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Charlotte Pride August 16-17

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volunteer
Ryan Beaupré
- pg 14

Pride's 'Flourish'
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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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American Airlines defends pro-LGBTQ+ policies

American Airlines makes it clear they won't be bullied into abandoning long-standing support for inclusion. At its June 2025 annual shareholder meeting, pressure to distance themselves from LGBTQ+ support came from the National Center for Public Policy Research, a far right wing think tank.

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Out in Music: An interview with Audrey Johnson of La Luz

Members of the all-female band La Luz identify as a surf rock band. Between the Beach Boys-esque harmonies, the Shana Cleveland's Dick Dale-inspired guitar work and Audrey Johnson's beach blanket beats on the drums, you'll be wanting to hear more. New member Johnson shares her story.

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The People speak on Social Media



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Bisexual erasure from the Stonewall Inn website: Who took it down, who put it back?

Removal and then replacement of references on the Stonewall National park .gov website raises questions



by Taylor Heeden Larkins
Qnotes Staff Writer

The MAGA movement hasn't been secretive or aloof when it comes to their goal of erasing any reference to queer and trans people. Within the first 24 hours of Donald 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 Jan. 31. The Trump Administration took it upon themselves to erase references to the term "transgender" from federal agencies' websites, including on the Stonewall Inn's page for the National Historical Monuments.

Earlier this year, it would appear that bisexuals also became a target by the administration for erasure. As reported by the LGBTQ+ news Substack page *Them*, removal of mentions of bisexuality from the Stonewall Inn's web page occurred, but went relatively unnoticed for a time, overshadowed by the removal of "queer" and "transgender."

In the days leading up to Pride Month, the National Park Service apparently made the additional changes to the official website of the Stonewall National Monument, removing nearly all references to bisexual individuals from its historical content. The edits followed the earlier revisions this year eliminating mentions of transgender people, raising concerns among LGBTQ+ advocates about increasing erasure of queer identities from federal documentation.

As of May 27, archived versions of the website show that language once acknowledging lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) individuals had been revised to refer only to "gay and lesbian" people. For example, an earlier version of the homepage stated that "almost everything about living openly as a lesbian, gay, bisexual (LGB) person was illegal." That phrasing was changed to mention only "gay and lesbian" individuals, but has since been changed back.

The "History and Culture" section was also altered, removing uses of the phrase "lesbian, gay and bisexual" in favor of "lesbian and gay." That also has been returned to "lesbian, gay and bisexual," although references to "transgender" and "queer" remain absent. Some parts of the website, such as the virtual fence exhibit and certain educational materials, still contain the acronym LGB. It remains unclear, however, whether those mentions will also be updated or removed.

The changes have sparked backlash from activists, historians, and members



Why does the federal government continue to whittle away at the authentic history of the Stonewall Inn? (seen here in an historic image from the early 1970s).
CREDIT: Facebook

of the bisexual community, who view the omissions as part of a broader pattern of exclusion. Independent journalist Erin Reed, who first documented the website edits in her report on *Them*, described the revisions as part of a "bi-erasure" trend within the federal government.

Stacy Lentz, CEO of the Stonewall Inn Gives Back Initiative, called the removal of bisexual references "deeply troubling." She added that excluding bisexual individuals from the narrative of the Stonewall uprising – a defining moment in LGBTQ+ history – is both historically inaccurate and harmful.

"That said, we find it deeply troubling that any government agency would erase bisexual people from their public-facing materials," she said. "Stonewall has always welcomed and celebrated the full spectrum of our community – and that will never change."

Kurt Kelly, co-owner of the historic Stonewall Inn, echoed those sentiments, warning that changing our history to make it more palatable to certain political agendas does real damage to queer youth today.

"The erasure of bisexual people from federal websites is not just a digital oversight — it's a deliberate act of invisibility that harms an already marginalized part of our LGBTQ+ community," Kelly stated. "We must unite as a community to always fight to ensure every identity under our rainbow is seen, heard and protected. Bi visibility matters. Lives depend on it. The fact they continue to do this on the Stonewall National

Monument website is even more troubling knowing what Stonewall means to our community around the globe."

Bisexual individuals were a significant part of the events surrounding the 1969 Stonewall uprising, which began after a police raid on the Stonewall Inn. The resistance that followed led to the modern LGBTQ+ rights movement. Among those instrumental in organizing the first Pride events was bisexual activist Brenda Howard, often referred to as the "Mother of Pride" for her work organizing the Christopher Street Liberation Day March in 1970.

Advocates worry the recent changes reflect a wider rollback of LGBTQ+ visibility in federal materials under the Trump administration, which returned to office in January 2025. The administration has already faced criticism for deleting transgender references from public health resources and issuing executive orders that restrict recognition of gender identity in federal programs.

Following public outcry and the report by Reed, the National Park Service partially reversed course, restoring the term "bisexual" to most of the monument's website. However, the term initially remained absent from the historical section. It has

since been restored.

Critics argue that the administration's focus on reducing the scope of LGBTQ+ history aligns with other anti-LGBTQ+ actions taken during Trump's second term. These include rolling back civil rights protections for transgender people in schools, healthcare and federal data collection.

As public pressure mounts, advocates say the future of LGBTQ+ visibility in national landmarks and historical records may depend on continued resistance.

Why would Trump and his administration seek to eliminate references to the contributions of transgender Americans in our nation's history? Who was ordered to erase the references to bisexual contributions from the website, and who later ordered it to be returned?

Specific answers to the question of bisexual erasure remain elusive. Part of the answer – to the question of the erasure of LGBTQ+ contributions as a whole – lies in a pattern seen throughout history, where governments have deliberately excluded marginalized groups from official records and monuments. The Trump administration is not the first to attempt to erase entire communities from historical memory.

Architectural historian Despina

Stratigakos uncovered a powerful example of this while researching Adolf Hitler's architectural ambitions in Nazi-occupied Europe. While searching for building plans and blueprints, Stratigakos discovered what he described as a calculated blueprint for erasure—something, he noted, "no historian was ever meant to see."

Among the documents he found was a directive issued by Field Marshal Wilhelm Keitel on 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."

Hitler's motivations were rooted in "revenge" for the Treaty of Versailles, which ended World War I but "humiliated" Imperial Germany in the Nazi Party's eyes. The feeling of national embarrassment created an environment where right-wing Germans' resentment was locked in on its own people with different backgrounds or perspectives, who they would go on to claim were traitors to their own country.

The message coming from the White House closely echoes rhetoric once used by Nazi leaders in Germany, who sought to justify their persecution of so-called "internal enemies." In that era, these so-called enemies included Jewish and Black Europeans, civilians accused of defiance, resistance fighters and others deemed undesirable by the regime.

Similarly, President Trump has repeatedly referred to his political critics and opponents as "enemies from within." On multiple occasions, he has singled out individuals and groups who oppose his agenda.

"I think the bigger problem is the enemy from within," Trump stated during a public appearance. "We have some very bad people. We have some sick people, radical left lunatics. And I think they're the big [threat] — 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."

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 genocide of entire populations.

History repeats itself, and if we're not proactive in stopping that cycle, America will become the villain in its own story. ::





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As culture wars flared up under Trump, NC lawmakers pass anti-trans bills

NC Republicans, with the help of some Democrats, prioritized several pieces of anti-trans legislation in 2025

by Brandon Kingdollar | NC Newsline

Donald Trump closed out his 2024 presidential campaign with a searing condemnation of trans rights: "Kamala Harris is for they/them, President Trump is for you."

Nearly six months into his second term, North Carolina Republicans have heeded his call, delivering blistering speeches on the floor of the General Assembly in support of rigid definitions of biological sex and passing a slew of measures aimed at curtailing trans rights, hoping to capitalize on what they believe is a winning issue among North Carolinians.

It's a far cry from 2016, when months into Trump's first successful campaign for the office, the state legislature's passage of House Bill 2, the "Bathroom Bill," sent billions of dollars fleeing from the state. As culture wars escalate across the U.S., laws clamping down on trans rights have entered the mainstream, with some Democrats acceding to or even supporting anti-trans bills from the other side of the aisle.

Here's how North Carolina politicians have handled anti-trans legislation in 2025 – from Republican leadership seeing an opportunity to win on the issue to Democrats, including Governor Josh Stein, relenting in response to at least some of those efforts.

Stein splits the difference on anti-trans bills

In contrast to former Governor Roy Cooper, who emphasized public stands in defense of trans rights after winning office in the wake of the backlash to HB 2, Stein has had little to say on trans issues in seven months in office.

He has also signaled some willingness to allow conservative bills on trans issues to proceed. On July 3, he signed Senate Bill 442, enacting a piece of legislation that bars abuse or neglect findings on the basis of a parent or caregiver who "raises a juvenile consistent with the juvenile's biological sex."

That signing garnered rare praise for Stein from the NC Values Coalition, a religious right advocacy group. The group's executive director, Tami Fitzgerald, lauded the governor for helping parents "protect their children from harmful gender transition interventions."

"We are thankful that today Governor Stein signed SB 442 into law, ensuring that our state upholds the fundamental truth that children belong to their parents, not the government," said Fitzgerald. "Now that Governor Stein signed SB 442 into law, North Carolina parents can rest easy knowing that they can exercise their parental rights without fear of the government taking their child away."

The signing puts Stein out of step with

most of his party — in its final vote in each chamber, no Democrats in the Senate backed the bill, and just nine supported it in the House. Unlike some other bills he took action on, Stein did not provide a written explanation for his decision, but a spokesperson wrote in a statement that the bill will not change how North Carolina punishes cases of abuse.

firming care, and restricting changes of sex designation on birth certificates – explaining in a statement that Republicans are "stoking culture wars that further divide us."

