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The curious pieces
of the Campus
Pride puzzle

-pg 5

The success of NC's
ZAMI NOBLA
Chapter

-pg 7



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shocking and inhumane.**”

- Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

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contributors this issue

Writers: Mykah Buff, Taylor Heeden,
L'Monique King, David Aaron Moore,
Terri Schlichenmeyer

front page

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LGBTQ and straight ally communities
of the Charlotte region, North Carolina
and beyond, by featuring arts, enter-
tainment, news and views content in
print and online that directly enlight-
ens, informs and engages the readers
about LGBTQ life and social justice
issues.

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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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Centers help provide a sense of family and belonging to LGBTQ+ and HIV+ folks

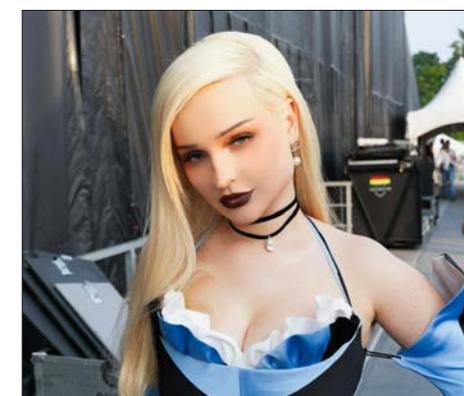
Drop-in centers across North Carolina help provide a sense of family and belonging to LGBTQ+ and HIV+ folks. Charlotte's The Drop and PowerHouse, along with Triangle Empowerment in Durham and SEEDS of Healing in Wilmington offer help for individuals in need, with a focus on trans individuals and gay male youth of color..

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Kim Petras made musical history as first trans artist to win a Grammy

One year ago this month, Kim Petras made musical history as the first trans artist to win a Grammy for her duet with Sam Smith in the best pop/duo category for the song "Unholy." Now she'll be appearing in the Jennifer Lopez film 'This is Me Now: A Love Story,' on Netflix February 16. You can also check out a plethora of her music videos on YouTube.

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Fortnite receives backlash for LGBTQ+ characters

CatholicVote takes aim at the game popular among younger audiences



by Taylor Heeden
Qnotes Staff Writer

Fortnite took the world by storm when it hit consoles in 2017, and it continues to be a staple within the gaming community. The game, which was developed and published by North Carolina-based company Epic Games, recently became the subject of backlash from the self-described Catholic lobbying group *CatholicVote.org*.

A recent blog post written by the staff at CatholicVote criticized the game for containing “widespread and overt LGBTQ content.” The article cited a tweet from VICE magazine co-founder Gavin McInnes, which contained images from a player-made LGBTQ+ Pride-themed “island” that players from around the world could play.

“My ten-year-old boy is playing [Fortnite] when this option appears,” McInnes wrote. “Rewards include going from straight to pansexual. WTF!?”

Fortnite is a battle royale inspired game where 100 players fight each other until there is one player remaining. The game features various cosmetic elements so players can customize their characters to look how they want, as well as host several events throughout the year with limited edi-

tion or rare in-game items.

Epic Games started an event called Rainbow Royale, which was meant to “celebrate love, understanding, acceptance, and all of the colors that make up our community.” This year’s event included new costumes for characters, as well as an exclusive animation characters could do, which included opening a large bamboo fan and voguing.

Fortnite isn’t the only video game receiving pushback for increased LGBTQ+ representation. According to Charlotte Gaymers Network Executive Director and Co-Founder Jonny Saldana, the video game world has been making progress toward having more inclusive storylines and characters.

“Until very recently, most game developing houses were primarily staffed by straight white men,” he explained. “So now that these spaces are being filled with more people of color, more queer folks, all of that, you’re seeing a lot more often authentic storytelling or genuine storytelling within this world.”

Saldana said what Fortnite is doing is the “bare minimum” for what other game developers have done in the past with other franchises, some of which actually include LGBTQ+ story lines.

“These are not storylines that have anything with LGBTQ thematic elements or stories or anything like that, these aren’t LGBTQ characters,” Saldana explained. “It’s

literally a pride flag. A backpack with the pride symbol on it. Things like that.”

Other popular shooting games such as Call of Duty have recently added LGBTQ+ pride cosmetic elements players can customize their characters with, but Charlotte Gaymers Network Deputy Director David McRae said the move towards more inclusivity within the narratives in video games is a long time coming.

“Nobody’s there to make you uncomfortable, that is not our goal,” he explained. “We have more in common than you think, we’re just trying to get through life. Queer people are always around you, so now we’re finally seeing our stories being told.”

Saldana and McRae cited different video game franchises with openly queer or gender-nonconforming characters where the character’s existence in the story plot isn’t driven by their sexual orientation. Some franchises include the Last of Us series (the main protagonist is a lesbian and there are LGBTQ+ storylines), Baulder’s Gate 3 (a Dungeons and Dragons inspired story-driven game), Overwatch (a first-person shooter team game) and more.



Video games — including Fortnite, Baulder’s Gate 3 and others — have incorporated more diversity into the plot and how players present themselves. CREDIT: Facebook

At the end of the day, Saldana said it’s important to have representation beyond labeling characters as queer and making their entire existence about that. Rather, he hopes there will be a time where games can have LGBTQ+ protagonists who become the heroes of their own stories.

“I can’t wait for the day when I watch a film or I play a video game, and the character is gay or trans or lesbian or non-binary, and it’s not made into such a big thing,” Saldana said. “Because when we watch movies or play games and it’s straight people, they’re not like, ‘Oh, I’m straight, and this is my straight girlfriend,’ ... just to be able to watch or participate in an artistic medium where the LGBTQ character just exists and that’s just normal, that’s what we’re working toward.” ::

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The continuing saga of Campus Pride and Shane Windmeyer

Putting together the pieces of a very confusing puzzle



by David Aaron Moore
Qnotes Staff Writer

Following authentication by Campus Pride board members of leaked documents dropped off anonymously at the Qnotes/ White Rabbit location, social media exploded with reaction to the organization's former CEO Shane Windmeyer's admission that he misused an unknown amount of funding that far exceeded \$100,000.

After the first story broke, Campus Pride board members Candis Cox and Christopher Bylone requested a second interview to talk more and in-depth about the agreement that had been reached between the organization and its former CEO.

"We want to clear the air," said Cox. "Set the record straight."

While it remains unknown who was responsible for dropping off the envelope of copied documents, once they were authenticated, numerous stories began to surface and other individuals came forward on social media with their own stories about experiences with Windmeyer.

To be clear, this reporter made numerous attempts to contact Windmeyer, through different phone numbers, including a phone that was confirmed by board members as his personal mobile device. Messages were left, but calls were not returned.

According to Cox, that's been the case for Campus Pride, as well.

"He hasn't returned our calls," Cox told Qnotes. "And he has hired a legal firm to represent him, so I expect most of his communication will be through his attorney."

As mentioned in our previous article, Campus Pride board members confirmed that Windmeyer, who had agreed to pay the organization \$100,000 in a settlement, had in fact made an initial payment of \$50,000. Since that time Cox has confirmed Windmeyer has made an additional payment of \$2,000.



These screen captured images show costuming Windmeyer offered for sale on Facebook Marketplace in December, 2023. CREDIT: Facebook

Both Cox and Bylone have indicated there are likely other financial misdeeds but they have not, as of yet, been able to ascertain the magnitude of exactly how much money was misused and what it was misused for.

