Family, Allies & Icons
Remembering Those We Lost in 2023

New direction for Equality NC and PFLAG - pg 7

A look at LGBTQ+ creative talent from NC - pg 10

QnotesCarolinias.com
You’ve got a lot on your plate this year. 

we can give you a boost.

ROSEDALE HEALTH + WELLNESS

DUDLEY’S PLACE

we’re now accepting new clients and all insurance types for the new year

✅ Improve my mood
✅ Eat healthier
✅ More health check-ups

704.977.2972  704.948.8582
@TheDudleysPlace  @MyRosedaleHealth  dudleysplace.org  myrosedalehealth.com
inside this issue

feature
8 Remembering those we lost in 2023
10 North Carolina queer icons

news
4 COVID hospitalizations in Charlotte at a three-year high
4 LGBTQ+ and AIDS activist Dr. Jesse Peel dies at 83
6 Asheville bookstore to ship banned books from Florida back to the state’s students for free
6 HB8 forces ‘adult entertainment’ websites to block access or require picture IDs for state’s residents
6 U.S. archbishop partially bans same-sex blessings
7 The Advocate calls NC #2 in list of ten states with the worst anti-LGBTQ+ laws
7 PFLAG Charlotte names Ray McKinnon as its new executive director
7 Elazar Posada named interim executive director of Equality NC

a&e
12 Mimi Benfield comes to the Comedy Zone Jan. 25
14 With more LGBTQ+ representation, ‘Mean Girls’ movie musical provides a ‘fetch’ take on the original film

life
15 Our People: David Aaron Moore

views

events
For event listings, visit qnotescarolinas.com/events-calendar.
COVID-19 hospitalizations in Charlotte at a three-year high

Less than 15 percent of Mecklenburg County residents have received the updated booster

By Evan Moore | Charlotte Observer

D uring the week of Dec. 30, there was an average of 124 daily COVID-19 hospitalizations in Mecklenburg County, according to the New York Times COVID-19 Tracker, which uses data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

That’s the highest daily average since Oct. 10, 2020, data shows. There was an average of 741 hospitalized COVID-19 patients in Mecklenburg County during the same time period, the highest since the first week of 2023; and intensive care units in at least four hospitals in the Charlotte area are more than 95 percent full.

Code Yellow in Mecklenburg

Mecklenburg County is currently in code yellow or medium-level exposure for COVID-19, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention community level indicator. Levels can be low, medium, or high, and are determined by the CDC community levels map that examines available hospital bed capacity, COVID hospital admissions, and new cases in an area to determine the severity of transmission.

With the medium-level exposure rating, the CDC is recommending that Mecklenburg County residents stay up to date with their COVID-19 vaccines and get tested if they have symptoms. Those who are at high risk of getting very sick should wear a high-quality mask and talk to their healthcare providers about additional preventative measures, the CDC says.

COVID-19 vaccination rate in Mecklenburg County

Data shows that 70 percent of all Mecklenburg County residents have completed their primary series of vaccinations, meaning they have received two doses of the Pfizer or Moderna vaccine, or one dose of the Johnson & Johnson vaccine. Nearly all residents (95 percent) aged 65 and older have completed their primary series of vaccines, according to the data.

However, the number of residents who have received the updated booster is much lower. Only 14 percent of county residents have received the updated booster, and roughly four in 10 residents have aged 65 older have gotten the shot, data show, meaning people may be missing out on protection from the virus as it mutates.

What is the dominant COVID-19 strain in Mecklenburg County?

According to data from the Mecklenburg County Health Department, the omicron JN and XBB variants are the dominant strains in North Carolina.

COVID-19 variants in Mecklenburg County

In Mecklenburg County, the most dominant strain is the COVID-19 variant currently circulating is B.1.1.529, also known as the Omicron variant. This strain emerged in late 2021 and has spread rapidly around the world.

Older vaccines were based on COVID-19 variants that are different from those circulating now, which means people who have not yet received the updated booster could be reinfected, according to Andy Pekosz, a molecular microbiology and immunology professor at Johns Hopkins University. “That, combined with the fact that your immunity from vaccination or infection tends to drop off over time, means that you won’t get a lot of protection from COVID-19 if you are relying on the vaccines you received nearly a year ago,” Pekosz said. Though he expects case rates to rise in January and February, Pekosz recommended that all eligible individuals get the booster, especially those in high-risk groups.

Where to get the updated booster in Mecklenburg County

The updated booster is available at pharmacies and doctor’s offices throughout the county. The shot is recommended for everyone aged 6 months and older, including pregnant people and those with compromised immune systems, according to the CDC.

Most health insurance plans will continue to cover the COVID-19 vaccine at no cost or with a co-pay, according to the Mecklenburg County Health Department. People with limited or no insurance coverage can get free or low-cost COVID-19 vaccines through the CDC’s Bridge Access Program for adults and Vaccines for Children Program for children 18 years old and younger.

To find a location to get the booster in your neighborhood, you can use Pfizer’s VaxAssist tool at vaxassist.com.

What are the side effects of the updated booster?

The side effects of the new booster will be the same as previous vaccines, Dr. Kirsten Hokenheim, immunologist and professor of biomedical sciences at Bryant University, said.

According to the CDC, those potential side effects include pain, swelling, redness at the injection site, fatigue, headache, muscle pain, chills, nausea and fever. If you have pain, swelling, or redness where the shot was given, the CDC recommends applying a clean, cool washcloth over the area. The CDC also advises drinking plenty of fluids and taking over-the-counter medicines, such as ibuprofen, acetaminophen, or aspirin, to relieve symptoms.

This article appears courtesy of our media partner the Charlotte Observer.

LGBTQ+ and AIDS activist Dr. Jesse Peel dies at 83

Many considered Peel a hero to the Southern LGBTQ+ community

by Taylor Heeden
Qnotes Staff Writer

O n Thursday, December 28, Dr. Jesse Peel — the namesake of the LGBTQ center at East Carolina University (ECU) — passed away in his Atlanta home. He was 83 years old.

The North Carolina native dedicated his life to helping those diagnosed with HIV/AIDS, as well as advocating for safe spaces for queer folks in his own home state.

“To me and many others, Jesse is a hero. He completely changed the face of Eastern Carolina University and, in my opinion, all of Eastern North Carolina,” ECU LGBTQ+ Center Program Coordinator Rose Bogue said. “When I was a student and first started here back in 2017, there was very little LGBTQ+ visibility.”

Peel attended the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, where he received his medical degree before receiving his license in psychiatry at the University of Pennsylvania. He opened a psychiatric practice in Atlanta for gay men at the height of the AIDS epidemic, and as he started to see how the virus was impacting his patients, Peel went to the front lines, helping to found AIDS Atlanta and Positive Impact, two organizations still working to address and eradicate HIV/AIDS.

In addition, Peel was instrumental in the creation of ECU’s LGBTQ+ Center, the largest resource of its kind in the entire North Carolina Public University system. Center Director Mark Rasdorf told WITN the Dr. Jesse R. Peel LGBTQ+ center has served as a point of visibility for queer students and faculty on campus.

“I’ve talked to many parents who say the presence of this center at such a prominent location and so large and with active programming and a lot of support helps to put their minds to ease that hopefully their student will both be safe and happy and successful here as a student at ECU,” said Rasdorf.

“Peel also served on several boards and committees back in Atlanta, including the Atlanta Gay Men’s Chorus, Lost ‘N Found Youth and Actor’s Express. Several of these organizations took to social media to share how much Peel’s dedication and efforts meant to the community.”

“Jesse was a part of Out Front’s family since day one,” Out Front Theatre Company wrote on Facebook. “We were honored to have Jesse in our audience more times than we can count and to also have him serve on our Board of Directors. He always entered the theater with a smile and left telling the staff that he would see us again soon.”

The world is a better place because Jesse was a part of it, and we are a better company because he was kind enough to share his gifts with us. He will be missed but he will not be forgotten.”

One of Peel’s friends, Mark King, also took to Facebook to share his condolences.

“Jesse Peel became my friend, confidant, and co-consipirator exactly 30 years ago when I moved to Atlanta,” Mark King wrote on Facebook. “He founded every major HIV/AIDS group in town, mentored countless young activists, and was once my phone call from jail. His loss cannot be measured. The lives he nurtured – and my phone call from jail. His loss cannot be measured. The lives he nurtured – and his legacy, I love you, Jesse. But you knew that. Rest in peace my friend.”

