

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



All aboard the Big Gay Cruise!



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

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goqnotescarolinas.com/events-calendar.



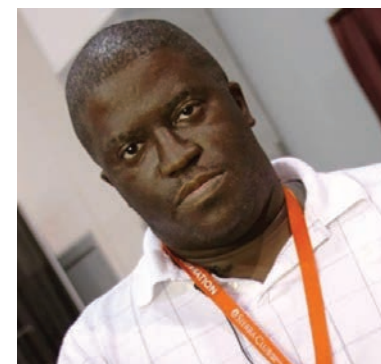
Caring for our LGBTQ+ Seniors

Studies show LGBTQ+ seniors face greater challenges with access to healthcare and quality of life than their heterosexual and/or cisgender counterparts. Age Well Advocacy's Travis Friot is dedicated to helping those members of our community in need. "I've always wanted to help people who are marginalized. I know what that's like," says Friot. LGBTQ+ older adults have a lot of health disparities compared to people who aren't part of a sexual minority community. My job is to help them get what they need."

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Our People: Alvin McEwen

Award-winning blogger and community activist Alvin McEwen shares a few details on his personal life and talks about his blog "Holy Bullies and Headless Monsters." Started in 2006, it continues to combat misinformation from organizations like Family Research Council, American Family Association, Concerned Women for America and political agenda-driven news like FOX. "I've written on marriage equality, the weaponizing of religious freedom and now what's going on with drag queens and the transgender community."



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The People speak on Social Media



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The removal of 'LGBTQ+' from federal gov't websites should raise alarm bells

Federal agencies were instructed to remove 'TQ+' and other queer content by Trump admin



by Taylor Heeden Larkins
Qnotes Staff Writer

In the wake of President Donald Trump's second inauguration this past January 20, the U.S. federal government has undertaken a sweeping removal of LGBTQ+ content from its websites, signaling a significant policy shift that has drawn widespread criticism from civil rights organizations and public health experts.

Within the first 24 hours of Trump's swearing-in, the president moved to sign Executive Order 14168, titled "Defending Women from Gender Ideology Extremism and Restoring Biological Truth to the Federal Government." This directive mandates that federal agencies recognize only two sexes — male and female — as determined at birth, effectively disregarding the existence of transgender and non-binary identities.

Subsequently, the Office of Personnel Management issued a memo directing all federal agencies to eliminate "gender ideology" from their websites, contracts, and communications by January 31. This led to the removal of terms such as "gender identity," "transgender," and "LGBTQ+" from numerous federal platforms.

According to the Williams Institute at UCLA, data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS) and the Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System (YRBS) were removed. In addition, the Census Bureau's Household Pulse Survey (HPS) data and documentation were deleted, Census data became inaccessible, and data related to tracking HIV/AIDS in the U.S. and globally were no longer available. Not only that,

questions about sexual orientation and gender identity have been removed from some federal surveys going forward.

The National Institutes of Health's Office for Sexual & Gender Minority Research has also seen its web presence eliminated, further limiting access to critical health information for LGBTQ+ communities.

Public health experts warn that these changes could have dire consequences. The Infectious Diseases Society of America emphasized that access to information on HIV and LGBTQ+ health is crucial for disease prevention and treatment efforts.

GLAAD President and CEO Sarah Kate Ellis released a statement in the first weeks of Trump's administration, sounding the alarm on the blatant censorship the executive branch is promoting.

"President Trump claims to be a strong proponent of freedom of speech, yet he is clearly committed to censorship of any information containing or related to LGBTQ Americans and issues that we

face," she said. "This action proves the Trump administration's goal of making it as difficult as possible for LGBTQ Americans to find federal resources or otherwise see ourselves reflected under his presidency. Sadly, for him, our community is more visible than ever; and this pathetic attempt to diminish and remove us will again prove unsuccessful."

Beyond health agencies, the State Department has removed the option to select "X" as a gender marker on passport applications and has instructed employees to eliminate gender-specific pronouns from email signatures. But wait, there's more.

The National Park Service has altered content related to LGBTQ+ history, notably removing references to transgender individuals from the Stonewall National Monument's website. Trans and gender-nonconforming folks such as Marsha P. Johnson, Sylvia Rivera, and Stormé DeLarverie were among those present on June 28, 1969, when police raided the Stonewall Inn — resulting in one of the most pivotal moments in the fight for LGBTQ+ rights.

Without Johnson, Rivera, DeLarverie and other trans community members, we wouldn't be where we are today. To get rid of the very mention of their identity from the memorial is a blatant attempt to rewrite history and erase the existence of a group of people who were often on the frontlines in the fight for equality and justice.

"Erasing letters or web pages does not change the history or the contributions of our transgender community members at Stonewall or anywhere else. History was made here and civil rights were earned because of Stonewall," said Timothy Leonard, the Northeast program manager for the National Parks Conservation Association.

What's concerning about this trend of removing trans narratives is it erases

the true history of the United States. Queer and trans-identifying people have time and time again proven to be integral to the history of our nation.

During the Civil War, trans soldiers fought for the Union — military records show Melvin Bean, Samuel Blalock, John Burns, Albert D.J. Cashier, Lyons Wakeman and Frank Thompson fought on American battlefields. Cashier's story is one of the most cited when talking about trans soldiers in the Civil War.

According to most researchers, Cashier — originally named Jennie Rodgers and born in 1843 — enlisted in the Union Army at 19 years old. Serving for a full three-year term, he fought in more than 40 battles during the Civil War. After the war, Cashier continued to live as a man in a small Illinois town, where he exercised rights typically denied to women at the time, including voting and receiving a military pension.

He never married and lived alone in a modest one-room home. Cashier's as-

signed sex at birth remained unknown until 1913, when, due to dementia, he was institutionalized. While under care, hospital staff discovered he had been assigned female at birth during a bath. He was subsequently forced to wear women's clothing for the first time since youth. Tragically, he later died after tripping over his skirt and falling.

Cashier was buried in 1915 in full uniform with military honours and given an official Grand Army of the Republic funeral service. His former comrades, although initially surprised by the news of his gender assigned at birth, rallied in support of their friend and protested his treatment at the hospital.

Cashier's story, among others, is targeted by the administration to be erased from our history books. Why would Trump and his administration want to remove any record of trans Americans' contribution to our country's history? The answer can be found in previous instances of the erasure of certain groups from archived records or monuments, because the Trump Administration isn't the first to attempt to erase entire populations from the history books.

Architectural historian Despina Stratigakos was researching Adolf Hitler's building plans for Nazi-occupied Europe, and while searching for building designs and blueprints, Stratigakos found a master plan of destruction that he described as "no historian was ever meant to see."

He came across a copy of a directive from Field Marshal Wilhelm Keitel dated Aug. 12, 1940.

"The document conveyed Hitler's order to Germany's Army High Command to destroy World War I memorials in occupied Belgium and France. The monuments, in Hitler's eyes, served to defame the army and perpetuate hatred against the nation. Their eradication was thus necessary to restore Germany's reputation and protect it for posterity," Stratigakos wrote. "Here was clear proof that Hitler had directly intervened to transform not only the physical landscape of Europe, but the landscape of memory itself."

In fact, one of Hitler's motivations for his takeover of Europe was simple: revenge on the Treaty of Versailles — the "stab in the back" he believed led to Imperial Germany's humiliation. This "humiliation," as Stratigakos put it, resulted in the fostered resentment



among right-wing Germans, who accused the German signatories on the treaty of betraying their own nation.

We are seeing a narrative from the White House parallel to the very narratives Nazi German leaders used to justify their campaign against the "enemy within." For Nazi Germany, the "enemies" were Jewish Europeans, Black Europeans, civilians (non-Jewish) accused of disobedience, resistance, or partisan activity and more.

The President of the United States has been quoted calling anyone who

opposes his policies the "enemy from within," occasionally name-dropping specific political opponents he wishes to target.

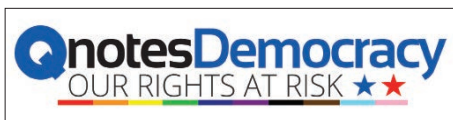
"I think the bigger problem is the enemy from within," Trump said. He added: "We have some very bad people. We have some sick people, radical left lunatics. And I think they're the big — and it should be very easily handled by, if necessary, by National Guard, or if really necessary, by the military, because they can't let that happen."

Throughout his 2024 campaign, Trump targeted immigrants with an even greater intensity. He referred to undocumented immigrants as "animals" and insisted "they're not humans." Additionally, the 47th president falsely accused Haitian immigrants of "destroying" Springfield, Ohio residents' "way of life," and "eating the pets of the people that live there."

Throughout his reign in Germany, Hitler portrayed Jews as aiming to "poison" the "pure" blood of the Aryan race. To support his insane conspiracy theories, he claimed Jews were "raping" Aryan females and "importing" Black people into Germany.

If it looks like a duck, quacks like a duck and waddles like a duck, it's a damn duck. The fact Trump uses the exact same strategies as one of the most disgusting, anti-freedom leaders and one of the biggest war criminals in the history of the world should raise alarm bells for all Americans. The dehumanization of LGBTQ+ folks, immigrants, people of color and other marginalized folks has historically been used to justify systemic discrimination and, in some cases, the systemic murders of entire populations.

