

**Our democracy is at risk!
If we are complacent it will FALL**



Matteo Lane

Is he the funniest gay guy ever?



**Eliazar Posada
named ED of
Equality NC**

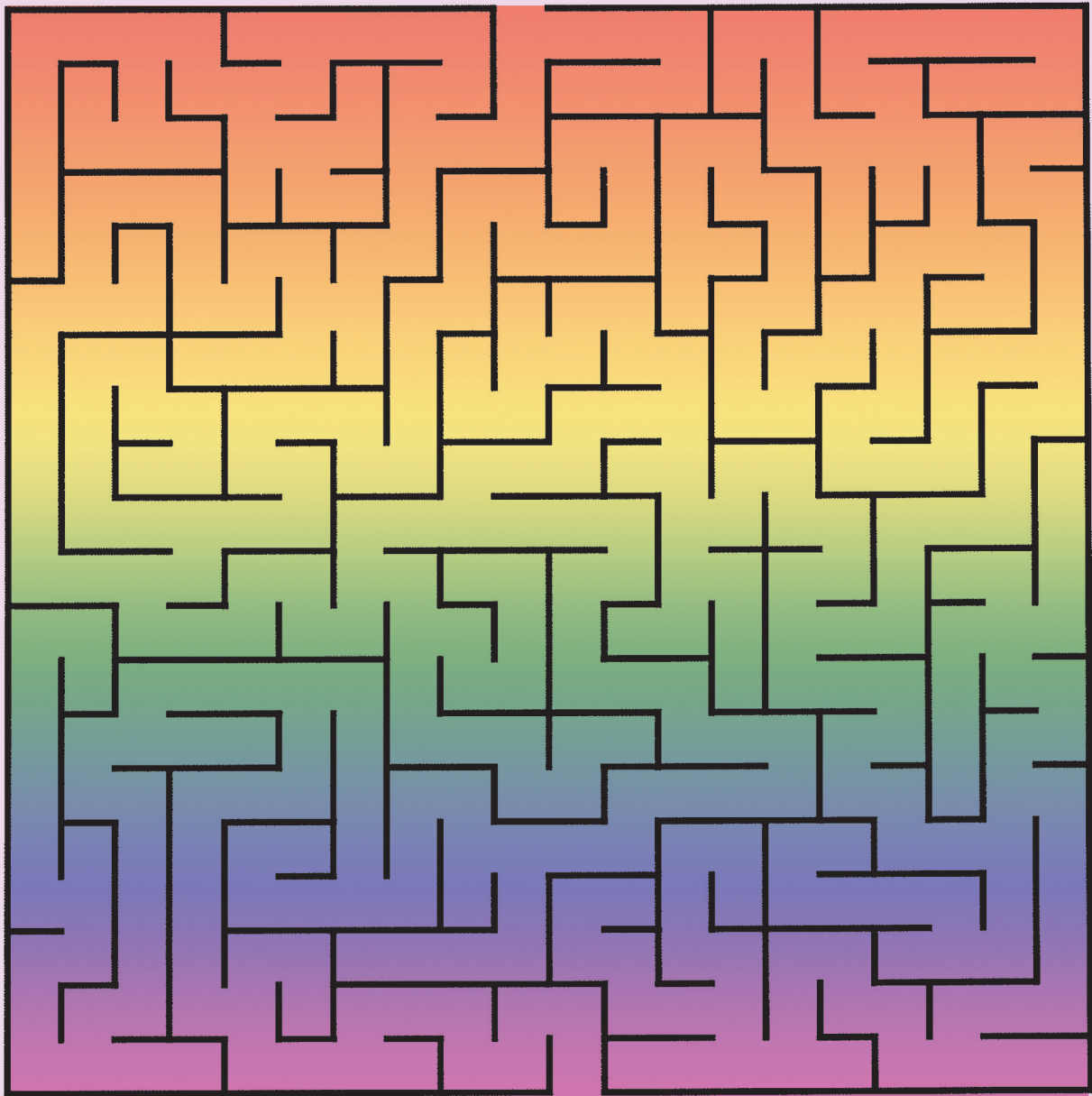
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**Democrat Josh Stein
is leading in the
NC governor race**

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Mission:

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



Our People: Delighted Tobe here

In our latest installment of Our People, we focus on SC resident Clay Smith and the drag entertainer he channels, Delighted Tobe here. Tobe here/Smith recently returned to the Carolinas following an engagement at the historic (and reportedly haunted) Alaskan Hotel in Juneau, Alaska. Fresh off a heat stroke at Charlotte Pride, they'll discuss their career, travel experiences, life journeys and what makes them tick!

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The QC celebrates with CIAF

Blumenthal Arts' Charlotte International Arts Festival (CIAF) returns to the Queen City September 13-29. The annual festival entertains residents and visitors from the surrounding area with local, regional and global artists, artisans and performers in a celebration filled with an exciting blend of culture through live performances, art installations and dining experiences from home and around the world.

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Republicans soften abortion and LGBTQ+ language for official platform

Will they honor their promise if elected? History suggests otherwise



by Taylor Heeden Larkins
Qnotes Staff Writer

This year's Republican National Convention was filled with its fair share of memorable moments — ranging from Hulk Hogan ripping his shirt in half to Kid Rock screaming into a microphone.

However, one of the largest headlines related to the convention broke just days before any speeches were given. The panel in charge of creating the official Republican party platform approved a new document using softened language regarding abortion and same-sex marriage.

NBC News reported it was the party's first time removing any mention of a federal abortion ban. CNN reported former President Donald Trump contributed to the platform by writing some of the sections himself.

The panel met to approve the platform, but for the first time, members of the media and the public weren't allowed to see the proceedings. The platform was approved by an overwhelming vote of 84-18, which appeared to signify a shift in the party's beliefs.

But does it actually?

Many are skeptical the party is actually becoming more moderate on any of these issues. In addition to those skeptical, social conservatives voiced their dissatisfaction with the removal of extremist language, feeling a sense of almost betrayal.

Ultimately, it appears, the Republican Party hopes to use moderate language as a Trojan horse to usher in an extremist agenda targeting America's most vulnerable.

What Led Up to the Change?

It's no secret that after the election of President Joe Biden, Republicans started to lean into culture war rhetoric and politics.

Florida Governor and former presidential candidate Ron DeSantis spearheaded legislative attacks against LGBTQ+ students and educators when he signed the infamous "Don't Say Gay" bill. DeSantis sparked a movement of vast anti-LGBTQ+ legislation, which swept across conservative-led states.

Laws targeting healthcare for trans youth and bans on books featuring queer representation began to pop up all across America. Around the same time, Republican officials claimed Critical Race Theory was infiltrating elementary and middle school classrooms, pitting students against each other. Critical Race Theory is an academic framework often used in higher education courses to examine public policy and history through a racial lens.

These claims resulted in entire curriculums being rewritten to whitewash history — some states even eliminated slavery as a contributing factor in the start of the Civil War. A total of 18 states have passed anti-Critical Race Theory laws, and almost 530 anti-LGBTQ+ bills are currently in the works across the country.

In 2022, the U.S. Supreme Court overruled the nearly 50-year precedent in *Roe v. Wade*, which guaranteed access to abortion on the federal level. After the Court's ruling, 22 states banned abortion or restricted the procedure earlier in pregnancy than what was previously standard.

As a result of stripping access to abortion in nearly half of the U.S., Republicans failed to flip the U.S. Senate, preventing them from completely blocking Biden's agenda. In addition, the number of people seeking abortions increased to the highest rate in nearly a decade, a 10% increase from 2020.

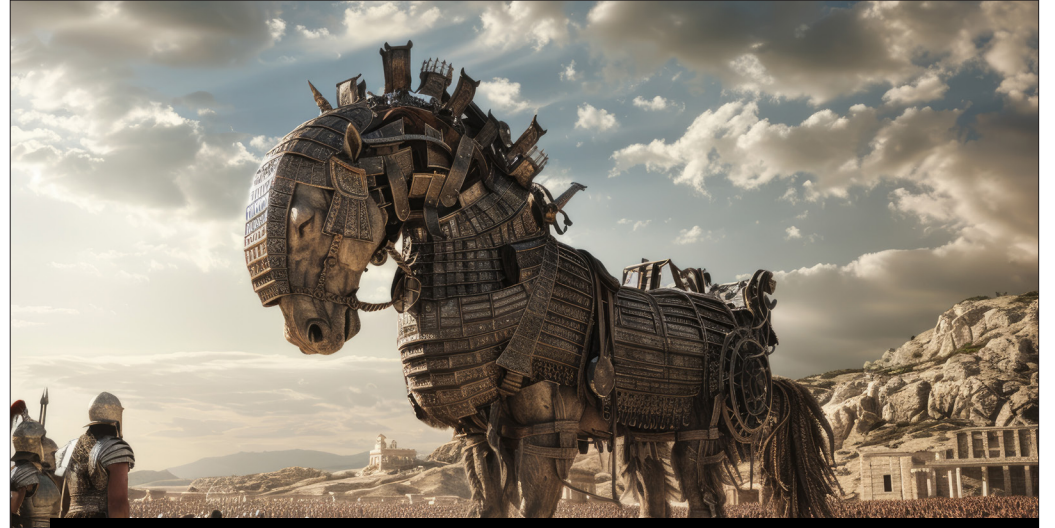
The Pew Research Center released a report revealing 63% of individuals say abortion should be legal in all or most cases, but that wasn't the most insightful discovery. The same report revealed 41% of Republicans believe abortion should be legal, and after a conservative Supreme Court overruled the right to abortion access, a majority of Americans — including conservatives — voiced their disapproval in the ruling.