"These mean-spirited bills would marginalize vulnerable people and also undermine the quality of public services and public education. Therefore, I am vetoing them," Stein said. "I stand ready to work

Top Republican lawmakers see opportunity to go on the offensive

If the Governor has spoken little on trans issues, Republicans in the General Assembly have seized every opportunity to drive a wedge in his coalition on anti-LG-BTQ+ legislation, explicitly following Trump's lead in doing so.

"Trump's Big Beautiful Bill CRUSHES woke insanity," Hall wrote in a July 14 post on X. "HB 805 does the same by affirming biological truth. Stein vetoed, but the NC House will DELIVER."

North Carolina Senate President Pro Tem Phil Berger, Hall's counterpart, authored a similar post on July 2, alleging that Democrats like Stein are "actively working against women by refusing to simply acknowledge there are two sexes — male and female."

Even amid growing discontent with the Trump administration over economic and immigration issues, the Republican emphasis on anti-trans legislation suggests they still view the issue as a political winner. Chris Cooper, a political scientist at Western Carolina University, said Republicans see the potential for political benefit in passing such bills.

"I think there is a sense from the Republican Party that they are closer to the average North Carolinian on these issues than the Democrats are," Cooper said. "I think they believe that politically, the bathroom-related legislation is a political loser, and that in general, things related to children and minors are political winners."

Growing anti-trans sentiment can be found in recent polling. An April survey of registered North Carolina voters by Meredith College shows that even on the issue of restricting bathroom use, considered beyond the pale a decade ago, a majority support proposals that roll back trans rights.

Asked about restricting trans North Carolinians to only using public bathrooms corresponding to their assigned sex at birth, 57 percent of surveyed voters voiced support. And 56 percent said they would support making it impossible for sex markers to be changed on an individual's birth certificate, a more restrictive proposal than the one Stein vetoed.

David McLennan, the director of the Meredith Poll, attributed this shift to Trump's rhetoric. "In less than a decade, the issue of restricting transgender rights has become popular among North Carolinians," he said in a statement. "This clearly reflects the concerted efforts of national Republicans, including President Trump, to demonize this group."

Among the most restrictive measures proposed on trans issues this session was Senate Bill 516, in effect a resurrection and



Legislation restricting trans rights: 'It's the culture war issue that's going to define this term of the General Assembly.' - Chris Cooper, WCU political scientist

"Parents have the right to raise their kids how they think is best for them, but, of course, child abuse will never be tolerated," the spokesperson wrote Tuesday. "The Governor remains confident that DHHS and county DSS offices will continue to find the best placements for children."

North Carolina ACLU policy counsel Reighlah Collins said she was "disappointed but not necessarily surprised" that Stein signed the bill, calling it "bad messaging" but whose impact will be "hopefully, pretty small."

"The parents in North Carolina are not being criminally charged or losing custody of their children because they refuse to support their child's gender identity. "It's just not something that's happening in North Carolina," Collins said. "It's all part of this broader strategy to push trans people out of public and civil life by just singling them out in all of these respects."

Also on July 3, Stein vetoed House Bill 805 – a separate bill that was amended at a late stage to include measures exclusively recognizing male and female sexes under state law, blocking state funds for gender-affirming care.

with the legislature when it gets serious about protecting people and addressing North Carolinians' pressing concerns."

Beyond alluding to culture wars, the veto statement did not explicitly reference trans North Carolinians or gender-affirming care, a break from Cooper's approach to these issues. In a 2023 veto on another bill seeking to block access to medical transitions, Cooper said "a doctor's office is no place for politicians, and North Carolina should continue to let parents and medical professionals make decisions about the best way to offer gender care for their children."

A more subdued approach has not spared Stein from condemnation from the right. House Speaker Destin Hall posted on X that Stein "sided with radical activists over the overwhelming majority of North Carolinians" in the wake of his veto. Fitzgerald, the NC Values Coalition executive director, blasted Stein for "appealing the radical block of his party that wants to force its sexual agenda on all of us" and called him "out of step with the values of the majority of North Carolinians."

expansion of HB 2. The proposal would have barred trans people from single-sex bathrooms, changing facilities and sleeping quarters at state-funded facilities that correspond to their gender identity.

After its first reading in the Senate, however, that bill died in the chamber's powerful Rules Committee, never receiving a hearing before the legislature's crossover deadline. In a May statement to the Raleigh News & Observer, Berger said while he views HB 2 as an inapt comparison for the new proposal, he did not "see at this point the runway exists for that bill to be passed by the Senate" ahead of the crossover deadline.

That bill also contained the other measure polled by Meredith, a bar on any modifications to sex designation on birth certificates. While the bill did not progress in time for its passage this legislative session, elements of it made into HB 805, the legislation vetoed by Stein. A set of definitions of biological sex and related terms added shortly before the bill's passage closely mirror those found in the Senate proposal, and a requirement that the original birth certificate must be attached to a modified version evinces a similar aim to the ban on sex marker changes.

It also contained a proposal centered on expanding potential liability for providers of gender affirming care — extending the statute of limitations for malpractice lawsuits involving gender transitions to 10 years and removing a ceiling on damages for such claims. That language was borrowed from House Bill 606, which has yet to see a vote in the Senate.

Veto fight looms as some Democrats defect

Whether Republicans' most substantive piece of anti-trans legislation becomes law depends on whether any Democrats are willing to help HB 805 overcome Stein's veto.

So far, the General Assembly's Republican majority have yet to overturn any of Stein's vetoes, despite the governor issuing 14 so far this year. Because they are one vote shy of a super majority in the House, Republicans need to peel off at least one Democrat for a veto override, assuming full attendance.

That would theoretically be attainable for HB 805, but by the slimmest margin. Only a single Democrat in the House opted to support the bill, Rep. Dante Pittman (D-Wilson). According to Chris Cooper, the WCU political scientist, that does not necessarily mean he would back an override effort.

"It's a pretty significant signal anytime you're going to go against the Governor who's a member of your own party," Cooper said. "I don't think any legislator enters into that lightly because it could mean that their legislation is less likely to get through later."

He cautioned that there's no guarantee that everyone holds their previous vote, meaning it is possible that another Democrat delivers the vote needed to overcome the override. In the House vote on the Parents Protection Act, which Stein declined to veto, eight other Democrats joined Pittman in voting to pass the bill, suggesting a larger contingent of members of the party with some level of willingness

to side with Republicans on LGBTQ+ issues.

The state party itself has rebuked anti-trans legislation introduced this term. In a Facebook post in March, the official North Carolina Democratic Party page decried any effort to revive HB2 or similar legislation.

"Women do not need Republicans to attack the basic human rights of our transgender community," the post reads.

Similarly, in a recent interview with *NC Newsline* for the radio show/podcast *News & Views*, Senate Democratic leader Sydney Batch was scathing in her assessment of anti-trans legislation. "You know, I don't understand why Republicans are so obsessed with genitalia," she said. "Literally, when I'm talking to my constituents, you know,

it doesn't come up. What doesn't come up is, you know, gender affirming care. What comes up is, 'Hey, you know what, I've had a permanent sub in my child's classroom for the last year, who doesn't actually know how to teach math.'"

Regardless of the veto fight's outcome, more legislation restricting trans rights will likely follow so long as public opinion remains on the side of Republicans on the issue. "It's the culture war issue that's going to define this term of the General Assembly," Cooper said. ::

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Harvard rebrands DEI offices amid political pressure

Harvard University has rebranded several of its campus diversity offices after receiving pressure from the Trump administration, shifting away from the language of “Diversity, Equity and Inclusion” in favor of titles that emphasize “community,” “culture” and “belonging.” While the university maintains that its support for marginalized students remains intact, the changes have sparked concern from students and advocates.

Earlier this year, Harvard’s central Office for Equity, Diversity, Inclusion and Belonging was renamed the Office for Community and Campus Life. Harvard Divinity School followed suit, renaming its diversity office the Office of Community and Belonging, effective July 1. The Harvard School of Public Health adopted the same title, and at Harvard Business School, webpages detailing



Harvard Business School is one of several Harvard institutions that rebranded its DEI office. CREDIT: Facebook

support for minority and LGBTQ+ students were taken offline. Staff titles also shifted

from diversity-specific roles to “community and culture” designations.

University officials have framed the changes as part of an institutional evolution, not a retreat. Harvard Divinity School Associate Dean Melissa Bartholomew described the rebrand as “a timely opportunity to reflect on our past as we shape our future,” saying it aligns with the broader development of diversity work at the university.

Still, the timing raises eyebrows. The shift comes amid growing scrutiny from the Trump administration, which has launched a federal task force aimed at dismantling DEI initiatives and threatened to withhold funding from institutions that maintain them. Harvard acknowledged that federal guidance played a role in the decision-making process, though it did not offer specifics.

University representatives insist the changes are semantic, not structural, and that the offices’ missions remain unchanged. Still, the removal of clearly labeled DEI offices has left many students questioning whether the university is

diluting its commitment to equity under political pressure.

“What begins with the erasure of web pages may soon continue to include the dissolution of programs, the reassignment or dismissal of trained staff, and the slow dismantling of the already few spaces where marginalized students have ever felt seen, safe and supported,” said Eli M. Visio, co-president of the Harvard Queer Students Association. “Growing up in Minnesota, I felt uncomfortable being openly queer. Harvard seemed like a refuge – a place that would celebrate, not merely tolerate, my peers and me. That illusion is now shattered: Harvard’s decision to silently capitulate to its detractors is an act of cowardice.”

