn of the new year fast approaches, most people find themselves reflecting on the previous year while rushing around trying to ready ourselves for the next. I'm no different and I can't help but think back on what a whirlwind this year has been. As I began my tenure at Charlotte Pride, it felt like the world had started waking up. The COVID-19 pandemic eased, and the marathon of community events began. We were coming off a historic year at Charlotte Pride with record-breaking participation in events like the festival and parade weekend, which meant that expectations for 2023 were incredibly high.

This past year also marked a shift in leadership, with Riley Murray taking on the role of our board president, supported by me and my colleague Meredith Thompson. Under Riley's leadership, we hit the ground running to plan the year ahead along with our board of directors and volunteer leaders. We are so grateful for the countless hours they gave to helping us bring our events to life.

In February, we hosted a job fair at Central Piedmont Community College's Parr Center and facilitated connections between over a hundred attendees and regional employers. Our local community partners Carolinas CARE Partnership, Transcend Charlotte, CLT Geek, and the Carolinas LGBT+ Chamber of Commerce collaborated with us to offer free career advancement opportunities and we can't wait to bring the event back in 2024.

Throughout the spring, while supporting various community events, we launched our expanded Charlotte Pride Scholarship & Internship Program, Generously Supported by Principal®

Foundation in April. In May, we celebrated the 15th anniversary of Reel Out Charlotte, the Queen City's Annual LGBTQ+ Film Festival, hosting for the very first time at The Independent Picture House.

June marked the official start of Pride events and we were thrilled to announce festival headliners Big Freedia and Greyson

Chance. We participated in Pride Night with Charlotte FC at Bank of America Stadium and joined in the festivities with our friends at Charlotte Black Pride at their Expo. We also got to be a part of Charlotte is Creative's third installment of "The Drop" series as artists Dyair and LaTroy Hampton unveiled a Pride mural for Series 3: Pride Fusion.

Charlotte Pride Week kicked off beautifully in August with an interfaith service at Caldwell Presbyterian Church, but our community faced a devastating blow when the North Carolina General Assembly passed several anti-LGBTQ+ bills just days before the festival and parade weekend. Despite these legislative challenges, the Charlotte Pride Festival and Parade weekend went off without a hitch, with advoca-



CREDIT: Mike Mazely/Courtesy Charlotte Pride

cy touchpoints across stages and platforms, a record-breaking 44 hours of entertainment, the most vendors and parade participants on record, and 260,000 attendees over the course of the weekend.

As I sit in the quiet of the Charlotte Pride offices before we close for our holiday break, I can't help but feel anticipation for what the next year will bring. A new staff member will soon join our team, along with a new group of volunteers eager to help bring our next round of programs to life. It's these folks, this community that keeps me centered in times of stress and frustration.

Together, our community has faced so many challenges, but also celebrated so many wins. We're resilient and I'm so grateful to be a part of this community.

As we close out the year, it is my hope that you will consider making a financial contribution to become a Friend of Pride this holiday season. If 2023 proved anything, it's that we can do great things together and, with your support, we can create exciting new opportunities and much-needed community connection for our LGBTQ friends, family, and neighbors.

Interested in becoming a Friend of Pride by making a financial donation to Charlotte Pride? Visit <https://charlottepride.org/friends/> to learn more.



Top stories of 2023

A look back at last year's most significant stories



by Taylor Heeden
Qnotes Staff Writer

This year saw some historic leaps and bounds for the LGBTQ+ community across the country. It also saw some regressive policies targeting trans and queer youth, and it further showed now more than ever, LGBTQ+ North Carolinians need to stand together and fight for their rights. Qnotes presents a recap of some of the year-defining moments of 2023 — from loss to hope for a better future.

DECEMBER 2022

Drag performer Coti Collins dies



North Carolina entertainer and drag superstar Coti Collins died right before the beginning of the new year. Born as David Lohman on March 27, 1960 in Gallipolis, Ohio, Collins went on to become an exceptionally well-known drag queen in the South, largely because of her impersonation of country superstar Reba McEntire.

During a concert tour McEntire had the opportunity to see Collins in action and the two eventually became good friends.

"When we were coming up with ideas for our 1996 tour, we decided to take David on the road with us to help with the "Fancy" trick in the show," McEntire posted on Twitter at the time. "He would appear on one end of the stage lip syncing to my live vocal and then pyrotechnics would shoot down the length of the stage and I would pop up on the other end in my red dress on a lever that would fly me over the audience. We stayed in contact ever since then."

Joe Biden signs Respect for Marriage Act



Approximately 3,000 people attended the official signing of the Respect for Marriage Act, which requires all states – even those with state level amendments that bar same-sex marriages – to recognize same-sex marriages performed in states without such amendments and to allow married same-sex couples to interact with the federal government in the same manner as opposite-sex couples.

"This [bill] involved a simple proposition: Who do you love? And will you be loyal with that person you love? It's not more complicated than that," President Joe Biden said. "The law recognizes that everyone should have the right to answer those questions for themselves without government interference."

Bishop Tonyia Rawls retires

Charlotte spiritual leader Bishop Tonyia Rawls retired from her church, Sacred Souls Community Church. For over two decades, Rawls served as a Christian faith Minister for Charlotte's LGBTQ+ community, and is well known as a national faith leader and social justice activist, who has focused much of her work in the southeast fighting against oppression and discrimination. In addition, she is the founder and executive director of the Freedom Center for Social Justice.

There's much more in Rawls' history of contributions to the LGBTQ community – far too much to list here – but it's clear she's a woman driven by spiritual inspiration and her caring and concern for humanity.

JANUARY

First generation college student mentorship program helps provide support to queer students



Qnotes' own Chris Rudisill wrote a feature about Firstly, an organization aiming to help mentor and support marginalized, first generation college students. According to EAB, a college research group formerly known as the Education

Advisory Board, first generation students make up nearly a third of U.S. undergraduates and they need more than financial support. Some may not even know they're first-generation.