In an additional interview, Bylone confirmed the existence of a COVID-related and government funded small business loan, but the amount is unknown and specifically what it was used for remains to be discovered.

"We have no way of knowing because he changed banks and didn't keep any records," said Cox.

Board members initially confirmed the existence of a USBank account with a balance of just \$2,000 available at that time for total operations of Campus Pride.

Additionally, Windmeyer's payment of \$2,000 was reportedly drawn on a First Citizen's account; in an earlier social media post, he announced previously on social media that he had maintained four bank accounts for over 20 years at Bank of America. With so many accounts spread across multiple banks, and it's exorbitant cost, it becomes clear why

Campus Pride was unable to hire a financial forensic investigator.

Despite Windmeyer's admission of misuse of funds and the now public awareness of the financial scandal, it appears there has been no effort by federal authorities to investigate the case any further, though internet chatter shows continued speculation about when and if that hammer might drop.

In a separate development, Windmeyer is currently facing charges of fraud from the state of North Carolina, reportedly for failure to pay for unemployment insurance to cover employees of Campus Pride.

According to Mecklenburg district court records, the offense date purportedly occurred December 5, 2023 and was filed January 4, 2024. An initial hearing was held January 24, but was rescheduled for March 27 and then on the same date rescheduled again for July 29.

Despite Windmeyer's ongoing legal battle, his fall from grace with LGBTQ+ leaders and activists in the

Charlotte Metro area and his termination from Campus Pride, he remains active with his drag alter ego Buff Faye, at least in some locations.

While there are no scheduled appearances by Buff Faye in Charlotte Metro, there are performances scheduled in other areas - February 4 at the Atlanta Eagle in Atlanta, Georgia - and an upcoming competition in an online drag contest touted as "Queen of Drag: the Drag Competition of the Year," which will reportedly be available for viewing sometime in the fall of 2024. It appears promotion of the event has been challenging: response to social posts touting the event have been regularly met with negative comments regarding Windmeyer/ Buff Faye, and parties responsible for the promotional post are continually removing comments they deem detrimental.

An interesting footnote: multiple drag performers in the Charlotte Metro scene have come forth on social media to speak out about unprofessional behavior by Buff Faye/Windmeyer. It has also been pointed out that in late December



One of three listed founders and fired Campus Pride CEO Shane Windmeyer

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Macy Alexander, long popular in the Carolina drag scene, passes away at 58

Macy Alexander, a prolific and much loved drag performer in the Carolinas and the southeast passed away at 5:30 p.m. On Monday, January 8, aged just 58. Her career spanned from Charlotte to Atlanta and points in between. In years past, she was a recurring performer at Charlotte Pride and clubs like 313 in Raleigh, Chasers and Scorpio in Charlotte and Pulse Ultra Club in Myrtle Beach, S. C., among others.

A native of South Carolina, Alexander was born Jerry Lee Dimmery in the town of Mullins on March 9, 1965. As a drag performer, she later took her stage name from the legendary North Carolina drag diva Brandi Alexander and found inspiration from another drag legend, Atlanta's much loved Tina Devore. She pointed to both performers, who preceded Macy in

passing, as her drag mothers.

According to the website *ourcommunityroots.com* Alexander held a laundry list of titles, including Miss South Carolina USofA 2011, Miss North Carolina Continental Elite 2010, Miss Gay Gastonia 2008, Miss Gay Charlotte USofA 2008, Miss Gay South Carolina United States 2006, Miss Charlotte Pride 2005 and Miss Gay Capital City America, among others.

In conversation and text exchange with **Qnotes**, Dimmery's partner Jason Arnold spoke at length about the man he shared his life with for more than 20 years, and the stage performer so many highly revered.

"We met Oct. 30, 2001," Arnold recalled. He was one of the nicest and most kind people I've ever met."

"I know that he helped and had an impact on almost every drag queen he worked with.

"Even though Jerry had more titles than most girls working today, there were so many times, especially in Charlotte, that Jerry got the short end of the stick. It was hurtful, but it never stopped him [and] he never talked about other girls behind their backs and never wanted to listen to anyone else gossiping. He wasn't afraid to be [a] friend or stand up for other girls when most people wouldn't."

According to Arnold, Alexander/Dimmery frequently gave away costumes and accessories to other performers who expressed appreciation for a particular ensemble and he was known for providing temporary living arrangements for fellow performers in need.

"For 10 out of 20 years we lived in Charlotte there was always a queen down on her luck living with us," Arnold recalled. "Now [they're] living on their own and supporting themselves."

In the week prior to her passing during conversation with friends Macy Alexander intimated she wanted her friends and fans to have some ol' skool fun during her memorial service: "Party like it's 1969!" she reportedly said, accord-



Southeast regional drag performer and multiple title holder Macy Alexander. CREDIT: Facebook

ing to a post on Facebook.

Friends and fellow performers Kiana Lane, Tiffany Storm and Essence will host a special memorial celebration with performance for Macy Alexander Feb. 4, at 9 p.m. at Chasers, located at 3217 The Plaza in the North Davidson area.

For more information visit Chasers' website and social media accounts on Facebook, Twitter/X and Instagram or call 980-402-3297. ::

—Taylor Heeden

Chapel Hill-Carrboro schools ignore some provisions of 'Parents Bill of Rights'

Chapel Hill-Carrboro City Schools' (CHCCS) Board of Education met last week for its regular meeting, where the board unanimously approved initial and updated policies regarding North Carolina's new "Parents' Bill of Rights," an anti-LGBTQ+ bill passed by the legislature this past August.

The Parents' Bill of Rights, officially titled Senate Bill 49, censors LGBTQ-related content from school curriculum, as well as forces educators and staff to "out" LGBTQ+ students to parents. The law officially went into effect after Jan. 1, and school districts across the state, including CHCCS, have been approving policies to be in compliance with the new law.

However, CHCCS's school board has elected to not create a protocol which would

disclose students' sexual orientation and preferred pronouns and names to parents. The board also said it wouldn't create a policy barring the instruction of gender identity and sexuality in its elementary schools.

"We're not looking to be contrary or get into any kind of struggle with legislators or anybody else, and we hope that won't happen," Board Chair George Griffin told the newspaper Friday. "Anytime you go up against a regulation or a law, you run the risk of people not being happy about that."

Several school board members and many community members, students and teachers have spoken at the meetings, saying the Parents' Bill of Rights would harm LGBTQ+ students more than help them. Another vote will be held on the policy at a

date yet to be announced.

Some Republican legislators responded to CHCCS' decision, saying the General Assembly should penalize the school districts who refuse to comply with all provisions of SB 49.

"A supermajority voted for this legislation," North Carolina Senate Majority Whip Jim Perry, a Lenoir County Republican, stated in a post on X (formerly Twitter). "I look forward to addressing this lawless behavior in the short session. This presents a great opportunity to see where others stand on law and order."

The Campaign for Southern Equality recently filed a lawsuit against the Parents' Bill of Rights, alleging the policies enforced by the Parents' Bill of Rights singles out LGBTQ+ students, stigmatizing and alienating them from their heterosexual or cisgender counterparts. However, legal challenges take time to go through due process, so school systems still have to abide by SB 49 until otherwise stated.

Orange County Democratic State Senator Graig Meyer, who is also a former



Members of the board of education for Chapel Hill-Carrboro City Schools, seen here, confirmed they wouldn't enforce two provisions of the controversial 'Parents' Bill of Rights.' CREDIT: Facebook

social worker, applauded the decision from CHCCS.

