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Art in the Queen City

Six creative voices of Charlotte

- pg 12

Culture under-the-radar

- pg 14

Charlotte's drag courts

- pg 10



Climate concerns-
NC legislation - pg 8
Fighting for a
just AI Future
- pg 9

Martina
Navratilova
owns a part of
Carolina Ascent
- pg 7



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on the cover

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Mission:

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

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inside this issue



feature

12 Creative voices of Charlotte: Six artists on art, identity and community



news

- 5 Community Pride celebrations set for Sept. 27
- 6 Uplift Outreach Center works to expand support for LGBTQ youth
- 6 Nation's HHS agency orders states to strip gender from sex ed
- 6 Annual FBI report says hate crimes against LGBTQ+ community among top most reported categories
- 7 Tennis icon Martina Navratilova joins Carolina Ascent as minority owner
- 7 Pope Leo XIV reaffirms welcome for LGBTQ+ Catholics
- 7 LGBTQ+ Americans less religious, survey finds



a&e

- 10 Charlotte Pride and Charlotte Black Pride's 2025 Courts step into the spotlight
- 14 Under the radar: Charlotte arts groups
- 15 Bell of the ball: an interview with Andy Bell



life

- 8 Politicizing the weather and the world
- 9 Fighting for a just and sustainable AI future



views

- 4 A Trans gun ban would show further disregard for the Constitution



events

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



The effect of AI on climate change and minority communities

Artificial intelligence is everywhere. It writes emails, recommends shows and drives major innovations in health care, finance and education. For LGBTQ+ readers, climate and technology are part of the same story. Just as AI can amplify bias and harm against queer and trans communities, its environmental costs impact vulnerable groups on the frontlines of climate change.

PAGE 8

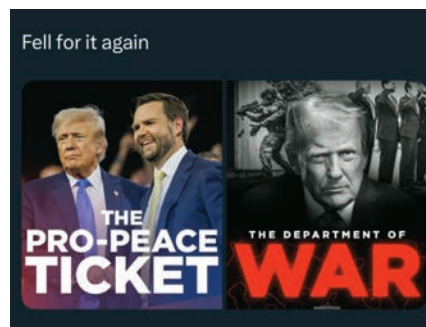
Mount Holly & Statesville hold Pride events Sept. 27

Two local organizations are ready to celebrate Pride in their own towns on the same day, creating a weekend to remember in North Carolina. Mount Holly Pride and the Statesville Pride Alliance will each host their own festivals, offering distinct experiences while sharing a common message of inclusion. Wanna' do both? It's just over a 45-minute drive from one to the other.

PAGE 5



The People speak on Social Media



Trump Still Polling Well
With Working-Class
American Pedophiles

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A Trans gun ban would show further disregard for the Constitution

The Dept. of Justice has reportedly been working on a firearm ban for transgender Americans



by Taylor Heeden Larkins
Qnotes Staff Writer

It's an unfortunate reality when mass shootings have become synonymous with the American identity. While all loss of life is tragic, the carnage entailed with gun violence leaves a particularly grotesque stain on the United States and its people, especially its most vulnerable. In fact, according to Johns Hopkins, gun violence is the leading cause of death for children ages one to 17 with firearms accounting for nearly a third of all deaths among youths aged 15 to 17. As of Aug. 27, there have been 44 school shootings in the United States – 22 of which were at K-12 schools.

The most recent school shooting occurred at Annunciation Catholic Church in Minneapolis on Aug. 27, injuring 18 people and killing two. The two deceased were 8-year-old Fletcher Merkel and 10-year-old Harper Moyski, both of whom were sitting in a church during the first week of school Mass – a whole future robbed from them in a matter of minutes.

The shooter was 23-year-old Robin Westman, and their motive may forever be unknown. Publications such as the New York Post and Fox News have pointed out the shooter's transgender identity, in turn creating more fear among their audiences toward the trans community.

Instead of proposing legislation to improve background checks or ban assault weapons, the federal government is looking into potentially barring transgender Americans from owning firearms. The Associated Press reported the Department of Justice began to float around the idea in wake of the Annunciation shooting, drawing criticism from people across the entire political spectrum. In fact, the National Rifle Association – who historically has supported President Donald Trump and Republican politicians – has even criticized the move.



The right to keep and bear arms is guaranteed by Amendment 2 of the American Constitution and does not preclude transgender individuals.

"The NRA supports the Second Amendment rights of all law-abiding Americans to purchase, possess and use firearms," the group said in a statement. "NRA does not, and will not, support any policy proposals that implement sweeping gun bans that arbitrarily strip law-abiding citizens of their Second Amendment rights without due process."

Another gun rights group called Citizens Committee for the Right to Keep and Bear Arms also called out the move, claiming it was unconstitutional to ban firearm access for any American.

"Prohibiting whole groups of people from owning and using firearms because a sick individual misused a gun to harm and kill children is as reprehensible as restrict-

ing the rights of all law-abiding citizens because some people have committed crimes," Alan Gottlieb, the group's chairman, said in a statement. "That anyone in the Trump administration would consider such nonsense is alarming."

LGBTQ+ advocates have also called out the potential ban as misguided, as most shootings in the United States have been carried out by men and don't involve trans folks.

"Transgender people are less than two percent of the overall population, yet four times as likely to be victims of crime," GLAAD said in an email to the Associated Press. "Everyone deserves to be themselves, be safe, and be free from violence and discrimination. We all deserve leaders who prioritize keeping all of us safe and free."

The trans gun ban – reported on by CNN – is one of many moves the Trump Administration has taken against the trans community in the United States. One of the first actions taken was the reinstatement of the trans military ban from Trump's first term, in addition to removing the term "transgender" from federal agencies' websites. The federal government has also banned trans women from playing on women's sports teams; rifled through medical records for information about patients receiving gender-affirming care across the country and attempted to bar changing gender identifiers on passports.

According to the Associated Press, the Department of Justice is "actively evaluating options to prevent the pattern of violence we have seen from individuals with specific mental health challenges and substance abuse disorders," not ruling out a potential gun ban for trans Americans.

"It's incredibly worrying ... that seems to be on the table for them," Alejandra Caraballo, a transgender rights activist and Harvard Law School instructor. "This is not something that would be that incredibly difficult to do logistically or practically but it would be politically explosive in terms of the backlash of Second Amendment groups."

It's become clear the Trump Administration and the MAGA movement are still as hellbent as ever with their dedicated witch hunt for trans Americans and their constitutional rights. This time, they're coming after one of the few ways trans Americans can defend themselves from potential attacks by those who would prefer to see the LGBTQ+ community eradicated.

The Second Amendment states: "A well regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed."

The right of the people to keep and bear arms is not exclusive to Republicans or Democrats – it's an inalienable right guaranteed to us by law, despite any reprehensible designs by Trump, his administration or his supporters. ::



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Community Pride celebrations set for Sept. 27

Mount Holly Pride and Statesville Pride host parades, vendors, performances and family-friendly activities



by Liz Schob
Qnotes Staff Writer

Two local Pride organizations are preparing to bring LGBTQ+ joy to their towns on the same day, creating a weekend of visibility and celebration in North Carolina. On Saturday, Sept. 27, Mount Holly NC Pride and the Statesville Pride Alliance will each host their own festivals, offering distinct experiences while sharing a common message of inclusion.

Mount Holly Pride is organizing its first Pride event, an all-day celebration from noon to 8 p.m. that will fill Main Street with a business crawl, vendor market, kids' activities and live performances. Attendees will be invited to pick up passports and collect stamps from local shops and cafés offering Pride-themed specials. Black Sheep Coffee and other participating businesses will be decorated in rainbow colors, welcoming visitors with festive displays and limited-edition menu items designed to highlight the spirit of Pride. Alongside the crawl, a vendor market will showcase handmade jewelry, candles, thrifted goods, baked treats and booths from LGBTQ+-affirming organizations.

Families can head to the kids' zone, where children will find crafts, games and storytelling activities that ensure they feel part of the day's celebrations. Organizers say the goal is to make the festival not only fun but affirming, offering a safe place for



young people to learn, play and participate. Musicians, drag performers and local artists will provide entertainment that brings the community together, creating a high-energy close to the town's first-ever Pride. Months of preparation have gone into building this moment, with volunteers and business owners collaborating at meetings hosted by The Summit Beer Shop to finalize details and build enthusiasm. Fundraising has focused on signage, decor, and fair pay for performers, with additional proceeds pledged to Time Out Youth, a Charlotte-based nonprofit that provides counseling, leadership programs, and safe spaces for LGBTQ+ youth.

