



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



Spring in the city

Festivals, music,
theater and more



**A Women's
HERstory month
shout out**
- pg 10

**The evolution
of lesbian spaces
in Charlotte**
- pg 9



DUDLEY'S DIVAS

PEACE, LOVE & 1970S DRAG BRUNCH

SUNDAY, MARCH 29, 2026

**TWO SEATINGS
11A & 2P**



**FEATURING LILLI FROST, NOVA STELLA, KAREN
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SCAN THE QR

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CAN YOU DIG IT?!



The
DEGENERATE

2116 N DAVIDSON ST, SUITE A, CHARLOTTE, NC 28205



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Mission:

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

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inside this issue

feature

12 Spring in the City:
festivals, music,
theater & more

news

- 5 HRC North Carolina marks 30 years with statewide focus at 2026 dinner
- 6 History made by Netherlands' youngest and first gay Prime Minister
- 6 Pope Leo will continue to bless same-sex couples despite his views
- 6 House Resolution proposes national ban on LGBTQ+ books in public schools
- 7 College of Charleston students speak out about loss of LGBTQ+ resources
- 7 Durham gay man sentenced for cyber stalking other gay men in The Triangle
- 7 Trump takes a greater aim at trans youth and voter eligibility
- 8 Record number of out athletes capture medals at '26 Winter Olympics

a&e

- 14 Out in Print: 'La Lucci'
- 15 Out in Music:
Guess again: an interview with gay singer/songwriter Mike Maimone

life

- 9 The evolution of lesbian spaces in Charlotte
- 10 A Women's HERstory Month shout out

views

- 4 Another Charlotte gay couple battles ICE even as Kristi Noem is out of DHS

events

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



Out in Music: an interview with Mike Maimone

Gay singer/songwriter Mike Maimone tells a story of love and loss through song about his late husband Howard Bragman. In 2022 the pair began a whirlwind, long-distance relationship, marrying in early 2023 shortly before Bragman died of acute myeloid leukemia. Maimone shares his feelings in his most recent album "Guess What? I Love You."

PAGE 15

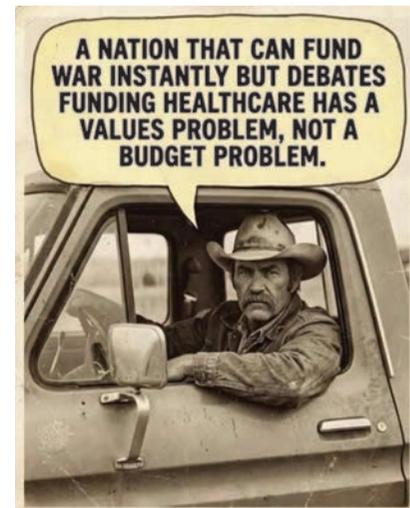
HRC North Carolina marks 30 years at 2026 dinner

"Our 30th anniversary is coming up March 21," says Sarah Castleman, HRC NC Steering Committee Chair and co-chair of the NC dinner. "We're super excited to celebrate." For three decades, the annual event has served as a formal gala and a barometer for where the state stands politically and culturally. This year, the statewide celebration takes place at the Westin Charlotte.

PAGE 5



The People speak on Social Media



For entertainment only. *Qnotes* does not vouch for factual authenticity.

Another Charlotte gay couple battles ICE even as Kristi Noem is out of DHS

Latin gay man's partner detained, may force deportation



by Taylor Heeden Larkins
Qnotes Staff Writer

The news of the ousting of Department of Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem sent waves of relief to many across the country, but for many others, the impacts of increased immigration enforcement operations are ongoing and continue to be a source of distress.

Charlotte was the central point for immigration enforcement operations in the Tar Heel State last year with "Operation Charlotte's Web" – an aggressive crackdown in Charlotte Nov. 15-20. Reportedly arresting as many as 400 individuals, it has raised widespread concerns about racial profiling, due process and community safety. The operation was led by U.S. Border Patrol, whose masked agents arrived in unmarked SUVs carrying rifles.

Federal officials, including the now-fired Noem, 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.

Throughout the five days, Trump's border patrol agents brought chaos throughout the Queen City, with residents across Charlotte reporting encounters with federal agents in shopping centers, parking lots, supermarkets, churches and residential areas.

ICE didn't stop with the end of Operation Charlotte's Web

As recently reported in *Qnotes*, a gay couple from Azerbaijan had their lives in Charlotte turned upside down when Department of Homeland Security Assistant secretary Tricia McLaughlin declared one of the men an "illegal alien" who repeatedly

"missed check-ins." Although his attorney says that's not true, the couple decided to return to Azerbaijan.

Incidents with immigration officials, ICE and the LGBTQ+ community have since continued. On a late February morning at around 6:30 a.m., Luis Duque was driving his boyfriend Oscar to work when police lights lit up behind them. Duque pulled over, thinking the lights from the patrol vehicle were Charlotte-Mecklenburg officers. Instead, he and Oscar were surrounded by



In happier times: Luis Duque (left) with his detained boyfriend Oscar.
CREDIT: Instagram

10 armed federal agents in masks, asking for identification.

"They stated that they're looking for somebody, an individual, with the same car description as mine, and that they needed to identify us," Duque said. The vehicle Duque drives is a 2023 Toyota Camry, and according to an interview he did with *The Charlotte Observer*, agents never showed paperwork or a warrant to justify the stop. Duque handed the agents his ID, but Oscar – who is in the process of

getting his citizenship – didn't have an ID.

Duque told reporters he had a feeling he knew what would happen once he learned it was ICE and Border Patrol agents making the stop. Nothing prepared him, however, for what would come next. Agents asked Oscar to step out of the car to be detained, and when Duque asked agents if he could step out of the car too so he could say goodbye to Oscar, he was denied and told to stay in the vehicle for the agents' safety.

In videos Duque took and shared with *The Observer*, Duque can be heard asking agents if he could get out and say goodbye "just in case" he didn't get to see Oscar again. When Duque insisted he wanted to get out of the car after agents' rejection, an agent told him "All right that's it, man," before walking away and taking Oscar with them.

"These aren't criminals that they're grabbing. Oscar has no criminal record," Duque said. "It's about human decency. You wouldn't want to see your loved one getting taken away."

From the traffic stop, Oscar was taken to a Department of Homeland Security office located on Tyvola Centre Drive in south Charlotte. During a short phone conversation, he told Duque that officials had presented him with two choices: accept \$2,500 to voluntarily return to Mexico or remain at a detention facility in Georgia for three to four months while waiting for a hearing before a judge.

"He really didn't know what to do and asked me what he should choose," Duque said. "But I don't know either. I just don't know."

Oscar was then taken to Stewart Detention Center in Lumpkin, Georgia, which has been continually reported on for its poor conditions including inadequate food for detainees, lack of medical care, safety issues amongst the facilities and more.

When Oscar called Duque again from Georgia on Thursday, he said a court hearing had been set for March 9. Duque advised him not to take the self-deportation option. He also said he had contacted a lawyer to explore the possibility of getting Oscar released from the detention center and returned to Charlotte so he could attend his court proceedings there.

In the same phone call, which lasted barely over a minute according to Duque, Oscar confirmed the conditions of the detention facility were abysmal, at best.

"Those detention centers are horrible," Duque said. "Jail is a mercy compared to those centers."

Oscar, who was brought to the United States from Mexico when he was two-years old, has been working with an immigration attorney since 2018 to get his citizenship.

Recently, he finally took major steps forward, filing critical paperwork in his citizenship process. Now, Duque says that progress feels like it's slipping away. The attorney who had been helping Oscar shows little urgency, Duque said, and won't speak with him because he isn't the client.

So Duque has started reaching out to other lawyers — ones he says seem to grasp how urgent the situation is and are willing to help.

In all of this madness, Duque finds himself wishing the agents on that fateful day would've let him say goodbye to the person he loves more than anything. "[I wanted to] at least give him a hug," Duque said. "I don't know what's gonna happen."



Duque and Oscar's reality is one that millions of Americans are currently living in. While the firing of Noem is a step in the right direction, there is still much work to be done to reverse the damage caused by DHS, ICE and the Trump administration. ::



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HRC North Carolina marks 30 years with statewide focus at 2026 dinner

Organizers say this year's event centers rural leadership, young voices and a renewed emphasis on people power



by **Liz Schob**
Qnotes Staff Writer

For three decades, HRC North Carolina's annual dinner has functioned as more than a formal gala. It has served as a barometer for where the state stands politically and culturally and as a gathering point for those navigating that terrain.

On March 21, the organization will mark its 30th anniversary at The Westin in Charlotte. The theme, "30 Years Fit for a Queen," nods to both the milestone and the Queen City. But organizers say this year's dinner is not simply reflective. It arrives at a moment when North Carolina once again finds itself at the center of national political gravity.

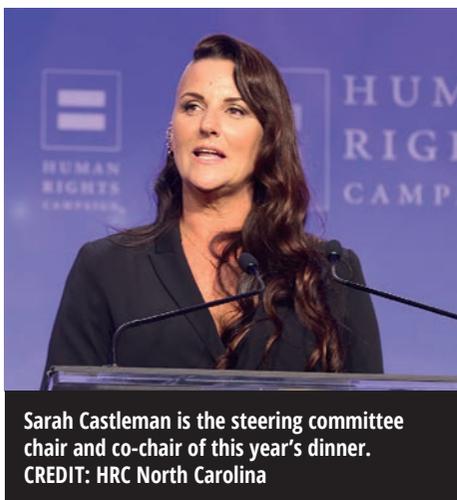
"North Carolina is going to be at the center of the political universe this year," said **Cameron Pruette**, a national Board of Governors member and leader with HRC North Carolina. "What happens in North Carolina will affect each of us living here, but it will also affect the country and the world."