It can be argued Republicans have alienated a majority of voters via their legislative agenda for the last four years, as 49% of Americans identify as democratic or democratic-leaning and 48% identify as right-leaning or Republican. The more extreme and marginalizing the language used, the more likely Americans will run the other way.

What Exactly Does the New Platform Say?

Trump and his team allegedly advocated to have less socially conservative policies, according to multiple news outlets. The platform was formally named "America First: A Return to Common Sense," and refocuses on trying to "end inflation" and "Make America Affordable Again."



Are Republicans' moderate approach towards abortion and LGBTQ+ issues nothing more than a Trojan horse?

"Ours is a forward-looking Agenda with strong promises that we will accomplish very quickly when we win the White House and Republican Majorities in the House and Senate," Trump said in a social media post.

One platform committee member told NBC the new platform "reflects modern day realities," while it appears to only dodge hot-button issues by using softened terminology to mask the stances Republicans truly have on the issue.

A draft document obtained by CNN reads:

"We believe that the 14th

Dannenfelter said in a statement. "If the Trump campaign decides to remove national protections for the unborn in the GOP platform, it would be a miscalculation that would hurt party unity and destroy pro-life enthusiasm between now and the election."

Are Republicans Becoming More Moderate?

It's hard to say if a majority of Republicans — including the former president — will follow the new platform.

Though Trump has voiced opposition to a federal abortion ban throughout this campaign, he was practically the first to claim responsibility for the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*. As recently as March of this year, Trump suggested to reporters he would be open to signing a federal abortion ban around 15 weeks of pregnancy.

"The number of weeks now, people are agreeing on 15, and I'm thinking in terms of that," Trump said on "Sid & Friends in the Morning" show on WABC.

"And it'll come out to something that's very reasonable. But people are really, even hard-liners are agreeing, seems to be, 15 weeks seems to be a number that people are agreeing at."

After that interview, however, Trump flipped his stance again, saying "Everybody agrees — you've heard this for years — all the legal scholars on both sides agree: It's a state issue. It shouldn't be a federal issue, it's a state issue."

Bottom line: There's no way to guarantee these politicians will stay as moderate as they claim to be. We can't risk politicians flipping their stances — as elected Republicans have shown they are quite capable of doing — in favor of a more extreme view. Ultimately, that would result in the uprooting of our Republic as we know it. ::

Trump VP pick JD Vance gets dragged for drag photos

The Ohio Senator is facing claims of hypocrisy after photos from college are leaked



by Taylor Heeden Larkins
Qnotes Staff Writer

Photos of Ohio Senator JD Vance dressed in drag have recently surfaced online, sparking a flurry of controversy and discussion.

The images, reportedly taken at a Halloween party in 2012 during Vance's time at Yale Law School, depict the senator in a yellow wig and skirt, striking a pose. The photos were leaked by a former classmate and quickly went viral on social media, reigniting debates over the intersection of personal history and political rhetoric.

The release of the photos has added a new layer of complexity to Vance's public image, and generated speculation and criticism about the Republican vice-presidential candidate. While Vance's spokesperson has not denied the authenticity of the photos, they have chosen not to comment further, leaving the public to draw their own conclusions and create memes about it.

Across X and Instagram, users have utilized their humor and artificial intelligence to create images of Vance in more elaborate costumes. Some had images of a bearded Vance in a Marie Antoinette-style outfit surrounded by cats. Others used the original 2012 photo to create doctored videos of Vance dancing in drag.

Social media users have also speculated Vance uses eyeliner as a part of his regular routine. Particularly on X, users have started to speculate about the senator's alleged use of eye makeup to accentuate his blue eyes.

"Why does JD Vance always look like he's wearing eyeliner?" journalist James Surowiecki asked. "He doesn't really seem like the goth-boy type."

This prompted thousands of people to share photos of Vance, focusing on what appears to be a black smudge on

his waterline. One user wrote "I've been saying JD Vance wears eyeliner since he got elected, I'm so damn happy someone else sees it!!!"

Another posted: "There is only one urgent political question on my mind tonight. Why does JD Vance wear so much eyeliner?"

Photojournalist Zach D. Roberts shared his own photo of Vance and claimed he "100 percent" does his makeup.

"I really thought people were joking about this, but then I photographed him last week. Vance 100 percent does wear eyeliner," he said.

Vance, who is a vocal opponent of LGBTQ+ rights and an advocate for legislation targeting drag performances, is now facing accusations of hypocrisy. Critics have pointed out the contradiction between his choice to wear "drag" and (allegedly) eyeliner with his current stance against the LGBTQ+ community, especially given his support for legislation that seeks to restrict drag performances and gender-affirming care.

Last year, Vance introduced legislation in the U.S. Senate banning gender-affirming care for folks under 18 at the federal level, as well as making care difficult for transgender adults to obtain.

Vance expressed his support for many "Don't Say Gay" laws, which bar conversations surrounding sexual orientation and gender identities in schools, writing, "I'll stop calling people 'groomers' when they stop freaking out about bills that prevent the sexualization of my children." He also spoke out against protections for LGBTQ+ people facing discrimination and opposed the Equality Act, which would add sexual orientation and gender identity in federal anti-discrimination laws. ::



This image of JD Vance from college (left) is making the rounds on social media. The created pic on the right is a parody, taking a jab at Vance's 'childless cat ladies' comment.
CREDIT: X/Twitter

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Democrats take lead in North Carolina, national races

The 2024 election is an entirely different race than it was one month ago.

On July 21, Joe Biden announced he would no longer be seeking reelection and instead endorsed his running mate Kamala Harris to be the new Democratic nominee. The days following Biden's announcement and Harris kicking off her historic bid for president have ignited a sense of hope in many Americans, and recent polling data has reflected this.

After Biden's disappointing debate performance, Trump had a lead of over three percent over the incumbent president. However, in a matchup against Harris, polling data shows the former president trailing by almost three percent nationally.

Harris has also gained ground in critical swing states, including Pennsylvania, Michigan and Wisconsin. In each of these

states, Harris leads Trump 50% to 46%, marking a significant jump from where Biden was among those same voters.

In North Carolina, Democratic candidates have also made significant strides. Most specifically in the gubernatorial race, Democrat Josh Stein has grown his lead over Republican Mark Robinson by at least four percentage points in the polls that have come out since Harris entered the presidential race.

North Carolina-based publication Carolina Journal had its own survey, and it found Stein was favored by likely voters with a total of nearly five percentage points. For the presidential race, Harris still trails Trump in North Carolina by about three percentage points according to a poll through the John Locke

Foundation, though it is believed she will likely close that gap before early voting and election day.

"The poll indicates that Josh Stein holds an advantage in voter trust over Mark Robinson, on the issues of the economy, education and crime," said John Locke Foundation CEO Donald Bryson. "That's very interesting when you consider that this poll shows Republican leads in every other race in the poll, including president, state Supreme Court and six other Council of State positions."

Absentee-by-mail ballots are 28 days away from going out, early in-person voting is 69 days away, and Election Day is 88 days away, so there is still time for things to change in the Tar Heel state. Gov. Roy Cooper appeared on MSNBC recently, and he believes North Carolina is on its way to



turning blue this November.

"I think that with this race in November ... in the state with Trump's closest win ... the data shows we can flip North Carolina for the Democrats," Cooper said. "It's pretty clear that the Harris campaign believes that too ... we are ready to engage our young people, who are excited for this, so we just have to keep the fever pitch." ::

—Taylor Heeden Larkins

Grant allows for Charleston LGBTQ+ nonprofit expand statewide

The Charleston-based LGBTQ+ nonprofit We Are Family is planning one of its largest expansions yet, utilizing a grant the organization received to provide online support and therapy-based programs. This would allow LGBTQ+ youth across South Carolina to access free resources to help address mental health.

The executive director, Domenico Ruggerio, was named as one of the members of a cohort of Young Futures Innovators. As a part of the program, the organization will receive a \$100,000 grant from the YF Lonely Hearts Club funding challenge.

WAF was founded in 1995 and is dedicated to supporting LGBTQ+ youth

and their families. The organization was initially created to offer support to LGBTQ+ youth who often faced rejection, bullying and isolation. Over the years, WAF has evolved to provide a wide range of services, including mental health support, leadership development and advocacy for LGBTQ+ youth and their families.

One of the initiatives taken on by the organization is through support groups, some of which go as far back as decades. WAF also has a contract with 21 affirming therapists in the tri-county area to provide specific help LGBTQ+ youth — all free. According to The Trevor Project, 59 percent of LGBTQ+ youth in South Carolina wanted mental health care but were unable to receive it. The reason: the

cost of care.

The nonprofit is planning to offer its therapeutic programming and support groups through video calling and chat-based applications such as Google Meet and Discord, respectively. These programs are already free for folks to use.

Ruggerio also has expressed concern about the ability to reliably access these resources due to lack of technology access. But it's the only way to provide statewide resources for LGBTQ Youth at the current moment. So WAF partners with an organization called LGBT Tech, whose program provides hardware like laptops, cellphones, tablets and more



to those in need.

"Out of all the projects that we do, this [Mental Health Assistance] is the one that is the most resource-intensive and of the most need," Ruggerio said. "We cannot expect our youth to be leaders in their communities without acknowledging that their basic needs have to be met." ::

—Taylor Heeden Larkins

Blue Ridge Pride takes place September 21

Blue Ridge Pride is set to make its return to Asheville on Sept. 21, bringing a Pride celebration back to western North Carolina.

