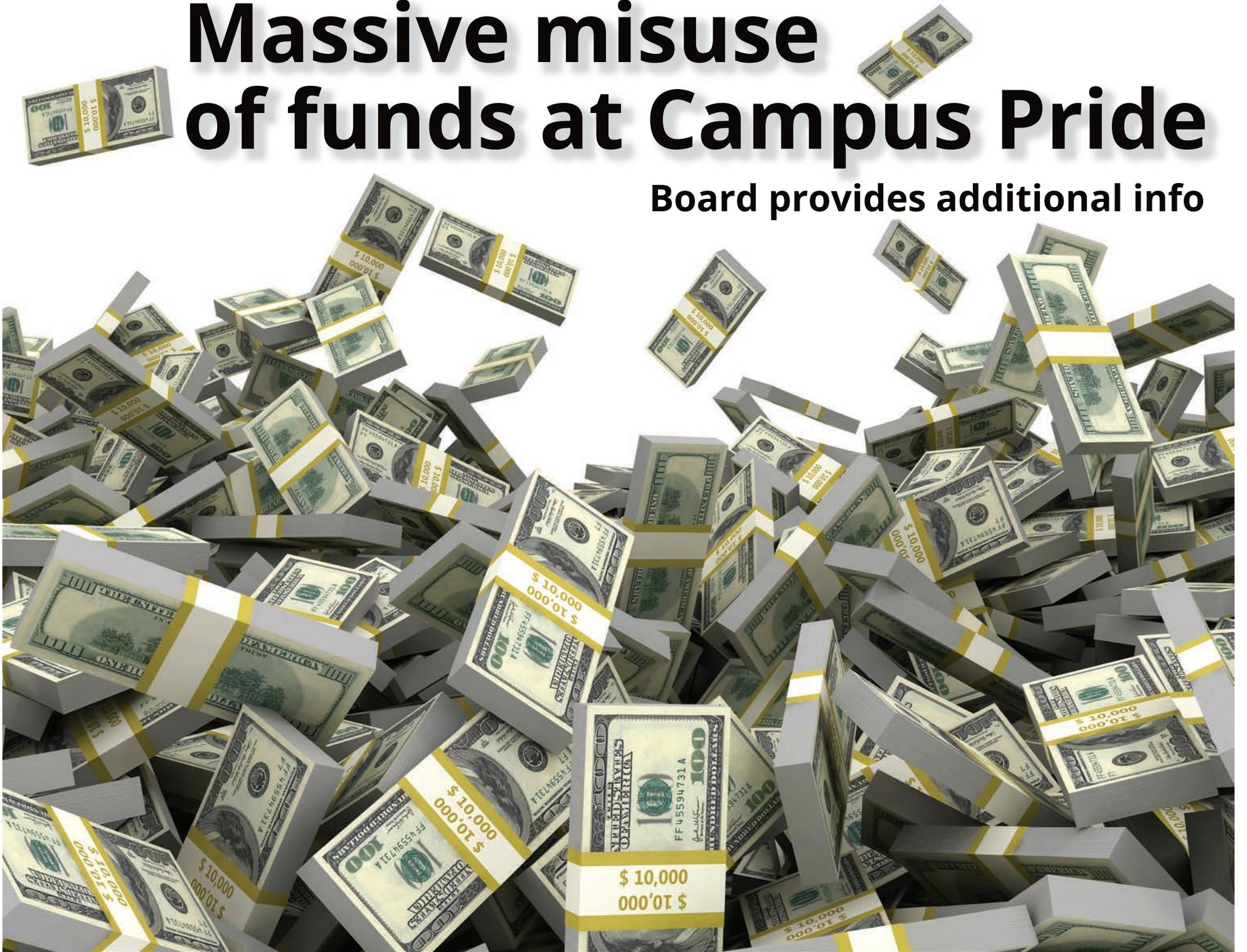


Massive misuse of funds at Campus Pride

Board provides additional info



Update on Jan. 6
riot in the capitol

-pg 6

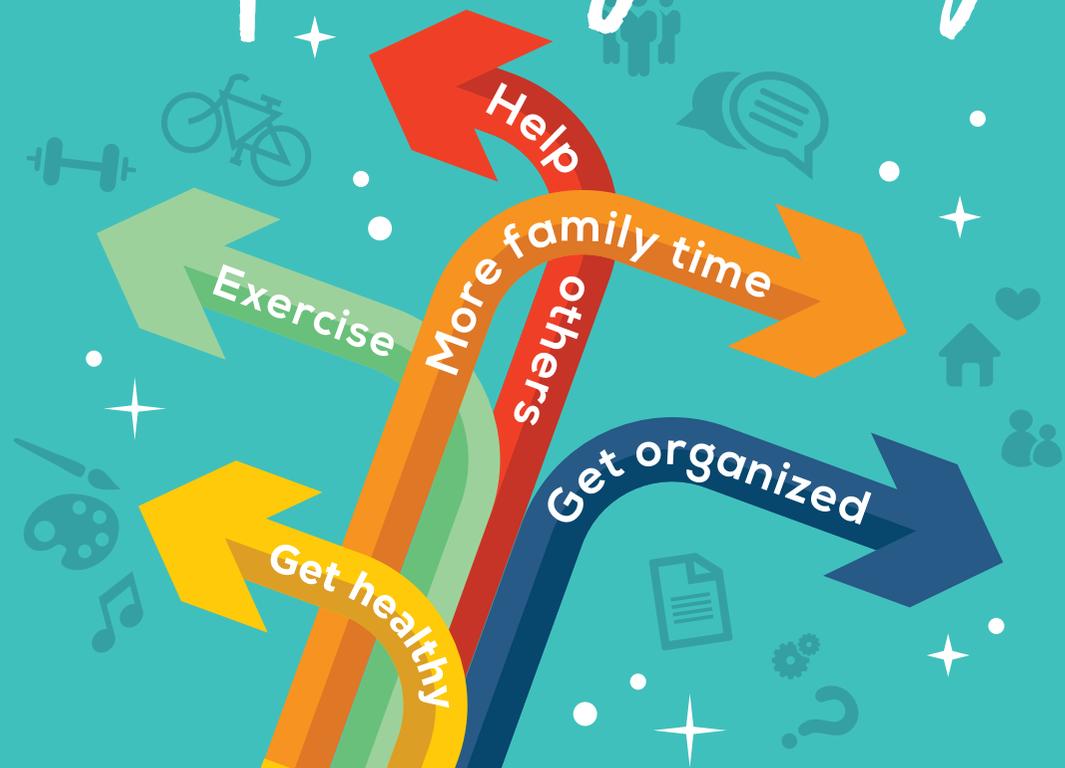
Mpox is still with
us, get vaccinated

-pg 14



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Writers: Mona Dougani, Taylor Heeden, David Aaron Moore, Gregg Shapiro, Terri Schlichenmeyer

front page

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

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ph 704.531.9988 fx 704.531.1361

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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inside this issue

feature

6 Three years later: what's happened since January 6, 2021?

news

4 Equality NC looks to the future as it searches for its next executive director
5 North Carolina LGBTQ+ candidates running for office in 2024

8 Misuse of funds and the end of a career at Campus Pride

10 Housing program for trans and non-binary Charlotteans to close LGBTQ+ population in America grows by over two million

11 Out gay soccer player Collin Martin moves to North Carolina Football Club

11 Newly introduced GOP-sponsored bill could expand Florida's 'Don't Say Gay' policy to the state workplace

a&e

13 Out in Print: "Blood Sisters"
15 Scream Queens: 10 best LGBTQ+ movies of 2023

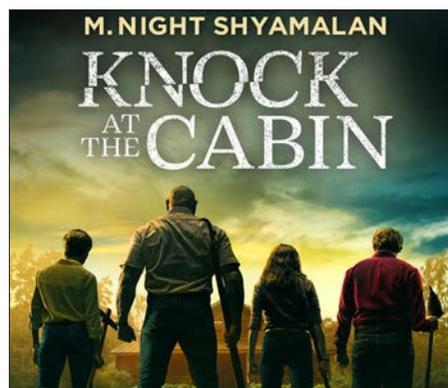
life

12 Over 100 years of recognizing greatness: a look at LGBTQ+ recipients of the Nobel Prize
14 Health and Wellness: Mpox isn't over and a new strain is sounding the alarm

views

events

For event listings, visit
qnotescarolinas.com/events-calendar.



Scream Queens: 10 best LGBTQ+ movies of 2023

Among the 10 Best LGBTQ + Movies of 2023 are Focus Films' "Of an Age," Searchlight's "All of Us Strangers," Sony Pictures Classics' "Shortcomings" and Universal's "Knock at the Cabin." Check out Screen Queen's list for more.