"We found that peer to peer learning is really helpful in building that sense of belonging and building a student's confidence so that later on they engage with more campus resources," says Firstly Founder Kevin Hu. This is especially important for first gen students Hu said are often existing like him, hiding their socio-economic status and struggling with loneliness. The program isn't specifically for LGBTQ students, but Hu's experience plays a major role in his perspective when designing the program. "Just being queer and low income, and Asian, it's obviously a lot to balance and figure out."

North Carolina license plate can include queer lingo



North Carolina's Department of Motor Vehicles (NCDMV), after more than 20 years, finally made the decision to review their Do Not Issue list of 9,000 or more words and phrases that are not allowed on automobile license plates. When they were finished, more than 200 items had been removed from the state's prohibited plates list, among them over two dozen related to the LGBTQ community.

"Anything on the 'Do Not Issue' list should not include the LGBT community," said DMV commissioner Wayne Goodwin, in an interview January 13 with Winston-Salem radio station WFDD. "I don't know how long the terms that relate to the LGBT community were on the list, but with my administration they are coming off."

More bi and gay men can donate blood after new FDA guidance



New Food and Drug Administration (FDA) guidance loosened restrictions placed on gay and bisexual men who want

to donate blood. Gay and bisexual men under the new policy will be asked to complete a risk assessment form to determine if they would qualify for donation. If a gay or bisexual man hasn't had anal sex within three months prior to the donation day, they can now donate blood. Prior to this, gay and bisexual men had to abstain from sex in order to donate blood.

North Carolina ranked among the worst states for LGBTQ+ equality



The Human Rights Campaign (HRC) Foundation and the Equality Federation Institute released their Ninth annual State Equality Index (SEI), which showed North Carolina is most likely to have religious refusal or other anti-LGBTQ laws. The states in the lowest-rated category, High Priority to Achieve Basic Equality, which numbers 23, are Alabama, Arizona, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Idaho, Indiana, Kansas, Louisiana, Michigan, Mississippi, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, North Carolina, Ohio, Oklahoma, South Carolina, South Dakota, Tennessee, Texas, West Virginia, and Wyoming.

Teresa Davis dies



Teresa L. Davis, former Charlotte LGBTQ Chamber President and Qnotes contributor, passed away peacefully on February 15, 2023, after a long illness. She is survived by her spouse of nearly 24 years, Victoria Eves and her brother Michael Davis, of Atlanta, Georgia.

Teresa had always been very active in the Charlotte Community since her arrival in 2003. She worked on several

committees and non-profit Boards, and in 2009, with the help of Victoria and friends, she founded Charlotte's Reel Out Annual Film Festival.

Anderson Clayton becomes the youngest chair of the North Carolina Democratic Party



In its biannual party leadership elections, the State Executive Committee of the North Carolina Democratic Party ousted its entire leadership bench, electing then 25-year-old Anderson Clayton as the party's chair. Clayton has since received national attention as the youngest chair of a state political party in the U.S.

MARCH

A tee shirt company served as an example of successful queer entrepreneurship



In 2020, Jared Sizemore left his job as marketing manager at a golf course and country club in Kentucky to join longtime friend Steven Romeo on growing Music City Creative (MCC) as a mix of e-commerce and business-to-business custom merchandising. Now, MCC focuses on ensuring a culture that cultivates the core values of sustainability, community support and social equity, including utilizing an online job board designed to recruit queer workers.

"Small businesses influence every part of the community, right? And so, if we are a voice for a community we have to sometimes take a side, whether we think it is appropriate, or not," Sizemore explained. "Taking a side that is welcoming to others will honestly help our business. We will find those patrons who agree with us and who want to be involved with the things that we stand for."

Stephen Smith's murder case was reopened for further investigation



Stephen Smith, an openly gay teenager, was found dead on a Hampton, South Carolina road in 2015. At the time, his death was ruled a hit-and-run. However, after further investigation, the case was reopened and determined to be a likely homicide. Authorities were investigating anonymous tips pointing to the infamous Murdaugh family and the possible involvement of one or both of convicted murderer Alex Murdaugh's sons - Buster and Paul - in the death of Smith.

Around the time of Smith's death, purported rumors began to spread that Smith and Buster were in a romantic relationship. While they were classmates at Wade Hampton High School and played on the same baseball team, there hasn't been any evidence presented to support the relationship's existence.

North Carolina House passes anti-Critical Race Theory bill



North Carolina House Republicans approved new rules limiting how racism and sexism can be taught through House Bill 187, which had provisions such as teachers not being able to teach material where students may "feel discomfort, guilt, anguish or any other form of psychological distress" based on their race or sex.

"This bill does not change what history standards can and cannot be taught," said Rep. John Torbett, a Gaston County Republican and the bill's primary sponsor. "It simply prohibits schools from endorsing discriminatory concepts."

APRIL

Bans on trans youth participating in sports boomed across the country



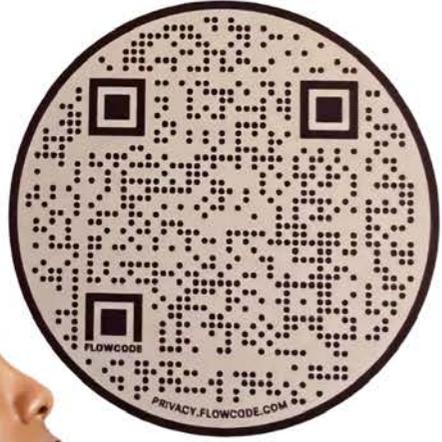
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continued from previous page Across the country and in North Carolina, counties, school boards, and school districts have been enacting laws and policies that prevent trans and gender-fluid children and teens – and in some cases 20-somethings in institutions of higher learning – from taking part in sporting activities. HB 574, which was passed in North Carolina in August, bars trans girls from participating on sports teams that correlate with the gender they identify at both the K-12 and collegiate level.