As other universities confront similar pressures, Harvard’s rebranding raises broader questions: Is this a strategic adjustment, or the beginning of a national retreat from the language, and potentially the substance, of campus diversity work? ::

— Liz Schob

Organizations speak out after hotline aimed at LGBTQ+ youth shuts down

When the news broke last month that the Trump administration would eliminate specialized services for LGBTQ+ youth from the national suicide prevention hotline 988 in July, LGBTQ+ advocates and mental health organizations across the country swiftly condemned the move.

Now, the decision has officially gone into effect. As of July 17, the “press 3” option, once a lifeline connecting LGBTQ+ youth with trained, identity-affirming crisis counselors, is no longer available on the 988 system.

“This administration has made a dangerous decision to play politics with real young people’s lives,” said Jaymes Black, CEO of The Trevor Project, in a public statement. “The 988 Lifeline’s Specialized Services Program was created to serve Americans at highest risk for suicide — including veterans

and LGBTQ+ youth — with best-practice crisis care that meets these populations’ unique needs. The program was created with overwhelming bipartisan support because, despite our political differences, we should all agree that every young person’s life is worth saving.”

While the federal government has removed the dedicated option, general support through 988 remains available. In an effort to clarify the current landscape, Qnotes called the 988 Lifeline directly and spoke with a crisis therapist, who confirmed that any caller in crisis, including LGBTQ+ youth, will still receive care. However, the absence of an identity-specific option has raised concerns among both providers and advocates.

“If we are taking away a lifeline for LGBTQ people specifically, it is a message

that is directly saying that your lives don’t matter as much,” said Sarah Mikhail, executive director of Charlotte’s Time Out Youth.

Kelley Robinson, president of the Human Rights Campaign, reflected on the impact of the change in her July message to supporters.

“This lifeline was created to provide critical, immediate care for people in crisis – people at their most vulnerable. The LGBTQ+ option, launched in 2022, was a game-changer. It connected queer and trans people in need with trained crisis counselors who understood our unique challenges and experiences,” Robinson wrote.

In response to the cut, The Trevor Project has emphasized that its own crisis services remain free, confidential and available 24/7. LGBTQ+ youth can reach out by calling 1-866-488-7386, texting START to 678678, or chatting online at [TheTrevorProject.org/Get-Help](https://www.thetrevorproject.org/get-help).

Other affirming support services include Trans Lifeline at 877-565-8860, the LGBT National Help Center at 888-843-

4564, and Q Chat Space, a live peer support platform for LGBTQ+ teens at qchatspace.org.

A full list of LGBTQ+ mental health resources is available at hrc.org/resources/mental-health-resources-in-the-lgbtq-community. ::

— Liz Schob



Many in the community believe the action sends a message that LGBTQ+ lives are of less value.

Andry Romero released from El Salvador, returned to Venezuela

It took openly gay stylist Andry Hernandez Romero a year to reach the United States. Following a guarded exit



This screen capture from social media reportedly shows Hernandez (fourth from bottom) exiting a plane upon his return to Venezuela. CREDIT: Facebook

from his native Venezuela, a trip on foot through the jungle-like and nearly impenetrable rain forest known as the Darien Gap and a few months spent in Mexico, he arrived at the southern U.S. border on Aug. 29, 2024, seeking asylum for fear of persecution because of his political beliefs and sexual orientation.

He was initially held at the San Diego detention center, then transferred to the Webb County Detention Center in Texas, while his asylum case was still pending. But before he was able to attend a hearing related to his request, he was illegally deported to El Salvador by Donald Trump’s ICE anti-immigrant squad. After being held in US immigration custody for nearly seven months, Hernandez spent 125 days in the notorious CECOT prison.

According to Immigrant Defenders Law Center, Hernandez Romero was released on July 18 as part of a prisoner swap between the United States and Venezuela.

“The news of Andry’s release brings both relief and anger,” said Human Rights Campaign President Kelley Robinson. “This country has long been a beacon of hope and a safe harbor for those yearning for freedom. But the Trump Administration is torching our values, using people like Andry as pawns in their quest for power.”

“Andry will not have to lay his head down in a Salvadoran gulag tonight, and that is welcome news. But he should have never been subjected to unknown terrors in that prison, his due process rights continue to be denied, and we do not know what awaits him in the country he fled due to persecution for his sexual orientation.”

“We are in a constitutional crisis – grappling with a reckless administration upending the rule of law and terrorizing the vulnerable to consolidate power. The targeting of immigrants, LGBTQ+ people and basic civil liberties are not unrelated; they are a coordinated assault on liberty

and justice. As LGBTQ+ Americans, many of whom identify as immigrants, we recognize this pattern and stand unwaveringly with Andry, immigrant communities – and all whose freedoms are under attack.”

Rallies against ICE, the actions of the El Salvadoran government’s actions and in support of Hernandez continue throughout the United States. While internet chatter indicated the possibility of a rally at the El Salvadoran Embassy in Charlotte on July 24, no further details have been forthcoming.

Although there are currently no specific reports about Hernandez since he has returned to Venezuela, online research implies after touching down at Simón Bolívar International Airport near Caracas, many of the 250 men were reunited with family members before case reviews begin in Venezuela.

Because of the political climate and social attitudes towards LGBTQ+ individuals in Venezuela, Hernandez Romero’s safety and future remain in question, and it remains unclear if he will be allowed to return to the U.S. for an asylum hearing. ::

— David Aaron Moore

American Airlines defends pro-LGBTQ+ policies, rejects opposing stockholders

American Airlines has made it clear that it will not be bullied into abandoning its long-standing support for LGBTQ+ inclusion. At its June 2025 annual shareholder meeting, the airline faced a resolution calling for it to withdraw from the Human Rights Campaign's Corporate Equality Index. The Index is a national benchmarking tool that evaluates companies on their policies, benefits and practices related to LGBTQ+ workplace equality. The proposal came from conservative investors who have intensified efforts to pressure major corporations into distancing themselves from LGBTQ+ causes and rolling back commitments to diversity, equity and inclusion.

Introduced by the National Center for

Public Policy Research, the resolution reflected a broader campaign by anti-LGBTQ+ activists pushing companies to walk away from inclusive practices. American's board of directors opposed the resolution and recommended that shareholders vote against it. Shareholders overwhelmingly agreed, with more than 273 million shares voted against the proposal and just over six million in support. The vote decisively aligned with the board's recommendation and preserved the company's participation in the Corporate Equality Index.

American Airlines has been recognized for its commitment to LGBTQ+ inclusion for decades. It was one of the first major U.S. airlines to include sexual orientation in its



American Airlines affirmed the company's long-standing commitment to LGBTQ+ rights.

nondiscrimination policy and has offered domestic partner benefits since the 1990s. For more than 20 consecutive years, the company has received a perfect score on the Corporate Equality Index. It regularly participates in LGBTQ+ Pride events and maintains

internal employee resource groups focused on equity and belonging. These efforts reflect a broader corporate culture that prioritizes inclusion and support for historically marginalized communities.

While some companies have scaled back public support for DEI initiatives in response to political pressure, American Airlines and its shareholders chose a different course. By rejecting the proposal to leave HRC's Corporate Equality Index, they affirmed the company's long-standing commitment to inclusion. In a moment when LGBTQ+ rights and visibility face renewed attacks across many sectors, the vote offers a clear contrast to organizations dismantling their DEI

efforts under pressure from conservative interest groups. Rather than retreat, American Airlines is choosing to uphold its values and move forward with integrity and not in fear. ::

— Liz Schob

'Beautiful bill' protesters bring a black casket to Rep. Tim Moore's office

Michael Danforth waited 37 months for disability assistance from Medicaid as colon cancer ravaged his health. Just nine days before his first disability was due to arrive, he died at 33. He was uninsured due to a genetic condition.

His smiling portrait sat atop an empty, black casket in front of the Gaston County Courthouse Monday. Held by organizers, the casket was decorated with signs reading "This coffin represents policy murder!" and "307,000 people in North Carolina will lose Medicaid."

His mother, Leslie Boyd, led a demonstration of nearly 100 clergy members, activists and community supporters who condemned the One Big Beautiful Bill Act, which was signed by President Donald Trump this month. Afterward, the crowd delivered a letter to Republican Rep. Tim Moore's Gastonia office, demanding an explanation for his support of the legislation.

Signed on July 4, the bill will make historic cuts to Medicaid and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, CNN reported. The Trump administration and GOP lawmakers have disputed that the bill will kick American families off Medicaid, saying the new legislation is "strengthening the

integrity of Medicaid by eliminating waste, fraud and abuse," according to The White House website.

"Blood is on the hands of the people who voted for the big bill," Boyd said before leading attendees in a rendition of "This Little Light of Mine."

In a July 3 news release, Moore said he was proud to vote for the bill that will deliver "the largest tax cut in history for working Americans" and strengthen Medicaid. Event attendees came from the Poor People's Campaign of North Carolina, Repairers of the Breach and the Kairos Center, among other advocacy organizations.

The rally was part of William Barber's Moral Monday movement to condemn the debt reconciliation bill. "Right now, in 10 southern states, we are moving forward together and not one step back," said NC organizer Sangria Noble.

Demonstrations also took place Monday in Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, South Carolina, Texas, West Virginia and Tennessee. Other groups across the country protested July 4 and have planned demonstrations nationwide in the coming days in response to various Trump policies, including the "beautiful bill."

During the Gastonia demonstration, speakers emphasized the role of faith in advocating for people who may lose support because of the bill. "You'll see in front of us here today are pallbearers and a coffin because this bill will cause lives," said Rev. Darryl Dayson of South Tryon Community Church. "That's why we have guided faith leaders, community members here today, because when people die in our community, we show up to remember their life."