History repeats itself, and if we're not proactive in stopping that cycle, this time in American history will be the next travesty in the history books. :



Democratic Senators plead with HHS to save LGBTQ+ crisis line

Lifeline is one of Donald Trump's own initiatives signed into law in 2020



by Jonathan Golian
Qnotes Staff Writer

As a part of an internal budget proposal that made the rounds in the White House in April, the national 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline for LGBTQ+ youth was on the chopping block in the latest round of cuts. Last Wed., May 7, seven Democratic Senators wrote a letter to Health and Human Services Secretary Robert F. Kennedy, Jr. denouncing the Trump administration's plan and appealing to the HHS head to save it.

A leaked fiscal year 2026 budget draft, which was reported on first by *The Washington Post*, shows the administration proposing the elimination of all funding for the LGBTQ+ hotline. Speaking about the hotline to the news outlet Axios, a spokesperson for the Office of Management and Budget said in a statement that the president's budget "funds the 988 at \$520 million — the same number as under Biden."

"It does not, however," the spokesperson added, "grant taxpayer money to a chat service where children are encouraged to embrace radical gender ideology by 'counselors' without consent or knowledge of their parents."

"We write with grave concerns regarding reports that the draft FY26 Department of Health and Human Services' (HHS) budget proposes defunding the LGBTQ+ youth suicide and crisis hotline," the letter begins. "The 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline's LGBTQ+ Youth Specialized Services program provides lifesaving services to LGBTQ+ youth, who face a higher risk of significant mental health challenges and barriers to receiving care than their peers."

"Given the Administration has claimed addressing youth mental health



Sen. Tammy Baldwin (D-WI), one of the main writers of the letter to HHS, speaks with veterans on cuts happening at the VA.
CREDIT: Facebook / Senator Tammy Baldwin

as a priority, elimination of specialized services specifically designed for at-risk youth is irresponsible. We urge you to reconsider and support continued funding for the program."

The writers and signatories of the letter include Sens. Tammy Baldwin of Wisconsin; Elizabeth Warren and Ed Markey of Massachusetts; Jeff Merkley of Oregon; Sens. Ron Wyden of Oregon; Alex Padilla of California; and Jack Reed of Rhode Island.

The hotline came into existence near the end of Donald Trump's first term in 2020, when Trump signed the bill ordering its creation. Since 2022, it has received more than 1.2 million crisis contacts, with a spike over the last several months, according to the senators' letter. Fiscal year 2026 begins on Oct. 1.

"After a successful initial phase, Congress recognized the importance of providing specialized services for LGBTQ+ youth and directed the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration to expand beyond the pilot to 24/7 operation in fiscal year 2023. To ensure that

youth would be able to access the Lifeline by phone, text or chat whenever they needed it, Congress also increased the program's funding from \$7.2 million for the pilot to \$33.1 million in fiscal year 2024 on a bipartisan basis," the letter notes.

"These specialized services are similar to other dedicated programs for veterans and service members, disaster survivors, individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing, and people with neurodivergence. This specialized intervention connects LGBTQ+ youth with specially trained crisis counselors, who can provide understanding, empathetic and confidential support. Despite the requirement for an operating plan for fiscal year 2025, HHS has provided no information about how or whether it plans to use funds for specialized services or the 988 Suicide Lifeline in general."

Jaymes Black, CEO of the Trevor Project, released a statement in response to the senators' letter. "Research continues to show that LGBTQ+ young people experience unique mental health challenges and increased suicide risk. 988 Suicide & Crisis

Lifeline's LGBTQ+ Youth Specialized Services adhere to clinical best practices to prevent suicide among this marginalized population, and provides research-backed crisis services from highly trained counselors. Thank you to these Senators for recognizing the life-saving power of continuing to fund these programs, which was passed into law with strong bipartisan support," Black wrote.

The Trevor Project has estimated that over 1.8 million LGBTQ+ youth in the United States seriously consider suicide each year, with at least one attempting suicide every 45 seconds. Since the day of Trump's inauguration, the project's crisis lines saw a 33 percent jump in calls and messages, with the total volume of incoming contacts going up 46 percent, as compared with normal daily rates. The last notable increase in volume happened on Nov. 6, the day after

Trump won the 2024 election, where calls and messages hit a record-breaking 700 percent increase due to the final results.

The letter concludes by stating, "While we strongly disagree with the many actions taken by the Trump Administration targeting LGBTQ+ individuals, we believe that suicide prevention should be a non-partisan issue. Elimination of services that help keep youth alive is reckless, and we urge you to reconsider your proposal to eliminate this lifeline. ::

If you or someone you know needs to locate mental health resources and support, the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline is still currently open to calls and texts via phone, or you can go online to 988lifeline.org for 24/7 access to free and confidential services. The Trans Lifeline, a support network for transgender and gender-nonconforming people, can be reached at (877) 565-8860. The Trevor Project Lifeline, for LGBTQ+ youth (ages 24 and younger), can be reached at (866) 488-7386, or by texting START to 678678.

Michael Thomas-Visgar appointed Blume Studios' first director of events

As announced by Blumenthal Arts last month, Blume Studios has found its first director in Michael Thomas-Visgar.

"Following a highly competitive international search that attracted over 100 applicants, Michael has been selected as the inaugural director of Blume Studios Events," said Blumenthal Arts President and CEO Tom Gabbard. "He will lead a diverse slate of programming, from national and international touring productions to corporate events and locally developed shows."

Blume Studios is a relatively recent addition to Charlotte's artistic landscape. Blumenthal Arts opened the new venue in 2024, dedicating it to bringing immersive art and multimedia experiences to the public. Its first exhibit, "Space Explorers: THE INFINITE," brought visions of space through interactive displays and models, including an immense spinning globe of Earth and a VR journey to the International Space Station, with 360-degree cinematic views of outer space.

Michael Thomas-Visgar is no stranger to the challenges Blumenthal Arts brings to visitors of its venues year-round. Having performed and directed at venues including the Pasadena Playhouse, McCoy Rigby Entertainment and 3D Theatricals, the Los Angeles native boasts more than a decade of experience in the live entertainment industry, with a focus on the creative development of immersive events in non-traditional spaces.

Thomas-Visgar's experience in entertainment and production includes original cast member status in "Frozen: Live at the Hyperion at Disney California Adventure." During turns in the director's seat, he has earned an LA Times Critics' Choice recognition for "The Mongoose" and received critical acclaim and awards for multiple productions at the Hollywood Fringe Festival.

In the last few years, Thomas-Visgar has also served as a key creative and operations leader at Rail Events, Inc., where he oversaw the reopening of Old Tucson, an immersive

wild west theme park, following a two-year closure due to the COVID pandemic. One of his ongoing projects, which he is especially elated to be a part of, includes the development of the "Harry Potter: A Hogwarts Express Adventure," a new immersive experience expected to launch soon.

Said Thomas-Visgar about his new role at Blume Studios: "I am deeply passionate about immersive art and its transformative potential within the entertainment industry. As audiences continue to seek out more engaging and innovative experiences, I believe immersive formats will continue to play a leading role in shaping the future of artistic expression. I am honored to join Blume Studios and contribute to growing this cutting-edge form of entertainment in the Charlotte community."

Adds Gabbard: "Since opening in September, Blume Studios has earned some of the highest audience ratings in Blumenthal's history. We are well on our way to realizing our vision of Blume Studios as a vibrant creative hub and national leader in immersive experiences and artistic development. Under Michael's leadership, we look forward to sustaining that level of excellence while expanding ways that we are [a] catalyst for creativity."



Michael Thomas-Visgar, Blume Studio's first director of events. (Photo Credit: Blumenthal Arts)

One of Thomas-Visgar's first major projects is the already underway "MONOPOLY LIFESIZED: Travel Edition" interactive exhibit. Bringing players into a life-sized version of the iconic game, they will navigate familiar properties like Boardwalk and Park Place, along with utilities, railroads and more. Attendees will solve clever puzzles, collect properties and outsmart opponents in order to win before time runs out. Monopoly Lifesized will run through July 27. Tickets are available at blumenthalarts.org/events-tickets. ::

— Jonathan Golian

Marjorie Taylor Green tries to codify Gulf of Mexico renaming

The U.S. House approved a measure Thursday, May 8, that would codify part of President Donald Trump's executive order renaming the Gulf of Mexico as the "Gulf of America."

The bill — which was passed on a nearly party-line vote, 211-206 — calls on the head of each federal agency to "update each document and map of the Federal agency in accordance" with the new name within six months of enactment.

U.S. Rep. Don Bacon of Nebraska was the only Republican to vote against the measure.

"Our country has more important issues to worry about," Bacon said in a statement shared with States Newsroom.

"The Administration is making great strides securing our border and cutting waste in government. But we need to focus on the reconciliation bill and how to strengthen Medicaid for every American

who needs it. Renaming bodies of water is not a priority and sends a bad message to the rest of the world," he said.

All Democrats stood in opposition. Sixteen House members did not vote, including eight Republicans and eight Democrats.