ECU will host a celebration of life for Peel and his funeral will take place in Atlanta. ::
Like We Are Floating On Air!

- Adult Toys, Cards & Novelties  • Gifts
- New Female Fits
- New Mens Underwear

Happy Valentine’s Day!

Follow Us @
- WhiteRabbit
- Wrabbitnc
- ShopWhiterabbit

White Rabbit
(704) 377-4067
920 Central Ave. Charlotte N.C., 28204
An Asheville-based book store recently announced it received thousands of children’s books from the Duval County Public School system in Florida after they were banned from school libraries. Firestorm Books, a queer-and-trans-owned book-store, will be returning those books into the hands of children across Florida starting this week.

“When we were told that these books were at risk of being destroyed, we knew we had to do this,” said Firestorm Books co-owner Esmé Joy.

The store will launch the “Banned Books Back!” campaign, with the goal of shipping books removed from Duval County schools directly to kids in states where book bans have been put in place. Firestorm Books plans to expand this initiative, but for now, it will start sending the books back to kids in Florida.

According to a press release, the organization also plans to distribute thousands of books in partnership with Floridian grassroots organizers, educators and activists who can then distribute the books to kids and families Firestorm wouldn't be able to reach otherwise.

Families, kids and allies in Florida can go onto the Firestorm Books website to request free books. Applicants can specify what kind of books they’d like to receive in their package, ranging from picture books for ages four to eight or chapter books for ages eight to 12. The press release also confirms requests will be fulfilled as funding becomes available.

“We’re expecting to spend around $17,500 on postage alone,” said Firestorm co-owner Glenda Ro. So far, to date, the bookstore has raised enough money to fulfill the first 700 requests.

The books that the store received from Duval County totalled over 22,000, with over half of those titles being LGBTQ+ related. Some of these books included the New York Times bestseller and Newbury Honor Book “Other Words for Home” by Jasmine Warga, and the Coretta Scott King Illustrator Honor Book “Memphis, Martin, and the Mountaintop: The Sanitation Strike of 1968” by Alice Faye Duncan and R. Gregory Christie, among others.

“We’re working to return these books as an act of solidarity with the kids from whom they were taken,” explained Beck Nippes, a Firestorm co-owner. “We hope the campaign can connect with and contribute to a broader antifascist struggle, because book bans aren’t happening in isolation. They’re connected to attacks on reproductive and gender-affirming health care in a climate of escalating violence against queer and trans folks, especially youth.”

—Taylor Heeden

**HB8 forces ‘adult entertainment’ websites to block access or require picture IDs for state’s residents**

After the North Carolina Chamber passed new legislation that requires proof of age to access adult entertainment websites, top internet companies like Pornhub and XHamster have either blocked North Carolinians’ access to the websites, or now require photo IDs, citing the new policy as its reason.

It’s not surprising that Republican state senators added the ‘No ID, No Porn’ requirement to House Bill 8. Originally a bill to add a computer science class to the state’s high school graduation requirements, the initial draft had nothing to do with internet porn.

It now requires adult film websites to verify the ages of its visitors, presented as an attempt to prevent children and youth under 18 from accessing the content.

An organization known as “Vigilante Truth,” which says its primary objective is to fight sex trafficking, confirmed their support for the bill because they believe porn encourages violence against women.

“...for me [it] is not whether you should be watching porn or not,” said Bo Quickel, the founder of Vigilante Truth. “What I do think is that keeping it away from minors, like any other drug – cigarettes, alcohol – if they’re not physically ready for that dopamine drop, they shouldn’t be ready for a porn dopamine drop either.”

The way the law is now written, which requires users to upload the image of an ID card to prove their age, has critics calling the demand a slippery slope, especially when it comes to an individual’s right to privacy.

Here is a portion of the message read by spokesperson Sherree Deville, which users in North Carolina will see and hear if they visit Pornhub and others that have chosen to block, like Redtube and YouPorn:

“As you may know, your elected officials in North Carolina are requiring us to verify your age before allowing you to access our website. While safety and compliance are at the forefront of our mission, giving your ID card every time you want to visit an adult platform is not the most effective solution for protecting our users, and in fact, will put children and your privacy at risk. The safety of our users is one of our biggest concerns. Until a real solution is offered, we have made the difficult decision to completely disable access to our website in North Carolina. Please contact your representatives before it is too late and demand device-based verification solutions that make the internet safer while also respecting your privacy.”

— Taylor Heeden and David Aaron Moore

**U.S. archbishop partially bans same-sex blessings despite Vatican letter**

A San Francisco archbishop semi-barred blessings for same-sex couples after Pope Francis released a statement affirming the right to take place.

Archbishop Salvatore Cordileone said he felt compelled to write something because of the “ignorance, animosity, and judgmentalism” in the media.

The Bay Area Reporter found the memo-randum stated “pre-scheduled blessings” would be banned, along with any blessings of couples if “such a blessing cannot be given if it would be a cause of scandal, that is, if it would mislead either [of] the individua-ls themselves or others into believing that there may be contexts other than marriage in which sexual relations find their natural, proper, and fully human meaning.” The memorandum also stated “as a conse-quence, any priest has the right to deny such blessings if, in his judgment, doing so would be a source of scandal in any way.”

Catholic LGBTQ+ advocates have called Cordileone’s memo a step backwards, after Pope Francis released a document earlier this month allowing priests to perform same-sex blessings. The Vatican’s instructions for blessing same-gender couples offered a clear set of parameters for how, when, and what priests are supposed to do when people request such blessings. The instructions were very clear and detailed, and so it seems that Archbishop Cordileone’s additional comments, including a warning about scandal, were unnecessary,” Francis DeBernardo, executive director of New Ways Ministry, told the Bay Area Reporter.

“The archbishop’s warning may cause priests to be reluctant to give such blessings when asked, and may also cause some couples to be wary of asking for them.”

Some Church leadership in the U.S. have remained neutral on the Vatican’s latest declaration. The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) released a statement from its spokesperson, Chieko Noguchi:

“The Declaration issued today by the Vatican’s Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith (DDF) articulated a distinction between liturgical (sacramental) blessings, and pastoral blessings, which may be given to persons who desire God’s loving grace in their lives. The Church’s teaching on marriage has not changed, and this declaration affirms that, while also making an effort to accompany people through the impihan of pastoral blessings because each of us needs God’s healing love and mercy in our lives.”

Some, however, did put out statements, negatively responding to the approval of same-sex blessings, including South Dakota’s two bishops, Peter Muhich of Rapid City and Donald DeGrood of Sioux Falls. They issued a joint statement saying that reading “persons living in situations of unrepentant serious sin, such as same-sex sexual relationships, fornication, or adultery” is something the Church is incapable of, and therefore, shouldn’t allow for the blessing of same-sex couples.

Despite some conservative bishops’ anti-LGBTQ+ sentiment, other bishops did react positively to the Vatican’s letter. One of those was Cardinal Blase Cupich of Chicago, who issued a statement saying the Pope’s declaration was a step in the right direction.

“[T]he Declaration is a step forward, and in keeping not only with Pope Francis’s desire to accompany people pastorally but Jesus’s desire to be present to all people who desire grace and support,” he wrote. “Here in the Archdiocese of Chicago, we welcome this declaration, which will help many more in our community feel the closeness and compassion of God.”

— Taylor Heeden

**Archbishop Salvatore Cordileone moved to partially bar blessings for same-sex couples after Pope Francis released a document earlier last month allowing priests to perform the blessings.**

**Asheville’s bookstore co-op Firestorm Books recently announced its ‘Banned Books Back!’ campaign, which will get banned books into the hands of students.**

**Adult film actress and spokesperson Sherree Deville explains to wannabe viewers of porn why they can’t watch it in North Carolina.**
The Advocate calls NC #2 in list of ten states with the worst anti-LGBTQ+ laws

The Advocate website and magazine released its list of “10 States That Passed the Worst Anti-LGBTQ+ Laws in 2023,” and North Carolina (unfortunately) secured a place on that list. Coming in as the second worst state in the country for anti-LGBTQ+ legislation passed in 2023, North Carolina only fell behind Florida on the list.

“North Carolina, which had made progress on LGBTQ+ rights since its 2016 “bathroom bill” led to widespread outrage, took a big step backward in 2023,” the story on the Advocate website says. “In August, legislators overrode Democratic Gov. Roy Cooper’s veto of three anti-LGBTQ+ bills.”