This year's festival promises to be a lively and inclusive event, with a lineup of diverse performers, including musicians, drag artists and dancers. The festival's parade — a highlight of the event — will feature colorful floats, marching bands and community groups, all showcasing their support for LGBTQ+ rights and visibility.

The festival serves as a platform for local organizations, activists and allies to promote awareness about the challenges faced by the LGBTQ+ community and celebrate the progress made toward equality.

Blue Ridge Pride, typically held in late September or early October, features a

vibrant parade, live performances, art installations and a variety of food and craft vendors. It stands as a beacon of diversity, inclusion and community spirit in the heart of the Blue Ridge Mountains. This annual event not only celebrates the LGBTQ+ community but emphasizes the importance of unity and acceptance in a rapidly changing world.

Founded in 2009, Blue Ridge Pride has grown significantly over the years, attracting thousands of participants from across the region. One of the core missions of Blue Ridge Pride is to advocate for LGBTQ+ rights and create a sense of belonging in the broader community.

The event aims to provide a safe and welcoming space for people of all sexual orientations, gender identities and backgrounds to come together

and celebrate their individuality and community identity.

In addition to the main festival, Blue Ridge Pride offers a range of programs and initiatives throughout the year. These include the "Generation Plus" program, which supports LGBTQ+ seniors, and the "Welcoming Spaces Directory," a resource that highlights businesses and organizations that are committed to inclusivity. The Blue Ridge Pride Center also collaborates with local schools, businesses and government agencies to promote education and outreach on LGBTQ+ issues.

Blue Ridge Pride is more than just a festival — it's a celebration of the progress made in the fight for equality and a reminder of the work that still



needs to be done.

As Asheville continues to grow as a hub of cultural diversity and artistic expression, Blue Ridge Pride remains a vital part of the city's identity, reflecting the values of acceptance, love and community that define the unique mountain town.

For more details, check out social media and visit their website at <https://www.blueridgepride.org/festival>. ::

—Taylor Heeden Larkins

Charlotte turns emerald for CharLOz festival

There's no place like the Queen City, and residents will soon be able to follow the yellow brick road to CharLOz — Charlotte's own "Wizard of Oz" themed festival.

The CharLOz Festival, held Sept. 26-29, is a unique celebration of L. Frank Baum's classic tale at UNC Charlotte. The event includes author talks, exhibits, gaming experiences and discussions on the themes of the classic story.

Highlights include a keynote by "Wicked" author Gregory Maguire, a VR exhibit and a presentation by Baum's granddaughter. The festival also features screenings and events at multiple locations, making it a vibrant, multi-faceted experience that reflects the ongoing cultural impact of "The Wizard of Oz."

"When I was a child, I used to get the

neighborhood kids together, and we would do a reenactment of the movie the day after it was on television ... I always had to play the Scarecrow, because obviously I couldn't be Dorothy," said Maguire, an openly gay man.

The connection between the classic movie and novel with the LGBTQ+ community is one widely acknowledged by society. The visible love of Oz among many gay men can be traced back to the 1970s and has since become a cornerstone of queer culture.

This love goes beyond an infatuation with Judy Garland — according to many fans. Oz represents a utopia where people can be whoever they want. The main lesson taught via the plot is simple: Become your own true self, which some

have attributed as an allegory for "coming out."

"The seeds of why I do what I do are in my childhood. I wouldn't let Nana of Never-Never Land and Oz go. ... Why would I love these wonderlands? They were the ways I best understood myself," said Clive Baker, an openly gay writer and filmmaker.

Complementing CharLOz, the Charlotte Symphony Orchestra is performing The Wizard of Oz in Concert Sept. 27 and 28. This special event at Belk Theater showcases the original 1939 film accompanied by a live orchestra, blending classic cinema with an orchestral score.

Audiences can enjoy the beloved movie as the symphony enhances the experience with a live performance of the iconic music. This event is a perfect companion to the CharLOz Festival, merging the magic of Oz with the beauty of live music.

Together, these events offer an immersive and multi-dimensional journey



into the world of The Wizard of Oz, allowing the Charlotte community to enjoy a blend of nostalgia and artistic expression.

For information on CharLOz, you can visit the festival website. For tickets to The Wizard of Oz in Concert, you can visit the Charlotte Symphony website. ::

—Taylor Heeden Larkins

Drag queens form Drag PAC to register voters and get folks to the polls

Six of America's most well-known drag queens have come together to use their platforms to advocate for folks to show up and show out at the ballot box this fall.

Jinkx Monsoon, Monét X Change, Peppermint, Alaska, BenDeLaCreme and Willam — who all have appeared on RuPaul's Drag Race — launched Drag PAC, the country's first political action committee focused on preventing legislation threatening to roll back LGBTQ+ rights.

"We as queer people have to recognize that we are part of a community," said BenDeLaCreme. "It's our job to keep things moving in the right direction."

The PAC was announced at the end of Pride month with a video featuring all six queens, each of them explaining the weight this year's election has on LGBTQ+ rights for the future. Each queen talked about the rampant legislative attacks against queer Americans, which include

drag show bans, gender-affirming care bans and barring conversations about LGBTQ+ identities in schools.

Two states, Tennessee and Montana, have already banned drag performances. Just this year, 25 anti-drag performance bills have been proposed, and of those, 14 were defeated, eight were introduced and two are advancing. More than 500 anti-LGBTQ+ bills were brought to state legislatures this year, according to the ACLU. Most of these bills target trans youth by restricting gender-affirming care for minors, including the one in effect in North Carolina.

"We're in the middle of something historic," Monét X Change says in a video introducing the PAC. "This is the most important election cycle for queer people's rights and freedoms in our lifetime."

On Aug. 21, the star-studded PAC is partnering with Chicago Drag Queen

Lucy Stool to host "Drag Night Chicago: A Voter Registration Kiki," the same night Kamala Harris will be formally nominated by the Democratic National Convention delegates. Some of the PAC queens will be performing, as well as other drag royalty including Detox, Bambi Banks-Couleé, Sheeza Woman, Sativa Diamond and Dusty Bahls.

"A lot of this political rhetoric does have real-life effects and consequences on people of multiple marginalized identities," Peppermint said. "How you vote matters, and it literally defines the future of not just the country but your cities, your communities and your people."

Monsoon released a statement, urging her fans to get involved and to "fight fiction with fact."

"As a member of the LGBTQ+ community, you're part of a community that includes all communities; a threat to someone's rights in one part of our country is a threat to rights everywhere, because these things have a way of spreading if we do not fight fiction with fact," she said. "What's difficult is watching parts of this country vote in



ways that strip away rights from people, just because there's not enough people there to vote against it. Queer people exist there — they just don't have the numbers to combat that kind of misinformation and targeted bigotry.

"Things do get better over time with progress, if we continue to push forward and not allow people to cause us to retreat.":

—Taylor Heeden Larkins

Charlotte's Bar 316 closes doors

After nearly a decade of controversy that included claims of racial discrimination against customers of color, purported misuse of COVID funding for small businesses, multiple citations for violations during the COVID pandemic, verbal abuse of drag performers and a pickup at the club that resulted in the death of a patron, Bar 316 is closing its doors.

According to internet chatter and community conversation, it isn't for any of the aforementioned reasons. Reportedly, Bar 316 has closed because they didn't pay their rent.

Public records show that property owner Douglas R. Stephen (additional records list a company called VV Dilworth Square as the current owner) has filed suit against The Rensselaer Group, the company that owns Bar 316, for unpaid back rent. At deadline, no sum total of

how much rent is due was available.

Although much of the history of the building that has housed Bar 316 has been lost with the passing of time, what is known is the following: It didn't begin its life at that location. The converted house was moved to its current address at some point during the 20th century. It's unclear how many businesses operated out of the structure, but it appears most of those that did either attracted a LGBTQ+ clientele or specifically geared their services to the gay, lesbian and trans communities. Among the businesses that called 316 Rensselaer home was a bar/restaurant named Amanda Rose, private clubs like Steven's, Liaisons and eventually, Bar 316. For a building that has played such a prominent role in the LGBTQ+ community, it seems somewhat of a loss it may fall prey to the gentrification that has absorbed much of the surrounding area.

While no one in the community is denying the historic significance of the site for our community, there are many who are glad to see the current owner and management team out the door.

A recurring claim of racist behavior towards non-white customers was regularly leveled at Bar 316 owner Jeff Edwards. An occurrence last year that involved the Caucasian owner verbally attacking a Black drag performer on stage during a performance left a bad taste in the mouths of Bar 316 clients and other individuals in the local LGBTQ+ community. Not surprisingly, protests followed, and calls for owner Jeff Edwards to step aside.



Edwards later came forward with an apology and what seemed like a renewed commitment to Bar 316 and an environment of inclusivity. For that very reason, regular patrons found the abrupt closing unexpected and has left them floundering for a new watering hole.:

—David Aaron Moore

New year, new rules: UNC system students return to campuses after DEI policies stripped

Universities close DEI offices, reassign employees to other roles



by Taylor Heeden Larkins
Qnotes Staff Writer

It's back to school season for North Carolina's public university students, but the institutions students are returning to are different from the ones they left during the summer.

Right after finals, the UNC Board of Governors voted to remove all Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) policies from all 16 UNC schools. The original policy was designed to "advance diversity and to foster an inclusive environment that engages, respects and values all members of the university community and to ensure such efforts are carried out in an effective manner."