U.S. Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene, who introduced the bill in January, said "this is such an important thing to do for the American people," during the floor debate Thursday.

The Georgia Republican said "the American people deserve pride in their country, and they deserve pride in the waters that we own, that we protect with our military and our Coast Guard and all of the businesses that prosper along these waters."

The legislation is unlikely to move far in the Senate, where it would take 60 votes to advance. Republicans control the cham-

ber 53-47. The Senate has 45 Democrats, but two independents, Sens. Angus King of Maine and Bernie Sanders of Vermont, caucus with the party.

Meanwhile, a federal judge in April sided with The Associated Press and granted the wire service a preliminary injunction in its case against the Trump administration over allegations of denied access to restricted spaces at the White House due to its editorial decision to use "Gulf of Mexico" rather than "Gulf of America."

The bill says "any reference in a law, map, regulation, document, paper, or other record of the United States to the Gulf of Mexico shall be deemed to be a reference to the 'Gulf of America'" and directs Interior Secretary Doug Burgum to "oversee the implementation of the renaming."

In a Statement of Administration Policy on Tuesday, the White House said it "strongly supports" passage of the bill and that Trump's advisers would recommend he sign it into law if the legislation were presented to him in its current form.

Ahead of the vote, House Minority Leader Hakeem Jeffries urged a strong "no"



U.S. Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene, (R-Ga.), talks about her bill renaming the Gulf of Mexico to the "Gulf of America" at the U.S. Capitol in Washington D.C. (Photo Credit: Screen Capture)

against the bill, which he described as a "silly, small-minded and sycophantic piece of legislation."

"What are we doing, folks? There are serious issues that the American people want us to confront," the New York Democrat added. ::

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— Shaureen Miranda

Supreme Court sides with Trump on transgender military ban

The Supreme Court gave the Trump Administration the ability to start enforcing a ban on transgender people from serving in the military May 6, which was previously blocked by the lower courts. Despite the ruling, the legal challenges against the barring will continue to move forward.

The case pertains to one of the many executive orders that Donald Trump issued while transitioning back to the White House, specifically spotlighting two transgender individuals.

The executive order made on Trump's first day revoked the previous order made by President Joe Biden that allowed transgender service members to serve openly. A week later, a second issue was issued, which states "adoption of a gender identity inconsistent with an individual's sex conflicts with a soldier's

commitment to an honorable, truthful and disciplined lifestyle."

There was no reason given by the Supreme Court justices in the emergency application submitted by Trump's Justice department, which is typical in fast-moving cases. The court's three liberal members, Justices Sonia Sotomayor, Elena Kagan and Ketanji Brown Jackson, also provided no reason in their dissents to the ruling.

After implementing the orders between January and February, a new policy was put into place, requiring the military branches to separate currently-serving members with an honorable discharge. According to official counts, about 0.2 percent of the military, amounting to around 4,200 service members, are transgender.

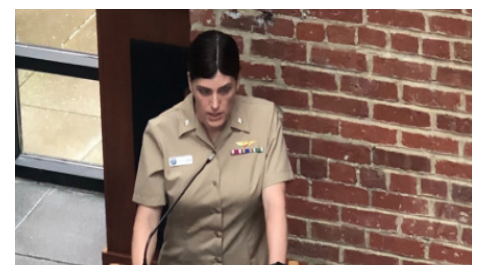
The executive order was previously blocked this past March by Judge Benjamin H. Settle of the Federal District

Court in Tacoma, Wash. At the time, Judge Settle had issued a nationwide injunction, effectively blocking the ban while using one of the plaintiffs, Cmdr. Emily Shilling, in his argument.

"There is no claim and no evidence that she is now, or ever was, a detriment to her unit's cohesion, or to the military's lethality or readiness, or that she is mentally or physically unable to continue her service," Judge Settle wrote. "There is no claim and no evidence that Shilling herself is dishonest or selfish, or that she lacks humility or integrity. Yet absent an injunction, she will be promptly discharged solely because she is transgender."

Judge Settle, who was appointed by President George W. Bush, then took aim squarely at the government, stating that it had failed to show that the ban was "substantially related to achieving unit cohesion, good order or discipline."

"Although the court gives deference to military decision-making," the judge added, "it would be an abdication to ignore the government's flat failure to address plaintiffs' uncontroverted evidence



Navy Cmdr. Emily Shilling shares her story during a Pride Month event at NAVFAC HQ in 2023. (Photo Credit: Facebook)

that years of open transgender service promoted these objectives."

Lawyers for the challengers reacted with dismay toward Tuesday's ruling.

"Today's Supreme Court ruling is a devastating blow to transgender service members who have demonstrated their capabilities and commitment to our nation's defense," opponents of the ban said in a statement from Lambda Legal and the Human Rights Campaign Foundation. ::

— Jonathan Golian

Note written on Marriage Equality bill puts VA in identity crisis

Just as North Carolina has cautiously closed the chapter on Lieutenant Governor Mark Robinson, one of the state's most memorable bigoted political figures in recent memory, our neighboring state of Virginia may be experiencing a reasonable facsimile in the form of their own Lt. Gov. Winsome Earle-Sears.

Earle-Sears, the Virginia Republican party's upcoming candidate for governor, hand wrote a note opposing same-sex marriage on House Bill 174, which affirmed the state's recognition and allowance of the right to marry. This bill also ensured that the state would recognize any lawful marriage between two parties, regardless of their sex, gender or race. It passed the General Assembly and was signed by Gov. Glenn Youngkin last year.

On the copy of the bill, after the document had passed both chambers, Earle-Sears wrote, "As the Lt. Governor, I recognize and respect my constitutional obligation to adhere to the procedures laid out in the Constitution of Virginia. However, I remain morally opposed to the contents of HB174 as passed by the General Assembly."

Delegate Rozia Henson (D-Prince William County) is the bill's author and is also the first openly gay Black man to serve in Virginia's General Assembly. That fact and milestone draws more reason for Henson's concern.

"She knows I'm an openly gay Black state representative, so the fact that she wrote something personal on my bill, knowing that she knows me and my family, that was somewhat disheartening," Henson said during an interview with a DC NBC affiliate.

While the act of signing the bill is a "ministerial" act that Virginia's lieutenant governor and House speaker carry out routinely for all bills passed by the General Assembly, per a spokesperson for the House of Delegates, the additional writing found tacked on is unusual.

"I haven't seen it done before in my time in the General Assembly, even as a legislative aide in the GA in 2014," said Henson.

House Bill 174 prohibits any person authorized by the state to issue marriage licenses from denying someone a marriage license based on their sex, gender or race. However, the law also includes a provision that allows religious organizations and members of the clergy to decline to officiate ceremonies that "violate their conscience," according to a previous statement from Youngkin's office.

In a statement to News4 NBC Washington, Earle-Sears' campaign said, in part, "She has already shown she will always be a governor for all Virginians. She has always been open and honest with the people of Virginia about her values and her unwavering commitment



Lt. Gov. Winsome Earle-Sears (Center) poses with the Home Builders Association of Virginia in late January. (Photo Credit: Facebook)

to both respecting and upholding the law."

The note may very well follow Earle-Sears to the next election in the most awkward way possible. While Earle-Sears stands as the Republican nominee for governor, the Republican lieutenant governor nominee, John Reid, as mentioned earlier in this article, is an openly gay man. ::

— Jonathan Golian

Maine scores victory over Trump in trans rights lawsuit

In a stunning victory for the state of Maine and its governor, Janet Mills (D), the Trump administration has pulled back on its freezing of funds for the state's schools over their support of transgender rights.

On Feb. 21, during a White House meeting with state governors, Trump directly threatened to revoke funding from Maine for not complying with an executive order banning transgender women and girls from women's sports. This sparked a tense exchange between Mills and Trump.

"Are you not going to comply with it?" Trump asked Mills. "I'm complying with state and federal laws," she replied. "We are federal law," Trump said. "You better do it. You better do it, because you're not going to get federal funding ... Your population

doesn't want men in women's sports."

"We'll see you in court," Mills replied. "Good. I'll see you in court. I'll look forward to that. That should be a real easy one," Trump said. "And enjoy your life after, governor, because I don't think you'll be in elected politics."

Now, over two months later, Trump and his administration are now finding just how "real easy" a fight like this may end up being. In a settlement announced on Friday, May 2, the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) said it would halt all efforts to withhold funds for a child nutrition program in Maine.

The settlement, without asserting wrongdoing by either Maine or the administration, says the USDA will "agree to refrain from freezing, termination, or oth-

erwise interfering with the state of Maine's access to United States Department of Agriculture funds ... based on alleged violations of Title IX without first following all legally required procedures."

In response to the victory, Aaron Frey, the Maine attorney general, said in a statement on Friday, "It's unfortunate that my office had to resort to federal court just to get [the] USDA to comply with the law and its own regulations, but we are pleased that the lawsuit has now been resolved and that Maine will continue to receive funds as directed by Congress to feed children and vulnerable adults."