PAGE 15

Over 100 years of recognizing greatness: a look at LGBTQ+ recipients of the Nobel Prize

A historic look at Nobel Prize Laureates from the LGBTQ+ community boasts activists, artists, scientists and writers from around the world, including Carolyn Bertozzi, an American chemist and Stanford professor

PAGE 12



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Equality NC looks to the future and searches for new ED

Kendra Johnson, who served as the organization's director, announced her resignation earlier this year



by Taylor Heeden
Qnotes Staff Writer

Founded originally to fight against North Carolina's Crimes Against Nature Law (also referred to as a "sodomy law"), Equality NC (ENC) has never wavered in the continuing equality fight for LGBTQ+ North Carolinians for nearly 45 years. Now the organization is poised to face a new chapter: Its executive director of over five years, Kendra Johnson, is leaving right before the beginning of a new year with an important general election.

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 worked with municipalities to pass 22 ordinances protecting LGBTQ+ people from discrimination, as well as establish a Rural Youth Empowerment program providing resources to queer folks in rural communities across the state.

"I made the decision to come to the Tarheel State because I witnessed a dramatic increase in vitriol directed toward minority communities as Trumpism began to rise and ultimately reach the White House," she wrote in a press release in October. "Amid the resurgence of mainstream racism, xenophobia, transphobia and homophobia, I knew I needed a bigger playing field to fight back, alongside strong allies working for undocumented immigrants, Black folks, women, differently abled people, the resource poor and the LGBTQ+ community. I found just that, with incredible partners working on issues from voting and reproductive rights to incarceration."

ENC has yet to name Johnson's successor. But according to sources familiar with the matter, the organization will announce

an interim leader and lay out a plan for finding their full-time director in the coming days. In fact, Johnson sent out a final press release on Dec. 26 — one day after Christmas — looking forward to the future.

"One of the things we do at Equality NC is one-word check-ins when we open and close our meetings, [and] as we close out 2023 and usher in 2024 the word that comes to mind for me is Hopeful," she wrote.

ENC will turn 45 in 2024, which makes the organization the oldest statewide advocacy group dedicated to LGBTQ+ rights in the country.

"That means four decades of organizing and uplifting LGBTQ+ voices and getting LGBTQ+ candidates and allies elected," Johnson emphasized. "It means 45 years of pushing to be heard, seen and respected for all the contributions that we as a community have made and continue to make every day."

However, LGBTQ+ issues have become a hot topic for the upcoming election year, as states across the country pass legislation restricting the rights of queer Americans. The legislature in our state voted to override Gov. Roy Cooper's veto on three different bills (House Bill 808, House Bill 574 and Senate Bill 49), which were criticized and categorized as legislative attacks on LGBTQ+ North Carolinians.

HB 808 made 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." 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. SB 49, also known as the "Parents Bill of Rights," bars instruction related to gender identity and sexuality in grades K through 4th and will notify parents

when students want to change their names or pronouns.

Rebby Kern, who identifies as nonbinary and serves as the Director of Education Policy of EqualityNC, said on the day these bills went into law they are a part of a national effort to belittle and dehumanize queer Americans.

"We knew that this day would come where we would be standing together filled with anger, rage, determination, all with an unbreakable spirit," Kern 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."

This sentiment was also shared by Johnson in her latest statement, as she emphasized the circumstances going forward into the 2024 election.

"We literally will be fighting for our lives on the state, local, and federal levels," she explained. "And we will need our entire community of progressive individuals and radical leaders within and outside North Carolina to come together as we advocate for pro-equality candidates from the appellate courts to the Governor's Mansion to the White House."

Johnson said organizations like ENC need to unite and work together to continue to advocate for queer residents. However, these organizations depend on the work of countless volunteers and staff to do the "on-the-ground" work to raise a voice for those who are marginalized.

"White supremacists and Christian nationalists have moved from the shadows of our society to the center stage of our government, taking aim at our rights and our very existence," Johnson offered. "Now



Kendra Johnson's final message to North Carolinians urged them to continue the fight for LGBTQ+ rights. CREDIT: Facebook

more than ever, we need to be telling our stories differently, flanking and supporting organizations that serve as a container for organizing, and working across identities to build a movement for us all.

"We are at a pivotal point in the organization's future where we can change the course of history."

In one of her final messages as executive director for ENC, Johnson urged the public to continue to advocate for LGBTQ+ North Carolinians and never stop pursuing equal rights for all.

"If you're tired of bullies winning by targeting women, children, and trans folks, fight back alongside us," she said. "There is much more work to be done, but Equality NC has shown repeatedly what we can do when we work in tandem with organizations and other dedicated and passionate movement leaders who share our goals and values.

"There is nothing we cannot accomplish together." ::

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North Carolina LGBTQ+ candidates running for office in 2024

Several out legislators have announced their intentions to run



by Taylor Heeden
Qnotes Staff Writer

The first weeks of December marked the filing period for those interested in running for office in North Carolina for the 2024 election. Several LGBTQ+ people made their way to their local Board of Elections office to sign up for local and statewide races.

Qnotes has compiled a list of the LGBTQ+ candidates who've announced their campaigns for office in 2024. This story will continue to be updated online as more candidates make their announcements. If we missed anyone, please email information to taylorheeden@qnotescarolinas.com.

Allison Dahle - N.C. House, District 11



Allison Dahle is a Raleigh native who is currently serving in House District 11 in the North Carolina General Assembly. She filed to run for re-election the first day of candidate filing on Dec. 4.

Dahle has co-sponsored at least six bills since her time in office, including HB 605 (Voters Right to Know Act), HB 1169 (Bipartisan Elections Act of 2020), HB 180 (Designate Overdose Awareness Day) and more. She has also served on various legislative committees, including the Elections and Ethics Law committee as Vice Chair, Joint Legislative Administrative Procedure Oversight Committee, Ethics Committee and more.

Cecil Brockman — N.C. House, District 60



Cecil Brockman is a state house representative from High Point, representing the 60th House District. He has filed for reelection and is facing a contested primary against former High Point NAACP President Jane Addams.

Brockman has served as District 60's representative since he was first elected in 2015. He serves on several committees, including the Appropriations Committee, Appropriations on Education Committee, Education - K-12 Committee as Vice Chair, Energy and Public Utilities Committee, Environment Committee, Health Committee and House Redistricting Committee.

Deb Butler — N.C. House, District 18



Deb Butler filed to run for re-election in her home district in New Hanover County, according to reporting from Port City Daily.

"I am a very strong advocate for workforce housing, fair wages, a cleaner and healthier natural environment, Medicaid expansion, and stellar schools for every N.C. child," Butler said in a statement. "I look forward to continuing my service for this community and all of North Carolina."

Butler was originally appointed to her seat in 2017 by newly elected Gov. Roy Cooper, and she has been able to maintain her seat since. Some of the main issues Butler wants to continue to address if reelected are public education, fighting climate change and advocating for human rights.

Lisa Grafstein — N.C. Senate, District 13



Lisa Grafstein filed to run for re-election in the redrawn Senate District 13, where she has served since her appointment earlier this year. Grafstein has consistently opposed Republican efforts to implement abortion restrictions and anti-LGBTQ+ policies. She is also the only openly LGBTQ+ member of the Senate.

Grafstein was the subject of controversy after she moved out of her current district to reside in the newly drawn District 13 in order to be able to file for reelection. The North Carolina State Constitution states senators at the time

of election must live in the district for one year immediately preceding their election. It doesn't bar senators from moving to their redrawn district if new maps are implemented. It does state that in order for Grafstein to qualify for her new district next year, she has to move there at least a year prior, which explains the move to her new home in southern Wake County.

Vernetta Alston — N.C. House, District 29



Rep. Vernetta Alston filed for reelection for her seat as the representative for House District 29 on Dec. 4. She and her wife Courtney are raising their two kids, Reese and Davis, in Durham.

Gov. Cooper appointed Alston, who previously served as a member of the Durham City Council, in 2020 after the death of late representative MaryAnn Black. Alston's priorities since taking office include statewide affordable housing research, transportation planning, gun violence intervention, advocating for the incarcerated and more.

Some of her legislative accomplishments include the passage of HB 387 (Flexibility in Filing Vacancies in Durham), HB 378 (Reduce Speed Limits in Durham), and HB 232 (Legislative Research Commission Affordable Housing Study). Other accomplishments to be noted are her work with Gov. Cooper to recognize Gender Expansive Parents' Day, secured funds for local hospital-based violence intervention programs and secured funds to install air conditioning in all North Carolina prison housing units. ::

Three years later: what's happened since January 6, 2021?