"As I told my General Assembly colleagues in the debate of the bill, if I were back as a social worker in (the district) and I had to decide between caring for a student and your stupid law, I would choose the student every single time," Meyer said. ::

—Taylor Heeden

President Biden talks broadband access during Raleigh visit

U.S. President Joe Biden made his way to the Tar Heel state last Thursday, Jan. 18, to announce millions of dollars in funds for broadband expansion across rural communities in North Carolina. The announcement of \$3 billion allocated to North Carolina is a part of a nationwide effort to provide high speed internet access in rural areas to 300,000 state residents by 2026.

"High-speed internet isn't a luxury anymore. It's an absolute necessity," he said in Raleigh, where Biden's visit took place. "The investment in high-speed internet means something else as well: good-paying jobs."

Biden is running for re-election this year, and according to reporting from The Associated Press, the president is hoping

to swing North Carolina from red to blue, something that hasn't been done since Barack Obama's election in 2008. Biden only lost North Carolina's 16 electoral votes by a margin of 1.34 percentage points to Trump. Many experts anticipate a "rematch" between the two in November.

The Raleigh visit served as a way for Biden to pitch himself to North Carolina voters, showing he is committed to addressing the needs of the state's residents and beyond.

"What we're doing here in North Carolina is one piece of a much bigger story," he said.

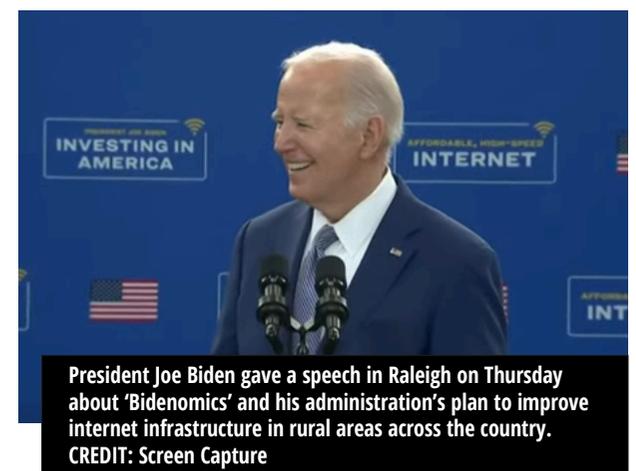
Biden also talked extensively about improvements to infrastructure across the country, including the bipartisan

Infrastructure Law, which secured billions of dollars in funds to help update and upgrade roads, internet, electric grids and more across the nation. However, a lot of voters in North Carolina have expressed concern about the state of the economy, which has proven to be a weak point in Biden's campaign for reelection.

Biden addressed inflation during his address in Raleigh, saying his policies are working to create factory and construction jobs with higher wages taking inflation rates into account.

"When jobs grow, everything grows," Biden said.

North Carolina Democratic Gov. Roy Cooper also spoke during the president's visit, warning what a second Trump presidency could mean for North Carolinians.



President Joe Biden gave a speech in Raleigh on Thursday about 'Bidenomics' and his administration's plan to improve internet infrastructure in rural areas across the country. CREDIT: Screen Capture

"I want a president who wakes up every morning thinking about the American people instead of a president who wakes up every morning thinking about himself," Cooper said. ::

—Taylor Heeden

ZAMI NOBLA's growing NC chapter

A Black lesbian group offering more than a meetup



by L'Monique King
Qnotes Staff Writer

We seem to keep hearing about how 50 is the new 40 and 40 is the new 30 and so on. Perhaps the point might just be an attempt at halting a level of ageism that fails to honor and benefit from an aging population with so much more to offer than just baking cookies and knitting doilies.

As science progresses and we learn more about living longer, healthier lives filled with vitality – that is exactly what's happening. Folks over 50 are becoming bodybuilders, pickleball champions, yoga instructors, social media influencers and of course, the keepers of our illustrious LGBTQ+ history. That's good, because these components are keys to community.

As human beings, sometimes referred to as pack animals, we need each other. Sometimes however, in this climate of "do whatever it takes to stay young" or at least appear that way and feeling cast aside once employment contributions have ceased, it's not always easy to find connections that affirm and value age and experience over youth and, well, everything else.

Fortunately, for aging Black lesbians living in North Carolina there's an organization filling the gap between the two while offering its members experiences that nourish, uplift and give back in life sustaining ways. It's called ZAMI NOBLA (National Organization of Black Lesbians on Aging).

"Deeply Rooted in Atlanta, Georgia with a national reach, ZAMI NOBLA is a membership-based organization committed to building a base of power for Black lesbians over the age of 40 living anywhere in the country," Paying homage to Audre Lorde (Poet, Activist and author of ZAMI: A New Spelling of My Name), the organization was born in Atlanta and birthed by Mary Anne Adams – the organization's founder and Executive Director.

In 2011, Adams, a Metro Atlanta community activist, social worker and public health research professional, noticed that in increasing numbers, many Black lesbians older than age 50 were beginning to disappear from community-based activities and organizations. She wondered if health is-

suess, the youth-oriented LGBTQ+ culture, or racialized ageism might be to blame. In response and in an effort to increase opportunities for networking and social support, and to explore the healthcare needs and coping strategies, Adams founded ZAMI NOBLA. By 2015, what started out as social media networking and outreach effort became an official 501c3 non-profit organization. Today, ZAMI NOBLA has expanded beyond Georgia with a burgeoning North Carolina Chapter and more on the rise. Interest and excitement for what the organization offers prompted a decrease in the 50-year-old age requirement for members to 40.

The organization's North Carolina Chapter is currently home to 30 paid members that include many Northeastern transplants and a sprinkling of native North Carolinians statewide. At the helm is Leland, North Carolina resident Janyce Jackson Jones. Jones is a founding member of the organization's North Carolina State Chapter [formed in the summer of 2021] and currently serves as President.

Jones was born in Florida, reared in Brooklyn, New York and lived for many years in Newark New Jersey. Along with her life partner of 14 years, she relocated to North Carolina in 2016. A quintessential advocate who has served as a pastor [Newark's Unity Fellowship Church], community volunteer and board member for organizations like SAGE Wilmington and the NAACP Jones also felt a void in services, support and representation of the mature Black LGBTQ+ community in North Carolina.

These days, it's clear her efforts have brought about substantial and positive change. Her knack for organizing and motivating has made a difference in the lives of local Black lesbians, diminishing a void that is not nearly as prominent as it previously was.

Jones eagerly shares what it's like being President of the organization's North Carolina Chapter: "Overall, it is one of the most rewarding things that I've done in my life. Mainly because I receive as much or more than I give in keeping the organization afloat. It's awesome. I get to meet new women, new Black lesbian women. I really wanted to start this chapter because in the area that I live in there's not an abundance of Black lesbian groups or support for Black lesbians over the age of 40. So, it was a selfish idea that selflessly serves others, and we need each other." Though technically retired, Jones continued to say that serving as the NC Chapter President is work, which requires her to keep a keen eye on her time management and adhering to her schedule of presidential duties and activities.

Activities are a leading component of ZAMI NOBLA. The NC Chapter offers members monthly Potlucks – with locations often rotating through the homes of members who host them. At those times, the women gather to socialize, support each other, dance and dine. The group also has access to fishing trips, and as well as online and in person events focused on staying abreast of inclusive language, wellness and community activism, affordable housing and research projects centered on identifying the needs of aging Black lesbians' health and wellness.