With competitive federal races ahead and state-level contests tightening, he added, "Every vote is going to count," pointing to a recent state Supreme Court race decided by just 734 votes.

For an organization that operates at the intersection of national infrastructure and local advocacy, that context shapes everything.

"Our 30th anniversary is coming up on March 21," said **Sarah Castleman**, steering committee chair and co-chair of this year's dinner. "We're super excited to celebrate. Thirty years of HRC's impact in North Carolina is huge."

But celebration, organizers say, is only part of the story.



Sarah Castleman is the steering committee chair and co-chair of this year's dinner.
CREDIT: HRC North Carolina

A Statewide Recalibration

In previous eras, large-scale LGBTQ+ events in North Carolina have often centered Charlotte or the Triangle. This year, organizers say the focus is intentionally broader.

"The biggest change is making it more focused on everybody across the state, not just Charlotte or Raleigh," added steering committee member and co-chair

Brian Femminella. "We're focusing on people who are on the ground doing the work that are often overlooked."

That recalibration is not cosmetic. It reflects a recognition that visibility and infrastructure are unevenly distributed across North Carolina. While larger cities may have more established networks, smaller and rural communities often carry the work with fewer resources and less public attention.

"Our goal is to reach the mountains all the way to the coast," Castleman said. This year's honorees reflect that statewide lens.

The Dan Mauney Community Award will go to **Asheboro Latinxs Services (ALS)**, a rural-based organization serving Latinx and LGBTQ+ residents as well as people living with HIV/AIDS. Operating out of Asheboro, ALS provides direct support, education and leadership development while advocating for immigrant rights, LGBTQ+ equality and language access. Its work centers on improving health outcomes and strengthening civic participation in communities where services can be limited and access uneven.

The Young Trailblazer Award will honor **MacGregor VanBeurden**, founding president of the LGBTQ+ Democrats of Catawba County. VanBeurden helped launch the Newton Rainbow Festival and has worked on building political infrastructure in Western North Carolina.



Founding president of the LGBTQ+ Democrats of Catawba County MacGregor VanBeurden will receive the Young Trailblazer Award.
CREDIT: HRC North Carolina

For Pruette, highlighting leaders outside major metropolitan areas is deliberate. He said the goal is to spotlight people beyond the state's largest cities, "not just Charlotte, Greensboro, Raleigh, Durham people, but folks from across the state who are taking the fight to where our people are."

That phrase, "where our people are," captures the throughline organizers return to repeatedly. Geography matters. School boards matter. County commissions matter. Municipal policies matter. The daily experience of LGBTQ+ life in North Carolina is shaped as much by local officials as by national headlines.

While federal contests draw media attention, organizers stressed that local offices often determine what students are allowed

to learn, how public resources are distributed and whether LGBTQ+ residents feel seen or protected in their own communities. The dinner, they say, becomes a space where those local realities share the same stage.

Balancing Strategy and Celebration

Even in a politically charged cycle, organizers are careful not to frame the evening as a policy forum.

"This is not just a night of political speeches," Pruette said. "You're going to have fun, you're going to meet new people, you're going to be in a space that is overflowing with every color of the rainbow."

The program reflects that balance.

One Voice Chorus, Charlotte's LGBTQIA and allies chorus founded in 1990, will open the evening. When the group began, some singers were hesitant to print their full names in concert programs for fear of persecution. Today, the chorus continues to serve as a visible public voice for LGBTQ+ communities through choral performance and community engagement.

Comedian and Out100 honoree **Dana Goldberg** will also perform. Goldberg's credits include appearances on ABC, TBS and "Last Comic Standing," along with performances at the San Francisco International Comedy Competition and the Edinburgh Fringe Festival. HRC National Press Secretary Brandon Wolf will also speak during the evening's program.

Charlotte City Councilmember **JD Mazuera Arias** will appear as a special guest. Representing District 5, one of the city's most diverse communities, Mazuera Arias was elected on a platform centered on equitable investment and community empowerment.

Pruette described him as "a historic elected official locally and really across the



Comedian and Out100 honoree Dana Goldberg will perform.
CREDIT: HRC North Carolina

country... an under 30 queer elected official from right here in Charlotte."

The evening will also include a silent auction and an afterparty featuring DJ Vanna Vanity and Vanity House. A pre-event gathering will bring together community leaders and supporters, part of what organizers describe as a broader weekend of engagement.

"In order for this fight to continue in a moment like this, we're bringing together people who have a collective mindset about how we move forward," Femminella said.

Power, Purpose and Presence

For Castleman, the most important outcome of the night cannot be measured in attendance numbers or programming highlights.

"I want people to have hope and have a night of safe space and community to celebrate," she said. "In a world that is so scary and terrifying right now, to come together and relax and celebrate and hear the stories of why we're all there and why we're collectively in this fight is so important."

Femminella framed that collective presence as its own form of civic action.

"I think the number one message we need to get behind is the power of defiance," he said. "Most people think defiance must look extreme. But it can be as simple as showing up to a dinner with collective minds in the room."

When asked what he hopes attendees take with them, his answer was succinct. "Purpose." Castleman offered one word of her own. "Community."

Thirty years after its first dinner, HRC North Carolina's annual gathering continues to function as both celebration and organiz-



Charlotte City Councilmember JD Mazuera Arias will make a special guest appearance.
CREDIT: HRC North Carolina

ing space. It is a place where longtime advocates and emerging leaders share a room, where rural organizers and urban elected officials occupy the same stage, and where history and future meet in real time.

"This is an intergenerational moment," Pruette said. "We're recognizing the people whose shoulders we stand on, but also the leaders who are fighting right now and the future we're building together."

In a state where margins are tight and political stakes are rising, that convergence of recognition and resolve may be exactly the point.

For more information about the March 21 dinner, including tickets and program details, visit: <https://northcarolina.hrc.org/events/north-carolina-dinner>. ::

History made by Netherlands' youngest and first gay Prime Minister

At age 38, Rob Jetten was sworn in as the new prime minister of The Netherlands by King Willem-Alexander on Feb. 23. Born in the southeastern town of Uden, Jetten studied business administration before turning to politics and won his first parliamentary seat in 2017.

Once sworn in, Jetten posted on X, "Proud to be doing this together. In a new phase, which creates responsibility and, above all, a shared promise to work for everyone in the Netherlands." He continued, "By not dwelling on what's wrong, but by building on what can be improved. That requires courage and collaboration."

He is the parliamentary leader of Democrats 66, a center to center-left party described as progressive, pro-European

and socially liberal, with climate change, affordable housing and restoring trust in government among the topics the party has campaigned on.

Jetten picked three more parliamentary groups – People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD) and the Christian Democratic Alliance (CDA) – to support him. Combining the seats of the three parties, they fall nine short of the majority, meaning they will work with other potentially opposing state officials to push policies.

The minority cabinet seeks to give an extra €19bn (\$22 billion) to defense forces to meet new NATO standards, with funds reportedly coming from healthcare and social security budgets.

Jetten's slogan during his campaign was



Netherlands' Prime Minister Robb Jetten becomes youngest and first gay man to hold position. CREDIT: Instagram

"Yes we can," which is a clear shift from his older far-right opponent, Geert Wilders. Jetten promoted his campaign and showed glimpses of his personal life, like photos of him with his husband, Nicolas Keenan, on social media.

The LGBTQ+ organization, COC Netherlands, complimented Jetten for his historic position. Referring to him as a role model, they said, "It shows that your sexual orientation doesn't have to matter. That you can become a construction worker, a doctor, a lawyer and even a prime minister."

Though celebrated as a historic achievement by many, not all parties and people agree with Jetten's plans and policies.

Head of the Green Left-Labour Party Jesse Kalver stated, "With this coalition agreement, ordinary people are once again [footing] the bill. Cuts are being made to social security, health care and education." He continued: "If the right-wing [and] minority government wants our support, a fundamentally different course is needed." ::

— Jaylen Jones

Pope Leo will continue to bless same-sex couples despite his views

When asked about his thoughts on shifting the perception of LGBTQ+ people in the church, Pope Leo XIV replied, "It seems to me very unlikely, at least in the near future, that the doctrine of the Church will change its teachings on sexuality and marriage." The Pope recently published a biography discussing his thoughts on the church. Sexuality and gender identity were among the topics he wrote about.

Born in Chicago, Pope Leo became the first Pope from the United States. Early in his career he traveled across the continent learning and teaching others about Catholicism and the Christian faith. He served as a missionary in Peru from the 1980s-1990s, working as a pastor, seminary teacher and admin-

istrator. As Cardinal, Leo addressed issues of climate change, global migration, church governance, human rights and has similar beliefs as his predecessor Pope Francis.

Pope Leo XIV quickly took over the role from Francis on May 8, 2024. Following his election by the Sacred College of Cardinals, Francis reminded parishioners and others around the globe that in the Catholic church, all are accepted in the eyes of God.

Pope Francis has blessed same sex couples and for some, like Francis DeBernardo, that brought hope, "We pray that in the 13 years that have passed, 12 of which were under the papacy of Pope Francis, that his heart and mind have developed more progressively on LGBTQ+ issues." DeBernardo

is the executive director of New Ways Ministry, a Catholic LGBTQ+ ministry.

"What Francis stated very clearly with that," Pope Leo offered through a quote from his predecessor: "Todos, todos." Everyone is invited in, but not as an expression or non-expression of a specific identity."

