

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

## Flag at Stonewall comes down and goes back up. What's next?



**Qnotes' Women  
of Distinction**  
- pg 12

**The weight  
of a letter**  
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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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**The many sides of aging for LGBTQ+ seniors**

Our elders face significant and disproportionate challenges, largely stemming from a lifetime of discrimination. Learn about that and a documentary you should watch.

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**Former Equality NC organizing director dies**

Aron Johnson was an important part of Equality North Carolina and a Democratic Party leader. He died unexpectedly on Feb. 4, 2026 at just 30 years old.

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**The People speak on Social Media**



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# How to vote in North Carolina's upcoming primary election

Some advance dates have already passed, although most have not



by Taylor Heeden Larkins  
Qnotes Staff Writer

It's that time again – North Carolina voters will head to the polls for the state's primary election, when political parties choose their nominees for the November general election. State election officials are urging voters to make a plan now – whether they intend to vote early, by mail or on Election Day.

The primary will be administered by the North Carolina State Board of Elections in coordination with county boards of elections across the state.

Election officials set several deadlines ahead of the primary:

- **Voter registration deadline:** Voters must have been registered by the state's deadline, which for this year's primary was Feb. 6.

- **Early in-person voting:** Early voting generally begins on Feb. 12 and runs through 3 p.m. on Saturday, Feb. 28 at 3 p.m.

- **Absentee ballot request deadline:** The deadline to request an absentee ballot has already passed. It was Tuesday, February 17, two weeks before Election Day.

- **Election Day:** On March 3, polls are open from 6:30 a.m. until 7:30 p.m. Voters in line at 7:30 p.m. are allowed to cast a ballot.

In 2026, North Carolina will hold its primary election on March 3, 2026, and general election on Nov. 3, 2026.

To vote in North Carolina's primary election, a person must:

- **Be a U.S. Citizen.**
- **Be at least 18 years old on or before the date of the general election.**
- **Have resided in North Carolina and in the voter's precinct for at least 30 days before Election Day.**
- **Not be serving an active felony sentence, including probation or parole.**

North Carolina holds partisan primaries. Voters registered with a political party may vote only in that party's primary. Unaffiliated

voting site, a person must provide proof of residence, such as a driver's license, utility bill or government document showing the voter's name and current address. It's important to note same-day registration is not available on Election Day.

North Carolina law also requires most voters to show photo identification when voting in person. Acceptable forms of ID include:

- **A North Carolina driver's license.**
- **A state-issued identification card.**
- **A U.S. Passport.**
- **Certain student or government employee IDs that meet state criteria.**

Voters who do not have an acceptable ID may obtain a free voter photo ID from their county board of elections. Those who are unable to present ID at the polls may complete an ID exception form and cast a provisional ballot, which will be reviewed by election officials.

Absentee-by-mail voters must include identifying information with their ballot materials as required by law.

North Carolina offers three ways to cast a ballot in the primary – early in-person voting, absentee voting by mail and Election Day voting.

During the early voting period, voters may cast a ballot at any designated early voting site in their county of residence. Hours and locations vary by county and are set by local election boards. Same-day registration is available only during this period.

Any registered voter may request an absentee ballot without providing a reason. Requests must be submitted by the statutory deadline. Completed ballots must be returned to the county board of elections by 7:30 p.m. on Election Day to be counted. State

law includes witness requirements for absentee ballots, and voters should carefully follow all instructions provided with their ballot.

On Election Day, voters must cast their ballot at their assigned polling place. Polling locations can be found through the State Board of Elections or by contacting the county board of elections. Voters should bring an acceptable photo ID.

Primary ballots may include races for U.S. House, statewide judicial offices, seats in the General Assembly and local contests. In some districts, a candidate must receive at least 30 percent of the vote to avoid a runoff election, known in North Carolina as a "second primary." Because many districts in the state lean strongly toward one party, some races may effectively be decided in the primary.

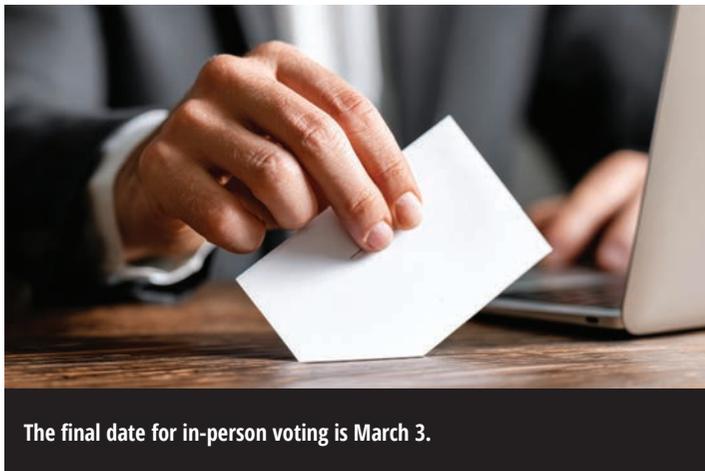
Election officials recommend that voters:

- **Verify their registration status and polling place location.**
- **Review a sample ballot in advance.**
- **Confirm early voting sites and hours.**
- **Allow extra time at the polls, particularly during peak hours.**

Voters with questions may contact their county board of elections or visit the State Board of Elections website for up-to-date information. Making a plan ahead of time,

officials say, can help ensure a smooth voting experience and that every eligible ballot is counted.

This primary election will designate the match ups for this November's midterm elections, and will serve as a litmus test of where the Tar Heel state – and the entire nation – stand in response to the current administration's policy direction. It's critical you and your loved ones make a plan to go to your polling place to cast your ballot to make your voice heard. ::



The final date for in-person voting is March 3.

voters may choose which party's primary ballot to cast, if the party allows it.

Eligible residents may register to vote online, by mail or in person at their county board of elections office. Registration forms are also available at many government agencies, including Division of Motor Vehicles (DMV) offices.

If a voter misses the standard registration deadline, North Carolina offers same-day registration during the early voting period. To register and vote at an early





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# “The Map of Us” podcast brings LGBTQ+ Media Mapping Project to life

The seven-episode series features publishers and editors discussing news deserts, funding challenges and the future of queer journalism



by Liz Schob  
Qnotes Staff Writer

When LGBTQ+ news disappears locally, what replaces it? A new national podcast series is asking that question.

“The Map of Us,” hosted by Dana Piccoli of *News Is Out*, is a seven-episode limited series designed to “bring the findings of the LGBTQ+ Media Mapping Project to life through candid conversations with the journalists and publishers doing the work.”

The series serves as a public companion to the LGBTQ+ Media Mapping Project, a national study led by Tracy Baim in partnership with the Craig Newmark Graduate School of Journalism at the City University of New York. The project was funded by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, with support from the Local Media Association and *News Is Out*.

The Media Mapping Project documented 174 LGBTQ+ media outlets across the United States. Baim and Hanna Siemaszko’s study confirmed “what many in the field already knew: Queer media is widespread, deeply local and operating on razor-thin margins. Nearly half of the outlets run on less than \$100,000 a year, yet they’re covering their communities in places where other media isn’t.”

At the same time, the research revealed



significant gaps. Baim noted in the *Dallas Voice* back in September 2025 that 18 states have no LGBTQ+ media and that many city-based publications are unable to cover their entire states. “That means millions of people have no local LGBTQ+ media coverage,” she wrote.

Each episode of “The Map of Us” focuses on a core finding from the research. Topics include queer news deserts, shrinking revenues, reporting under threat in states passing anti-LGBTQ+ legislation, collaboration as a survival strategy, leadership and ownership gaps and the increasing reliance on philanthropy and reader support as traditional advertising models erode.

The opening episode features Baim in conversation with journalist Alexander Rodriguez of the Los Angeles Blade, discussing why the mapping project exists and what it reveals about this moment in queer

media. Later episodes spotlight publishers and editors from across the country, including a conversation between *Dallas Voice* Publisher Leo Cusimano and *Tagg Magazine* Publisher Sondra Morris on collaboration between LGBTQ+ outlets.

Episode 7 centers on funding and the future of queer journalism, with *Dallas Voice* Managing Editor Tammye Nash speaking with *Buckeye Flame* Editor Ken Schneck and *Qnotes Carolinas* Publisher Jim Yarbrough about sustainability and revenue pressures facing LGBTQ+ outlets.

*Philadelphia Gay News* Editor Jeremy Rodriguez appears in Episode 4, which examines communities without local LGBTQ+ news coverage. In that episode, Rodriguez speaks with Nicole Leahy of The Community Center in Boise, Idaho, about visibility, connection and the consequences of the absence of dedicated queer journalism.