It truly seems to be a resource the wom-



Sharon Harley and wife Jacqueline Marshall enjoy the activities and ability to bring Black women together that ZAMI NOBLA offers. CREDIT: Facebook

en are sincerely enjoying. One such member is Kim M., one of the group's Northeastern transplants. She joined ZAMI NOBLA shortly after losing her beloved older sister and explained, "She helped raise me. I moved here to Concord to be with her and her family, and lost her in 2022 on Christmas day. I joined ZAMI NOBLA a few months later and now have so many sisters. So, my major loss also became gain – though there's no way to ever replace my sister." She went on to say, "[the group] almost feels like a sorority for mature Black lesbians. It's like family and so much more than a meetup group."

Sharon Harley, originally from Brooklyn, New York has been a member of ZAMI NOBLA's NC Chapter for two years, with no plans of leaving any time soon. For Harley also, the group offers a sisterhood that offers safety and affirmation. "I feel so secure. Everyone has a part to play and I'm enjoying these women and the roles they play in our gatherings and our lives." Harley's wife Jacqueline Marshall is a board member with the organization and equally enthusiastic about the organization's mission, activities and ability to bring women together in an empowering manner.

The organization's members have so much to offer each other and community, presenting opportunities for internal networking and more. With members who have had [or currently have] careers in such fields as professional life coaches, performance artists, marketing professionals, public health researchers, clergy and culinary artists – just to name a few – ZAMI NOBLA can look inward first when arranging events like webinars, in person presentations and guidance on health, wellness and advocacy.

It's quite possible that might just be the reason why – even though the NC chapter currently has a modest membership of 30 paid members – their gatherings often exceed that number.

As chapter president, Jones is acutely aware of the importance for growth in the organization. "I'd like to see our membership grow throughout the state," she explains, "involving and connecting more women. When we come together, we often realize that many of us have the same needs and desires and that things are more doable than we think." :

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ZAMI NOBLA NC Chapter President Janyce Jackson Jones.
CREDIT: Sarah J. Stephens Photography

Centers help provide a sense of family and belonging to LGBTQ+ and HIV+ folks

The Drop, PowerHouse, Triangle Empowerment and SEEDS of Healing offer help



by Taylor Heeden
Qnotes Staff Writer

Having a sense of community and belonging is crucial for anyone's success, but for LGBTQ+ people, that can be hard to find. Queer folks are often ostracized from mainstream circles, so there are times we have to create our own spaces where we can share our experiences and come together. In addition to general stigmatization, LGBTQ+ people are also disproportionately low income, experience homelessness, lack access to healthcare and have a greater risk of contracting HIV.

Individuals' race, gender identity and more can also play a factor in one's success. As it currently stands, people of color are at an even greater disadvantage than their white counterparts. An example of this can be found in HIV/AIDS rates among men: while Black men only account for 13% of the United States' population, they make up over 42 percent of AIDS cases in the country. For Black women, it's a similar story — according to the U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services Office of Minority Health, Black women make up around 14.5 percent of all of the AIDS cases in the U.S.

This has created a need for intersectional spaces to help address all the needs of marginalized community members, and across North Carolina, there are multiple spaces working toward this vision. From RAIN's The Drop in Charlotte to SEEDS of Healing just outside of Wilmington, each of these organizations are dedicated to helping educate folks on HIV prevention as well as provide essential services to ensure people's basic needs are met.

The Drop — Charlotte

The U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services had identified Mecklenburg County as one of 48 counties across the country that's a hotspot for new HIV diagnoses. According to reporting from Spectrum News, special resources are be-



PowerHouse is located at 3552 Beatties Ford Rd. in the heart of Charlotte.
CREDIT: Screen Capture

ing allocated for the Mecklenburg area to try reducing new HIV diagnoses in the U.S. by 90 percent by 2025.

Some of those resources have gone to the Drop — a space created by RAIN, an HIV awareness organization based out of Charlotte. The Drop is a "welcoming community-based safe space for young men of color who have sex with men, who are provided HIV education, prevention and essential support services," according to the organization's website.

The Drop helps provide essential services to queer men of color,

some of which include full panel HIV/STI testing, counseling, a food pantry, a clothing closet, computers to use in house, resume building, shower services and more. Program Manager Devin Cokley



Triangle Empowerment Center depends on volunteers and its resilient community to help spread awareness regarding HIV prevention. CREDIT: Facebook

told Spectrum News in December that the organization was able to help identify multiple HIV cases in the community throughout 2023.

"We have, current to date, over 1,000 [HIV] tests, which is a record for RAIN. And, we have been able to find 25 positives since the beginning of the year, since March," Cokley said. "Having the doors open has given us the opportunity to serve the community a little bit better."

Folks can drop into the center during operating times — 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Mondays through Wednesdays and on Fridays, 9 a.m. to 7 p.m. on Thursdays and 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. on Saturdays. The Drop is located at 5114 Monroe Road in Charlotte.

PowerHouse 2.0 — Charlotte
PowerHouse is very similar to The

Drop in its mission — it's a drop-in style center for young, queer men of color to come together and have access to essential resources. This center serves as a hub for queer men of color in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg area and offers a wide array of services, including free and confidential HIV/STI testing that can be done in-house or the testing kits can be sent to people's homes.

PowerHouse's mission statement reads:

"Our mission is to provide a safe, non-judgmental space for our clients to access HIV prevention and education services as well as essential support services. We are committed to empowering our clients and providing them with the resources they need to stay safe and informed. Our counselors are dedicated to building a supportive community and helping our clients reach their goals."

Other services besides HIV/STI testing the organization provides include PrEP services, career guidance, computer and media use and more. Folks can drop into the center located at 3552 Beatties Ford Rd. from 9

a.m. to 5 p.m. on Mondays, Thursdays and Fridays; 9 a.m. to 7 p.m. on Tuesdays and Wednesdays; and every second and fourth Saturday from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m.

Triangle Empowerment Center — Durham

Located at 112 Broadway St. in downtown Durham is the Triangle Empowerment Center, a non-profit volunteer-run community organization providing a variety of health-related services to residents of the Durham, Wake, Orange and Johnson counties and the surrounding areas.

According to the organization's website, the Triangle Empowerment Center offers a wide array of services — from social gatherings to HIV/STI panel testing. Their mission statement reads:

"There are no membership fees, no initiation, no minimum requirement of



The Drop, ran by RAIN in Charlotte, offers HIV prevention treatments and testing for LGBTQ+ men of color. CREDIT: Screen Capture



SEEDS of Healing, located just outside of Wilmington, helps sponsor the AIDS walk in town as a part of its community engagement.
CREDIT: Facebook

meetings/events to attend, etc. Everyone is welcome to seek services at Triangle Empowerment Center or to come to our events. Because lots of people of color, shape, sexual orientation, religion and culture make up the community we serve, we don't clique or exclude anyone ... Even though Triangle Empowerment Center's services are primarily geared towards minority [males who have sex with males], anyone is always welcome. No matter if you're straight, gay, lesbian, transgender, etc., we welcome you. The only requirement is that you come as you are."

For more information about appointments and activities from the Triangle Empowerment Center, people can email triangleempowermentcenter@yahoo.com or send a message to the group's Facebook page

SEEDS of Healing — Wilmington

Just outside of Wilmington in Castle Hayne, North Carolina, resides SEEDS of Healing (SOH), a not-for-profit organization providing HIV awareness and education to the eastern North Carolina community. SOH utilizes different community outreach tactics to help educate the importance of HIV prevention, some of these methods include "mobile-targeted HIV testing, consistent in-person and online educational programming, and annual events that build community, awareness, and resilience," according to the organization's website.