“We knew that this day would come where we would be standing together filled with anger, rage, determination, all with an unbreakable spirit,” Rebbly Kern, who is nonbinary and serves as the Director of Education Policy of EqualityNC, explained. “We will not be silenced — our Pride celebrations are bigger than ever, you will continue to see drag shows and drag story hours all over the state, our students will continue to read banned books ... trans youth will continue to assert their identity in safe and supportive ways in schools ... We will not be erased. Together, we rise up, and we fight back.”

MAY

New Mecklenburg Democratic Party



chair is named

Newly-elected Mecklenburg Democratic Party Chairperson Drew Kromer represents a new era for North Carolina Democrats. At the age of 26, Kromer is one of the many new faces of the state's Democratic party. QNotes spoke with Kromer about the wide range of challenges the Democratic party faces in our state and how LGBTQ North Carolinians will be impacted by proposed legislation and more.

“I think one of the things that we haven't done a great job of as the Democratic party, historically, is ... helping people understand what's at stake in some of these elections,” he said. “The more we can improve that messaging and help explain what's at stake, then more people can understand, 'okay, this is an issue that I care about.'”

The Plus Collective celebrates 20 years



The Plus Collective: Charlotte-Mecklenburg's LGBTQ+ Community Fund is managed by Foundation for the Carolinas. Twenty years ago – and in the truest spirit of serving and assisting our own – a group of Charlotte residents “saw the need for prioritized funding for LGBTQ+ non-profits.” This led to the establishment of the Charlotte Lesbian and Gay Fund.

Over time the affirming name was changed, to reflect and embrace the diversity of the community. In 2021 the Charlotte Lesbian and Gay Fund was renamed The Plus Collective (TPC). Frequently described as a Collective Giving Fund, The Plus Collective's mission of sharing humanity based in love is married to their vision of being “guided by principles [and] inspired by diversity and supported by community.”

JUNE AND JULY

Triangle LGBTQ+ advocates warn against intolerance



QNotes spoke to LGBTQ+ elected officials and advocates across the Triangle, including former Carrboro mayor Damon Seils and executive director of the LGBT Center of Raleigh Kori Hennessey. Seils said as an openly gay man, he is disappointed in the direction North Carolina is going.

“I'm disappointed and kind of tired – this is not the first legislative session we've [had] to fight back attacks on LGBTQ people, including LGBTQ youth,” he said. “I think on a personal level, it feels very stigmatizing. That's something that all of us, who grew up queer or any other LGBTQ identity, are very familiar with – feeling stigmatized and in many cases bullied, either emotionally or physically.”

South Carolina trans man Jacob Williamson is murdered



The Fourth of July is normally a celebration, but for the loved ones of Jacob Williamson, it was a nightmare turned reality. Williamson, who was just 18 and transgender, had plans to go on his first date ever with 25-year-old Joshua Newton

to Carowinds, located on the North and South Carolina state line. However, Williamson never came home.

His body was found about 10 miles from the small town of Pageland, South Carolina, in Chesterfield County, where investigators believe Newton — along with an accomplice — attempted to hide evidence of Williamson's murder.

AUGUST

Charlotte Pride brings 260,000 people to Uptown



Charlotte Pride brought hundreds of thousands of people together to celebrate and spread positivity to the community and each other. Over 260,000 people clad in every color of the rainbow strolled down Tryon Street and through Uptown Charlotte between that Saturday and Sunday. Charlotte Pride Programs & Development Director Meredith Thompson said every year she is amazed how Pride continues to grow and succeed.

“As one of just two staff people working with Charlotte Pride, I am humbled by the year-round efforts of our hard-working board and a team of about 40 volunteers who work tirelessly to make this festival and parade happen,” she offers. “I'm especially grateful for our board president, Riley Murray, who has given two decades of her life to our organization and cares so passionately about creating a memorable and affirming experience for LGBTQ people and their allies, not only for our two-day Pride festival but every day.”

HB2 supporter Dan Bishop announces 2024 bid for Attorney General



Charlotte-based Republican Congressman Dan Bishop announced his candidacy for North Carolina Attorney General August 3. Bishop is widely recognized for authoring the notoriously anti-LGBTQ+ “Bathroom Bill,” also known as House Bill 2 and frequently abbreviated as HB2. The bill was designed to prohibit trans-identifying individuals from using the bathroom that coincides with their

gender identity.

As attorney general, Bishop would represent all state government departments, agencies and commissions in legal matters. He would also provide legal opinions to the general assembly, the governor and any other public official when requested. With far right conservative Republicans having gerrymandered their way into almost complete control of the government on a state level, Bishop would likely meet no resistance to his anti-LGBTQ+ legal opinions.

Beyonce stops in Charlotte for her Renaissance World Tour



Bank of America Stadium became the House of Renaissance on Wednesday, August 9 when Beyoncé Knowles-Carter stepped onto the stage for the Charlotte leg of her Renaissance World Tour. Beyoncé dropped her album “Renaissance” last summer, which is heavily inspired by the Black queer experience. It's been dubbed a “love letter to Black queer dance culture,” infused with house beats, ballroom style music and more.

For most of her career, Beyoncé has been recognized as an ally to the LGBTQ+ community and has been recognized for her advocacy. However, “Renaissance” went beyond traditional advocacy work — it's one of the only musical projects to pay homage to a part of history that often is overlooked, or completely ignored.

“Renaissance” honors those who paved the way for LGBTQ+ folks today: trailblazers who were on the front lines fighting for equality for all. It also looks to a future where we all can be free to be our true, authentic selves without fear of persecution or dehumanization. While the concept of the album isn't radical by any means, its message resonated with fans, especially her LGBTQ+ audience.

N.C. House Democratic leader Robert Reives speaks to Qnotes in exclusive interview



House minority leader Robert Reives II (D-Dist. 54) has spent the last few months working and rallying fellow Democrats to

combat the Republican super majority's efforts, but after the passage of House Bill 808, House Bill 574 and Senate Bill 49, many LGBTQ+ residents are feeling helpless and afraid.