Piccoli anchors the conversations across seven episodes with a focus on sustainability and shared strategy, allowing newsroom leaders to speak candidly about the pressures they face and the adaptations underway. The result is not only a documentation of the current media landscape, but a clear articulation of what local LGBTQ+ journalism requires to endure.

Across outlets covering the launch, a consistent theme emerges: LGBTQ+ media is both deeply local and structurally vulnerable. *Philadelphia Gay News* described the series as examining “the growing challenges facing local

queer journalism,” including financial strain, safety concerns and audience demand for reliable reporting. *The Buckeye Flame* described the show as exploring “queer news deserts, shrinking revenues, safety and reporting under threat, collaboration, leadership and the growing need for philanthropy and reader support to sustain local queer journalism.”

In a September 2025 column about the Mapping Project, Baim wrote that philanthropy has historically provided limited support to LGBTQ+ media in part because most outlets operate as for-profit businesses. “But now that more funders see a need to support local for-profit media, this could open up an opportunity to support more of these outlets,” she wrote.

The Mapping Project also found increased willingness among LGBTQ+ outlets to collaborate across editorial and business lines. But as Baim noted, such efforts require time and resources.

“The Map of Us” positions those realities in conversation rather than isolation. By pairing research findings with firsthand accounts from newsroom leaders, the podcast documents not only where LGBTQ+ media exists, but what it takes to sustain it.

All seven episodes of “The Map of Us” are streaming now at <https://thebuckeyeflame.com/2026/02/03/the-map-of-us-the-lgbtq-media-mapping-podcast/> and major podcast platforms.

The full LGBTQ+ Media Mapping Project report and interactive map is available here <https://newsisout.com/lgbtq-media-mapping/>.

## views

# A call to do better

Letter to the Editor

To whom it may concern,

I am writing this letter with a heavy heart and real concern regarding the termination of Mr. Lorenzo Tucker, a respected community advocate and a member of the Charlotte Black Gay Pride community.

I want to be clear about the timeline. Mr. Tucker was terminated from his position at C.W. Williams Community Health Center before the “Bridging the Gap” event, which he later hosted in observance of National Black HIV/AIDS Awareness Day. That detail matters, because the event reflects the kind of community-centered work that is now being questioned and, in my opinion, unfairly so.

After losing his job, Mr. Tucker still showed up for the community. He went on to host “Bridging the Gap,” an event that created a

safe and affirming space for people living with HIV/AIDS. It brought organizations together and included a town hall where real, honest conversations took place about collaboration, equity and how we can do better together. It was powerful, needed and rooted in service, not competition.

When I learned about Mr. Tucker’s termination, I reached out to him directly because I needed to understand what had happened. As he explained the situation, I was deeply saddened. While Mr. Tucker is not an employee of Quality Comprehensive Health Center, he is part of my community, and I take that seriously. I am committed to standing up for my community, especially when actions taken against one person risk discouraging collaboration from all of us.

What troubles me most is that Mr. Tucker was acting as a

representative of Charlotte Black Gay Pride, not on behalf of C.W. Williams Community Health Center. Over the years, Quality Comprehensive Health Center and C.W. Williams Community Health Center have worked together. C.W. Williams has participated in events hosted by Quality, and collaboration has never been treated as a problem or a conflict of interest before.

Seeking clarity, I personally contacted Debra Weeks, CEO of C.W. Williams Community Health Center. She assured me that Mr. Tucker’s termination was not related to the Quality Comprehensive Health Center. However, that assurance did not align with documentation later shared with me, including a forwarded email from Jose R. Rivas, HR Director, which stated that the reason for termination was a “conflict of interest.”

That contradiction is deeply

concerning.

As community leaders, we cannot keep sweeping issues like this under the rug and pretending they don’t cause harm. Silence doesn’t fix anything; it erodes trust and damages relationships. This moment calls for honesty, accountability and a willingness to sit at the table and work through hard conversations.

We also have to be honest about the larger picture. In this political and funding climate, people are losing access to care every day. Programs are shrinking, resources are tightening, and the communities most impacted by HIV/AIDS and health inequities are suffering the consequences. At a time like this, we are fighting the wrong people.

No single organization can do this work alone. Collaboration is not a threat, it is a necessity. When we punish people for build-

ing bridges, we send the wrong message to advocates and public health professionals who are simply trying to make sure no one is left behind.

Mr. Tucker’s actions were not inappropriate or self-serving. They were rooted in service, advocacy and a genuine desire to create safe spaces for marginalized communities. Responding to that kind of leadership with termination undermines the mission we all claim to stand for.

I write this letter not only in support of Mr. Lorenzo Tucker, but as a call to do better. Our communities deserve leadership that values collaboration, protects advocates and puts people before politics.

Respectfully,  
Dr. Ra’Shawn D. Flournoy  
Chief Executive Officer  
Quality Comprehensive Health Center ::

## NC's Holly Springs town council adopts nondiscrimination ordinance

"Holly Springs offers a home to everyone without question, without exception," said Holly Springs Mayor Mike Kondratick as the town council voted to adopt Wake



Holly Springs Mayor Mike Kondratick wholly supports Wake County's nondiscrimination ordinance. CREDIT: Facebook

County's nondiscrimination ordinance (NDO) at Tuesday's meeting.

The new ordinance recognizes that Holly Springs finds discrimination in public accommodations and employment to be "detrimental to the health, safety and welfare of its residents and the peace and dignity of the town."

Holly Springs joins eight other municipalities within Wake County – including Raleigh, Cary and Apex – that have signed on to the nondiscrimination ordinance since 2022.

At Tuesday's hearing, Karyn Mulligan, a 26-year-resident of the town, said passing the ordinance was unnecessary, and placed an unfair burden on small businesses.

Longtime town resident Beth Richardson joined Mulligan in trying to persuade the council to reject the resolution once again, calling it "big government overreach."

"The people in this community have the 14th Amendment that was ratified in 1868, 158 years ago. That amendment gave everyone, not in Holly Springs, but in the entire United States, equal rights," said Richardson.

Richardson said in her 27 years living in Holly Springs, she hadn't seen anyone

denied employment or housing because of the color of their skin or whether they are male or female.

Council member Chris Deshazor suggested that Richardson's assessment was incomplete.

"Look around in this room – the majority of you could not vote on equal rights 158 years ago, because only white males could vote," said Deshazor. "We have to continue to evolve and to grow."

Under the Wake County Interlocal Agreement, protected classes include race, natural hair or hairstyles, ethnicity, creed, color, sex, pregnancy, marital or familial status, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, natural origin or ancestry, national guard or veteran status, religious belief or non-belief, age or disability.

Resident Donna Friend said it was sad that folks opposing the NDO had largely been focused on sexual identity and sexual orientation.

"I would suspect each of us in this room fits into one or more categories," Friend told the council. "And if you don't, you probably have friends and family members who fit into one of those categories."

Tuesday's 5-1 vote follows nearly four years of rejection by prior town council members.

In 2022, then-council member Aaron Wolff spoke out against an "intolerant

minority" when then-Mayor Sean Mayefskie dismissed efforts to sign on to Wake County's nondiscrimination ordinance and issue a proclamation to recognize Pride Month.

All current members of Holly Springs Town Council have been elected in the past three years.

Only Danielle Hewetson voted against the NDO.

Mayor Kondratick said the council's vote Tuesday evening was a recognition that many residents and businesses have been far ahead of elected officials to this point.

"I think that adopting Wake County's nondiscrimination ordinance means that the letter of our law matches the power of your example," said Kondratick.

Holly Springs has seen explosive growth in recent years, attracting major science and biotech businesses including Fujifilm Diosynth Biotechnologies, Amgen and Genentech. The vast majority of those larger U.S. employers have established nondiscrimination policies as part of their corporate culture.

"Once we know better, we do better," said Sarah Lawson, who joined the town council in December. "No percentage is too small to fight discrimination." ::

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

— Clayton Henkel / NC Newsline

## National travel website chooses most LGBTQ friendly cities in N.C.

The website *Islands.com* recently released their list of cities and towns in North Carolina deemed as tops for LGBTQ+ folks. Among them are Chapel Hill, Greensboro, Carrboro, Charlotte, Durham, Winston-Salem, Raleigh, Wilmington, Cary and the Outer Banks. Though the article didn't rank the cities, **Charlotte** placed fourth on the list as one of the areas that queer folk felt represented.

The Queen City's growing population has inevitably brought with it an ever-increasing queer scene. Charlotte's various LGBTQ+ organizations create plenty of opportunities to keep us busy. More than 200,000 people attend CLT Pride annually. Pride-related events, like the LGBTQ+ film

festival, are big draws for local and surrounding communities. Charlotte also has a rich history of LGBTQ+ clubs and bars, popular restaurants and community events.