Mills, also upbeat from the win for Maine, talked about the triumph and how things look going forward. "I told him I'd see him in court," she said, as reported by the *Portland Press Herald*. "Well, we did see him in court, and we won ... It's the congress that makes the law, not the president... These bullying tactics, we will not tolerate them ... I am confident when we see him in



Janet Mills speaks to constituents about funding a Community Resilience Partnership award on May 1. (Photo Credit: Facebook)

court, we will win time and time again."

While this case has been settled, the lawsuit filed by the presidential administration against Maine's Department of Education for allowing trans student-athletes to compete on school teams matching their gender identities is still ongoing. ::

— Jonathan Golian

Trump admin DOJ halts monitoring of trans individuals in crime surveys

In a series of unpublicized revisions made in March to federal government surveys, the Bureau of Justice Statistics has chosen to remove all references to gender and gender identity in at least four different surveys.

The Appeal reported on this development on Monday, May 5. As a result of these changes, the federal government will no longer collect data about the gender identity of people who experience violent crime or sexual misconduct.

To expand on how large an issue this change is, previous statistics from the U.S. Department of Justice survey data states that transgender people are more than four times as likely to experience violent crime. As well, behind bars, incarcerated trans Americans experience sexual violence at more than 12 times the rate of other imprisoned people.

Federal data on trans individuals is crucial because surveys on minority groups require large sample sizes to be accurate. The four surveys that were just modified sample hundreds of thousands of re-

spondents each year, an undertaking that private organizations don't have available resources to collect data at such a scale.

"The removal of sexual orientation and gender identity questions from federal surveys is devastating to our understanding of LGBT populations' health and wellbeing," Ilan Meyer, senior scholar for public policy and sexual orientation law at the Williams Institute of UCLA, told The Appeal via email. "Such data is important for setting policy goals for interventions. The removal of sexual orientation and gender identity data will leave policymakers, researchers and advocates with no valid information on the victimization of LGBT people."

The reportedly affected surveys were The National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS), the School Crime Supplement, the Survey on Sexual Victimization (SSV) and the Survey of Inmates in Local Jails (SILJ).

Meyer noted that no federal data on crimes committed against LGBTQ+ people existed before the BJS added questions on gender identity and sexual orientation in

2016. By analyzing data from the NCVS, the Williams Institute found that LGBTQ+ people experienced violent crimes at five times the rate of non-LGBTQ+ people.

Each question removal stands to dramatically affect the transgender population whether in schools, in correctional facilities or in the general public. However, Trump's move toward transgender erasure may have conflicted with a federal law requiring the government to collect data on hate crimes against LGBTQ+ people. According to Rachel E. Morgan, chief of the BJS's Victimization Statistics Unit, the changes may be illegal.

"The fourth question on the NCVS that refers to 'gender' is in the hate crime series of questions," Morgan wrote. "The Matthew Shepard and James Byrd, Jr., Hate Crimes Prevention Act of



Ilan Meyer (left) of the Williams Institute calls Trump's anti-trans actions 'devastating,' while Rachel Morgan, chief of the BJS's Victimization Statistics Unit, says the changes may be illegal. (Photo Credit: Screen capture)

2009 uses the term 'gender' and 'gender identity' as an actual or perceived characteristic that can be the basis for a hate crime. Given this federal law, the removal of this question ... is being reviewed by Office of General Council [sic.] representatives at BJS, Census Bureau, and OMB. Until final guidance is provided, this question has been programmed by Census to be skipped by [Field Representatives]." ::

— Jonathan Golian

LGBTQ+ Catholics have cautious optimism for Pope Leo XVI

Even in Francis's time as pope negative views on queer community remain



by Jonathan Golian
Qnotes Staff Writer

In the weeks since Pope Francis passed away, there have been many conversations as to who would take up the next mantle, and what version of the Catholic church they would represent.

Before Francis had donned the mantle of the highest figure in the faith's leadership, Roman Catholics had stayed the way of conservatism, last overseen by Pope Benedict XVI. Francis's era, from 2013 to early 2025, strove to move away from that line of thinking by opening the church's arms to those it had once shunned, including those in the LGBTQ+ community.

While not every action of the late figure was positive — he approved declarations against same-sex unions and gender affirming surgeries — many of his actions did push the church to view the world more progressively. Now the question is whether or not the newly elected Pope Leo XIV will follow in Francis's footsteps and continue to move the



Pope Leo XVI during announcements being made the day he was chosen as the Vatican's new leader.
CREDIT: Facebook

church forward in a positive manner, or walk back to a less inclusive way of thinking.

While there is a limited amount of quotes that can be attributed to the previously named Cardinal Robert Prevost, there is some speculation as to how the new pope would move forward based on past remarks.

During the 2012 Synod of Bishops, Prevost had reportedly expressed contention with the challenges the Catholic Church was faced with, due to sympathetic media portrayals of "alternative families."

"Note, for example, how alternative families comprised of homosexual partners and their adopted children are so benignly and sympathetically portrayed on television programs and in cinema," he told a group of bishops at the time, according to the Catholic News Service. "The sympathy for anti-Christian lifestyle choices that the mass media fosters is so brilliantly and artfully engrained in the viewing public that when people hear the Christian message, it often inevitably seems ideological and emotionally cruel

by contrast to the ostensible humaneness of the anti-Christian perspective."

Francis DeBernardo, the executive director of New Ways Ministry, which works to foster LGBTQ inclusion in the Catholic Church, has called the remarks "disappointing," but notes there is a quiet optimism in his thoughts on the passing of the role.

"We pray that in the 13 years that have passed, 12 of which were under the papacy of Pope Francis, that his heart and mind have developed more progressively on LGBTQ+ issues, and we will take a wait-and-see attitude to see if that has happened," DeBernardo said in a statement.

Michael O'Loughlin, the executive director of Outreach, an LGBTQ Catholic organization, feels similarly to DeBernardo. Able to experience the announcement of the new pope first-hand in Rome, O'Loughlin remains hopeful that Leo will follow in the positive steps Francis made.

"I'm willing to look at his wider message, which was one of peace and standing up for the marginalized," he said. "The fact that he switched to Spanish to address his former community in Peru I thought was a nice sign that he's a man of the people."

Jason Steidl Jack, a gay Catholic and an assistant teaching professor of religious studies at St. Joseph's University, New York, presented a balanced reaction when it came to Pope Leo being announced to head the next era. "I do see him continuing Pope Francis' legacy, especially of dialogue and synodality," Steidl Jack said. However, the New York resident is also keeping in mind that yet again, Pope Francis wasn't a perfect leader in the eyes of the LGBTQ community.

"The church's teaching, even under Pope Francis, remains incredibly homophobic, and the church goes on inventing new ways of being transphobic as it really avoids learning about trans people and their experiences," he said.

However, even for Steidl Jack, the passage of time does indicate some hope. "A lot of the world has changed since 2012. Even Pope Francis changed a great deal over the course of his pontificate," he admitted. "So I hope that Pope Leo has been listening to LGBTQ Catholics. I hope he's been paying attention and growing, just as Pope Francis did, just as the rest of the world has been."

Greg Krajewski, a resident of Chicago, Pope Leo's American home city, and also a practicing gay Catholic, expressed that he's "careful [of] who I talk to and how I present myself," but that many things said within the new pope's opening speech painted an optimistic picture of who the man would be for all the church's people.

"The first thing he said a couple of times, 'God loves us without limits or conditions.' I think this is a really big indication that even if he himself maybe has more reservations about the LGBTQ issues in the church, he is open to those discussions," Krajewski remarked. "He is open to bringing us in." ::

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Caring for Our LGBTQ+ Seniors

Qnotes talks with an expert in the field of senior care who specializes in LGBTQ+ clients



by David Aaron Moore
Qnotes Staff Writer

Many in the LGBTQ+ community have dealt with caring for a loved one or significant other first hand. You've read this recipe before: parents are aging and facing health issues. Add into the mix an out son or daughter, possibly partnered or single, with no children. Heterosexual siblings are married with children and family. Who is the most likely candidate to step up to the plate?

With the AIDS pandemic of the late 20th century, those who survived were often there to care for those who would not. Friends helping friends and remaining steadfast by their side as an advocate for care and dignity, when even hospital staff were reserved about providing care and family members had stepped away entirely, was not uncommon.

Most of those caregivers — and some while still young — cared for friends who passed away from AIDS-related complications; and later in middle-age saw to the needs of their own aging parents. Those caregivers are now in their '60s and beyond. Who is left to help with their care?

But it's not just the caregivers of the past who need help today. Seniors in our community, by far, face financial and healthcare challenges at a much greater rate than their hetero nuclear family counterparts.

What is the answer and where can help be found?

In an effort to find help for those in need now and others planning for the near future, *Qnotes* spoke with Travis Friot, a young gay man with a passion for caring for LGBTQ+ seniors. Here he shares some of his own story, and offers suggestions to live the best life possible in your later years.

David Aaron Moore: Tell us about the services you provide for seniors.

Travis Friot: I'm a gerontologist and Gerontology is a broad discipline. It has to do with so many things related to aging, so I've tried to narrow it down. I help with dementia care guidance, care coordination and wellness consulting. So that may include helping people to look for long term care options like Adult Day services, understanding their options and finding what's a good fit for them.

DAM: Let's talk about Age Well Advocacy.