From congressional hearings to criminal convictions, the last few years have been defined by the attack on the Capitol after the 2020 election



by Taylor Heeden
Qnotes Staff Writer

January 6, 2021, was set to be a long day for congressional representatives and senators alike. Congress met to certify the results of the highly contested 2020 election in which now President Joe Biden was to be officially named the victor.

However, in the weeks leading to Congress's meeting, former President Donald Trump and his allies went on a mission to try to discredit the election results. Trump made claims the election was stolen, and as a result of the rhetoric he used, thousands of his supporters stormed the Capitol building as the House and the Senate met to solidify election results.

Now, three years after the January 6 Insurrection, people are still being convicted for related charges, Trump has been disqualified from the primary ballot in states like Maine and Colorado and it doesn't seem like its impact is slowing any time soon. Here are some of the key developments since the infamous attack on the Capitol — from North Carolina indictments and convictions to the findings of the January 6 Committee.

The North Carolinians involved in the January 6 Insurrection

People from across the United States took part in the January 6 riot, including some fellow North Carolinians. The Charlotte Observer created a list of North Carolina residents who have been indicted and convicted of charges related to the events of January 6, 2021. Here's the list their team comprised:

Additionally, some higher level politicians from North Carolina also played a role in the events of Jan. 6, 2021.

North Carolina native, former congressman and White House chief of staff Mark Meadows was one of the 18 people indicted alongside the former president for separate charges related to attempting to try to overthrow the election results. Meadows was one of the main proprietors of the stolen election conspiracies, and he's been accused of working with several others within the Trump administration to overturn the election results, specifically regarding the state of Georgia.

Meadows was charged for breaking Georgia's RICO (racketeering) law, as well as solicitation of violation of oath by a public officer. The indictment explains the charges, alleging Meadows and other co-conspirators knowingly lied about the election's results, purposely spreading misinformation to the public. The indictment also claims those close to the presi-

Name	Town	Convicted	Sentence
Aiden Bilyard	Cary	Felony assaulting, resisting or impeding certain officers using a deadly or dangerous weapon or inflicting bodily injury	40 months
Anthony Scirica	Winston-Salem	Misdemeanor violent entry and disorderly conduct on Capitol grounds	15 days of incarceration; \$500 fine; \$500 restitution
Cleveland Meredith	Hayesville	Felony interstate communication of threats	28 months
Dale Shalvey	Conover	Felony assaulting, resisting, impeding officers; felony obstruction of official proceeding	41 months
Easton Cantwell	Waynesville	Felony civil disorder and aiding and abetting	5 months
Grayson Sherrill	Cherryville	Felony Assaulting, resisting, impeding officers using a deadly or dangerous weapon	7 months
James "Les" Little	Claremont	Misdemeanor Violent entry and disorderly conduct on Capitol grounds	60 days; three years probation. Under appeal
James Mault	Fort Bragg	Felony assaulting, resisting impeding certain officers	44 months
Johnny Harris	Shelby	Misdemeanor engaging in disorderly or Disruptive conduct on the capitol buildings or grounds	7 months
Laura Steele	Thomasville	Felony obstruction of official proceeding	12 months; six months home detention; three years supervised release
Matthew Wood	Reidsville	Felony obstruction of an official proceeding, 5 misdemeanors	3 years of probation, including 12 months of home detention; 100 hours of community service; \$2,000 restitution
Stephen Baker	Garner	Misdemeanor violent entry and disorderly conduct in Capitol	9 days; two years probation
Tara Stottlemeyer Shalvey	Conover	Felony obstruction of official proceeding	8 months
Virginia "Jenny" Spencer	Pilot Mountain	Misdemeanor violent entry and disorderly conduct on Capitol grounds	90 days; 3 years probation
Matthew Beddingfield	Middlesex	Assaulting a police officer	38 months

dent were working to persuade electors in Georgia to change their electoral college votes to be in Trump's favor. Meadows wasn't named as participating in these acts.

The January 6th Congressional Committee hearings

On July 1, 2021, the United States House Select Committee to Investigate the January 6th Attack on the United States Capitol was established to look into the Capitol Attack. The committee met consistently for two and a half years, collecting evidence and hearing testimonies from those closest to Trump on Jan. 6.

There were a total of 11 public hearings, with 10 of them being televised on major news networks. The committee released its final report at the beginning of this year, which noted many key findings found over the investigation.

The committee found there was enough evidence for the Department of Justice to criminally prosecute the former president on the following charges: obstruction of an official proceeding, Conspiracy to defraud the United States, Conspiracy to knowingly make a false statement and Assisting, aiding or comforting an insurrection.

Evidence collected by the committee suggests Trump knew he had lost the election, but then continued to publicly say the election was stolen. He also, allegedly, attempted to pressure Vice President Mike Pence to not fulfill his constitutional duty by refusing to certify the results. Pence



Insurrectionists heading for the Capitol on January 6. CREDIT: Screen Capture

stated at the time he would follow his Constitutional duty, and ultimately, Pence did certify Biden's election win.

Some other actions Trump has been accused of include targeting the Department of Justice, pressuring state officials, false electors, pressuring members of Congress, providing false information in court, summoning and provoking the crowd, failing to act and conspiracy.

The committee also found law enforce-

ment and intelligence agencies had received whisperings of a plan to invade the Capitol building in the weeks leading to the January 6th attacks. According to reporting from PBS, agencies were aware of plans from the Proud Boys and Oathkeepers, and information on those plans were shared with the Secret Service, the president's National Security Council and staff in the executive branch. The report also stated law enforcement was unaware of

the extent of Trump and his allies' plans and how their speeches would have contributed to the violence on that day. It also showed Trump provided minimal to no assistance in crowd control efforts.

The repercussions of Trump's actions

The former president was impeached for a second time following the January 6th Insurrection, but that hasn't diminished the support he has within the Republican Party. As it stands, Trump is the frontrunner in the Republican primary, polling at a whopping 61.4 percent. Multiple polls have Trump narrowly beating Joe Biden in a head-to-head general election, even as multiple Republicans continue to call for an end to the Trump era.

Trump now faces over 90 felony criminal charges related to four different cases in the District of Columbia, Georgia, New York and Florida. The cases include the Federal Election Interference Case, The Georgia Election Interference Case, The Classified Documents Case and The Hush Money Case against Stormy Daniels.

The former president is also facing legal challenges from multiple states who are working to remove him from the Republican Primary ballot under the insurrection clause of the 14th Amendment of the constitution. Two states — Maine and Colorado — have officially removed the former president from the ballot for the March primary. Other states are considering similar motions. ::



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Misuse of funds and the end of a career at Campus Pride

Non-profit's CEO Shane Windmeyer 'terminated' following abuse of funds, board confirms authenticity of anonymously dropped documents



by David Aaron Moore
Qnotes Staff Writer

An anonymously dropped envelope was found on the front counter of White Rabbit Books on Friday, December 15.

The office of Qnotes shares the same single story building with the White Rabbit retail store at the corner of Central Avenue and Louise Avenue, just on the edge of the Plaza-Midwood neighborhood. At some point the store's clerk on duty had stepped away briefly, leaving no one to address who the courier might have been or provide any description.

Inside the manila mailer: a collection of documents that included email exchanges, excel spreadsheets of financial activity and two legal documents.

Copies of emails contained names of board members for Campus Pride, attorney Lee Robertson and Campus Pride CEO and one of the original founders, Shane Windmeyer, also known in Charlotte and throughout the southeast as drag performer Buff Faye.

According to the text in the copied emails, Windmeyer readily admitted he had made a number of bookkeeping errors in 2023 and was requesting help from his current board of directors, most all recently appointed, to rectify the situation.

"I became aware of mistakes I made in the 2023 expenditures a couple of weeks ago," Windmeyer wrote in an email dated November 17. "November 3/4 roughly. This first started with CashApp transactions in August that continued until the end of October. I then identified further mistakes I made in error with Zelle and PayPal that I had rendered. I would like to ask to meet with the BOD to discuss the following that I outlined below further so you can consider the best actions."

In the outline that followed, Windmeyer explained his discovery of the errors and his inability to maintain a committed system of accounting and bookkeeping, as well as staff to handle such actions he felt he was ill-equipped to keep in order. His lack of skills with finance and use of the aforementioned cash transfer apps, he maintained, along with health issues he was facing, all contributed to his improper use of and documentation of funding.