Of particular note is **Chapel Hill**, known as a progressive college town and for its welcoming environment. Rainbow flags can be seen along Franklin Street. And the official town website doesn't hide its queer history. In 1987 and 1991, the city elected the first openly gay councilman, Joe Herzenberg. The town's inclusive history has led to many opportunities for queer people, like UNC Health's gender affirming care.

With the third highest population in the state, **Greensboro** was consistently



North Carolina offers a number of great places to live and visit.

ranked as one of the most LGBTQ-friendly cities in North Carolina. The Guilford Green Foundation & LGBTQ Center plays a large role in queer life. By creating support groups, space for events and access to health care, Greensboro ensures that LGBTQ+ lives are taken care of and valued.

In 2025, the town got a perfect score of 100 (for the fifth year in a row) on the Human Rights Campaign's Municipal Equality Index.

Oddly missing from the list? **Asheville**. Considering the city's large queer population and progressive politics, it's a mystery why the town wasn't included.

Though state legislation continues to restrict queer rights, cities and towns like Charlotte and others listed here continue to support and protect their communities with NDOs that provide welcoming environments. Any of the towns and cities chosen by *Islands.com* are well worth a visit as well as a potentially great place to call home. And so is Asheville! ::

*For more details, visit the Islands website at <https://www.islands.com/2087316/most-inclusive-north-carolina-cities-lgbtq-people-welcoming-communities-comfortable-living/>.*

— Jaylen Jones

## Canadian trans woman kills eight people at secondary school

In Tumble Ridge, British Columbia, 18-year-old Canadian Jesse Van Rootselaar shot and killed a total of nine people. Rootselaar was known for having an interest in guns, mass violence and called depictions of violence "addictive."

Rootselaar shot and killed her 39-year-old mother and 11-year-old stepbrother. After, she walked from her home over to Tumble Ridge Secondary School at 1:30 p.m., and shot a total of six people. Officers arrived two minutes after an initial call was made. Once on school property, shots were fired in their direction.

The victims at the school were identified as one 39-year-old teacher and five students – three 12-year old girls and two boys, 13 and 12. Police also counted 24 people

who were wounded.

Most of the victims were found in the library, and one was found in a stairwell. Rootselaar was found with a self-inflicted bullet wound alongside a long-barreled gun and a modified pistol.

When asked about Rootselaar's motives for the shooting, Police Deputy Commissioner Dawayne McDonald told reporters, "There is no information at this point that anyone was specifically targeted."

In a briefing of the event, Officer McDonald revealed that they frequently visited Rootselaar's home for reported mental health concerns. On one occasion, Rootselaar was apprehended under the provincial Mental Health Act.

Officers returned to the residence



Canadian trans woman Jesse Van Rootselaar reportedly suffered from mental health issues and had an intense interest in violence. CREDIT: Facebook

when they received details of an expired gun license. The suspect's guns were taken

away—but were returned after filing a petition. When asked if the guns used in the shooting were the ones previously seized, the police were unresponsive.

Though rare, the Canadian government has responded to previous mass shootings harshly with strict gun control, including a ban on guns it considers assault weapons.

The Tumble Ridge shooting was one of the deadliest assaults in Canada since 2020, when a gunman in Nova Scotia killed 13 people and created a fire that burned nine more.

In a town of 2,300 residents and a school of 160 students, this small community was greatly impacted by their loss. Town Mayor Darryl Krakowka called the event "devastating."

Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney responded to the shooting, pointing out that, "parents, grandparents, sisters and brothers in Tumble Ridge will wake up without someone they love." ::

— Jaylen Jones

## Invisible Histories to host Queer History South conference

Invisible Histories, a community-based archive preserving LGBTQ+ history in the South, will host the 2026 Queer History South virtual conference Feb. 20-21, bringing together historians, archivists, students and community members from across the region.

The annual conference serves as a convening space for those researching, preserving and documenting the history of queer and trans people in the U.S. South. Designed as both a scholarly and community-centered gathering, Queer History South creates opportunities for participants to share research, discuss archival practices and strengthen regional networks focused on preservation. It is structured to support both academic scholarship and community-based history work, reflecting the reality that much of Southern LGBTQ+ history has been preserved outside traditional institutions.

This year's conference will be held virtually, allowing participants from across the

South to engage in panels and discussions without geographic barriers. The event is part of a broader effort to ensure that Southern LGBTQ+ history is not only preserved but actively studied and shared.

Invisible Histories, co-founded by Joshua Burford and Maigen Sullivan, PhD, serves 13 Southern states: Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Florida, Louisiana, Kentucky, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia and West Virginia. The organization is also relocating from Birmingham, Ala. to Charlotte this spring, expanding its presence in North Carolina as it continues its regional work.

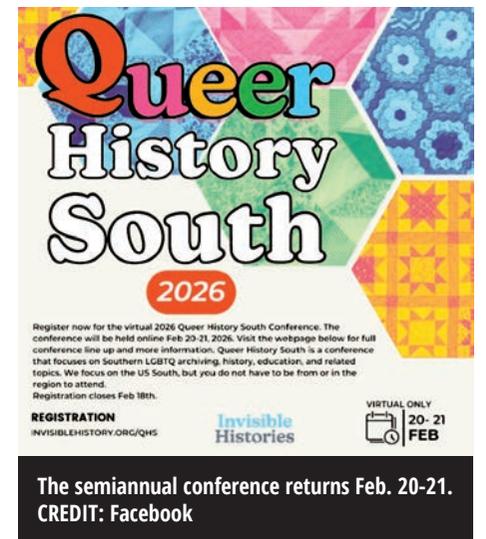
The archive is actively collecting materials in six states: Alabama, Georgia, Florida, Mississippi, North Carolina and South Carolina. According to its website, the organization has recovered more than 1,000 pieces of LGBTQ+ history. These materials include records that document the lived

experiences, organizing efforts and cultural contributions of LGBTQ+ Southerners.

Queer History South functions not only as an annual conference but also as an ongoing network connecting LGBTQ+ historians and archivists throughout the region. The gathering supports research opportunities for students, faculty and community members working in institutional and community-based archives, while also encouraging collaboration among preservation partners.

Invisible Histories identifies four core areas guiding its work: community engagement; archiving, preservation, research and scholarship; education; and professional development and best practices.

Community engagement includes building relationships with local communities to support collaborative preservation and research. Archival efforts involve direct collection and preservation of materials, as well as facilitating scholarly access. The organization also provides education on Queer Southern history through exhibitions, speaking engagements, online resources and publications. Professional development efforts focus on supporting emerging scholars and collaborating with universities, libraries,



The semiannual conference returns Feb. 20-21. CREDIT: Facebook

museums and community-based archives to strengthen preservation partnerships.

By convening Queer History South 2026 virtually, Invisible Histories continues advancing regional collaboration and expanding access to LGBTQ+ Southern history. ::

— Liz Schob

## Former Equality NC organizing director Aron Johnson dies at 30

Aron Johnson, former organizing director for Equality North Carolina and a Democratic Party leader who served as Affiliated Organizations Committee Chair, died unexpectedly on Feb. 4, 2026. He was 30 years old.

The LGBTQ Democrats of Wake County first shared news of Johnson's passing on Feb. 5, writing, "Saddened to hear of the passing of Aron Johnson, a true activist and advocate in our community." He was working on a campaign in Colorado at the time of his passing. The post noted that Johnson served as the North Carolina Democratic Party's Affiliated Organizations Committee Chair and worked with Equality NC, where many saw him staffing booths at Pride festivals across the state last summer.

Equality NC confirmed his death the following day. In a public statement, the organization wrote, "Aron believed in the power of

community." The statement continued, "Those who worked alongside Aron Johnson knew this to be his guiding light. As our organizing director at Equality NC, and in every leadership role he held, he didn't just lead efforts – he built a foundation for justice that will support this movement for years to come."

The organization added, "While we may not have Aron's joy and light with us anymore, his impact, passion and legacy will remain in our hearts and minds as we continue the work he believed in. Rest in power, friend."

Johnson had served as organizing director for Equality NC, the state's largest LGBTQ+ advocacy organization. In that role, he led grassroots organizing efforts, represented the organization at Pride festivals and community events and helped coordinate statewide engagement around LGBTQ+ issues and legislation.



Aron Johnson at the 2024 Democratic National Convention. CREDIT: Facebook

Beyond his work with Equality NC, Johnson held significant leadership positions within the North Carolina Democratic Party. He served as affiliated organizations

committee chair, was a member of the State Executive Committee and previously served as a precinct chair in Guilford County. His work connected LGBTQ+ advocacy with broader Democratic organizing efforts across North Carolina.

Johnson also worked on several national campaigns over the course of his career, including Hillary Clinton's 2016 presidential campaign, Elizabeth Warren's 2020 campaign and the Biden-Harris 2024 campaign.