"I invite a person because he or she is a son or daughter of God. Everyone is welcome, and we can get to know and respect each other."

Leo also addressed people hoping for the Catholic Church to change their beliefs on same sex couples. "People want Church doctrine to change and they want attitudes to change," he said. "I believe that we must first change attitudes, before even thinking about changing what the Church teaches on a particular issue."

Regardless of the church's progress, Pope Leo believes in the core Catholic teachings that oppose same-sex marriage. "Blessing[s] are for people in the same-sex

unions but not the union themselves.

He concluded, "The teaching of the Church will continue to remain as it is, and for now I have nothing more to add on this point." ::

— Jaylen Jones



Pope Leo speaking to an audience about a new series dedicated to the Second Vatican Council. CREDIT: Pope Leo XIV

House Resolution proposes national ban on LGBTQ+ books in public schools

On Tuesday Feb. 24, House Representative Mary Miller (R-IL) introduced House Resolution 7661, also known as "Stop the Sexualization of Children Act." The resolution seeks to amend the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, which allowed public schools to use federal aid for the education of disadvantaged children.

Known as the "Stop the Sexualization of Children Act" the bill's purpose is "to prohibit the use of funds provided under such Act to develop, implement, facilitate, host or promote any program or activity for, or to provide or promote literature or other materials to, children under the age of 18 that includes sexually oriented material, and for other purposes."

The bill defines "sexual oriented material" as anything that includes "any depiction, description or simulation of sexually explicit conduct" and "involves gender dysphoria or transgenderism."

H.R. 7661 explains that, "standard sci-

ence coursework, including biology, botany, zoology, microbiology, cytology, genetics, ecology, human health or human anatomy and physiology; the texts of major world religions; classic works of literature; or classic



American Library Association denounces H.R. 7661: 'It's about giving politicians authority to restrict stories ... allowed on our shelves.'

works of art," will not be affected by the bill.

If passed, H.R. 1776 could halt public schools from stocking or teaching literature that mentions LGBTQ+ people. Federal-funding would also end for sex education programs, clubs and support groups.

Book bans are not new. According to PEN America, a non-profit that raises awareness of book censorship, the modern era banning of books started in 2020 "with politicians threatening to defund schools." PEN has documented nearly 23,000 book bans since 2021. In 2023 PEN noticed that 4,218 books were banned in public schools; out of those, 29 percent had LGBTQ+ content and 28 percent of those books specifically contained transgender characters.

"When we strip library shelves of books about particular groups, we defeat the purpose of a library collection that is supposed to reflect the lives of all people," said PEN senior manager Sabrina Batêta. "The damaging consequences to young people are real."

In 2023, North Carolina introduced Senate Bill 49 (S.B. 49), also known as the "Parents' Bill of Rights." Similar to H.B. 7661, the purpose of S.B. 49 was to censor LGBTQ+ students and queer curricula

by prohibiting the discussion of gender identity, sexual activity or sexuality, but only in kindergarten through fourth grade. It also enforced a process that allowed parents to inspect and review all textbooks and required teachers to "forcibly out" their students to parents. This section applies to all students, aged 18 and under.

The bill was initially vetoed by Governor Roy Cooper. The veto, however, was overturned, and the "Parents Bill of Rights" remains North Carolina law today.

On an up note as of this writing, according to the website govtrack.us, House Resolution 7661 currently has only a one percent chance of becoming a law.

Despite H.R. 7661's lack of viability, the American Library Association sees the resolution as enough of a threat that it issued a public denouncement.

"H.R. 7661 isn't fundamentally about protecting kids," said American Library Association President Sam Helmick. "It's about giving politicians broad authority to restrict whose stories are allowed on our shelves. That should concern anyone who believes in the freedom to read and the right of families to make decisions for themselves." ::

— Jaylen Jones

College of Charleston students speak out about loss of LGBTQ+ resources



A photo of the College of Charleston mascot decorated with balloons and the transgender flag. CREDIT: Instagram

LGBTQ+ students from the College of Charleston are demanding their administration reinstate DEI resources. In January, Charleston students realized that LGBTQ+ programs on campus had been discontinued. The removal of gender-accepting and -acknowledging questions on housing applications received the most backlash. Resources like inclusive housing and pride centers created community and safety on campus, but now that safety is in question.

Public colleges have erased words, phrases and services related to Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI), including any references to the acronym LGBTQ+. Based on data from the Human Rights Campaign, 489 anti-LGBTQ+ bills were introduced in 2024. The DEI ban has only intensified discriminatory bills.

To appease the Trump administration, the College of Charleston removed the PRIDE Center, the Closet Corner Program,

and inclusive housing questions for students inquiring about residential space. These programs and efforts welcomed all students by giving them clothing, space and security when needed. Though Charleston has a history steeped in inequality, based on data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) and Campus Pride's Index, the College of Charleston was known as the most LGBTQ+ friendly campus in South Carolina. Now, Charleston students will have to look elsewhere for inclusion.

Junior Mallery Mason explained to Charleston's News Channel 2, "It's really insulting because part of the student experience includes all these resources, and the things that they claim they have here, and then they take it away. It's like what? This [is] part of the reason I came here," Mason said. "It's a slap in the face."

Students have emailed the administration en masse, requesting staff rethink the removal of LGBTQ+ resources, but little has been accomplished so far.

The administration has replied by email regarding gender-inclusive housing.

"In developing the [housing] applica-

tion, we aim to be consistent and fair in the information we collect, focusing on rooming preferences and living considerations that apply equally to all students. Living with others can be challenging, and [we] understand why questions about safety are important to students. Our Residence Life staff play an active role in supporting students and addressing concerns when uncomfortable situations arise."

Despite the response, no changes have been made to address gender-inclusive housing.

Student organizations are continuing to post on social media to educate peers on these changes while working hard to grow the LGBTQ+ and allied community.

The American Civil Liberties Union at CofC posted: "This decision is dangerous. It erases queer and trans students from a process that directly affects our safety, dignity and ability to live without fear. Inclusive housing questions aren't 'extra.'" They are a harm-reduction tool. Removing them puts students at risk." They continued, "Silence is not neutrality. It's complicated." ::

— Jaylen Jones

Durham gay man sentenced for cyber stalking other gay men in the Triangle

A federal judge recently sentenced David Ryan Winters, age 40, to three years in federal prison for cyberstalking. For almost a decade, Winters stalked, harassed and threatened gay men online in the Raleigh-Durham area. Winters pleaded guilty to the charges.

According to court documents and other information presented in court, Winters, who identifies as a gay man, became enraged at the gay community in Raleigh-Durham for perceived slights. Following a reported stint as a volunteer at the LGBT Center of Raleigh, which ended

with staff requesting he leave because of reports of "inappropriate behavior, Winters began stalking gay men in 2016 online and in person, including by showing up at victims' homes and sending them pictures of their residences.

Winters would discover victims' personal information and send angry messages. He repeatedly threatened to kill specific victims and gay men generally, saying that he wanted to make national headlines and invoking the Pulse homicides from Florida.

Winters visited one victim's workplace, shattered a window, and threw a metal

trashcan on the victim's car. Winters's obsessive harassment campaign terrified many people, forcing them to move or take other self-protective measures.

"We believe in protecting all citizens who deserve to live their lives in peace. This antisocial behavior cannot fester without serious attention and prevention. Thanks to our dedicated law enforcement partners for taking this very seriously and putting this criminal behind bars." said U.S. Attorney Ellis Boyle.

Ellis Boyle, U.S. Attorney for the Eastern District of North Carolina, made the announcement after sentencing by Chief U.S. District Judge Richard E. Myers II. The FBI and Raleigh Police Department investigated the case and Assistant U.S. Attorney Erin C. Blondel prosecuted the case. ::

— Qnotes Staff



During court proceedings it was revealed David Winters volunteered for the Raleigh LGBT Center and had been asked to leave. CREDIT: Social Media

Trump takes a greater aim at trans youth and voter eligibility

Trump complimented his peers and guests at the State of the Union Address February 24, among them Sage Blair. He called for both Blair and her grandmother to stand for applause, and stated that "Sage was thrown into an all-boys state home, and suffered terribly for a long time." Trump continued, "But today, Sage is a proud young woman with a full-ride scholarship." After his praise, the two women stood up. Sage's grandmother applauded Trump and her child while Sage stood motionless with what appeared to be a forced and only slight smile.

Blair was 14 when she socially transitioned in her high school in 2021 without her parents' knowledge. Staff and faculty allowed Blair to use her preferred pronouns and the boys' bathroom. But because of bullying, she ran away from home, resulting in an eight-month disappearance, along with being sexually trafficked.

Once she returned to her Virginia hometown, grandmother Michele Blair filed to sue Appomattox County School Board,

claiming that the school's lack of notification on Blair's mental health "violated her fundamental right to direct upbringing of S.B [Sage Blair]." This lawsuit led to the creation of "Sage's Law," an act that Trump wants other states to adopt.

Introduced in 2023, Sage's Law was a Virginia bill that required school faculty to disclose to a child's parent when they use pronouns that are different from their biological gender.

Trump and other advocates say the bill is needed to protect parental rights, arguing that parents should be involved in their child's mental health. Others say that it's "forcibly outing" children, creating dangers and warping the relationship of children's parents who wouldn't agree with transitioning.

Another bill Trump highlighted was the Safeguard American Voter Eligibility Act, or "SAVE Act." To reduce voter fraud, the SAVE Act will require Americans to bring a form of citizenship when registering to vote. The three forms of accepted identification are passports, birth certificates and REAL IDs.

SAVE ACT effects on trans and women voters

This bill has created a lot of controversy. If enacted, millions of Americans, including trans people and women, won't be allowed to cast their vote.