According to included out-of-court settlement documents prepared by Robertson and agreed upon by Campus Pride board of directors and Windmeyer, the terminated CEO of Campus Pride agreed to repay a sum of \$100,000 to the organization for his misuse of Campus Pride funds.

That's a generalized outline of what the documents contain and how they came to be in our hands.

Campus Pride Board President Candis Cox agreed to speak with Qnotes, although the responses she initially offered were limited by the constraints of the previously prepared agreement. When asked if Windmeyer had been terminated and if the documents left at Qnotes were, in fact,



authentic, her reply was simple and direct: "Yes," Cox said.

A particularly unsettling point made in the documentation refers to the settlement amount in question, which asserts that \$100,000 is adequate compensation, given that investigation into the possibility of additional misuse of funds could be "too costly."

In a document titled Employment Termination Agreement, section 4. Admissions of Liability, part a. Misappropriation of Campus Pride's Resources, Windmeyer signed off on and agreed to the following statement:

*Windmeyer admits that, in 2023 during the course of his employment with Campus Pride, he misappropriated Campus Pride's financial resources. Windmeyer admits that he did so through a variety of methods, including by using Campus Pride's credit cards and cash to pay for numerous unauthorized personal expenses, including but not limited to, personal travel, drag pageants and other personal expenses. **Windmeyer acknowledges and admits that during his employment with campus Pride he misappropriated substantially more than \$100,000, but that calculating the actual amount misappropriated by Windmeyer would be timely and expensive.***

As a result, Campus Pride and Windmeyer agree that Windmeyer shall be liable for misappropriation of \$100,000. Windmeyer acknowledges that such a misappropriation is a violation of his duties and obligations to Campus Pride.

Consider the following from the Campus Pride website:

"Founded in the Fall of 2001 and launched a year later in October of 2002, Campus Pride started as an online community and resource clearinghouse under the name Campus PrideNet. The original partners were M. Chad Wilson, Sarah E. Holmes & Shane L. Windmeyer. In 2006, Windmeyer expanded the organization's outreach efforts and became the 501c3 educational non-profit organization known as Campus Pride."

According to the organization's website, Windmeyer has been involved with Campus Pride for over 20 years, taking the lead to turn it into a non-profit five years after it was established.

Obviously, questions remain that are significant. Given Windmeyer's long-term involvement with the organization, admission of inability to properly expend finances and lack of organizational accountability and documentation, why was the amount of \$100,000 settled upon as being adequate? With no research into previous years' activities, essentially dating back to the beginning of the 21st century, and especially when taking into consideration Windmeyer's own admission in a settlement document of liability in which he "acknowledges and admits that during his employment with Campus Pride he misappropriated substantially more than \$100,000" why was this not handed over to state and/or federal authorities?

Cox's response: "I cannot comment on that."

What will be done with the \$100,000 once it is paid in total? Without Shane Windmeyer and only a fragmentary revolving door board of directors and a small staff, what will become of the organization and the staff that remains?

Cox confirmed the two remaining employees would be paid. As for the future of Campus Pride, she offered, "It will continue. The organization is assessing its needs and how to move forward."

Embezzlement and corruption in financial corporations and nonprofits is far from uncommon and has reportedly been swept under the carpet on multiple occasions for non-profits in the LGBTQ+ community. This particular incident, however, is the first such case in the LGBTQ+ community that an individual, or individuals, apparently deemed the amount of fraud so egregious they made the decision to leak the information to the press.

When Cox was asked why criminal

charges were not being filed against Windmeyer and whether or not he had paid any portion of the \$100,000, she offered tersely: "I am not able to comment on any internal employment matters. As of today, all of the requirements of the contract have been met."

Several attempts were made to contact Windmeyer for comment through multiple phone numbers, but all calls went unanswered.

Since this story originally broke, it has been the subject of intense debate in the community and through multiple social media platforms. Under the advice of the organization's attorney Lee Robertson, Campus Pride Chair Candis Cox and Co-Chair and Treasurer Christopher Bylone requested an additional interview to share further details regarding the process the board went through to reach the decision they felt was best for the survival of the organization.

Cox and Bylone are relative newcomers to Charlotte and were officially elected to the Campus Pride Board just this past fall.

"None of the board has been [in place] for over a year," Cox explained. "The board is made up of six people. Four of the six joined in September and October, so this is basically an entire body of people ... learning this information at the same time. There was no one on the board there long enough to have even known anything. There was no transfer of knowledge or powers. As chair I had access to nothing. Christopher had access to nothing."

"It is my understanding that sometime around the beginning of January of 2023 ... the previous board basically vacated and there were no officers," Bylone offered. "The chair had left, the vice chair and treasurer had all vacated the board. So when I came on and when Candis came on, the transfer of knowledge we were getting came from Shane. We were relying on Shane to give us factual information."

"When I was given the treasurer of Campus Pride email account, it was empty. There was no organizational history there. I had no access to files. I had to request information. [No] previous emails, nothing was in the email account."

"Being a new treasurer, I was trying to get up to speed to find out what the finances were of the organization. I did not initially have suspicions about the blatant misuse of funds," Bylone explained. "I had questions about spending the money in the correct way, so I was asking questions about 'should we be spending money on this, or should we be spending money on that.' It wasn't initially questions about misuse of funds."

"So I had two meetings with Shane, between the October board meeting and the November board meeting, to deep dive into the finances. One of the things I had asked for was access to the bank accounts and to our QuickBooks. There was an initial hesitation from Shane about giving me access to those things. But I persisted, as treasurer, in saying that I needed access to those."

"Through those two meetings we came to an agreement on how we were going to

be presenting the 2024 budget to the board. We were going to give the board a preview on the November 14 board meeting, so they had time to see the 2024 budget, digest it, ask questions [and] so that we could approve the budget at the December meeting going into the new year.

"In that meeting I presented the budget the way Shane presented it to me ... the board started asking why we were spending money on office space [and] why was the expenditure shown on internet services so high. Shane got really agitated in that meeting, which kind of caused me to raise my eyebrows and think, 'why is he throwing me under the bus?'"

"By that time I also had access to the bank account. So I started looking at everything in the bank account, and I came across a transaction that was for a payment that was made at RAIN Gay Bingo. I was there. Not as a representative of Campus Pride, but with my employer. Buff Faye was there as Buff Faye. Buff Faye also sponsored one of the games, however there was a charge to the Campus Pride bank account at Gay Bingo, where Campus Pride had no involvement. At all. That

raised my suspicions and it made me wonder why is there a \$250 charge at gay bingo, when Campus Pride as an organization had nothing to do with Gay Bingo, so I started conducting my own audit for the finances of 2023 and started finding things that were concerning, *and kept being concerning.*

Following the November board meeting, Bylone called Cox and voiced concerns about Windmeyer's behavior and what he had discovered in the bank account records.

"We need to talk," Bylone said to Cox. "I am concerned. I don't know what I'm looking at, but I am concerned. We started to dive in deeper into the finances and kept saying this doesn't look right and this doesn't look right. We then decided we had a problem on our hands. So I said 'we need to put a firewall around this,' because it could get really bad really fast."

At that point, Cox and Bylone made the decision to reach out to Robertson, who has served as an attorney for multiple non-profits. After extensive conversation, an emergency meeting of the board was called and Bylone requested complete access to all financial records. Windmeyer was compliant and supplied what information he said he could, although no records were reportedly accessible prior to January of 2022 because Windmeyer had moved his account from one bank to another. A review of Windmeyer's submissions from just 2023, confirmed that he had misused the aforementioned \$100,000.

Robertson advised the Campus Pride board that a forensics audit would be the best option to use moving forward to get an idea of what was going on, but an initial retainer fee was \$20,000 and Campus Pride's bank account had only \$2,000.

"We had no idea how much money was going to come in from Giving Tuesday, or where any other financials were going to come from," said Bylone. "So after that time we decided, on the advice of our attorney, that we [could] not move forward with the forensic audit because we didn't know how much it would ultimately cost us."

"Hindsight is 20/20, but we [used] the facts we had at the time to make an educated decision of what we were going to do so that Campus Pride as an organization could potentially move forward."

On the advice of Robertson, the board came to the decision to terminate Windmeyer and was advised to try and reach a settlement over the \$100,000.

"[He] basically said cut your losses and try to figure out what you are going to do with the organization going forward," Bylone recalled.

Cox and Bylone worked through the Thanksgiving weekend to draft a separation agreement that included repayment of the \$100,000.

"We didn't even know if he was capable of repaying that," Cox recalled.