Following news of his death, organizations across North Carolina, including the North Carolina Democratic Party and the Young Democrats of North Carolina, issued statements honoring his life and leadership. In those tributes, he was remembered for his "unwavering belief in democracy" and his "heart of gold."

Details surrounding Johnson's death have not been publicly released. For many across the state's LGBTQ+ and Democratic organizing communities, he is remembered first and foremost for his belief in community and the work he helped build. ::

— Liz Schob

## Asheville and Buncombe County stand up against DEI critic's allegations

Officials from Asheville and Buncombe County went to the Legislative Building in Raleigh to rebut allegations they were using Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) policies to help Black people to the exclusion of other races.

They were responding to Ruth Smith, an Asheville lawyer and unsuccessful Republican legislative candidate, who told the House Select Committee on Government Efficiency in January that the city and county are using "equity" to allocate resources based on race.

Buncombe County Chairwoman Edwards told the committee that was not true. "We are here to correct the record and any misinterpretations," she told the committee.

Edwards explained that the county used its Racial Equity Action Plan to make sure information is reaching underserved communities, which include public housing,

which she said has a growing white population in rural areas.

"There have been no instances where race-based criteria or other protected characteristics have been used in any of our work, including hiring, contracts or allocations of revenue," she said.

Over the last year, Republicans have worked to dismantle DEI programs and policies in federal, state and local government.

The legislature passed a bill along party lines banning DEI initiatives in state and local government and giving government employees the ability to sue their employer if they believe it violated the bill's provisions.

Gov. Josh Stein, a Democrat, vetoed the bill, and the legislature has not overridden his veto, though it still may do so.

Republicans on the committee were skeptical of Buncombe officials' claims that they were abiding by the law.

Rep. Brian Echevarria (R-Cabarrus) asked Edwards what changes the county made to correct past flaws. "Go ahead and confess your faults," he told Edwards.

Edwards said they didn't have any.

Rep. Keith Kidwell (R-Beaufort), a committee co-chairman, didn't like the word "equity."

"The moment you inject equity, you lose equality," Kidwell said, "because equity is going to give you the outcome that is desired by whatever group is setting the equity tolerance."

Republican legislators keyed in on the Community Reparations Commission that Asheville sponsored and Buncombe supported.

Members were appointed in 2022 and the commission delivered its final report last month.

The commission found great disparities between Black and white city residents in educational outcomes, health-related outcomes, homeownership rates and poverty rates, said Asheville Mayor Esther Manheimer.

City Attorney Brad Branham said the recommendations were not about providing individuals money, but were aimed at

community investment policies.

Kidwell said the oversight committee may have to revisit the issue "when the payments start flowing out."

Rep. Phil Rubin (D-Wake) said even though racially discriminatory practices like redlining were outlawed decades ago, their impacts are still with us today.

For example, he said, the poverty rate is 2 ½ times higher for Black Buncombe residents versus white residents, The infant mortality rate for Black infants in Buncombe is also 2 ½ times that of white infants, and the disparity is even greater in North Carolina as a whole.

Rubin said he'd rather see the committee work on those things rather than focus on banning DEI.

"How can we get it to be that infant mortality isn't so different by race across the state?" he asked. "Because that reflects poorly on us, and it is not getting better." ::

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— Lynn Bonner / NC Newsline

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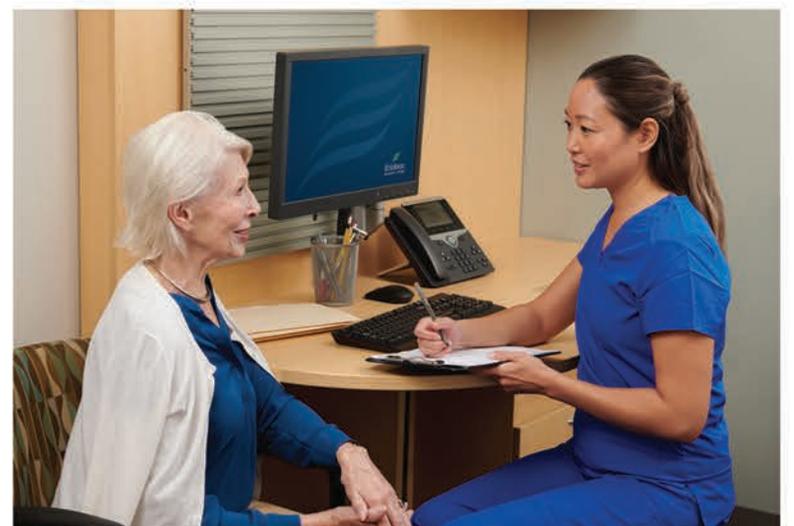
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# Rainbow Flag at Stonewall removed, replaced, then a lawsuit follows. What's next?

Senators announced legislation to permanently authorize display of Pride flag at Stonewall National Monument



by Jaylen Jones & David Aaron Moore  
Qnotes Staff Writers

On Monday, Feb. 9, the Rainbow Pride flag that flew above the Stonewall Monument in New York City was taken down by National Park authorities, at the behest of the Trump administration. After being questioned about the flag's removal, the National Park Service stated that they were following federal guidelines issued on Jan. 21.

Located in the center of the tiny park in Manhattan's Greenwich Village. The first and only LGBTQ+ monument can be seen across from the Stonewall Inn, where the riots that later came to be known as the Stonewall Uprising occurred across six days beginning June 28 and continued through July 3, 1969. The flag was permitted to fly on Federal property beginning in June, 2021, and has served as an important reminder to patrons and the surrounding community about the fight by earlier generations for LGBTQ+ visibility and safety.

When park services were questioned by USAToday as to why it was taken down, they said, "With limited exceptions, only the U.S flag and other authorized flags are



The Rainbow Pride Flag was raised back into its proper place at the Stonewall monument Feb. 12.  
CREDIT: Screen Capture ABC News 7

permitted on flagpoles managed by the agency." Exceptions are flags of historical context, current military branches and federally recognized tribal nations.

Though rainbow flags wave outside businesses and city-owned fences, advocates fought for the flag to fly on federal property. The flag was added to the monument in 2019 as a symbol of the federal government acknowledging the queer community.

Hundreds of people gathered in the area Feb. 10 to protest the removal of the flag in the park and on social media. Stonewall Inn

owner, Stacy Lentz, was surprised by the flag's disappearance and explained the importance of speaking up. "We cannot allow the government to erase a historical fact," she said.

Just two days later on Feb. 12, New York City officials and activists reinstated the Pride flag at the Stonewall National Monument. Despite the Trump administration and National Park Service's removal, outrage and accusations of erasure from LGBTQ+ advocates saw local leaders and community members come together in direct retaliation to federal attempts to restrict the display of LGBTQ+ symbols at recognized historic sites.

A protester agreed with Lentz and told USA Today: "Right now, we need to speak up for one another. Right now it's just a flag, soon they'll tear down Stonewall [and] tear down the monument."

Manhattan Borough President, Brad Hoylan-Sigal, also expressed his disapproval as an openly LGBTQ+ elected official, "on one level, removing a flag seems extremely, I guess, pedestrian." The Manhattan representative continues, "but the symbolism of doing it here at Stonewall is what is so profoundly disappointing and frightening."

Not only does he worry about his visibility, but also the visibility of his family. Married with two kids, he wonders how his children feel about the event. "It's deeply

troubling because...What are they supposed to think? That the president of the United States doesn't want their family represented in a national Landmark?"

But it doesn't stop there.

Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer (D-N.Y.), along with Representative Daniel Goldman (D-NY) announced legislation on Feb. 15, to protect and permanently authorize the display of the LGBTQ Pride flag at the Stonewall National Monument. The bill aims to classify the flag as federally authorized because of its placement and historic significance.

And if you think that's all going on in the fight to keep the Rainbow Pride flag in place at the Stonewall Monument, you'd be wrong.

On Feb. 17, a coalition of LGBTQ+ advocates and community groups, including the Gilbert Baker Foundation, Equality New York and Village Preservation sued the Trump administration in federal court for the removal of the Pride flag.

Represented by Lambda Legal and the Washington Litigation Group, the plaintiffs argue the move was an "arbitrary and capricious" act based on anti-LGBTQ+ animus and in violation of existing policies that allow for historical context flags.

As of this writing, there has been no official response from the Trump administration. ::

# ICE treatment of gay couple in CLT reflecting a national trend?

Illegal deportations, a shooting death and lack of medical care say ICE is targeting the LGBTQ+ community



by David Aaron Moore  
Qnotes Staff Writer

Although Qnotes regularly reports authentic names in news stories, there are the rare occasions when we make exceptions for safety concerns of the individuals we're reporting on. That's the case here. We've chosen a couple of names that are common for the country of Azerbaijan: Fazal and Alikhan.