Mandy Armstrong, a Gaston county resident, said losing Medicaid coverage would mean losing health care for three of her rheumatoid arthritis medications. "I would love for Representative Tim Moore to tell us why he voted to pass such a bill that will have devastating impacts right here," she said.

All Republicans in North Carolina's House delegation voted in favor of the bill, while all Democrats opposed it, *The News and Observer* reported. Following Monday's speeches, organizers carried the empty casket while rally attendees followed in a line to Moore's office. They placed the casket and their signs down before entering the building.

Inside the building, Dayson delivered a letter and asked a receptionist to schedule an appointment to discuss its implications. She said the appointment would be scheduled. Dayson then led the group of attendees and the receptionist in a prayer. Heather Stancil, a Belmont resident, said she hopes the demonstration will catch the attention of



Protester Leslie Boyd is seen here during a march held last year with a picture of her son. CREDIT: Facebook

NC lawmakers. "I think demonstrations like this are the only thing left to do," she said. "It's the only thing they'll listen to." ::

This article appears courtesy of our media partner The Charlotte Observer.
— Abigail Pender / The Charlotte Observer



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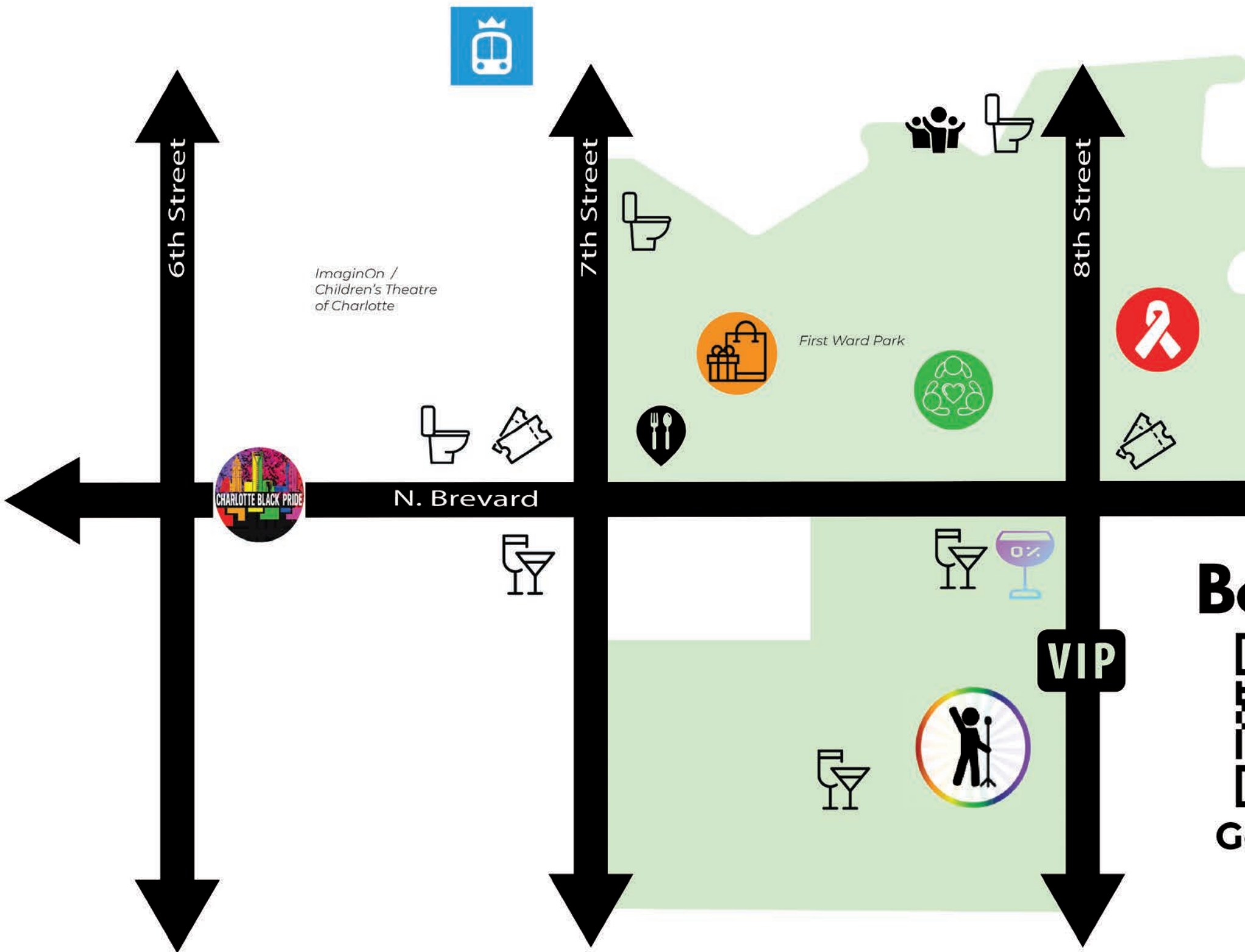


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A conversation with Rabbi Sandra Lawson

Lawson talks about the intersectionality of faith, identity and a call to action we should all heed



by Wendy Lyons
Qnotes Staff Writer

During an increasingly divided time in our country, discussions surrounding identity, faith and social justice have become paramount. In an effort to comprehend at least some of what's going on in the world around us, we recently engaged in an in-depth conversation with RSL Lawson, executive director at Carolina Jews for Justice (headquartered in Durham). Lawson is a trailblazing activist who embodies the intersectionality of being the first openly gay, African-American, female Rabbi in the world.

Given the current political climate, where issues of race, gender and sexual orientation are often at the forefront of societal and political debates, the conversation sheds light on the unique challenges and opportunities faced by individuals who self-identify on multiple levels.

Lawson is a leading voice for Jews of Color and others. Her insights are not only uplifting but also serve as a call to action for those who seek to understand and promote inclusivity within sacred spaces.

Wendy Lyons: Do you reside in the Carolinas?

Rabbi Sandra Lawson: I do. I live in Burlington.

WL: Are you originally from the Carolinas?

RSL: No, I was a military brat. I grew up mostly in the Midwest, but I've lived in the South most of my adult life, between Alabama and Georgia and here.

WL: Tell me a little about yourself, and I know you're in a new role, right? What brought you to that role?

RSL: Oh, well. I mean, not in any particular order, but it was a natural progression of my career as a Rabbi, as a movement Rabbi, a denominational Rabbi. Whatever you're going to call it? I mean, I think Jews use the term movement as a denomination because it's sort of, it's more expansive than denomination. Okay, I moved to North Carolina because I used to be the campus Rabbi at Elon.

WL: Elon University?

RSL: Yeah, I was the campus Rabbi at Elon for almost three years, and then the pandemic hit. I was doing a lot of things outside of working at Elon, plus working at Elon, but the world was just very different, and people needed to have different kinds of conversations.

WL: So what was the transition like for you?

RSL: I helped create a job at Reconstructing Judaism. In shorthand, it was [the] director of DEI (Diversity, Equity and Inclusion), but [it's] a lot more complicated than that. We called it the inaugural director of racial diversity, equity [and] inclusion, to tie it to the ever-growing number of Rabbis that were coming to our Rabbinical program, or students of color.



WL: That's a significant role. How did you approach it?

RSL: We recognized that the focus on DEI and particularly anti-Black racism had to be a priority. I created an assessment tool to gauge our congregations on this issue, not to make them non-racist, but just to figure out where they are. It was a successful project, and I also spent a lot of time mentoring and talking with faculty and our students of color.

WL: When did you start your current role?

RSL: I officially started on June 1, but in the Jewish calendar, the first few days of June were a non-working holiday called Shavuot, so I didn't actually start until June 4.

WL: I've never known of a female Rabbi who looks like me. What was your personal journey like?

RSL: For people outside of the Jewish world, most Jews are brown. If you look globally, most Jews are some kind of brown. In the U.S., depending on which study you look at, Jews make up about two percent or less of the population, and a sizable number of those are racially diverse.

WL: That's an important narrative to share, especially considering the mainstream portrayal of Judaism.

RSL: Exactly. The narrative often focuses

on Ashkenazi, Eastern European stories, sidelining the rich history of Black, Brown, and Sephardic Jews in America.

WL: Are there other Black or Brown Rabbis, especially in leadership?

RSL: There are a growing number of Black and Brown Rabbis across progressive Jewish spaces.

WL: What about the challenges within those spaces?

RSL: The challenge is that even within our community, there's a blind eye to the racial diversity that exists. While there are many Black and Brown folks in our congregations, leadership often lacks representation.

WL: Are there gender-affirming or same-sex Rabbis?

