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## Qnotes 2025 Organization of the Year The Freedom Center for Social Justice

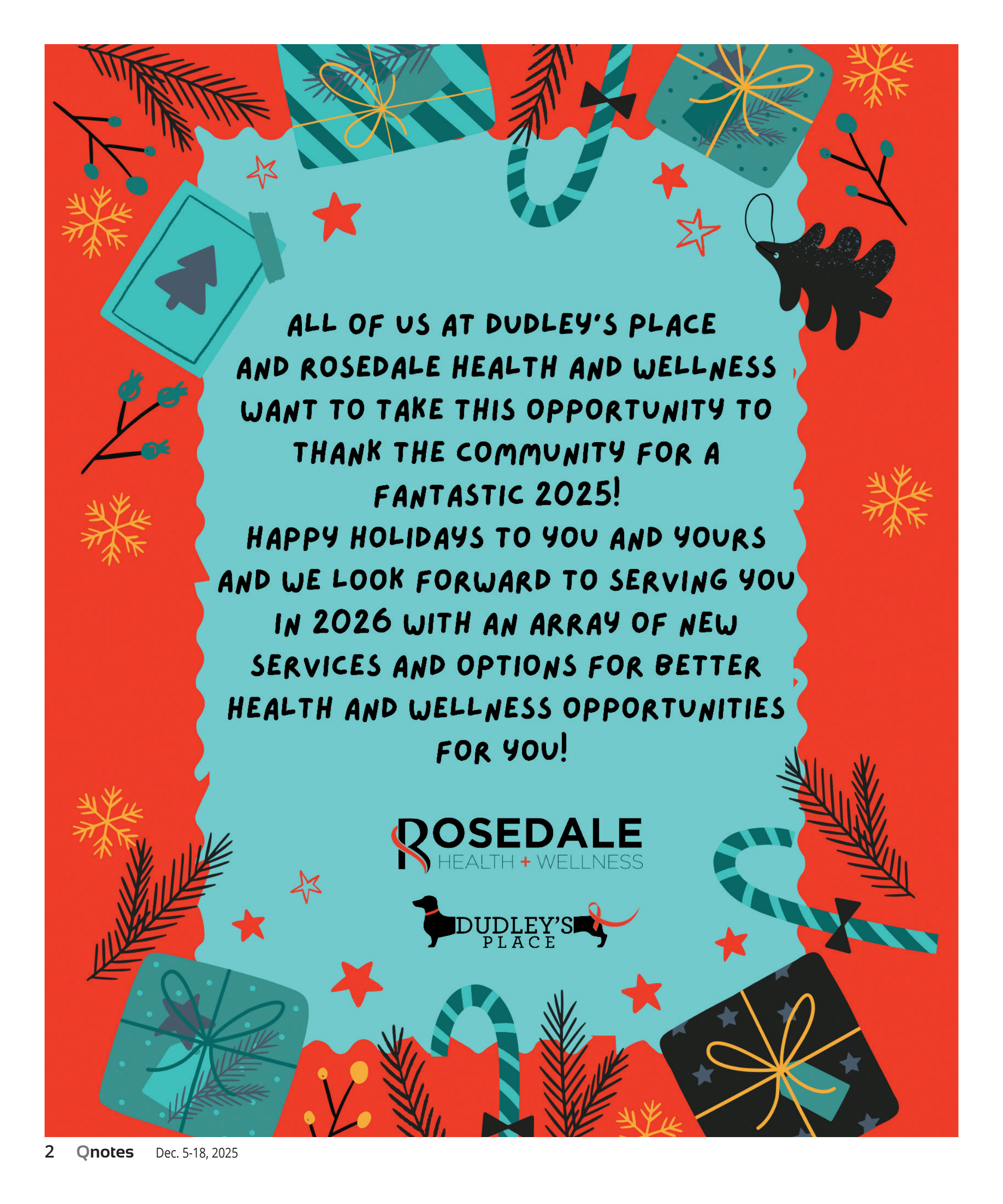


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### Mission:

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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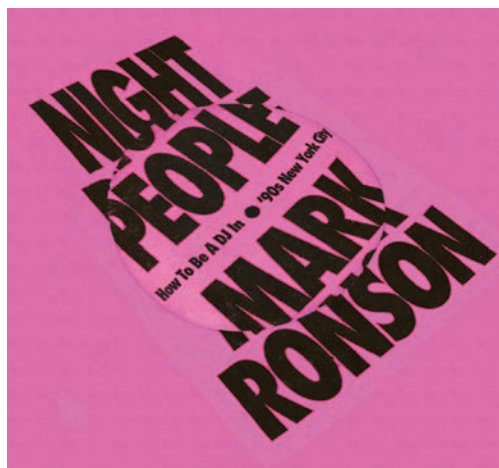
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### Out in Print: "Night People: How to Be a DJ in '90s New York City"

Part esoteric hip-hop discography, part biography, part SNL's Stefan and part cultural history, "Night People" is your book if you were deep into clubbing, somewhere in your 20s or 30s in the 1990s and you never missed a club night.

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### Tasty Holiday Treats: Sandra Hamlin's brunswick stew

When the winter months settle in and the air turns crisp, the kitchen becomes more than a place to cook. It becomes a refuge. The aroma of herbs and slow-cooked vegetables bring loved ones together for Sandra Hamlin's Brunswick Stew.

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## The People speak on Social Media

If a tree tree falls in the woods and everyone saw Donald Trump cut it down, is it still Biden's fault?



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# Charlotte community combats Border Patrol presence

Residents came together to help bring Operation Charlotte's Web to an early end



by Taylor Heeden Larkins  
Qnotes Staff Writer

In the week leading up to Thanksgiving, Charlotte experienced an invasion. This occupation wasn't from an enemy nation or foreign army – it was a division of the United States Dept. of Homeland Security tasked with carrying out a mission to pick up undocumented residents in the area.

On Nov. 15, the Dept. of Homeland Security launched Operation "Charlotte's Web" – a mission designed to "target the criminal illegal aliens who flocked to the Tar Heel State because they knew sanctuary politicians would protect them and allow them to roam free on American streets," according to the department's release on the operation.

Starting on Nov. 16 in Mecklenburg County and spreading to its surrounding counties, Operation Charlotte's Web reportedly led to more than 370 people being arrested. Border Patrol and ICE's presence in the Queen City created an atmosphere of fear and tension, something quite the opposite of the South's known hospitality.

"People are terrified, they're angry, they're hiding," Susan Rodriguez-McDowell, a Democratic county commissioner in Charlotte, said of her constituents to Reuters. "They're mad as hell that this happened in our community, and they want to know what the hell we are going to do about it."



Videos started to emerge online of masked federal agents detaining folks they suspected of being undocumented, emerging from unmarked cars and moving to cuff and arrest anyone officers believed to be a potential undocumented person. One video showed Charlotte resident Rheba Hamilton confronting federal agents when they emerged from an unmarked, gray minivan to ask two men working in Hamilton's yard for "papers." Hamilton started filming from her cell phone, asking the agents to get off her property and that they weren't welcome



Charlotte residents protested in uptown and other areas of the city.  
CREDIT: Screen Capture

there. After yelling for her husband, the agents retreated and left, allowing the workers in Hamilton's yard to leave and find safety.

Hamilton's confrontation with agents wasn't the only one of its kind – multiple videos of Charlotteans standing up for their neighbors have taken the internet by storm, demonstrating how a community shows up for one another even in times of uncertainty.

The community didn't just stand up to federal agents – thousands of folks flocked to training sessions hosted by Siembra NC, a grassroots advocacy group for immigrants and Latino communities in the state, to learn how to observe and report on ICE activity in North Carolina even before the enhanced enforcement.

Activists, including those from organizations such as Siembra NC, worked to patrol neighborhoods where CBP and ICE had been seen operating, following vehicles and at times honking horns in warning. Others have observed CBP and ICE units at local hotels, logged vehicle details and checked parking lots for potential early-morning staging locations around Charlotte.

"It's actually not totally out of our control to know where these guys [are] hunting people down," Andrew Willis Garcés, a

senior strategist with Siembra NC, said. "We can know that and we can also be much more in communication about what we see and where we see."

Unlike other recent raids in large American cities – such as Chicago, New York City and Portland – Operation Charlotte's Web marked the first mass immigration enforcement operation in a state which went to President Donald Trump in the 2024 election.