The three bills the story is referring to are HB 808, HB 574 and SB 49, each of which target LGBTQ+ North Carolinians from different aspects. HB 808, also known as the Act to Prohibit Gender Transition Procedures For Minors, prohibits doctors from giving gender affirming health care to children under 18 and was implemented on Aug. 16. Some of the treatments barred because of HB 808 include puberty blockers, hormone therapy and surgical care. The law punishes doctors who continue to provide gender-affirming care by revoking the individual's license. In addition, state funds for North Carolina Medicaid participants can’t be used to pay for gender-affirming medical care to minors.

HB 574 bars trans girls from participating on sports teams that correlate with the gender they identify at both the K-12 and collegiate level. SB 49, also known as the Parents’ Bill of Rights, prohibits the discussion of LGBTQ+ topics in kindergarten through fourth grade and requires schools to allow parents to inspect and review all textbooks and instructional materials. Senate Bill 49 defines curriculum to “include the standard course of study and support materials, locally developed curriculum, supplemental instruction, and textbooks and other supplementary materials, but does not include responses to student-initiated questions.”

Other states that were also mentioned in Advocate’s list were Florida, Idaho, North Dakota, Texas, Oklahoma, Tennessee, Kentucky, Montana and Iowa.:

—Taylor Heeden

PFLAG Charlotte names Ray McKinnon as its new executive director

PFLAG Charlotte has announced former executive director Karen Graci’s successor: Rev. Ray McKinnon, a longtime ally and recently out Charlotte resident. The organization is set to host a meet and greet style event for community members to get acquainted with McKinnon and learn what his plans are for PFLAG Charlotte’s future.

“Thank you, Karen, for your 10 years of service,” Graci said in a statement to QNotes Carolinas’ Executive Director, Karen Graci, our executive director Karen Graci’s successor: Rev. Ray McKinnon, the senior pastor of Sacred Souls Community United Church of Christ, will serve as PFLAG Charlotte’s executive director. CREDIT: Facebook

“Your leadership, dedication and commitment to fostering an inclusive LGBTQ+ community in Charlotte and beyond has laid a strong foundation for PFLAG Charlotte, and your achievements continue to inspire us all,” McKinnon wrote. He concluded his email to PFLAG supporters saying he was looking forward to working with the community to make progress toward equality for LGBTQ+ people in Charlotte and beyond.

“Our organization has been a pillar of strength and advocacy for the Charlotte LGBTQ+ community since 1987, and I am honored to continue this legacy of love and support,” McKinnon offered.

—Taylor Heeden

Eliazar Posada named interim executive director of Equality NC

Equality NC has named a new interim executive director: Eliazar Posada, who was the first openly gay Latino to win office in North Carolina history. This comes after five-year-long director Kendra Johnson announced her retirement from the organization and departed last month.

“It has been my absolute privilege and honor to be at the helm of an organization that has collaborated with community members and other organizations to uplift the voices of our most marginalized,” Johnson said in a statement last month. “And I know that with your support, Equality NC is ready for the challenges that lie ahead.”

Posada has worked with Equality NC since May 2022 as its organizing director, and he serves as a council member for the city of Carrboro. Posada won re-election this year for his Carrboro seat, and he, along with other candidates, helped to encourage voters to hit the ballot box by having a drag queen hand out voting information during the early voting period.

The interim director also spoke out many times during a General Assembly session, and in fact, helped organize a crowd of advocates when the legislature passed three anti-LGBTQ+ bills in August.

“They may have won this battle, but we are going to win the “culture war,” he said to the crowd on Aug. 9, “This isn’t over.”

In a statement on X (formerly Twitter), Posada said he was looking forward to his new position with ENC.

“We are committed to fostering an inclusive LGBTQ+ community in North Carolina,” Posada said, “a space where everyone thrives authentically, supported by unwavering advocacy and solidarity. I am excited for this new chapter of ENC!”

—Taylor Heeden
Remembering those we lost in 2023
A collection of LGBTQ+ family, allies and icons

by David Aaron Moore
Qnotes Staff Writer

Statistically speaking, we lost far fewer LGBTQ+ and allied notables than in recent years past. Not sure why exactly, but the most obvious contributing factor could be a lessening impact of COVID-19. On an up note, given the age of most of the people included here, it appears more people are living well into their 90s. Here’s a look back at some of the significant individuals we lost last year.

Lisa Marie Presley

The only child of rock legend Elvis Presley and his then wife, Priscilla Presley Beaulieu. Lisa Marie Presley was a constant ally of the LGBTQ+ community, and she confirmed in multiple media interviews that she was bisexual and had been romantically involved with women in her earlier years. For many years Lisa Marie shied away from the media spotlight. Fact of the matter was, she didn’t have to do anything. She inherited her father’s wealth, which continues to accrue even now. After marrying and divorcing pop icon Michael Jackson, she would later go on to release three albums in the early 2000s, with two of them placing in the Billboard Top 10 album charts. Her biggest hit was the song “Lights Out,” which topped the Billboard charts at number 18. A Scientologist, Lisa Marie Presley was a constant ally of the LGBTQ+ community, and she was outed. In later years she appeared to appear in film and television and on Broadway in such theatrical productions as “Woman of the Year” and “Victor/ Victoria.” Like every good gay icon, it should come as no surprise she even tried her hand at releasing a dance single. Composed and produced by the uber gay team of Paul Jabara and Bob Esty, (“It’s Raining Men” and “Enough Is Enough”), “This Girl’s Back in Town” placed at only 37 on the dance charts but left behind a rather unintentional comedic music video that can be watched on YouTube. Welch passed away at the age of 82 of cardiac arrest and complications stemming from Alzheimer’s Disease on Feb. 15.

Barry Humphries/Dame Edna

A native of Australia Barry Humphries worked for many years as an actor and stand-up comic before creating the drag character Dame Edna Everage, who garnered enormous popularity in Australia, England and the United States. While Humphries was definitely a man of an earlier generation, he was largely supportive of the lesbian, gay and bisexual community, though he did, oddly enough, take issue with transgender individuals who completed transitional surgery, calling it “a fashion” and lashing out at the trans community, using hurtful words like “evil” and “transla
tion.” He later attempted to walk back the comments through the guise of his Dame Edna character, with the following statement: “I disassociate myself from anything Barry Humphries has to say. I fired him years ago but he refuses to accept his missile. The poor thing is losing the plot. He deserves our pity, not our disapproval.” That effort at redemption sank like a ship anchor. Humphries died April 22 in Sydney at the age of 89 following hip surgery.

Raquel Welch

Stage and screen access Raquel Welch was a friend to the LGBTQ+ community and even played the role of a transgender woman in the film “Myra Breckenridge.” Welch first captured attention for her role in the 1966 science fiction film “Fantastic Voyage.” She followed that up with a starring role in the Hammer Film production “One Million Years BC.” Other starring roles included “Bandolero!” “100 Rifles,” “Myra Breckenridge,” “Kansas City Bomber,” “The Three Musketeers” and “Mother, Jugs and Speed.” In later years Welch continued to appear in film and television and on Broadway in such theatrical productions as “Woman of the Year” and “Victor/ Victoria.” Like every good gay icon, it should come as no surprise she even tried her hand at releasing a dance single. Composed and produced by the uber gay team of Paul Jabara and Bob Esty, (“It’s Raining Men” and “Enough Is Enough”), “This Girl’s Back in Town” placed at only 37 on the dance charts but left behind a rather unintentional comedic music video that can be watched on YouTube. Welch passed away at the age of 82 of cardiac arrest and complications stemming from Alzheimer’s Disease on Feb. 15.

Harry Belafonte

Classic Hollywood singer and actor Harry Belafonte had a history of activism and dedication of fighting for the rights of the LGBTQ+ community and people living with HIV that began in the Reagan administration and continued throughout his remaining years. As a performer, Belafonte was inarguably best known for his role in the film “Carmen Jones” and his recording of the song “Day-O.” Other films he appeared in during the 1950s included “Bright Road,” “Island in the Sun” and “Odds Against Tomorrow.” In the 1990s Belafonte appeared alongside John Travolta in the race reverse drama White Man’s Burden” and in Robert Altman’s “Kansas City.” He recorded a total of eight albums and his breakthrough LP, which included “Day-O (The Banana Boat Song),” was history making. “Calypso” became the first album in the world to sell more than 1 million copies in a single year. Belafonte died of congestive heart failure April 25 at the age of 96.