TF: Last year, I started Age Well Advocacy to provide care management and dementia care guidance and wellness consulting to older adults. And I made it a point in the way I advertised and on my social media and when I'm connecting with people that they know I support LGBTQ+ older adults.

I posted it, I put it on my website. I got my SAGE credentials. You know, I do my update with SAGE every year, and when I meet with people, other people who do some kind of service or resource for older adults, I make sure that I let them know I am an affirming place for LGBTQ+ people,



Studies show that LGBTQ+ seniors face far more challenges than their non-minority counterparts. CREDIT: Adobe Stock

and I let them know that, because if I'm going to refer somebody to them, I want to make sure that they are, too.

DAM: Your focus is Charlotte?

TF: I live in Charlotte. And Age Well Advocacy is based in Charlotte, but it's remote, virtual consulting, so I'm able to help people all over the country.

DAM: How did you find yourself reaching out and working with LGBTQ+ seniors? What motivated you to go down that path?

TF: My whole career has been working with the aging. A lot of it has been in long term care. I started working in long term care when I was 13. I started off volunteering. Some of the facilities and the assisted living communities that I worked in had residents who identified as LGBTQ+. There was a transgender resident in one facility, and then I had another resident who identified as part of the community in another. I made it a point to celebrate Pride Month. And I just remember the push back I was getting. It wasn't like I was broadcasting it, because my thing was, I wanted to make sure I was still honoring the privacy of those people. Not trying to broadcast them. And because in that environment, they have to be safe, they have to be secure among the other residents. I feel good about helping people who I know are so marginalized. I identify with that. I know what that's like. LGBTQ+ older adults have a lot of health disparities compared to people who aren't part of a sexual minority community. I don't feel like there are enough services and resources out there for them.

DAM: You mentioned disparities, would you mind elaborating on that just a little bit?

TF: Older adults are more likely to be disabled, and they're more likely to live in poverty. They're more likely to age

alone without children. So if they do end up needing support from family, a lot of times, it's not there, they may have been disowned by a family. It was different back then. It was so much less accepted and there was so much more discrimination that a lot of people have lost contact with their families.

DAM: When you speak of seniors, what age range are you typically referring to?

TF: People 55 and older. But there are different groups of old. You've got the older and you've got the oldest of the old that are 80 and older. And they're such a diverse group of people, so many different cultures and backgrounds.

DAM: When people come to you for help, what do you find most often, that they are looking for?

TF: There are a lot of people who are looking either for themselves, or as an older adult caregiver. They just don't know the resources that are out there. And that can mean government resources, you know, free resources. I don't know if it's like these resources and services are not advertising enough or what, but I'll give you an example. When you're thinking about an area agency on aging, which is a government resource for older people and people living with disability, that is one of the first places you should be going to if you're looking for resources, because they're like a hub. And they're every-

where. They're in every state. They will help you for free. And I'm finding that hardly anybody knows about them.

DAM: If someone reaches out to you for assistance, how much does it cost them to have your expertise?

TF: So I'm very transparent about the cost, and I also put it on my website, on the FAQ tab, I charge \$150 an hour, and that's pretty competitive compared to people who are offering care, management services. And I've offered a little bit of a lower rate because my services are virtual. Typically it's more expensive than that. It can be a lot more expensive, when you're looking at people offering care management. I've seen some initial assessments can for over \$1,000, and that's just for a consultation. Unfortunately, it's not something that insurance covers.

DAM: What are some of the suggestions you would make for people who are entering into that senior age bracket and what they should prepare for?

TF: You know there are several things. There's a difference in health outcomes for people who are living in rural areas, versus people who are living in the city, when you're aging. You know there's so many more resources and services available. So that may look like maybe you want to live somewhere that offers more resources and services. AARP has

something called a livability index, and it's a tool that you can use on their website and see areas are ranked, as far as being able to age in them and live in them with the best health outcomes and what's available to you. I would also say, it's important to prepare your finances. And with what's currently happening with the government and all the budget cuts, health-care as you age can be very expensive. Especially if you're relying on people for care giving, especially when someone is LGBTQ+, doesn't have children and they're not partnered or married. Be prepared and know what your options are. Some are very affordable. If you want to stay in your home, it's important to know that adult day centers provide interaction with others. There are age tech companies like Care Yaya,

where you can have students that come to your house, pre-med students that come to your house for a much cheaper rate, a much more affordable rate. And they may not be able to do CNA work, but they can help you around the house with cleaning. They can help you around the house with technology issues, fixing things, all kinds of things. Knowing your resources and being financially ready are such an important part. ::

For info on services available:
<https://www.agewelladvocacy.com/>
<https://www.careyaya.org/>
<https://livabilityindex.aarp.org/>



Travis Friot on LGBTQ+ seniors: 'I don't feel like there are enough services and resources out there for them.' CREDIT: Facebook

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Considering a staycation: Should I stay or should I go?

When you need a break but you're short on time or cash



by Wendy Lyons
Qnotes Staff Writer

Are you in need of a vacation, but don't have the time to get away? Do you need to check out, but can't afford to check in? Maybe a "staycation" is what you need.

A staycation refers to a vacation that is spent at home or nearby rather than traveling to a distant location. This trend has gained popularity for various reasons, including budget constraints, time limitations or simply the desire to explore your local area without the stress of travel.

Staycations can help you relax and recharge while discovering new experiences close to home. A favorite staycation activity many QC residents enjoy includes a trip to the US Whitewater Center with a lawn chair, walking shoes and a good book.

Staycations can significantly reduce travel expenses such as flights, expensive accommodations and dining out. This allows for more budget-friendly vacation options. Depending on the staycation activity, there is no need to pack or travel long distances, making it easier to enjoy quality time with self, family or friends, without the distractions of daily life.

Far too often residents overlook hidden gems in their city. A staycation encourages residents to discover local attractions, parks, historical landmarks — and events they are otherwise be unaware of. By removing or reducing travel logistics, staycations can lead to a more relaxing experience. "I really enjoyed my weekend hotel stay at the Embassy Suites and I stayed less than five miles away from home," shared Charlotte resident D. Johnson. "I took myself out to a museum, grabbed some take-out food and went back to my hotel room and relaxed."

Here is a list of staycation ideas in and around the Charlotte, N.C. region:

Art Galleries and Museums



Visit the Mint Museum, Harvey B. Gantt Cultural Center, Bechtler Museum of Modern Art to immerse yourself in local culture.

<https://www.charlottesgotalot.com/articles/>



The Westin Hotel
CREDIT: Facebook

arts-culture/charlotte-museum-guide

Charlotte Airport Overlook



Experience unparalleled views, immersive education, relaxing picnics and fun-filled adventures at the Airport Overlook.
<https://www.cltairport.com/community/airport-overlook/>

Discovery Place Science



Engage in hands-on exhibits and learn about science and technology in an entertaining way.
<https://discoveryplace.org/>

Lake Norman Beach

Spend the day at the beach in beautiful Lake Norman State Park.
<https://www.visitlakenorman.org/>



Local Hotel/Airbnb



There are countless local/regional hotels and Airbnbs to consider for an overnight

or weekend stay. Be sure to consider amenities like indoor/outdoor pools, breakfast included, and room service options.

https://www.tripadvisor.com/Hotels-g49022-Charlotte_North_Carolina-Hotels.html
<https://www.airbnb.com/charlotte-nc/stays>

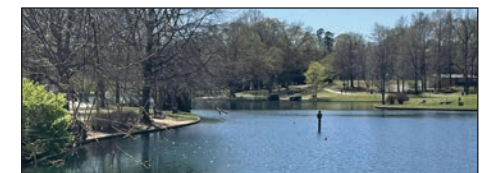
Local/Regional Breweries and Wineries



Take a brewery tour or a wine tasting at local establishments like The Olde Mecklenburg Brewery or Childress and Treehouse Vineyards.

<https://www.charlottesgotalot.com/eat-drink/breweries>

Mecklenburg Park and Recreation



Spend a day picnicking, walking trails, or

see next page ►

enjoying the playgrounds and lake.
<https://parkandrec.mecknc.gov/Places-to-Visit/Parks>

NASCAR Hall of Fame



Explore the history of NASCAR with interactive exhibits and memorabilia.
<https://www.nascarhall.com/plan-a-visit>

Spa Day



Treat yourself to a spa day at one of Charlotte's many wellness centers for some pampering.
<https://www.charlottesgotalot.com/articles/things-to-do/charlotte-spa-guide>

U.S. National Whitewater Center
 Enjoy outdoor activities like kayaking, rock



climbing, zip-lining, and hiking.
<https://whitewater.org/whitewater-center/>

NC Sullenberger Aviation Museum



Founded in 1992, the Smithsonian affiliate museum boasts multiple historic aircraft, including the legendary Airbus 320 (packed full of Carolina residents bound for Charlotte) that Captain Sully Sullenberger safely landed in New York's Hudson River.
<https://www.sullenbergeraviation.org/>

These staycation ideas can help you and your family enjoy a refreshing break without the need for extensive travel. Staycations can be a fun and fulfilling way to reenergized yourself and enjoy your surroundings without the need for extensive travel. ::

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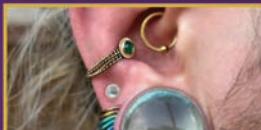
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Big Gay Cruise takes Pride out on the ocean blue

Seafaring event welcomes all of the LGBTQ+ community



by Jonathan Golian
Qnotes Staff Writer

When was the last time you treated yourself to a real getaway, leaving the cities and towns you know for a bit of a reset? It is certainly not easy. As prices for practically everything goes up, looking for a fun and affordable vacation is getting more difficult. If you are looking to really float your boat on the high seas, look no further than the Big Gay Cruise, the ocean-bound Pride party where anything can happen!