About 140 million Americans do not have a passport, and 21 million Americans don't have access to their birth certificates.



De-transitioned MAGA darling Sage Blair musters a mild smile and an eye roll during Trump's SOTU speech. CREDIT: Screen Capture

Meaning a majority of people will either have to find a form of citizenship ID or order a new one before elections.

Trans and women's communities have a greater chance of having mismatched information on their documents because of name changes or gender markers. The Gallup poll revealed that 1.3 percent of Americans are transgender, equal to about 3.3 million eligible voters. Out of that 1.3 percent, about 75 percent of the transgender population voted in the 2020 election, compared to the 67 percent of general voters.

Transgender individuals are known as active voters, but if the SAVE Act is accepted, a massive portion of them will become ineligible. According to the 2020 U.S. Transgender Survey, 44 percent of transgender adults have updated their IDs. Only 18 percent of those adults have changed their birth certificates to correlate with their preferred gender and name.

The same can be said for women, as many of them have changed their names because of marriage and divorce. The Center for American Progress, or CAP, wrote that "as many as 69 million American women do not have a birth certificate with their legal name on it and thereby could not use their birth certificate to prove citizenship." ::

— Jaylen Jones

Record number of out athletes capture medals at '26 Winter Olympics

At least 19 publicly out Olympians reached the podium as Winter Olympics conclude in Italy



by Liz Schob
Qnotes Staff Writer

As the Milan Cortina Winter Olympics concluded Sunday, publicly out LGBTQ+ athletes recorded their strongest Winter Games medal wins to date.

According to tracking by *Outsports*, 49 publicly out LGBTQ+ Olympians competed in Milan, a record number for a Winter Olympics. Of those athletes, 19 won gold, silver or bronze medals, the highest total documented at any previous Winter Games.

Team USA's women's hockey team secured gold after defeating Canada in overtime on Feb. 19. Cayla Barnes, Hilary Knight and Alex Carpenter are publicly out LGBTQ+ members of the U.S. roster. The Games also marked a personal milestone for Knight, who proposed to Olympic speed skater Brittany Bowe while in Milan. In a video shared on Instagram, Knight wrote, "Olympics brought us together. This one made us forever."

In alpine skiing, Breezy Johnson, who is bisexual, won gold in the women's downhill. Johnson also became engaged during the Games after her fiancé proposed at the finish line of her Super-G race. In figure skating, Amber Glenn, who identifies as bisexual and pansexual, earned gold as part of the U.S. team event. Glenn became the first out queer woman selected for the U.S. Olympic figure skating team.

Glenn has spoken publicly about competing as an out athlete on the world stage. "I'm gonna keep speaking my truth. I'm gonna keep representing what I believe in and what I think all Americans believe in, which is freedom and being able to love and do what you want," Glenn said.

LGBTQ+ athletes also reached the podium across Europe. French ice dancer Guillaume Cizeron, who is gay, and his partner Laurence Fournier Beaudry won gold. Swiss freestyle skier Mathilde Gremaud won gold in women's freeski slopestyle. Great Britain's Bruce Mouat, a gay man, captained

the British curling team to a silver medal finish.

Canada's women's hockey team earned silver, with six publicly out LGBTQ+ players on its roster: Emily Clark, Erin Ambrose, Emerance Maschmeyer, Brienne Jenner, Laura Stacey and Marie-Philip Poulin.

Bronze medalists also included several openly LGBTQ+ athletes. Belgian and gay speed skater Tineke den Dulk was part of Belgium's mixed 2000-meter relay team that won bronze. Swedish freestyle skier Sandra Naeslund, who is a lesbian, won bronze in ski cross. Gay Canadian ice dancer Paul Poirier and his partner Piper Gilles won bronze. Laura Zimmermann, who identifies as queer, was a member of the Swiss women's hockey team that secured bronze after defeating Sweden.

The scale of participation in Milan reflects a measurable shift in Olympic visibility. *Outsports* has tracked publicly out Olympians for more than a decade, documenting steady growth in athletes competing openly at both Summer and Winter Games. Earlier Winter Olympics featured far fewer publicly out competitors.

Milan Cortina's 49 openly LGBTQ+ athletes represent the largest group documented at a Winter Games since that tracking began, marking a significant milestone in Winter Olympic history. The 19 medalists



Amber Glenn celebrates her gold medal at the Milan Cortina Winter Olympics. CREDIT: Facebook

in Milan represent athletes from multiple countries, including the United States, Canada, Great Britain, Switzerland, France, Belgium and Sweden, illustrating the international scope of openly LGBTQ+ participation. The medal count spans team and individual events, from women's hockey and curling to alpine skiing, figure skating and freestyle skiing. Athletes competing openly in Milan also represented a range of identities across lesbian, gay, bisexual and queer communities, confirming the breadth of participation across disciplines and competitive levels at the Games.

That increase has changed the nature of representation at the Olympic level. Rather than a single athlete standing alone, openly LGBTQ+ competitors in Milan appeared across team and individual events, across

medal ceremonies and across multiple national delegations, reflecting broader inclusion within elite winter sport.

Among Team USA's openly LGBTQ+ competitors was speed skater Conor McDermott-Mostowy, the only out male athlete among the eight openly LGBTQ+ members of Team USA in Milan. He has spoken about the responsibility that can accompany competing openly at the Games. "I do feel I need to be a spokesperson," he said in an interview with GLAAD. "Partly because I am gay and I'm the only out person in my sport."

With Milan Cortina now complete, the 2026 Winter Olympics stand as the most successful Winter Games on record for publicly out LGBTQ+ athletes based on documented participation and medal counts. ::



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The evolution of lesbian spaces in Charlotte

With zero locations for sapphic women to create their community, some have started to change the way women get together



by Jaylen Jones
Qnotes Staff Writer

Charlotte has a rich history of LGBTQ+ bars and clubs. Places such as Oleens and Scorpio allowed drag queens and LGBTQ+ individuals to ignore societal troubles and enjoy themselves. But for queer women, there is little space for community.

Today, there are about eight gay bars in Charlotte. Most of these locations serve a male audience, but anyone can attend, regardless of sexual orientation or gender. Spaces like Garbo's, Hartigan's and L4, which all focused on the Lesbian community have closed, leaving behind a void that has yet to be filled.

Said Bethany McDonald: "It's really hard in any bar/restaurant scene to have any type of a niche business."

Initially, lesbian bars were created as a place for entertainment and socializing in a safe environment. She added that LGBTQ+ bars "need[ed] to provide space" when people couldn't find that security at home.

McDonald bought Hartigan's in 2008. A couple of blocks from Bank of America Stadium, the building was a nightclub and bar owned by and for lesbians. McDonald made sure everyone was included and stated, "Anyone and everybody belonged there."

That sense of belonging was felt throughout the building as patrons could be themselves. "Even introverts became



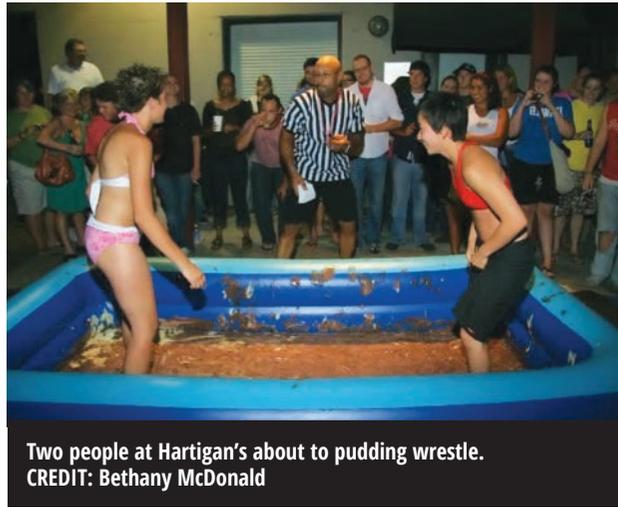
Having a good time at Hartigan's.
CREDIT: Bethany McDonald

extroverts" in Hartigan's, McDonald added.

With events like pudding wrestling, drag brunches, country line dancing and more, people were never bored. "One night, some people came dressed as muppets just on a Thursday night," McDonald stated.

As time moved on, so did people's tastes. Hartigan's grew older while the club's audience stayed young. "You could see the trend, people didn't need to only go to a gay bar every Friday and Saturday night." McDonald continued, "people didn't have to go to lesbian bars anymore..." The low number of customers and the building's maintenance became too much for McDonald's team. Hartigan's closed on Mar. 14, 2014.

"People were devastated," McDonald explained. "It was more than a bar, it was a home...nothing can take that space." Not only did Hartigan's closure create a massive loss in the community, but also for McDonald. "I don't know where I would be without that bar."



Two people at Hartigan's about to pudding wrestle.
CREDIT: Bethany McDonald

To anyone willing to create another bar or club, McDonald said, "[someone must create an] affirming and welcoming space for all. It can be designated for gay, lesbian and queer all together, but you have to be welcoming and affirming to everyone."

Shifting from lesbian bars to group hikes

Instead of bars and clubs, sapphic groups are emerging around Charlotte. Groups like Lesbian Friends and The Sapphic Collective host events created by and for women. Whether they are meeting for a hike or to discuss topics within their community, it's a space that is desperately needed.

McDonald believes events are an important shift in the queer women's community. "We've always needed that, that's always been something that there has been a big gap." McDonald added, "I love that they are taking it outside of the bars... I'm really excited that somebody is continuing that."