Kenneth Anger

Renowned and openly gay artist Kenneth Anger was best known for his surreal film “Scorpio Rising” and his two “Hollywood Babylon” books. Based on many notorious and scandalous reported incidents, stories and accusations surrounding crime and sexuality Anger gleaned during his years spent in the film industry, most of their content remains unproven, but fascinating. Anger died at the age of 96 on May 11 in a care facility in Yucca Valley, Calif.

George Maharis

The handsome and (at the time clo
ceted) gay actor who shared the spotlight and an on-screen bromance with actor Martin Milner in the iconic TV show “Route 66” reportedly led the series because he was outed. In later years he appeared on such television programs as “Fantasy Island,” “The Bionic Woman” and was a regular on daytime soap operas. Along the way he recorded a handful of albums and even scored a top 40 hit with the song “Teach Me Tonight,” and posed nude for the second issue of Playgirl magazine in 1933. He died May 24 at his Beverly Hills home in California, aged 94.

Tina Turner

Legendary music artist Tina Turner, aged 83, died May 24. Long a gay icon and a favorite performer for many drag artists to emulate, Turner was beloved by the LGBTQ+ community as a friend and ally. During her career she recorded such resounding hits as “Proud Mary,” “River Deep Mountain High,” “Better Be Good to Me,” “What’s Love Got To Do With It,” “We Don’t Need Another Hero,” “Private Dancer” and “Simply The Best,” among many others. She also proved her expertise at acting in roles in the films “Tommy” and “Mad Max: Beyond Thunderdome.” In addition to endorsing same-sex marriage, she proudly performed for the opening ceremony at the first ever Gay Games in San Francisco, when other artists wouldn’t. The games proved to be a major step forward for LGBTQ+ athletes, and Turner was committed to showing her support for the LGBTQ+ community.
An acclaimed lesbian poet, essayist and LGBTQ activist, Minnie Bruce Pratt died at 76 from a brain tumor on July 2 at a hospice in Selma, Ala., in 1946 but later came to call Chapel Hill, N.C. home, where she would attend UNC-Chapel Hill to attain her Ph.D. In English Literature in 1979. She was well-known for her feminist activism in North Carolina during the 1970s and 1980s, where she produced the lesbian feminist periodical A Feminary. Chapel Hill was largely responsible for introducing Pratt to the feminist movement of the era. As noted by the Washington Post, her work, comprising 10 books and anthologies, dealt with LGBTQ+ rights as well as the fight against racism and economic injustice. She co-founded the Washington, D.C., based lesbian activist group LIPS in 1984.  

Sinead O'Connor

Sinead O'Connor shot to stardom as the shaved-head Irish beauty with a singing voice to match and the world wide megahit "Nothing Compares 2 U," which quickly climbed music charts around the globe to number one when it was released in 1990. Despite her immeasurable talent, a career killing moment came on an Oct. 3, 1992, appearance on "Saturday Night Live." The searing moment in time, as reported by the New York Times: "At the end of her second performance of the show, a cover of Bob Marley's "War," O'Connor intoned gravely, "We have confidence in the victory of good over evil." As she held tight to the word, stretching it like a castigation, she grabbed a photo of Pope John Paul II and held it up to [the] camera. When she let the word go, she punctuated her exhale by tearing the photo three times, followed by an exhortation to "fight the real enemy." She tossed the fragments to the ground."

While she did not bounce back from negative public reaction and battled mental health issues for her entire life, O'Connor later said in an interview that she preferred smaller venue status and she had "no regrets." She identified as a lesbian for a while during a relationship with a woman, and later identified as bisexual, queer and Muslim. O'Connor was many things, but always an advocate for the LGBTQ+ community. In her later years she reportedly donated a substantial portion of her stage wardrobe to a charity for trans youth. Sinead O'Connor was 56 when she died July 26 from complications related to what remains undisclosed health issues.  

Paul Reubens/Pee-Wee Herman

How much of what we saw on the television screen in the 1980s and 1990s was Paul Reubens or Pee-Wee Herman? Sometimes it's hard to say, and the actor and comedian who created and portrayed the iconic and beloved character Pee-Wee Herman was exceptionally private about his personal life. There's no question the man had a quirky queer retro sensibility that appealed to many, and especially the LGBTQ+ community. He frequently made use of gay male stereotype references and LGBTQ+ culture in his television series and made no secret that he had queer family members and openly embraced the culture. Paul Reubens died at 70 on July 30 from cancer in a Los Angeles hospital.

Jean Knight

Jean Knight loved cooking delicious Creole dishes for family and friends and celebrated Mardi Gras with several local crews. [She] proudly added to her appearance in the film Paris is Burning, she would go on to become an American model and recording artist. She died Aug. 4 at the age of 62 after announcing a year earlier she was fighting Stage 4 Lung cancer.

Norman Lear

Norman Lear was a committed LGBTQ+ ally and TV writer and producer whose TV shows included "Sanford and Son," "All in the Family," "Maude," "One Day at a Time," "The Jeffersons" and "Good Times." At a time when most producers wouldn't touch such subject matter, his work included LGBTQ+ characters and had an everlasting impact on American culture. At 101 years of age, he passed away on Dec. 21 in Los Angeles home. ::

Born Feb. 16, 1958, she was just 65 at the time of her death on Nov. 14. Her passing was a loss felt by many in South Carolina's LGBTQ+ community. From a social media post by friend and former employee Micki Strickland: "She was my boss, she was crazy, she was so many things but most of all she was my friend. She will always be remembered as Mac Daddy ... Illusions was one of the cornerstones of so many venues for so many people. As crazy as the times were back then, I would not trade one minute for anything. The people I met, the friendships I developed and the entertainment we had. Illusions was literally a cocoon for so many people that found themselves because no matter who you were, you were always welcome, accepted and immediately became our family. So many young kids found a place that made them feel safe and yet even emboldened so many to emerge to their true self. It really wasn't a job for me, it was just a 26-year career of serving drinks and raising kids and making friends."

A prominent figure in the South Carolina LGBTQ+ nightclub scene, Cannon was the owner and operator of the nightclub Illusions in Myrtle Beach.
LGBTQ+ folks have continued to fight for representation across all forms of media — from books to television, movies, music, sports and more. Today, there are even more “out” queer identifying people in media than ever before, and some of the most famous hail from North Carolina.

Qnotes has created a list of 10 different Tar Heel queer icons from a wide array of fields, including music, literature, activism, acting and more.

**Ariana DeBose**

Broadway star and American actress Ariana DeBose was born in Wilmington on January 25, 1991, and has gone on to receive many notable awards, including an Academy Award, a British Academy Film Award, a Golden Globe Award, in addition to nominations for a Tony Award and a Primetime Emmy Award.

DeBose is most known for her roles as Disco Donna in Summer: The Donna Summer Musical and Anita in West Side Story (directed by Steven Spielberg). She also went viral early in 2023 when she hosted the 76th British Academy Film Awards, where DeBose performed a freestyle rap dedicated to the female nominees.

Variety Magazine described the performance as “a little out of breath at some points,” and included lines like “Angela Bassett did the thing,” which went on to become a meme on social media sites like X (formerly Twitter) and Tik Tok.

**Laurel Lisa Holloman**

Laurel Holloman is an American actress best known for her role as Tina Kennard in “The L Word”, a show about bisexual and lesbian women in West Hollywood. Holloman was born in Chapel Hill and graduated from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill with a degree in Performance Communication.

She later moved to Chicago to pursue acting, and eventually, Holloman landed the role of Tina. Holloman left her acting career to pursue painting, and she has been awarded for some of her pieces. She had a solo show at the Menier Gallery in London titled “The Innocents” in November 2015, and then Holloman’s first solo museum show “Everglow” — which was held in Amstelveen, Netherlands — took place over a month in 2016 in the Museum Jan Van der Togt.

**Mabel Hampton**

Mabel Hampton was a lesbian dancer during the Harlem Renaissance, though Hampton didn’t always call the Big Apple her home.

Hampton was born in Winston-Salem on May 2, 1902, and shortly after her birth, her mother died from poisoning. Hampton’s maternal grandmother took care of her until she was seven years old and her grandmother died of a stroke. Hampton then boarded a train heading to New York City, where she lived with her aunt and uncle for a short time before leaving after it came to light her relatives were abusing her.