Qnotes met with Reives on August 16, before the historic vote to talk about what the next steps are and what Democrats need to do to break the supermajority.

"One of the great blessings I've had is being able to openly love the person that I love, and I want that feeling for everybody because nothing stabilizes a community [more] than people being able to be the best versions of themselves," he said. "I will strive from a personal standpoint, whether I'm elected or not elected, whatever it is, to continue to make us a better society in that sense."

SEPTEMBER

The battle for Union County Pride



Monroe resident Cristal Robinson and other LGBTQ+ residents and allies came together last year to create Union County Pride, a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization aiming to "support the youth and young adults of Union County with all sexual orientation and gender identities," according to its website.

However, planning Union County Pride has proven to be a battle, often against the city or county government, according to Robinson. Last year the group faced backlash from some residents, local churches, elected officials and even the county manager at the time. Despite the challenges Union County Pride has faced, Robinson said they will have Pride, even if the city governments don't want to.

"This is one of the only spaces here where people can truly be themselves," they said. "We are going to continue to fight to have these spaces for our queer neighbors and kids, no matter what it takes."

Charlotte-based organizations help local LGBTQ+ students



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. Their work, however, may have to shift in its approach after the passage of anti-LGBTQ+ legislation in North Carolina. One of the new laws, which has been dubbed the "Parents' Bill of Rights," 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.

With PFLAG Charlotte and other advocacy groups' initiatives tied closely to supporting queer students in their local school systems, it's important to understand the fear in North Carolina's queer community, which is evident through the conversations PFLAG Charlotte's Executive Director Karen Graci has had with caregivers and teachers. Some have said they are thinking about moving from their homes to find a place where they can feel safe and supported.

"It's unbelievable that this is happening, but we can let them know how much they are loved and supported by people in their communities," Graci says. "Let's talk about how you assert your LGBTQ+ students. If you've been thinking about coming to a peer support meeting, now it's more important than ever. If you've been thinking about wanting to learn more, please come, to navigate your journey."

OCTOBER

2023 marks 25 years since Matthew Shepard's murder



October 12 marked the 25th anniversary of the death of Matthew Shepard, a young gay man who was found badly beaten and tied to a fence in Laramie, Wyoming, on October 7, 1998. Chris Rudisill and executive director of PFLAG Charlotte Karen Graci reflected on

Shepard's death, and what his memory and legacy mean for our community.

"I will be 47 years old this November – a life that I feel has so far been well spent," Rudisill wrote. "Shadowed by a life taken, I often wonder what Matt's life would have been like. His legacy has challenged and inspired millions."

"I'm thankful for The Matthew Shepard Foundation and its wide-ranging efforts to Erase Hate," Graci wrote. "Hate is violence and bullying against LGBTQ+ individuals. Hate is prohibiting medically necessary healthcare. Hate is banning LGBTQ+ themed books. Hate is the recent legislation in North Carolina that directly targets LGBTQ+ people, families, affirming schools, and healthcare providers."

Charleston African-American Museum opens its doors



"[Two years ago] my partner and I planned a trip to Charleston, South Carolina ... what I wasn't prepared for however, was the impact the area's historical legacy would have on me," Qnotes' writer L'Monique King wrote in reference to her first trip to the South Carolina city. "The lasting impression left on my psyche and soul was so triggering, angst filled and a lot to digest."

"Only recalling the pain of what it feels like, what it must have felt like for my ancestors to be antagonized, insulted and oppressed for nothing more than the skin you're in. That feeling, buoyed by historical pain and trauma, left me vowing to never return. Or so I thought at the time."

King returned to the city earlier this year to explore the new International African American Museum (IAAM).

"As it turns out, I made the right decision in facing my fears about being immersed within a tumultuous past. Before it was all over, I traded in feelings of sadness and anger, embracing the inspiration and new knowledge gained from my museum visit and the resilience of a people it reified."

NOVEMBER

Scorpio closes and is displaced by local megachurch

Within days of being listed as the longest running nightclub in a Qnotes story



recognizing historic gay bars in North and South Carolina, Charlotte's Scorpio (located on Freedom Drive in West Charlotte) announced they would be closing, with plans to reopen in the near future.

Following that disclosure came another dubious announcement: the controversial evangelical mega worship franchise known as Elevation Church announced they would occupy the property and Scorpio was informed they had to vacate the premises.

The closing of a historic LGBTQ+ gathering place like Scorpio has been a huge loss for Charlotte. The fact that an entity such as Elevation, seemingly masquerading as a center of welcoming and love, which reportedly holds such contempt for the LGBTQ+ community and will erase part of that history, suggests the move is rooted in some sort of ulterior motive.

DECEMBER

Kendra Johnson leaves Equality NC



Over five years after moving to North Carolina to join Equality NC (ENC) as its executive director, Kendra Johnson announced her departure from the organization, which will be effective at the end of December.

During her time at ENC, Johnson oversaw the expansion of the organization from the diversifying of ENC staff to the physical expansions to western and eastern North Carolina. ENC has also served a crucial role in advocating for LGBTQ+ North Carolinians, including, but not limited to, demonstrations at the North Carolina General Assembly to protest anti-LGBTQ+ legislation, showing up at community events at booths or handing out information and more. ::

LGBT+ Chamber Annual Awards Gala honors members

Over 500 attend THRIVE celebration, held December 12



by Taylor Heeden
Qnotes Staff Writer

The Carolinas LGBT+ Chamber of Commerce held its THRIVE Annual Awards Gala on December 12, honoring the accomplishments of corporate partners and community leaders. The celestial evening of celebration took place at the Revelry in Camp Northend and was sponsored by Sonoco, Chase, Per Scholas, and TIAA.