In a recent newsletter from Val Rosenquist, the Senior Pastor of First United Methodist Charlotte wrote about a November marriage ceremony she and executive Pastor Jim Sanders performed for two men who had immigrated to the U.S. from Azerbaijan.

The two men were adapting to life in the Queen City comfortably, living in uptown Charlotte building a home renovation business. During a routine immigration appointment for Alikhan in January, Fazal became concerned when his husband failed to return home.

According to a report in the Charlotte Observer, Fazal contacted the immigration facility to find out that Alikhan had been detained and moved to the DHS office on Tyvola Centre Drive. Shortly thereafter he was moved again to the Stewart Detention Center in Georgia. For several days there was no report on the missing spouse's status.

In an interview with the Charlotte Observer, Fazal said of his husband who had literally vanished: "He kind of disappeared. They just stole him, robbed him ... You're doing everything together. You're cooking here, you're drinking here, you're watching TV and that person is no longer with you."

Department of Homeland Security Assistant secretary Tricia McLaughlin defended the rights of federal agents to arrest Alikhan and described him as an "illegal alien" who repeatedly "missed check-ins."

The couple's attorney says none of that is true.

During the time Alikhan was held at the Stewart Detention Center, he became increasingly ill. Despite Fazal's efforts to intercede with a request of medical help for his husband, he was ignored.

Eventually, Fazal reached out to Rosenquist, the Charlotte pastor from First United Methodist who had performed their wedding ceremony. She contacted the office of North Carolina Senator Thom Tillis. After Tillis intervened, Alikhan's medical condition was reviewed and he was given the necessary medication.

The Observer report confirms that Fazal was allowed to visit Alikhan in Georgia for his birthday on Jan. 30. He still exhibited signs of illness and anxiety. Since that time Alikhan officially announced during a court date in early February he would be leaving the United States, or "self deporting," rather than face possibly endless months in de-

tainment while his case was debated. Faisal has said he will follow him soon after.

As of now their future is somewhat unclear. Both men confirm that finding employment in Azerbaijan will be difficult. They anticipate rural residency and possibly farming to survive. "It's good that we'll meet after some time," Fazal said after their decision was made official. "But that doesn't change that our own lives [are] just destroyed."

Fazal and Alikhan's story of harassment by U.S. immigration officials under the guidance of the Trump administration indicates a possible pattern of action against both immigrants and American-born residents in the LGBTQ+ community. Other reports confirm ICE and DHHS are continuously ramping up overall efforts against immigrants nationwide.

## The impact of ICE's actions against the LGBTQ+ community nationwide

In March 2025, openly gay Venezuelan immigrant Andry Hernandez Romero, who legally sought asylum in the United States, was illegally deported to El Salvador and held at the notorious CECOT mega prison. After 125 days he was released and sent back to Venezuela where he is attempting to rebuild his life.

An earlier case that occurred during the first Trump administration was that of Roxsana Hernandez, a transgender woman who was fleeing violence in Honduras. She died while in ICE custody



Two Azerbaijan men - immigrant status legal in Charlotte - choose deportation over prison and separation.

in New Mexico in 2018, reportedly from inadequate medical care.

Then in Minneapolis, there was Renee Nicole Good, a 37-year-old mother of three and married to wife Becca, who was fatally shot during an encounter with agents in Minneapolis on Jan. 7.

The latest story of immigration injustice for LGBTQ+ individuals comes from a report dated Feb. 23. Farah, who identifies as a 21-year-old gay woman, left the country of Morocco for fear of imprisonment and violence from her family, according to an Associated Press report.

Under the Trump administration she has been forced to return to Morocco, where her own family had attempted to kill her because of her sexual orientation. "It is hard to live and work with the fear of once again being tracked by my family," she said in the interview. "But there is nothing I can do, I have to work." ::

# The many sides of aging for LGBTQ+ seniors

Our elders face challenges unique to our community



by David Aaron Moore  
Qnotes Staff Writer

Seniors in the LGBTQ+ community face challenges vastly different from their heterosexual counterparts. The majority of LGBTQ+ seniors alive in today's world identify as The Silent Generation (born between 1928-1945) and the Baby Boomer Generation (born between 1946-1964). Even a handful identify as Generation X (born between 1965 and 1980).



LGBTQ+ seniors face challenges their heterosexual counterparts don't – it's up to us all to care for our community elders.

Whatever the age, generation or culture you recognize as your own, chances are you've likely experienced the sting of intolerance, discrimination, isolation and societal judgment. And that's something queer folks of all ages can acknowledge these days, especially in our current political climate.

LGBTQ+ seniors, however, face significant disproportionate challenges, largely stemming from a lifetime of discrimination, stigma and systemic inequality. They are more likely to experience poverty, profound social isolation, poor health outcomes and often have smaller support networks because they are less likely to have children or partners.

### Watch this documentary

To get a good look at the actual lived human experience, check out Stu Maddux's 2010 documentary "Gen Silent." Although the film is over 15 years old, it still shares valuable insight as it follows

the lives of six gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender seniors (in Boston) as they confront a difficult choice: remaining open about who they are and risk hostility, or hide their identities to survive in the healthcare system.

One of the subjects from the film was Krysanne Hembrough, a veteran and a transgender woman who had already lived through decades of discrimination. When Hembrough considered moving into a nursing home, she didn't do so with optimism, she did so with dread. A previous experience in care had been traumatic: Staff were reluctant to even assist with basic personal needs when they learned she was transgender. They frequently avoided physical contact during care routines, leaving her feeling humiliated, isolated and unsafe. That memory, she said, pushed her to exhaust every alternative before agreeing to consider institutional care again. Regrettably, Hembrough passed away before the documentary was finished.

Also featured in the film were lesbian partners Sheri Barden and Lois Johnson. After decades together, they worried deeply about how a long-term care facility would treat them – not just as individuals, but as a couple. In one nursing home they visited, fellow residents whispered and stared, and staff looked confused when the couple identified each other as spouses rather than "friends."

Facing the very real possibility of discrimination, Johnson considered the idea of hiding their relationship just to avoid the emotional pain of exclusion.

"Gen Silent" is available to stream for free in most areas if you have a public library card or you're a student at an institute of higher learning. It's included in the vast library of films on the Roku app Kanopy and at the Kanopy website, located at <https://www.kanopy.com/>.

### An epidemic of LGBTQ+ senior mistreatment

For many LGBTQ+ elders, discrimination can seem insurmountable. Surveys conducted by organizations advocating for older gay, lesbian and trans adults reveal hundreds of reported instances of mistreatment in care

settings, ranging from deliberate misgendering and ignoring a person's partner to outright refusal to provide basic care because of a patient's identity. These accounts come from lived experiences from long-term care facilities across the country where many older people must rely on others as they age.

### The importance of telling their stories

Through it all, these seniors have exhibited remarkable resilience. Their lives tell stories of love that endured for decades, of rebuilding community after profound loss and of advocating – not just for themselves – but for future generations of LGBTQ+ people. They also remind us that while legal protections have expanded in many places, lived experience and fear of discrimination still influence how senior queer and trans adults think about care, housing and trust.

### Breaking the cycle of dismissal

In American society, far too often, the lives of those 60 and over are dismissed and discarded, as though the individuals living in this period of their life have little to contribute, or have outlived their usefulness. That's far from the truth: The value of LGBTQ+ senior lives is not only in what they

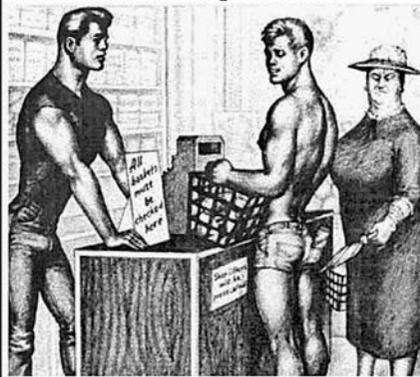


Krysanne Hembrough in a scene from the documentary 'Gen Silent.' CREDIT: Facebook

endured, but in what they have built. They created community centers where none existed. They organized pride marches before they were corporate-sponsored festivals. They formed support networks for youth who had been rejected by their families. They advocated for anti-discrimination laws, for hospital visitation rights, for the right to be counted in census data, the decriminalization of same sex relationships and the right to marriage equality.