The same afternoon, the **Statesville Pride Alliance** will host its Pride Parade and Festival downtown from noon to 4 p.m. The event begins with a parade circling Broad Street between North Meeting and Mulberry Streets, filling the corridor with floats, decorated cars and community groups marching in solidarity.

After the parade, the celebration will flow directly into an outdoor festival with food trucks, vendors, and live entertainment. A performance lineup featuring drag entertainers, live music and community speakers will keep the energy high throughout the afternoon.

The Alliance has built momentum for this year's festival through events like the Pride Pet Pageant and Parade at the Historic Sharpe House earlier this summer. Pets competed in categories such as Cutest



Pet and Most Creative Costume, giving families and children a playful entry point into the Pride spirit. Organizers emphasize that the September festival is free and open to all, reflecting their mission to create a safe, inclusive and affirming community in Statesville.

Although the two events are independent, they share a common spirit of grassroots organizing. Both are powered by volunteers, small businesses and nonprofits committed to LGBTQ+ visibility and joy. Mount Holly Pride offers a day-long downtown crawl culminating in evening performances, while the Statesville Pride Alliance hosts a parade and afternoon festival. Each reflects the voices of local residents and the unique character of its town.

The significance of these festivals extends well beyond a single day. For Mount Holly, it represents the creation of a new tradition and a first step toward greater visibility in a town that has never before hosted Pride. For Statesville, it continues the growth of a community-led festival that connects families, vendors and organizations while making LGBTQ+ life more visible downtown. Together, they illustrate how Pride is spreading beyond North Carolina's major metropolitan centers and into smaller towns where LGBTQ+ people and allies are determined to create affirming spaces.

As Sept. 27 approaches, anticipation is building. Organizers from both Mount Holly Pride and the Statesville Pride Alliance have been active on social media, recruiting volunteers, highlighting sponsors and promoting vendors.

On the day itself, attendees can expect color, energy and connection. In Mount Holly, visitors will spend the day exploring shops, browsing vendors and ending the evening with performances that turn Main

Street into a stage. In Statesville, parade-goers will cheer floats and marching groups before gathering downtown for food, games, and entertainment. Both festivals will provide opportunities to celebrate, connect with neighbors and support local businesses and nonprofits working to affirm LGBTQ+ visibility.

With parades, vendors, music and programming for all ages, both Mount Holly Pride and the Statesville Pride Alliance are preparing to make history on Sept. 27. Their efforts highlight the strength of grassroots organizing and the ability of local communities to claim space for making memories, affirmation and belonging. As rainbow banners rise over two downtowns, the day will stand as another milestone for LGBTQ+ visibility in North Carolina. ::

For more details on Mount Holly Pride visit <https://www.facebook.com/mthollyncpride>.

Additional info on Statesville Pride at <https://www.statesvillepridealliance.com/>.



Community members gather at The Summit Beer Shop to organize Mount Holly's first Pride celebration. CREDIT: Facebook



Free Mom Hugs volunteers spread love and support at last year's Pride celebration in Statesville. CREDIT: Facebook

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Uplift Outreach Center works to expand support for LGBTQ youth



Uplift Outreach Center serves more than 300 LGBTQ+ youth in Upstate South Carolina. CREDIT: Facebook

Uplift Outreach Center, Spartanburg's LGBTQ+ youth center, is working to expand its services at a time when federal funding

cuts have left many similar programs across the country in jeopardy.

The nonprofit has served as a lifeline for young people in Upstate South Carolina since 2019, offering weekly support groups, after-school programs, leadership development, and a safe space for LGBTQ+ youth. In addition to direct support, Uplift provides resources for parents and caregivers and collaborates with local organizations to create safer, more affirming communities.

"We're not here to censor them," Uplift Program Director Jodi Snyder told *WSPA*. "We are here to support them and give them resources and show them that there are safe adults in their corner."

Executive Director Raymond Velazquez-Turner told the *Post and Courier* the work goes beyond programming to address larger challenges facing the community. "We want

to make sure they have the resources they need to take care of themselves," he said. "So one of our problems going on is attacks in our community as a whole. Taking care of ourselves is vital in the LGBTQ+ community."

The center offers tutoring programs supported by local colleges and music jam sessions that bring young people together. Each year, new activities are added to meet emerging needs and interests. Youth also serve on an advisory board that helps shape programming decisions, ensuring the services reflect the voices of those who use them. In addition to social activities, the center hones leadership skills and teaches financial literacy, preparing participants for life beyond the classroom.

Founded by Eric Nolley and Debra Foreman, Uplift has grown from a grassroots vision into a thriving community hub. Today, it serves over 300 young people from Spartanburg and surrounding counties, meeting at least twice a week in space provided by Fernwood Baptist Church. Leaders hope to eventually expand the center's hours and remain open more days

each week to better meet demand.

Federal funding streams that once supported LGBTQ+ programs have been reduced or redirected, leaving centers like Uplift more dependent on private donations, local grants and community partnerships to sustain and expand their services. Despite those challenges, Uplift has continued to build momentum. Its programs provide a safe and affirming place for young people to learn more about themselves, share their experiences, and build skills for the future.

Uplift's leaders say the goal is simple, and it is urgent. The center exists so LGBTQ+ young people have a place to be themselves, to find community, and to build the skills and support networks they need to thrive. With demand rising and hours set to expand, community backing will determine how many youth Uplift can reach next. ::

For more information about Uplift Outreach Center and ways to support its mission, visit upliftoutreachcenter.org.

— Liz Schob

Annual FBI report says hate crimes against LGBTQ+ community among top most reported categories

The latest annual crime report from the FBI highlights once again that while overall violent crime in the U.S. continues to decline, hate crimes against the LGBTQ+ community remain alarmingly high – an especially concerning report coming as the Trump administration, Republican-controlled Congress, and right-wing state lawmakers continue to level legislative, administrative and personal attacks against LGBTQ+ people.

In 2024, according to FBI data submitted by local jurisdictions, attacks based

on a victim's sexual orientation made up 17.2 percent of all hate crimes, and four percent were based on gender identity.

"The FBI's 2024 hate crime data has revealed a national emergency hiding in plain sight. Everyone deserves to be safe in this country and have the chance to thrive. But anti-equality politicians continue to spread lies about LGBTQ+ people, trying to push us out of more and more corners of society," said Kelley Robinson, Human Rights Campaign President. "Those smears come with a cost. The FBI has exposed a



The FBI report indicates there were over 2,000 recorded incidents relating to sexual orientation and gender identity.

chilling reality: our community remains a target of violence — and that is unacceptable. LGBTQ+ people, just like everyone

else, should be free to live our lives, pursue our careers and education, build our homes and pursue our American Dreams, without the threat of violence hanging over our heads. This FBI data is clear: We need more support from our political leaders, not animosity and attacks that seek to demonize us."

The FBI's report noted that there were 1,950 recorded incidents relating to an alleged victim's sexual orientation in 2024 and 463 relating to an alleged victim's gender identity. Race/ethnicity motivated hate crimes remained the largest category, making up 51.8 percent of all hate crimes. Hate crimes based on religion were second, just ahead of sexual orientation. ::

— Qnotes Staff

Nation's HHS agency orders states to strip gender from sex ed

President Donald Trump's administration demanded Tuesday Aug. 26, that dozens of states remove from sex education materials any references to a person's gender departing from their sex assigned at birth, or lose federal funding.

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Administration for Children and Families warned in letters to 40 states, the District of Columbia and several territories that they could lose a total of \$81.3 million in remaining federal funds for the Personal Responsibility Education Program, or PREP, if they do not get rid of these references within 60 days.

The policy appears to target any reference to transgender or nonbinary people. For example, in a letter to an adolescent health program specialist at Alaska's Department of Health and Social Services, the federal agency asked that a definition of transgender and related terms be deleted from school curricula.

In a statement shared with States Newsroom, Laurel Powell, a spokesperson for the Human Rights Campaign, an LGBTQ+ advocacy organization, said the move was

part of Trump's "all-out fight to erase government recognition of transgender people."

"Sexual education programs, at their best, are age-appropriate, fact-based and informative at a time when young people need this information to keep themselves healthy," Powell said. "When they do not acknowledge the existence of trans people they fail in their goal to inform, and cutting this funding denies young people the information they need to make safe, healthy, and informed decisions about their own bodies."

PREP focuses on preventing teen pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections, and targets youth who are experiencing homelessness or in foster care, or reside in rural areas or places with high rates of teen birth, according to the agency.

The states that HHS sent letters to Tuesday are: Alabama, Alaska, Arizona, Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware, Georgia, Hawaii, Illinois, Iowa, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Mississippi, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, Nevada, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York,

North Carolina, Ohio, Oklahoma, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, South Carolina, South Dakota, Tennessee, Utah, Vermont, Washington, West Virginia, Wisconsin and Wyoming.