"North Carolina is not Illinois," Garcés said. "We all know it's not the same political train, it's not the same playbook about how to defend against these particular kinds of federal attacks. But overall, I think there is too much instinctual cautiousness. There's a little bit of an overcautiousness in terms of what we won't even explore ... You don't have to use the same talking points and don't have to have the same policies, but what if the question is just: What can we do?"

A couple of days after the launch of Operation Charlotte's Web, Siembra NC posted video of what appeared to be a 47-vehicle convoy on its way to Atlanta – much earlier than the reported timeline for the operation's conclusion. Mecklenburg County Sheriff Garry McFadden confirmed Border Patrol left his jurisdiction, with

Charlotte Mayor Vi Lyles expressing her gratitude for the operation's end.

"I'm relieved for our community and the residents, businesses and all those who were targeted and impacted by this intrusion," Lyles wrote on X. "As we move forward, it is essential that we come together – not as separate groups divided by recent events, but as one Charlotte community."

While DHS publicly maintained the crackdown in the Queen City is ongoing, separate internal documents state Border Patrol's operation there concluded, with agents demobilizing from the area last week – aligning with the video captured by Siembra NC.

CBS reported fewer than one third of those arrested by Border Patrol during the Trump administration's operation in Charlotte were classified as criminals. In a document from DHS obtained by CBS, it was stated roughly 200 Border Patrol agents recorded nearly 300 immigration arrests in Charlotte. Fewer than 90 of those arrested were noted as "criminal aliens" in the document.

The impact of Charlotte's Web was immediate and far spreading. According to recent reporting from Axios, a survey showed businesses were experiencing daily losses of around \$2,500, though the amounts varied widely – from \$200 for smaller tiendas to a reported \$12,000 for a general contractor. Of the 90 surveyed businesses, 47 percent were closed for at least three days, with 70 percent of survey respondents located in east Charlotte.

Greg Asciutto, executive director of CharlotteEast, told Axios he estimates it will take at least one fiscal quarter – and maybe longer – for east Charlotte's business district to regain "normalcy" for their business' performance.

North Carolina Republican Party spokesperson Matt Mercer touted the crackdown a success, and fellow Republicans have joined him in praising DHS and ICE for their work in the Tar Heel State. The truth couldn't be further from Mercer's and others' disillusioned claims: The Trump administration orchestrated a federal operation against one of the United States' own cities, resulting in economic losses and a new found fear among all North Carolinians. That isn't a successful implementation of American justice – it's a tactic to disempower and divide, with the hopes of molding the United States and its people into whatever those in power wish. ::



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# Avoiding the 12 scams of Christmas

No matter the holiday you're celebrating, avoid being swindled

by Qnotes Staff / Better Business Bureau

**W**hen shopping or donating this holiday season, watch out for schemes trying to swipe your cash or steal your personal information. We're going to explore 12 examples of underhanded exploitation on this list and help you avoid being financially hoaxed by taking a few simple precautions.

Always exercise common sense with social media ads promoting discounted items, holiday events, job opportunities and donation requests, as well as direct messages from strangers. If you are asked to make a payment or donation by wire transfer, through a third party, or by prepaid debit or gift card, treat it as a red flag.

## 1. Misleading social media ads

As you scroll through your social media feed, you often see products advertised. Always research before you buy. BBB Scam Tracker receives daily reports of people paying for items that they never receive, getting charged monthly for a free trial they never signed up for, or receiving an item that is counterfeit or much different from the one advertised. The 2024 BBB Scam Tracker Risk Report found that online purchase scams were the fourth riskiest scam reported by consumers in 2024.

## 2. Social media gift exchanges

Each holiday season this scheme pops back up. The older version was called "Secret Sister." Newer versions of this scam revolve around exchanging bottles of wine or bourbon; another suggests purchasing \$10 gifts online. Another twist asks you to submit your email to a list where participants get to pick a name and send money to strangers to "pay it forward." There is even a twist about "Secret Santa Dog" where you buy a \$10 gift for your "secret dog." In all these versions, participants unwittingly share their personal information.

## 3. Holiday apps

Apple's App Store and Google Play list dozens of holiday-themed apps where children can video chat live with Santa, light the menorah, watch Santa feed live reindeer, track his sleigh on Christmas Eve, or relay their holiday wish lists. Review privacy policies to see what information will be collected. Be wary of free apps, as they can sometimes contain more advertising than apps that require a nominal fee. Free apps can also contain malware.

## 4. Fake toll collection texts

If you're planning to drive a long distance to visit family or take a vacation this holiday season, watch out for fake road toll collection

texts, which have been on the rise this year. In this con, scammers impersonate a state road tollway collection service and text you saying you owe a road toll fee and provide a link to click to make your payment. If you receive a text, don't click the link. Instead, if you think you may owe road tolls, verify your outstanding balance with the legitimate agency.

## 5. Free gift cards

Nothing brings good cheer like the word FREE. Scammers have been known to take advantage of this weakness by sending bulk phishing emails requesting personal information to receive free gift cards. In some of these emails, scammers impersonate legitimate companies and promise gift cards to reward their loyal customers. They may also use pop-up ads or send text messages with links saying you were randomly selected as the winner of a prize.

## 6. Temporary holiday jobs

Employment scams were identified as the number one riskiest scam for people ages 18-34 in 2024. If you're looking for seasonal work this holiday season, keep an eye out for opportunities that seem suspicious. Job seekers need to be wary of employment scams aimed at stealing money and personal information during the job application process. If it sounds too good to be true, it usually is.

## 7. Impostor scams

Impostor scams can take many forms, especially during the holiday season when you may be purchasing and returning gifts. When shopping online, be on the lookout for fake, look-alike websites created by scammers to trick people into downloading malware, making dead-end purchases and sharing private information. When in doubt, go to the business's website and find their official social media handles, or use the information on the site to reach out.

## 8. Fake charities

The last few weeks of the year are a busy time for charitable donations. Donors are advised to look out for fraudulent charities and scammers pretending to be individuals in need. Avoid impromptu donation decisions to unfamiliar organizations. Responsible organizations will welcome a



Research shows most pet adoption social media ads are fake.

gift tomorrow as much as they do today.

## 9. Fake shipping notifications

More consumers making online purchases during the holidays leads to an increase in the number of notifications about shipping details from retailers and carriers. Scammers use this surge to send phishing emails and texts about package deliveries with links enclosed that may allow unwanted access to your private information or download malware onto your device.

## 10. Advent calendars


Each year, there are more and more advent calendars being sold; CNN has a list of over 20 calendars, and many are in hot demand. In past years, the Better Business Bureau received reports to Scam Tracker about advent calendar ads on social media not delivering as promised. Some were not received, and others received inferior products or incomplete orders.

## 11. Holiday wishlist items

Low-priced luxury goods, jewelry, designer clothing and electronics are almost always cheap counterfeits and knockoffs. The same applies to popular toys. Be very cautious when considering purchases from resellers on Facebook Marketplace and other platforms.

## 12. Puppy scams


Many families may be considering adding a furry friend to their household this year. However, be on the lookout for scams. Many would-be pet owners turn to the internet to find their future cat or dog, but experts say a shocking 80 percent of sponsored pet advertisements may be fake. Be sure to see the pet in person before making a purchase. ::




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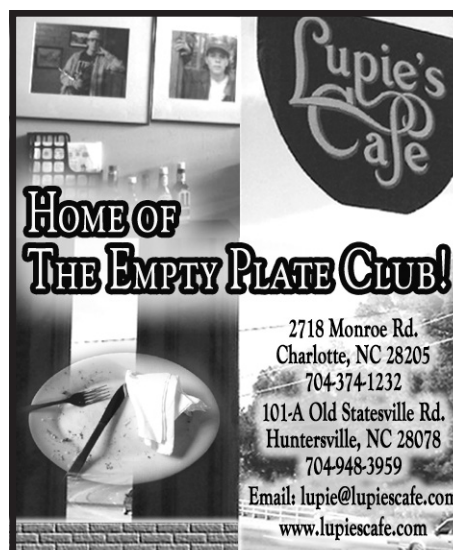
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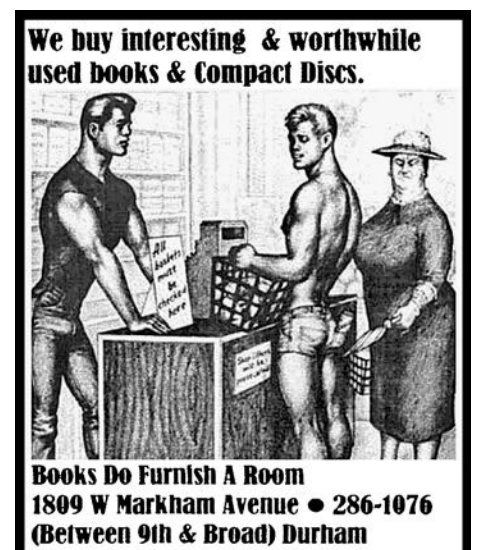
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# Federal judges uphold 2024 NC congressional and legislative districts

Federal judges have ruled against opponents of North Carolina congressional and state Senate districts who claimed they are racial gerrymanders.