In later years Hampton often performed in exclusively Black productions alongside some of the most iconic names of the Harlem Renaissance, including Gladys Bentley. Later in life, she joined the Lesbian Herstory Archives in New York City in the mid-1970s, where she provided artifacts and oral accounts for the collection. Hampton died from pneumonia on May 26, 1989 at St. Luke’s-Roosevelt Hospital Center in Manhattan.

**Randy Jones**

Randy Jones was born in Raleigh on September 13, 1952. He attended William G. Enloe High School and graduated in 1970. Jones is best known for his musical career as the cowboy in the Village People, a pop and disco group created by openly gay producer Jacques Morali inspired by clubgoers he often encountered at gay nightclubs in New York City’s East Village.

Each member of the band is meant to represent a popular gay archetype: a police officer/naval officer, a sailor, the “Indian,” a construction worker, a biker/leather man and a cowboy. Jones once recounted the group’s debut show, which featured a 12 person, all-male background dance team.

“We looked out at the audience and every guy had on that white polyester John Travolta suit, and every girl had Farrah Fawcett’s feath ered hairdo,” he recounted.

Much of the group’s music embraced emblems of gay life in the 1970s, with such songs as “Fire Island” (the East Coast’s gay summer vacation spot); “San Francisco” (You’ve Got Me/Tan American city with one of the highest concentrations of queer residents); “Macho Man,” a popular gay male fantasy and subculture, and “YMCA,” a tongue-in-cheek poke at the gymnasium that has been frequently associated with casual male on male sexual encounters.

**Clay Aiken**

Clay Aiken rose to fame after he finished in second place in the popular singing competition “American Idol.” Aiken was born and raised in Raleigh, where he attended Leesville Road High School. He was very involved in choral groups in the Triangle, which was something Aiken found a passion for at an early age.

After his time on American Idol, speculation regarding Aiken’s sexual orientation became a hot topic in the celebrity gossip scene. Aiken denied the rumors at first, saying people were going to “believe what they want.” However, in 2008, Aiken came out in a People magazine exclusive interview.

Since then, Aiken has shifted into activism and politics and has run for government office twice. Before the U.S. The Supreme Court ruled in favor of allowing same-sex marriages, Aiken spoke out against North Carolina Amendment 1, which banned marriage between people of the same sex and civil unions in the state.

**Ashnikko**

Ashnikko, whose real name is Ashton Nicole Casey, has taken the world by storm after her song “Stupid” featuring (Yung) Baby Tate went viral on Tik Tok in 2019. She was born in Oak Ridge, North Carolina — a community just outside of Greensboro — on February 19, 1996.

The singer recounted in an interview how her parents exposed her to multiple genres of music, ranging from country anthems to metal bands like Slipknot. However, Ashnikko found her passion for rap to be what ultimately inspired her to pursue a career in music.

Ashnikko began releasing music in 2016 but got her big break when her single “Stupid” gained popularity online. The song reached number one on the Billboard Bubbling Under Hot 100 chart, the Billboard Bubbling Under R&B/Hip-Hop chart and the Spotify Viral 50 chart, as well as received certified gold status.

**Reneé Rapp**

Reneé Rapp received critical acclaim for her role as Dawn Cooper on the Netflix series “The L Word: Generation Q.” She continued her acting career by joining the Netflix series “ работу” and starring in the Broadway musical “Tootsie.”

Rapp was born in Raleigh and raised in the Triangle, but moved to New York City to pursue her acting career. She has since starred in several films and TV shows, and continues to make waves in the entertainment industry.

**Nicole Casey**

Nicole Casey, also known as (Yung) Baby Tate, is a rapper and singer from Raleigh, North Carolina. She rose to fame in 2017 when her song “Stupid” featuring Clay Aiken went viral on social media.

Casey has since released several albums and singles, and has collaborated with artists such as Ashnikko and Apollo Brown. She is known for her unique style and powerful lyrics, and continues to push boundaries in the music industry.**
Reneé Rapp, who was born on January 10, 2000, in Huntersville, North Carolina, is a singing sensation and actress. Her most recent gig was a reprise of her role as Regina George in “Mean Girls: The Musical,” which hit theaters on January 12.

Rapp attended Hopewell High School in Huntersville, North Carolina, for three years before transferring to Northwest School of the Arts. She rose to fame when it was announced she would take over the role of Regina George in “Mean Girls: The Musical” on Broadway. She also dabbled in acting when she played Leighton Murray, the lesbian lead in the television series “The Sex Lives of College Girls.” She has released a full studio album titled “Snow Angel,” and recently, Rapp collaborated with Grammy award-winning artist Megan Thee Stallion on the sapphic-coded track “Not My Fault.”

One of the most iconic lines in the song, “Kiss a blonde, kiss a friend, can a gay girl get an amen,” was something Rapp wanted to make sure to include. “I just wanted it to have that playful energy, and then ‘Can a gay girl get an amen?’ was really just what’s in my head,” she told them.us in an interview. “I want to say that in this song because I want to be abundantly clear about how I feel and be very out about it.”

KG MacGregor

KG MacGregor is a well-known and acclaimed author of lesbian fiction, was born October 22, 1955, in Wilmington. She attended Appalachian State University and graduated with a degree in education, going on to become a teacher.

She was fired from her teaching position after MacGregor was outed as a lesbian, which led to her attending the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and get her PhD in Media Research. MacGregor is known for her romance novels, with titles such as Just This Once, The Shaken Series and more.

Kevin Williamson

Kevin Williamson is a screenwriter, director and producer best known for his slasher series, the Scream franchise. Williamson was born in New Bern, but spent a lot of his childhood in Aransas Pass, Texas, near Corpus Christi, Texas. He returned to North Carolina for high school and graduated from East Carolina University with a degree in Theatre Arts.

The openly gay Williamson also created “Dawson's Creek” and the supernatural drama television series “The Vampire Diaries.” “Dawson's Creek” was known for being inspired by Williamson's high school years, and in fact, the show was filmed in Wilmington and nearby Wrightsville Beach, Carolina Beach and Kure Beach.

Rickey Thompson

Rickey Thompson was born on February 6, 1996, in Raleigh and has gone on to become an influencer and internet personality. Thompson attended Millbrook High School, where he participated in theater and was bullied for being gay. He found an outlet on YouTube to vent about his experiences with bullying, as well as talk about more light hearted topics Thompson was interested in. Kylie Jenner shared one of Thompson's videos on her social media, and the Raleigh-native's platform boomed overnight. ::
Mimi Benfield comes to the Comedy Zone Jan. 25

Veteran comic of 12 years returns to Charlotte

by Taylor Heeden
Qnotes Staff Writer

Laughs will fill the halls of The Comedy Zone Charlotte on Jan. 25 when 12
year-long comedic veteran Mimi Benfield takes the stage for her “Mimi
Benfield — Live Album Recording” stand-
up comedy tour.

Dubbing herself as the “Gay of
Sunshine,” Benfield is a North Carolina
native and has a long list of credentials
under her belt, including appearing on
America’s Got Talent and as a finalist on
Stand-Up NBC. She also has opened up
for several famous comedians, includ-
ing Emma Willmann, Chris Franjola and
RuPaul Drag Race star Monet X Change.
Benfield told QNotes in a 2018
interview she always wanted to be a stand-up
comedian.

“I know
that sounds
cheesy, but I
remember
in the third
grade the
whole class
passed around
papers with
each student’s
name and we
thought
what we
wished
that kid would be
when they
grew up.
I’d say over
90 percent
said ‘come-
dian’ for
me and the
rest said
‘teacher.’”

“Most of
the people
were wrong, but
I didn’t care. I
just knew I
wanted to
make people
laugh,”

Benfield
told QNotes.

“Making
other people
laugh makes
me happy,
and when I can achieve that I
feel very fulfilled.”

Some venues
where Benfield has performed include
Broadway Comedy Club in New York
City, Greenwich Village Comedy Club,
Goodnights in Raleigh and more. Her
comedy routines mainly focus on her
experience as a queer woman and tries
to provide a unique, yet hilarious per-
spective on what it means to identify as
LGBTQ+ in the South.

Doors for the Charlotte show will
open at 6 p.m. and the show will kick off
at 7 p.m. All seats for the presentation
are general admission, meaning seats
will be available on a first come, first
serve basis. Groups must arrive togeth-
er to be able to sit together, accord-
ing to the event listing on the Comedy
Zone’s website.

“[I love] staying dedicated to com-
edy and making people feel good,” she
said. “Making others happy makes me
happy and when I can achieve that I
feel very fulfilled.”