Latest demand

The demand marks the latest effort from the administration to do away with "gender ideology," which the administration says includes "the idea that there is a vast spectrum of genders that are disconnected from one's sex."

GLAAD, an LGBTQ+ advocacy group, noted in a fact sheet that "gender ideology" is "an inaccurate term deployed by opponents to undermine and dehumanize transgender and nonbinary people."

The letters came less than a week after the administration terminated California's PREP grant after refusing to remove "radical gender ideology" from the education materials.

Failure to comply with this demand, the agency said, could result in the "withholding, suspension, or termination of federal PREP funding."

"Accountability is coming," Andrew Gradison, acting assistant secretary at HHS' Administration for Children and Families, said in a statement.

Gradison added that the administration "will ensure that PREP reflects the intent of

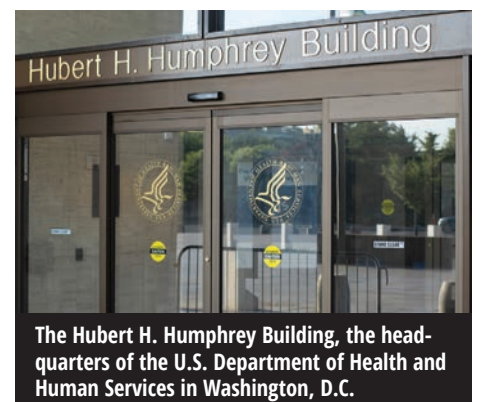
Congress, not the priorities of the left."

The effort also comes as the administration continues to crack down on gender-affirming care.

Trump signed earlier executive orders that restrict access to gender-affirming care for youth; make it the "policy of the United States to recognize two sexes, male and female;" bar openly transgender service members from the U.S. military; and ban trans women from competing on women's sports teams. ::

This article appears courtesy of our media partner NC Newsline via Creative Commons license CC BY-NC-ND 4.0.

— Shauneen Miranda / NC Newsline



The Hubert H. Humphrey Building, the headquarters of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services in Washington, D.C.

Tennis icon Martina Navratilova joins Carolina Ascent as minority owner

Legendary tennis star Martina Navratilova is now part of the Carolina Ascent FC ownership team, the club announced Friday, Aug. 22.



Navratilova joins as a minority owner of the Charlotte-based women's professional soccer franchise after its award-winning inaugural season in the Gainbridge Super League.

The Ascent capped its debut campaign with the league's Players Shield as the top regular-season team, led attendance in its first year, and won multiple league honors with their players and head coach.

"Carolina Ascent's mission to become one of the top women's clubs in the world resonated with me immediately," said Navratilova, winner of 59 Grand Slam titles including a record nine Wimbledon singles championships. "This team and its leadership are determined to compete at the highest level."

The ownership group includes majority owner Dan DiMicco, Jim and Kelly McPhilliamy and the Empower HER Fund, a women-led investment team.

Club officials praised Navratilova's legacy and influence, citing her drive as a match for Ascent's ambitions. "Martina Navratilova is widely regarded as one of the greatest female tennis players in history, revolutionizing the sport with her powerful serve and aggressive playing style," DiMicco said in a statement. "That description fits well with our team's approach to soccer."

Carolina Ascent opens its second season at home Sept. 6 at American Legion Memorial Stadium, located at 1218-1238 Armory Drive in Charlotte. For tickets and additional information visit their website at <https://www.carolinaascent.com/>. ::

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

— Shane Connuck / Charlotte Observer



'Carolina Ascent's mission to become one of the top women's clubs in the world resonated with me immediately.' — Martina Navratilova
CREDIT: Screen Capture

Pope Leo XIV reaffirms welcome for LGBTQ+ Catholics

Pope Leo XIV met privately with Jesuit Father James Martin on Sept. 1, in a half-hour audience inside the library of the Apostolic Palace. The meeting marked one of the first significant signals from the new pontiff regarding his pastoral approach to LGBTQ+ Catholics.

Father Martin, a Jesuit priest known internationally for his LGBTQ+ ministry and founder of the Outreach initiative, described the encounter as both "very consoling and very encouraging" to the Associated Press. He added that the time with Pope Leo was "frankly a lot of fun," underscoring the relaxed and open tone of the conversation.

"The message I heard from Pope Leo is the same message I heard from Pope Francis, which is the desire to welcome all people, including LGBTQ people," Martin said. He noted in a social media post that Pope Leo was serene, joyful and encouraging, urging him to continue his ministry of inclusion.

The significance of this meeting lies not only in its content but also in its symbolism.

Pope Francis, who led the Church from 2013 until his death earlier this year, consistently emphasized a pastoral style marked by welcome and compassion, even as doctrine remained unchanged.

His famous "Who am I to judge?" remark and the Vatican's approval of blessings for same-sex couples defined his papacy's tone toward LGBTQ+ Catholics. The audience with Pope Leo suggested that this spirit of welcome will remain a visible part of papal ministry moving forward.

Pope Leo XIV, who previously held a reputation for more conservative theological views, appears

intent on continuing that spirit of inclusion. By granting a publicized audience to Father Martin and endorsing his ministry of outreach, the pope sent a message of continuity to LGBTQ+ Catholics worldwide. The meeting also signaled that conversations about LGBTQ+ people are not relegated to the margins of Church life but acknowledged at the highest levels of leadership.

In an essay for Outreach, Martin

reflected that Pope Leo emphasized the importance of "synodality," a guiding framework for the Church's future that was central to Pope Francis's vision. At its heart, synodality calls the Church to listen to people from all walks of life, including those on the margins like LGBTQ+ Catholics, so that it can become, in Martin's words, "more open, more listening, more welcoming and more inclusive." He said the pope's encouragement was both hopeful and practical, tying LGBTQ+ ministry to the Church's broader commitment to dialogue and inclusion.

As Pope Leo begins his pontificate, the meeting with Martin offers early insight into the direction of his leadership. While global issues of peace and reconciliation remain at the forefront of his agenda, including conflicts in Ukraine, Gaza and Myanmar, his decision to affirm ministries of welcome shows that LGBTQ+ concerns are not absent from his attention. The timing of the meeting, coinciding with a Holy Year pilgrimage of LGBTQ+ Catholics, underscored that point. For many, it offered reassurance that Pope Leo's leadership will continue to build bridges and affirm the presence of LGBTQ+ people within the life of the Church. ::

— Liz Schob



Father James Martin shared a private Vatican audience with Pope Leo XIV.
CREDIT: Facebook

LGBTQ+ Americans less religious, survey finds



A recent survey shows members of the LGBTQ+ community are moving away from organized religion, but retaining a strong sense of spirituality.

New Pew Research Center data shows that just under half of LGBTQ+ adults in the U.S. (48 percent) identify with a religion, compared with 73 percent of non-LGBTQ+ adults. That leaves 52 percent of LGBTQ+ individuals describing themselves as atheist, agnostic or "nothing in particular," while only 26 percent of non-LGBTQ+ Americans fall into those categories.

When it comes to religious practice, the gap is even clearer. Only 17 percent of LGBTQ+ adults say religion is very important in their lives, compared with 42 percent of non-LGBTQ+ peers. Just 16 percent attend services at least monthly, while 23 percent pray daily. Among non-LGBTQ+

adults, those numbers rise to 31 percent and 46 percent, respectively.

The study also highlights differences within the LGBTQ+ community. Lesbian and gay adults are more likely than bisexual adults to report a religious affiliation, while bisexual adults show the highest levels of religious disaffiliation overall. Younger LGBTQ+ adults, particularly those under 30, are less likely than older generations to consider religion important or to participate in traditional practices. This generational divide mirrors broader national trends but is more pronounced among LGBTQ+ people.

Still, many LGBTQ+ adults retain a strong sense of spirituality. Pew found only modest differences between LGBTQ+ and non-LGBTQ+ adults when it comes to personal beliefs, such as whether humans have a soul or spirit. Many LGBTQ+ Americans also report belief in spiritual forces or practices outside institutional

religion, from astrology to meditation. Reporting on the study emphasized this nuance: Less than half of LGBTQ+ adults identify with a religion, but many still describe themselves as spiritual.

While formal ties to religion are weaker among LGBTQ+ people, spirituality has remained resilient. That reflects both dissatisfaction with institutional religion and a desire to retain personal meaning and connection.

LGBTQ+ Americans are increasingly moving away from churches, synagogues and mosques while holding onto spirituality or moral frameworks that some believe help them navigate life. The findings suggest a shift, not a rejection of belief, but a rethinking of how faith is experienced, prioritized and expressed outside traditional religious structures.