Founded by Michael Sharpton, one of Scorpio's former managers, as well as his partners Thomas Ziri and Peter Enns, the Big Gay Cruise line touts itself as the ultimate experience for LGBTQ+ community members and their allies while at sea. Bringing together world-famous recording artists, stars from RuPaul's Drag Race and renowned LGBTQ+ DJs and comedians, each night on the cruise is curated with the passengers in mind. From exclusive nightclub events and concerts to panel discussions and gatherings around themed cocktail hours, there's something for everybody on the BGC ocean tours.

QNotes recently talked with Michael to learn how the project started, where future trips may lead, and where he'd like to see the brand travel to.

Jonny Golian: Tell me a little bit about the Big Gay Cruise.

Michael Sharpton: So, the Big Gay Cruise was originally created as a thank you for our employees coming out of COVID, and that was how we did our first one, together with our sister bar in



The Margaritaville at Sea will serve as the host ship for the next Big Gay Cruise event, which leaves Tampa Oct. 26.
(Photo Credit: Courtesy Big Gay Cruise)

Greensboro. And then as we developed the concept, we wanted to offer something that was affordable to our community, something that was completely inclusive for everyone, something that was family-friendly, that you could feel comfortable bringing your kids on. A cruise that certainly celebrated our community.

JG: How long has the Big Gay cruise line been going for?

MS: We've had ... our fifth cruise and we have six more lined up over the next two years.

JG: Do you get to go on all of the trips out, or do you more or less just plan them out?

MS: I go on a majority of them. [Between] me and the two other partners in this, someone is always on these trips.

JG: How does the planning work for each of the cruises?

MS: Along with my other two partners in the Big Gay Cruise, we manage all of the bookings, along with our line partner, Royal Caribbean, and work on the tasks of booking entertainment, along with securing the logistics of everything that needs to happen in order to get 400 to 500 people on a cruise ship. We work with the cruise lines to make sure that we have venues in place for all of our private parties. By the time of each departure, on each of our cruises, our group has access to about 40 hours of private events that are held exclusively for our groups. It takes months of negotiations to get the entertainment in place, to get hotel rooms in place and secure group rates for all of our guests, certainly including employees and entertainers coming into whatever port we're leaving out of.

JG: Out of the five cruises that you've done so far, which trek has been your favorite?

MS: You know, I always have a special place for the very first one, a lot of memories there. We put a lot of work into that, and it came off so successfully. We are extremely proud of what we were able to pull off. And then with our second one, which was our largest, we had just over 800 people on that one, so we were very pleased with that. We've been very fortunate to have a good working relationship with Royal Caribbean, so they have been very generous with their support of the Big Gay Cruise.

see next page ▶

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LGBTQ+ passengers enjoying everything the Big Gay Cruise has to offer. (Photo Credit: Courtesy Big Gay Cruise)

has to offer. So you really get the best of both worlds.

JG: Oh, okay, so the cruises end up being kind of a mixer of sorts.

MS: Absolutely. You know, we feel very strongly that being part of a larger cruise community is important, and that just being in mainstream cruising certainly helps our community.

JG: So, while you don't at the moment get to chart the actual paths, where would you love to see future cruises go? Do you and your partners have any specific plans after the two cruises coming up?

MS: Right now, our cruises are based mostly in Florida. Some of the cruises that we have coming up will be departing out of California, which will give us different ports along the west coast. After that, we'll do an Alaskan cruise. We will do another Transpacific cruise. We'll do something out of Europe at some point, so you know, we have plans to certainly grow this and start our cruises out of different ports throughout the world.

We've also looked at an Australian cruise and a Panama Canal cruise, so there's a lot available to us. It's just a matter of the logistics, and we offer three big cruises a year. So how do we fit in these smaller cruises throughout? Most people do one to two cruises a year. So we certainly don't want to saturate the market in that we hurt our main business, the three main ones that we do every year. So right now, it's a game of numbers to make sure that we offer enough cruises throughout

the year, that we maximize our audience and yet not oversaturate the market.

JG: Last question: Do you personally have a place that you would like to see the Big Gay Cruise line visit? Do you have your own wish list for future treks?

MS: My wish list, and it's certainly on my personal bucket list, is the Alaskan cruise. Never done it. So I would expect that one probably in '27, and I'm very interested in doing a Hawaiian cruise, and then on down to Australia. So those are the few that are on my bucket list. ::

The next dates for the Big Gay Cruise are from Oct. 26 through Nov. 2, and Feb. 8 through the 14th. Check out their main site, BigGayCruise.com, for room prices and the details on all of the events the cruise offers.




Big Gay Cruises are a celebration of LGBTQ+ diversity. (Photo Credit: Courtesy Big Gay Cruise)

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Enjoy the Journey!

Pride Journey: Detroit, Michigan



by **Joey Amato**
Guest Contributor

There's a distinct pull to Detroit. Built on industry and powered by music, it's a city that wears its grit like a badge of honor. But beneath the steel and soul lies something softer: a place that opens its arms to creatives, dreamers, and outsiders. For LGBTQ travelers, Detroit isn't just rising — it's already resonating, thanks to its authenticity and inclusive spirit.

My stay began at the AC Hotel Detroit at the Bonstelle, where old meets new in the most seamless way. Adjacent to a historic theater in Midtown, the hotel blends sleek design with rich history. By night, the AC Lounge turns into a chic yet relaxed spot where LGBTQ travelers can enjoy expertly mixed cocktails and light bites. The location couldn't be better — close to Detroit's top theaters and Little Caesars Arena, it's the perfect launchpad for your Motor City adventure.

The rooms at the AC Hotel Detroit are spacious and modern. My corner room came complete with luxurious linens and a beautiful view of the sunset.

Detroit's queer roots run deep. From underground ballroom scenes in the 1980s to today's thriving grassroots movements, the city's LGBTQ identity is woven into its culture. Unlike cities with one defined "gayborhood," queer life in Detroit is everywhere. You'll find it on the dance floor at Menjo's Complex — a historic venue where Grace Jones once graced the stage — or at Gigi's, a community staple known for its electric drag shows.

Each June, Detroit turns up the volume for Motor City Pride. Held at Hart Plaza, it's a vibrant celebration packed with music, performances, and community connection. But the celebration doesn't stop there. LGBTQ organizations keep the spirit alive year-round with art shows, advocacy panels, and public events that welcome locals and visitors alike.

Organizations like the Ruth Ellis Center have been pillars of support for decades. Named after a Black lesbian trailblazer, the center offers critical services for LGBTQ youth, including housing, health care, and mental health support. Its newest addition, the 44,000-square-foot Clairmount Center, reflects the city's ongoing investment in its queer community.

Meanwhile, the Detroit Regional LGBT Chamber of Commerce uplifts LGBTQ professionals through mentorship, networking, and resources. Their commitment to economic empowerment proves that inclusivity and entrepreneurship go hand in hand.

Just a few block away from the hotel is Detroit Shipping Company — a lively collective of eateries, art spaces, and hangouts. Whether you're there for the beer garden, open mic nights, or Bollywood High Tea, it's a spot that celebrates Detroit's diversity in every sense. I loved the community feel of the space, which is welcoming from the moment you step through the door. They even organize a monthly event where local DJs can take turns spinning their favorite music.

Detroit's story isn't only told through its nightlife. One powerful stop was the Henry Ford Museum of American Innovation in nearby Dearborn. It's more than a showcase of machines — it's a museum of progress. Standing before the bus where Rosa Parks made history was a humbling reminder that Detroit is at the crossroads of civil rights, past and present. The museum also highlights other modes of transportation and even features an old locomotive which guests can climb into. It's like stepping back in history.

You'll feel that same spirit at Michigan Central Station. Once an abandoned relic, it's been transformed into a gleaming center for tech and innovation, thanks to Ford's vision and investment. Today, it's a stunning symbol of Detroit's rebirth — and yes, a top-tier photo op.

Book lovers, prepare to be amazed at John K. King Used & Rare Books. Spanning four floors and over a million titles, this former glove factory is a labyrinth of stories. From well-worn paperbacks to rare first editions, it's the kind of place where you could lose an entire afternoon — and love every minute of it. I purchased an entire Britannica collection of books for under \$300. I probably would have ended up spending more time there, but it was a beautiful day outside, so I wanted to take in the sun.

Nature and culture collide on the Detroit Riverwalk, a stunning 5½-mile path along the water. It's one of the most scenic stretches in the city, perfect for biking, strolling, or simply soaking in skyline views and public art.