RSL: Yes, there are many, especially in progressive Jewish

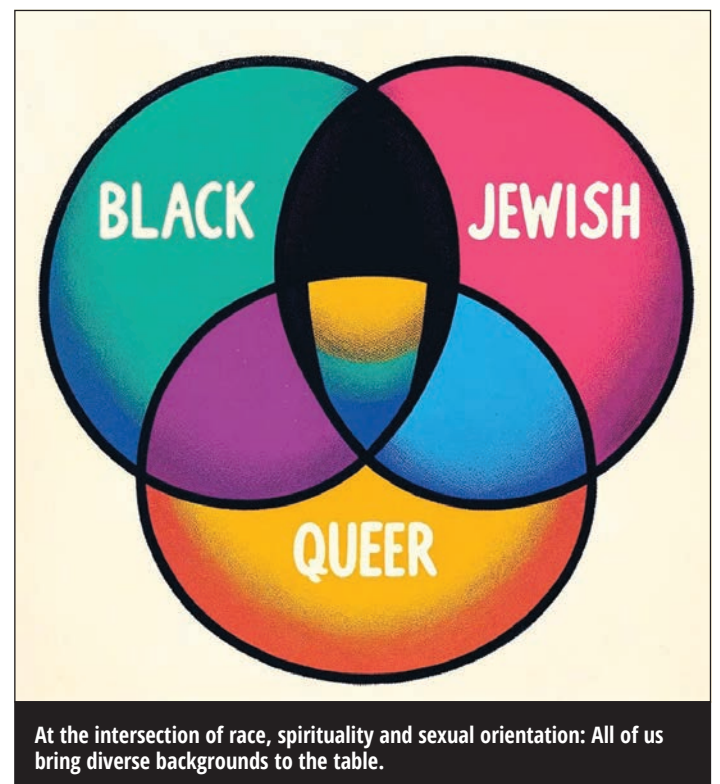
spaces. Even in Orthodoxy, there are openly gay Rabbis, though ordination issues persist. Most non-Orthodox schools have no problem ordaining gay individuals, including gay, lesbian, and bisexual Rabbis. Being queer does not negate one's Judaism. You can't take away someone's identity based on their sexual orientation. While there may be homophobia in society, it doesn't strip away their Jewish identity. It's crucial to recognize that gay individuals have held significant leadership roles in various Jewish movements, including the CEO of Reconstructing Judaism, who is a queer woman.

WL: In your opinion, what's the most pressing political issue facing the LGBTQ+ community today?

RSL: The most pressing issue is the erasure of the progress we've made. We're seeing a political climate that aims to control and diminish diversity of thought. This isn't new; history has shown us that periods of acceptance can be followed by attempts at erasure.

WL: Absolutely. How can spiritual leaders contribute to addressing these issues?

RSL: Spiritual leaders can play a crucial role by fostering dialogue and building coalitions. We may not agree on everything, but we can work together on shared values and goals. We've had periods in our history where we've just let gay people be gay people, embracing diversity of thought and opinion. However, we are now facing a government that is trying to be authoritarian or is moving in that direction, which means control and erasing any diversity of thought. I think part of the political strategy is to create more divisiveness in our society. I wish more people would understand that we may not all agree on everything, but we should work on the things we agree with instead of arguing about the things we don't.



WL: That's a powerful perspective. How does your organization, Carolina Jews for Justice, fit into this?

RSL: We focus on social justice issues; food insecurity, homelessness, voting rights and community safety. Our work intersects with various organizations, and we aim to uplift marginalized voices within our community.

WL: What are some key initiatives your organization is currently pursuing?

RSL: So, right now under my leadership, we are slowly restructuring a little bit to better address the community's need, not to change the work we do but just because we're very short staffed. Recently, we've been working on food issues, homelessness and community safety, aiming to provide non-violent solutions to crises. I want to work with the Board to come up with a serious strategic plan for the next three to five years.



Rabbi Sandra Lawson at a recent press conference.

WL: How can individuals support your organization?

RSL: Grassroots funding is crucial. We need to engage our community, be transparent about our budget, and create avenues for people to get involved, whether through volunteering or donating.

WL: What do you do for downtime, outside of all your activism?

RSL: I play music and write songs. It's a creative outlet for me. I perform at local

venues, and it allows me to express myself in a different way.

WL: That sounds wonderful! And congratulations on your upcoming anniversary!

RSL: Thank you! We've been married for almost ten years now, and it's been quite the journey.

Lawson's journey is a testament to the power that can grow when combining faith and activism. Her work at Elon University, Reconstructing Judaism and Carolina Jews for Justice highlights the importance of community engagement and the need for spiritual leaders to advocate for social justice and equity. In a time where political and social issues often seem insurmountable, RSL's insights remind us of the strength that comes from embracing our diverse identities and working collaboratively towards a more inclusive society. As we continue to navigate the complexities of faith and identity, may we all take inspiration from Lawson's journey and commit ourselves to the pursuit of justice and equality for all.

Recognized by the JTA as one of the "50 Jews Everyone Should Follow on Twitter" Lawson was also named one of the Forward 50 in 2020. In 2022, the Center for American Progress identified her as one of the "22 Faith Leaders to Watch." For her latest musical endeavors, followers can connect with her on Instagram, Facebook and YouTube and her music is available on all streaming services, including Spotify.

Additional information on RSL Lawson can be found on the various social media platforms, simply by entering her name. She is often referred to as the "Snapchat Rabbi" and the "TikTok Rabbi." :

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Charlotte Pride's long-term volunteers

Core group shows dedication and commitment across the years



by Wendy Lyons
Qnotes Staff Writer

Officially founded in 2000 and with roots dating back to the 1980s, Charlotte Pride identifies as the leading LGBTQ+ organization in the Carolinas, producing events, programs and advocacy initiatives that empower our communities.

The annual Pride Festival & Parade attracts hundreds of thousands of attendees to the Queen City, making it one of the Southeast's largest Pride gatherings. This year, the event will be held at First Ward Park (301 East 7th Street), with the festival spanning over two days (Aug. 16-17) and parade taking place along Tryon Street (Aug. 17).

Behind the glitter, floats and cheers lies a simple truth: This event only happens because of volunteers.

With just three staff members and a seasonal intern, Charlotte Pride relies on an extraordinary network of volunteers who dedicate months each year to bring this event to life. These selfless individuals are the stern and the engine of Pride, turning chaos into choreography and vision into reality.

As the organization prepares for its 2025 festival, **Meredith Thompson**, Managing Director of Charlotte Pride, shared why long-term volunteers matter and why the organization is determined to keep them engaged.

When Thompson joined Charlotte Pride three years ago, she brought decades of business experience and a passion for community work. "My wife was retiring, our rent was going up, and I was ready for a new chapter," she explained. "I had always loved nonprofit work and volunteered on

the side. Then this position came through in a Charlotte Pride newsletter. It just felt like the dream."

That dream came with weighty responsibility. "Charlotte Pride has only three staff members. There is absolutely no way we could deliver a Festival & Parade for hundreds of thousands of people without volunteers," she said.

Today, Thompson oversees roughly a dozen volunteer teams that operate throughout the year. These groups handle everything from logistics and safety to vendor management, parade staging, and artistic programming. "We have volunteers who have been with us for years," Thompson noted. "They are our stability and our strength."

One example is the vendor team, led by **Ryan Beaupré** and Asha. "The work they do is incredible," said Thompson. "They review every application in detail, manage spreadsheets, answer questions and handle on-site operations. And they do it all without pay, because they care deeply about this community."

Beaupré echoed that commitment: "I started volunteering in 2015, stepped away for a bit and came back because this matters. We're not just looking for vendors who can pay. We want those who show a real connection to the LGBTQ+ community. It is about authenticity."

Thompson says the motivation that keeps volunteers engaged comes down to passion, purpose and people. "The volunteers who stay long-term are collaborative, curious and open-minded," she explained. "They want to connect. That is why we hold in-person team huddles every month. It's not just about ticking tasks off a list; it's about building relationships."

Volunteer appreciation events and leadership opportunities are also part of the strategy. "We create updated team descriptions every year,"

Thompson added. "We want to make space for new people while honoring the experience of those who have carried the weight for years."

The weight is real. Planning Charlotte Pride is not a seasonal gig. "It's a year-round effort," Meredith said. "People give their evenings, weekends, even vacation time. They do it because they want to see others feel safe and celebrated."

One moment still stands out to her. "At a post-festival dinner, Tiffany, one of our longtime volunteers, got emotional and said, 'Y'all are my why. You're why I do this.' That hit all of us. It reminded me that this is more than an event. It is a commu-



Vendor team co-leader Ryan Beaupré.
CREDIT: Courtesy Image

nity effort to create something meaningful." While Meredith coordinates from a leadership perspective, volunteers like **Tessa Malayan** and **Tiffany Crooks** embody the heart and soul of Pride on the ground.

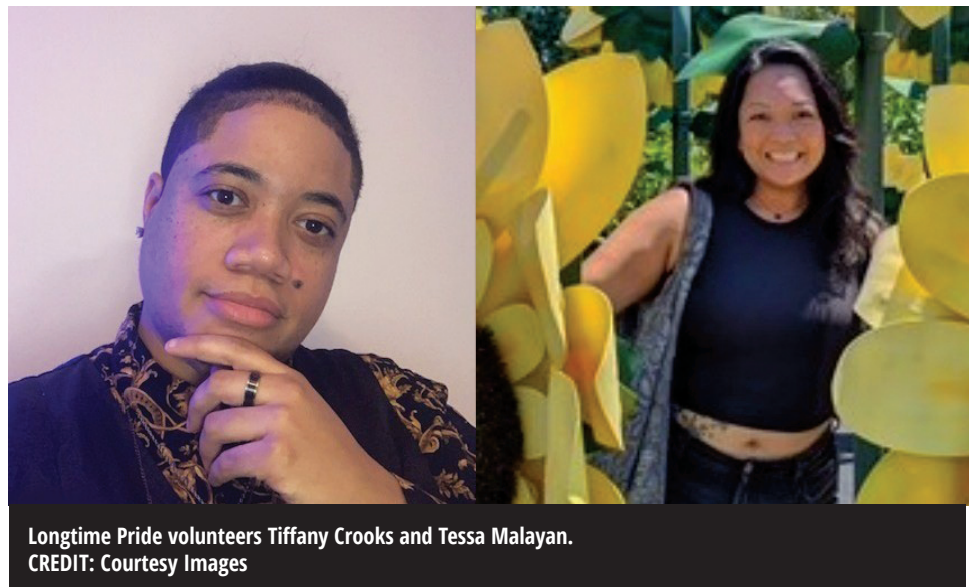
Malayan, who leads the parade team, first joined Charlotte Pride during the pandemic. "I told myself, when this is over, I need to get involved more. I wanted to fill my philanthropic cup," she said.