Community curator of Lesbian Friends and founder of the Sapphic Collective, Heidi Hemphill Samples, ensures women

of all ages have space to love and create connections. Though both groups have similar goals for women, the Sapphic collective focuses on women over 40. Samples explains, "I picked 40 because it's a transitional age and at that age you're starting to deal with adult children, aging parents, menopause...And I wanted to make sure that that community felt heard and seen."

"Charlotte has always had an LGBTQ+ community; what's changed over time is how that community gathers." Samples continues, "I don't think [there's] a conflict...between gay or lesbian spaces. It's really about different social histories and different communities evolving."

She adds that gay spaces have more access and funding compared to lesbian groups in the 1970s. "Bars require consistent and weekly spending to survive...any bar is focused on the drinks. Most women prioritize conversation...and smaller group interaction...for the most part." Samples stated, "That's why smaller curated gatherings are thriving models now." Samples refers to the countless pop-up lesbian events around Charlotte. "[The] lesbian community has always been relationship-centered more than venue-centered."

"What we're seeing now is an expansion of what queer women's spaces look like. Not replacing existing venues...it just might look a little different." Samples explained.

Though there aren't any actual physical spaces for women, there are people who are creating a community where lesbians feel comfortable. "I think there's an underlying level of stress [with the Trump administration] in the broader LGBTQ community—because when rights and visibility and culture seem uncertain, people internalize that. Even if it's not always spoken out loud, it shows up in anxiety, hesitation, or a stronger need for sapphic spaces." Samples concluded, "What I've noticed most though is not division but a deeper hunger for community." ::



Groups like Lesbian Friends and The Sapphic Collective host events created by and for women.
CREDIT: Heidi Hemphill Samples



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A Women's HERstory Month shout out

Qnotes salutes LGBTQ+ women who have made their mark



by L'Monique King
Qnotes Staff Writer

America has celebrated Women's History Month since 1987.

Originally, the recognition began a little more than 10 years earlier as "Women's History Week" – with a local celebration held in Sonoma County, Calif. The celebration was organized to coincide with International Women's Day, recognized as March 8.

Like most celebratory and historic recognitions, holidays and events – little light has been shed on members of the LGBTQ+ community – in this case, lesbian community members. *Qnotes* proudly acknowledges the contributions of all our community members and presents you just the tip of an iceberg with these phenomenal women. Some have left us and some are still with us; but none will ever be forgotten.

Gloria Evangelina Anzaldua
(Sept. 26, 1942 – May 15, 2004)

Gloria E. Anzaldúa was a queer Chicana poet, author and feminist theorist. She received her bachelor's degree from University of Texas–Pan American (now University of Texas Rio Grande Valley) and later earned a master's degree in English from University of Texas at Austin. Her poetry and essays often examine the frustration, alienation and complexity of living at the intersections of cultural boundaries and collective identities.

Born in Texas. Her parents were struggling migrant workers who labored tirelessly in their attempts to escape poverty. In doing so, they produced a fearless child, an author, educator and activist who would later be known for groundbreaking work like her book "Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza" (1987) and her essay "La Prieta."

For her work in the literary field, Anzaldúa received numerous awards. Among them, the Sappho Award of Distinction, an NEA (National Endowment for the Arts) Fiction Award and the Lambda Lesbian Small Book Press Award, to name a few. Her body of work includes

authoring several books of poetry, nonfiction and children's fiction.

Deborah Batts
(April 13, 1947 – February 3, 2020)

When it comes to trailblazing women, our community does not



Lifetime appointed justice Deborah Batts.

fall short. So, it should come as no surprise, America's first ever openly LGBTQ+ lifetime judge was a lesbian who already knew something about being a first. Nominated by former President Bill Clinton, the United States Senate confirmed Deborah Batts to a lifetime judgeship in the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of New York in 1997.

A graduate from Radcliffe College and Harvard Law School, she was also Fordham Law School's first Black faculty member [1984]. She later became their first Black tenured professor in 1990. Batts's appointment led to opportunities for over 20 openly LGBTQ judges now serving lifetime appointments. Batts wanted to be known for more than being a lesbian or "the gay judge." She once said, "I'm a mother, I'm an African American, I'm a lesbian, I'm a former professor."

In 2011 the New York Times printed her wedding announcement while many applauded the union of what some would call a lesbian power couple, Batts married Dr. Gwen Zornberg, a lead medical officer epidemiologist for the Food and Drug Administration.

Angela Davis
(January 26, 1944)

Still sporting big hair that has gone from jet black to silver, Angela Davis, is an activist, philosopher and educator the world became better acquainted with in the midst of the Black Power Movement of the 1970s.

Reportedly a member of the Los Angeles Black Panther Party, Davis worked closely with the organization though she would eventually sever ties with the Panthers because of her involvement with the Communist Party and issues with the organization's male-dominated structure and Black Nationalist stance.

Among her historic achievements: The Black Panther Party's Angela Davis People's Free Food Program. A substantial accomplishment, the program gave out 10,000 bags of groceries to Oakland California residents in need.



Poet and academic Gloria Evangelina Anzaldua.



Academic, activist and author: Angela Davis.



Author, journalist and transgender rights advocate Janet Mock.

Movement. She supports inclusion, the rights of transgender individuals, queer liberation, and the dismantling of heteronormative structures like marriage.

Janet Mock
(March 10, 1983)

Because being a woman is about more than what's on a birth certificate and "there is no universal women's experience," we'd be more than remiss if we didn't include the iconic and accomplished Janet Mock. Mock is a writer, television producer and transgender rights activist.

Her debut memoir "Redefining Realness" became a New York Times bestseller establishing her as an inspiration to cisgender and transgender women.

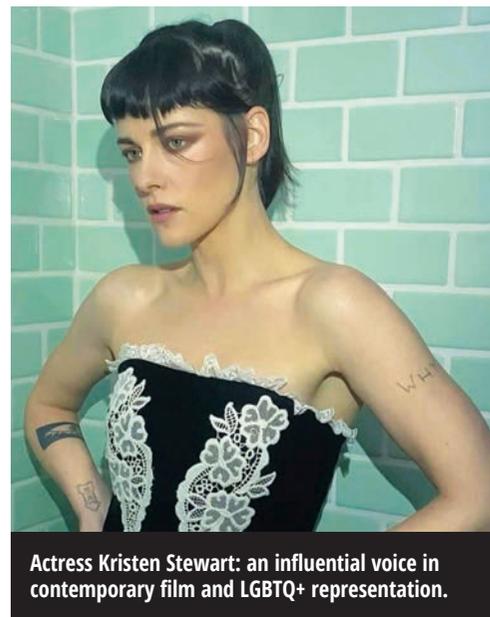
With vulnerable candor Mock shared intimate details about her interesting and often challenging experiences as a transgender woman of color and teenage sex worker. She did it in a manner which provided the type of insight that opened hearts and minds to a journey some experienced and others were curious about.

Mock was no stranger to the literary world. She served as a contributing editor for *Marie Claire* and a former staff editor for the online version of *People Magazine*.

A multi-faceted talent, she's appeared in, written, directed and produced television series, talk shows and documentaries, sometimes simultaneously filling multiple roles. Notably, Mock is the first trans woman of color hired to write for a TV series. The FX Network production "Pose" depicted the lives of five transgender women – and their many friends – living in New York City. In addition to her role as writer, Mock was also director and producer for the now iconic series.

Kristen Stewart (April 9, 1990)

Chances are, if you're into cult classics like the "Twilight" series or blockbusters like "Spencer" you've seen millennial film star Kristen Stewart. In her ability to seamlessly go from a sexy vampire to an emotionally distraught Princess Diana she's proven her acting range. Stewart publicly came out during a Saturday Night Live opening monologue in 2017 and identifies as sexually fluid. Most recently, Stewart made headlines due to another resonating



Actress Kristen Stewart: an influential voice in contemporary film and LGBTQ+ representation.

Davis has always been dogged in her efforts, including when she was wrongly charged with "unlawful flight to avoid prosecution on state charges of murder and kidnapping" – making her the third woman in history to end up on the FBI's 10 Most Wanted list in 1970.

She came out as a lesbian in 1997 during an interview with *Out* magazine.

Now in her 80s, Davis continues to teach at University of California Santa Cruz and has reportedly lived with her partner, Gina Dent since 2020. Together, they continue to advocate for the abolition of police and prisons, using the concept of abolition feminism.

Today, her efforts, writings and lectures still continue to inspire individuals and organizations like the Black Lives Matter

appearance. This time though she wasn't playing a role, she was being interviewed by Architectural Digest. Using her time to share her angst over the changing landscape of Los Angeles resulting from ICE deportation actions, Stewart expressed shame in having to identify as a Los Angeles native.

"I don't identify with that right now. I can't stand the idea – the dismantling of [our] culture, that did have a hand in making me who I am. Which is so meaningless in the face of people's lives being completely unearthed, uprooted, destroyed. This is not who we are."

There's little to no argument that Stewart is not afraid of rustling feathers when it comes to bringing awareness to issues faced by marginalized populations, issues that impact us all.

**Lily Tomlin
(September 1, 1939)**

Way back in the early '70s Lily Tomlin entered our homes as Ernestine, a nasal sounding telephone operator who made each call with her signature, "one ringy-dingy, two ringy-dingies" phrase in a skit on the TV series "Rowan & Martin's Laugh-In,"



Comic, actress and forever a feminist: Lily Tomlin.

a sketch comedy show. Those old enough to remember the show can probably still hear her snorting chuckle when she doled out some quick wit to one of her pretend callers she wanted to take a job at.

Most American television viewers didn't know that Tomlin, a renowned comedian and actress, was not only part of the LGBTQ community but partnered with writer Jane Wagner since 1971.