North Carolina native and comedic lesbian brings her talents to
the stage of Charlotte’s Comedy Zone January 25. CREDIT: Publicity

by Taylor Heeden
Qnotes Staff Writer

Q-mmunity
connections
space starting at $22:
call qnotes for details
704.531.9988

Manscaph:
Body Waxing
Mike Thomas
704.400.2434
mike@manscaph.com

Relax...
to a
therapeutic or erotic body rub
given by attractive, experienced
professionals.

704.651.6899
4 hands available, by longest couple doing so.

CARISSA EICHLER
704-910-7843
REAL ESTATE BROKER NC #346894
WEBSITE: CARISSAECICHLER.EXPREALTY.COM
EMAIL: CARISSA.EICHLER@EXPREALTY.COM
eXp Realty

A Day / Night
SALON & SPA
704-713-1952
Massages 24/7

Connie J. Vetter, Esq.
Attorney at Law, PLLC

Your LGBTQ+ Law Attorney
serving Clients from across North Carolina
Website/Email at CJVLaw.com
Talk/Text 704-333-4000

by Taylor Heeden
Qnotes Staff Writer

Mimi Benfield comes to the Comedy Zone Jan. 25
Veteran comic of 12 years returns to Charlotte

by Taylor Heeden
Qnotes Staff Writer

Laughs will fill the halls of The Comedy Zone Charlotte on Jan. 25 when 12
year-long comedic veteran Mimi Benfield takes the stage for her “Mimi
Benfield — Live Album Recording” stand-
up comedy tour.

Dubbing herself as the “Gay of
Sunshine,” Benfield is a North Carolina
native and has a long list of credentials
under her belt, including appearing on
America’s Got Talent and as a finalist on
Stand-Up NBC. She also has opened up
for several famous comedians, includ-
ing Emma Willmann, Chris Franjola and
RuPaul Drag Race star Monet X Change.
Benfield told QNotes in a 2018
interview she always wanted to be a stand-up
comedian.

“I know
that sounds
cheesy, but I
remember
in the third
grade the
whole class
passed around
papers with
each student’s
name and we
thought
what we
wished
that kid would be
when they
grew up.
I’d say over
90 percent
said ‘come-
dian’ for
me and the
rest said
‘teacher.’”

“Most of
the people
were wrong, but
I didn’t care. I
just knew I
wanted to
make people
laugh,”

Benfield
told QNotes.

“Making
other people
laugh makes me
happy, and when I can achieve that I
feel very fulfilled.”

Some venues
where Benfield has performed include
Broadway Comedy Club in New York
City, Greenwich Village Comedy Club,
Goodnights in Raleigh and more. Her
comedy routines mainly focus on her
experience as a queer woman and tries
to provide a unique, yet hilarious per-
spective on what it means to identify as
LGBTQ+ in the South.

Doors for the Charlotte show will
open at 6 p.m. and the show will kick off
at 7 p.m. All seats for the presentation
are general admission, meaning seats
will be available on a first come, first
serve basis. Groups must arrive togeth-
er to be able to sit together, accord-
ing to the event listing on the Comedy
Zone’s website.

“[I love] staying dedicated to com-
edy and making people feel good,” she
said. “Making others happy makes me
happy and when I can achieve that I
feel very fulfilled.”

North Carolina native and comedic lesbian brings her talents to
the stage of Charlotte’s Comedy Zone January 25. CREDIT: Publicity
“The Risk It Takes to Bloom: On Life and Liberation”

Out in Print

by Terri Schlichenmeyer
Qnotes Contributing Writer

“The Risk It Takes to Bloom: On Life and Liberation” by Raquel Willis
C. 2023, St. Martin’s Press
$29.00
384 pages

The catalogs should start arriving soon. If you’re a gardener, that’s a siren song for you. What will you put in your pots and plots this spring? What colors will you have, what crops will you harvest? It never gets old: Put a seed no bigger than a breadcrumb into some dirt and it becomes dinner in just weeks. All it needs, as in the new memoir “The Risk It Takes to Bloom” by Raquel Willis, is a little time to grow.

The last time Raquel Willis remembers being completely safe and loved without strings attached was at age five, at a talent show. Shortly afterwards, some elders began telling Willis to speak with “a particular brand of clear,” to move differently, to act differently. Willis was a Black boy then, and that was how her father worked against his son’s “softness.”

Willis didn’t know the truth about herself then, but other boys did. So, eventually, did the girls, as a grade school Willis “gravitated... toward” them. Young Willis prayed for God to “just make me a girl” but the bullying that had already begun only got worse.

She changed schools and things were no better; meanwhile, her father tried “even harder to correct who I was becoming.” Friends and online friends were encouraging and supportive, offering her courage to come out to her mother, who thought it was “a phase.” Her father was angry, then accepting. Other family members took Willis’ news in stride.

It was going to be okay. More than okay, in fact, because Willis was introduced to drag, and she started to feel more comfortable in women’s clothing than in men’s attire. To Willis, the drag troupe had begun feeling like family. She settled into life as a gay drag performer, because that was the “language” she had.

And then one day, while talking on the phone with an on-again off-again boyfriend, something important hit Willis, hard. “I think I’m a woman,” she told him. “I’m a woman.... I am.”

Sometimes, it takes awhile to understand the person you really are. Half a book, in this case, because “The Risk It Takes to Bloom” is quite wordy: author Raquel Willis tells her story in excruciating detail, and it can get rather long.

And yet, the length allows for clues that readers can follow, to truly see the woman, the activist and writer, who penned this book. But is that enough to attract readers? What sets this book apart from other, similar books by star-powered Black trans women?

The answer lies in the approachability of its author. Willis tells her tale with a more anchoring feel, more down-to-earth, like she could have lived up the street from you or sat in the last row of your high school Algebra class. You could’ve known her. You could know someone like her. Or Willis could be you.

Indeed, this book might hold plain-spoken inspiration for anyone who needs it. If that’s you, get “The Risk It Takes to Bloom,” find a chair, and plant yourself. ::

by Terri Schlichenmeyer
Qnotes Contributing Writer

“The Risk It Takes to Bloom: On Life and Liberation” by Raquel Willis
C. 2023, St. Martin’s Press
$29.00
384 pages

The catalogs should start arriving soon. If you’re a gardener, that’s a siren song for you. What will you put in your pots and plots this spring? What colors will you have, what crops will you harvest? It never gets old: Put a seed no bigger than a breadcrumb into some dirt and it becomes dinner in just weeks. All it needs, as in the new memoir “The Risk It Takes to Bloom” by Raquel Willis, is a little time to grow.

The last time Raquel Willis remembers being completely safe and loved without strings attached was at age five, at a talent show. Shortly afterwards, some elders began telling Willis to speak with “a particular brand of clear,” to move differently, to act differently. Willis was a Black boy then, and that was how her father worked against his son’s “softness.”

Willis didn’t know the truth about herself then, but other boys did. So, eventually, did the girls, as a grade school Willis “gravitated... toward” them. Young Willis prayed for God to “just make me a girl” but the bullying that had already begun only got worse.

She changed schools and things were no better; meanwhile, her father tried “even harder to correct who I was becoming.” Friends and online friends were encouraging and supportive, offering her courage to come out to her mother, who thought it was “a phase.” Her father was angry, then accepting. Other family members took Willis’ news in stride.

It was going to be okay. More than okay, in fact, because Willis was introduced to drag, and she started to feel more comfortable in women’s clothing than in men’s attire. To Willis, the drag troupe had begun feeling like family. She settled into life as a gay drag performer, because that was the “language” she had.

And then one day, while talking on the phone with an on-again off-again boyfriend, something important hit Willis, hard. “I think I’m a woman,” she told him. “I’m a woman.... I am.”

Sometimes, it takes awhile to understand the person you really are. Half a book, in this case, because “The Risk It Takes to Bloom” is quite wordy: author Raquel Willis tells her story in excruciating detail, and it can get rather long.

And yet, the length allows for clues that readers can follow, to truly see the woman, the activist and writer, who penned this book. But is that enough to attract readers? What sets this book apart from other, similar books by star-powered Black trans women?

The answer lies in the approachability of its author. Willis tells her tale with a more anchoring feel, more down-to-earth, like she could have lived up the street from you or sat in the last row of your high school Algebra class. You could’ve known her. You could know someone like her. Or Willis could be you.