"But we decided that, not knowing if he had \$100,000, we would terminate his employment and that he would have to pay back \$100,000, and we would come to an agreement on what that repayment plan would be," Bylone continued. "As

long as he repaid it, there wouldn't be any other actions because at the time we didn't know what else to do. We just knew that he could no longer be leader of Campus Pride."

To date, Cox has confirmed, Windmeyer has made one payment of \$50,000, by check.

Still, the question remains, why were state or federal authorities not contacted for such a sizable amount, especially considering the many years Windmeyer had been with Campus Pride and his admission of misuse of a much larger total of funds during that time?

"We're not lawyers," Bylone said. "We asked them if we should contact the police, but we were told that admission of guilt is not substantiated evidence. Lee [Robertson] was advising us on what we needed to do to protect Campus Pride as an organization, because at the end of the day our responsibility - as the board - is to Campus Pride. His advisement was to stop the hemorrhaging of the money and [because] Shane had admitted he was not capable of carrying out the duties of executive director and has misused funds, terminate him."

"The way the promissory note was written," Bylone contended, "was that as long as he paid the \$100,000, we wouldn't do anything else to him because he was at least making restitution to the organization."

"We would not seek any further damages from him," Cox concluded. "We can't speak for what the government can and can't do." ::



Former Campus Pride CEO Shane Windmeyer and his alter ego, drag performer Buff Faye. CREDIT: Facebook

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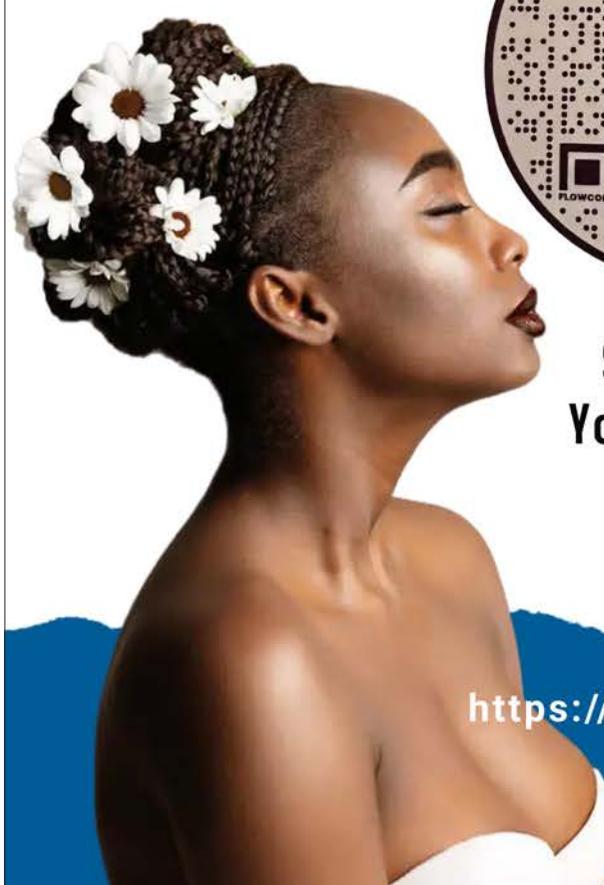
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Housing program for trans and non-binary Charlotteans to close

Founder of program says she can't go it alone

By Mona Dougani | WFAE

Rev. Debra Hopkins knew she wanted to help others in the community after she experienced homelessness during a bout of poor health. As a transgender woman, she had struggled to find refuge in the housing programs Charlotte offered — many of which are gender specific. So in 2017, she created her own: There's Still Hope.

There's Still Hope started as an emergency temporary shelter, in Hopkins' one-bedroom apartment. It blossomed into the first transitional housing program in Charlotte specifically designed to serve transgender and nonbinary adults.

"I really wanted to just focus on a group of people who were being completely ignored, and those were the trans-identified adults who were struggling with homelessness here in Charlotte," said Hopkins, a nondenominational minister.

"We knew that here in Charlotte, there was a program called Time Out Youth (to help homeless LGBTQ young people). Fabulous program, love the program," she said. "But these kids age out of the program ... There was no program available at the time for them to be able to bridge over."

There's Still Hope filled that gap. But after seven years, the organization is closing its doors this month. "We're closing this part of the transitional housing segment of the program because it's hard to do the work when you're doing, pretty much, the work by yourself," Hopkins said.

That means potentially losing one of the only safe places trans and gender-diverse people struggling with homelessness can find housing, said Dr. Holly Savoy, executive director of Charlotte Trans Health.

"You take a community like transgender, and gender-diverse individuals, and know that they're more marginalized in terms of being able to get employment, to get housing, to have identification that matches with their correct name, and gender, which can be a barrier," she said. "There's Still Hope was filling that need for a particular part of our community."

The group served roughly 114 clients over the past seven years, and 77 percent were successful in completing the program by finding stable housing and full-time employment.



Reverend Debra Hopkins (left) at the There's Still Hope booth at the 2022 Charlotte Black Pride Expo. CREDIT: Courtesy Reverend Debra Hopkins

Hopkins found people housing by arranging contracts with extended-stay hotels. Program participants got their own fully furnished room with Wi-Fi, as well as weekly groceries and laundry assistance. Most funding for the program came from grants focused on LGBTQ people, as well as from individuals and local nonprofits like Equality NC and Human Rights Campaign of Charlotte.

To complete the program, participants had to stay for six months, as well as find and maintain full-time employment. After finding employment, participants needed to open a bank account. They were also required to attend weekly counseling sessions and basic money management classes, and they needed to save 85 percent of their income.

"It was all designed to launch them in the right way to get on their feet," Hopkins said. "It's just like any parent who's raising their children. You're taking care of them, but you're teaching them how to save their money."

Hopkins said for many transgender people, living on the streets might be preferable to facing discrimination from a landlord or family members.

"For a trans-identified person, you have to really be in their shoes to understand it," Hopkins said. "A lot of people just can't fathom they would be willing to live on the streets all because of their

transition ... I can relate because I experienced it myself, and I can understand their comments of saying I would rather live on the streets. I got that. I got that because I went through it. I said that I would rather live on the streets than to be treated discriminatively."

Though Hopkins said she feels the program fills an essential need in the community, it was never her goal to run the program indefinitely.

"It was three years into the program that I realized that the goal for me was for someone, in particular within the trans-identified community, to come along where I could mentor them and walk them through how to run the program, and then turn it loose to them. But that never happened," she said.

Running the program took a toll, and Hopkins plans to spend more time focusing on her health.

She still plans to advocate for the trans community through workshops and speaking engagements, but she's sad to leave the housing program she started.

"The visions always started with one, but it takes a village to continue — for that program to sustain itself. It breaks my heart that I'm stepping away from this aspect of the program. But I'll find a way to continue to be a voice in some form or another."

This story appears courtesy of WFAE and the station's EQUALibrium newsletter. ::

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In celebration we've got some awesome online promotions!!



* All promotions expire: 2/28/24*

Out gay soccer player Collin Martin moves to North Carolina Football Club

Soccer player Collin Martin signed to the North Carolina Football Club (North Carolina FC) for a two year contract after four seasons with the San Diego Loyal. Martin is a familiar face in the North Carolina soccer community: He previously played for the Wake Forest Demon Deacons in college.

"I'm very excited to be signing with NCFC at a time where the club has just won USL League One and is now pushing to enjoy success in the USL Championship," he said in an interview with the NCFC website. "I can't wait to see what this club achieves in the future and to be a part of something special in North Carolina."

Martin's decision to come to North Carolina was heavily influenced by the fact his family is based on the East Coast.

"Moving back to the east coast and closer to my family was definitely a factor in my decision to join NCFC," he told Outsports. "I was fortunate to play in front of my sister and her family in San Diego and I want to be able to have family at games in North Carolina. Also, only playing at Wake Forest for a year, I wanted to experience North Carolina again and playing there."

Martin came out in June 2018 while he was playing for the Minnesota United, and he is one of only a few professional out male athletes. Others include 21-year-old Luke Prokop in hockey, and Anderson Comas and Solomon Bates in baseball. Martin was awarded the Outsports Male Hero of the Year Award five years ago, and he continues to use his platform as a professional athlete

to raise awareness for LGBTQ+ equality. The soccer player was also awarded the Harvey Milk Champion of Equality Award at the San Diego LGBT Center earlier this year.

"There is a source of pride knowing that I'm one of the few out pro athletes on the male side and I don't take that lightly," Martin added.