For a quick bite, head to Jose's Tacos — a humble Midtown eatery where the flavors speak for themselves. Fresh tortillas, savory fajitas, and warm hospitality make it a local favorite, and a great spot to connect with Detroit's diverse food scene. If you are hungry for something sweet, head over to Astoria Pastry Shop in Greektown. You will want to try everything there.

Walk off lunch with a peaceful afternoon stroll at Belle Isle Park. This 982-acre island oasis is packed with hidden gems like the Anna Scripps Whitcomb Conservatory and the Belle Isle Aquarium — both steeped in history and beauty. Although the Aquarium was closed that afternoon, I did spend time wandering



Joey Amato feels the peace at The Detroit Institute of Arts.

around the Conservatory as well as the grounds of Belle Isle.

And of course, no visit is complete without a stop at the Detroit Institute of Arts. With more than 65,000 works and a long-standing commitment to showcasing diverse voices, the DIA stands as one of the nation's most progressive art museums. From exhibitions exploring gender and identity to pieces by renowned LGBTQ artists, it's a reflection of Detroit's cultural heartbeat. I've been to many museums around the country but the DIA exhibits one of the most extensive collections of historic works I've ever seen.

Dinner at Empire Kitchen & Cocktails closed out my day on a high note. The restaurant staff was stylish, the atmosphere intimate, and the food was packed with flavor. I ordered the white pizza which is something I don't usually go for, but was blown away. The garlic béchamel, spinach, sausage, and fresh mozzarella were balanced to perfection. Enjoying a Detroit-style pizza was high on my list of experiences.

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'Make Sure You Die Screaming'

Out in Print



by Terri Schlichenmeyer
Contributing Writer

"Make Sure You Die Screaming"
by Zee Carlstrom
©2025, Flatiron Books
\$26.99

Sometimes, you just want to shut the door and forget what's on the other side. You could just wipe it from your memory, like it didn't occur. Or create an alternate universe where bad things never happen to you and where, as in the new novel "Make Sure You Die Screaming" by Zee Carlstrom, you can pretend not to care. Their mother called them "Holden," but they'd stopped using that name and they hadn't decided what to use now. What do you call an alcoholic, queer, pessimistic former ad executive who's also "The World's First Honest White Man," although they no longer identify as a man? It's a conundrum that they'll have to figure out soon because a cop's been following them almost since they left Chicago with Yivi, their psychic new best friend. Until yesterday, they'd been sleeping on a futon in some lady's basement,

drinking whatever Yivi mixed, and trying not to think about Jenny. They killed Jenny, they're sure of it. And that's one reason why it's prudent to freak out about the cop. The other reason is that the car they're driving was stolen from their ex-boyfriend who probably doesn't know it's gone yet. This road trip wasn't exactly well-planned. Their mother called, saying they were needed in Arkansas to find their father, who'd gone missing so, against their better judgment, they packed as much alcohol as Yivi could find and headed south. Their dad had always been unique, a cruel man, abusive, intractable; he suffered from PTSD, and probably another half-dozen acronyms, the doctors were never sure. They didn't want to find him, but their mother called... It was probably for the best; Yivi claimed that a drug dealer was chasing her, and leaving Chicago seemed like a good thing. They wanted a drink more than anything. Except maybe not more than they wanted to escape thoughts of their old life, of Jenny and her death. And the more miles that passed, the closer they came to the end of the road. If you think there's a real possibility that "Make Sure You Die Screaming" might

run off the rails a time or three, you're right. It's really *out there, but not always in a bad way*. Reading it, in fact, is like squatting down in a wet, stinky alley just after the trash collector has come: it's filthy, dank, and profanity-filled. Then again, it's also absurd and dark and philosophical, highly enjoyable but also satisfying and a little disturbing; Palahniuk-like but less metaphoric. That's a stew that works and author Zee Carlstrom stirs it well, with characters who are sardonic and witty while fighting the feeling that they're unredeemable losers — which they're not, and that becomes obvious. You'll see that all the way to one of the weirdest endings ever. Readers who can



Author Zee Carlstrom
CREDIT: Amy Lombard



withstand this book's utter confusion by remembering that chaos is half the point will enjoy taking the road trip inside "Make Sure You Die Screaming." Just buckle up tight. Then shut the door, and read. ::

Detroit

continued from page 16
crossroads of civil rights, past and present. The museum also highlights other modes of transportation and even features an old locomotive which guests can climb into. It's like stepping back in history. You'll feel that same spirit at Michigan Central Station. Once an abandoned relic, it's been transformed into a gleaming center for tech and innovation, thanks to Ford's vision and investment. Today, it's a stunning symbol of Detroit's rebirth — and yes, a top-tier photo op. Book lovers, prepare to be amazed at John K. King Used & Rare Books. Spanning four floors and over a million titles, this former glove factory is a labyrinth of stories. From well-worn paperbacks to rare first editions, it's the kind of place where you could lose an entire afternoon — and love every minute of it. I purchased an entire Britannica collection of books for under \$300. I probably would have ended up spending more time there, but it was a beautiful day outside, so I wanted to take in the sun. Nature and culture collide on the Detroit Riverwalk, a stunning 5½-mile path along the water. It's one of the most scenic stretches in the city, perfect for biking, strolling, or simply soaking in skyline views and public art. For a quick bite, head to Jose's Tacos — a humble Midtown eatery where the flavors speak for themselves. Fresh tortillas, savory fajitas, and warm hospitality make it a local favorite, and a great spot to connect with Detroit's diverse food scene. If you are hungry for something sweet, head over to Astoria Pastry Shop in Greektown. You will want to try everything there.

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Remembering Jill Sobule (1959-2025)

Composer, singer and musician was first pop artist to have a hit with 'I Kissed a Girl'

By Gregg Shapiro



Qnotes writer Gregg Shapiro with Jill Sobule in 2000.
CREDIT: Courtesy Gregg Shapiro

Here's something else worth mentioning about Jill. She was known for collaboration skills. As a songwriter, she maintained a multi-year creative partnership with Robin Eaton ("I Kissed A Girl" and many others), as well as Richard Barone, the gay frontman of the renowned band The Bongos. Jill's history with Barone includes performing together at a queer Octoberfest event in Chicago in 1996.

Writer and comedian Julie Sweeney, of "SNL" and "Work in Progress" fame was another collaborator with Sobule. Together the two frequently performed their delightful "The Jill and Julia Show." John Doe, of the aforementioned band X, also collaborated with Jill in the studio ("Tomorrow Is Breaking" from "Nostalgia Kills"), as well as in live performances.

On a very personal note, in 2019, when I was in the process of arranging a reading at the fabulous NYC gay bookstore Bureau of General Services — Queer Division, I reached out to Jill and asked if she would like to be on the bill. We alternated performing; I would read a couple of poems, and Jill would sing a couple of songs. She even set one of my poems to music, on the spot.

Jill had an abundance of talent, and when she turned her attention to musical theater, it paid off in a big way. Her stage musical "F*ck 7th Grade," a theatrical piece that seemed like the next logical step in her

career, had its premiere at Pittsburgh's City Theatre in the fall of 2020, during the height of the pandemic. The unique staging (an outdoor drive-in stage at which audience members watched from their cars) was truly inspired. "F*ck 7th Grade" went on to become a New York Times Critic's pick, as well as earning a Drama Desk nomination.

In honor of the 30th anniversary of Jill's eponymous 1995 album, reissue label Rhino Records is re-releasing it on red vinyl. Jill and I had been emailing each other to arrange a time for an interview. We even had a date on the books for the third week of May.

When she passed suddenly on May 1, 2025, Jill received mentions on network and cable news shows. She was showered with attention from major news outlets, including obits in the New York Times and Rolling Stone (but not Pitchfork, who couldn't be bothered to review her music when she was alive).

Is it wrong to think that if she'd gotten this much attention when she was alive she could have been as big as Taylor Swift? I don't think so. ::

You can watch Jill Sobule's video for "I Kissed A Girl" on YouTube here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LUi11Cz4ZUg>

I've always prided myself on being the kind of music consumer who purchased music on impulse. When I stumbled across "Things Here Are Different," Jill Sobule's 1990 MCA Records debut album on vinyl in a favorite Chicago record store, I bought it without knowing anything about her. This was at a time when we didn't have our phones in our pockets to search for information about the artist on the internet. The LP stayed in my collection until, as vinyl was falling out of fashion, I replaced it with a CD a few years later.

Earlier in my career, I received a promo copy of Jill's self-titled 1995 Atlantic Records album. That year, Atlantic Records was one of the labels at the forefront of signing and heavily promoting queer artists, including Melissa Ferrick and Extra Fancy, and its roster included the album by Jill. It was a smart move, as the single "I Kissed A Girl" became a hit on radio and its accompanying video (featuring Fabio!) was in heavy rotation on MTV (when they still played videos).

Unfortunately for Jill, she was a victim of record label missteps. When 1997's wonderful "Happy Town" failed to repeat the success, Atlantic dumped her. That was Atlantic's loss, because her next album, the superb "Pink Pearl" contained "Heroes" and "Mexican Wrestler," two of her most beloved

songs. Sadly, Beyond Music, the label that released that album ceased to exist after just a few years. To her credit, the savvy Jill had also started independently releasing music (2004's "The Folk Years"). This was a smart move because her next major-label release, the brilliant "Underdog Victorious" on Artemis Records, met a similar fate when that label folded.