After moving to Charlotte from Arizona, Malayan searched online for organizations that matched her values. "Charlotte Pride came up. I had seen them on social media, checked the website, and sent in a write-up about myself. A couple of weeks later, they asked if I wanted to join the parade team."

Despite having no parade experience, Malayan jumped in headfirst. "It is chaotic and stressful, but in the best way," she said,



Meredith Thompson, managing director of Charlotte Pride.
CREDIT: Social Media



Longtime Pride volunteers Tiffany Crooks and Tessa Malayan.
CREDIT: Courtesy Images

laughing. "Once you see the floats rolling and the smiles on people's faces, it makes everything worth it."

Her role includes approving applications, managing the parade lineup, and coordinating the staging area. "If you see someone running around like a chicken with its head cut off, that's me," she joked. Her motivation is personal: "Our daughter came out when she was eight or nine, and I'm part of the community too. Our home has become a safe space for her and her friends. Volunteering with Pride is a way to extend that safe space to the larger community."

For Crooks, the path to Pride began with music. "I started off singing with One Voice Chorus and performing at Flourish," she recalled. Flourish is the festival's arts and culture showcase, and when the program needed a coordinator, Crooks stepped up. "I said, 'I'm interested,' because it was something I loved. That was seven years ago."

Since then, Crooks has curated a vibrant mix of visual art, spoken word and live music for festival-goers. "Providing a platform for queer artists has been incredible," she said. "I still remember the first time we tried using a makeshift teleprompter during a show. It was chaotic, but we made it work and then improved it the next year."

Now Crooks is preparing for a new chapter. "I'm training others to take over Flourish," she said. "It's time to branch out and volunteer in other spaces, like Charlotte Black Pride or the LGBTQ Chamber. I want to see the full landscape of our community."

Her advice for new volunteers? "Do it. Whether it's with Pride or another group, find your place and give your time. That's how we build a deeper community."

According to Thompson, the volunteers who succeed share three qualities:

passion, patience and flexibility. "You have to believe in the mission," she said. "Otherwise, the long nights and early mornings will feel overwhelming."

Volunteers who are allies share similar qualities. "We do have some volunteers who are purely just allies," explained Beaupré. "And they're really tied to it because they know it's a cause that impacts someone who's important to them."

Malayan agrees. "Everybody has a different idea of what Pride should look like. You have to listen, adapt and create something that feels inclusive for everyone."

Crooks adds resilience to the list. "Things shift. Plans change. You figure it out and keep moving forward."


Pride is a celebration, but it is also a lifeline in a challenging climate for LGBTQ+ rights. "Being visibly supportive matters now more than ever," Beaupré said.

Thompson summed it up simply: "Our volunteers aren't just helping with logistics. They are creating spaces where people feel safe, seen, and celebrated. That is what Pride is about."

The 2025 Charlotte Pride Festival & Parade is Saturday, Aug. 16 through Sunday, Aug. 17, 2025. Charlotte Pride Week, which includes a variety of celebratory Pride events all around the city, hosted by local businesses and organizations, runs Friday, Aug. 8 through Friday, Aug. 15. Expect more space, more art and more opportunities to connect and as always, volunteers will make it possible.

If you've ever considered giving your time, now is the moment. Whether you enjoy organizing, creating or simply lending a hand, there is a role for you. ::


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Where they want silence, Flourish speaks in technicolor

As anti-LGBTQ+ attacks escalate, this Charlotte Pride Weekend event carves out space for bold expression, radical joy and queer resilience



by Liz Schob
Qnotes Staff Writer

Every August nearly a quarter million people flock to the streets of Uptown Charlotte for LGBTQ+ music, celebration and visibility as the Charlotte Pride Festival and Parade Weekend returns to the Queen City. But just beyond the crowds and main stage energy, *Flourish: A Celebration of LGBTQ+ Arts & Culture* offers something quieter, but no less powerful. This year, *Flourish* makes its debut at the Dubois Center at UNC Charlotte Center City. Held Saturday, Aug. 16 from 1 to 6 p.m., the event features LGBTQ+ choirs, spoken word artists, visual art, short films and more.

Now in its twelfth year and part of Charlotte Pride's 25th anniversary celebration, *Flourish* continues to evolve alongside the festival itself, which relocates this year from South Tryon Street to First Ward Park. For Tiffany Crooks, who has coordinated the event for Charlotte Pride since 2018, *Flourish* remains a vital space for connection and visibility. "Flourish is about supporting our community through connection and creative experience," she says. "It's a space where our artists can thrive, where their stories are heard, their work is seen and their



The Charlotte Pride Band performs at Flourish.
CREDIT: John Quillin

contributions are valued."

Flourish began in 2013 as a response to a problem: The main stage at Charlotte Pride was no place for choirs. "It was hot, we were in full sun, and there was no way for anyone to hear us properly," recalls founder John Quillin. The Gay Men's

Chorus of Charlotte, One Voice Chorus and other local groups were often slotted into early morning times with inadequate sound equipment and sparse audiences.

Rather than accept the limitations, Quillin helped launch a new activation that would center LGBTQ+ artists from across disciplines: music, drag, spoken word, literature, visual art and film. In partnership with the Bechtler Museum of Modern Art, *Flourish* offered free programming in

an indoor space where artists could finally be seen and heard on their own terms.

In 2018, the event transitioned to Charlotte Pride, with longtime performer and volunteer Tiffany Crooks stepping in to lead it into its next chapter. Under her guidance, *Flourish* has grown into a multidimensional celebration of LGBTQ+ artistry. "We've always wanted *Flourish* to be a platform for artists who might not be seen on the main stage at Charlotte Pride," Crooks says. "Now we're able to do that on a much larger scale."

This year's lineup includes spoken word artists, singer-songwriters, musical improv and Charlotte's cornerstone LGBTQ+ performance groups: the Gay Men's Chorus of Charlotte, Women's Chorus of Charlotte, One Voice Chorus and Charlotte Pride Band. Zulynette, who is both performing and exhibiting, shares bold, bilingual poetry and visual art that speaks to identity and liberation. Mo Pirela returns with original spoken word pieces shaped by her experiences as a Black

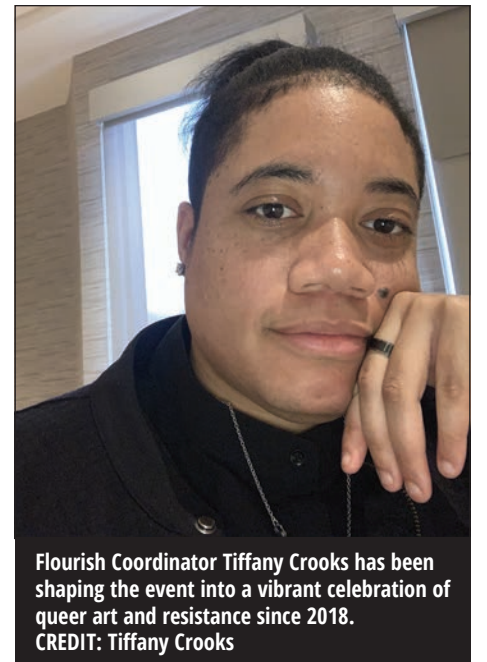
lesbian woman and community storyteller. Making her *Flourish* debut, Mimi V brings heartfelt indie/alternative songs performed on ukulele, offering what she describes as "mellow vibes" and music rooted in personal truth.

At its core, *Flourish* is a space for LGBTQ+ artists to speak, sing and create from the truth of their lived experience. Few embody that mission as fully as Zulynette, Mo Pirela and Mimi V.

Returning for her third year, Zulynette is a spoken word artist, visual creator and community facilitator whose work explores liberation, grief, identity and joy. Her performances pulse with rhythm and resistance, often weaving references to her Boricua heritage through language and music. "When I first moved to Charlotte, I was looking to be part of community events that had values that aligned with mine," she said. "Flourish is that. It's about celebrating us, celebrating queer community, celebrating queer artistry, and so I was all in." She will also exhibit



One Voice Chorus performs during Flourish at the Mint Museum during the 2024 Charlotte Pride Festival Weekend.
CREDIT: Dylan Shackelford



Flourish Coordinator Tiffany Crooks has been shaping the event into a vibrant celebration of queer art and resistance since 2018.
CREDIT: Tiffany Crooks

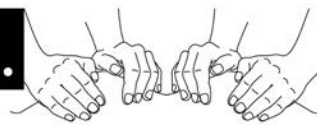
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by Terri Schlichenmeyer
Contributing Writer

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The monkeys used to scare you a lot. The Wicked Witch was one thing but those flying simians with their booming voices? Ugh, they gave you nightmares for weeks. And despite that you knew how things would end – you’d seen the movie annually, for heaven’s sake – let’s just say you spent a lot of time covering your eyes. So now be like a Lion. Get *uncowardly* and find “**Judy Garland: The Voice of MGM**” by Scott Brogan.

When most people think about Judy Garland, two images come to mind: the teenager in pigtails or “The one-dimensional image of an always suffering and always tragic Garland...” Neither one, says Brogan, is totally correct. In reality, Garland was “positive, joyful, and funny.”

Her parents, Ethel and Frank Gumm,

were performers who moved their little family around Michigan and Wisconsin before landing in Grand Rapids, Minnesota, where their youngest child, Frances, was born in 1922. An adorable baby, little Frances loved an audience almost from the time she could walk; her parents happily added her to the family troupe.