Martin's previous team, the San Diego Loyal, walked off the field in September 2020 during a game against the Phoenix Rising after an opponent directed a homophobic slur at Martin. By walking off the field in solidarity with the out athlete, the Loyal team forfeited the match and any chance of making the playoffs. The walk-off became the topic of international headlines, sparking conversations about



Collin Martin will hang up his San Diego Loyal jersey when he moves to North Carolina to play for the North Carolina Football Club. CREDIT: Facebook

allyship in sports.

"I didn't have a lot of references of gay athletes in professional sports," Martin told San Diego-based television station CBS8 during an interview. "I wanted to be a reference for kids that were looking up to me, so that's why visibility is really important to me."

— Taylor Heeden

Newly introduced GOP-sponsored bill could expand Florida's 'Don't Say Gay' policy to the state workplace

Florida's GOP legislators are on the attack against the state's LGBTQ+ population, but this time, it will impact government workers and contractors.

The proposed House Bill 599 (HB 599) — which is sponsored by political newcomer Rep. Ryan Chamberlin (R-Belleview) — if implemented would block state-funded entities from requiring employees to address trans or nonbinary colleagues by their preferred names or pronouns. This would include state government agencies, local government agencies, nonprofit organizations who receive funding from the state and government contractors. The bill would also "prohibit adverse personnel action on the basis of deeply held religious or biology-based beliefs."

This is the next step in the GOP-majority

Florida legislature's policy tirade against the queer community. Just last year the state enacted the Parental Rights in Education Act, which was dubbed the "Don't Say Gay" bill.

The controversial policy prohibits educators from teaching about topics regarding sexual orientation and gender identity in Florida classrooms, and since Gov. Ron DeSantis signed the bill into law, other states have taken the same approach by passing their own version of the "Don't Say Gay" bill.

The proposed expansion to the Parental Rights in Education Act would stop the requirements for training on gender identity and sexual orientation for government employees. It also states the following:

"It is the policy of the state that a person's sex is an immutable biological trait and that it is false to ascribe to a person a

pronoun that does not correspond to such person's sex."

According to reporting from Politico, some critics of HB 599 are claiming the bill is unconstitutional, including Florida's first openly gay state senator Rep. Shevrin Jones (D-Miami Gardens).

"I would hope that this is not a part of their agenda moving into the next legislative session," he told Politico. "It [the bill] is deaf and insensitive to the current climate in Florida."

Carlos Guillermo Smith, who serves as the senior policy adviser at the LGBTQ+ rights organization Equality Florida, said to Politico that HB 599 doesn't allow trans and nonbinary government and nonprofit employees to "live as their authentic selves at work," even if they've undergone the processes to legally



Ron DeSantis has signed a bevy of anti-LGBTQ+ legislation during his terms as Florida's governor. CREDIT: Screen Capture

change their names.

"It shouldn't come as a surprise to anyone that Florida Republicans are willing to use the power of government to retaliate against those who speak out against their extreme agenda — ask Disney," Smith said.

— Taylor Heeden

LGBTQ+ population in America grows by over two million

The LGBTQ+ population in the United States experienced an unprecedented increase of over two million people, and there's no sign of that growth slowing.

According to a study conducted by the Williams Institute at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), 13.9 million American adults (5.5 percent of the United States' adult population) identify as part of the LGBTQ+ community. The same study was performed in 2020, which found that 4.3 percent of Americans (11.3 million people) identified as LGBTQ+.

The study also revealed a majority of LGBTQ+ Americans live in the South, with almost 40 percent (five million) of the nation's entire queer population living below the Mason-Dixon line. Over 24 percent (3.4 million) of LGBTQ+ Americans reside in the

West, 21.1 percent (2.9 million) live in the Midwest and 18.5 percent (2.6 million) live in the Northeast.

The study revealed people between the ages of 18 and 24 were more likely to identify as queer, with one in every six identifying as LGBTQ+. People ages 25 to 34 account for 9.1 percent of the LGBTQ+ population, five percent are ages 35 to 49 and less than three percent are ages 50 and older.

States with the highest population density also had the largest amounts of gay, lesbian and queer residents. Most of the top states with the largest number of LGBTQ+ people are in New England, though some of the other states may come as a surprise.

Oregon, Delaware and Vermont are the

top three states in regard to the amount of LGBTQ+ people living there. The three states with the lowest concentrations of LGBTQ+ residents are West Virginia, Mississippi and North Carolina.

The Williams Institute's study also noted the states with the lowest number of LGBTQ+ residents were the ones passing the majority of anti-LGBTQ+ legislation. North Carolina is one of the states to pass such legislation, including a ban on gender-affirming healthcare for trans people under 18, a policy barring trans girls and women from competing on women's sports teams at both public schools and at the collegiate



The Williams institute study reveals that nearly five million individuals who identify as LGBTQ+ live in the south. CREDIT: Adobe Stock

level and a "Parents' Bill of Rights" that prohibits instruction related to LGBTQ+ topics in grades K through 4th and alerts parents when students want to change their names or pronouns. ::

— Taylor Heeden

Over 100 years of recognizing greatness: a look at LGBTQ+ recipients of the Nobel Prize

Scientists, authors, playwrights and activists are among those recognized as Laureates included here

By Taylor Heeden and David Aaron Moore

The Nobel Prize has become synonymous with greatness. Only a select few of the highest achieving scientists, activists, writers, artists and other leaders in various fields around the globe have been recognized as recipients since the prize's establishment in 1901. This year's Nobel Prize went to 10 recipients, also called Laureates, in the fields of physics, chemistry, medicine, literature and peace.

While there are no known members of the LGBTQ+ community that were selected this year, we've taken the opportunity to take a look back at ten LGBTQ+ individuals who have received the Nobel Prize since its inception.

Jane Addams

Jane Addams was the first woman to receive the Nobel Peace Prize when she was recognized in 1931 for her activism in women's suffrage and social work. Addams cofounded Hull House, which served as a home in Chicago for low income families, especially immigrants. She also helped to found the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) in 1920.

Addams would most likely be labeled as a lesbian in today's world: Her documented partners were all women. Addams would refer to her partner of almost four decades, Mary Rozet Smith, as "My Ever Dear," "Darling" and "Dearest One," according to historian Lilian Faderman.

Vicente Aleixandre

Vicente Aleixandre was a Spanish poet who received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1977. His poetry is considered some of the most influential from the writers of his time, with some of his work including "Passion of the Earth," "Destruction or Love" and "Shadow of Paradise," among others. Aleixandre's bisexuality was known among his close friends and colleagues. Although he never publicly divulged his sexual orientation, he maintained a long term relationship with fellow Spanish poet Carlos Bousoño.

Jacinto Benavente

Benavente was born Aug. 12, 1866, in Madrid, Spain. One of the foremost Spanish dramatists of the 20th century, he was awarded the 1922 Nobel Prize in Literature "for the happy manner in which he continued the illustrious traditions of the Spanish drama." He never married, and most historians believe he was gay, although he remained closeted because of the turbulent times he lived in. The author of more than 170 plays, among them "High Society," "Saturday Night" and "The

Lady of the House," Benavente died in Madrid on July 14, 1954, at the age of 87.

Carolyn Bertozzi

American chemist and Stanford professor Carolyn Bertozzi was awarded the Nobel Prize for Chemistry in 2022 "for the development of click chemistry and bioorthogonal chemistry." She currently studies a wide array of subjects, including examining the synthesis of chemical tools to see how glycans — cell surface sugars — affect cancer, inflammation and viral infections like COVID-19.

Bertozzi is highly respected among LGBTQ+ scientists, and many point to her as an inspirational figure in their chosen career fields.

"Growing up, I didn't have any scientific role models that were women, let alone queer," L Handy, a graduate student in Bertozzi's lab says. "The Nobel Prize win for Carolyn not only symbolizes that queer female scientists do, in fact, exist but establishes that we are talented, valued and ... have the potential to be recognized for our accomplishments."

Selma Lagerlöf

Born Nov. 20, 1858, in Sweden, Selma Lagerlof published her first novel, "Gösta Berling's Saga," at the age of 33. She was the first woman to win the Nobel Prize in Literature, which she was awarded in 1909. She wrote many titles, and was

revered by the Swedish Royal family, who compared her writings to the works of Homer and Shakespeare, which led to global notoriety. Lagerlof was never married during her lifetime, but was known to have maintained close, personal relationships with another female writer, Sophie Elkan, and a creative advisor, Valborg Olander. While Lagerlof destroyed most of the correspondence she exchanged with her two female companions (same-sex relationships were illegal in Sweden at the time), the surviving letters with Olander revealed the romance the women shared. "Gösta Berling's Saga" was made into a film (with Greta Garbo) and since its original publication has been translated and republished numerous times. Lagerlof died March 16, 1940.