SOH offers special programming for Black Women with an HIV diagnosis; HIV testing, and promotion of PrEP, focusing on reaching Black gay and bisexual men, LGBTQ+ youth

and Transgender persons in its service area.

According to the organization's mission statement:

"HIV affects those of lower socioeconomic status and impoverished neighborhoods at a disproportionately higher rate. Trends demonstrate the increased impact of the disease on women, minorities, older adults, rural residents and those living in the South. Our county's hospital is the largest HIV provider in southeast North Carolina and provides HIV care to the neighboring rural counties ... We are asking you to consider getting involved to END THE EPIDEMIC."

More information about SOH and its programs can be found on its website at <https://www.seedsofhealinginc.org/>. ::

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"Seek: How Curiosity Can Transform Your Life and Change the World"

Out in Print



by Terri Schlichenmeyer
Quotes Contributing Writer

"Seek: How Curiosity Can Transform Your Life and Change the World" by Scott Shigeoka
c.2023, Balance
\$30.00
243 pages

Curiosity killed the cat. That's what Grandma said when you were a nosy little kid, but hey, you needed to learn about your world. Asking questions, that's what kids do - and so do savvy grown-ups. Curiosity may have plagued Grandma's cat, but as you'll see in "Seek" by Scott Shigeoka, a lack of it could do you harm.

His friends worried about him. When Scott Shigeoka quit his job to travel around America for a year, they figured he'd be the target of all kinds of bad things. As a queer Asian American man, Shigeoka wasn't searching for himself, and he surely wasn't looking for trouble. No, he was looking for strangers, to see what we have in common with one another.

"I wanted to feel less scared and angry all the time," he says,

Shigeoka's interpretation of studies is that our general lack of curiosity about one another "is literally killing us." With that in mind, he left his home and his job and headed out to small towns in the south, a reservation in Minnesota, a Trump rally and a retreat center with nuns and millennials. He squashed his inner negativity, bravely swallowed his reluctance, approached people and cultivated his curiosity by speaking with religious leaders, zealots and everyday folks. In doing so, he learned to D.I.V.E. into his outward curiosity.

Detach, he says, and let go of "the ABCs": assumptions, biases and certainty. Even if you think you're against racism, homophobia or any other intolerance, you "still have unconscious biases that need to be... interrupted and challenged." Learn to act with Intent. Know what questions to ask so that you can best learn about others and their thoughts. Show someone their Value by remembering that their political leaning, for instance, "is only one piece of a person's life and personality." And finally, learn to Embrace what's in front of you. This will "open the doors" to "more fulfillment and happiness to your life."

Does it sometimes seem as though today's world is filled with awkward moments? Like you want to communicate with people you meet, but the rules have changed? Or maybe you have and if that's the case, then author Scott Shigeoka has a fix. In "Seek," he shows how one tiny action



can open great big doors.

It seems kind of fun, actually: You meet someone new, show a gentle bit of interest and pay attention, ask a few open-ended questions and voila! New friend or client. New, healthy lines of communication. New or enhanced working relationship. Big yay.

And yet - while this book is very useful, easy to grasp and enthusiastic, Shigeoka has very few cautionary words to offer readers who may be too eager. Some of the ideas here, in the wrong hands, may be perceived as obnoxious or threatening. Understanding when to back off might have been good advice here, too.

Keep that in mind, know your target, open your heart and have fun. If your curiosity needs fluffing up, "Seek" may be the purrfect book for you. ::

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SCOTT SHIGEOKA



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Charlotte Pride Kicks 2024 into High Gear

by Liz Schob (she/her), Communications Manager

The new year is officially here. For her first column of 2024, Charlotte Pride Communications Manager Liz Schob shares some of the exciting new and returning programs the organization has in store for 2024.

Hey, Y'all.

I'm writing this column as I sit in a Las Vegas hotel room where members of Pride organizations from around the country

We've expanded our footprint from last year and still have a few vendor spaces available, so we invite organizations with open positions or resources to reserve a table at <https://cltpri.de/jobfair>.

Film submissions are also open for Reel Out Charlotte – the Queen City's Annual LGBTQ Film Festival, which returns to the Independent Picture House May 15 – 19,



CREDIT: Mike Mazely/Courtesy Charlotte Pride

are meeting for the annual United States Association of Prides conference. This is my first time attending and it's been humbling listening to other organizations share their struggles and successes; we all have our own experiences, yet we are united in purpose. It's been great connecting with other Pride organizers and sharing similar stories of challenge and triumph. Being in this space and connecting with other Pride organizations as we kick our own season into high gear has been invigorating.

When I return to the Queen City, we will be kicking our 2024 season into high gear, and I am excited to share with you some of the programming we have planned. With three staff and a dedicated group of board members and volunteers, we are building on the momentum from our 2023 season to bring back our annual programs and to revitalize programs like Latine Pride and Trans Pride that were paused at the height of the coronavirus pandemic.

On Tuesday, February 13th, Charlotte Pride is hosting a job fair from 12-4pm in the Parr Center at Central Piedmont Community College's Central Campus near Uptown Charlotte. This annual event provides a space for LGBTQ job seekers to feel comfortable and empowered as they connect with employers who value diversity, equity, and inclusion. Several community partners will be joining us to provide free workshops throughout the day.

2024. We've added three prizes this year: 1) Best Short Film – Viewers' Choice with a \$500 prize; 2) Best Short Film – Jury Awards with a \$200 prize; and 3) Best Feature Film – Jury Award with a \$300 prize. The film submission deadline is April 7, and we look forward to bringing you an incredible lineup of LGBTQ cinema this spring. Select films during Reel Out Charlotte: The Queen City's Annual LGBTQ Film Festival are sponsored by Culture Blocks— a community partnership funded by Mecklenburg County. Through this partnership, one showing each day of the festival will be completely free to the community. More information can be found at <https://charlottepride.org/reelout/>

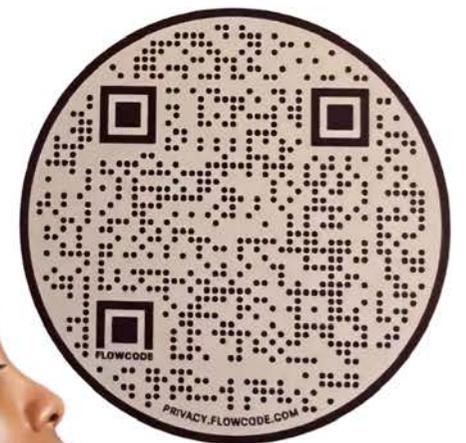
The record-breaking Charlotte Pride Festival and Parade Weekend returns to the Queen City August 17 – 18, 2024. We've already launched vendor, parade, and entertainer applications so make sure to apply soon as spaces fill up quickly. Volunteer, Charlotte Pride Drag Pageant, and Pride Week applications will launch later this spring. Mark your calendars as we take over Uptown Charlotte for what is already shaping up to be another incredible weekend.

For more information about the job fair, our film festival, or any other event we have coming up this year, please visit our website (charlottepride.org/) or sign up for our newsletter (<https://cltpri.de/newsletter>).