A staunch supporter of the Los Angeles LGBT Center – Tomlin frequently spoke out

against anti-LGBTQ+ legislation has made her views on oppressive LGBTQ+ laws and attitudes clear. Though she's expressed pride in the uptick in LGBTQ+ representation over the years, Tomlin has lamented, "I mean, limiting any group's rights is a travesty. People cannot push backwards to that. It's insane."

Today, Tomlin has left Ernestine behind – while continuing to entertain and advocate for us. Over the course of her career she has won too many awards to mention in this small space (Grammy, Mark Twain and Screen Actors Guild Lifetime Achievement awards among them) can still be found on media platforms public spaces and making us laugh or sit up and pay attention on stages and more recent movies and shows like "Grace and Frankie" and "Damages."

**Chantale Wong
(November 1, 1954)**

Chantale Wong really knows her way around a spreadsheet. When it comes to finances and organizational budgets, this woman is a beast. Wong has occu-



American diplomat and public servant Chantale Wong.

pled many U.S. government and private sector roles in the realm of finance. In 2022, she made history as the first openly lesbian (and first openly Asian American lesbian) senate-confirmed ambassador and served as United States Director of the Asian Development Bank.

During former president Barack Obama's administration, Wong also served as Vice President for administra-

tion and finance, and CFO, at the Millennium Challenge Corporation. Before that, she was budget director at the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, acting budget director at the U.S. Department of the Treasury, and as the chief of staff to the director of the Office of Management and Budget (OMB).

But she hasn't solely spent her time and career engaged in furthering the goals of government officials. She also founded the Conference on APA Leadership, which encourages young Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders to pursue careers in public service.

During her childhood, Wong has said, her parents "made the ultimate sacrifice to allow me to escape" referring to a time (1960) when she and her grandmother fled China, hiding in the bottom of a boat headed for Hong Kong.

A champion for inclusive leadership, public service and diversity in representation, Wong has often referenced the legacy of a long-term friend in the civil rights arena, "John Lewis taught me about making good trouble, but necessary trouble." ::

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Spring in the City: Festivals, music, theater & more

From LGBTQ+ film festivals and musical performance to touring shows, museum exhibitions and citywide festivals, the Charlotte calendar is full through May 2026



by **Liz Schob**
Qnotes Staff Writer

As spring unfolds, Charlotte's arts and entertainment calendar is filling up with festivals, concerts, workshops, exhibitions, theater productions and community events across the city. The season includes a mix of large-scale cultural festivals, LGBTQ+ programming, local music performances and nationally touring shows, giving audiences a wide range of ways to engage with the city's creative life.

From chorus concerts and film festivals to museum exhibitions and neighborhood art walks, Charlotte's spring offerings reflect both the scale of its major venues and the energy of its local arts community. We've collected a selection of events taking place through May and hope they help guide your spring plans.

ArtWalks CLT/ASC Public Art Trail

Location: Throughout Charlotte
Details: ArtWalks CLT connects visitors to murals, public art and street art through free, self-guided digital walks and trails across Charlotte.
<https://artwalksclt.com/>

Bechtler Museum of Modern Art exhibitions

Location: Bechtler Museum of Modern Art
Details: The Bechtler's current exhibitions, including Hansjürg Brunner: The Trial, Chakaia Booker: Weighted Balance, and David McGee: The Griot and the Nightingale add another option for readers looking for modern and contemporary art in Uptown.
<https://www.bechtler.org/onview>

Harvey B. Gantt Center exhibitions

Location: Harvey B. Gantt Center for African-American Arts + Culture
Details: The Gantt Center is presenting multiple exhibitions this season, including Jazz Greats: Classic Photographs from the Bank of America Collection, In Pursuit of Home: Mario Moore and Presence of Color: Jeremy Okai Davis.
<https://www.ganttcenter.org/exhibitions/>

Mint Museum exhibitions

Location: Mint Museum
Details: The Mint is presenting multiple



In Pursuit of Home: Mario Moore exhibition at the Harvey B. Gantt Center for African-American Arts + Culture.
CREDIT: Facebook



Interventions: Weaving Joy, Woven Resistance exhibition at the Mint Museum.
CREDIT: Facebook

exhibitions this season, including Designing Dynamism: Kuba, Interventions: Weaving Joy, Woven Resistance, Art of Devotion: The Santos Tradition of Puerto Rico and Across the Nation: Masterpieces from the National Gallery of Art.
<https://www.mintmuseum.org/exhibitions/>

March 2-25 —

Unleash Your Creativity Art Workshops

Location: Ivory/Baker Recreation Center
Details: Charlotte artist LaDara McKinnon leads a series of free community art workshops throughout March as part of the Unleash Your Creativity program funded by ASC Culture Blocks.
<https://www.ladaramckinnon.com/unleash-yourcreativity>

March 15 — Overcome

Location: Park Road Baptist Church
Details: Charlotte Pride Band presents Overcome, a spring concert program featuring music centered on resilience, justice and community.
<https://www.charlotteprideband.org/2026>

March 15 —

OSCARS® Viewing Party & Fundraiser

Location: Independent Picture House
Details: Independent Picture House will host its fourth OSCARS® Viewing Party & Fundraiser, a celebration of film, art and community featuring a live broadcast of the Academy Awards.
<https://independentpicturehouse.org/programs/oscars-program/>



The Gay Men's Chorus of Charlotte and Women's Chorus of Charlotte present The Big Gay Sing 7: Mamma Mia!
CREDIT: Facebook



Janelle Symone and LAMAR perform at Petra's in Plaza Midwood on March 20.
CREDIT: Facebook

March 19-21 —

The Big Gay Sing 7: Mamma Mia!

Location: The Galilee Center
Details: The Gay Men's Chorus of Charlotte and Women's Chorus of Charlotte present The Big Gay Sing 7: Mamma Mia! with performances on March 19, 20 and 21.
<https://www.gmccharlotte.org/mamma-mia>

March 20 —

Janelle Symone and LAMAR

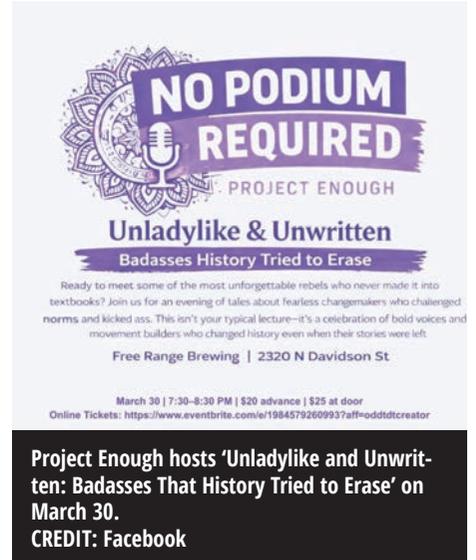
Location: Petra's
Details: Singer-songwriter Janelle Symone and independent R&B artist LAMAR perform a live concert at Petra's in Plaza Midwood. Doors open at 8 p.m. with the show beginning at 9 p.m. Tickets are \$15.
<https://bit.ly/40S1JfD>

March 21 — Latine Party

Location: Chasers
Details: This 21+ event features performers including Nacho Novio, Thi Vee, Lolita Chanel, Oso Chanel, Quetzali Rose and Mia Diva. Doors open at 9 p.m. with the main show at midnight. Presale tickets are \$10 and \$15 at the door.
<https://bit.ly/47A04Pw>



Pop music icon of the '80s Sheena Easton performs at the Cain Center for the Arts in Cornelius March 22.
CREDIT: Facebook



Project Enough hosts 'Unladylike and Unwritten: Badasses That History Tried to Erase' on March 30.
CREDIT: Facebook

March 22 — Sheena Easton

Location: Cain Center for the Arts in Cornelius
Details: Legendary 1980s pop icon who brought us such hits as "Strut," "Morning Train" and "Sugar Walls" in concert. Long an LGBTQ+ ally with support for queer equality & performances at multiple Pride events. Showtime 7 p.m. Tickets \$63 - \$83.
<https://sheenaeaston.com/>

March 28 —

She/They/We: Honoring Pauli Murray

Location: One Voice Chorus
Details: One Voice Chorus Charlotte presents a concert honoring civil rights activist, poet and Episcopal priest Pauli Murray. The program highlights Murray's legacy and contributions to movements for racial and gender justice.
<https://onevoicechorus.com/event/ovcs-march-concert-2026-she-they-we/>

March 30 — Unladylike and Unwritten: Badasses That History Tried to Erase

Location: Free Range Brewing
Details: Project Enough hosts an interactive talk highlighting historical figures whose contributions were often left out of traditional narratives.
<https://bit.ly/47gYUIE>

March 31-April 5 — Mamma Mia!

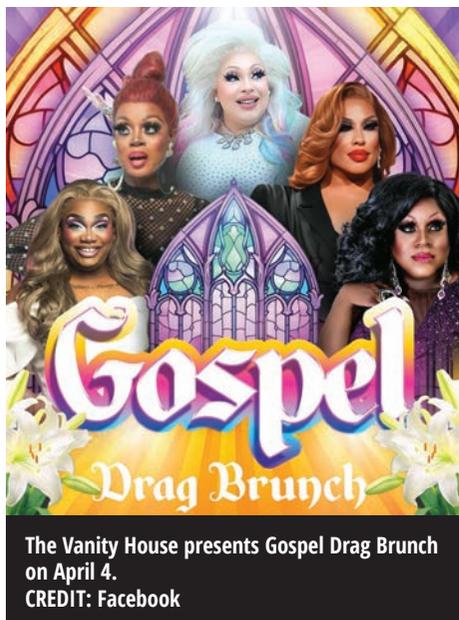
Location: Belk Theater - Blumenthal Arts Center
Details: The 25th anniversary tour of Mamma Mia! stops in Charlotte for a six-day run at Belk Theater.
<https://www.blumenthalarts.org/events/detail/mamma-mia-3>

April 4 — Gospel Drag Brunch

Location: Catalú
Details: The Vanity House presents a gospel-themed drag brunch featuring live drag performances alongside brunch service. Doors open at 11 a.m. and the show begins at noon.
<https://bit.ly/3NcKxhN>

April 3-19 — Charlotte SHOUT!