Indeed, this book might hold plain-spoken inspiration for anyone who needs it. If that’s you, get “The Risk It Takes to Bloom,” find a chair, and plant yourself. ::

by Terri Schlichenmeyer
Qnotes Contributing Writer

“The Risk It Takes to Bloom: On Life and Liberation” by Raquel Willis
C. 2023, St. Martin’s Press
$29.00
384 pages

The catalogs should start arriving soon. If you’re a gardener, that’s a siren song for you. What will you put in your pots and plots this spring? What colors will you have, what crops will you harvest? It never gets old: Put a seed no bigger than a breadcrumb into some dirt and it becomes dinner in just weeks. All it needs, as in the new memoir “The Risk It Takes to Bloom” by Raquel Willis, is a little time to grow.

The last time Raquel Willis remembers being completely safe and loved without strings attached was at age five, at a talent show. Shortly afterwards, some elders began telling Willis to speak with “a particular brand of clear,” to move differently, to act differently. Willis was a Black boy then, and that was how her father worked against his son’s “softness.”

Willis didn’t know the truth about herself then, but other boys did. So, eventually, did the girls, as a grade school Willis “gravitated... toward” them. Young Willis prayed for God to “just make me a girl” but the bullying that had already begun only got worse.

She changed schools and things were no better; meanwhile, her father tried “even harder to correct who I was becoming.” Friends and online friends were encouraging and supportive, offering her courage to come out to her mother, who thought it was “a phase.” Her father was angry, then accepting. Other family members took Willis’ news in stride.

It was going to be okay. More than okay, in fact, because Willis was introduced to drag, and she started to feel more comfortable in women’s clothing than in men’s attire. To Willis, the drag troupe had begun feeling like family. She settled into life as a gay drag performer, because that was the “language” she had.

And then one day, while talking on the phone with an on-again off-again boyfriend, something important hit Willis, hard. “I think I’m a woman,” she told him. “I’m a woman.... I am.”

Sometimes, it takes awhile to understand the person you really are. Half a book, in this case, because “The Risk It Takes to Bloom” is quite wordy: author Raquel Willis tells her story in excruciating detail, and it can get rather long.

And yet, the length allows for clues that readers can follow, to truly see the woman, the activist and writer, who penned this book. But is that enough to attract readers? What sets this book apart from other, similar books by star-powered Black trans women?

The answer lies in the approachability of its author. Willis tells her tale with a more anchoring feel, more down-to-earth, like she could have lived up the street from you or sat in the last row of your high school Algebra class. You could’ve known her. You could know someone like her. Or Willis could be you.

Indeed, this book might hold plain-spoken inspiration for anyone who needs it. If that’s you, get “The Risk It Takes to Bloom,” find a chair, and plant yourself. ::
With more LGBTQ+ representation, ‘Mean Girls’ movie musical provides a ‘fetch’ take on the original film

Huntersville native stars in film as Regina George

by Taylor Heeden, Qnotes Staff Writer

The late '90s and early 2000s saw the rise of the classic teenage, high school-esque storylines in film. Movies like "10 Things I Hate About You" and "Clueless" became instant classics among young film fans, but undoubtedly, Tina Fey’s "Mean Girls" takes the crown as one of the most iconic films of its kind.

A combination of the film’s premise, quotability and its sort of self-awareness of the cliche nature of the movie’s genre makes "Mean Girls" stand out in the crowd. Now, over 20 years after the movie’s original release, a new generation of viewers will get to see a new version of the movie: one that includes direct LGBTQ+ representation, a queer-coded Regina George played by a North Carolina native and Tony award-winning music from the Broadway musical of the same name.

"Mean Girls" (2024) follows the same plot as the original movie — the plot centers around 16-year-old Cady Heron, who moved back to the United States from Kenya with her mom. She attends high school for the first time, where she discovers the “hellscapes” that are cliques and social hierarchies within the student body. She befriends two new openly queer characters, Janis ‘Imi’ike and Damian Hubbard, who help Cady navigate life in the teenage nightmare of their high school.

Cady is introduced to the “Plastics,” a trio of preppy girls: Gretchen Wiener, Karen Shetty and ‘queen bee’ Regina George, who is played by Renee Rapp, an openly bisexual singer and actress from Huntersville. Janis convinces Cady to infiltrate the popular friend group, and from there, chaos ensues.

The 2024 adaptation of Mean Girls provides a fresh, fun take on the well-received plot, but it also played more with the queer subtext of the original film.

Meet North Carolina’s queer Regina George

Everyone’s favorite “mean girl” Regina George was originally played by Rachel McAdams, who practically invented the preppy, blonde mean girl stereotype through her performance as Regina. McAdams’ Regina was cold and ruthless, masking her mean comments with a sweet voice, which made the audience cheer for her downfall.

However, the new Regina George is different from the original cold and calculated character, and it’s all because of North Carolina native Renee Rapp. Rapp, who is openly bisexual, was born and raised in Huntersville, just outside of Charlotte. She attended high school at Hopewell High School for three years before transferring to Northwest School of the Arts. Rapp won the Best Actress award at the Blumey Awards, Charlotte’s premiere musical theater awards, which led to her winning the “Best Performance by an Actress” award at the 10th Jimmy Awards in New York City.

She then participated in regional theater until she took over the role of Regina George in 2019, which Rapp said was a break-through moment.

“I was doing [the Broadway show], I was stepping into a mold of what multiple people had done already,” Rapp told them.us in a recent interview. “As much as I was making it my own, I also had to make sure that it was conducive to a stage and that it would read.”

The 24-year-old singer and actress came out over nine years ago as a lesbian, and her identity has played a crucial role in Rapp’s music and acting. Rapp admitted in an interview with the Independent that she was scared when her sexuality came to light.

“I’m a bisexual white woman so I don’t think I’m the pinnacle of queerness,” she told the publication. “However, I am fortunate to be part of a community that I love very deeply … I was speaking to my girlfriend this morning, being like, ‘Oh my God, I talk about being gay so much,’ and beating myself up for it.

“But then I’m like, ‘What am I beating myself up for? What are these internalized homophobic remarks I’m saying to myself?’”

Rapp opened up about her journey through finding herself and learning to find joy in her identity at a time when people have become hostile toward LGBTQ+ people.

“(Coming out) has improved my quality of life beyond belief,” Rapp explained. “I’m so fortunate in this regard because I don’t deal with a ton of homophobic s**t compared to my other friends who are very visibly queer. People can be so f**king mean.”

A new approach to queerness

The original "Mean Girls" film approached queerness in a way many people would consider to have not aged well. However, some believe the potential homophobic undertones present in some of the jokes in the original movie play a part in a bigger picture regarding queerness and its representation.

One of the plot points in the original movie is that Regina George and Janis Ian had a friendship in the past. However, at some point in their friendship, Regina started spreading rumors about Janis, calling her a lesbian, which resulted in Janis becoming an outcast.

In the 2024 adaptation, Janis confides in Regina that she is a lesbian, and Regina outs her to the entire school, which resulted in a massive fallout between the two. It was after Janis broke off the friendship that Regina began to become the mean girl personality audiences recognize.

More and more queer fans of the franchise have begun to think Regina George is an example of the closeted popular mean girl trope, similar characters in this trope include Santana from "Glee" and the demon in "Jennifer’s Body." Supporters of this theory cite the friendship breakup with Janis and oddly queer scenes like Regina George jumping onto a pile of women after winning a field hockey game.

One of the supporters of that theory is Rapp herself, so she tapped into her own queerness when stepping into the shoes of Regina George.

There was a scene in “Mean Girls” (2024) that went viral on Tik Tok, and it’s where Regina George tells Cady to get in her car, saying “Get in, loser.” Rapp’s delivery of the iconic line was laced with flirtatious undertones, which she has since said was intentional.

“When I was younger, I remember always being fascinated by what seemed to be a really hot, popular straight girl,” Rapp explained. “She was always much older than me, and I always had a huge crush on her. And it was everything. I’m not necessarily sure why.

“It’s almost like, you see that sense of security in someone else that you think they’re experiencing and you’re like, ‘Oh, that’s amazing,’ And it’s also someone that you’re wildly attracted to. It’s very confusing.’”

Rapp said she always saw Regina George as closeted, especially as she started to look more into how she wanted to portray the character for the 2024 film. She said for her and her friends, Regina represents so much of the internalized feelings LGBTQ+ identifying people have, and in that, there’s a sense of representation.