For many, spirituality remains a vital part of identity, even when religion does not. ::

— Liz Schob

Politicizing the weather and the world

A look at NC legislation impacting the environment and our community



by David Aaron Moore
Qnotes Staff Writer

Do you ever stop and wonder how we got here? Angry politicians and mouthy religious figures going head to head with scientists, environmentalists and caring individuals over the state of our planet: soil and water contamination, a breathable atmosphere, poisoned crops, animal extinction, energy production, electric cars. Concern for the planet has been turned into evangelical vs. non-religious, conservative vs. progressive and even straight vs. LGBTQ.

It's preposterous.

But it isn't hard to see how this has evolved. Fossil fuel lobbyists leaned on members of the House and the Senate. Through conservative cable news and online media, deceitful politicians turned it into a social issue. The less educated rallied for the right, lumping it in with other conservative causes and buying into deranged notions like "windmills cause cancer" and solar energy would "leave senior Americans without air conditioning in the summer and heat in the winter."

It's happening in states all around the country. But what's happening now in North Carolina?

Some good, some bad and others a mix of both, let's take a look at the passed, potential, stymied and squashed. All are examples of state level legislation that have impacted or could affect North Carolina, beginning with the most recent.

As of Aug. 4, 2025, NC lawmakers said yes to a bill that could dramatically marginalize environmental protections. Governor Stein vetoed **HB 402 (also known as the Regulations from the Executive in Need of Scrutiny act)**, but the legislature found enough votes to override his objections. The new law imposes steep approval thresholds for costly regulations and advocates say public health could suffer.

Advocates warn that the law, combined with the Trump administration's push to weaken federal environmental protections, could stall urgently needed responses to environmental and public health threats.



Radical, anti-environment legislation will continue to have an impact on the country and our state for years to come.

In a release from the North Carolina offices of the Southern Environmental Law Center, Director Mary Maclean Asbill said the following: "Lawmakers who passed this bill did not have the best interests of North Carolinians at heart. This new law marks an awful turning point for families and communities across North Carolina when elected officials in the state legislature ignore serious illnesses and deaths in favor of polluters' profits."

Power Bill Reduction Act (Senate Bill 266, became law in July 2025)

This sweeping energy legislation, enacted after the legislature overrode Governor Josh Stein's veto, rewrites state energy policy. It repeals the 2030 interim carbon reduction target that was established in 2021 and allows utility provider Duke Energy to begin charging customers for the construction of future power plants, a practice known as "construction work-in-progress" (CWIP), before they are completed. It also shifts more of the fuel cost burden onto residential customers, which analysts predict will lead to higher electricity bills for families.

2025: Water Safety Act (Senate Bill 666, filed in March, still in review by the Senate Operations Committee)

This bill was introduced to direct the Environmental Management Commission to establish regulatory limits on PFAS contamination, particularly affecting areas like the Cape Fear River basin. The bill was referred to a Senate committee in March 2025 and has not yet advanced.

2024: Disaster Recovery Act (House Bill 149, passed in October 2024, still active)

Passed following Hurricane Helene, this act included environmental provisions intended to support recovery efforts. It created exceptions to some solid waste rules for debris management following the storm. It exempted certain air curtain incinerators from needing a General Title V Operating Permit. It also allows flexibility for municipalities to use funds from the Water Infrastructure Fund for disaster-related damages to water systems.

2023: Regulatory Reform Act (House Bill 600, remains settled state law)

This multi-purpose bill made various changes to environmental regulations. Read on.

Livestock: Reduced the state's ability to require remediation for the disposal of hog waste.

Solid waste: Banned the landfill disposal and incineration of lithium-ion batteries and restricted the disposal of photovoltaic cells to lined landfills.

Stormwater: Altered regulations concerning water supply watershed protection, including how new development may affect existing storm water infrastructure.

Wetlands: Limited state wetland protections by defining "waters of the state" to match federal "waters of the United States" definitions, eliminating protection for some coastal wetlands previously covered under state law.

Regulatory process: Prohibited the Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) from denying a permit based on the applicant's failure to obtain another permit, authorization, or certification, unless required by state or federal law.

2023: NC Farm Act (Senate Bill 582, remains settled state law)

The legislature overrode Governor Cooper's veto to enact this law, which reduced environmental protections. It specifically rolled back state protections for wetlands to align with less protective federal rules, without first studying the environmental consequences. ::

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Fighting for a just and sustainable AI future

The environmental costs of AI are real, so are the opportunities to build systems that prioritize people and the planet



by **Liz Schob**
Qnotes Staff Writer

Artificial intelligence is everywhere. It writes emails, recommends shows, powers online searches and drives major innovations in health care, finance and education. Behind the buzz, though, lies a hidden reality: AI is not weightless. The tools many of us interact with every day, whether a chatbot or an image generator, require enormous amounts of electricity, water and physical infrastructure to function. Far from immaterial, AI has a growing environmental footprint with real consequences for people, communities and ecosystems.

For LGBTQ+ readers, the climate story is not separate from the story of technology. Just as AI can amplify bias and harm against queer and trans communities, its environmental costs fall disproportionately on vulnerable groups already on the frontlines of climate change, health inequities, and systemic discrimination. To understand what ethical AI should mean, we must look beyond algorithms to their environmental impact.

What is AI, really?

Artificial intelligence refers to computer systems designed to perform tasks that normally require human intelligence, such as recognizing speech, analyzing images, generating text or making predictions. The most familiar branch today is generative AI, which can create new text, art, or audio based on patterns in huge datasets.

Training these systems requires staggering amounts of computational power. A single large language model can consume as much electricity as an entire U.S. neighborhood uses in a year. Running them day to day, through millions of user queries and image requests, multiplies that impact exponentially.

The infrastructure that makes this possible, massive warehouses filled with servers called data centers, relies on continuous cooling. That cooling often depends on water drawn from local reservoirs or rivers and energy from the electrical grid. The more AI grows, the larger this footprint becomes.

The environmental footprint

The energy required to train and run large AI models is already pushing electrical grids to their limits. Typical chatbot prompts can use around five times more electricity than a standard web search, with some studies estimating an AI query consumes up to 23 times more energy. As adoption accelerates, experts warn of a dramatic rise in greenhouse gas emissions if the electricity comes primarily from fossil fuels. To meet this demand, some tech companies are experimenting with nuclear energy. Meta, for example, recently signed a deal to power data centers with nuclear power, even while maintaining investments in gas-fired plants. The result is a messy, uneven transition that pairs promises of clean energy with continued dependence on fossil fuels.



The amount of energy required to operate the type of infrastructure that supports artificial intelligence operations can be enormous.

Water is an equally pressing concern. An investigation by the Associated Press found that large data centers can consume millions of gallons every day, enough to match the demand of a small city. When these facilities are built in water-stressed regions, the strain on local ecosystems and communities can be devastating. In underserved rural areas, data centers often drive up utility prices while competing with residents for limited water supplies.

The environmental impact of AI extends further. Servers require rare earth minerals mined under exploitative conditions, and hardware disposal generates toxic e-waste. Efficiency gains often backfire through a phenomenon known as the Jevons Paradox: as tools become faster and cheaper, usage skyrockets, wiping out sustainability gains. Without regulation, AI's footprint risks becoming one of the fastest-growing contributors to climate stress.

Why it matters for LGBTQ+ communities

At first glance, AI's environmental impact might seem like a distant issue, an infrastructure problem left to governments and corporations. In reality, the consequences are deeply intersectional. Pollution and water stress caused by data centers often fall hardest on marginalized communities. LGBTQ+ people, particularly queer and trans people of color, already face disproportionate health disparities that these additional burdens only worsen. Rising energy and water costs compound the problem, placing an even heavier weight on low-income households where many LGBTQ+ people are already struggling to make ends meet.

Advocacy groups like LGBT Tech have warned that without intentional design, AI risks reinforcing bias against queer and trans communities. As anthropologist Mary

L. Gray has observed, AI often fails LGBTQ+ people because it struggles to capture the fluidity of identities. The same extractive mindset that reduces queer lives to rigid categories also reduces ecosystems to consumable resources. Both are consequences of designing technology without consent, nuance or accountability.

Building an ethical and sustainable AI framework

Around the world, momentum is growing to regulate AI responsibly. The EU's AI Act, the first of its kind, bans certain harmful uses, sets risk categories and explicitly links responsible AI to environmental sustainability. In the U.S., federal rules remain piecemeal, with executive orders and voluntary industry commitments that critics argue lack enforceable power.