The board opted to create a new policy to replace DEI with one that focuses on "institutional neutrality," which critics have said leaves historically marginalized students to fend for themselves in an institution built to keep them out.

What Exactly Is DEI?

DEI has become the latest legislative target for conservatives as at least 85 *anti-DEI* bills have been introduced in nearly 30 states across the nation. DEI is defined as the practices and initiatives that aim to create a more diverse and inclusive workplace, where individuals from different backgrounds and experiences are treated with respect and fairness.

Diversity refers to the presence of differences within a given setting. In the context of DEI policies, this encompasses a wide range of attributes including, but not limited to sexual orientation, gender, race, ethnicity, age, physical abilities, religious beliefs, socioeconomic status and cultural backgrounds. The goal of diversity policies is to ensure that these varied perspectives are represented and respected within the organization.

Equity involves the fair treatment, access and opportunity for all individuals, while striving to identify and eliminate barriers that have historically led to the unfair treatment of marginalized groups. Unlike equality — which provides the same resources and opportunities to everyone — equity takes into account the different needs and circumstances of individuals.

Inclusion is the practice of creating environments in which any individual or group will feel welcomed, respected, supported and valued to fully participate. An inclusive organization actively works to ensure that all employees, regardless of their diverse backgrounds, feel they are an integral part of the organization's dynamics.

DEI encompasses people of different ages, races, ethnicities, abilities, disabilities, genders, religions, cultures and sexual orientations. Initiatives within

the DEI umbrella often will provide opportunities for groups who have historically been discriminated against. This can include, but is not limited to: members of the LGBTQ+ community, people of color, people over the age of 65, indigenous people, those who practice religions other than Christianity, such as Judaism or Islam and veterans.

On a broader scale, DEI policies can contribute to social change by promoting equality and justice within the community. Organizations that prioritize DEI can serve as role models, encouraging other entities to adopt similar practices. This can help reduce societal inequalities and foster a more inclusive community.

What Have Universities Done?

Appalachian State University was among the first of North Carolina's public universities to close its DEI offices and eliminate the chief diversity officer position from the chancellor's cabinet. According to Megan Hayes, a spokesperson for the university, there were four employees "solely dedicated to DEI work." Two of those employees were allocated to new positions, including the former chief diversity officer.

East Carolina University (ECU) moved all personnel-related units under one department before the Board of Governors' vote: Department for People Operations, Success, and Opportunity.

"Achieving our goals of increasing utilization of well-being resources, sustaining an inclusive environment, and supporting employees throughout their career journeys requires us to broadly examine our structures and practices," the university said in a March statement announcing the consolidation.

Over at NC State, Provost Warwick Arden announced the DEI office would be renamed to "Office of Equal Opportunity. In addition, the African-American Cultural Center, the LGBTQ Pride Center, Multicultural Student Affairs and the Women's Center will move to the university's student affairs department. The Disability Resource Center will remain with the equal opportunity office.

UNC-Chapel Hill has removed mentions of DEI from its webpages, according to reporting from WUNC. Kevin Best, a university spokesperson, told the same news outlet UNC-Chapel Hill is "focused on building a welcoming environment that maintains our commitment to institutional neutrality and the equality of opportunity for every member of our community."

In Charlotte, UNCC has completely shut down its DEI office, according to reporting from The Charlotte Observer. The school's Office of Diversity and Inclusion, Office of Identity, Equity and Engagement and the Office of Academic Diversity and Inclusion were eliminated and all 11 employees were relocated to different departments.

Student newspaper The Niner Times recently published a story that surveyed LGBTQ+ students about their feelings the environment for queer and trans students at UNCC, and how supportive or lacking it is.

At the time of the survey, respondents

mostly felt comfortable expressing their identity with other students (62.75%). Around the same amount of respondents felt comfortable expressing themselves outwardly on campus (58.82%) and two thirds of respondents felt safe at UNC Charlotte (66.67%).

Students shared while they did feel safe expressing themselves in the current moment, they are worried about where the future will take the university.

"UNC Charlotte has been an amazing, safe space for my queer friends and myself. I feel that I can be free here," said a first-year student respondent. "That said, I worry about the future of our safe space; we've gotten caught in the crossfire of a culture war that we didn't choose. The state hasn't given me reason to believe it has our best interests at heart."

With the news of DEI initiatives being removed from campus, queer students have continued to voice their concerns about what the fate of inclusive spaces and programs on campus will be.

"Being queer at UNCC was a love-hate relationship," said an alumni respondent. "The queer community was loving and accepting, but so many other communities [clubs, student orgs, teachers, programs, etc.] weren't. We had to create our own resources, and now that the new DEI legislature has passed, the spaces queer students and faculty have worked so hard to create will likely be defunded and eventually closed or changed."

What People Are Saying About DEI

UNC System President Peter Hans spoke at the board meeting where the vote barring DEI took place saying, "it is not the job of the university to decide all the complex and multi-dimensional questions of how to balance and interpret identity." However, it is the universities' responsibility to ensure all students are set up for success throughout their academic careers and beyond.

Students have continued to be in the crosshairs of campus culture wars, something The Niner Times Editor-in-Chief Davis Cuffe and his staff are working to navigate.

"It's been insane," Cuffe explained in a sit-down interview with *QNotes*. "We spent over 97 hours covering the [pro-Palestinian] encampment, and in that same week, we had DEI protests going on."

On the day the Board of Trustees revealed the plan to eliminate DEI, Cuffe recounted how he and his staff came into the newsroom at 7 a.m. and didn't "clock out" until nearly 1 a.m. that night.

Then, they had to drive to Raleigh a few weeks later to report on the Board of Governors meeting.

"We spent nearly two days in Raleigh covering that," Cuffe recounted. "We weren't sleeping ... we were looking at our Google Docs for hours at a time, working



Gone: students returning to campuses will find DEI offices or initiatives completely absent.
CREDIT: Adobe Stock

to report on what was going on for our students who depend on us."

Something Cuffe noticed as he continued to report on the UNC DEI situation was just how diverse his school was — and in turn, how the elimination of these policies appear to contradict the makeup and mission of the university.

"I don't want to speak for any campus groups or other people, but it kind of goes against what we are as a campus — a very diverse and culturally rich group," Cuffe said.

Some of Cuffe's own staff are students who've benefited from DEI programs and initiatives, and he said for those student journalists, covering these issues has been an even bigger challenge.

"We're a diverse group, and we're a really close group ... We all want the well being of each other and seeing stuff that maybe goes against their values ... people come to me and talk, and it's been difficult for some people," Cuffe explained. "I'm a straight, white guy, so I'm not directly affected by a lot of this stuff, but it's still alarming to see the disregard for some of these students who are my colleagues, my friends."

There is an apparent disconnect between a majority of the university students in the state and the conservative Board of Governors, according to Cuffe. In the case of UNCC, the student body tends to lean more towards liberal philosophies while the body in charge of creating university policy is the complete opposite.

Whether the issue was protesting for the university to divest from Israeli supporting companies and weapons manufacturers to advocating for DEI efforts to remain on campus, it was clear to Cuffe and his staff there's a bridge missing between the two entities.

"From the students we've talked to, they're a little disappointed [about] the lack of response, even with the Palestine protests and now with the DEI stuff," he said. "I think people are just confused and they're concerned because there's a huge change coming that could potentially affect them. There hasn't been any clarification or news about what that could be ... we've just been left in the dark." ::

Eliazar Posada named Executive Director of Equality NC

Posada made history as the first openly LGBTQ+ Latino elected official in the state



by Taylor Heeden Larkins
Qnotes Staff Writer

Equality NC announced interim executive director Eliazar Posada is now serving as the permanent director, according to a release sent by the organization. Posada has served as the interim since former director Kendra Johnson left ENC in 2023.

"I am honored and excited to take on the role of Executive Director at Equality NC," Posada said in the statement. "I look forward to continuing to work with our dedicated team, partners and supporters to advance our mission and make a meaningful impact in the lives of those we serve."

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

"As we embark on this new chapter in our 45th year of proudly serving North Carolina, we are confident that under

Eliazar's leadership, Equality NC will continue to thrive and make significant strides in defending and advancing the rights of queer and trans people across our state," announced in an official statement.

ENC has faced hardship in recent months — facing financial challenges and laying off a number of key employees. A group of current and former employees got together and put their thoughts down and then anonymously posted a document with their words to the internet and shared the link with **QNotes**. You can read what they had to say here:

<https://enc-accountability.ghost.io/enc-accountability>

In their defense, Equality NC released their own statement. It's available to read online here:

<https://equalitync.org/2024/04/05/equality-nc-is-changing>

Last month, the organization fired its last Black, trans employee Celeste Jones, who worked for ENC for three-and-a-half years.

When Jones asked why she was being terminated after almost three-and-a-half years with ENC, she claims she was told it was partially due to her "unresponsiveness." However, Jones has said she had to return her work equipment almost three months ago for repairs and since then, had to rely on using a friend's equipment to work because ENC didn't provide her with a replacement.

"Equity means that you even the playing field for folks who would otherwise not have the resources or privileges they need to succeed ... I was given none," Jones said.

Former employee Artie Hartsell — who was also terminated — said he believed ENC wouldn't have a role in this year's election cycle.

"It's unfortunate, but I can't say I believe that Equality NC is capable of operating effectively during this election year for the LGBTQ+ community, in their current state," Hartsell said.

Xavier Boston, another former employee of ENC, has been vocal about their concerns regarding the organization and Posada's ability to lead the organization.