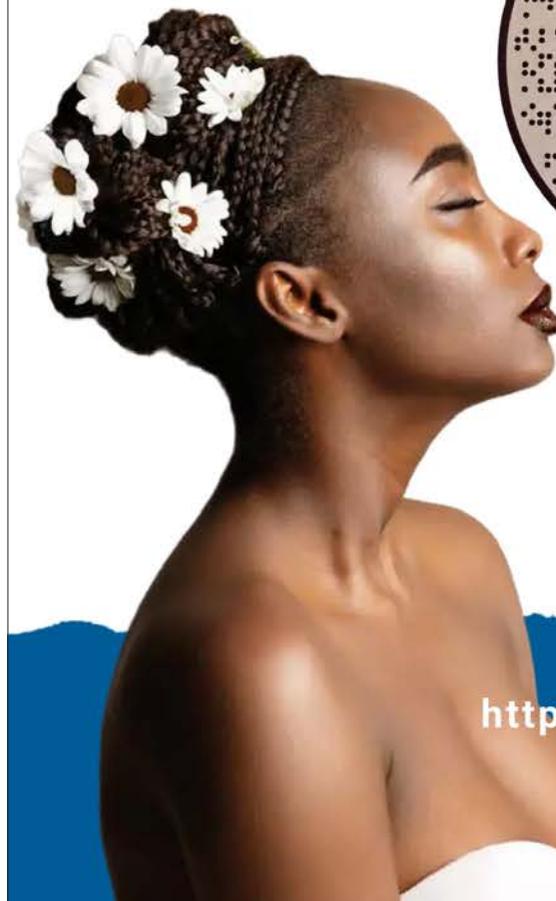


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Valentine's Day for the Girls, Gays and Theys

Exploring the floral, flavorful and flirty fun-filled history of the romantic holiday



by Taylor Heeden
Qnotes Staff Writer

Valentine's Day hasn't always been inclusive toward queer couples — most advertisement campaigns would opt to feature a vaguely attractive, mostly white couple walking hand-in-hand, clearly head over heels in love with each other. Now, companies like Hallmark, Lush, Jared Jewelers and more are including the stories of multiple LGBTQ+ couples, finally working toward a world where queer love is normal and accepted.

Valentine's Day is full of traditions both heterosexual and LGBTQ+ identifying couples participate in — ranging from giving roses or a chocolate treat to a spouse, to flirtatious post-date night fun. **Qnotes** has created a brief guide to three pillars of Valentine's: the floral gifts, flavorful sweets and flirty gadgets and gizmos to spice up your Valentine's Day post-date activities.

Floral Gifts and Their History



One of the most famous traditions associated with Valentine's Day is the exchange of flowers, most specifically red roses. This kind of rose was originally cultivated in eastern Asia over 5,000 years ago and became popular during the time of the Roman Empire, according to historians. Red roses were also grown in the Middle East to be used for perfume, party décor and medicine, but most of the roses we recognize today can be traced back to the 1700s when the flower started to make its way back into European culture.

Fast Forward to Victorian times when Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, the wife of a British ambassador to Turkey at the time, became obsessed with flower language — the concept that every flower holds a different meaning — which quickly became a trendy idea in Europe. Eventually, a dictionary for flowers and their meanings titled "Langage des fleurs" (Language of Flowers) was published in 1819, and it's in there the meaning behind the rose is derived.

According to the "Langage des fleurs," "Nature seems to have exhausted all her skill in the freshness, the beauty of form, the fragrance, the delicate colour, and the gracefulness which she has bestowed upon the Rose."

The color of roses can also hold different meanings, according to an article from Martha Stewart Living. Red roses are often associated with passion, while pink roses

are there to convey appreciation. Yellow roses symbolize friendship and happiness, while the white one has historically represented innocence.

Ever wonder where all those roses come from during a time that's usually so cold the plant is normally dormant in our region? According to NBC news, the United States imports 80 percent of the Valentine's Day stock — in all colors — from the South American country of Columbia

Regardless of what color rose you decide to get your loved ones this Valentine's Day, the history of their meaning comes from the days of courting and regency, and they've traveled quite a distance to reach their intended destination.

Flavorful Sweets: How Chocolate Became a Valentine's Day Treat



The first written record of Valentine's Day as a romantic holiday actually comes from the writer of the Canterbury Tales, Geoffrey Chaucer, but during those days in medieval Europe, sugar and sweets were luxuries.

Chocolate didn't become a Valentine's Day staple until the mid-1800s when Richard Cadbury was in charge of sales for his family's candy empire sharing the same name as his surname. According to *History.com*, Cadbury had recently perfected its recipes and processes for making drinking chocolate, which left the company with a surplus of cocoa butter. In turn, that extra

cocoa butter was used to create the modern day candy bars we all know today.

However, Richard came up with a new way to market the "eating chocolate" to the public: create a box to place them in, decorated with images associated with love, including Cupids and roses. The box of chocolates were sold with the idea of them serving a dual purpose: the chocolates would be enjoyed by intended consumers, and then the box could be reused to hold various culturally significant household items at the time, ranging from love letters to pieces of hair from spouses and children.

The original boxes were more ornate in appearance than the classic red box people are used to seeing in today's day and age. The boxes were meant to last, so they were often made of different materials, ranging from wood to metal and some were even covered in velvet. Other versions had floral designs or were made into heart shapes, and then there were those that had metallic trim and hammered textures. Some still exist today in the form of family heirlooms or in museums.

While it's unclear if Richard was the one who created the iconic heart-shaped box, many historians credit him as the first to sell one.

Flirty Fun: A Deep Dive Into Sex Toys



While Valentine's Day is often associated with love and romance, there is a slightly naughtier, lust-filled side to the holiday. Whether you call it coitus, the hanky panky, intercourse or what have you, sex is closely associated with the romance-themed holiday.

The history of sex toys is a fascinating journey that spans centuries, reflecting changing societal attitudes towards sexuality and pleasure. While the use of sex toys may seem like a modern phenomenon, evidence suggests their existence dates back to ancient civilizations.

One of the earliest documented sex toys came from ancient Greece, where archeologists have uncovered artifacts resembling dildos. These phallic objects were often made from materials such as wood and stone, and were also believed to be used for religious rituals.

Moving forward in time, the Renaissance era saw a surge in the creation of more intricate and artistic sex toys. During this period, Europe experienced a revival of interest in classical art and culture, and this was reflected in the craftsmanship of pleasure devices. However, the moral and religious values of the time led to the suppression of sexual expression within society, and the use of sex toys became "taboo."

The Industrial Revolution introduced new materials and production techniques. Advances in rubber production, for example, led to the mass production of affordable and flexible sex toys. Despite this, discussions around sexuality remained controversial.

The 20th century witnessed significant strides in the acceptance and availability of sex toys. The sexual revolution of the 1960s and 1970s challenged traditional norms, promoting sexual liberation and openness. This cultural shift paved the way for the emergence of sex shops and the commercialization of various pleasure products.

The advent of the internet in the late 20th century further revolutionized the sex toy industry. Online platforms provided a discreet and accessible means for individuals to explore and purchase a wide range of products. Additionally, the development of sex-positive movements and communities helped destigmatize the use of sex toys, encouraging open conversations about sexual pleasure.

Today, the sex toy industry is a thriving and diverse market, catering to a wide range of preferences and desires. The history of sex toys reflects the evolving attitudes towards sexuality, from ancient rituals to contemporary conversations about pleasure, consent, and sexual well-being. As societal views continue to evolve, the future of sex toys likely promises further innovation and acceptance in the pursuit of fulfilling intimate experiences. ::

For Valentine's Day: Date night in Charlotte

Local couple shares their experience out on the town celebrating romance

By Qnotes Staff

For Valentine's Day, Qnotes asked local Charlotte couple Brad Gorman and Trevor Hoppe to tell us about their date night out as inspiration for those in search of an interesting and entertaining way to share the annual celebration of romance with someone special.