No matter how old we are, it's important to validate the lives of seniors in our community, and to take it a step further. Listen to their stories, offer a helping hand and break the cycle of dismissal and non-validation. Be a friend with others in our community who lived their youth in a different period from your own. You'll be surprised at what we can all share and learn. ::

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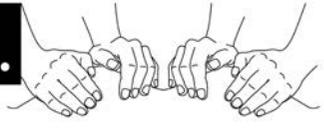
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# LGBTQ+ Women of Distinction

Qnotes honors LGBTQ+ women in Charlotte whose work is shaping our community today



by **L'Monique King & Liz Schob**  
Qnotes Staff Writers

In every community, there are women doing the steady, intentional work that helps others thrive. Qnotes' LGBTQ+ Women of Distinction recognizes leaders in Charlotte whose impact is shaping this moment. These women are showing up with clarity, consistency and care, strengthening LGBTQ+ life in our city through leadership that is both visible and deeply felt.

## Ann Gonzales

In 1998 Ann Gonzales moved from Waco, Texas to Charlotte, N.C. Inspired to start a marketing business after attending a Charlotte LGBT Business Expo, Gonzales has a plethora of skills ranging from Digital IT and Web Design to non-profit leadership.



**Ann Gonzales.**  
CREDIT: Facebook

She's a proud Filipino who embraces her roots, although she wants to make one point perfectly clear: "My biggest thing is to let people know, though I'm Filipino – I don't just represent Filipinos, I represent all Asian communities."

Gonzales, who previously served as president of the Carolinas Asian American Chamber of Commerce is now the organization's strategic adviser. In this new role she is tasked with training the new president for the role she occupied since 2016, providing guidance with all operations and answering questions regarding community outreach and how the board functions.

Of her experience with inclusive Chamber of Commerce organizations, Gonzales readily recalls the beginning of her journey.

"A lot of my knowledge and work is focused on small business for all communities, not just the Asian community. I started with the Carolinas LGBT+ Chamber of Commerce in 2012 under [former organization president] Theresa Davis's mentorship as the organization's secretary."

As time moved on, Gonzales quickly made her way up through multiple positions that led to her own presidency. In 2019 Gonzales took a break from her duties as chamber president to assist her mom with the care of her ailing

father – a career marine sergeant – who fortunately lived long enough to walk her down the aisle for her wedding in October 2022.

One event that has helped her heal from the loss of her father was the Carolinas LGBT+ Chamber's annual Friends and Diversity event; a brain child she conceived and worked on with Chad Turner [current president and CEO] bringing together the chambers for African Americans, Latinos, and Asians. It's a unifying event Gonzales is proud to see grow larger each year. With all that going on, Gonzales still struggles to balance her professional and family life.

That's part of the reason why she retired from her role as president of the Asian American Chamber of Commerce. As for the individuals who come behind her, it's her wish that they remember their work is "not about one person, it's about community."

## Chelsea Gulden

Chelsea Gulden identifies as part of the microgeneration known as Xennials. Xennials (born between 1977 and 1983) are often referred to as a cusp generation bridging Generation X and Millennials.



**Chelsea Gulden.**  
CREDIT: Facebook

Maybe that's why Gulden is a woman who has made a career out of bridging gaps in public health for those who often face health care disparities, particularly in the realm of HIV health and wellness. Gulden, a native of New Jersey, has been living in Charlotte since 1998 and at the helm of RAIN, a prominent organization providing HIV intervention and prevention to the area's community residents since 2021. Serving as RAIN's president and CEO is a joy and labor of love for her.

Among her greatest accomplishments, says Gulden, are "being a mother to my children and the children and adolescents [living with HIV] who grew up in the EPY (Empowering Positive Youth), who I started taking care of in 2006."

Gulden is a devoted mother of four – three biological children and one step child – to whom she gives her whole heart and soul. While passionately leading her staff at RAIN and serving on multiple committees and boards, she has learned the invaluable lesson of saying "no" and prioritizing her own self-care – something she wishes she had embraced earlier in life.

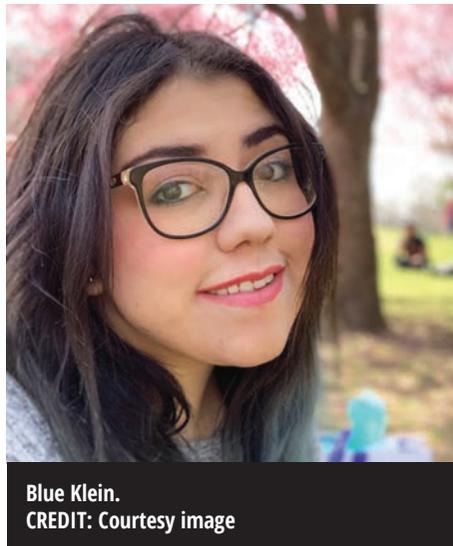
That's also her wish for younger women and budding female professionals. "They should value themselves and recognize their needs are important, meaningful and worthy." Reflecting on Women's History Month Gulden says, "I love being a woman. I also think as women, we often fall into the habit of caring for others so much that we don't care for ourselves. This month is a time to reflect and honor our achievements and each other in ways we may not intentionally do during other times."

## Blue Klein

Blue Klein understands the power of being seen.

As communications manager for the Freedom Center for Social Justice, she builds the bridge between bold advocacy and the communities it serves. But for Klein, the work is personal.

Originally from Colombia and raised in a conservative environment, she speaks



**Blue Klein.**  
CREDIT: Courtesy image

openly about the journey of unlearning and growth that shaped her commitment to LGBTQ+ and trans advocacy.

"Being able to help the communities I was raised to misunderstand," she says, "is how I leave my mark on the world."

After a decade in Florida, Klein moved to North Carolina seeking an environment more aligned with her values. She found it at the Freedom Center, where faith, social justice and LGBTQ+ liberation intersect. What keeps her committed is seeing advocacy move beyond rhetoric. "It's not just saying the work needs to be done," she says, "it's watching it happen."

Whether supporting immigrant communities, amplifying trans voices or helping mobilize voter engagement, Klein's work centers survival and collective endurance. "No system of oppression lasts forever," she says.

In the spaces between the work, she turns to books, Lego builds and the steady comfort of home with her partner and her two cats.

What gives her hope is simple: the next generation. "The fights we're having now," she says, "are so they don't have to."

## Bethany McDonald

Bethany McDonald has spent more than two decades building spaces where people

feel safe, seen and connected.

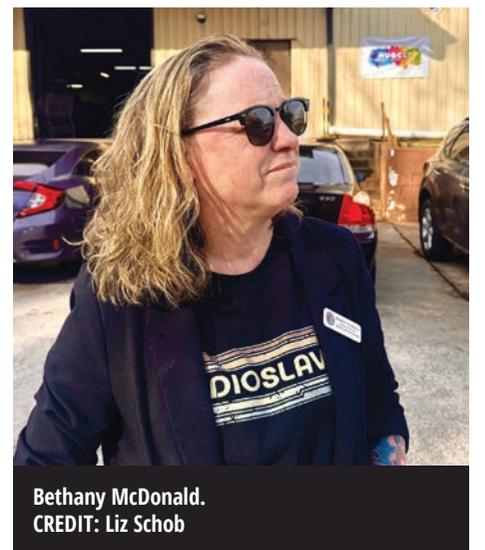
For many in Charlotte's LGBTQ+ community, that work took shape at Hardigan's, the lesbian bar she owned. What began as a nightlife space became something larger: a cornerstone where friendships formed, relationships began and chosen family took root. That same spirit carries into her work as DJ Little Betty, where she fills rooms with music and watches people at their happiest, celebrating milestones, finding each other and claiming space together.

Today, that same instinct to create refuge lives in Heart United for Good.

Since 2019, she has helped grow HUG into a nonprofit that adapts to meet community needs, from food security to animal advocacy to support for schools and smaller organizations. The pantry has expanded significantly, but for McDonald, the impact is measured less in numbers and more in feeling.

"I love being able to make so many people happy," she says. "Seeing everybody else have a good time or feel relief is the most important thing in the world to me."

From dance floors to pantry shelves, her legacy is not defined by buildings or programs. It is defined by one constant:



**Bethany McDonald.**  
CREDIT: Liz Schob

creating spaces where people can exhale, feel welcomed, and know they belong.

## Abby Mederos

Abby Mederos has helped shape the Carolinas LGBT+ Chamber of Commerce from the inside out.

Joining the organization over three years ago as its first staff hire beyond the CEO, she stepped into a role that was still being defined. Today, as director of operations, she oversees events, systems and strategy for an organization that has expanded regionally and opened a dedicated Impact Center for members and entrepreneurs.

"I love understanding people," she says. "When you see different cultures and backgrounds come together and realize they have more in common than they thought, that's community."

That belief comes to life at Chamber events, where she finds purpose in watching connections form across differences. "Anytime I hear someone say, 'This really is a community,' that's why I do it," she says. "Seeing people



**Abby Mederos.**  
CREDIT: Liz Schob

who have never met each other building relationships makes it all worth it."