Among the entertainers were Nicco Annan (best known as Uncle Clifford on the Starz drama series P-Valley), as well as The Vanity House, DJ Vanna Vanity, Erica Chanel, Jaidynn Diore Fierce from RuPaul's Drag Race, Unpredictable Approach and Ellie & Cole.

The chamber awarded 20 companies and individuals with various awards for their efforts and services, including Qnotes Publisher Jim Yarbrough, who was awarded the Teresa L. Davis Legacy Award. The award is given in honor of its namesake, the former president of the Carolinas LGBT+ Chamber of Commerce, and recognizes individuals who have used their positions to promote acceptance of the LGBTQ+ community and continue the fight for equality.

Here's a list of the awards given at the THRIVE gala and their recipients:

Corporate Partner of the Year — Sonoco

Sonoco was given the award for Corporate Partner of the year at this year's gala. Sonoco is a large packaging supply distributor, and according to its website, their team includes approximately 22,000 employees working in over 300 operations around the world.

Excellence in Supplier Diversity — TIAA Financial Services

The Excellence in Supplier Diversity Award was granted to TIAA Financial Services, an investment and retirement planning institution. TIAA has a dedicated page on its website that details the company's Business Resource Groups, which – it indicates – “enhance(s) the Inclusion, Diversity and Equity strategy through leadership development, networking opportunities, community outreach, philanthropic efforts, business solutions, product input and multicultural awareness.”

LGBT+ Business of the Year — Mapp Enterprises

Mapp Enterprises of Charlotte, a long haul transportation service provider that frequently moves food items both fresh and refrigerated to areas experiencing food insecurity, was awarded the LGBT+ Business of the Year award.

Ally Business of the Year — Letty's On Shamrock

The Ally Business of the Year award was presented to Letty's on Shamrock, which is located at 2121 Shamrock Drive



The theme for this year's LGBT+ Chamber annual awards ceremony, THRIVE, captured the excitement among honored members.
CREDIT: Facebook

in Charlotte. Letty's on Shamrock is described as a traditional southern & bistrot-style food restaurant. It's a very popular LGBTQ+ go-to destination spot for comfort food and socializing.

Emerging Entrepreneur — CT Anderson

Charlotte's own CT Anderson was named the Emerging Entrepreneur of the Year by the chamber. She founded the nonprofit Springclean, which focuses on reusing recycled materials with the goal of creating sustainable products. Some of the organization's goals include artist-led hands on workshops that demonstrate creative reuse of collected materials, on the job training in sustainability and work with local entrepreneurs to sell sustainable fashion apparel and accessories.

LGBT+ Professional of the Year — Richard Stevens

The LGBT+ Professional of the Year for 2023 was Richard Stevens, a branch leader for Truist Bank. Qnotes profiled Stevens for an edition of Our People, where he described his advocacy work for the LGBTQ+ community.

“I'd like to see us at a point in time where you don't have to come out, where you can just be your best authentic self, living freely each and every day,” he told Qnotes. “So, if sharing my past traumas, my stories, helps someone else, I don't mind sharing my story at all.”

Ally Professional of the Year — Michelle DeGrappo Castelloe

Michelle DeGrappo Castelloe was named the Ally Professional of the Year. Castelloe is the owner of Plaza Midwood's Moxie Mercantile, a store selling locally handmade and fair trade gifts, housewares, and accessories.

Excellence in Diversity, Equity and Inclusion — Charlotte FC

The Excellence in Diversity, Equity and Inclusion award went to the Charlotte Football Club. Charlotte FC hosts an annual game in honor of LGBTQ+ Pride, as

well as participating in Charlotte Pride.

Non-Profit of the Year — The Freedom Center for Social Justice

The Freedom Center's founder and CEO Bishop Tonya Rawls, along with Cameron Pruetto, the organization's Director of Intersectional Initiatives, accepted the award for Nonprofit of the Year. As written on FCSJ's website, the organization is dedicated to creating “culture shifts in social justice, civil rights, LGBTQ+ communities and spaces where people of low wealth and racial minorities dwell.”

ERG of the Year — WeR1 - Duke Energy

The ERG of the Year went to WeR1 - Duke Energy, which has consistently been supportive of the LGBTQ+ community. Duke Energy has participated in Charlotte Pride, as well as other sponsored LGBTQ+ events.

Corporate Engagement Award — Chase

Nationally-known Chase Bank was given the Corporate Engagement Award at the chamber's THRIVE gala on December 12.

Teresa L. Davis Legacy Award — Jim Yarbrough

Qnotes publisher Jim Yarbrough received the Teresa L. Davis Legacy Award. Yarbrough has been with Qnotes since its inception in 1986, and his dedication to the LGBTQ+ community has made a lasting impact for generations to come.

“It's important for our community to have its own space, its own voice and to be able to tell our own stories,” Yarbrough said in an interview for the UNC Hussman School of Journalism and Media. “We need to be here, we need to be sustained and we need to grow ... We need the support from readership to help do that, but it's important, too, for us to be here, especially in this political climate.”

Donaldson King Community Impact Award — Cameron Pruetto

The Donaldson King Community Impact

Award went to Cameron Pruetto, the Director of Intersectional Initiatives at the Freedom Center for Social Justice.

“This year has been difficult, but I've been constantly inspired by the many leaders, partners, and unsung heroes who are here daily, stepping up to fight and care for our community,” he tweeted. “I hope we can all find some rest in this winter season, and we can continue to, in the vision of FCSJ, ‘Educate. Advocate. Celebrate.’”

President's Award — Jennifer Fenton Weishaupt and Veleria Levy

Veleria Levy, the Executive Director of AIDS Action Network; and Jennifer Fenton Weishaupt, the co-founder and CEO of Ruby Slipper Restaurant Group were given the President's Award.

Blue Ridge Visibility Award — Uppity, LLC

The Blue Ridge Visibility Award was presented to Uppity, a clothing brand based in Shelby, North Carolina. The company's website says the clothes made are for “those who challenge the status quo and refuse to be relegated to staying in their ‘place.’”