Location: Uptown Charlotte
Details: Charlotte SHOUT! returns this spring with a multi-week celebration of art, music, food and ideas across Uptown. The festival in-



The Vanity House presents Gospel Drag Brunch on April 4.
CREDIT: Facebook

cludes public art installations, performances, culinary experiences and community events.
<https://charlotteshout.com/>

April 6-29 —

Unleash Your Creativity Art Workshops

Location: Ivory/Baker Recreation Center
Details: Charlotte artist LaDara McKinnon leads a series of free community art workshops throughout April as part of the Unleash Your Creativity program funded by ASC Culture Blocks.
<https://www.ladaramckinnon.com/unleash-yourcreativity>

April 16-26 —

Charlotte Latino Film Festival

Location: Independent Picture House
Details: Presented by Cine Casual, the Charlotte Latino Film Festival returns with films from Latin America and a North Carolina short film block.
<https://charlottelatinofilmfestival.com/>

April 18-19 — The Art of Song

Location: Arts Plus Community Campus
Details: Queen City Performing Arts presents The Art of Song, featuring the small ensembles of the Gay Men's Chorus and Women's Chorus of Charlotte.
<https://www.gmccharlotte.org/art-of-song>

April 24 — Floetry: Say Yes Tour

Location: Ovens Auditorium
Details: Floetry returns to the stage for its first national run together in a decade, joined by Raheem DeV Vaughn and Teedra Moses.
<https://www.boplex.com/events/floetry-say-yes-tour>



BOOM Charlotte returns to The Shoppes at University Place for a second year in a row in May.
CREDIT: Facebook

April 24-26 — Tuck Fest

Location: U.S. National Whitewater Center
Details: Tuck Fest combines outdoor recreation with live music, competitions and festival activities including trail races, yoga sessions and concerts.
<https://tuckfest.whitewater.org/>

April 25 —

Song & Savor: A Place at the Table!

Location: The Long Room
Details: One Voice Chorus hosts its dinner and concert fundraiser featuring Chroma, with a reception, meal and performance.
<https://onevoicechorus.com/event/song-and-savor26/>

April 26 — Rockin 4 Rescues

Location: Skiptown Charlotte
Details: Join Beer Money Entertainment



Local artist LaDara McKinnon will lead an art workshop series in March and April.
CREDIT: Facebook



Floetry comes to Ovens Auditorium on April 24.
CREDIT: Facebook

for a concert benefitting Charlotte-Mecklenburg Animal Care & Control.
<https://bit.ly/40Y9hNP>

April 30 —

Kathy Griffin, New Face, New Tour

Location: Knight Theater
Details: Kathy Griffin brings her latest comedy tour to Knight Theater on April 30.
<https://www.blumenthalarts.org/events/detail/kathy-griffin>

May 1 — Chelsea Handler, The High and Mighty Tour

Location: Ovens Auditorium
Details: Chelsea Handler brings new material to Charlotte as part of her High and Mighty Tour.
<https://www.boplex.com/events/chelsea-handler>

May 1-3 — BOOM Charlotte

Location: The Shoppes at University Place
Details: BOOM Charlotte is a multidisciplinary arts festival showcasing experimental theater, dance and performance art from local and visiting artists.
<https://boomcharlotte.org/boom-charlotte-2026/>



Kathy Griffin brings her latest comedy tour to Knight Theater on April 30.
CREDIT: Facebook

May 1-3 — Kinky Boots

Location: Belk Theater - Blumenthal Arts Center
Details: The Broadway tour of Kinky Boots comes to Charlotte for a three-day run at Belk Theater.
<https://www.blumenthalarts.org/events/detail/kinky-boots-2>

May 2-3 — Kings Drive Art Walk

Location: Little Sugar Creek Greenway
Details: The Kings Drive Art Walk features artists and makers displaying paintings, photography, ceramics and jewelry along the greenway. The outdoor event also includes live music and food vendors.
<https://festivalinthepark.org/kings-drive-art-walk/>

May 8 — Ashnikko: Smoochies Tour

Location: The Fillmore
Details: Pop artist Ashnikko brings the Smoochies Tour to Charlotte, performing songs from her genre-blending catalog.
<https://bit.ly/46OUbxP>

May 15-17 — Reel Out Charlotte LGBTQ+ Film Festival

Location: Independent Picture House
Details: Reel Out Charlotte celebrates LGBTQ+ cinema through screenings of independent features, documentaries and short films from queer filmmakers.
<https://charlottepride.org/reeloutcft/>

May 28 — Ilana Glazer Live!

Location: Knight Theater
Details: Ilana Glazer is scheduled to perform at Knight Theater on May 28.
<https://www.blumenthalarts.org/events/detail/ilana-glazer-ilana-glazer-live>

May 26-31 — Moulin Rouge! The Musical

Location: Belk Theater - Blumenthal Arts Center
Details: Moulin Rouge! The Musical closes out the month with a Charlotte run at Belk Theater.
<https://www.blumenthalarts.org/events/detail/moulin-rouge-the-musical>



The 18th annual Reel Out Charlotte: The Queen City's LGBTQ+ Film Festival returns to the Independent Picture House in May.
CREDIT: website screenshot

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'La Lucci'

Out in Print



by Terri Schlichenmeyer
Contributing Writer

"La Lucci"
by Susan Lucci with Laura Morton
©2026, Blackstone Publishing
\$29.99
196 pages



was a keystone character on TV's *All My Children*, and she learned a lot from older actors on the show, and from Agnes Nixon, the creator of it. She says she still keeps in touch with many of her former costars.

She is thankful for her mother's caretakers, who stepped in when dementia struck. Grateful for more doctors, who did heart-saving work when Lucci had a clogged artery. Grateful for friends, opportunities, life, grandchildren and a career that continues.

And she's grateful for the love she shared with her husband, Helmut Huber, who died nearly four years ago. Grateful for the chance to grieve, to heal and to continue.

And yet, she says of her husband: "He was never timid, but I know he was afraid at the end, and that kills me down to my soul."

"It's been fifteen years since Erica Kane and I parted ways," says author Susan Lucci (with Laura Morton), and she says that people still approach her to confirm or deny rumors of the show's resurrection. There's still no answer to that here (sorry, fans), but what you'll find inside "La Lucci" is still exceptionally generous.

If this book were just filled with stories, you'd like it just fine. If it was only about Lucci's faith and her gratitude – words that happen to appear very frequently here – you'd still like reading it. But Lucci tells her stories of family, children and *All My Children*, while also offering help to couples who've endured miscarriage, women who've had heart problems, and widow(ers) who are spinning and need the kindness of someone who's lived loss, too.

These are the other things you'll find in "La Lucci," in a voice you'll hear in your head, if you spent your lunch hours glued to the TV back in the day. It's a comfortable, fun read for fans. It's a story you'll love. ::

They're among the world's greatest love stories. You know them well: Marc Antony and Cleopatra. Abelard and Heloise. Phoebe and Langley. Cliff and Nina. Jesse and Angie, Opal and Palmer, Palmer and *Daisy*, Tad and Dixie. Now read "**La Lucci**" by **Susan Lucci, with Laura Morton**, and you might also think of Susan and Helmut.

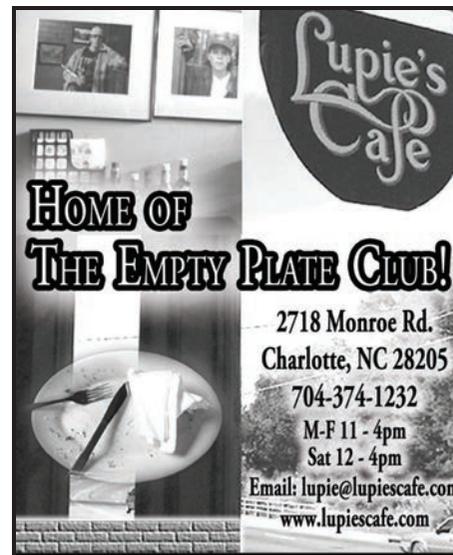
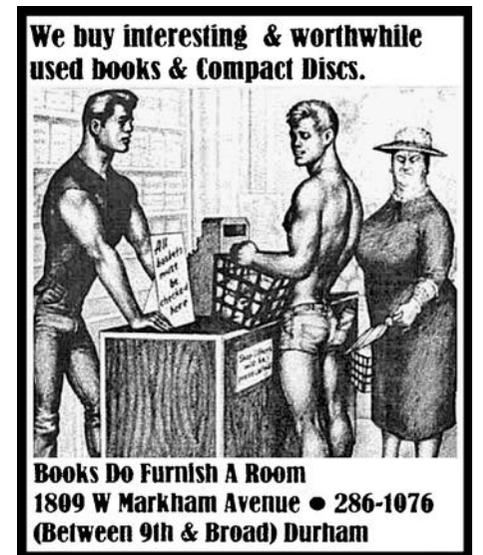
When she was a very small girl, Susan Lucci loved to perform. Also when she was young, she learned that words have power. She vowed to use them for good for the rest of her life.