With her 2009 album "California Years," Jill launched her own indie label, Pinko Records, on which she would release two more outstanding full-length discs, 2014 "Dottie's Charms" (on which she collaborated with some of her favorite writers, including David Hadju, Rick Moody, Mary Jo Salter and Jonathan Lethem), and 2018's stunning "Nostalgia Kills." Jill's cover of the late Warren Zevon's "Don't Let Us Get Sick" on "Nostalgia Kills" was particularly poignant as she had toured with him as an opening act.

Jill was a road warrior, constantly on tour, and her live shows were something to behold. My first interview with Jill took place at the Double Door in Chicago in early August of 1995, when she was the opening act for legendary punk band X. She had thrown her back out the previous day and was diagnosed with a herniated disc. To be comfortable, she was lying down on a fabulous-fifties sofa. "I feel like

I'm at my shrink's," she said to me, "Do you want me to talk about my mother?"

That sense of humor, which permeated and enriched her music, was one of many reasons to love Jill. I was privileged to interview her for seven of her albums. Everything you would want to know about her was right there in her honest lyrics, in which she balanced her distinctive brand of humor with serious subject matter. Drawing on her life experiences in songs such as "Bitter," "Underachiever," "One of These Days," "Freshman," "Jetpack," "Nothing to Prove," "Forbidden Thoughts of Youth," "Island of Lost Things," "Where Do I Begin," "Almost Great" and "Big Shoes" made her songs as personal as they were universal, elicited genuine affection and concern from her devoted fans.

While she was a consummate songwriter, Jill also felt equally comfortable covering songs made famous by others, including "Just a Little Lovin'" (on the 2000 Dusty Springfield tribute album "Forever Dusty") and "Stoned Soul Picnic" (from the 1997 Laura Nyro tribute album "Time and Love"). Jill also didn't shy away from political subject matter in her music with "Resistance Song," "Soldiers of Christ," "Attic," "Heroes," "Under the Disco Ball" and the incredible "America Back" as prime examples.

Our People: Alvin A. McEwen

A professional blogger talks about the need for equity and truth



by L'Monique King
Qnotes Staff Writer

There's a gentleman in Columbia, S.C., who enjoys his own company, the comfort of the familiar surroundings where he was born and raised and, quite possibly, dusting and polishing numerous awards.

Alvin A. McEwen is an award-winning blogger and community activist who graduated from Winthrop University with a degree in mass communications. How fitting, because McEwen's messages to the masses remain sorely needed, appreciated and impactful. During this interview, we learn a little more about what that means and what makes McEwen tick.

L'Monique King: What do you appreciate about the neighborhood in Columbia where you live?

Alvin A. McEwen: Columbia is where I want to be. My neighborhood is quiet, not exciting, but no one bugs or bothers you. I moved around a lot as a child, so I guess once I find a place I feel comfortable I like to stay there for a bit. I've traveled a lot in the past, but this is where I am and what I'm used to. I don't live far from the hospital I was born in. My mother literally walked to the hospital while in labor with me. Patience is not something my mother is known for. While at a friend's house her water broke. When she told them, they went to call someone [for help] — there were no cell phones in the '70s. By the time they got back my mom had left, walking to the hospital.

LMK: Is there a partner you share your home in Columbia with? Are you partnered?

AAM: No, and probably won't be. As I became older, I started to think — I'm a little too selfish to be partnered. I enjoy having my space to myself, eating what I want and not having to compromise on where things are placed in the house or what I might do on any given day. As we get older you get accustomed to being by yourself, but that doesn't mean I don't want to be with anyone at all.

LMK: Is blogging how you make a living, or do you have a primary livelihood?

AAM: I do different things in the health-care industry. I'm behind the scenes making sure everything goes smoothly for clients.

LMK: From what we've heard, it sounds like you're in public health during the day and social justice and wellness after five. That's a fully packed agenda for anyone. Is this what you've always dreamed of doing? What did you want to be when you grew up?

AAM: *Laughter* I couldn't tell you. It changed so much. At one point I wanted to be a cowboy (like most of my peers) and then President of the United States. *Giggles* Only people who are not in their right mind would want that. Eventually though, I settled on writer.



Blogger, Health care worker and community activist Alvin A. McEwen
CREDIT: Facebook

LMK: And that last part you've certainly accomplished. Tell us about your blog.

AAM: Before Will and Grace, before RuPaul's Drag Race, there was little representation and a lot of misinformation out there. The blog "Holy Bullies and Headless Monsters" was started in 2006 and is about combating misinformation. It was a big old furious thing in the beginning. There were what they called then "policy analysis" who would cherry pick legitimate studies to create a negative idea about gay folks. They had a religious belief that homosexuality is a sin — but you cannot pass laws on religious belief so a fictional mindset was created and fostered instead. The Southern Poverty Law Center declared many of these groups of people as hate groups. Groups like Family Research Council, American Family Association, Concerned Women for America and Alliance Defending Freedom. [In response] I've written on marriage equality, the weaponizing of religious freedom and now the drag queens and transgender community. [Conservative hate groups] always use what people fear to deliberately demonize and stigmatize the LGBT community. Funny thing is, I didn't start blogging to make money, and even though I was able to monetize it slightly — it was always a labor of love. When I started, I was working on a book, it was awful *laughter*. I had no editors or other folks, and thought I would self-publish and create a blog to publicize the book. The book died and the blog blew up. At the time my blog focused on how the groups I mention (and others) were deceiving America about gays and creating hysteria. Today, the groups have changed and now include social media influencers and Tik Tokers. The tactics have changed, and the focus isn't so much on gay men now. Now the lies told are told about trans

people. Every transphobic lie you see now was previously used against gay men.

LMK: Do you think you can change any of those stigmatizing efforts with your blog?

AAM: No. I don't. We'll always have bigotry. All we can do is get the truth out, get the positive information out and be there so it can be seen. People need to know that they are not alone. That's one good thing that social media has afforded us — representation and resources. You can only reduce the power of negativity with truth, positivity and giving people hope. Evil will always be there but we have power over it, how it will impact our lives and community. That's what my blog is designed to do.

LMK: Apparently it is making an impact — or so it seems looking at all the recognition and awards you've received for your writing. Would you share a little on what it felt like to receive a GLAAD (Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation) award?

AAM: I've been nominated seven times for GLAAD awards and in 2017 I won their award for Outstanding Blog. It's right next to my bed, and I look at it every day to remind myself that I've done something [of note and value] but still have more to do. I was voted most likely to succeed in high school, so it feels good to have the personal satisfaction of trying to fulfill my potential.

LMK: And what about the Pride award in the name of Audre Lorde & James Baldwin. Did receiving an award in honor of such huge LGBTQ icons resonate in any particular way for you?

AAM: Well, that was from South Carolina Black Pride and that was for different

things, not just my blog. It was also for my volunteer efforts in organizing and promoting South Carolina Pride events and LGBT advocacy in general. It was equally significant to receive an award in the names of two LGBT people who did so much was great. In fact, any award is significant, because everything matters.

LMK: As a writer yourself, who are your top three favorite authors or books?

AAM: I haven't read novels in a while, but one of the authors I really like is Richard Wright and his book "Black Boy" and Alice Walker, author of "The Color Purple." I'm rediscovering "The Color Purple" and all the nuances with the characters and the dynamics between men and women. So I'm looking at old classics with new eyes, like Shakespeare's "King Lear" where most people think that the villains were his two daughters, but I think he too was villainous.

LMK: Considering the current political climate and the surrounding air of fear, uncertainty and censorship, do you see yourself staying in the southeast, or are you considering relocating?

AAM: I've never considered relocating in any form. I'm stubborn and I'd feel like I'm running away when I need to stay and fight. One of the luckiest things about my blog, written by a Black gay guy in the south — people often don't take you seriously — which allows you to fly under the radar in getting information out to people who need it. South Carolina hasn't voted for a president that's Democratic since Carter. However, Columbia is a bit of a mecca. We have a thriving LGBT community though we still have work to do.

LMK: Yes, there's plenty of work to be done, and we'll need all the help we can get. If you had a superpower, what would it be?

AAM: Oh Lord! *Chuckling* it would have to be intelligence. Everyone wants to be strong or fast, but if you have intelligence, you could probably accomplish anything including some of the other superpowers.

LMK: With intelligence as your superpower and all the work to be done, what are your feelings on our need for a multi-generational approach when it comes to combating the madness we're currently facing?

AAM: As we grow and things become more diverse and fluid we are still in our infancy as an LGBT movement, there's a lot we still don't know. I only recently learned that William Dorsey Swann — a Black drag queen and former slave from Maryland who fought police while in drag — petitioned then President Grover Cleveland about the arrest. When we are young, respect needs to be had for those who came before us — that's how we start.

LMK: Before we let you get back to serving our community, would you share a few final thoughts or words of advice for our youth?

AAM: Don't let them steal your joy or your ability to give others joy. And never let anyone tell you what you can do or what your place should be, that's for you to decide. ::

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