Grand Strand Visibility Award — Johnny D's Waffles & Benedicts, Myrtle Beach

Johnny D's Waffles & Benedicts received the Grand Strand Visibility Award. The Myrtle Beach brunch stop is known for its unique waffle creations, from red velvet and cinnamon waffles to a banana split waffle.

Low Country Visibility Award — Charleston Black Pride

Charleston Black Pride, honored with the Low Country Visibility Award, has become integral for the South Carolina LGBTQ+ community, especially for its BIPOC members.

“The reason for starting Charleston Black Pride was to empower, educate, and inspire those who felt that their voices were silent because of who they are or whom they chose to love,” former Charleston Black Pride CEO Shah Hill said. “We want to thank everyone for the many years of support and we will continue to let love win!”

Partnership Champion Award — Fifth Third Bank

The Chamber proudly recognizes the financial institution for ten years of partnership.

Community Partner Award — Plaza Midwood Merchants' Association

The Plaza Midwood Merchants Association received the Community Partner Award. In a statement, the organization thanked the community for its support.

“We love supporting our community and neighbors — thank you for recognizing our efforts.” ::

Ripped from the headlines: the worst of 2023

All the things you'd like to forget but shouldn't about the past year



by David Aaron Moore
Qnotes Staff Writer

In a society and time when breaking news is constant, it's actually quite difficult to keep up with everything that happens in a year's time. We thought it would be a good idea to dust off the past 12 months and remind you of some of the less pleasant moments that occurred, just so you're properly armed for any debative conversations that might pop up around the dinner table come the new year. Since we're going to print with this issue in December, we also decided to take a step back into December, 2022.

While the world would be a much better place if none of these things had occurred, don't be surprised if you find a chuckle or two along the way.

DECEMBER 2022

North Carolina tops list of anti-drag report from GLAAD

As 2022 came to a close, GLAAD released a report that showed North Carolina and Texas were tied for the largest number of anti-drag efforts in the United States. No longer known as the voice of reason, North Carolina has become a state of embarrassment.

North Carolina Community struggles with more threats of violence

Before and after Moore County had their power substation shot up, plunging more than 35,000 people into darkness, the department of Homeland security's National terrorism advisory network warned of ideologically motivated terrorist attacks against public gatherings, places of worship, government facilities and schools. Why are rednecks so afraid of drag queens?

Trans trustee quits Asheville School board

Payton O'Connor, a transgender member of the Asheville City School board of Education resigned after backwoods Minister Ronald Gates claimed she was attempting to indoctrinate students. O'Connor stepped down, telling parents, students and the media she didn't want to be such a needless distraction.

JANUARY 2023

Twitter becomes voice of hate towards LGBTQ community

Annoying conservative and far too wealthy Elon Musk purchases Twitter, makes a mess of everything, sends long time users scattering, changes name of service to X and allows political trolls to start spewing hatred again.

George Santos is embarrassing



Explosive year includes rampant discrimination, tirades against anything trans or drag and a bevy of crazy politicians. CREDIT: Adobe Stock

A gay man runs for office as a Republican, gets elected, can't seem to open his mouth without telling lies and alienates the entire planet.

GOP lawmakers want to ban drag on Sunday mornings

Confused Republicans felt certain that drag performances would be a conflict of interest with church services.

Madison Cawthorn leaves North Carolina for Florida

Another embarrassing (and probably closeted gay) ex-elected official who couldn't stop opening his mouth and saying really stupid crap. One of many thorns in the side of North Carolina, the universe took pity on our state and sent him packing to Florida, the most popular go-to destination for Republicans these days.

FEBRUARY

More than 100 anti-LGBTQ+ bills proposed by February 2023

It's a race to the finish line to see how much queer culture the GOP can stomp out. What's wrong with our country?

Nikki Halley announces presidential bid

She claims she doesn't oppose same-sex marriage but she does not support transgender female student athletes sharing locker rooms or competing in women's sports. Definitely incapable of being a president for all of the people all of the time.

Masculine men discriminate against feminine men

It's unfortunate, but true. As is the case with practically every community, discrimination within always exists and it comes as no surprise that masculine gay men look

down their snout at femme gay men. Can't we all just get along?

MARCH

Madonna's plastic surgery

We're inclined to agree with Madonna's claims of ageism, but why doesn't anyone ever tell celebrities to stop BEFORE they've gone too far under the knife?

Christians could sue people who call them homophobic

Florida's House Bill 991 makes it illegal for journalists anywhere to refer to a resident of the "Sunshine" state as homophobic, no matter what anti-LGBTQ+ utterances fall out of their mouth.

Man driving car that killed Luke and Reston Drawdy convicted and sentenced

Thomas James Nix was convicted of two felony death by vehicle charges after his car slammed into and killed Luke and Reston Drawdy. Initially, Nix was serving a prison sentence at the Piedmont Central Incarceration Unit in Salisbury, North Carolina until 2031. He has since been moved to the Pamlico Correctional Institution in Bayboro, North Carolina, now with an expected release date of 2029.

Tricia Cotham changes parties

Trisha Cotham was a devoted progressive member of the Democratic Party, who supported a woman's right to choose and LGBTQ+ rights. In fact, she was known to show up at fundraising events for our community in Charlotte on a recurring basis. At least, that was until she claimed she got her feelings hurt by Democrats and decided to jump ship for the Republican party, giving the GOP a super majority and the ability to overturn any veto signed by Democratic Governor Roy Cooper. Rumors have swirled

that there was something *MOORE* to her decision, but none of it makes sense to us, unless...

Mark Robinson goes after governor's office

Likely the biggest whack job in the state announces he's running for governor. Oh joy.

APRIL

Equality Florida advises LGBTQ travelers to avoid the Sunshine State

You know it's bad when queers tell people to stay away from their own state.