Here's what they had to say...

Qnotes: Tell us what restaurant you selected, and why.

Trevor Hoppe: Everybody always talks about the hot new and usually very expensive restaurants opening in Charlotte. But sometimes an old standard just slaps. That was Alexander Michael's for our date night. The Cajun fries were yummy and my creamy pasta with blackened chicken ("What It Is") was super flavorful.

Brad Gorman: We barely ever get to uptown, so we checked out Alexander Michael's in Fourth Ward. The interior was beautiful with charming wood accents; our server Lilly was lovely; and the menu was simple southern and sweet. I got the catfish and Trevor had the pasta, which was delicious, so I stole some bites. Also, after 10 years together and five years married, we have to spice things up a little bit, so we got the Cajun Fries as an appetizer. They were so good! Plus the bill was only \$60 for dinner for two and one libation.

Qnotes: In addition to a nice dinner, what else is on your calendar for a perfect Valentine date night?

Trevor: Did you know Valentine's Day is on a Wednesday this year? Did you know the Mint Museum has free admission Wednesday evenings? Need we say more.

Brad: Who doesn't love free art? When we learned Mint Museum is free on Wednesday nights, we simply could not pass that up. It was busy! The five floors of art were stunning and we were surprised and delighted to come around a corner and see a small sculpture by Keith Haring, our favorite beloved departed queer artist.

Qnotes: Traditionally, most couples wrap up their Valentine's night out at a special place that involves something sweet. If that's the case for you guys, where did you go for dessert?

Brad: Amelie's. [It's] like going to Paris without even booking a flight. I'm [describing] it as inventive and confident. I ordered some chocolate cake, which was meh, but Trevor ordered better, so I ate half of his caramel treat.

Trevor: I ordered right because I did the only sensible thing when entering a dining establishment [for the first time].



Dining at Alexander Michael's.
CREDIT: Courtesy Gorman & Hoppe

I asked the person working there what was the most delicious thing on offer. My caramel brownie confection was insanely good!

Trevor Hoppe and Brad Gorman love exploring local dishes and trying all the top restaurants they can handle. They live in Plaza Midwood with an adorable old cat named Nomi. ::

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Kim Petras made musical history as first trans artist to win a Grammy

One year ago this month, Petras and Sam Smith captured a Grammy in the best pop/duo category for the song "Unholy"

By Mykah Buff

German pop star Kim Petras is taking the world by storm after making history a year ago this month as the first transgender woman to ever win a Grammy Award in the best pop/duo category, for "Unholy," a collaboration with Sam Smith.

Petras started making music in her teens, releasing a number of songs independently from 2017 to 2019, that charted on Billboard's Dance/Electronic songs chart. She also independently released her first two full-length projects, "Clarity" and "Turn Off the Light" in 2019, as well.

Following her history-making moment at the 2023 Grammy Awards, Forbes says the 30 year-old pop sensation got to team up with one of her heroes, rapper Nicki Minaj, on "Alone," the lead single from Petras' debut studio album, "Feed the Beast."

"Petras has already won a Grammy... for 'Unholy,' her duet with Sam Smith," reported Forbes magazine. "Now, the Grammy winner is shooting for another accolade [with] 'Alone,' which finds her teaming up with one of her heroes, Nicki Minaj."

After Petras and Smith's Grammy performance of "Unholy," the two were met with a wave of backlash from critics, who, according to Pink News, called the duo "degenerate filth," claiming the song promoted satanic worship.

Despite the negative response, Pink says Petras and Smith were still graced with support from musical icons such as Madonna.

The European pop singer has indicated she believes some people were bothered by the song and video because of its no-holds-barred presentation of the two

performers LGBTQ+ identities: Petras is transgender and Smith is non-binary.

"'Unholy' was a song that was so about me and Sam," Petras told Pink News. "Our identities and stuff like that, and I think so many people just really tried to tear that down."

The 31-year-old artist said she's been faced with some negative response for simply being transgender and the subject matter of her music for quite a while, but she's learn to deal with the cynicism as she's continued on her journey through life to reach a point of finding her true and authentic self.

"I've had people protest my shows since my first tour (2019's the Broken Tour), so I'm used to that," Petras told iHeartRadio.

"I mean, just being trans, being part of the LGBTQ community you're just used to that; to people saying and openly saying you're living wrong and that you're going to hell," said Petras.

She went on to say those sort of comments have been something she's had to deal with since childhood.

"So that was like since I was a kid honestly, how people reacted towards me," Petras said. "I just kind of got used to it and I was like, Well, I am the way I am and I have to live with that."

During "Call Her Daddy," a podcast by Alex Cooper which aired on June 28, 2023, Petras discussed how anti-trans intolerance and hate continues to grow and her efforts to stand up for the right to live the way they choose and to express themselves freely.

She spoke out about how trans peo-

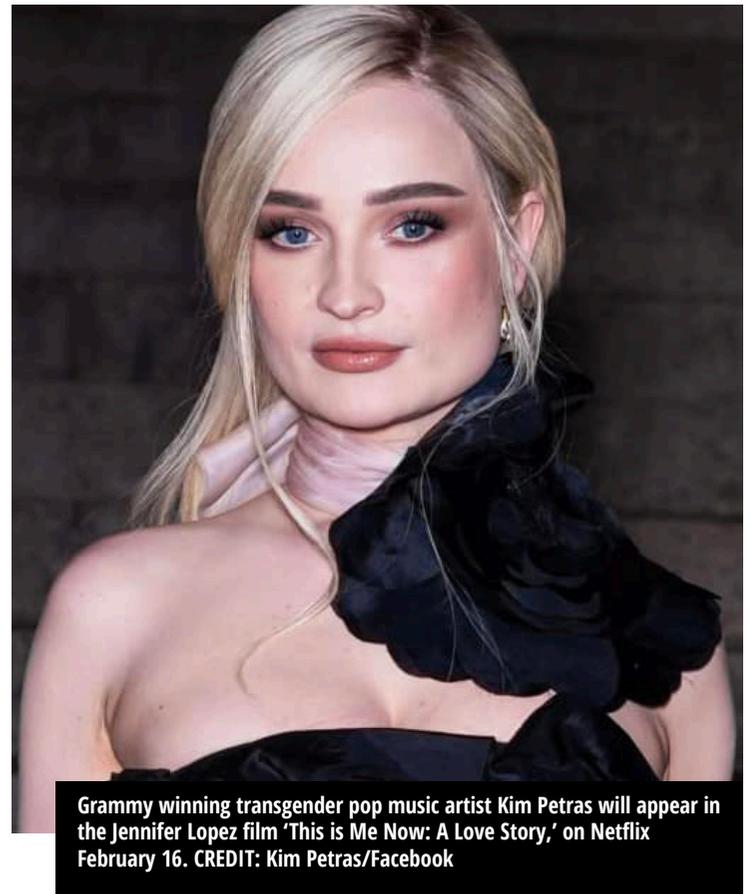
ple are discriminated against; and how LGBTQ+ intra-community empathy and support help create a strong and united force.

"It's brutal how people treat trans people," said Petras.

She described the way things are presently for the trans community and the way their lives are negatively impacted by the anti-trans agenda sweeping the nation. Petras emphasized the shame and judgment a trans individual can face after disclosing their trans identity, noting that the violence can get so bad that it can even lead to murder.

"The judgment around it is still so intense and scary," Petras says. "There's so much actual murder and things that are happening to the trans community. [It's] really terrifying."