In a 181-page opinion issued Nov. 21, the three-judge panel dismissed claims brought by the North Carolina NAACP, Common Cause, and individual voters against districts used in the 2024 election.

In those lawsuits, which were brought in 2023, plaintiffs claimed that congressional and state Senate districts in the Piedmont, Mecklenburg County, and eastern counties were drawn to dilute the

power of Black voters.

Republican legislators said they did not use racial data in creating the districts.

The judges, all Republican appointees, held a six-day trial last summer. Their opinion said Republican map-drawers "did not act with discriminatory purpose," and that opponents failed to prove any of their claims.

"After considering all the evidence, we find that Plaintiffs have failed to prove that the North Carolina General Assembly drew state Senate or federal congressional districts with the discriminatory purpose of minimizing or canceling out the voting po-



Judges deny discrimination claims, approve gerrymandered districts.

tential of black North Carolinians. The racial data necessary to execute such a discriminatory purpose was not used in drafting the 2023 Senate or congressional plans," the judges wrote.

"The circumstances surrounding the plans' enactment and the resulting district

configurations and composition are consistent with the General Assembly's non-racial motivations, which included traditional districting criteria, North Carolina law, and partisan performance," the opinion continued.

The judges did not rule on the claims against the newly drawn 1st Congressional District, which Republicans reconfigured last month in order to elect another GOP member of the U.S. House. A hearing on those claims was held Wednesday. Opponents have asked the judges to prevent the new districts from being used in the 2026 election. ::

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— Lynn Bonner / NC Newsline

# Border patrol agents may have arrested as many as 400 in Charlotte

Federal immigration agents launched an aggressive crackdown in Charlotte November 15-20, reportedly arresting as many as 400 individuals and raising widespread concerns about racial profiling, due process and community safety. The operation, known as "Operation Charlotte's Web," was led by U.S. Border Patrol, whose masked agents arrived in unmarked SUVs carrying rifles.

Federal officials said agents made at least 370 arrests within five days, although other sources estimated the number to be over 400. It has been declared one of the largest immigration sweeps in the state's history.

Siembra NC is a grassroots organization focused on defending communities from abusive employers, landlords, ICE and corrupt government officials. They have monitored reports across the region, and called Nov. 15 "a day of shame," noting it was the highest number of immigrants arrested in one day on record in North Carolina.

Throughout the five days Trump's border patrol agents ran rough shod throughout the Queen City, residents across Charlotte reported encounters with federal agents in shopping centers, parking lots, supermarkets, churches and residential areas. Witnesses described several people being tackled or restrained, including a man who appeared to collapse during an encounter near a church in east Charlotte and a teen employee who was thrown to

the ground and detained outside the Super G Mart in Pineville. Residents also reported agents stopping people in public areas such as sidewalks and store parking lots.

Throughout the invasion, thousands of residents protested publicly in the streets of the city and in the uptown area carrying signs in English and Spanish, marching through the streets and calling for Border Patrol to leave Charlotte. Multiple protests occurred at high schools throughout the county.

The presence of federal agents also led businesses in immigrant-serving corridors to close. Along Central Avenue, many shops remained shuttered during the operation, including Manolo's Bakery, a longtime fixture in east Charlotte. Owner Manuel "Manolo" Betancur told CNN he saw agents pull up in unmarked SUVs and begin "jumping and taking people down in the street, just people that look like me." Betancur, a naturalized U.S. citizen, said he now carries his passport because he promised his family he would come home safely. He said he does not want customers exposed to the same danger. "It's too risky," he said.

Local officials announced the operation had ended Nov. 21, and that border patrol was moving on to New Orleans, La. Sources in Greenville, S.C., say they made a brief appearance there and other media sources reported "Operation Swamp Sweep" would begin in NOLA starting Dec. 1.

City officials initially said they had received almost no information from federal authorities about the enforcement surge, including how long agents had planned to remain in the city or where detainees were being taken. Mecklenburg County Commission chairman Mark Jerrell said the lack of communication was "stoking a lot of fear in our community," and cited the case of a resident and American citizen whose car window was smashed by agents before he was briefly detained, pointing to what he described as potential profiling. "Why were they stopped? What is this that allows folks just to be detained on the street, essentially profiled?" Jerrell asked.

Charlotte Mecklenburg Police Department reiterated they were not participating in the operation. CMPD stated that officers "are not authorized to assist with ICE administrative warrants" and "do not participate in ICE or CBP operations," adding that the department would have only engaged when criminal behavior or a criminal warrant falls under its jurisdiction.

As the operation finally wound down, Charlotte Mayor Vi Lyles issued a statement via Twitter/X:

"It appears U.S. Border Patrol has ceased its operations in Charlotte. I'm relieved for our community and the residents, businesses and all those who were targeted and impacted by this intrusion.



Protestors rallied at First Ward Park during 'Operation Charlotte's Web.' CREDIT: Facebook

"As we move forward, it is essential that we come together—not as separate groups divided by recent events, but as one Charlotte community. Our strength has always come from our ability to support one another, especially in challenging times. I am calling on all members of our community to join in this effort. Let us stand together, listen to one another and recommit ourselves to the values of dignity, compassion and unity that define our city. Charlotte is strongest when Charlotte stands as one."

Despite Lyles' statement, border patrol, news outlets and internal federal sources imply that while agents were preparing to move on to New Orleans, some reportedly remain and others could return to Charlotte at any time to continue enforcement. ::

— Liz Schob & David Aaron Moore



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# CLT City Council appoints Cameron Pruette to public transit board

Throughout the month of November the Charlotte City council announced a total of 27 members to serve on a new public transit board. Those members will serve four-year terms and may serve a maximum of two terms.

They'll oversee the recently developed transit authority and the use of an approved one cent sales tax increase during their terms. Current and future members will work with the multi-billion dollar transportation plan over the next 30 years in a continuing effort to provide reliable, world class public transportation.

Cameron Pruette is a local activist known for his work with the Democratic party and the LGBTQ community, as well as his position as executive director of the

Freedom Center for Social Justice.

Pruette was recently named among the final appointments of November to the transit board. He's a confirmed public transit rider, and believes that combined with his background in human resources led to the appointment.

In an interview with Charlotte television station WCNC's news department, he talked about what his priorities would be in the role.

"I think immediately we have to think about how do you structure 27 folks to represent and effectively make decisions.

"My priorities will be on that and a better bus plan. We won't see new rail for many, many years, but we can give you better bus service within three to four. We can build 2,000 bus shelters within five years.

And so my focus is on making sure those projects are successful so we can gain trust in the system for those bigger projects."

Pruette also confirmed what he hopes to see accomplished during his time on the board.

"I would like to see ... trust in the system has increased dramatically. I want to make sure that everybody feels happy hopping on a bus, hopping on a light rail. I want to make sure that our bus drivers and operators feel safer. I want to see ridership increase wildly. I want there to be stories about how no one thought ridership would rebound the way it [did]." ::

— Qnotes Staff



Charlotte activist Cameron Pruette.  
CREDIT: Freedom Center

# SC quarantines 137 as measles continue to spread in Upstate

More than 130 people are in quarantine for measles exposure after infectious people visited schools, an airport and a church, the Department of Public Health announced Nov. 21.

Since Oct. 2, the state health department has reported 52 measles cases related to an outbreak in Upstate South Carolinas, plus three unrelated cases. Of the eight new cases reported, four came from exposures to known measles patients. It is unknown how the remainder contracted the disease, according to the health department.

Most of the 137 people in quarantine Friday were students and staff at three public schools in the Upstate.

One person with an active case worked at Greenville-Spartanburg International Airport and may have exposed travelers and

fellow employees to the virus between 9 a.m. and 7 p.m. on Nov. 10 and 11. Another attended Way of Truth Church in Inman the evening of Nov. 7 and the morning of Nov. 9, according to the health department.

Anyone who visited the airport or church on those days should monitor themselves for measles symptoms and call a doctor if they get sick, according to the health department.