Nonprofits and industry groups are also stepping in. From IBM's principles of accountability and fairness to certification efforts by AI4Good, the Responsible AI Institute and the Ethical AI Alliance, the goal is to tie technological progress to ethics, transparency and sustainability.

What unites these efforts is the recognition that AI cannot be left to market forces alone. Communities deserve a say when their water, electricity and land are used for data centers, and they should see benefits when resources are consumed. The Indigenous principle of data sovereignty shapes conversations about consent in AI, and applying similar frameworks to environmental stewardship could help ensure technology serves both people and planet.

Moving from awareness to action

It is easy to feel powerless in the face of massive tech companies and global energy

systems. But just as individuals and communities have driven climate action, they can also shape AI's trajectory.

Not all AI models require the same resources. Smaller, open-source models often have lower energy costs. Demanding transparency from vendors about energy use, water cooling and sustainability strategies can create pressure for accountability. If organizations rely heavily on resource-intensive AI, they can reinvest in local climate justice or conservation efforts to repair

the impact. And when communities and businesses talk openly about AI's footprint, they help normalize the idea that sustainability matters in technology choices.

Health systems in California are already piloting this approach. The California Health Care Foundation reports that by forming AI working groups, they ensure new tools both improve care and reduce disparities. That kind of intentionality can be applied far beyond medicine.

Looking ahead

AI is at a crossroads. Progress framed only in terms of competitiveness and efficiency is not progress if it comes at the cost of ecosystems, water supplies and community health. Yet AI also holds real promise. Researchers are developing models that require less energy, engineers are testing renewable-powered data centers, and policymakers are beginning to link sustainability with ethics and equity. Tools like planetary accounting can help measure AI's impact across water, carbon and biodiversity, while innovations in hardware design may drastically reduce resource demands.

For LGBTQ+ communities, the fight for ethical AI is inseparable from the fight for climate justice. Both demand visibility, accountability and shared power, and both offer opportunities to build systems that uplift rather than extract. Liberation movements have always been strongest when struggles are connected. The climate fight is a queer fight. The AI ethics fight is a queer fight.

A more sustainable AI future is possible. With intention, transparency and creativity, we can mitigate environmental costs while embracing the innovations that help us thrive. ::

Charlotte Pride and Charlotte Black Pride's 2025 Courts step into the spotlight

This year's drag royalty represents a legacy of community resilience and excitement



by **Liz Schob**
Qnotes Staff Writer

Charlotte's drag courts are more than crowns and sashes. They are institutions of visibility, leadership, and artistry. Rooted in years of Pride celebrations, they continue to evolve with the city's LGBTQ+ community. This year's Charlotte Black Pride and Charlotte Pride courts bring together veterans, newcomers and voices across identities who embody the radical joy of drag.

Ivy Chanel-Iman Davidson

For **Miss Charlotte Black Pride 2025** Ivy Chanel-Iman Davidson, stepping back into drag was both a personal and community victory. After surviving a devastating car accident, she returned determined to carry a message of unity. "It's time for our community to stand together as one, not separated," she said. "I want to stand for the community, not just myself."

Davidson's performances are fueled by energy and connection. "I want people to feel welcome, have a good time, and know it's okay to stand out and be proud of who they are." That joy was on full display during her favorite pageant moment, a Cowboy Carter-inspired red-carpet look with a sweeping white coat. "For a moment, I felt like Beyoncé," she laughed.

Her reign is about more than fashion. "Yes, I represent Charlotte Black Pride, but I care for everyone," she explained. "Pride should unite us as one." Guided by her mother and mentor, Malayia Chanel Iman, Davidson hopes to inspire others to "stop being afraid, step out and be yourself."

Justine Symone Lindsay

Justine Symone Lindsay, a professional dancer and the first openly trans woman NFL cheerleader for the Carolina Panthers, stepped into pageantry to embrace a lifelong dream. "I decided to take a chance on myself, embracing my identity with the affirmation: I am here, I am queer, and my voice matters," she said.

For Lindsay, the pageant was more than a competition. It was a chance to affirm her place in a world that often denies trans women space. On the night she competed, her sister stood by her side, encouraging her to fully embrace her true self. She says she will never forget that moment of gratitude and happiness when her name was called.

Now serving as **Miss Charlotte Black Pride Lady**, she views her crown as a responsibility to uplift and inspire. "We represent the curiosity and passion for the arts," she explained. "Through our roles, we aim to inspire and empower the next generation to embrace their identities and express their creativity."



Ivy Chanel-Iman Davidson

Porsche Dupree XL

Miss Charlotte Black Pride FFI Porsche Dupree XL describes her drag as "old school style with a new school flair." Inspired by her drag sister Peaches, she entered the pageant determined to test her artistry. The night was stressful, and after realizing her talent routine wasn't working, she reworked her entire performance. The risk paid off with the crown.

Dupree is centering her reign on youth empowerment. "I want to uplift young people, give them opportunities, and let them see themselves reflected," she said. She hopes to create events for queer youth



Justine Lindsay

in Charlotte and beyond, ensuring they feel supported in a world that too often tells them otherwise.

She sees her crown as a symbol of resilience, artistry, and a platform to embrace identity while pushing back against attacks on LGBTQ+ rights. Looking ahead, she is even excited for her "give-up" moment, when she can return to the stage and show how much she has grown during her reign.

Psych Starr Valentino

For Psych Starr Valentino, winning the title of **Mr. Charlotte Black Pride 2025** was the culmination of a long journey. Driving from Atlanta to compete, they carried the weight of personal struggle and self-doubt. "I used those interview questions to share my life story and resilience," they said. "Winning felt like validation of all the hard work and perseverance."



Psych Starr Valentino



Porsche Dupree XL

both an honor and a responsibility. "What inspired me most is what's going on in the world around us, and especially right here in our country," he said. "This was the best opportunity to be visible and to share my voice."

He carries the crown every day. "I feel like I'm Mr. Charlotte Pride 24/7. It is not just a hat I take off when I do a show. It is who I am in my day-to-day life for the next year." For Tapp, the title represents visibility, education, and advocacy. "Personally, it means that I can go into our community, speak to others about the issues facing us, and be a better advocate," he explained.

To young and emerging performers, his advice is simple: "Lean on the people that have come before you. Find a mentor you trust, that can pass on the knowledge they've gained. Believe in yourself, and don't be afraid to do it. The world will try to censor you and tell you that you can't, but you need to tell yourself, 'I can.'"

Valentino is no stranger to pageantry. A former Mr. Kentucky Black Pride, they see competitions not just as a stage but as opportunities to connect and give back. "I want to be a pillar and a role model in the community, someone who gives back and inspires others," they said.

Their reign is grounded in visibility and strength. "Wherever I go, I'll always have Charlotte Black Pride on my side," they reflected. To them, the crown is not just recognition but a symbol of hope. "I want people to see that no matter what you go through, you can still stand tall and keep moving forward."

Charleton Alicea Tapp

For **Mr. Charlotte Pride 2025** Charleton Alicea Tapp, the crown is



Charlton Alicia



Malaysia Chanel Iman

Malaysia Chanel Iman

Few carry the history of Charlotte drag like Malaysia Chanel Iman, crowned **Miss Charlotte Pride 2025**. With 116 titles, she has built a career blending pageantry, performance, and advocacy. Entering this year's pageant was her way of finally giving back to a community that had given her so much.

Her approach to the title is serious and expansive. "I am not just a show pony," she explained. Malaysia sees herself as an advocate who uses the platform beyond the stage, whether addressing city council, speaking at conventions, or organizing in the community. "Sometimes you have to be that squeaky wheel," she added.

For Malaysia, the heart of drag is mentorship. She works with dozens of drag children, guiding them in performance as well as education, employment, and personal growth. Her advice to young performers is simple: "Always be yourself and never let any individual determine your worth."

Vicki Vanity

For **MX Charlotte Pride 2025** Vicki Vanity, drag is both expression and advocacy. Performing lets them showcase creativity and personality, while the crown provides a platform to entertain, inspire, and speak for those often unheard in Charlotte's LGBTQ+ community.

Vicki's persona is animated, theatrical and bold. Just a year and a half into drag, they entered pageantry to showcase their artistry on a larger stage. Their heritage and lived experience with homelessness

drive their advocacy for housing justice and Latinx representation in Charlotte's LGBTQ+ community.

"My drag is blunt, bold and bearded," Vicki said with a grin, "but it's also about compassion and unity." Beyond competition, they hope to strengthen Charlotte's LGBTQ+ community, showing that drag unites people and fosters resilience.