She also founded the Chamber's internship program, creating a pathway for students to gain professional experience and mentorship. In two years, she has worked with 12 interns, helping cultivate the next generation of leaders.

A second-generation Cuban-American, Mederos draws strength from her heritage and from the belief that progress requires persistence. Her message to her younger self remains steady: "It'll all be all right."

#### Meredith Thompson

Her favorite color is teal; she's a Gen Xer and a force to be reckoned with. Meredith Thompson is a name many associate with Charlotte Pride.

Quite possibly that's because she has been a fixture with the organization for some time now. Currently Thompson serves as the organization's managing director - at the helm of Charlotte's largest annual parade and countless activities leading up to the massive uptown event.

Thompson has been in this role for four years but confirms her weighty tasks as managing director has made the duration feel as though the time has passed in dog years!

Thompson, who previously owned the Canine Café (closed in September 2024) along with her wife, grew up in Memphis, Tenn. but has been a North Carolina resident since the '90s. She moved to the Charlotte area shortly after graduating from Davidson College with a degree in English.

"I'm proud of having kept a business going for a couple of decades and the joy it brought to so many people who love dogs," she



**Meredith Thompson.**  
CREDIT: Facebook

beams. "It's really tough to keep a small business going - especially a brick and mortar."

When it comes to the challenge of engaging difficult people in her many roles, Thompson embodies an old adage with a smile, "Kill 'em with kindness. It's better and healthier for you and the cause you're trying to affect." With her passion for "equity for all beings," it's no surprise this vegan powerhouse would land in the positions she's embraced so fondly.

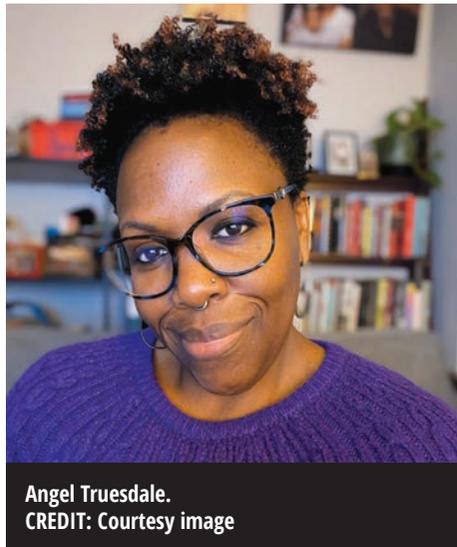
For individuals that follow in her footsteps, she offers the following: "My hope would be, in spite of everything, that they continue to believe in themselves and a better world. Right now, they [our current administration] are essentially trying to take voting rights away from married women or anyone who has changed their last name.

"So, we have to look back and be inspired by the women of the past who have bravely fought in the face of adversity."

#### Angel Truesdale

Angel Truesdale believes stories matter.

Born and raised in Charlotte, she has woven together scholarship, film and community engagement into a life centered on representation and access. As a research and instruction librarian at UNC Charlotte, she helps students navigate information and inquiry. Beyond the classroom, she has long supported Charlotte Pride, Reel Out Charlotte and the Independent Picture House, elevating queer and trans stories through film.



**Angel Truesdale.**  
CREDIT: Courtesy image

"Identity is everything, and representation is everything," Truesdale says. "Our stories deserve to be told. We are not a monolith. We are all of the things."

For Truesdale, film is immersive and transformative, a way to step into worlds beyond your own. That belief carries into her advocacy on campus, where she serves as president of the LGBTQ+ Staff and Faculty Caucus and helps sustain community amid shifting policies. She also champions the university's LGBTQ+ archives, which preserve Charlotte's rich queer history for researchers and the broader public.

As a Black LGBTQ+ woman, Truesdale speaks candidly about the impossibility of separating the personal from the political. Grounded in family, chosen and biological, and inspired by cultural icons, she practices mindfulness and emotional intelligence as tools for resilience.

"I live my life out loud," she says. "I'm proud that I've been able to be authentically myself."

For Truesdale, joy is not incidental. It is intentional, and it is sustaining. ::

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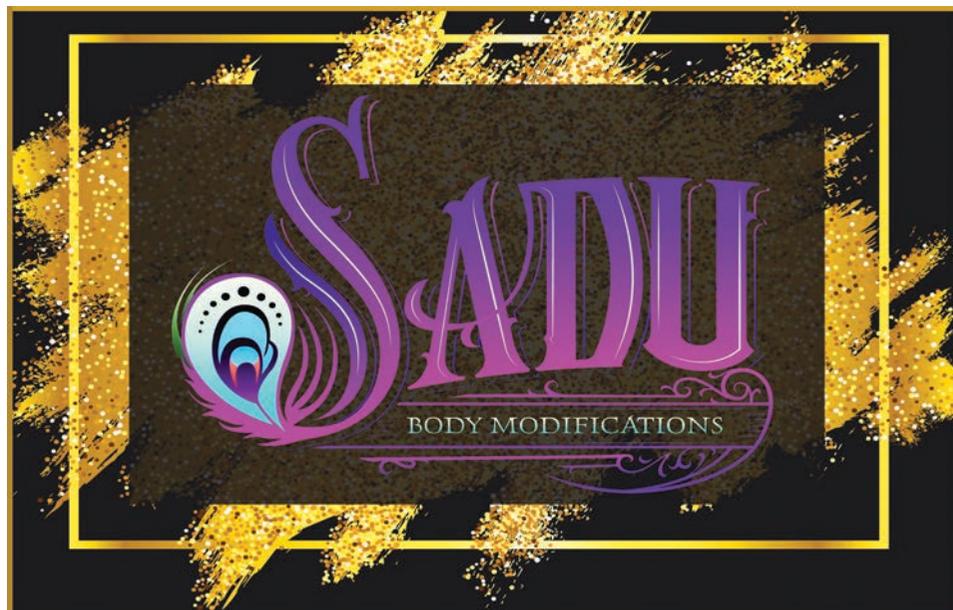
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# The weight of the letter 'L' in LGBTQ+

From Sappho to the AIDS crisis, how lesbian history, labor and recognition shaped the order of LGBTQ+



by Liz Schob  
Qnotes Staff Writer

The order of four letters might seem minor, but it is not. For years, people have asked why the “L” appears first in LGBTQ+. Was it alphabetical? Political? Intentional? Was it a symbolic decision layered onto the acronym later? The answer is more layered than a slogan and less tidy than a single origin story. There is no archived vote that reordered the letters, no formal announcement declaring that “L” would move ahead of “G.” Like much of LGBTQ+ language, the acronym evolved gradually, shaped by use rather than mandate. But gradual does not mean accidental.

To understand why the “L” comes first, you have to begin much earlier than the AIDS crisis. You have to begin with a poet.

## Before the acronym, there was a name

The word “lesbian” derives from the island of Lesbos, home of the ancient Greek poet Sappho. Writing in the sixth century BCE, Sappho composed lyric poetry that expressed love and longing between women. Only fragments of her work survive today, preserved in scraps of papyrus and later quotations. What remains comes to us in pieces, incomplete yet enduring, carried across centuries despite deliberate attempts to erase women’s voices from the historical record.

It is important to be careful here. Ancient Greeks did not operate with modern sexual identity categories. There were no equivalents to “gay,” “straight” or “lesbian” as contemporary labels. It would be historically inaccurate to assign Sappho a modern identity. Still, her association with love between women endured long after the specifics of her life blurred.

By the late nineteenth century, English-language writers began using the term “lesbian” to describe women who loved women and the geographic adjective evolved into a sexual identity term. At first, it carried negative connotations, often used in medical or moralizing contexts. Over time, women reclaimed it. Organizations such as the Daughters of Bilitis in the mid-twentieth century intentionally invoked Sappho in naming their publication *The Ladder*. The word “lesbian” became a site of self-definition. It was claimed rather than imposed.

## Identity before coalition

The modern acronym LGBTQ+ grew in stages. “Gay” emerged as a political identity in the twentieth century. “Bisexual” and “Transgender” gained broader visibility as organizing and scholarship expanded. “Queer” was reclaimed from slur to umbrella term. Additional letters were added as recognition expanded.

Professional organizations like the American Psychological Association emphasize that language surrounding sexual orientation and gender identity evolves through social use. Terms reflect shifts in understanding and power. They are not fixed by decree.

Coalition language followed identity language. First came lesbian communities. First came gay organizing. Only later did umbrella acronyms attempt to gather distinct experiences into a shared political shorthand.

The acronym followed that pattern. It

was not engineered in a single moment. It accumulated. Which means its order reflects not bureaucracy but memory.

## The years when care meant survival

In the early 1980s, AIDS began devastating gay communities across the United States. Federal leadership ignored it. Public health systems struggled. Fear and stigma intensified the crisis. In many instances families abandoned family members and institutions failed to respond quickly or adequately. In that vacuum, care became a form of resistance.