The state health department did not say how many of the active measles cases came from each of the schools. When a student at a school tests positive, the schools send home every non-vaccinated student to prevent spread, health officials said.

Lyman Elementary has 57

people in quarantine, Boiling Springs Middle School has 55, and D.R. Hill Middle School has one, according to the health department. The department did not specify how many non-vaccinated people were students versus staff.

Symptoms of measles typically begin between a week and 12 days after exposure

with a cough, runny nose and red eyes, along with a fever. Cases can then cause a red, blotchy rash that appears first on the face and spreads to the rest of the body.

The best way to keep from getting and spreading measles is to get vaccinated, South Carolina state epidemiologist Linda Bell has said.

Typically, children receive two doses of the measles, mumps and rubella vaccine, which is about 97% effective in protecting them from the virus. All but two of the people who contracted measles were non-vaccinated. The two who had their vaccines only had one dose, which is less effective than the full two doses.

The state health department stopped routinely operating the mobile vaccine clinics that have run since mid-October, but organizations can still request a mobile clinic date through the health department's website. ::



Health authorities are encouraging individuals who have not been vaccinated to do so.

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— Skylar Laird / SC Daily Gazette

# Is Mpox back and is it a danger?

Multiple media sources across the Charlotte Metro area have reported that Mpox, previously known as Monkey Pox (because the virus was originally discovered in a colony of macaques in 1958) is reportedly on the rise in the Charlotte Metro area again.

According to reports from the news departments of Charlotte television stations WBTV, WCCB and WCNC the viral infection was found in three people in October and had increased to seven by November, though no official press release was

available from the NCDHHS at the time of publication.

The reported increase of numbers in Mecklenburg County is similar to other American cities that have confirmed a more severe strain of the Clade One Mpox virus, which has been spreading throughout Europe and Africa.

The risk to the larger community is said to be low, but high risk indi-

viduals, which includes men who are sexually active with other men, are encouraged to get vaccinated.

Sexual activity is not needed to pass the virus from one person to another. Skin to skin contact with the presence of sweat, such as what one might experience while on a dance floor or casually brushing against someone else can also pass the virus from someone who is infected to another who is not.

Dr. Raynard Washington, the Public Health Director for Mecklenburg County was quoted in multiple interviews.

"While the overall risk from Mpox in our community is very low, we encourage those who are at higher risk to take steps to protect their health. The vaccine remains the best tool we have to prevent Mpox and serious complications from the virus."

Earlier this year in March and April, particles of the Clade 1 Mpox virus were discovered in wastewater collected in Greenville, which implied there was at least one person undiagnosed living in the area, or possibly traveling through.

Charlotte-Mecklenburg announced its first case of Mpox over three years ago on June 27, 2022. At that time, panic swept through the LGBTQ+ community, fearing

a possible return to the COVID and AIDS pandemic. In some instances, healthcare workers refused to take blood samples from patients exhibiting symptoms.

Infections typically last two to four weeks and can cause symptoms similar to chickenpox, which can leave scarring. Additional symptoms are flu-like and include swelling of the lymph nodes as well as a rash with fluid filled bumps that eventually scab over.

Mecklenburg County officially released its latest advisory as of Nov. 20, 2025, urging all healthcare providers to include Mpox as a part of their differential diagnosis for all patients who exhibit clinically consistent symptoms.

The virus is of significant concern for individuals who are HIV positive or immunocompromised. In such cases, an Mpox infection could lead to severe illness and even death, the advisory indicated.

There is a vaccine for Mpox, known as Jynneos. Most physicians offer the vaccine and it is also available through the Mecklenburg County Public Health department. Residents can schedule appointments by calling 704-336-6500 or by simple walk-in during regular business hours. ::

— David Aaron Moore



Individuals at higher risk are encouraged to request a vaccination.



# Freedom Center for Social Justice named Qnotes 2025 Organization of the Year

Sixteen years after its founding, Charlotte-based nonprofit leads the movement for LGBTQ+ empowerment, immigrant justice and cultural change



by Liz Schob  
Qnotes Staff Writer

For 2025's Organization of the Year, Qnotes is honored to recognize the Freedom Center for Social Justice, a Charlotte based nonprofit now in its sixteenth year of community rooted advocacy, culture shifting education and intersectional justice work across the Carolinas and beyond. Since 2009, the Freedom Center has helped shape what liberation work looks like in the South, guided by a clear belief that relationships, dignity and collective care change communities. In a year when targeted policy attacks and hostile rhetoric have left many feeling worn down, the organization has remained steady, offering education, leadership development and spaces where people can gather, heal, and organize.

The Freedom Center began with a need Bishop Tonyia M. Rawls could not ignore. When she moved to Charlotte in 2000 to open Unity Fellowship's first affirming congregation in the Bible Belt, she encountered Black LGBTQ+ people with virtually no safe spiritual or communal spaces. "For Black queer folk, they did not have any spaces that felt safe for them," she said. What she witnessed beyond the church walls was just as urgent. Charlotte was navigating an HIV crisis, with young Black men disproportion-

ately impacted. "One in three young Black men were HIV positive in Charlotte," she recalled. At the same time, major education decisions were diverting resources away from under resourced schools. Coupled with the spiritual harm reinforced by long held teachings, Rawls saw a landscape where one church could not address everything alone. "It was impossible to do the faith work and not also understand that there were so many other incredible needs that existed outside the walls of the church," she said.

Do No Harm, one of the Freedom Center's earliest initiatives, responded directly to that need. The program brought clergy into honest conversations about the ways churches had contributed to stigma around sexuality, HIV and LGBTQ+ identity. Rawls remembers being surprised by what she heard. "What I found was almost every cleric I spoke with was far less homophobic than they appeared to be in public," she said. Many simply lacked a place where they could process their questions without fear. Her own journey made her uniquely prepared to sit with them. "I myself could not even accept my own self for many years," she told us. "Because of what I went through, personally, I have a lot of grace. I have space for those who are grappling."

These early conversations helped clergy rethink harmful teachings and their real impact on the LGBTQ+ community. The work built trust where there had been fear and opened space for new relationships that became central to the Freedom Center's long-term approach. "A lot of the wisdom comes from those relationships," Rawls said. Importantly, those relationships also created a foundation for later work: Faith leaders who began in Do No Harm eventually partnered with the Freedom Center on HIV initiatives, racial justice actions and fights related to public policy. Even those still theologically uncertain committed to Rawls's guiding principle that "I cannot cause harm." It was a cultural shift born from patient, persistent engagement.

Executive Director Cameron Pruette, who stepped into leadership earlier this year, describes the Freedom Center's approach with similar clarity. "Our work really is about connecting people," he said. "We have made intentional



Freedom Center for Social Justice staff at Charlotte Pride.  
CREDIT: Freedom Center for Social Justice

choices to build relationships and to be truly intersectional in how we approach queer rights, immigrant justice, racial justice and economic justice." That relational foundation, he explained, is what allows the organization to respond with integrity during moments of crisis. "It has positioned us to respond in ways that we would not be able to otherwise." Pruette also points out that the organization's consistency is its power. Even when political winds shift or funding climates change, "the Freedom Center being present" remains a through line.

Over sixteen years, the Freedom Center has developed a wide-ranging ecosystem of programs shaped by its founding commitments. The Trans Seminary Cohort, co-hosted with the National LGBTQ Task Force and the Center for LGBTQ and Gender Studies in Religion, is the nation's only leadership program specifically designed for transgender and genderqueer seminarians. Participants represent Christian, Jewish and other faith traditions and receive mentorship, theological grounding and community support. More than sixty seminarians have completed the program.

"We have an opportunity to do some pretty amazing work," Rawls says. The cohort also strengthens the Freedom Center's belief that trans people should shape their own spiritual and theological futures.

The Freedom Center also runs the For Them Too campaign, which uplifts the needs of trans youth and equips communities with guidance, education and tools to advocate on their behalf. This work reflects the organization's belief that trans young people deserve communities prepared to stand with them in the face of policy threats and cultural harm.

Community centered programming remains at the heart of the Freedom Center. For Trans Day of Visibility, the organization partnered with the ACLU on the Freedom to Be campaign, inviting community members to create quilt squares that were later displayed on the Capitol lawn to help open World Pride. The Trans Faith and Action Network retreat, held near Durham, brings trans people of faith together for rest, connection and exploration in a space intentionally led by trans organizers. Rawls described it simply: "We bring together transgender seminarians with other trans leaders for a weekend of connection, and it is a space run by trans people for trans people."