MAY

Republicans play cancel culture with drag

Conservatives and Republicans in North Carolina, Florida, Texas and across the country continue with their relentless attacks on drag queens.

NC bar association embraces homophobia

The North Carolina bar association, once a stalwart of progressive support for the LGBTQ+ community, abruptly decides to cancel a drag trivia night.

George Santos gets even more embarrassing

Openly gay and perennial liar George Santos, a representative from New York's third district and likely one of the most disliked humans in the United States, surrenders to federal authorities for 13 criminal charges

Mark Robinson can't stop sounding stupid

The misguided wannabe candidate for governor of North Carolina incorrectly claims "clinics" perform "transgender surgery" on five-year-olds.

JUNE

Pat Robertson is dead

He was once a presidential wannabe and a lifetime nut job who claimed that the LGBTQ+ community, drag queens, doctors performing abortions and President Obama were responsible for all the world's ills. After sucking oxygen off the planet for 93 long, years he finally died.

JULY

Tennessee upholds anti-trans birth certificate policy

In their continuing effort to make life as difficult as possible for the LGBTQ+ community, Tennessee refuses to allow trans individuals to change their gender-at-birth assignments on birth certificates.

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 **views**

continued from page 17

Support for gay relationships drops among Republicans

Like that's a big surprise from a political party that wants to take us us back to 1955.

Bar at 316 incident

Reportedly an inebriated bar owner got angry because he didn't like a drag queen and shut down her performance. Members of the queer community in Charlotte got mad for a minute, but then the story just faded away.

GOP plans to give North Carolina public schools a make over

Power-crazed right wing Republicans plan to wipe any references to the LGBTQ+ community and slavery from school curriculum.

AUGUST

Trans teen murdered in SC by online acquaintance

Eighteen-year-old Jacob Hill, a young trans man who thought he was going on his first date to Carowinds, an amusement park in suburban Charlotte, is instead senselessly slaughtered, purportedly by Joshua Newton and Victoria Smith. As of this writing, the two are still awaiting trial.

Impact of COVID-19 still being felt

Despite multiple vaccines that have successfully slowed infection and reduced the impact of COVID-19, the World Health organization and the Centers for Disease Control expect another rough ride with a

number of new strains.

SEPTEMBER

Jake Hill is Dixon Dallas

My, oh my. Musician Jake Hill is a gay thrash rocker. Dixon Dallas is a gay country singer. How can two people so different be the same individual?

Canada issues travel advisory for citizens visiting US

Our neighbor to the north, previously a long time friend, has now become so wary of aberrant politicians and anti-LGBTQ+ sentiment, the country has issued a warning to any residents considering visiting the United States.

OCTOBER

Charlotte's historic Scorpio closing

After wading through a significant amount of historic data, it is finally determined that Scorpio is the oldest LGBTQ+ nightclub in the Carolinas still in operation. Within weeks of receiving the recognition from Qnotes, the bar is forced to close when mega Christian worship franchise Elevation Church decides they're moving in.

Indian trail HOA tells man to remove Pride flag

While homophobia and anti-LGBTQ+ hate rages across the United States, a gay man who has displayed his rainbow flag for the past decade and then some is told by his local homeowners association in Union County that he must take the flag down.

NOVEMBER

Pope discharges anti-LGBTQ+ Texas Bishop

What's bad for the bishop is good for Catholics. At least that's the way we see it, although Pope Francis has received significant backlash after he removed (see: FIRED) Bishop Joseph Strickland of Tyler, Texas, who has been a consistent critic of the Pope's efforts to make the church more welcoming for the LGBTQ+ community.

DECEMBER

Santos finally gets kicked to the curb

After surviving two previous attempts of expulsion from office, crazy gay Republican George Santos finally gets the heave-ho when a bi-partisan group voted December 1 to expel him from the house. His web of lies about practically anything you can think of, left him a national laughing stock with a 23-count federal indictment. Follow up reports seem to indicate he's headed towards a career as a social media influencer and governmental gay whistle blower.

One idiot deserves another

Sort-of Republican and aspiring dictator wannabe Donald Trump held a fundraiser for North Carolina gubernatorial wannabe Mark Robinson at the infamous crime site known as Mar-A-Lago.

As if that's not bad enough, Trump then proceeded to compare Robinson to Martin Luther King, Jr. ::

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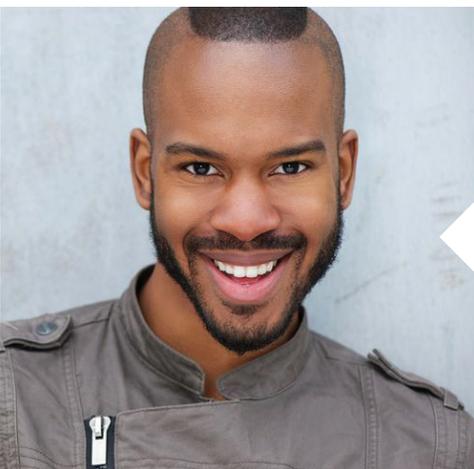