Petras is also getting her feet wet in



Grammy winning transgender pop music artist Kim Petras will appear in the Jennifer Lopez film 'This is Me Now: A Love Story,' on Netflix February 16. CREDIT: Kim Petras/Facebook

film, as she has appearances in Jennifer Lopez's new Amazon original film, "This is Me...Now: A Love Story," which has an accompanying album as well. The film is set to be released on Feb. 16, exclusively on Amazon Prime Video. ::

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Our People: Rayvon Moore

A young clergy member inclusively brings comfort to those in need



by L'Monique King
Qnotes Staff Writer

The Black church has a long and spirited history of providing comfort, a place of refuge and a breeding ground for social justice, since its early beginnings when enslaved Africans established and relied on them. No matter your thoughts on Christianity or organized religion as a whole, a discussion on American history, politics and/or culture couldn't be intelligently had without recognition of the Black church. Naturally, like most institutions, leadership is just as crucial as individuals that make up congregations.

Leadership comes in many forms and every now and then someone comes along who really shakes things up. More impressive however, is when that person, one with such a deep commitment to their own ideals actually shakes things up with the acceptance, support and affirmation of others with different ideals from their own. It's a subtle and selfless kind of altruism with the potential to make a lasting impact.

At under 35 years of age, Pastor Ravon Moore is one of those people. He is a young Black gay man who is truly making a difference in the lives of others.

Originally from Orangeburg, S. C., Moore has lived in South Charlotte since he relocated to the area in 2014 after his father passed away. Moore has officially served as a pastor since 2022 but began preaching at just seven-years-old with the United Methodist Church.

Almost two decades later he serves as Chaplin for The Hospice of Lancaster, South Carolina and Atrium Health-CMC where he also serves as Bereavement Coordinator. In these roles, he offers "comfort and spiritual care to people who feel disconnected from themselves, God or whatever deities or spiritual beliefs they may have." During this interview he shares some of his thoughts and beliefs on sharing his faith through an inclusive lens which aims to support and affirm communities that have often been hurt or ostracized by the very thing that should provide respite and motivation.

L'Monique King: What attracted you to ministry?

Ravon Moore: Being in church as a little boy – seeing the culture of fellowship as well as watching people find their healing space.

LMK: Is ministering to people who are not of the same faith, agnostic or atheist challenging?

RM: In the beginning it was. Now it has become very interesting and educational for me. It gives me a chance to learn about who people are and what brings them to a place of wholeness – so it expands my mind in understanding people. It's increased my passion for meeting the needs of others.

LMK: As a Christian and a person with immense faith in God, how do you comfort those who do believe as you do?



RM: By meeting them where they are, wherever they may be. Even though I'm a Christian, biblical scripture says, "love covers a multitude..." and so I believe meeting people where they are with love versus imposing my spiritual beliefs upon them allows them to feel seen as well as heard.

LMK: What was it like for you, preaching at seven?

RM: I rushed life, because of growing up preaching. When I turned 20, I already felt 30. When you're a child in ministry you [are put in a position to] have to experience adulthood early. Spiritual leaders want to start modeling and shaping you, so you're seeing and hearing things you really shouldn't be dealing with as a child. Things like divorce and other traumas, exposing you to the [harsh] realities of life. Those spiritual leaders are giving something good to you also, by guiding and teaching you about faith, but I really want our younger generation to experience life, go to high school, go to college (many don't) and have friends. Not just those you see in church.

LMK: What's your greatest challenge as an LGBTQ+ clergy member?

RM: Battling with traditional religious order and my belief in who I feel God has called and chosen me to be. Over time, we've been looked at as sinful, unwanted and an abomination. So, I've had to deal with feelings of wondering if God had any need or use for me. God had no longer become my protector and ally but my adversary and enemy.

LMK: What changed that for you?

RM: Bishop O.C. Allan II. Watching him help uplift many other people in the LGBTQ community was a great inspiration to me. He took it upon himself to bring together

people from the LGBTQ community and allies together and love them right where they were. He literally built a community that shifted to become a family.

LMK: In your role as a Bereavement Coordinator what words of consolation do you offer those facing the loss of a loved one?

RM: I tell partners and loved ones to embrace the lasting impact of each valued moment and every day shared.

LMK: Is there a special person in your life that you spend free time with? Are you partnered?

RM: Yes. We've been together for about six months and it's wonderful. He's a hardworking gentleman with a great sense of concern [for others]. We met at a gathering with friends at a time when I was afraid to love again after my previous relationship ended abusively. Now, I can say – my relationship is one of the best decisions that I've made in a long time; facing fear head on.

LMK: Soooo, dinner or the movies?

RM: Movies.

LMK: What's self-care look like for you?

RM: <Hearty laughter> This is the third time I've been asked that question today. I feel like God is trying to tell me something. It looks like taking a step back and being comfortable with the boundaries you've set when you step away from what you normally do that keeps you moving at a working pace. Also, it is a chance, a time when you get to be selfish. So, when I practice self-care, I'm having a nice night of wine with friends, having conversations and reflective moments.

LMK: Red wine or white wine?

RM: Red.

LMK: What are your top two bucket list items?

RM: I want to live in Switzerland when I turn 65 and I want to build a chaplaincy educational program within the LGBTQ community that teaches others how to become Chaplains.

LMK: In thinking about today's socio-political climate, what concerns you most?

RM: The rights of people being taken away. The idea that freedom can be taken away and [government with] a dictatorship mentality that seems to keep forgetting; LGBTQ+ community members have a right to make decisions, live with them and the life they've been given.

LMK: This seems like a good time to ask you – if you do, what makes you want to curse?

RM: Honestly, nothing makes me curse, it's just a part of my natural human DNA <chuckling>. I feel like if it comes out and it does. I feel like society has made such a bad thing, but they need to understand that even Peter had a human moment when he had to deny Jesus and he cursed.

LMK: Aside from that, what would people be surprised to know about you?

RM: That I battle with confidence issues. It's hard believing in myself when I've had to fight through so much criticism and judgment from so many people. I've experienced so much failure that success didn't look normal. However, I've gradually grown to make success part of my day-to-day life and I'm learning to see success in a different way so that it has become a part of me and not detached from me.

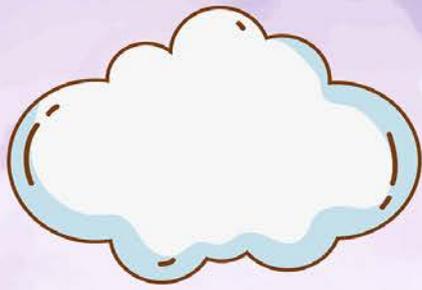
LMK: What's next for you? Working on any potential successes?

RM: I'm very excited about planning "The Release" a day retreat. It's something that's being put together to help LGBTQ+ and allies of the community release whatever part of them that has a blockage, whether that be the ability to forgive, low self-esteem or trauma from abuse. It will be done through mindfulness, spoken word and open conversation. We'll be serving refreshments – food for the soul. There's no admission fee and it will be held at Hearts United For Good (HUG) on May 4, from 11am to 2pm. So far, we're already getting good responses with a few folks already suggesting that we hold the retreat longer, past two o'clock.

LMK: In closing, are there any thoughts you'd like to share with readers?

RM: I encourage readers to never minimize the vision when God has given you a maximized gift. Whether it be the gift of leading or the gift of love, don't allow self-doubt to stop you from believing in what's right in front of you – your gift. ::

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