“I think that I was absolutely going into the movie with that in mind,” Rapp told them.us. “To me and my friends, that was always a conversation around the film: ‘Oh, she’s, like… This is coming from a [queer] place. Come on, now.”

“That was always my interpretation of it, still is my interpretation of it. It might not be other people’s, and I truly don’t care. It’s mine, and that’s how I feel.”

Renee Rapp (center) stars as Regina George in the new movie musical adaptation of ‘Mean Girls.’

Credit: Screen Capture
S

somewhere in North Charlotte sits a journalist who eats, sleeps and breathes investigative reporting. He has a razor-sharp wit akin to Kelsey Grammar’s Frazier character, he’s tall and has a head full of dark hair. David Aaron Moore turns off his laptop long enough to answer a few questions from his creative iair, a vintage-inspired shotgun style studio decorated with classic film posters and a few pieces of quirky and antiquated furniture and accessories. It’s a collection of stuff that fulfills his desire to be surrounded by history while working. But first, a little background.

Moore is a native Charlottean, though he has lived in other places for extended periods of time, like Atlanta, Denver and D.C. Since his return in 2016, his journey in publishing has continued. For the past three years he’s been a part of QNotes where he serves as Senior Content Editor and a contributing staff writer. Moore has worked for many prestigious publications and is also the author of the non-fiction short story collection “Charlotte: Murder, Mystery and Mayhem.” He describes it as a look back over a hundred years or so of crime, disaster and unsolved mysteries in the city of Charlotte. In this special interview we offer you a glimpse of the man behind the words. In doing so, we hope to shed some light on what it means to be a gay journalist giving voice and representation to LGBTQ+ issues.

L’Monique King: So, how long have you been involved in the field of journalism?

David Aaron Moore: Hmmm, let’s see. Oh good God — 30 years, almost all of my adult life.

LMK: How’d it all begin? How’d you get your start?

DAM: I was in Atlanta, working for an independent television station and decided print media was the direction I wanted to go into, because I enjoyed writing more than I did production. But I did find that many of the skills transferred over nicely.

I got my start at a publication in Atlanta called Ecetera Magazine where I was the Arts & Entertainment Editor and a staff writer. At the same time I was writing a column for Creative Loafing (an alt-weekly press) also in Atlanta. I worked for them for five years and it was a lot of fun. Especially being able to interview some really incredible people. I interviewed some amazing people like Quentin Crisp, Grace Jones, John Travolta, Janelle Monae, John Waters and Boy George [to name a few].

LMK: But why? Why journalistic writing?

DAM: Why not? I love it.

LMK: What just gets on your last nerve, within your field or otherwise?

DAM: People that support Donald Trump, right wing conservatives and the use of repetitive catch phrases like “authentic true self,” “nothing burger” and “there’s no there there.” Certain phrases and words get overused by talking heads and when that happens they lose their validity and almost become trendy or a fad. In my opinion that weakens the punch and takes away from their true authenticity.

LMK: You mentioned having interviewed some noteworthy people. Who would you say is the most interesting person you’ve interviewed to date?

DAM: I would say Grace Jones, maybe? She was intense and funny, but she was so fucking complicated to schedule for an interview. <Laughter> During our conversation she was drinking wine straight from a bottle. While we were talking, she told me, “I don’t want to talk about Ahn-dee” – she was talking about Andy Warhol’s death – but 20 minutes later, once she was comfortably inebriated she suddenly announced, “okaaay, weee caaan talk about Ahn-dee now,” and she proceeded to spill all this stuff that kinda shocked me, but was great. Cindy Lauper was very interesting, too, because she cares so much about the world outside of her music. I can’t imagine anyone meeting her and not liking her. Then there’s Eartha Kitt, another intense experience, interviewing her. So, it might be a toss-up between the three.

LMK: Speaking of celebrities, who is your current celebrity crush?

DAM: Seth MacFarlane [actor, animator, writer and creator of “Family Guy” and “Orville” television series]. He’s creative. He’s funny. Intelligent and politically aware. And he’s handsome. The total package.

LMK: During your extensive career as a journalist, is there a particular story that you’ve written that has had a strong or indelible impact on you?

DAM: Whew. That one I just did on the Campus Pride finance issue – and we’ll just leave it at that – was a lot. That’s still fresh in my brain. But there was one in the 1990s in Atlanta that involved a number of Black trans sex workers who were found dead, their bodies thrown in dumpsters and stuffed in trash cans. There was an individual I interviewed who described this suspected serial killer – she called him “Overcoat Slim.” When he showed up, somebody would disappear. It was awful and it just kept happening. The murders were never solved during my time in Atlanta and it felt as though the victims had no one to advocate for them and nobody cared. It was disconcerting. It really stuck with me and had a huge impact on me as a writer for LGBTQ press. The saddest thing is the situation hasn’t changed that much. Every year we run a story on all the trans people who have died and/or been killed. But wouldn’t it be better if they hadn’t lost their lives in the first place, if we were able to do something to prevent their deaths?

LMK: Do you think there’s something that could have or can be done about that?

DAM: With the current polarization of culture and politics in this country and the lack of gun control I don’t know the answer to that. My thoughts are – what would fix it is compassion and education and our country just isn’t there right now.

LMK: Do you think LGBTQ represen-
tation in media has come far enough to make an impactful difference?

DAM: I died. But again, a change in our political climate. When we frequently saw LGBTQ representation in the media prior to the time Trump was in office, people seemed to be getting increasingly comfortable every day with LGBTQ visibility across the board. Fast forward a few years and CNN cans Don Lemon and appears to be slowly but surely easing Anderson Cooper. They were both considered mainstream journalists, who happened to identify as gay men. And now, the very topic of anything queer feels un-touchable again in mainstream media. It’s avoided. So, I think it’s important again to make sure we have a vibrant LGBTQ press we can turn to for information.

LMK: When the work of journalism takes its toll, who is your greatest supporter?

DAM: My sister Kathy. She’s a strong supporter of me as an individual and of my work. She’s very patient and has always been there to help when I needed it. She’s been through a lot in life and is still able to be funny and find humor in things. She’s been a constant rock for me.

LMK: As a writer and journalist, would you share your feelings about AI (Artificial Intelligence)? Are you concerned about your job or the future of journalism?

DAM: No, I’m not worried about true journalism being impacted by AI, but I do feel like it’s almost indicative of the dumbing down of America.

LMK: As an author you are often tasked with describing others. Using five words, describe David Aaron Moore.

DAM: I gotta think about that for a minute. Weird? I’ve been told that before by the banker worker bees. I take it as a compliment. Though, it’s hard to talk about yourself like this, but, I guess I’d also say I’m curious, passionate. I’ve been told I’m funny and I care. About people. And animals. And world issues.

LMK: When you aren’t editing or writing, how do you spend your free time?

DAM: Playing with my dog Della [named after Della Reese], driving my old Chrysler convertible. I love historic films. It always makes me feel like I’m looking through a window into the past. And I really enjoy exploring old forgotten places. Things like abandoned buildings, cemeteries and old churches. But, you know, I don’t ever stop thinking about the stories that are attached to wherever I am. I guess my career is such a part of my life, even in my spare time I’m thinking, “I wonder what the story is behind that?” It’s like a painter or sculptor. They never stop being an artist. Even when they’re at home watching TV or out for dinner or sleeping, they’re still an artist. So, no matter what I’m doing, that awareness of the world around me, it’s always there.

LMK: Any words of wisdom you’d like to share with aspiring young LGBTQ writers?

DAM: You probably already know if you’re good with words and language. If you are, don’t get hung up in the waiting to get ready syndrome, or you’ll never get anything done. Put yourself out there and pitch and network to websites and publications. If you really want to live a writing life, you should be ready to write about anything. If you’re a single-focus kind of writer, and a lot of writers are, know your voice. A lot of people want to contribute to the fight for LGBTQ equality and visibility, but not everybody is an activist. Writing for queer press is a major way to contribute to our community. And especially if you’re in the Carolinas, send me an email. We’re always looking for new stories and new voices. :)

Life

Our People: David Aaron Moore

Qnotes editor weighs in on the importance of LGBTQ Press

by L’Monique King

Qnotes Staff Writer

Jan. 19 - Feb. 1, 2024

qnotes 15
SPREADING DOLLARS.
GETTING BACK CHANGE.

THE CHARLOTTE MECKLENBURG BLACK CHAMBER OF COMMERCE RECEIVED FUNDING TO SUPPORT ITS WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT TRAINING PROGRAM.