More Than a Title

The true brilliance of the Charlotte Pride and Charlotte Black Pride crowns are found in the people who wear them. This year's titleholders show that drag in Charlotte is about art, resistance, devotion and family. Pride is more than a weekend or parade. It is a promise to be visible, lead with love and keep building a community that reflects every color of the rainbow. ::



Vicki Vanity

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Creative voices of Charlotte: Six artists on art, identity and community

Community artists address their journeys through creativity



by Wendy Lyons
Qnotes Staff Writer

In these challenging times, as pressures mount on LGBTQ+ communities, art remains a powerful source of refuge, resistance and renewal. Qnotes spoke with six Charlotte artists across music, fashion and visual mediums about their journeys, their inspirations and how creativity builds connection. Their voices reveal how art continues to heal, challenge and strengthen our community.

Darrell Anderson brings Charlotte roots to the runway and redefines fashion with St. Mark Vintage

Charlotte native Darrell Anderson is reshaping fashion with bold vision, deep heritage and an unmistakable flair for style. "I grew up really interested in the arts, always drawing as a kid, then diving into music, and eventually discovering how to marry my love of visual arts with fashion," he said.

The pandemic gave Anderson the time and space to fully embrace design. "I sat down and learned how to sew, researched and played around with creating. It's been five years now, and I love it," he shared. His label, St. Mark Vintage, honors his grandparents and the street where he grew up. "My whole design ethos is centered around sustainability and freedom. I don't believe in gendering clothing. You should just wear what you want, whatever makes you happy."

Anderson's work often draws inspiration from disco culture and Black queer aesthetics. "I wish I could have been at Studio 54 in its heyday. That energy, that glamour. It was fashion, music and art all together," he said.

With collections featured at Columbia Fashion Week and the ArtPop Street Gallery upcycle show, Anderson is only gaining momentum. "I want people to feel free and authentic when they wear something I've created."

To learn more and for bookings, explore stmarkvintage.com.

Musician, entrepreneur, teacher and artist: Krystle Baller shapes Charlotte's soundscape and skyline



Darrell Anderson

When Krystle Baller moved to Charlotte in 2012, they knew the city's creative spirit was the right fit. "I found my place here. This is home. I found my people, I found my purpose in Charlotte," they said.

people to feel awe and wonder and leave renewed," Baller explained.

Beyond music, Baller leaves their mark on Charlotte visually as well. Their mural at Gardner Skelton Law in NoDa features 50 fictional and nonfictional lawyers in graffiti style, a vibrant nod to the neighborhood's creative pulse.

"Art is a way to make connection," Baller continued. "People may come for the music, but they stay because they find kindness and belonging."

Follow Krystle's art journey at <https://www.krystle-baller.com>.

Maggie Lowe: a soulful composer, performer and musician

Since moving to Charlotte in 2019, musician Maggie Lowe has poured heart and soul into the city's soundscape. A North Carolina native, they came here to support close friends and soon found a deeper purpose in music and community.

"I've been writing songs since the sixth grade and good ones since the ninth," Lowe said. Their music weaves folk, pop, and blues into storytelling that feels both raw and healing. With an acoustic guitar in hand and sometimes a ukulele, they channel life's joys and struggles into melodies that linger.

For Lowe, songwriting is survival and connection. "When words fail, music speaks. It's how I process life and how I stay grounded. My favorite part of performing is seeing someone recognize their own feelings in my songs."

One of their most cherished pieces, "Be Kind," was inspired by their father's words. "No matter where you stand politically or religiously, everything gets better if we'd just be kind to one another," they shared.

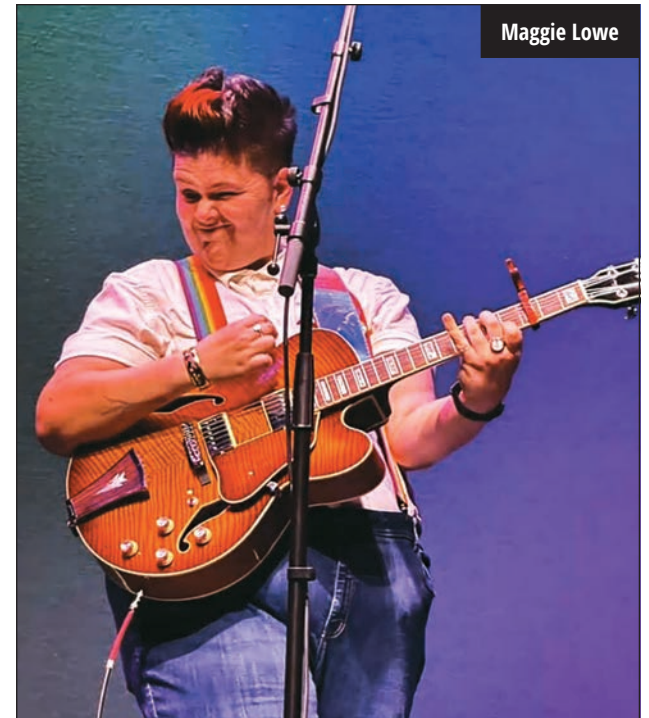
So far this year Lowe has released two albums, "Comin' In Hot" and "Love," and a third is on the way. Every note carries the same mission: belonging. "I want people to feel seen and leave lighter than they arrived."

Connect with Maggie and get details about upcoming shows at <https://www.instagram.com/maggany>.

Sydney Mason: out of the pandemic arose an oil painter

When the pandemic shut everything down, Sydney Mason looked around her empty walls and picked up a brush. "I just challenged myself and started painting,"

she said. Six years later, her portraits, deep and soulful with striking detail, are making waves in Charlotte and beyond.



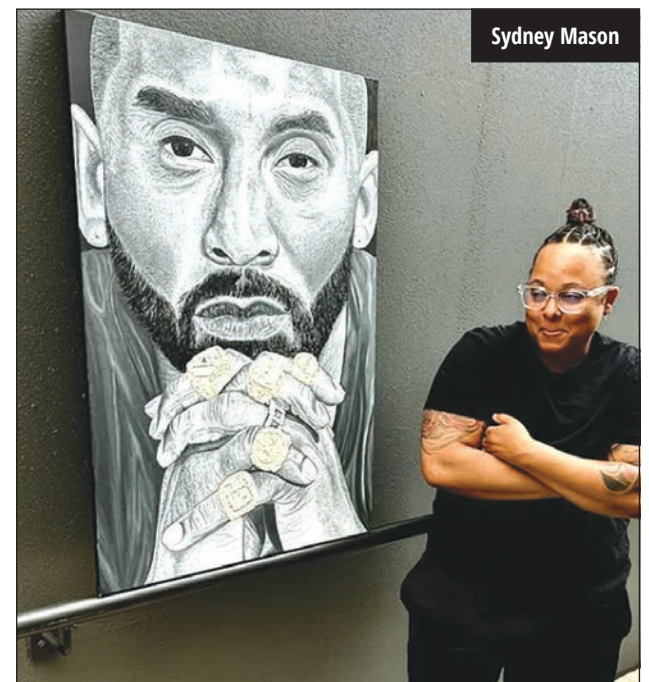
Maggie Lowe

Originally from Stone Mountain, Georgia, Sydney moved to Charlotte in 2019 for a coding boot camp. By day she works in software engineering. By night she creates. "I focus on realism, mostly portraits. I love telling stories through people's eyes. You can see so much emotion there."

Largely self taught, Sydney began in grayscale and pointillism before diving into bold color. Her work has already appeared at the Mint Museum, the Black Girl Art Show and various Raleigh showcases. One of her pieces currently hangs in Atlanta's Trap Music Museum, a milestone



Krystle Baller



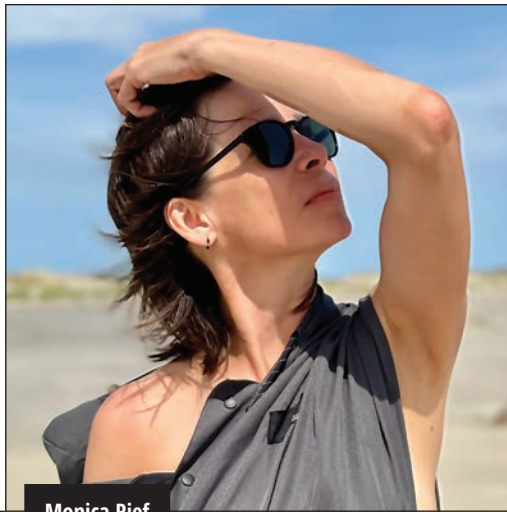
Sydney Mason

Sydney calls "a great feeling, especially in my hometown."