In 1926, the Gumms performed their way across the country to Los Angeles, where Frances and her sisters appeared in many shows, but critics were not entirely impressed. Still, Ethel pushed and the girls toured with Paramount Circuit in the northwest, and then in Chicago in 1934 where Frances had “one of [her] biggest career milestones.”

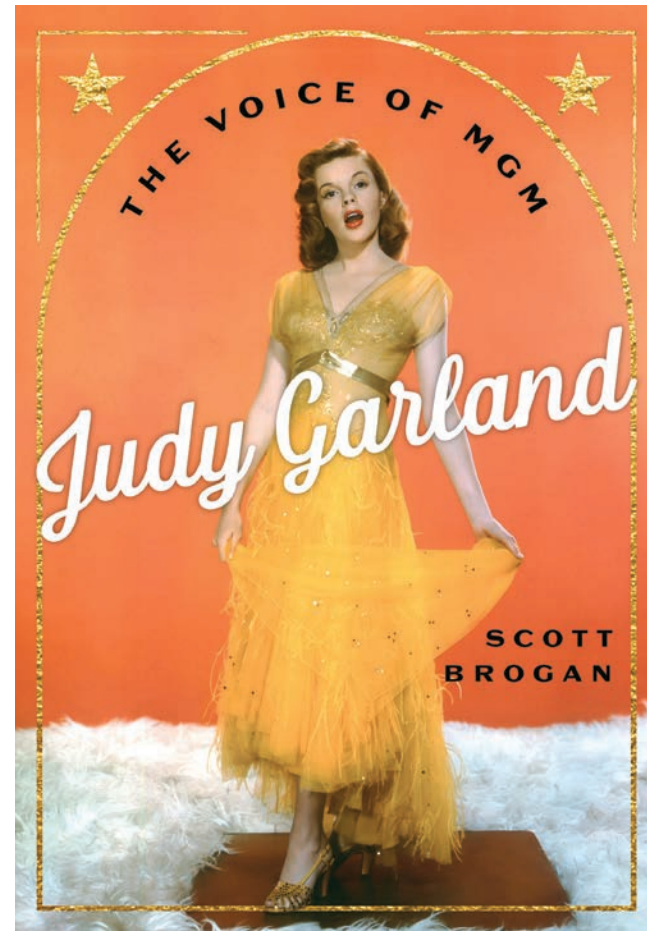
By 1935, she was formally using the name “Judy Garland” onstage and she’d secured informal representation. That same year, she signed a contract with MGM, a studio which took a near-total control it “would exert over Garland’s personal life” and her schedule, denying her wish to be with her father at the end of his life and dictating what she ate or didn’t eat.

Still, says Brogan, their methods worked: by the time Garland was twenty years old, her “career seemed to know no limits.”

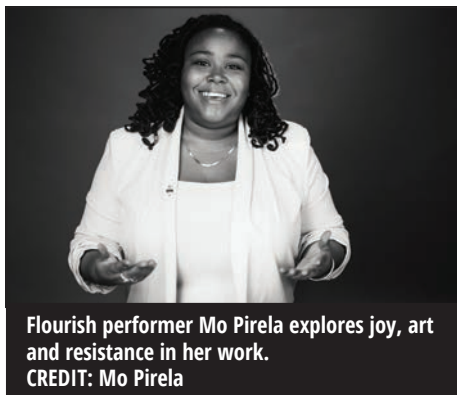
Page through “Judy Garland: The Voice of MGM” and you’ll instantly know that you’re in for a treat: this book is loaded with photos, stills, publicity shots, and newspaper recreations. There’s a lot to look at here, but what there is to *read* is better.

Author Scott Brogan makes Judy Garland his *raison d’être* in this book, but it’s not entirely all about her. Brogan shares an overview of the movie studio that made her famous, including what is arguably her most top-of-mind film, the gossip that surrounded it then, and the mythology that still lives on. There’s a comprehensive list of World War II-era appearances that Garland made, and what happened at each one. If you’re expecting dirt-dishing, you’ll read about her father’s secret, her marriages, and her addictions, but not in an over-the-top scandalous way. Brogan is factual, inclusive, and respectful, just as you’d want.

If you’re planning on having guests soon, put “Judy Garland: The Voice of MGM” away or your guests will want to read, rather than mingle. It’s the kind of coffee-table book that, for fans, will make you *Get Happy*. ::



from previous page



Flourish performer Mo Pirela explores joy, art and resistance in her work.
CREDIT: Mo Pirela

artwork this year, continuing her practice of storytelling through multiple mediums.

Mo Pirela, also in her third year at Flourish, brings a dynamic presence to the spoken word stage. Her poetry is grounded in personal narrative and political truth, shaped by her identity as a Black lesbian woman. “My identity heavily influences my work,” she says. “There’s a brilliance and a beauty that comes from being a part of the LGBTQ+ community. Each one of us brings something different.” For Pirela, Flourish is more than a stage. It is a place where community support fuels artistic risk. “There’s nothing like being in a room where people just get it.”

Mimi V makes her Flourish debut this year performing original indie/alternative songs on a ukulele she taught herself to play by ear during the pandemic. “I’m a musician and singer-songwriter with a lifelong love for the arts,” she says. “My songs often come from personal truths whether it’s mental

health, queer experiences or life transitions.” As an LGBTQ+ artist, V says Flourish is a space where she can “be a safe space for others and also feel safe with others.”

Together, these artists represent the range, depth and soul of Charlotte’s LGBTQ+ creative community. Their voices remind us that visibility is not a performance, but a practice of presence, truth and connection.

In 2025, visibility alone is no longer enough. Across the country, LGBTQ+ organizations are facing mounting political pressure and financial instability. Lawmakers continue to push legislation aimed at dismantling diversity, equity and inclusion programs, while major donors scale back LGBTQ+ funding. The impact is felt in the day-to-day work of artists and organizers trying to hold space for joy and resistance.

“With the political climate, and I think this is throughout the whole nation, money has been a huge factor,” says Tiffany Crooks. “But what I’m really amazed by is how we’ve pulled together and still been able to find these artists, bring them in, and say, ‘Hey, come do Flourish.’ Let’s get you visibility. Let’s put you out there.”

Flourish, she says, is a space of per-

sistence. “No matter what is happening, we’re overcoming it, moving through and saying, ‘Here’s what we can do.’”

For Flourish founder Quillin, the urgency is all too familiar. In 1997, the Mecklenburg County Commission defunded the Arts & Science Council (ASC) over its support for “Angels in America.”

At the time, County Commissioner Hoyle Martin (the only Democrat who voted with Republicans to defund the ASC) talked about the controversy and the LGBTQ+ community with the Charlotte Observer. “If I had my way,” Martin said, “we’d shove these people off the face of the earth.”

Despite Martin’s comments, Quillin was unshaken. “You are not pushing me off the face of the earth,” he recalled saying in response to Martin’s hate-filled words. “I won’t be swept away, and neither will anybody else. We’re going to flourish.”

At its heart, Flourish is about possibility. Crooks hopes that attendees leave with a sense of connection to the art, the community and their own creative potential. “There are some dope artists in our community across all spectrums,” she says. “And there are spaces out there, if you want to get involved. Or maybe you’ll



Spoken word artist and visual creator Zulynette weaves Boricua heritage, resistance and queer joy into every performance.
CREDIT: Zulynette

hear someone whose words resonate with you and think, ‘I want to find them again.’”

In a time when fear and division dominate headlines, Flourish offers something else: imagination, courage and care. It is a place to witness LGBTQ+ creativity in its fullest form, to support artists who speak truth to power and to remember that building community is an act of resistance. Come for the art, stay for the spirit and leave ready to carry it forward. ::



Mimi V makes her Flourish debut with original songs on ukulele, exploring queer identity, mental health and resilience.
CREDIT: Mimi V

Different drummer: An interview with Audrey Johnson of La Luz

Out in Music



by Gregg Shapiro
Contributing Writer

When the members of Seattle-based all-female band La Luz declare themselves to be a surf rock band, you better believe them. Between the Beach Boys-esque harmonies, the Shana Cleveland's Dick Dale-inspired guitar work, and Audrey Johnson's beach blanket beats on the drums, you'll be wanting to hang ten on the next perfect wave.

Johnson, who identifies as a member of the LGBTQ+ community, joined the band

I started playing it, I was like, "This is cool, but it isn't giving me the thing that I need." So, I switched to drums after I watched some interview with No Doubt. I really liked the drummer [Adrian Young] in his Speedo. I was like, "This is the energy I'm feeling [laughs]."

GS: Do you have other favorite drummers? Maybe Karen Carpenter or Gina Schock?

AJ: Yes. That was always my secret, especially when I got into punk. My guilty pleasure was that I loved the Carpenters. I loved Karen Carpenter. I grew up with my family listening to Sheila E; I really love her! And Cindy Blackman, she used to play for Lenny Kravitz and plays with Santana. Those were big influences of mine.

was the first time that I met Shannon and The Clams. Will, their keyboardist, came up to me after the show, and he said, "My partner Shana (Cleveland)'s band is looking for a drummer. Would you be interested in auditioning?" Then I found out the band was La Luz, and I was like, "Well, hell yeah I would [laughs]!" It pretty much went from there.

GS: 2024's "New of the Universe" is the first album you recorded as a member of La Luz — what was that experience like for you?