"We weren't showing up in our community, and we were lying about our money problems," Boston claimed. "They were not giving us any information, and so I submitted my resignation in April."

Posada told **QNotes** in April ENC was in the middle of reorganizing after Johnson left in December 2023. Because of that, layoffs and position rearranging would be inevitable.

"[We knew] Kendra was leaving at the end of the year and when I came into this role, to our knowledge, we expected there would be someone installed when Kendra left, but then the search got extended," Posada explained. "So an interim position wasn't



'I am honored and excited to take on the role of Executive Director at Equality NC.'
— Eliazar Posada CREDIT: Facebook

something that the organization wanted [or] something I was ... expecting."

"Now having to deal with the entire organizational budget and then some of the restructuring that has been happening over the last couple of months [was] ... also something that I wasn't kind of like, in [on] the conversation."

While the promotion to executive director is a positive development for Posada, concerns about the organization remain unaddressed. ::

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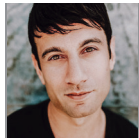
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Lake Tahoe

Pride Journey



by Joey Amato
Qnotes Staff Writer

Bordering California and Nevada is the iconic town of South Lake Tahoe. The destination seamlessly blends natural splendor with vibrant urban life. Surrounded by the majestic Sierra Nevada, this charming city is a year-round haven for outdoor enthusiasts, adventure seekers and those looking for a retreat into nature's embrace.

Lake Tahoe enjoys a prime location on the shores of the largest alpine lake in North America. The city is surrounded by towering mountain peaks creating a stunning backdrop for every activity and adding an extra layer of allure to the area. The lake itself, with its crystal-clear waters and breathtaking panoramas, serves as the centerpiece of the region's natural beauty, making it a great destination to visit year-round.

Boasting a plethora of outdoor activities during the warmer months, the lake becomes a playground for water sports enthusiasts, offering opportunities for kayaking, paddleboarding, jet skiing and sailing. Miles of hiking and biking trails wind through the surrounding mountains, providing stunning views of the lake and the surrounding wilderness.

Come winter, the city transforms into a winter wonderland, attracting skiers and snowboarders to its world-class ski resorts. The city is in close proximity to popular resorts like Heavenly Mountain Resort and Sierra-at-Tahoe, providing access to pristine slopes and top-notch amenities. The crisp mountain air, snow-covered landscapes and vibrant après-ski scene make Lake Tahoe a premier destination for winter sports enthusiasts.

Beyond its natural wonders, Lake Tahoe offers a vibrant entertainment and nightlife scene. The city is home to numerous restaurants, bars and cafes catering to a variety of tastes. The bustling Heavenly Village is a hub for shopping, dining and entertainment, featuring a range of boutiques, art galleries and live entertainment venues. One of my favorite venues in Heavenly Village is The Loft, a combination of a restaurant and theater featuring upscale tapas and fabulous cocktails.

On my visit to The Loft, I enjoyed the ahi tuna ceviche which was complimented with mango and avocado ceviche as well as the roasted tomato bisque with lump crabmeat. I try to eat healthy when I travel, but I couldn't resist the white chocolate bread pudding. I hiked earlier in the day, so I wasn't that worried about the calories. After dinner, I caught the magic show by Chipper Lowell. With an unusual blend of stand-up, improvisation and magic, Chipper has twice been honored with the Merlin award for "Comedy Magician of the Year"



Beautiful Lake Tahoe. CREDIT: Unsplash

by the International Magicians Society. He was also named as one of the "Top Funniest Magicians" performing today by Magic Magazine.

For those feeling lucky, the famed casinos on the Nevada side of the border add a touch of excitement to the Lake Tahoe experience. Try your hand at the tables or enjoy a show, making for a lively evening in town. If gambling isn't your thing, head to Flatstick Pub for indoor mini-golf and drinks.

Lake Tahoe also boasts cultural and historical attractions that provide insight into the area's rich past. The Tallac Historic Site offers a glimpse into the region's pioneer days, with well-preserved estates and museums showcasing the history of the destination. The area's Native American heritage is celebrated at the Valhalla Tahoe Heritage and Arts Center.

The region places a strong emphasis on environmental conservation and sustainable tourism. Efforts to protect the lake's clarity and preserve its natural beauty involve community initiatives, responsible development practices and ongoing partnerships between local businesses and environmental organizations such as the Lake Tahoe Destination Stewardship Council, a lake-wide collaborative effort to protect the lake.

I stayed at two different properties during my visit. The first is Coachman Hotel, which is located within blocks of Heavenly Village. The multi-building property was originally built in 1960 as two separate motels but was combined in the 1980's. The hotel offers comfortable rooms, complimentary Stumptown coffee and nightly s'mores if your heart desires. The property features a fitness center, pool, hot tub, multiple fire pits and occasionally you may spot a 'friendly' black bear. I happened to cross paths with her on the first night of my stay. It was quite dark, and I couldn't tell if the figure I was seeing was a statue... until it started walking. She walked past me and once my heart started beating again, I slowly made my way to the lobby. Only in

Lake Tahoe!

There is a chance of spotting a black bear during your trip to Lake Tahoe. If you do, it is best to keep your distance. Visitors should not approach the bears nor feed them. For more information on what you should do if you encounter a bear, visit Bear League's website.

After a wonderful night's sleep, I woke up early the next morning and headed to the lobby for breakfast. The reception desk doubles as a bar where guests can enjoy breakfast in the morning and cocktails later in the day, unless you'd like a mimosa with breakfast. I decided to try the overnight oats with berries. It was so good, I had it on both mornings of my stay at Coachman Hotel. After my healthy breakfast, I had some time to kill, so I took a leisurely walk to Lakeside Beach where I got my first glimpse of the glistening lake.

If you're looking to keep up with your yoga practice, head to Bliss Experiences and take one of their Sustainable Stability classes. It was exactly what I needed to work out all the stiffness from traveling the day before. During the warmer months, Bliss offers a variety of outdoor yoga experiences, including paddle yoga and beach yoga. I also had the chance to have an oracle reading, which turned out to be fairly accurate and echoed what a psychic told me the following day.

For lunch, head to Sidellis, an LGBTQ-owned restaurant/bar which serves a great selection of pub fare, including a delicious French dip. The owner was slinging drinks on the day I visited and told me about his vision for the establishment. Sidellis offers diners a selection of barrel-aged beers, seasonal beers as well as ciders.

If you have time, hop on the Sunset Champagne Cruise to Emerald Bay organized by Tahoe Cruises. The two-hour voyage takes guests to picturesque Emerald Bay which is one of the most photographed locations in Lake Tahoe. You'll come up close to Vikingsholm mansion which was built in 1928 by Lora Knight and is considered one of the grand-

est homes in the region. Knight built the Scandinavian-inspired home because Emerald Bay reminded her of the fjords of Norway. Be sure to bring a jacket as the temperature drops dramatically as the sun goes down. Luckily, there is a full bar offering a variety of beverages including hot cider and spiked hot chocolate if you decide not to drink the endless champagne.

I spent the last night of my stay at Black Bear Lodge, a beautiful property surrounded by mature trees and a picturesque setting. It is a bit further from the hustle and bustle, but there are still a variety of restaurants within walking distance.

My room at Black Bear Lodge came complete with a gas fireplace, comfortable sitting area and essential oil diffuser, perfect for a relaxing evening. Guests can also gather at the quaint wine bar located just off the lobby or grab a glass of wine and mingle with other guests in the hot tub.

Getting to and from Lake Tahoe is quite simple. Most people fly into Reno-Tahoe airport and jump on the South Tahoe shuttle which takes a little over an hour. Once in town, the Lake Link is a free shuttle service which guests can use. All you need to do is download the app. Lake Link is a very convenient service and a great substitute for Uber if you are looking to save money but be sure to schedule your trip about 30-minutes in advance. I found that to be the average wait time.

The late fall season was the perfect time to visit. It was busy but not overly crowded and the weather was absolutely perfect. Cool mornings gave way to comfortable afternoons when you only needed a light sweater. The evenings were a bit chilly, but nothing too extreme.

Whether you seek adventure on the slopes, relaxation by the lake or a taste of the local culture, South Lake Tahoe has something for everyone. This captivating destination invites visitors to immerse themselves in the beauty of nature while enjoying the warmth and hospitality of a mountain town that truly has it all.

Enjoy the Journey! ::

High COVID levels were found in NC wastewater

Health & Wellness

by: Evan Moore/Charlotte Observer

CCOVID-19 virus levels are rising sharply at wastewater treatment plants in Charlotte and Raleigh, potentially indicating a surge in cases. Of the seven combined treatment plants in Charlotte and Raleigh, six saw significant spikes in virus particle levels within the last few weeks, N.C. Department of Health and Human Services data shows.

At three plants in Charlotte, the number of viral gene copies per person doubled from July 23 to Aug. 6, according to the most recent data available from NCDHHS. The number of viral gene copies per person at a plant in Raleigh sat at 21 million on July 24, before spiking to 200 million on Aug. 7, data shows.

How Can Wastewater Help Detect COVID Spread?

Wastewater can be an important tool for scientists who study SARS-CoV-2, according to the CDC. Here's how: Wastewater data showing the percent change in virus levels can be used with other data, like the overall levels of the virus in the water and historical wastewater for a particular location. Levels of the virus in wastewater could be an indicator of how well prevention strategies are working. Small changes in the level of virus in wastewater can be an early signal that the number of people with COVID-19 in a community is rising or falling. State and local health officials can use wastewater data to predict trends in COVID-19 transmission and respond accordingly.