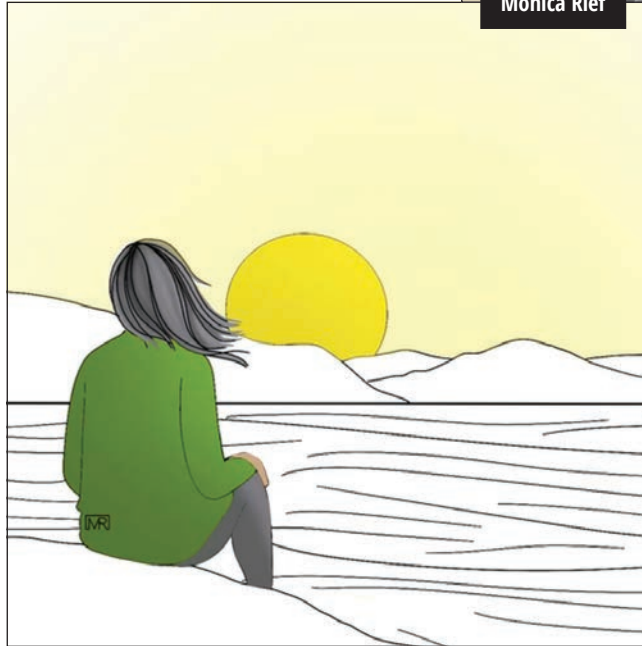
Her artistry was further shaped by Kuumba Academy, a program that sharpened her vision and connected her with a thriving network of creative individuals in Charlotte. For Sydney, art is more than technique. "I want people to feel something. I want my art to spark conversations, even uncomfortable ones."

A solo show is on the horizon. Until then, Mason is painting, pushing, and proving that art can turn quiet walls into a powerful voice.

Follow Sydney's journey on Instagram at https://www.instagram.com/_sydbmason
Monica Rief: a whimsical and



Monica Rief



Kevin Spencer: visual artist's work includes acrylics, landscapes, portraits and wearable art

Kevin Spencer spent nearly four decades in Los Angeles before making Charlotte his new home. "I was in LA [for] 38 years and I loved it, but I couldn't see myself retiring there. My husband and I wanted a change, and North Carolina felt right," said Spencer.

Since arriving, Spencer has found the Queen City's warmth a catalyst for his creativity. "My connections have come so organically here. It feels like I'm meant to be in Charlotte. Everyone has been so welcoming, and it inspires me every day."

Spencer, once a sought-after makeup artist, returned to painting during the COVID pandemic. His artistic journey now includes large-scale commissions such as five 36 x 36 landscapes for Novant Health's Mint Hill hospital. "I hope people find peace and calm when they see my art, especially those waiting for loved ones in the hospital," he said.

His themes have shifted with his surroundings: from LA portraits inspired by fashion photography to landscapes rooted in North Carolina's natural beauty. "Art should make people talk, feel and reflect," Spencer shared. "Whether it's joy, controversy, or healing, I want my work to spark something human."

Explore more of Kevin's art journey at www.kevinspencerart.com ::

thought-provoking illustrator and designer

For Charlotte artist Monica Rief, art has always been more than images on a page. It's a way of connecting with people. Born in São Paulo, Brazil, Monica moved to Charlotte at eight years old and quickly found herself pulled into creativity. "By third grade I knew I wanted to make art for the rest of my life," she said.

That realization came alive in high school when her drawings were published in the school's creative magazine. Students flipped straight to her page, then lined up down the hall to have her sign their copies. "Everybody wanted me to sign the page with my drawing. I had a line. I can still see it," she remembered with a smile.

Today, Monica's art continues to carry that spark. Her work is on display at Atrium's Art Gallery on Blythe Boulevard through October, where a curator recently described it as "whimsical and intellectual." Monica embraces that balance. "I'm playful and I'm serious. I try to capture feelings and spark thought."

From exhibitions at Morning Star Gallery in Mint Hill to a new showcase at Pauline Tea Bar, Monica thrives on collaboration and community. "Art is a connector. Somebody sees an image and says, 'You captured what I was feeling.'"

Explore more of Monica's work and upcoming shows at her website, <https://monicarief.com>



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Under the radar: Charlotte arts groups

From arts organizations to creative socializing, the Queen City has thriving, under-the-radar arts experiences



by L'Monique King
Qnotes Staff Writer

When you think about area arts groups, what comes to mind? If you're like most folks, some of the larger and more well-known organizations and museums might be at the forefront: the Blumenthal, The Mint Museum, the McColl Center and the Arts and Science Council, among others.

Throughout the city, however, one can find a bevy of counter culture artistic creativity to immerse themselves in and enjoy the richness under the radar arts groups can provide.

Artists are doing more than just entertaining. They're providing safe spaces, mitigating trauma, beautifying neighborhoods, building bridges and bringing joy. Charlotte is ripe with undiscovered and underexposed artists and arts groups. Qnotes is eager to share some of them with you.



The VAPA Center is an excellent opportunity to create, experience and meet local artists.
CREDIT: Facebook

The VAPA Center is a non-profit organization, established in 2021 by 12 anchor arts organizations to create a much-needed space for artists to create, practice, exhibit, and perform their respective arts. According to their mission statement, the center's goal is "To Cultivate accessible exhibition and creative work spaces to inspire and nurture the relationship between artists and the community." The center meets these goals with a commitment to providing affordable studios and exhibition spaces by raising funds through grants, individual donors, fundraising productions and festivals, arts market days, and sponsorships from local companies. Many local area artists have utilized this space and found a safe haven for their art and inspiration from neighboring artists.

For those with a palate for music, food and an atmosphere welcoming to canines, there's **Goldies**, which provides space to experience music DJs, local musicians and to be a featured artist. The establishment offers live music enthusiasts and those who prefer to hear their sounds mixed by a DJ an opportunity to dance, eat and drink while being entertained by local artists. Local groups and bands interested in performing can throw their proverbial mics

in the ring by signing up for booking on the company website. Located in Charlotte's lower south end area, Goldies also boasts a dog friendly front and back patio and a menu of various pizzas, big weiners (i.e. large hot dogs with mounds of various toppings), drinks (a full bar for grown up; soft drinks for kids and nondrinkers) and a savory mix of American fair and bar food. They even have a kid's menu for those venturing out for some family fun with local artists. After all, what better time to get arts exposure than while we're young, open to new experiences and haven't yet become so fixated with our likes and dislikes?

<https://www.vapacenter.com/>

Art has the capacity to heal and build bridges. Locally, if any group is aware of these facts and how to leverage art against adversity, it's the folks at **The Arts Empowerment Project**. The mission of The Arts Empowerment Project is "To break the cycles of violence and trauma through arts opportunities that ignite change in vulnerable youth." The project, funded in part by a grant from South Arts and in partnership with the National Endowment for the Arts, blends high-quality art instruction with essential life skills. Through multiple programs and activities, this program fosters positive self-expression, personal growth and empowerment. With activities that include performing arts, culinary programs, dance, music, visual arts and more, skills involving communication, self-esteem, decision-making, personal branding, leadership, goal setting, visual literacy and the



Goldies offers patrons, artists in multiple fields and their pets the opportunity to socialize and bring their pets along.
CREDIT: Instagram

exploration of social and racial justice are honed in a way that makes lifetime impact for participants and communities.

A quick visit to their website makes it all quite apparent how valuable this program's efforts are. Visitors to The Arts Empowerment Project's website can view video clips of enthusiastic former students and program instructors exposing the program's impact.



Members of the Arts Empowerment Foundation.
CREDIT: Facebook

We spoke with local poet Jah Smalls (featured in one of the site's YouTube videos) who expressed why he feels the program has such merit. Smalls stated, "Most grown adults in our communities have yet

to address their childhood traumas, which contributes to having a community full of broken adults trying to manage life, hiding every scar they've encountered. Teaching young people that it's normal to have emotions and speak about them is the first step towards healing and preparing young people for adulthood." For Smalls, poetry, his gift and life love is the perfect conduit to creating a needed salve for trauma-based feelings. <https://thearts-empowermentproject.org/>

The KUUMBA Academy, founded by local artist and playwright Jermaine Nakia Lee, offers a creative fellowship program designed to provide artistic and professional development for visual, literary and performing artists of color in the Charlotte area. This tuition-free program equips fellows with skills in media relations, grant writing, social media, marketing, production, collaboration and more. The initiative is supported by a 2022 ASC Cultural Vision Grant awarded to Lee, along with funding from the Knight Foundation. The organization continues to expand and grow with a new institutional partnership between KUUMBA Academy and Johnson C. Smith University's Cultural Studies Program.