The organization continues shaping theological conversations through its annual Liberating Theologies conference. This year it was hosted at Union Presbyterian Seminary, where the theme, Love Reimagined, invited participants to consider how love must function not as sentiment but as a force for justice. The gathering brought faith leaders, scholars, activists and community members into conversation about tradition, liberation, identity and what spiritual transformation requires in public life. Sessions focused on theologies shaped by lived experience and the ways spiritual imagination can challenge political and cultural harm.

Cultural work and civic engagement also converge in Clack the Vote, the Freedom Center's nonpartisan voter education and mobilization program. Handheld fans, which hold deep cultural significance in both church and LGBTQ spaces, became a tool for building political engagement. Rawls explained why it works: The fans



Bishop Tonyia Rawls and Rev. Carmarion Anderson  
at Liberating Theologies 2025.  
CREDIT: Freedom Center for Social Justice





The Trans Seminary Cohort gathers during this year's Trans Faith and Action Network retreat. CREDIT: Freedom Center for Social Justice

"build a bridge between the Black mother in a church and a white gay boy who is flamboyant, and both of them are walking around with a Clack the Vote fan." This year the Freedom Center adopted five precincts and saw an 85 percent increase in turnout for both the primary and general elections. One of those precincts elected the city's first Latino council member, who is queer, under 30, and a former DACA recipient. "It is impactful," Pruette said. The program illustrates how cultural practices, when honored rather than dismissed, can become powerful tools for civic engagement.

The Freedom Center has also deepened its immigrant justice work through participation in the Charlotte Immigrant Protection Alliance with partners like Carolina Migrant Network and Indivisible Charlotte. When ICE and Border Patrol

presence rose sharply in Charlotte, years of consistent relationship building allowed the Freedom Center to respond quickly. "Probably the first two years of our intentional outreach, that is all it was," Pruette said. "The Freedom Center being present." Today the organization helps coordinate Know Your Rights education, supply drops and crisis support for immigrant families navigating fear and uncertainty. The trust built over slow, steady relationship building has become one of the organization's strongest tools.

The Freedom Center's collaborative approach has strengthened movements across the region. Its work with the North Carolina NAACP helped establish an LGBTQ+ committee on the organization's executive board. The Latin American Coalition has recognized the Freedom Center for its



The Freedom Center for Social Justice joining partners in opposing HB805, legislation that targeted transgender and nonbinary North Carolinians. CREDIT: Freedom Center for Social Justice

consistent partnership and solidarity. These interwoven relationships reflect the organization's culture shift philosophy: Show up, stay engaged and build trust.

The Freedom Center's values also guide its internal structure. This year, the organization launched a Trans Advisory Council composed entirely of Black and Brown trans leaders and increased trans representation on its Board of Directors, ensuring accountability to the communities at the center of its work.

A new partnership with the Black Mountain School of Theology and Community reflects the organization's commitment to developing leaders who can bridge faith, justice movements and community needs. The school brings activists and seminarians into shared learning environments. Rawls said the goal is to train people together. "We expect activists to know how to work with communities of faith, but nobody teaches them how. We also expect seminary students to understand communities, and nobody teaches them that either."

Leadership transition has also been a significant moment for the organization. Rawls describes her shift out of day-to-day leadership as intentional and rooted in care. "I wanted to make sure people knew Cameron had my blessing," she said, noting the importance of continuity in funding and relationships. She also named the importance of modeling a healthy transition. "I saw so many of us do it poorly," she said.

"This was an opportunity to model what is possible." Pruette's leadership builds on the foundation she laid while expanding the organization's political education and voter engagement work. "My faith keeps me grounded," he said. "It gives me context. It gives me peace in moments like this."

As the organization prepares for 2026, its priorities remain focused on trans liberation, voter empowerment, immigrant justice and faith-based organizing. Pruette stressed the importance of increasing voter turnout and building strong collaborations with labor unions, faith communities and grassroots groups. Rawls spoke directly to the future, saying, "There will always be marginalized people, and it is my hope that we will always be concerned about and find the most cutting-edge strategies to support and liberate them."

Both Rawls and Pruette emphasize that the Freedom Center's strength has always come from the people who make up its community. "We have deep talent in our communities," Pruette said. "It is about making space for them." Sixteen years after its founding, the Freedom Center for Social Justice continues to build coalitions, grow leaders and shift culture in ways that are reshaping the Carolinas. Its work remains rooted in community, strengthened by faith and driven by a belief that justice begins with the people most impacted. For these reasons and many more, the Freedom Center for Social Justice is Qnotes' 2025 Organization of the Year. ::

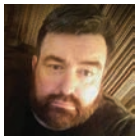


Freedom Center for Social Justice staff and community partners marching at a May Day protest for workers and immigrant rights. CREDIT: Freedom Center for Social Justice:



# Invisible Histories Project moving to Charlotte

Nonprofit LGBTQ+ history organization boasts massive collection of documents, recorded stories and memorabilia



by David Aaron Moore  
Qnotes Staff Writer

Joshua Burford is a native of Alabama, but he's plugged in to the queer south through the non-profit LGBTQ+ history organization Invisible Histories Project. Qnotes has covered his work with the organization in years past and written about his time spent here in Charlotte.

In 2013 Bradford worked as an assistant director for Sexual and Gender Diversity at UNC Charlotte to create the city's first LGBTQ+ archives, which was housed at the J. Murray Atkins library on the school's campus.

Burford eventually returned to Alabama and officially launched the Invisible History Project with co-executive director Maigen Sullivan. By September 2018 both were working on the project full time. Qnotes spoke with Burford during the last week of November and confirmed the organization would be relocating to Charlotte.

"Yes. We are moving Invisible Histories and all of our staff to Charlotte in a month or two. Since 2021, we've been thinking about what it might actually mean for us to open a stand-alone archive of our own. We spent about two years trying to figure out where we wanted to put it. We workshoped Atlanta, Charlotte and Nashville, because we needed a large enough urban area where we could raise money, and a place that has philanthropy and an organized queer community. I



Joshua Burford is the co-executive director of the Invisible Histories Project.  
CREDIT: Invisible Histories



A clipping captures a moment in Charlotte Queer history.  
CREDIT: Invisible Histories

have so many connections from the days I spent in Charlotte, so the final decision was made for us to move there."

Invisible Histories has rented a space that will allow for offices, storage and display. While the exact location hasn't been announced just yet, it is in close proximity to other LGBTQ+ organizations in Charlotte.

"It should be ready for us to move into in mid-December," said Burford. "We will be moving the collections in late January and it will take us a while to get the space set up. We have a ton of stuff and lots to be installed, so we don't expect to be open to the public until April or May."

Currently invisible histories is operating out of Birmingham, Ala. "The landscape here is not great politically for LGBT people," Burford explained. "Charlotte and North Carolina offered a more progressive area for us to be in, and we're collecting in six States now so it just made sense for us to be in a place where we could travel much easier."

The six primary states Invisible Histories actively collects data, information and memorabilia from are Alabama,

Georgia, Florida, Mississippi, North Carolina and South Carolina. While their primary collection efforts are focused in these states, the project also engages with and provides resources for LGBTQ+ history in a total of 13 southern states.

The space the organization is moving into is 1800 square feet. Burford expects approximately half of the facility to be used for archival purposes.

Among the collection are items from throughout the 20th century, with the oldest heading back to 1912.

"It's a diary," Burford offered. "It's a chat book, actually which is part poetry, part diary, from a gay guy who served in the First World War, who wrote it mostly after he came back from the war."

"We also have a beautiful diary from the Second World War from 1942. A family donated it and he wrote in it extensively while he was in Europe. He chronicles his experiences and it actually ends up being kind of a cool sex diary, with a lot about the hot male nurses he was hooking up with while he was in France," Burford chuckled. Other items that belong to the individual were donated; and historic records and memorabilia from Camp Pleiades, a lesbian Land Community near Asheville are also part of the collection.

"We've got a very sizable collection and we are looking forward to making it available and partnering with other organizations in Charlotte to figure out ways we can do programming together, all of which will be free and open to the public. Once we get settled into the space we will have a grand opening."

While those dates are forthcoming more information about the Invisible Histories Project can be found at the organization's website at <https://invisiblehistory.org>. ::



The current archives of the Invisible Histories Project, which will be relocated to Charlotte next month.  
CREDIT: Invisible Histories



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SERVING THE  
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# In times of need, food pantries are here to help

As the cost of living soars, the need for assistance grows



by L'Monique King  
Qnotes Staff Writer

While some of us are deciding on the holiday dinner leftovers to have for breakfast or making promises we won't keep to begin workout and weight loss routines, others are navigating how to gain access to daily meals.