AJ: It was a lot of fun. I guess the way that they would usually record was even different from this experience. We all hung out with each other for a week at Shana's, the singer's, house. We started jamming together and decided we were going to start these songs from scratch, which they had not written like that previously. It was interesting; a lot of different energies going into it. Different visions from the get-go. There were some songs that were a little bit pre-written, but a lot of them we developed together. It was really quick, actually. We went in with the intention of making an EP, and we ended up coming up with all these cool songs and sent them to the label. They were like, "Cool, you guys can make more songs, and we can make it a full-length

[album]. We got back in the studio another time and basically did the same thing; we just hung out with each other for a few days and wrote and recorded the songs pretty quickly.

GS: Finally, would you mind saying a few words about your experiences as a queer musician?

AJ: Being a queer musician and being a woman musician is always wonderful to me, but people will say weird things sometimes. Trying to give compliments, but it comes out in strange ways. It's all good and fun. But honestly, even growing up in Fresno, which is kind of a conservative place for California, I feel very lucky to have been surrounded by other queers and other people that are freaks also, like my wife (Janell Bowen, the two recently celebrated their 16th anniversary), and being a weirdo also. I've grown up loving places like Oakland and the Bay Area. As a child, my parents would take my siblings and me on day trips to San Francisco. I knew, as a little kid, "Okay, this is cool! There are some weirdos here, and I feel like I would fit in perfectly [laughs]." ::

For more details on La Luz and their upcoming performances, visit their website at <https://laluzband.com>.



Surf rock: the new line up of La Luz includes drummer Audrey Johnson (second from right).
CREDIT: Facebook

in time for the recording of 2024's "News of the Universe" (Sub Pop). La Luz has been on tour throughout the year, and Audrey was kind enough to make time for an interview. Although it's still a few months away, they have an upcoming show in Asheville.

Gregg Shapiro: Audrey, at what age did you start drumming?

Audrey Johnson: I started drumming around 14. But I started playing drum kit, because I was doing percussion and things like that in [school] band when I was around 16.

GS: You were in your school band?

AJ: Yeah, I was a big nerd. I was in marching band and jazz band [laughs].

GS: When did you know the drums were the right instrument for you?

AJ: Actually, I originally started on saxophone as an 11-year-old. I come from a musical family, and one of my uncles plays saxophone, so I always wanted to play. Once

GS: Were you in other bands before joining La Luz?

AJ: Oh, yes, lots [laughs]! One of the main ones – I'm from Fresno, California – and I played with a band called Fatty Cakes and the Puff Pastries.

GS: Great name!

AJ: [Laughs] Yeah, it's a lot of food-related things, but also kind of an activism band, so it's something that I feel like Fresno really needed and I'm glad that they let me join their band. I used to play for a group called Needy Evie, which is an all-girl band. I played for a woman named Teri Gender Bender. She's incredible. I was a big fan of hers before I was ever asked to join her band. Just like dreams coming true playing with Teri Gender Bender and La Luz.

GS: How did you come to be in La Luz?

AJ: I was playing a show with Fatty Cakes and the Puff Pastries in Visalia, Calif., and the band Shannon and The Clams was the headliner; we were opening for them. That



Audrey Johnson says she feels very lucky 'being a weirdo.'
CREDIT: Facebook

Our People: Caroline Bedenbaugh

Charlotte Pride communications coordinator talks about art, Pride and life in Charlotte



by L'Monique King
QNotes Staff Writer

“Terrorism & counter terrorism, History of Photography, History of Performance Art. These were the most fascinating classes I took while working on my Bachelor of Fine Arts at Florida Southern College – and I took them simultaneously. You wouldn’t believe how intertwined these subjects were,” Caroline Bedenbaugh said about her college experience, which culminated in a degree in graphic design with a double minor in political science and art history.

Bedenbaugh is a film buff and recent young LGBTQ+ transplant from Florida who has quickly found her footing in Charlotte’s Queer Arts community and LGBTQ+ advocacy.

How did she end up in the Queen City, you might ask?

“I had never lived outside of Florida and wanted to experience seasons, more than Florida has,” she mused. With a best friend in tow, this yearning for cooler temps and fall colored leaves lead to a North Carolina road trip.

According to Bedenbaugh, of all their destinations along the way, “...there were so many good vibes from Charlotte, we decided it would be a good place to live.”

Together the two friends made the move and settled into a NoDa apartment they adore. That was September 2024 and the rest – as they say, is new history. During this interview we learn a little more about Bedenbaugh’s experiences as a comelately Charlotte resident and Charlotte Pride’s Communications Coordinator.

L'Monique King: What are you passionate about?

Caroline Bedenbaugh: I’m super passionate about the LGBTQ+ community, art and film. Especially art by queer artists.

LMK: What are your top two favorite films?

CB: I’ve got so many favorites; I need a minute to think about that. My top two would be, “The Way He Looks” (a Brazilian coming of age love story) and “Desire Lines.” I highly recommend it. It’s half narrative and half documentary with footage of Lou Reed – a gay trans man who died of AIDS in the ‘90s.

LMK: Are you partnered?

CB: I have a girlfriend, yes. She is wonderful, kind and funny. We’re in a long-distance relationship – she’s in Austria. It’s hard and as you might imagine, because of our political climate, more worry comes with travel. Thankfully, the internet allows us to connect without 10-12 hour airline flights. I miss her and look forward to being able to be together in person.

LMK: What’s your favorite space or place to visit in Charlotte?

CB: I like Rosie’s [Coffee and Wine Garden] in NoDa. It’s like a coffee shop

during the day and a wine shop at night with a beautiful garden [on premises]. They have events there too. I also love Independent Picture House, the movie theater. I work there part-time and full-time for Charlotte Pride.

LMK: How did you get involved with Charlotte Pride?

CB: I got involved actually because of queer film. Before I moved to Charlotte, I looked up two things; whether or not there was an independent movies theater and what LGBTQ organizations there were. I found out that IPH (Independent Picture House) annually hosts a Charlotte Film Festival. At the 2024 festival – I’d just moved here – they presented a queer documentary and invited the Queer Charlotte Film Festival [Reel Out] to attend and participate in a Q&A following the film. It was at that festival where I met the organizers of Reel Out and showed interest in joining their Screening Committee. Over time I found and applied for a job opening with Charlotte Pride for a Communications Coordinator – the role I currently occupy.

LMK: This must be a challenging time to be in communications, considering we now have lists of words being scrubbed from websites and federal grant applications. Has this been an issue or challenging for you? How is Charlotte Pride handling this issue?

CB: I would say yes, it’s been challenging for our managing directors who deal more with managing sponsorships. In my current role, I haven’t had to worry about that as much so far. On the social media side, I’m communicating with the queer community. So, when I’m engaging with our community I have continued to use “our words” words we’re proud of.

LMK: Considering the over political climate are there any changes in place this year for Charlotte’s Pride festival and parade?

CB: We’ll be in a new festival zone this year in First Ward Park Saturday, Aug. 16 through Sunday, Aug. 17. I think the new location will give a greater community and festival feel, with more local vendors than we’ve ever had before. [Pride week begins Sunday, Aug. 10, with an interfaith service at the Unitarian Universalist Community of Charlotte]. The week will be filled with activities and cool events like Flourish [Aug. 16], our arts and cultural celebration. Flourish features LGBTQ art, artists and culture. It’ll be in the Dubois Center at the uptown UNC-Charlotte campus. I think by visiting these events, people will find the community that they crave, during a time when it feels like the world isn’t recognizing our worth or visibility. Attending Pride will provide a renewed sense of purpose, community and hope.

LMK: Speaking of being seen, what does intersectionality look like for you? Do you ever feel like you have to compartmentalize your identities?



Caroline Bedenbaugh, the communications director for Charlotte Pride, says she loves the North Carolina seasonal changes.
CREDIT: Lani Crowell

CB: I’m white and white passing – a woman and woman passing. I do think, despite wanting to look as gay as I can all the time, people do often assume I’m straight. I don’t hide my gayness, in most circumstances. Though I’ve been in situations where I felt like I had to dial back, whether that meant being quieter as a woman or silent as a gay person. As far as intersectionality goes, the phrase reminds me to use my privilege as a white person, a white woman, in leveraging the voices of my friends who don’t share my identity. In the meantime, I try my best to keep learning, listening and being a good friend.

LMK: On a lighter note, what frightens you?

CB: Right now, I’m afraid for my trans friends. Especially back in Florida. Florida was the first state to end up on the anti-trans legislation map and has been listed as a [non]-travel state for trans people for over a year now. It’s not the only state either, but it was the first one.

LMK: If you could take a dream vacation to escape it all for a while, where would you go?

CB: Ooh, I’d love to go to Greece.

LMK: As a communications expert what concerns do you have about AI?

CB: Lots of things. It doesn’t have the knowledge or depth (as a person) we need to communicate with people. I’ve tried things like captioning Instagram posts and it’s just not very good. It takes away from the art of communication and [eliminates] the brain power it takes to create. I think we should challenge ourselves to keep writing, keep being human, even if it’s not perfect.

LMK: But what if you weren’t human? <Chuckling> If you could be any animal, what would you be?

CB: <Without a moment’s hesitation> A house cat. Cozy life, lying in the sun with food provided – they’re just cool animals.

LMK: Returning to your human self and in closing, can you offer a few words of encouragement to our LGBTQ youth readership?

CB: <Thoughtful pause> It’s undeniable that we are living in times where we worry. The fear is extremely valid. But, to find hope and not get lost in the despair we have to lean on each other, show up for each other and engage in community. It’s so powerful. It’s not something you can quantify or see online. It’s [within community] when you’re with people and having tough conversations – that’s when you find the hope, the idea, the creativity and the comfort to keep trying and moving forward. ::



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