Thomas Mann

German anti-Nazi writer Thomas Mann received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1929 for his works "Buddenbrooks" (1901), "The Magic Mountain" (Der Zauberberg, 1924) and his short stories.

Mann wrote of his sexuality constantly in his personal journals, detailing the feelings he would have toward younger men. In fact, his work "Death in Venice" has obvious parallels to experiences Mann had in his own life.

Svante Pääbo

Swedish geneticist Svante Pääbo was

awarded the Nobel Prize for Physiology or Medicine in 2022 for his work "discoveries concerning the genomes of extinct hominins and human evolution." Pääbo's area of study focused on mapping out the genome of Neanderthals.

He disclosed his sexuality in his 2014 book "Neanderthal Man: In Search of Lost Genomes," where he revealed he was bisexual. Pääbo has said he believed that he was gay until he met his wife, fellow geneticist Linda Vigilant. The two have co-authored many papers.

Maria Ressa

Maria Ressa is an openly lesbian Filipino-American journalist who was given the Nobel Peace Prize in 2021 for "efforts to safeguard freedom of expression, which is a precondition for democracy and lasting peace." She was also recognized as one of Time magazine's "100 Most Influential Individuals of 2019," along with other journalists who were working to combat misinformation and the stigma surrounding media.

Otto Warburg

Otto Warburg was a gay, Jewish doctor living in Germany at the peak of the Nazi regime, and he received the Nobel Prize in Medicine in 1930 prior to the regime's takeover. He extensively studied cancer cells and their ability to metabolize and duplicate. ::



Created in 1901, the Nobel Prize continues to recognize individuals who have achieved greatness from different fields and walks of life.
CREDIT: Facebook

“Blood Sisters”

Out in Print



by Terri Schlichenmeyer
Qnotes Contributing Writer

“Blood Sisters”
by Vanessa Lillie
c.2023, Berkley
\$27.00
384 pages

It’s the truth. Scout’s honor. Pinky swear. Spit on your palms or prick your fingers, and shake hands. As a child, you had many ways to show that you intended to keep a promise when you made it, and your word was your bond, but you’ve grown up. Today, you cross your heart, but, as in the new novel “Blood Sisters” by Vanessa Lillie, you hope no one has to die.

She wasn’t looking for skeletal remains. For Bureau of Indian Affairs archaeologist Syd Walker, such a find was very unusual but not unknown. Odd things happen during geological surveys on tribal

lands everywhere. Still, the gruesome recovery in Rhode Island wasn’t top of Syd’s mind.

She’d gotten a call that her sister, Emma Lou, was missing in Oklahoma. Again.

Fifteen years before, as Syd, Emma Lou and Luna, who they’d considered a sister, were chilling in Luna’s family’s trailer, a group of men broke in. Wearing masks, the “devils” killed Luna and her parents, and the small town of Picher was never the same.

Neither were Emma Lou or Syd. As a member of the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma, Syd was well aware of the problems near her hometown, the issues Native Americans had there with the BIA and her own ancestors’ efforts to survive on land that was given and then snatched back. She also knew the fact that she had a wife at home in Rhode Island set her apart since she’d left. And drugs – too many people on tribal allotments were getting drugs too easily.

But someone wanted Syd to come home: A female skull was found in the crook of a tree with her old work badge in its mouth. Despite knowing that Syd had fled Oklahoma on purpose, her new boss at the BIA pulled strings to arrange the trip

and assigned her the case.

Years ago, Syd had promised to protect Luna and Emma Lou.

One of them was already dead. The other was missing.

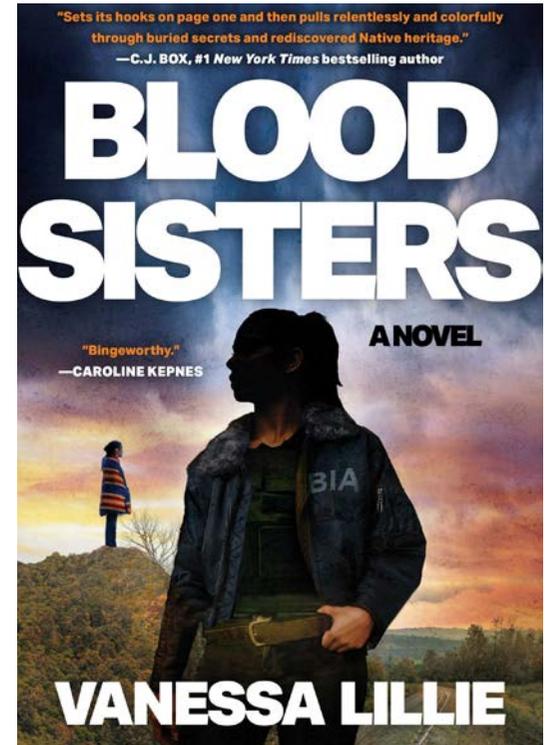
Was the skull a threat – or a warning?

Here is the best advice you’re going to get when you grab “Blood Sisters”: Pay close attention to the minutiae. Without being a spoiler, little things mean a lot.

Unless you watch carefully, you’ll be cruising along at 200 miles an hour in a screaming run through pages and pages of barely-bearable excitement when suddenly, your brain will make that scratchy sound like a stopped record album. It’s there where author Vanessa Lillie drops three tons of TNT, right towards the almost-end of her story, and whoa, Nelly. If you’re not paying attention, you may have to read the chapter multiple times to cut your “What the....?” down to a manageable level.

Yeah, this is that kind of book, the kind that’s written with authenticity, an insider’s feel and heightened tension that’ll keep you awake. The kind

that you think you know how it’ll end, and you’re wrong. For mystery lovers or thriller fans, “Blood Sisters” is the kind of book you should scout out. ::



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Mpox isn't over and a new strain is sounding the alarm

Health and Wellness



by David Aaron Moore
Qnotes Staff Writer

Mpox (also known as Monkey Pox) cases continue to be reported as we move into the new year and the potential for exposure and future outbreaks are still of serious concern. For your best health status, it's important to get both of the now available two-part vaccine doses, check yourself and partners for symptoms; and get screened for STIs.

In a letter dated December 20 to medical colleagues throughout the country, Assistant Surgeon General Jonathan Mermin addressed his concerns about future outbreaks.

"I am writing to you today with a reminder that Mpox continues to circulate in the United States. Although case counts are lower than they were last year, severe manifestations, including deaths, continue to occur. The Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices now recommends persons with potential risk of exposure receive two doses of the JYNNEOS vaccine. Despite this, only one in four of the approximately two million people eligible to

receive the vaccine in the United States have received both doses.

"Although reported cases ... have significantly declined since the height of the outbreak in 2022, small clusters are still occurring in the United States. Within the past two months, some health departments have reported an increase in cases among men who report having sexual contact with men.

Vaccination remains an important, but underutilized, tool in stopping the spread of [Mpox]. If vaccine coverage in the United States does not increase, we may experience large outbreaks in the future." <

It can't be stressed enough, to be fully vaccinated and have the most protection against MPOX, it is imperative you get both doses of the vaccine. The second dose is given four weeks after the first dose, and your protection will be highest two weeks after your second dose.

If it has been more than four weeks since the first dose, the second dose can be administered as soon as possible, and the series does not need to be restarted. If you have received your second dose, there is no need for a third dose at this time.

Healthcare professionals remain on high alert for a new strain of the Mpox vi-

rus – known as Clade I, which is far more infectious and deadly than Clade II (by ten percent), which manifested in the gay male community at a high rate in 2022). The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) is currently experiencing its highest ever outbreak of Mpox as a result of the Clade I variant.