The most recently reported statistics (2023) from the Food Research & Action Center show almost 50 million Americans having experienced food insecurity in their households (one in seven American households).

These individuals were challenged with accessing enough nutritious foods and often went hungry as a result. Of those individuals nearly 15 million were children.

With the rising cost of food, and a government shutdown that halted food stamp payouts in the very recent past – food pantries have become a very valuable resource, particularly for communities that routinely face financial challenges.

Among the challenges so many families and individuals face in 21st century America are economic instability, access to quality education, access to quality healthcare, declining neighborhood environments and depreciating social and community interactivity.

Food security is near the top of the list when it comes to achieving economic stability.

Why? Because it's difficult to find success at much else when one is hungry or malnourished. Simply stated, as human beings, we need food to survive. Without the strength proper nourishment provides, it's more than just daunting to conquer the daily challenges of life and living.

Fortunately, food pantries continue to meet the needs of many with donations, volunteers and grateful recipients across the Carolinas.

Most often, pantries serve all of the community, including ours. Many are staffed, operated and recommended by LGBTQ+ advocates and community

members who routinely fight to make sure everyone has access to food.

Locally, **Block Love Charlotte** has provided over 2.5 million meals since 2020, and that's not just bags of groceries. With a keen eye on bridging the gap between homelessness and thriving, Block Love Charlotte offers groceries, hot cooked meals and countless items needed by those facing hunger and housing instability.

Open every day but Wednesdays, folks don't need an appointment to line up at Block Love Charlotte on any Friday from 1-4 p.m., where they will be able to select from proteins, canned goods, breads and snacks. Just days before Thanksgiving, Block Love Charlotte included ground beef, turkeys and racks of ribs in their offerings to needy community members.

**Hearts United For Good (HUGCLT)** has already provided over 48,000 pounds of food (Jan - June 2025) to local area residents who line up weekly for HUG's weekly drive through pantry every Wednesday. Grateful motorists receive bags of groceries for themselves and their families in an organized and intentional manner. For those on HUG's food pantry line, they can also find food for their four legged family members too, as HUG also tackles Animal Welfare and Homeless Outreach.

Local LGBTQ and health and wellness organizations make referrals to these pantries and others that require referrals from Community Health Workers, Case Managers, Patient Navigators and Peer Support Specialists, to name a few.

Nourish Up and Hearts and Hands Food Pantry are two of them.

**Nourish Up** offers a seven-day food supply for the creation of 21 nutritionally

balanced meals of each person on the referral. Items include canned and dry goods, fresh produce along with dairy and fresh meat when available.

Anyone can receive food from Nourish Up regardless of income. They take their mission so seriously their website offers additional resources for food outside of what their organization can provide. Visitors to the Nourish Up website will not only find information on how to receive food from them, but also a comprehensive list of churches and community organizations offering food on particular dates and times. Clearly, when they say, "We accept no excuses for our neighbors going hungry" they mean it.

At **Hearts and Hands** they believe "Food is a basic human right" and have served over 100,000 Charlotte area residents since 2017. At Hearts and Hands, part of the referral process is learning what individuals

cannot or will not eat. This means folks are not just given a bag of food with items that might be harmful to their health or wasted. Individuals have an opportunity to make their nutritional needs known so that a diabetic for instance doesn't receive items that will negatively impact their glucose levels and vegans won't be gifted with pot roast and ham sandwiches. It's not just thoughtful, it's pretty cool too. Even cooler is the fact that Nourish Up and Hearts and Hands also offer delivery options for those unable to use their curbside services for food pick up.

Outside of Charlotte, the Carolinas continue to step up to meet the need of food insecurity and some with particular focus on serving marginalized LGBTQ community members.

The **Gwendolyn Iris Woodard Rawls Food Pantry** is located at Sacred Souls UCC. Rev. Sherry Foust is sponsoring a Fall Food



Resources like Block Love provide access to food resources for the home and hot meals prepared and served onsite.

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Drive through December to bring awareness to the needs in the community. They are open Thursday mornings from 9:00 A.M. to 12:00 Noon. Food Pantry immediate needs are; Cash donations (used to purchase food at Second Harvest Food Bank of Metrolina and other Grocery Stores) and non-perishable food like, can meats (chicken, tuna, beef, turkey, ham) vegetable, fruit, dry goods, peanut butter and snacks. Donations can be made on Thursday mornings or Sundays at the church. Monetary donations may also be mailed to the church address marked for the Gwendolyn Rawls Food Pantry.

**The LGBTQ Center of Durham** has partnered with the **Food Bank of Central and Eastern North Carolina** (an LGBTQ owned business) in their efforts to assist food insecure community members.

Asheville's **Tranzmission** program provides food to transgender and non-binary individuals in Western North Carolina through **Talya Mazuz Memorial Food Pantry**.

**Cornbread & Roses** serves rural Western NC by creating inclusive spaces with low barriers to access to their food pantry, which is open to all those in need.

For LGBTQ+ community members who can't find safe and/or affirming assistance (beyond what is included in this article), consider checking with a local LGBTQ+ Community Center, the **LGBTQ Chamber of the Carolinas**, Pride Organizations or affirming health and wellness organization for referrals. For those not facing food insecurity, we encourage you to reach out to a food pantry to learn more about how you can assist via food and monetary donations or volunteering your time to assist community members in need. ::

## FOOD PANTRIES AND RESOURCES FOR FOOD ASSISTANCE

**CHARLOTTE**  
Block Love Charlotte  
<https://blockloveclt.org/>

Gwendolyn Iris Woodard Rawls Food Pantry  
2127 Eastway Drive, Charlotte, NC 28205  
980-301-5863

Hearts United For Good  
<https://www.hugclt.org/>

Nourish Up  
<https://nourishup.org/>

Hearts and Hands  
<https://www.heartsandhandsfoodpantry.com/>

LGBT+ Chamber of the Carolinas  
<https://www.clgbtcc.org/>

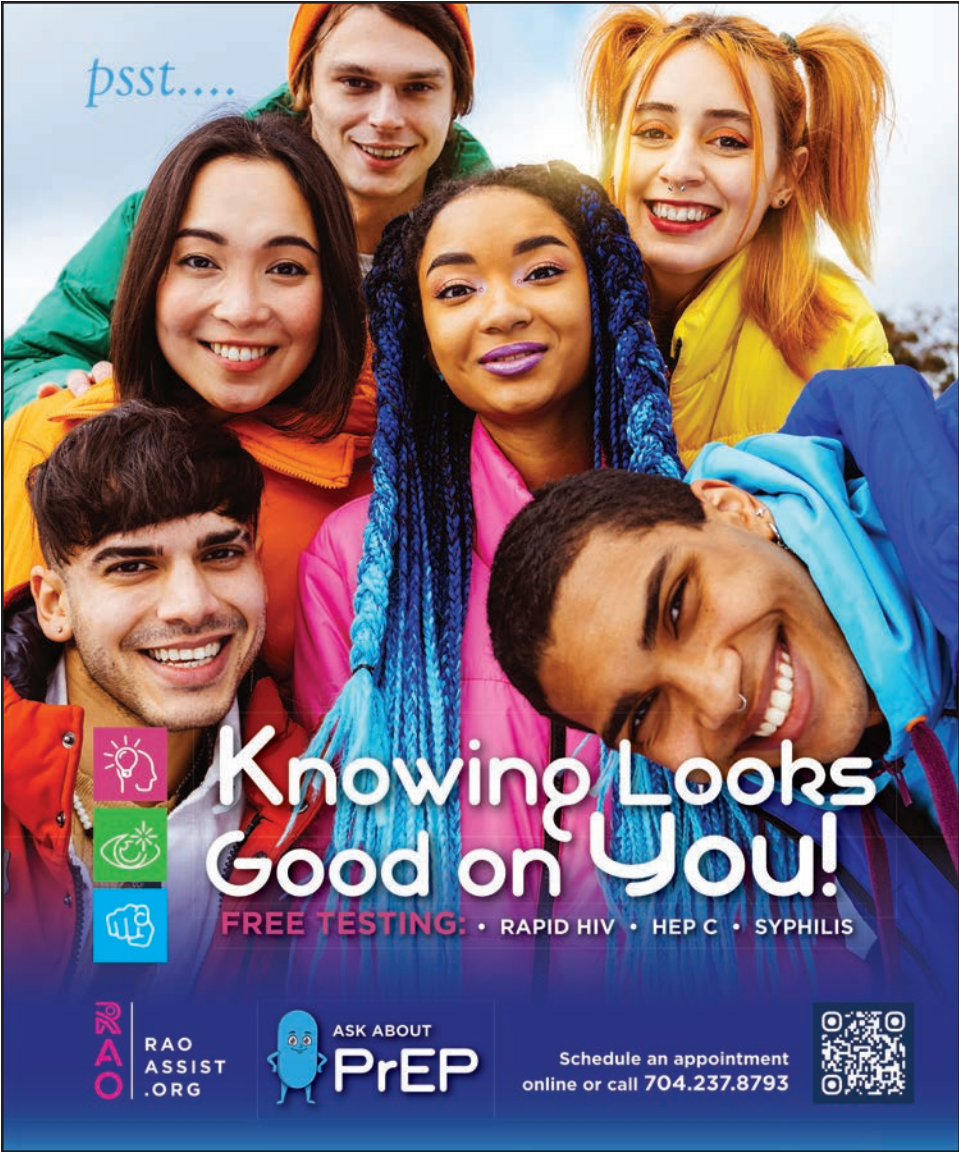
**ADDITIONAL NC RESOURCES**  
The LGBTQ Center of Durham  
<https://www.lgbtqcenterofdurham.org/>