Lesbians stepped into roles that were immediate and necessary. Most were not themselves contracting HIV, like gay men. These women organized meal delivery, staffed clinics, coordinated transportation to medical appointments, and provided hospice care. They advocated with insurance companies and sat in hospital rooms where others would not dare enter. They built networks that held people together when formal systems turned their backs.

The San Diego Blood Sisters is a prime example of a lesbian-led group that organized blood drives for AIDS patients at a time when gay and bisexual men were barred from donating. They mobilized donors and worked directly with blood banks so patients could receive transfusions. Similar efforts appeared in other cities.

Oral histories preserved by the ACT UP Oral History Project document lesbians serving as organizers, media strategists, researchers and caregivers within AIDS activism. Their participation was not symbolic. It was structural. When survival required infrastructure, they helped build it.

## What the record confirms and complicates

There is no single document announcing that the acronym was reordered because of this work. Archival material from the late 1980s and early 1990s shows “GLBT” and “LGBT” used interchangeably. The shift in usage was gradual and uneven, shaped by culture rather than decree. That does not weaken the story. It clarifies it.

Much of the labor performed by lesbians during the AIDS crisis was never fully preserved in institutional archives. Care work, particularly work performed by women, has historically been undervalued and under-recorded. Organizations such as Invisible Histories now work to preserve materials that might otherwise have been discarded. Recognition often follows the work itself. Sometimes it arrives years later.

Advocacy organizations have been explicit in how they interpret that history. Both GLAAD and the Human Rights Campaign describe the placement of the “L” at the front of LGBTQ+ as an acknowledgment of lesbians’ leadership and care giving during the AIDS crisis. They do not frame it as a bureaucratic origin story. They frame it as collective recognition.

Scholars who study identity formation note that political language often accumulates meaning through shared experience. Symbols can come to represent values that were felt long before they were formally articulated. In that sense, the “L” at the front of LGBTQ+ reflects a community’s understand-



Arden Eversmeyer founded Lesbians Over Age Fifty in 1987 to combat isolation and preserve oral histories.  
CREDIT: Facebook

ing of who carried the weight when it mattered most. It signals who stood in the gap.

## A longer lineage of survival

The AIDS crisis was not the beginning of lesbian organizing, nor was it the end.

A recent review published by GLAAD of the documentary “Old Lesbians” highlights the work of Lesbians Over Age Fifty, founded in 1987 to combat isolation and preserve oral histories. In the film, founder Arden Eversmeyer recalls growing up without the vocabulary to describe her identity. There was no language readily available. Community existed long before recognition caught up.

The fragments of Sappho’s poetry survived across centuries. Lesbian organizing survived through word of mouth, newsletters, community centers, living rooms and whispered networks. AIDS-era caregiving survived through oral histories and personal collections.

Seen in that broader arc, the “L” at the front of LGBTQ+ does not assert hierarchy. It acknowledges continuity. It reflects a decision, gradual but meaningful, to recognize lesbian labor, intellectual lineage, and community-building as foundational rather than an afterthought.

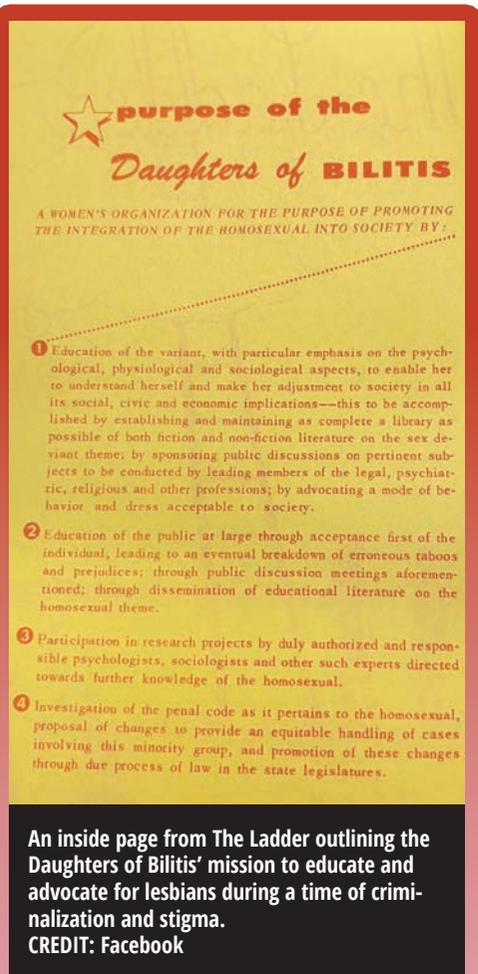
## Why this still matters

Debates about the LGBTQ+ acronym are not abstract. They surface in moments of political tension. The Trump administration has led efforts to remove letters from public discourse and government websites. When letters disappear, communities become more vulnerable. It is the canary in the coal mine.

Understanding why the “L” appears first clarifies what those letters signify. They mark histories of struggle and solidarity. They reflect a community looking back at its own survival and choosing to recognize those who stood in the gap.

There was no single announcement that changed the order. There was a crisis. There was care. There was memory. And over time, there was recognition.

The order of letters tells a story. It reminds us that visibility often follows labor and that acknowledgment, even when it comes later, still matters. ::



An inside page from *The Ladder* outlining the Daughters of Bilitis’ mission to educate and advocate for lesbians during a time of criminalization and stigma.  
CREDIT: Facebook



Lesbian activists march in public defiance, reflecting the organizing and visibility that shaped the “L” in LGBTQ+.  
CREDIT: Facebook



The San Diego Blood Sisters organized blood drives to ensure patients received transfusions at a time when gay and bisexual men were barred from donating.  
CREDIT: Facebook

# Queer representation took center stage at Super Bowl LX

From Brandi Carlile's opening performance to Bad Bunny's halftime show, LGBTQ+ visibility was present on one of the world's largest stages



by **Liz Schob**  
Qnotes Staff Writer

Queer artists and allies were prominently visible throughout Super Bowl LX, marking a significant moment of LGBTQ+ representation during one of the most-watched cultural events in the United States. From the game's opening performances and the halftime show, queer visibility was integrated into the event's core spectacle in ways that were

performed "America the Beautiful" during the Super Bowl broadcast. Speaking to *Variety*, Carlile described her decision to appear as a moral responsibility. "I have my own moral code, my own moral imperative... and I believe in my ability and responsibility to do this, and that's why I'm here," she said, adding that representing a marginalized community on the country's largest stage is "something you don't say no to. You do it." Rock band Green Day also appeared during the broadcast, delivering a high-energy performance led by frontman Billie Joe Armstrong, who has spoken openly about being bisexual. The

and cultural commentary.

The halftime show belonged to Bad Bunny and became the night's most concentrated expression of queer community and culture. As the first artist to headline a Super Bowl halftime show with a full Spanish-language set, the Puerto Rican artist delivered a Spanish-language performance centered on Latin identity, family and celebration. He opened with "Tití Me Preguntó" and performed "Yo Perreo Sola," a song long embraced by queer fans and previously accompanied by a music video featuring Bad Bunny in drag. The choreography included two male dancers performing together, a brief but unmistakable moment of same-sex intimacy on one of the world's most visible stages.

Bad Bunny was joined by two queer pop icons whose presence carried their own historical weight. Lady Gaga emerged midway through the set to perform "Die With a Smile" in a new arrangement. Long embraced by LGBTQ+ audiences for both her advocacy and her music, Gaga's appearance

underscored her enduring relationship with a community that has consistently shaped her career. Later, Ricky Martin joined the stage, marking a moment that resonated deeply for many viewers. As one of the most globally visible Puerto Rican pop stars of his generation, Martin's later decision to come out as gay helped dismantle barriers around masculinity, sexuality and Latin identity in mainstream music.

Queer visibility extended beyond the performers themselves. Coverage noted that celebrities including Pedro Pascal were present during the halftime show. Pascal has been widely recognized as a vocal ally to the LGBTQ+ community, particularly in his public support of his transgender sister, Lux Pascal.

Super Bowl LX offered a snapshot of how queer artists and allies continue to reshape America's most traditional cultural spaces. At a moment when LGBTQ+ inclusion is increasingly politicized, Super Bowl LX placed queer artists, allies and cultural influence squarely front and center. ::



Super Bowl LX included Brandi Carlile's opening performance and Bad Bunny's halftime show with Lady Gaga and Ricky Martin.  
CREDIT: Screenshot

both celebratory and symbolic rather than relegated to the margins.

Brandi Carlile, who is openly queer,

band performed "American Idiot," a politically charged anthem that added another layer to a night shaped by queer visibility

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