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Six best LGBTQ+ albums 2023

Q-Music



by Gregg Shapiro
Qnotes Staff Writer

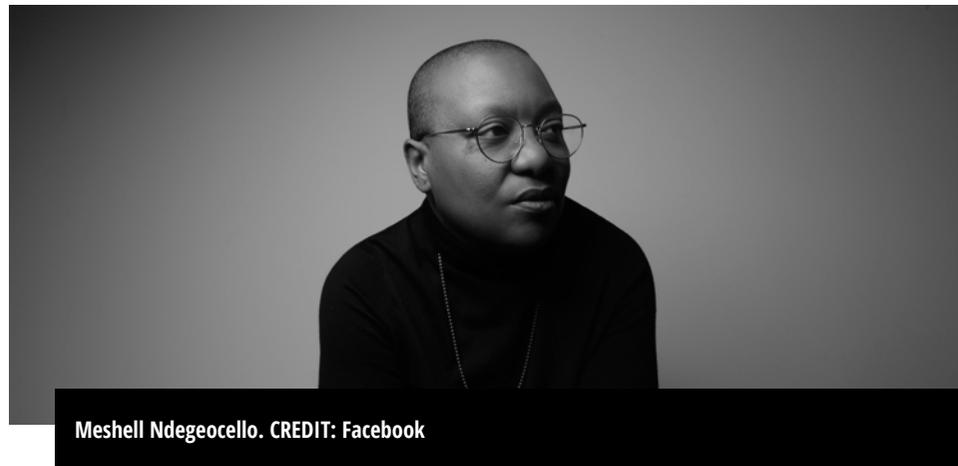
When it comes time to compile a “best of” list for the year, it’s a relatively simple process. I ask myself what albums I kept returning to time and time again. Beginning with Brandy Clark’s eponymous fourth album (which got the most spins of all) and concluding with Man On Man’s sensational second album “Provincetown,” it was a very queer year. While I did everything in my power to limit the list to five, I had to make an exception so you, dear reader, can learn about the great LGBTQ+ music put out in 2023.

Brandy Clark

It was only a matter of time before two of the biggest queer names in Americana/country crossover collaborated, but we’re glad that Brandy Clark and Brandi Carlile did. Clark’s eponymous Warner Records album was produced by Grammy-winner Carlile who plays on all but one of the 11 tracks. While Carlile’s presence is felt, the album is pure Clark. From her celebrated turn of phrase and distinctive sense of humor and perspective to her easily recognizable vocal style and delivery, the album is all hers. Unforgettable tunes include “Tell Her You Don’t Love Her” (on which she’s joined by Lucius), the gorgeous duet with Carlile on “Dear Insecurity,” “Best Ones,” “Ain’t Enough Rocks” (featuring Derek Trucks), “Northwest,” “Take Mine” and “She Smoked in the House.”

Jake Shears

Jake Shears kept us waiting five years for “Last Man Dancing” (Mute), the follow-up to his 2018 solo debut. An entirely different animal from its predecessor, the music is joyful, youthful, exhilarating and forward-thinking. And, yes, dancing



Meshell Ndegeocello. CREDIT: Facebook

is required. “Too Much Music” is both retro and of the moment, while “Do the Television,” co-written by Shears, and Scissor Sister bandmates Scott Hoffman (aka Babydaddy) and Ana Lynch (Ana Matronic) is mesmerizing. Kylie Minogue duets with Shears on the irresistible “Voices” and we get a good measure of Big Freedia on “Doses.” Shears makes use of the old-school continuous mix groove from “8 Ball” through “Devil Came Down the Dance Floor,” giving the listener the feeling of being at their own private dance party or club.

Sufjan Stevens

The signs were there all along when it came to Sufjan Stevens’ official October 2023 coming out. What straight man could possibly write a song about serial killer John Wayne Gacy and his victims, and make it as gorgeous and chill-inducing as “John Wayne Gacy, Jr.” (from 2005’s “Illinois”)? Would a straight man have been able to create a song as sensitive as “Mystery of Love,” Stevens’ Oscar-nominated tune from the gay film “Call Me by Your Name?” His 2023 masterwork “Javelin” (Asthmatic Kitty), featuring

the dedication to his late partner Evans Richardson (who died in April), feels less like a surprise, and more like a confirmation. The music is everything we’ve come to expect from Stevens, and more. From the alternately exquisite and jarring opener “Goodbye Evergreen,” to the lush choral vocals on “A Running Start” and the potential hit single pop of “Will Anybody Ever Love Me?,” Stevens continues to merge queerness and faith.

Meshell Ndegeocello

If you’ve been listening to and following queer musician Meshell Ndegeocello’s compelling music career, from her early ‘90s hit single “If That’s Your Boyfriend (He Wasn’t Last Night),” the political statement of “Leviticus: Faggot,” and the breathtaking “Bitter” album, through her vast and varied 21st century sonic explorations, you know that her output is anything but predictable or dull. “The Omnichord Real Book” (Blue Note), Ndegeocello’s first album of all original tunes since 2014’s “Comet, Come to Me,” continues her longstanding tradition of being musically daring. The roster of guest musicians, including

Joan As Police Woman, Jason Moran, Jeff Parker and Josh Johnson, is mind-blowing. The sound throughout is equal parts timeless and forward-thinking, soulful and soul-stirring.

Anohni and the Johnsons

Anohni has long been a transformational artist. From performing “Cripple and the Starfish” on 1996’s various artists compilation “God Shave the Queen” to leading Antony and the Johnsons in the early years of the 21st century to going solo on 2016’s “Hopelessness,” Anohni has always remained their distinctive creative vision. Now, coming full circle as Anohni and the Johnsons, this has proven true once again on the stunning “My Back Was a Bridge for You to Cross” (Secretly Canadian). Beginning with “It Must Change” (a song with an environmental message on par with Marvin Gaye’s “What’s Going On”), Anohni makes a statement to which we should listen. The R&B vibe on “Can’t,” “It’s My Fault” (featuring the lines, “It’s my fault/ The way I broke the earth”), and “Why Am I Alive Now?,” also make these among Anohni’s most accessible songs. Even the jarring “Go Ahead,” with its Yoko Ono-style arrangement and delivery, doesn’t feel out of place here.

Man on Man

When queer musical duo Man on Man – Roddy Bottum and Joey Holman, whose partnership is both creative and romantic – released its eponymous debut album in 2021, it was as if someone opened a gallon drum of poppers, and we were all experiencing the same thrilling head rush. Man on Man effortlessly avoids the dreaded sophomore slump with the incredible “Provincetown” (Polyvinyl). Not shying away for a moment from its sexy subject matter, Man on Man is in peak condition on songs including “Take It from Me,” “Gloryhole,” “Piggy,” “Showgirls,” “I Feel Good” and “Kids.” ::

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