Food Bank of Central and Eastern North Carolina  
<https://secure.foodbankcenc.org/>

Tranzmission and Talya Mazuz Memorial Food Pantry (Asheville)  
<https://www.facebook.com/TranzmissionAVL/>

Cornbread & Roses (Western NC)  
<https://www.cbrcounseling.org/>

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# Sandra Hamlin’s Brunswick stew

## Tasty Holiday Treats



by Wendy Lyons  
Qnotes Staff Writer

When the winter months settle in and the air turns crisp, the kitchen becomes more than a place to cook. It becomes a refuge. The soft simmer of a pot on the stove, the aroma of herbs and slow-cooked vegetables and the gathering of loved ones around a warm meal all offer comfort that reaches beyond the plate. Winter holiday recipes are more than seasonal traditions; they are stories told through flavor, memory and care. They remind us that in the coldest seasons, warmth is something we create with heart and soul, with hands and often with a well-loved wooden spoon.

One person who understands this wholeheartedly is Sandra Hamlin, a home cook who finds joy in preparing meals that bring people together. Known among family and friends for her generous spirit and festive gatherings, Sandra believes every holiday has a taste and every dish carries a memory. One of her most requested winter favorites is her homemade Brunswick stew, a hearty classic that fills both the belly and the soul. Below is Sandra’s go-to recipe, crafted with love and perfect for the season.

INGREDIENTS

- 4-5 lbs. chicken or chicken parts (I use legs and thighs)

- 6 inch piece of a double or other smoked sausage cut into half inch slices
- 1 can diced tomatoes, seasoned with salt of choice (lemon pepper is NOT recommended)
- Celery seed
- Garlic powder
- Smoked paprika
- Black pepper
- 4 chicken bouillon cubes
- 24 ozs. frozen baby lima beans (or butter beans)
- 15 ozs. can whole kernel corn

PREPARATION

Season chicken with seasoning salt and black pepper. Place in a Dutch oven or other large pot. Add sausage, diced tomatoes, bouillon cubes, celery seed, garlic powder and smoked paprika. Cover with water, bring to boil and lower heat to medium. Cook for approximately 45 minutes. Add lima beans, corn and potatoes. Cook for another 20 minutes, then enjoy.

Tips from Sandra:

- For deeper flavor, sear the chicken and sausage in olive oil before adding water.
- A rotisserie chicken works great if you need to save time.
- Sandra doesn’t measure seasonings; she eyeballs them. One brand of season salt is enough (she recommends Lawry’s).
- A pinch of crushed red pepper can brighten the flavors – but not enough to make it spicy. ::



Sandra Hamlin’s Brunswick stew.  
CREDIT: Courtesy Image

# “Night People: How to Be a DJ in ‘90s New York City”

## Out in Print



by Terri Schlichenmeyer  
Contributing Writer

“Night People: How to Be a DJ in ‘90s New York City”  
by Mark Ronson  
©2025, Grand Central  
\$29.00  
256 pages

You just can’t hold still. The music starts and your hips shake, your shoulders bounce, your fingers tickle the sky to match a beat. Your air guitar is on-point, your head bops and your toes tap. You can’t help it. As in the new memoir, “Night People” by Mark Ronson, you just gotta dance.

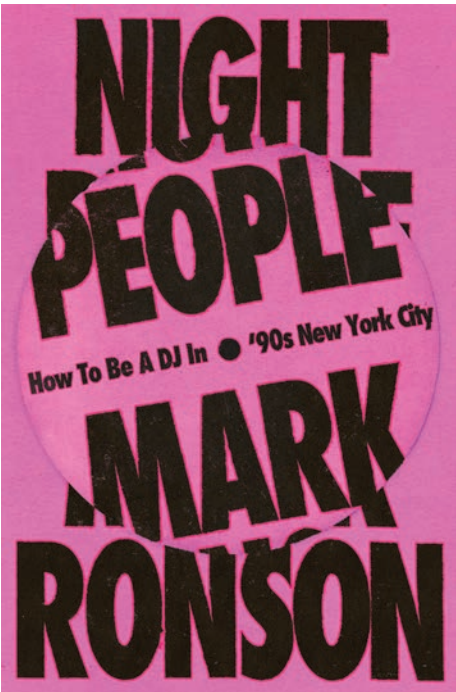
With a mother who swanned around with rock bands, a father who founded a music publishing company, and a stepfather who founded the band, Foreigner, it was natural that Mark Ronson would fall into a music career of some sort. He says he was only ten years old when he realized the awesome power of music.

Full backward compatibility with oriAs a pre-teen, he liked to mix music in his stepfather’s studio. As a teenager, he formed a band with Sean Lennon that didn’t quite catch on. In the fall of his senior year of high school, Ronson began sneaking into Manhattan clubs to listen to music, dance

and find drugs. It was there that he noticed the alchemy that the DJs created and he searched for someone who’d teach him how to do that, too. He became obsessed.

Finding a gig in a New York club, though, was not easy.

Ronson worked a few semi-regular nights around New York City, and at various private parties to hone his skills. His mother purchased for him the electronic equipment he needed, turntables and amps. He befriended guys who taught him where to get music demos and what to look for



at distributor offices, and he glad-handed other DJs, club owners and music artists. That, and the rush he got when the dance floor was packed, made the job glamorous. But sometimes, attendance was low, DJ booths were located in undesirable places, and that totally killed the vibe. Some people, he says, are mostly day people. For others, though, sunlight is

something to be endured. Nighttime is when they feel most alive. Part esoteric hip-hop discography, part biography, part SNL’s Stefan, and part cultural history, “Night People” very likely has a very narrow audience. If you weren’t deep into clubbing back in the day, you can just stop here. If you were ages 15 to 30, thirty years ago, and you never missed club night then, keep reading. This is your book. Author Mark Ronson talks the talk, which can be good for anyone who knows the highs of a jam-packed club and the thrill of being recognized for skills with a turntable. That can be fun, but it may also be too detailed: Mixology is an *extremely* heavy subject here. Many of the tunes he names were hits only in the clubs and only briefly, and many of the people he name-drops are long gone. Readers may find themselves not particularly caring. Heavy sigh. This isn’t a bad book, but it’s absolutely not for everyone. If you weren’t into clubbing, pass and you won’t miss a thing. If you were a die-hard club kid back then, though, “Night People” will make your eyes dance. \* \* \* Want more? Then check out “What Doesn’t Kill Me Makes Me Weirder and Harder to Relate To” by Mary Lucia (University of Minnesota Press). It’s Lucia’s tale of being a rock DJ in Minneapolis-St. Paul, life with legions of listeners, and not being listened to by authorities for over three harrowing, terrifying years while she was stalked by a deranged fan. ::



# Queer musician Roddy Bottum talks about new memoir “The Royal We”

Out in Music



by Gregg Shapiro  
Contributing Writer

A singer’s voice, distinctive and immediately recognizable, is the key to their success. It’s what earns them a devoted following of fans who will stick with them through thick and thin.

In recent years, a handful of memoirs by musicians, including “The Harder I Fight the More I Love You” by Neko Case, “I’ll Never Write My Memoirs” by Grace Jones, “Boys Keep Swinging” by Jake Shears, “Broken Horses” by Brandi Carlile, and “Trans Electric” by Cidny Bullens, have succeeded in capturing those voices in prose form.