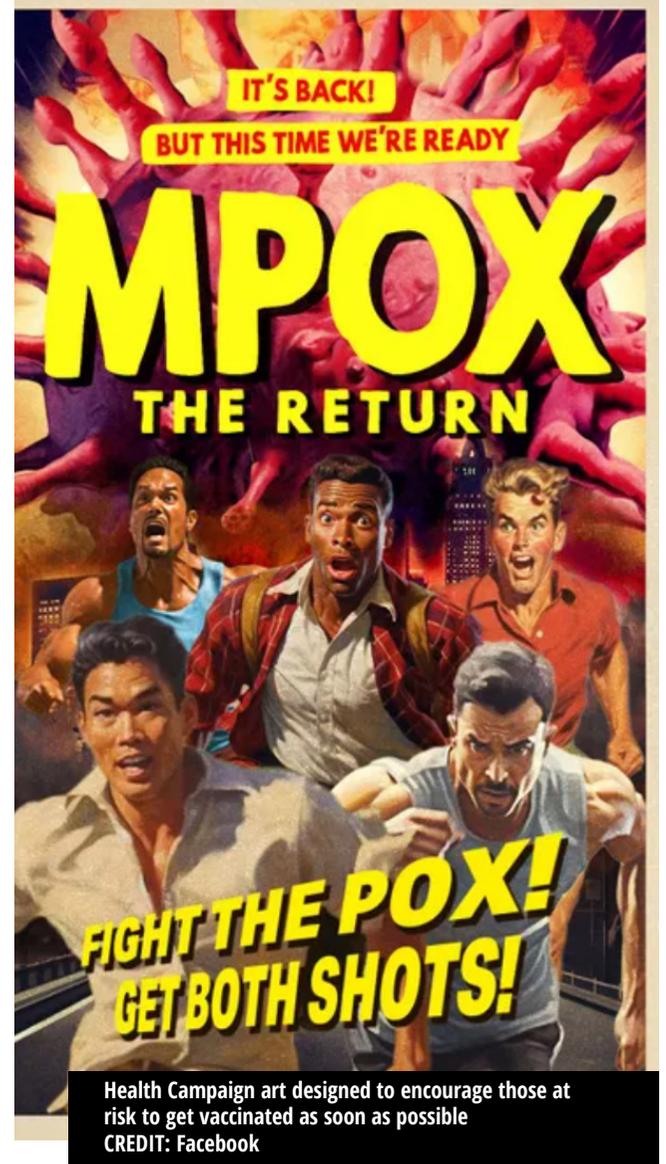
"The virus variant is known to be more virulent. If it adapts better to human to human transmission, that presents a risk," said Rosamund Lewis, the chief advisor on Mpox for the World Health Organization (WHO) in an interview with Reuters news service. Lewis also said WHO is "very worried" the outbreak could spread further – potentially beyond the DRC.

Immunization Clinics in the Charlotte area are available to help individuals stay up to date with their vaccines by providing the routinely recommended vaccines for all age groups, as well as specific vaccines for high-risk groups. Mpox immunizations can protect our community from a dangerous infection that can spread quickly.

Among the sites for treatment in the Charlotte area are: the Huntersville Mecklenburg County of Health Department at 2845 Beatties Ford Rd.; the Charlotte Mecklenburg County of Health Department at 249 Billingsley Rd.; the Valerie C. Woodard Community Resource

Center at 3205 Freedom Drive; and the Ella B. Scarborough Community Resource Center at 430 Stitt Rd.

For information on making an appointment at any of these locations call 704-336-6500. Hours of availability are Monday, Tuesday, Thursday and Friday, 8 a.m. – 5 p.m. and Wednesday, 10 a.m. – 7 p.m. ::



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10 best LGBTQ+ movies of 2023

Screen Queens



by Gregg Shapiro
Qnotes Staff Writer

When it comes to looking back at LGBTQ+ movies (and characters) in 2023, it's reassuring to know that representation still matters, and we are, in fact, everywhere on screen. Here is a list of some of the best.

1 "Passages" (Mubi): Gay filmmakers rule this list, beginning with Ira Sachs. Sachs and co-screenwriters Mauricio Zacharias and Arlette Langmann have crafted a very emotional story, and one that is also quintessentially French. It's as sexy (watch for the Martin and Tomas sex scene!) as it is sorrowful. The three leads, especially Whishaw and Rogowski, are all more than up to the task at hand.

2 "All of Us Strangers" (Searchlight): Few gay filmmakers are as consistently brilliant as Andrew Haigh, and "All of Us Strangers" continues his winning streak. In this intimate and imaginative portrait of the inner workings of a writer's mind, out actor Andrew Scott plays Adam, who revisits his childhood for inspiration and also finds stimulation in a potential relationship with hot neighbor Harry (Paul Mescal). As absorbing as it is haunting, it's the kind of movie that lingers long after the final credits roll.

3 "Of an Age" (Focus): As I predicted when I interviewed writer/director Goran Stolevski in early 2023, his second movie, "Of an Age," would end up on my "Best of" list when the time came. At turns exhilarating, funny, sexy, touching and ultimately heart-breaking, "Of an Age" is one of those rare transformative gay coming-of-age stories. The combination of the acting (both Elias Anton as Kol and Thom Green as Adam are exceptional) and the writing and direction are effective. Just wait until you see his new movie, "Housekeeping for Beginners," out in early 2024!

4 "Blue Jean" (Magnolia): Set in 1988 England, during the Thatcher years, as the anti-gay Clause (or Section) 28 was being advanced, we see the impact of the pressure on Jean (Rosy McEwan), a closeted queer secondary school P.E. teacher. Through it all, Jean struggles to find a balance, and from what we can gauge from the open-ended conclusion, a kind of hard-won victory occurs. Once again, timing is everything, and the release of "Blue Jean" occurs as a reminder that while history may repeat, it's possible for good to triumph over evil.

5 "Kokomo City" (Magnolia): Trans filmmaker D. Smith did some-

thing incredible with her first film, the documentary "Kokomo City." She has given voice to Black, trans sex workers, a segment of the population that has something to say after remaining silent for too long. Focusing on four individuals – Liyah Mitchell, Dominique Silver, Daniella Carter and the late Koko Da Doll (who was murdered in April 2023) – Smith offered us insight into both the trans and sex worker communities in equal measure.

6 "Egoist" (Strand): Director and co-screenwriter Daishi Matsunaga's "Egoist" was one of the most original and moving gay movies of the year. As a mother and her son's lover bond following a calamity, "Egoist" finds the perfect balance between eroticism and emotion. The three lead actors give convincing and moving performances. Even with the heartbreak-

ing elements of the story, "Egoist" is strongly recommended.

7 "Cassandro" (Amazon Studios): From the first time many of us saw Gael García Bernal on screen, in "Amores Perros" or "Y tu mamá también," we knew he had something special. A little spark they used to call "star quality." In Almodóvar's "Bad Education," Iñárritu's "Babel" and more recently, Larraín's "Ema," Bernal was never anything less than riveting. With his performance as "Cassandro," a flamboyant "exótico" luchador, Bernal has the potential to receive his first Academy Award nomination in a lead role. Like the titular character, "Cassandro" is a triumph.

8 "Shortcomings" (Sony Pictures Classics): Adapted from the graphic novel by Adrian Tomine (who also wrote

the screenplay), "Shortcomings" is actor Randall Park's directorial debut. A kind of Asian-American "Annie Hall" in the way it looks at modern love and artistic snobbery; it's also reminiscent of "Barbie" in the way it takes well-deserved jabs at masculinity. Queer actor Sherry Cola (who also stole the show in 2023's "Joyride"), plays Alice, a funny and flirty lesbian lothario who's earned herself a reputation in the Bay Area.

9 "Afire" (Sideshow/Janus Films): Writer/director Christian Petzold's "Afire" is a lot to handle. Thoroughly unlikeable and completely self-absorbed, lead character Leon is someone who might make some viewers give up on him less than halfway through the movie. But don't do that. He doesn't necessarily become easier to take, but there is something of a payoff if you stick with him. The main thing to know about "Afire" is that no one is as they appear, beginning with Felix and Devid who begin a sweet and affectionate sexual relationship. "Afire" takes a long time to ignite. Once it does, brace yourself.

10 "Knock at the Cabin" (Universal): What would the late, gay film historian and activist Vito Russo think of mainstream director M. Night Shyamalan's movie "Knock at the Cabin"? Would he have been impressed by Shyamalan casting two gay actors (Jonathan Groff and Ben Aldridge) as gay dads who must shoulder the responsibility of saving the world from mass destruction? What about GLAAD's Vito Russo Test (glaad.org/sri/2021/vito-russo-test)? Yes to parts of it, no to others. Not nearly as silly or pointless as "The Happening," "The Lady in the Water" or "The Village," calling "Knock at the Cabin" a comeback for Shyamalan is kind of a stretch. At the very least, it's not a complete waste of 100 minutes.

Two honorable mentions:

"American Fiction" (MGM/Orion) gets a nod for its honest depiction of "gay adolescence," as portrayed in a supporting role by Sterling K. Brown as Cliff, a man who comes out late in life and gets busy making up for lost time.

"Barbie" (Warner Brothers), because no end of the year list would be complete without this commercial and critical success story. As for its queerness, out actor/comedian Kate McKinnon, as Weird Barbie steals every scene in which she appears. And we can't forget about Michael Cera's "sensitive" Allan and the recurring sound of Indigo Girls' "Closer to Fine"!! ::



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