"Beginning with the Class of 2025/26, KUUMBA Academy will reserve 8-10 of its 20 annual fellowships exclusively for talented JCSU students," Lee explained. The partnership will re-imagine the academy as a fellowship that blends creative students with artists and entrepreneurs from across the creative sector. Monthly sessions and other related programming will take place at JCSU – further enriching the already bustling cultural prowess on campus. <https://www.facebook.com/KuumbaAcademyNC/>

BOOM Charlotte is yet another progressive arts experience for both artists and enthusiasts (with the exception of youth being their focus).

"BOOM is an artist-led performance and visual arts showcase of contemporary and experimental works created on the fringes of popular culture."

This annual (three day) arts festival is designed to be an arts experience built on the belief that art has the explosive power to unite and transform communities. In nurturing this belief art becomes a bridge across divides, sparking creativity and collaboration among diverse artists, performers and audiences. To achieve this mission, BOOM convenes artists, volunteers, nonprofits, businesses and neighborhood organizations to form a dynamic coalition reshaping how arts and culture are created and shared in Charlotte. This past April, BOOM Charlotte took place



Artists gather for dinner and discussion at the Kuumba Academy.
CREDIT: Facebook

in the University City Area and hosted a well-mixed group of performances that included visual and music groups, poets, dancers, vocal artists and storytellers. <https://boomcharlotte.org/>



Boom Charlotte is one of the city's longest running performance and visual arts showcases created on the fringes of popular culture.
CREDIT: Facebook

If you haven't already gotten the idea, the Queen City is bursting with arts groups and programs just ready to welcome and embrace artists and arts enthusiasts on multiple levels. While we struggle for print space to share it all, know that there certainly isn't any shortage of creativity in Charlotte nor in any of our neighboring towns not mentioned this go-round. ::

Bell of the ball: an interview with Andy Bell

Former Erasure vocalist back with solo project



by Gregg Shapiro
Contributing Writer

Even though it's been 10 years between Andy Bell solo albums (if you don't count Bell's "Torsten" side projects), the gay music icon hasn't exactly been sitting idly by.

As one half of Erasure, Bell (and Vince Clarke) released about a half dozen studio albums. But now Bell is back with the fabulous "Ten Crowns" (Crown Recordings Limited). It's glittering with Bell's trademark vocals and enough dance beats to take you on the "galactic journey" he references on the album opener "Breaking Thru The Interstellar."

We spoke with Bell in advance of his upcoming tour dates.

Gregg Shapiro: Congratulations on being one of the Pride ICON winners at the 2025 Peugeot Attitude Pride Awards Europe. What does an honor such as this mean to you?

Andy Bell: It's really flattering because I'm an old bird now [laughs]. I'm 61 years old. I think just to have a little nudge from the powers that be to remind the young ones that we're still around [laughs]. There were some people that existed before they did and fought for their right to be as comfortable as they are, even though we're under attack, again.

GS: What is the significance of the title of your new album, "Ten Crowns?"

AB: To be honest, it's not really that significant. It's my third solo record, and it's been 10 years since the last record. We were trying to think of a title, and it just so happened I had 10 (dental) crowns done in Miami. I thought, "Ten Crowns, that sounds really good." It kind of sounds like a reference to a semi-royal something or other. I thought it's good enough for a title.

GS: Dave Audé, who produced "Ten Crowns," also co-wrote all the songs on the album with you. Tell us how that creative collaboration works.

AB: Dave is really amazing. I have three or four people I trust in my life, studio-wise. One is Vince Clark, one is Dave Audé, and one is Gareth Jones, the recording producer. I've had a kind of working relationship with Dave Audé for the past 12 years or so. We had a couple of Billboard number ones on

the dance charts quite a while ago. We carried on writing as an exercise in between. He moved his family from LA to Nashville. He's such a sweet guy, and he's so untainted by the record business after being in it for so long. He's a straight man, and he comes from Utah, but he has the sensibility of a bear [laughs].

GS: That's a great sensibility to have. You're saying he's warm and fuzzy?

AB: Basically, he's warm and fuzzy, and he cares, times ten.

GS: Sisely Treasure, who most folks will remember from Cooler Kids, co-wrote "Put Your Empathy On Ice" with you and Dave, and she also sings with you on the track. How did this collaboration come to be?

AB: That came about because she had already written the song with Dave. Cooler Kids also did a tour with Erasure, and (Sisely's former band) Shiny Toy Guns is my husband's favorite band. I didn't realize how versatile Sisely was with her voice and stuff. She'd written this song, and the verse was something like, "I stand on the side of your grave and I mourn the blah blah blah..." I thought I'd like to make it something that's still a bit dark but much more uplifting. We rewrote the chorus and the verses just so it sounded a bit more like David Bowie.

GS: Speaking of collaborations, does the song "DHDQ," from your 2010 album, "Non-Stop," have anything to do with Debbie Harry's guest appearance on the "Ten Crowns" song "Heart's a Liar"?

AB: It doesn't, but I suppose we could put one and one together and get three [laughs] because Debbie's my total heroine; she always has been. When I wrote that "Debbie Harry drag



Andy Bell today.
CREDIT: Social Media

queen" song, it was by no means any disrespect to her. It was really an ode to her being the queen of New York and the queen of punk. Somebody did ask her if she felt like a drag queen, and she goes, "Oh, well, I suppose so [laughs]." I would not exactly call her look drag. It was just a bit of trickery with the lyrics.

GS: You have a long history of collaboration, not just in Erasure with

Vince Clarke, but in your solo career, from your k.d. lang duet on "No More Tears (Enough is Enough)" and "The Coneheads" soundtrack to Jake Shears and Claudia Bruckner who appeared as guest artists on your "Electric Blue." What makes you so good at playing well with others, Andy?

AB: I love meeting people. If we click, especially when you're in the studio together, it's such good fun. It's hilarious! Writing together with Boy George is hilarious. If I'm doing remixes for people -- I did one for Sandra Bernhard, one for Amanda Lear, and one for Goldfrapp -- and I love the person, I'll add vocals to them as well without telling them, so it's like a really nice surprise [laughs] when they get the remix. Usually, they ask me for another one, and I'm like, "Oh, haven't got time!"

GS: In "Dance For Mercy," you sing about what sounds like a near-death experience.

AB: I've had a few [laughs]. I've never seen the light, though. Maybe I'm going to hell [laughs]. You know how all the people talk about going towards the light? I've never seen it. That's why I've always thought that it's not my turn yet. My nan always had this turn of phrase that you're too wicked for this world, which kind of meant you're an angel, really.



Andy Bell (left) with Erasure band mate Vince Clarke in 1985.
CREDIT: Social Media

GS: I love the "Diamonds Are Forever" reference in "Dawn of Heaven's Gate." Have you ever had the chance to meet Shirley Bassey?

AB: I have not. If I did, we would probably have a field day, I'm sure. She loves to drink, she's from Wales, I love Welsh voices. Her voice is incredible. She's got one of the most amazing voices in the world ever. I think we would get on like a house on fire.

GS: "Dawn of Heaven's Gate" also includes lyrics in Spanish that echo what you sing in English.

AB: We've never had a hit in Spain, for one [laughs]. We're huge in South America. We had a guy in the studio; the engineer was from Chile. I thought that it would be wonderful to have the lines translated into Spanish, just to let the people know what I'm singing about. Usually they can't speak English, so they just go by the feeling of the lyrics. I wanted them to know that this is the kind of thing that I write about.

GS: You are embarking on a multi-city solo U.S. tour from October into December. What are you most looking forward to about being on tour?

AB: We've got a great team. We've got an amazing band. We've got a great tour manager. (Andy's husband) Steve's gonna be on tour with me. We've already got the show down pat. It's a great mixture of all the new songs and Erasure classics. I'm looking forward to celebrating with our fans and the local people. We just have a great, wild time. We had some shows in Germany, Denmark and the UK, already. It was so hot in those places. 100° on the stage. Hopefully, it's gonna be just as steamy [laughs].

GS: "Wonderland," the debut album by Erasure, will be celebrating its 40th anniversary in 2026. Is there anything special in the works to mark the occasion?

AB: Apart from the Erasure shows that we have in September, and Vince and I writing already for a new record, there aren't any special celebrations planned, so far, for the "Wonderland" anniversary. But I think it's time for a high-energy resurgence, and we caught the very end of it in 1985, 1986, post-Frankie Goes to Hollywood, was the death of the clone. We missed the boat a bit on that record. Hopefully, it will be rediscovered. ::

Andy Bell performs on Oct. 14 in Durham at the Durham Performing Arts Center.



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just the way you are!

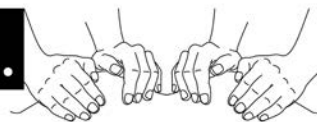
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