The same can be said for gay musician Roddy Bottum’s memoir “The Royal We” (Akashic, 2025). Known by many for his membership in the bands Faith No More, Imperial Teen and Man on Man.

Bottum’s story, told without hesitation, is one of survival and resilience. Roddy was gracious enough to make time for an interview shortly after the publication of the book.

**Gregg Shapiro: Why was now the time to write your memoir?**

**Roddy Bottum:** During the first Trump presidency, as COVID hit, the noise of the right was getting painfully loud. It felt like lies, lies, lies, lies, lies. It infuriated me that people were just spouting off whatever they wanted to say, regardless of how their words landed. In that context, I wanted my voice to be heard and to shout back, to combat the hate-speak with my truth. It was also COVID times in which I was scrambling to stay sane and busy. I started doing “morning pages” every morning, and it became a book.

**GS: In chapter 31, you wrote, “I need to look up years. I have no idea what happened when, I’ve never known the year it was...” In chapter 33, it says, “I continue to write things down, but I still can’t remember them.” Does that mean you weren’t a journal keeper and relied on memory for the details in the book?**

**RB:** I don’t remember dates; I make no effort to. In a similar way, I lose everything. I kept journals throughout my life and wrote things down, but they’re all lost. I have a hard time holding on to things. I relied on memory for the details. I remember specifics, mostly in the throes of tragedy or extremely odd situations.

**GS: You are a Los Angeles native who eventually found his musical community in San Francisco. Did you ever consider becoming part of the L.A. punk scene alongside X, Dead Kennedys, Black Flag, the Go-Go’s and others?**

**RB:** I grew up seeing bands in L.A., so, yeah, I would see X and the Go-Go’s and a million other punk bands, but I was pretty young. I didn’t think about making music until I moved to San Francisco. I was so ornery when I left L.A., I wanted out. Even the punk scene felt superficial and kind of “made up”



Bottum Performing with Faith No More.  
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to me as a kid. Like, the Go-Go’s, though I love them, were so squeaky clean and poppy and cartoony. San Francisco felt more real.

**GS: Very early in the memoir, in the second chapter, you write about your experiences with alcohol as a teen, behaving “like we’d seen our parents do at their cocktail parties.” This was the beginning of your years of substance abuse, which later included drugs such as heroin. As a sober person, what was it like revisiting that part of your life?**

**RB:** I tend to glorify my drug years, and it feels weird. Undeniably, there are exciting peaks, stories and tales that buzz really loudly, know what I mean? The drama of what I went through doing drugs was exciting. There’s also a lot of pain, and the way that my drug use affected others that I’m aware of. I tried to not get too caught up in the guilt of what I’d done in my past as I wrote. It was complicated for sure. There were tears.

**GS: Speaking of parents, it isn’t until chapter 11 that readers see you fully interacting with your parents, and they continue to appear throughout the book after that. How do you think your late parents would react to the way they are portrayed?**

**RB:** My parents were really open-minded. I think they’d be put off for sure by my “overshare.” Like, “Roddy, do you really need to say all that?” And I’d be like, “Yeah, Mom. I do.” My dad was encouraging. I think in the best sense, my parents were open to learning from their kids.

**GS: How have your sisters responded?**

**RB:** Great question. It was the one thing that made me nervous. Divulging where

I went as a kid, particularly as a young boy, up into cruising zones, having sex with older men in bushes and in bathroom stalls...that felt like a lot to drop on my sisters, who basically know everything about me. But that was a secret that I hadn’t shared. They were surprised, but the takeaway was that they were supportive. Amongst themselves, I’m sure there were conversations. To me, they were just sweet and embracing. They’re so cool, my sisters. Like, the best.

**GS: Being gay is one of the central elements of the memoir, beginning with the fourth chapter in which you wrote about realizing you were queer from an early age and that, as you mentioned, your “sexual partners were adults.” Are you prepared for the various responses that will elicit from readers?**

**RB:** I’m hoping to push buttons, to provoke and prickle, if you will. I’ve always been one to push the envelope and challenge mindsets. Like I mentioned, it’s a truly ripe time to speak truths that are going to disturb and incite. I’m looking to start conversations and broaden the spectrum of what’s acceptable and not. Believe me, I’m aware of the reaction I’m sure to get and I’m living for it, yeah.

**GS: There are some wonderful queer moments in the book, including drinking “together in a small-town gay bar” with Robert Plant in chapter 26, and that Kurt Cobain “loved” that you were gay in chapter 27. Also, the time you kissed Kurt “goodbye on the lips and he said, ‘Mmmmm, you kiss me like a man, boy.’”**

**RB:** I kept a lot of the details and scenarios in the book to times in my life that resonated in a loud way to myself, things that changed me and opened me up. The queer moments that come up, particularly queer moments that happen alongside straight avenues, those are moments that got me through life. Pushing the envelope in worlds that may be initially resistant to accepting me for who I am. These are my victories.

**GS: Courtney Love also figures prominently in the memoir,**

**and she even blurb’d the book jacket. Would it be fair to say that she is comfortable with the way she is portrayed, and do you know if she has written or plans to write about you?**

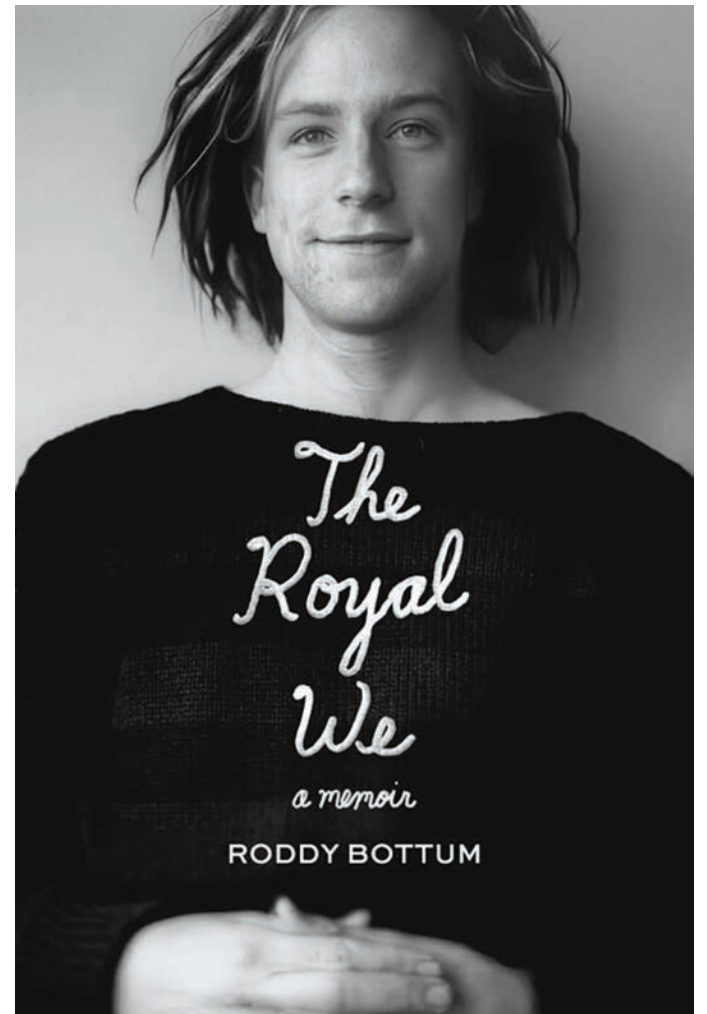
**RB:** Courtney read a really early draft of the book and loved it. She told me it was the best memoir she’d read. I took that as a “go” in terms of how she felt comfortable being represented. She was so inspiring to write about. Who could be better? She’s writing her own memoir, I can only hope I’ll be front and center.

**GS: In chapter 23, regarding the “combat between what I knew I should stand for and what I settled on,” you mention “casting myself in a movie of it.” If there were a movie adaptation of “The Royal We,” who would you want to play you?**

**RB:** I was in a movie [“Tyrel”] a couple of years ago with Caleb Landry [Jones], and he was such a unique and wild spirit. Let’s cast him.

**GS: Finally, because you are best known as a musician, are there plans for new albums by Imperial Teen and/or Man on Man?**

**RB:** Imperial Teen just finished recording our new record before I came out on this press tour. Hoping it’s finished and out by summer. Man on Man is going to write and record over the winter. Crickets, too, my other band, I’m in with JD Samson and Michael O’Neill. ::





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