COVID Hospitalizations in Mecklenburg County

A federal mandate that required hospitals to report COVID cases ended in May, Axios reported, but local health data

could indicate that cases are on the rise. From July 19 to Aug. 1, there were 827 emergency department visits for COVID-19-like illness, according to data from the Mecklenburg County Health Department. Of those ED visits, 81 resulted in hospital admission. That's a slight increase from the previous two-week period, when there were 78 hospital admissions for COVID-19-like illness.

"COVID-19-like illness" is defined as "fever and cough or shortness of breath or difficulty breathing with or without the presence of a coronavirus diagnosis code," according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Wastewater data usually corresponds with the number of cases reported in a particular area, and people should be cautious despite the low number of hospitalizations compared to previous months, Virginia Guidry, the branch head for occupational and environmental epidemiology at NCDHHS, previously told The Charlotte Observer.

"We're pretty confident in our wastewater data as a way to measure what's going on in the community," Guidry said. "And it captures both symptomatic and asymptomatic folks, regardless of whether they get tested, and that is one of the real advantages of wastewater monitoring."

Should You Get the Vaccine?

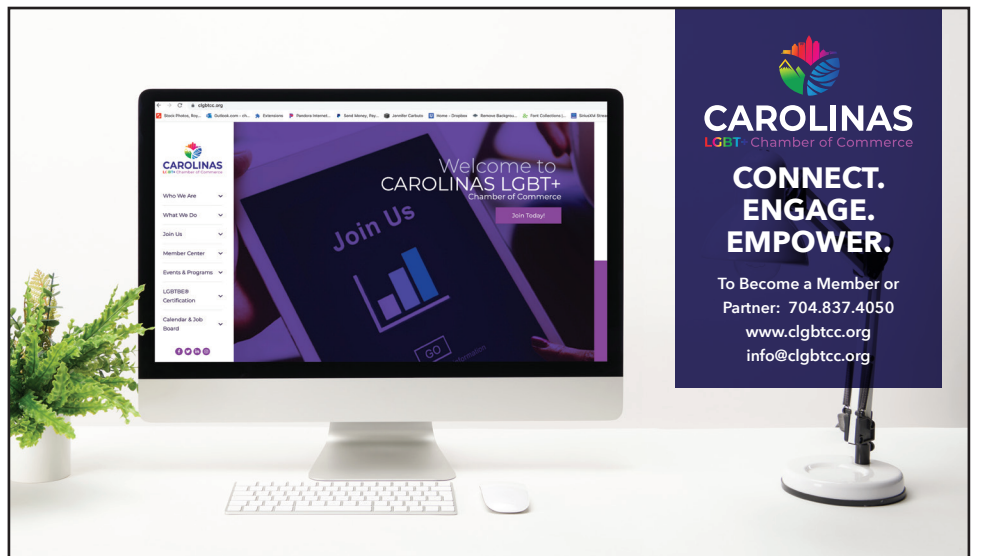
The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends all people aged six months and older receive a COVID-19 vaccine. Vaccinations are especially important for those at higher risk of severe viral respiratory disease, NCDHHS told the Observer, including: People 65 years and older, children younger than five, pregnant women, those with a weakened immune



While North Carolina wastewater surveillance shows higher levels of the virus, hospitals are reporting more COVID-related admissions.

system and those with certain medical conditions such as asthma, diabetes, heart disease and obesity.

This article appears courtesy of our media partner The Charlotte Observer. ::



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Charlotte International Arts Festival is returning this September

Art installations, live entertainment and various cultural events will take place throughout the city

by: Qnotes Staff

Blumenthal Arts has announced the lineup for the 2024 Charlotte International Arts Festival (CIAF), a Blumenthal Arts Original, returning to the Queen City Sept. 13 through Sept. 29. The annual festival bridges Charlotte's local and international communities with global artists in a joyful celebration filled with live performances, art installations and cultural expressions from around the world.

A smorgasbord of art from a variety of cultures and genres, CIAF offers something for everyone – no matter your taste, background, or budget – with more than 200 events, many free and open to the public, along with ticketed events starting at \$5.

"As we enter our third year hosting CIAF, we are proud of the festival's growth, not only in attendance, but also in the number of international artists and organizations with whom we're partnering in Charlotte," said Blumenthal Arts Vice President of Marketing, Danny Knaub. "Last year, we embraced the tagline 'A Blumenthal Arts Original,' and we continue to present a festival unlike anything Charlotte has seen."

The launch of CIAF in 2022 introduced an abundance of cultural programming to the Queen City. This year, CIAF will span over 17 days and will include 130 free events, 40 art installations, 70 Cultural Stages acts, nine Blumenthal Fellows, 15+ venues, including four free outdoor stages, 14 in-venue attractions, 25 cultural partners, 45+ countries represented, 14 Festivals-within-the-Festival and 300+ hours of entertainment

The festival is expanding its footprint this year, transforming the Iron District with pop-up art installations, the return of Luke Jerram's Gaia (a giant inflatable of the earth created from NASA imagery) and the regional premiere of "Space Explorers: The Infinite," a powerful, immersive experience inspired by NASA missions aboard the International Space Station, which will be the first tenant in Blume Studios.

"Joining the 28th annual Festival of India



From the Netherlands, the performing puppetry troupe known as The Birdmen will appear spontaneously throughout multiple CIAF events. Credit: CIAF

and 34th annual Latin American Festival as part of CIAF are other Charlotte festival staples like Le Dîner en Blanc, Festival in the Park, and the UNC Charlotte International Festival, to name a few," Knaub shared.

There will also be programs new to the area, such as Lowcountry Cultural Festival and Southern Guitar Festival and Competition. Most programs are free, including live music Uptown at Levine Avenue of the Arts and at Ballantyne's Backyard.

CIAF 2024 is being made possible thanks to sponsorship contributions, including The Leon Levine Foundation (TLLF) returning as lead sponsor with a generous renewed gift of \$100,000. TLLF is joined by Bank of America, Hearst, and Shea Homes. Other partners include Ally, Wells Fargo, TD Bank and Wastequip.

Fitness classes, presented by Brighthouse Financial, will take place on select Saturdays and Sundays on Levine Avenue and The Green. Join Lauren Nixon for **Glow Yoga**, a playful yoga

flow set against the backdrop of **Atelier Sisu's Evanescent**. Or immerse yourself in **Dropsound Yoga & Meditation** underneath LED Lab's **Constellation**, where noise-canceling headphones eliminate external distractions and allow you to fully engage in the experience.

Now in its third year, audiences will enjoy returning favorites such as the colossal wandering **Birdmen**; vibrant dance featuring **Tablao Flamenco**; the communal **Festival Biergarten**, featuring local craft beer; and more, in CIAF locations in Uptown Charlotte, Ballantyne's Backyard, and others.

UK artist Luke Jerram will bring back two of Charlotte's favorite art installations: **Of Earth and Sky** and the aforementioned **Gaia**. **Of Earth and Sky** is Jerram's popular poetry trail — which was last seen in Charlotte in 2021. The installation turns poems submitted by local writers into public art that will be seen popping up in various festival locations across the city.

Previously seen in Founders Hall, **Gaia** is a 19-foot illuminated, three-dimensional globe created from NASA imagery. This year, **Gaia** will be exhibited for free in conjunction with the previously announced immersive space journey, **Space Explorers: The Infinite**.

In 2023, CIAF partnered for the first time with two Charlotte cultural fixtures, the **Festival of India** and the **Latin American Festival**. As previously announced, Blumenthal will stretch its cultural partnerships even farther into the community this year.

In 2024, CIAF will team up with the following partners, some returning and others new:

Returning CIAF cultural partners: Festival of India, Charlotte Brunch Festival, El Grito Festival, Latin American Festival, Festival in the Park, Charlotte Symphony Orchestra, JazzArts Charlotte, International House, SouthPark After 5, Mint Museum,

Tosco Music and the Charlotte Film Festival.

New cultural partners include:

ArtPop Street Gallery, Lowcountry Culture Festival, University City Wine Festival, UNC Charlotte International Festival, Le Dîner en Blanc Charlotte, ourBRIDGE for KIDS, Southern Guitar Festival, CharLOz, Queen City Zine Fest, CLTure, BOOM Charlotte, NOMADNESS Fest and Guild of Charlotte Artists.

International highlights at CIAF include **Mystical Arts of Tibet**, with meticulous mandala sand painting and magnificent sacred music and chants that are believed to generate energies promoting world healing; **Evanescent by Atelier Sisu** (commissioned by Blumenthal), shimmering, towering rainbow bubbles with a bespoke soundscape by local artist Ryan Persaud; the incredible human artistry of **Cirque Kalabanté – Afrique En Cirque**, inspired by daily life in Guinea; and more.

Musical acts of all styles will pop up again this year at Levine Avenue of the Arts and Ballantyne's Backyard. New this year in Ballantyne will be a series of days out at the park called **Backyard Bashes** — all-day events in Ballantyne's Backyard with food trucks, Cultural Stages performances, family-friendly activities and more on festival weekends.

CIAF this year will offer dining experiences ranging from Charlotte's best food truck fare to the chic Le Dîner en Blanc, Charlotte Brunch Festival, international cuisines at the Festival of India and Latin American Festival; and an immersive comedy dining event known as Faulty Towers.