Her parents, she says, were supportive and her family, loving. Because of her Italian heritage, she was "ethnic looking" but Lucci's mother was careful to point out dark-haired beauties on TV and elsewhere, giving Lucci a foundation of confidence.

That's just one of the things for which Lucci says she's grateful. In fact, she says, "Prayers of gratitude are how I begin and end each day."

She is particularly grateful for becoming a mother to her two adult children, and to the doctors who saved her son's life when he was a newborn.

Lucci writes about gratitude for her long career. She


Guess again: an interview with gay singer/songwriter Mike Maimone

Out in Music



by Gregg Shapiro
Contributing Writer

Gay singer/songwriter Mike Maimone has a soul-crushing story to tell. What better way to do it than in song? Maimone and the late, legendary, gay public relations whiz Howard Bragman, who was renowned for his crisis management skills, met in 2022. The pair began a whirlwind, long-distance relationship, marrying in early 2023, shortly before Bragman died of acute myeloid leukemia. Maimone's two most recent albums, 2023's "Mookie's Big Gay Mixtape," and his latest, 2025's "Guess What? I Love You" (8Eat8), address the relationship with a broad range of emotions. Listeners can expect to be taken on a roller-coaster ride of feelings, concluding on an unexpectedly uplifting note with "Waiting In The Light," which closes the new album. Mike spoke with us about the album before its early 2026 release.

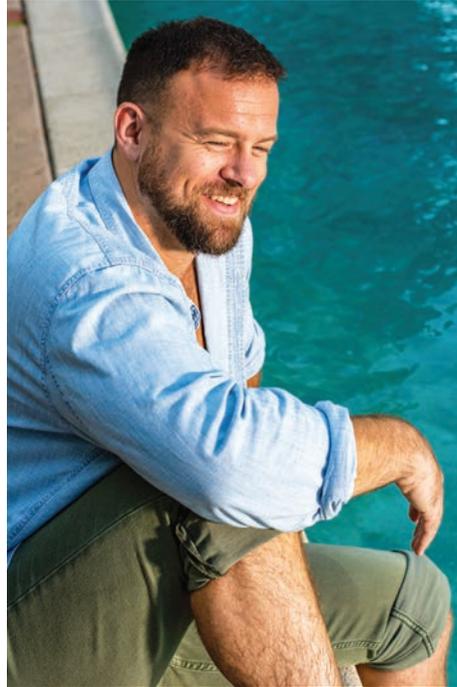
Gregg Shapiro: The dedication on your 2023 album "Mookie's Big Gay Mixtape" reads "In loving memory of my husband, Howard Benjamin Bragman." It was released the year Howard passed, and your new album, "Guess What? I Love You," arriving a couple of years later, is also dedicated to Howard, whom you call "my forever guy." Were any of the songs on the new album originally intended for its predecessor, or were they all written specifically for the current project?

Mike Maimone: The songs on "Guess What? I Love You" were all written specifically for the album. The only exceptions are "Forever Again," which I wrote for Howard when we first got engaged, "Big Kiss," which I started writing after Howard and I returned from a road trip through the Southwest, and "Paranoid in Paradise," which I wrote after a misguided attempt to get high with him. Those three ended up on Side A of the record, chronicling our love story from first meeting through our wedding.

GS: There's a certain blush to the songs written for and about Howard, on both albums, that made me wonder if he was your first serious relationship.

MM: I'm glad to hear you say that, because no, this was not my first serious relationship. In fact, "Forever Again" was written because I'd been previously engaged, and Howard had been divorced, and I wanted to ease any trepidation about putting our hearts on the line again. I was in that prior relationship for seven years, before that I was with a man for six years, and had a yearlong relationship before that. Because Howard and I met later in life, we had the experience to recognize what an incredible thing we had from the moment we met. It made us giddy. We were genuinely grateful for each other. I'm glad that shines through the songs.

GS: There is a distinctive shift in tone from the "Mixtape" to "Guess What?"



Gay singer/songwriter Mike Maimone.
CREDIT: Rafael Paiva

although the new album does open with more upbeat numbers, including "On My Way," "Big Kiss," and "Meet Me." Was it important to you that you ease the listener in for what was to come later?

MM: Similar to "Mixtape," I added interlude tracks to guide the narrative, including some voicemails. The new record flows chronologically, so it starts with songs about those first exciting trips to see each other, falling in love, and deciding to spend the rest of our lives together. On the vinyl, "Forever Again" closes Side A, about our love story. Side B begins with "Beautiful Mess" about being by Howard's side through his diagnosis and, ultimately, holding him as he passed away. It took me about two years to write and record, and eventually I realized that the album needed to be about beginning to heal, as well, so there is a trio of hopeful songs to close the album.

GS: You mention "the Windy City" in "Meet Me." You lived in the Chicago area for 12 years, and Howard was also from the Great Lakes Region. How much would you say that sharing that Midwestern sensibility played a part in your mutual attraction?

MM: It was a large part of what made me comfortable with Howard in the beginning. We met on Scruff and immediately moved off the app to phone calls and FaceTime. We had a lot of differences on paper, not the least of which was that he lived in LA and I was in Nashville. But we talked several times a day, falling in love long-distance as we discovered our commonalities.

GS: The songs on "Guess What? I Love You" are propelled by a combination of retro and regional musical styles. Please say a few words about how those kinds of influences work their way into your music.

MM: Having loved all kinds of music,

I've never wanted to stick to a specific style in my own songwriting. My first band was called Mutts for that reason. I'm a '90s kid, which may be the most eclectic decade for popular music. The Billboard charts had everything from Dr. Dre to Enya to Nine Inch Nails to the Benedictine Monks of Santo Domingo de Silos. I'm not saying those are my influences on this record; I just mean that we're in this algorithmic era where new artists blow up by sounding exactly like every other song on a playlist. And if you deviate from that sound on your next track, the algorithm doesn't know what to do with you anymore. You only get one life, so why limit your creativity to placate an algorithm? I guess if you only want to make one style of music, that works out great. For me, that's been a challenge. I don't question whether one song fits with another. I just try to make them flow together on the album.

GS: The transition from joy to despair comes across about halfway through "Guess What? I Love You" on songs such as "Beautiful Mess," "So Hard To Let Go" and "Oh How Lucky." How do you prepare yourself to sing such deeply personal tunes for an audience?

MM: It's difficult. It leaves me emotionally drained to keep going back through that pain. But these songs have brought with them the most powerful connection my music has ever had. Grief is a horrible thing that we all eventually have to go through, and an unfortunate bond we all have. I first played "Oh How Lucky" for my Patreon subscribers. Afterwards, several people messaged me saying how much the song meant to them. It reminded them of their own departed loved ones and helped them realize their own gratitude



Mike Maimone (right) with his late husband Howard Bragman.
CREDIT: Courtesy Mike Maimone

for the love they shared.

GS: In the midst of all the sadness, there is also a healthy dose of humor, especially on what sounds like an anti-drug song: "Paranoid in Paradise."

MM: I'd like to clarify that it's not an anti-drug song – I like marijuana, I'm just allergic to it. But yeah, I wanted to make sure the album reflected how much fun Howard and I had. "Paranoid in Paradise" is about a night when I tried to get high with Howard. I knew I couldn't handle weed, but we were

having a relaxing evening, just the two of us, and I figured it was a good environment to try again. I was so wrong. At first, Howard thought it was hilarious that I thought he was trying to kill me. Eventually, he got tired of my BS and went to sleep, leaving me to spiral out on my own.

GS: In recent years, albums by queer artists, including Sufjan Stevens and cabaret artist Frank Dain, have addressed the loss of a life partner. Did you listen to these kinds of albums while working on your own?

MM: I didn't. But after Howard's Celebration of Life, I outlined a documentary about him. He had produced a number of docs and had a lot of friends in that world, all of whom loved the treatment but said they were too swamped with other projects. One of them suggested I write a book first, as that wouldn't require funding, and if successful, it could open the door for a film on Howard's legacy. He suggested that I read "Spoiler Alert: The Hero Dies." It was a brutal read just months after losing Howard, but helpful in visualizing how to make art about my grief.

GS: Even though this is a very personal album, was it your intention for "Guess What? I Love You" to be helpful to others grieving the loss of a life partner?

MM: That was one of the intentions. First was to document the love for my own memory. I needed to capture it through music, or I'd start to second-guess if it happened at all. The next was to honor Howard's legacy and make sure he'd always be remembered. Channeling my grief into the music helped me begin my healing journey, and as I started sharing it with people close to me, the third intention emerged. Although it's very specific lyrically, it seems to speak to the universal as well.

GS: In addition to this album, you have also written a memoir about your experience. What can you tell the readers about the book?

MM: The book is my story about love, loss, grief, and healing. It started as a way for me to memorialize Howard's contributions to the world through the lens of our love story. But it ended up describing the ways Howard changed my life upon entering it, and again upon leaving it one year later. Howard was an enormous personality, and there were a lot of funny moments. There are a lot of sexy stories, too. And some interesting insights due to our culture clash, as he was a Hollywood publicist and celebrity in his own right, while I was a scrappy independent musician living in Nashville. It, of course, gets very heavy. In the writing and editing process, I've had to pause many times to allow myself to break down. But I didn't want to leave the reader – or myself – in sadness. In the two years it took to write, a lot of things changed in my life. I grew as a person. And my beliefs evolved. So it closes with some perspective on hope and healing. I got a fantastic literary agent and a publisher, and we're looking at February 2026 for release. I've pushed the album back so we can put out both at the same time. ::

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