There are a myriad of ways for individuals or families to be immersed in the joys and discoveries of CIAF. This year's returning favorites will include: Birdmen, Of Earth and Sky, Lotty by Moradavaga, Gaia and Tablao Flamenco.



Festival of India will host a bevy of live performance presentations. Credit: CIAF/Festival of India

The festival will include entertainment in three distinct locations, in addition to pop-ups and partners throughout greater Charlotte.

Blume Studios in the Iron District

Located in the new Iron District — former home of Charlotte Pipe and Foundry — Blume Studios is Blumenthal's new pillar of programming that focuses on the intersection of technology, art, and community.

Launching the first chapter of Blume Studios will be **Space Explorers: The Infinite**, an out-of-this-world immersive journey inspired by NASA missions aboard the International Space Station with 360-degree videos captured in space using advanced technology.

In addition to Gaia, Blume Studios will also be home to the free exhibit **Groundswell**, an awe-inspiring interactive climbing sculpture out of Australia, which sways with tens of thousands of ball bearings as the structure tilts.

Part dining experience, part comedy show with improv galore, **Faulty Towers** is two hours of nonstop laughter, designed as a tribute to the iconic BBC series Fawlty Towers. A limited number of VIP tickets will be available for each performance.

All Blume Studios events will be up throughout the duration of the festival and beyond. **Check blumenthalarts.org for schedule and details.**

CIAF in Ballantyne

The new CIAF **Backyard Bash** series will feature all types of music from

artists around the world and around the corner on the main stage: dance of the performance and participatory variety; pop-up surprises; activities for families; food trucks; and more.

Several CIAF partner festivals, including the Latin American Festival, Lowcountry Culture Festival, and CLTure's CIAF Day and Night Market will take place in Ballantyne's Backyard.

Blumenthal will partner with the Festival of India to expand its reach this year across two days. Historically a one-day extravaganza Uptown, this year even more Festival of India programming will be introduced to Ballantyne for a second day of celebrations, culminating with a free lawn performance by the Charlotte Symphony Orchestra and special guest performer Anjan Shah.

Ballantyne's Backyard will also feature public art by local and visiting artists, including Christopher Schardt of LED Labs, whose Mind Wash, an enchanting 26-foot rotating, brain-shaped animated structure that comes alive with classical music, will be one of a trio of that artist's works presented at CIAF this year.

CIAF Uptown

Blumenthal's Uptown venues will host numerous ticketed events, including the return of the beloved family show "Bluey's Big Play" (September 21-22); legendary jazz musician Herbie Hancock (September 25); CharLOz events and the Charlotte Symphony Orchestra's "The Wizard of Oz," a live performance of the iconic score alongside a screening of the



The Charlotte International Arts Festival takes place Sept. 13 through Sept. 29.
Credit: CIAF

film (September 27).

Uptown will also be home to large-scale artworks, including Christopher Schardt's Constellation, a stunning, star-shaped canopy adorned with 21,600 LED modules. There will also be a piece called Mariposa, a mesmerizing gigantic butterfly hovering 15 feet in the air and CIAF favorite Lotty — the giant, red, interactive squid (Italy and Portugal).

Free performances will be plentiful at the Levine Stage at Levine Avenue of the Arts Friday through Sunday with a

mix of Cultural Stages musicians, Tosco Music curations, and the ourBRIDGE Fall Festival/BOOM Charlotte teaser.

Food and drinks, including local craft beer, will be featured at the Festival Biergarten open Tuesdays through Thursdays from 4 p.m. to 9 p.m., Fridays from 4 p.m. to 10 p.m., Saturdays from noon to 10 p.m. and Sundays from noon to 9 p.m.

For additional event info, tickets, performance times and more information, visit charlotteartsfest.com. ::

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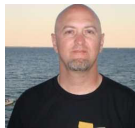


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Matteo matters: an interview with gay comedian Matteo Lane

Lane comedian to perform in upcoming Atlanta and Durham shows



by Gregg Shapiro
Qnotes Contributing Writer

When it comes to comedy, everyone has their own ideas about what is or isn't funny. Things that make you laugh might have the opposite effect on someone else. In the ongoing evolution of stand-up comedy, the presence of LGBTQ+ comics continues to increase at a fast pace.

While lesbian comedians have long dominated, gay male comics are making their presence felt, with Matteo Lane being, far and away, one of the best. Lane, who combines Midwestern and European influences in his material, has a distinctive delivery style that often has audience members struggling to catch their breath between jokes and laughs. It also helps that he's easy on the eyes.

Lane was kind enough to make time for an interview in advance of his upcoming comedy tour which will take him to Atlanta and Durham in September and October.

Gregg Shapiro: Matteo, I had the pleasure of interviewing you for the first time in 2017 in advance of your performance at the Dania Beach Casino.

Matteo Lane: I think I remember that. I wasn't headlining, right? Was I opening for someone else?

GS: Someone else who was not very funny.

ML: Okay, now I remember, Sam Jay and I were both opening for...[laughs] yeah, I remember that.

GS: Since then, your social media and online presence have increased greatly.



Visiting the island of Salina off the coast of Sicily, during a trip to Italy.
CREDIT: Facebook

How important is it to you to maintain that?

ML: I don't know that I think about it in terms of maintaining it so much as it's nice to reach out and have people reach back. It's also a great way of letting people know that I'm on tour, so they get to see what I work on all the time, which is stand-up. I don't think I've ever thought about it that way, as maintaining. I just think of it more as a great opportunity to express yourself and have people enjoy it.

GS: Your conversations with comedians are inspired and hilarious, and the ones with Jessica Kirson are a particular favorite of mine.

ML: I love Jessica!

GS: That face! Are you having as much fun as you appear to be having?

ML: [Laughs] Yes! What do you take me for? I wouldn't be doing it if I wasn't enjoying it [laughs]. It's not like it's MGM in 1935 and I have to pretend with Mickey Rooney that I'm having a good time. I'm choosing to do this!

GS: Speaking of Mickey Rooney, do you know if Liza Minnelli is aware of your impression of her?

ML: I don't know. But I feel like I've been getting closer [laughs]. Now I'm at the point where I know close friends of hers. I don't even think she would be offended if she heard it. I think she's got tough skin. I think she would laugh, and probably ask me what I wanted for dinner. She seems nice. She has a memoir coming out, and at least 10 people texted me yesterday saying that I should do the audiobook.

GS: The way the audience becomes part of your shows has become something of a trademark of yours.

ML: They actually haven't. It's a big misconception. It takes a really long time to write material. I do about 20 shows a week at The Comedy Cellar in New York, strictly working on material that I've been writing. Twice a year, just two times a year, I record my advice special where I just talk to the audience because it's fun and it is a skill that I have. But it allows me to also use that in place of material that I need to build for a special in the meantime. When you come to see me live in a giant theater, I don't do any talking to the audience. It's all well-prepared, well-written material. It is a bit of a misconception. I understand where people would get that impression. Probably 11 months out of the year I'm consistently working on new jokes, crafting them, redoing them, practicing them over and over until they're ready for the road. When I'm on the road, I practice them and practice them until it's ready for a special so that it's

a fully ready, well-written special. I only do crowd work literally twice a year.

GS: Your cooking videos continue to be as informative as they are entertaining. Could you foresee doing a cooking show on the Food Network or the Cooking Channel?

ML: I feel like at this point they would have asked me. It's always so strange when people see a special night on YouTube and they'll say, "Next time, Netflix!" I'm like, "But you're watching it right now, so what's the difference?" If I'm on the Food Network or YouTube, isn't it the same thing [laughs]? It's all an excuse to be funny. The cooking is secondary because I'm using it as an excuse to be very comedy-driven. The benefit of not doing it for someone like the Food Network is I get to have full control and air it the way I like it.

GS: You own it.

ML: Yes. I guess it does look more official if it's on the Food Network, but I don't know, I'm enjoying it.

GS: I went to Emerson College in Boston, and I see you shot a video there at Mike's Pastry on Hanover Street? How much fun was that?

ML: We went to Mike's Pastry because everyone's like, "If you want cannoli, you've got to go to Mike's." I went in with my friend Francesco [De Carlo] from Rome and my friend Amina Imani. They were speaking Italian to us; they gave us the cannoli for free. They were so sweet about it. It was a great experience. It's a nice little street in Boston. I enjoyed it.

GS: The Asia and Chris DeBurgh tour t-shirt you're wearing in the wonderful cooking video with your mom and your aunt made me wonder, who are some of your favorite musical acts?

ML: I promise you those shirts I wear, I wear them just because they fit well [laughs]. Someone was like, "Are you a huge AC/DC fan?" I go, "What? No, I listen to Bill Evans Trio and Maria Callas." If it fits well, that's all I care about. I didn't even know what was on the shirt, to be honest with you. I guess I should pay more attention to it.

GS: What can you tell the readers about your colorful ink which is very visible in that video?

ML: I have three tattoos now, all of which I've designed. One is Maria Callas,



'I wouldn't be doing it if I wasn't enjoying it!' – Matteo Lane on his stand-up comedy career.
CREDIT: Facebook

one is Poison Ivy from "Batman," and the other side is Storm from "X-Men: The Animated Series."

GS: You are also known for your shopping videos, such as the ones at Trader Joe's and Mall of America. Do you enjoy in-person shopping as much as you enjoy poking fun at it, or would you rather make all your purchases online?

ML: I'm on a plane and in hotels most of my life. So, when I'm home in New York, the last thing I want to do is go shopping. Sometimes I'll go to thrift stores if I'm on the road. A comedian friend of mine and I will go to thrift stores. Usually, I'll just order online. I don't have that much stuff. Besides furniture that I've ordered online, it's basically groceries and that's about it.

GS: Do you think you might have a cookbook or memoir, or a combination of both, in you?

ML: I think that's definitely possible in the future.

GS: When you do a hometown show in Chicago, what do you like best about it?

ML: When I go home to Chicago, it's great, because all 31 of my cousins come to the show. I get to go to my Aunt Cindy's house for Sunday sauce. It's always a good time. I go see my grandparents. By the way, I talk to them every day. It's not like it's some family reunion. I talk to them all the time, but it's always nice to go home to Chicago and see my family.

Matteo Lane will perform at the Fox Theatre in Atlanta Sept. 22 and the Durham Performing Arts Center Oct. 11. ::

Our People: Clay Smith is Delighted Tobehere

Inside the life of a career drag queen



by L'Monique King
Qnotes Staff Writer

There's a guy in Greenville, S.C., who simply wants to make the world a better, safer LGBTQ celebratory place. His name is Clay Smith, and he has found peace in faith, 10 years of sobriety and the ability to champion diversity.

He's a self-described drag queen, celebrity illusionist, host, singer and comedian. He's also a specialist in Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI). With over 20 years of success as a performer, Smith is known to many as Delighted Tobehere, which speaks volumes about how he approaches life. During this candid and frequently comical interview, we'll get to know the man behind the make-up and his thoughts on the world around him.

LMK: I know you currently live in Greenville but have also lived in Charlotte. Would you elaborate on that a bit?

CS: I was raised in Greenville, S.C., graduated from Clemson University where I was the school's first performing arts major. I had 'come out' during my time at Clemson and that was a difficult time for me and my family. When I returned home [after graduating] and they realized that the "gay" had not gone away, I was given an ultimatum. Actually, it was a handwritten letter that said I needed to stop telling people I was gay, I'd have a curfew imposed, I needed to seek professional Christian counseling and couldn't go to Atlanta anymore. So, I moved to Charlotte within 24 hours where an old roommate of mine from college had an apartment.

LMK: Where are your parents now, regarding your identity and affirming you?

CS: My dad has come a long way. He's not a PFLAG parent, but our family dynamic is loving, healthy, supportive and communicative. My mom passed away a few weeks ago of dementia. My mom was further along in her acceptance journey – but that was cut short due to the dementia. I tell people when they're coming out that their journey and their timing is theirs. Likewise, the family, friends and co-workers that you tell – their journey and timeline is also theirs. So, whether it takes 10 minutes or 10 years of them accepting you – at some point you've got to start the clock. And the beginning of that is respecting yourself by living authentically.

LMK: As a child, what did you want to be when you grew up?

CS: I wanted to be a dentist. I got accepted to pre-dentistry at Clemson with the goal of becoming a pediatric dentist. That's how I got in. A lot of people have a fear of the dentist, and I wanted to create an atmosphere and

experience that encouraged people to take care of themselves instead of doing something else they deem important. A lot of people are afraid of a diagnosis – like having a cavity. If I've learned anything from my mom's dementia, which has no cure at the moment – just medication that delays the progression – you can be so afraid of the diagnosis that you miss the window of the only help available. Your fear can literally lead to a worse outcome. There's something vulnerable and self-loving about going in [facing your fear] and taking care of yourself. This applies to knowing your HIV status, having mammograms, testicular self-exams – practicing self-care through combating those fears is an important part of self-love.

LMK: Assuming you never embarked on that dental career, what's your livelihood?

CS: At the moment, that is a very good question. At the end of last year, I stepped down from full time performing. I'm not sure if I retired or if I was just tired. The depression I faced from watching my mom disappear, and watching life as I knew it disappear, put me in a mindset where I questioned: Maybe I shouldn't be doing drag or performing? [I thought], maybe I should be an accountant. Lashes come in sizes; 101, 201 and 301s. But they do not come in size 401K, and as someone who is 42 now and has been performing for 23 years and spent my life savings, to stay afloat while taking care of my mom I've been facing major questions surrounding stability in the second half of my life and what I want it to look like. It's also difficult [as a long-term drag performer] to find spaces and jobs doing some of the things that I can. At the same time, it's devastating to think that I wouldn't be able to continue to commit to a passion that was there for the first half of my life and still is. Being a gig worker is difficult. It does not promise longevity – unless you are incredibly savvy as a businessperson.

LMK: We don't often hear or think about the perils of a lasting career. How did you get into drag to begin with?

CS: For me it started off with entering a talent show. Then it moved on to guest spots in shows. When I started making some money it became a part time job. Then I made enough money to where I could live exclusively as a performer. But that is rare, most drag entertainers are plus ones. They are a drag performer and a makeup artist, or hair stylist, or wig designer or costume designer. I couldn't do any of those things, so when I made a living as a performer, it was exclusively as a performer.

LMK: Your successes as a performer have been plentiful. You've been on America's Got Talent, performed in multiple states and countries and produced your own shows. How'd you end up on AGT and what was that experience like?

CS: I was living in Charlotte, touring and performing in West Holiday doing



Creative artist Clay Smith (left), alongside his alter-ego, drag performer Delighted Tobehere.
CREDIT: Facebook



a drag brunch that had as many people in the audience as the cast <giggles>. Queens were complaining about the small audience and how there wouldn't be any tips. While packing up at the end, a guy (one of the seven people in the audience) approached me and asked me if I wanted to be on TV. I said yes, as long as it's not Cops. Turns out he was an AGT talent scout and they added me to the show even though casting had been completed and filming started in two weeks. The experience was incredible. I got four yes votes from the judges. A big deal, especially as a drag queen singing a bass country song. I sang Josh Turner's, "Your Man." The most important lesson from the experience was: You never know who is watching, so give your best show at all times.

LMK: Tell our readers about your show, "Hello Daddy."

CS: "Hello Daddy" was to be my 20th anniversary show, and it came after four seasons of performing a winter residency at a theatre in Puerto Vallarta, Mexico. I had just finished starring as Hedwig at the Warehouse Theatre in Greenville. From that I learned that a 90-minute cabaret could be so much more than what I had been doing in Mexico. So, I found an intern from Clemson's performing arts department, and we co-wrote a show exploring the frustrations that I was having with Delighted getting all the credit for Clay's work. The show in essence is a [display of] mid drag-life crisis. You get to meet Delighted and Clay in Hello Daddy and it's that transparency and vulnerability that appealed to the Gay Men's Chorus of Charlotte. As a result, they reached out and asked if I would do three productions of it in the Charlotte area to gauge the desire and need for a theater company that uplifts queer voices.

LMK: Any sage advice for young folks wanting to get into performing drag?

CS: Don't quit your day job until the arts tell you that you can. Even then (the advice I never got starting out), pay your taxes, establish savings and set up a retirement account. Lastly – know that you will not be able to do spits and death drops forever <raucous laughter>. King Arthur Rightus will eventually enter your life.

LMK: What are you doing when you're not performing? How do you spend your free time?

CS: I love my nearly three-year-old Aussie doodle named Archie. I love being an uncle to a niece and three nephews, all under 10. I love that I don't have any kids, I enjoy laughter and spending time with friends in groups no larger than five. Clay is a small group person. [Even] Delighted, in the busiest club or sold-out theater, is not the one bumping elbows with everyone. She's on stage with plenty of space around her. It's my business to bring in and entertain crowds, but I don't enjoy them. I love meeting people, but if you'd like to connect with me, please invite me to coffee.

LMK: How do you feel about what we saw during the Democratic National Convention?

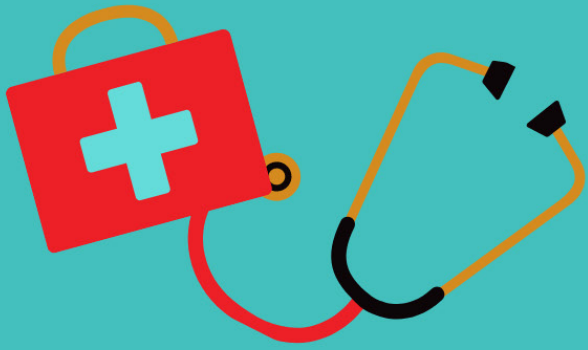
CS: Relieved. And energized that we are now voting for something instead of simply just against someone.

LMK: I'm going to include in the intro a reference to your experience with DEI. Can you dive into that a little deeper, for our readers, and what that's been like for you?

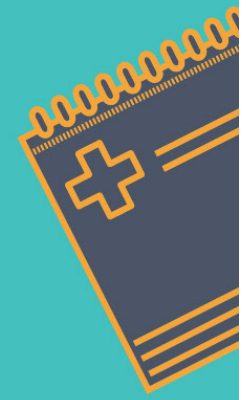
CS: I've [been] hired by companies such as PepsiCo, Frito Lay and Food Lion to come in and provide a behind the scenes look at what it takes to be a Queen and it's gone quite well. I go about these DEI talks in one of two ways. One, I start out in drag and take the drag off during the presentation or [in reverse] I start out as Clay and put the drag on during the show. It gives folks a chance to see the transformation right before their eyes. I did a TED talk about how stereotypes, assumptions, fear and expectations get in the way of relationships – be they working or personal. Those words spell safe, SAFE. What I have found is that folks have to admit they are wrong about someone and leave their SAFE bubbles of what they [believe] in order to accept someone, and that can be scary.

LMK: Any final thoughts for our readers?

CS: The moment we can find peace with the unknown, the better off we'll be. ::



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