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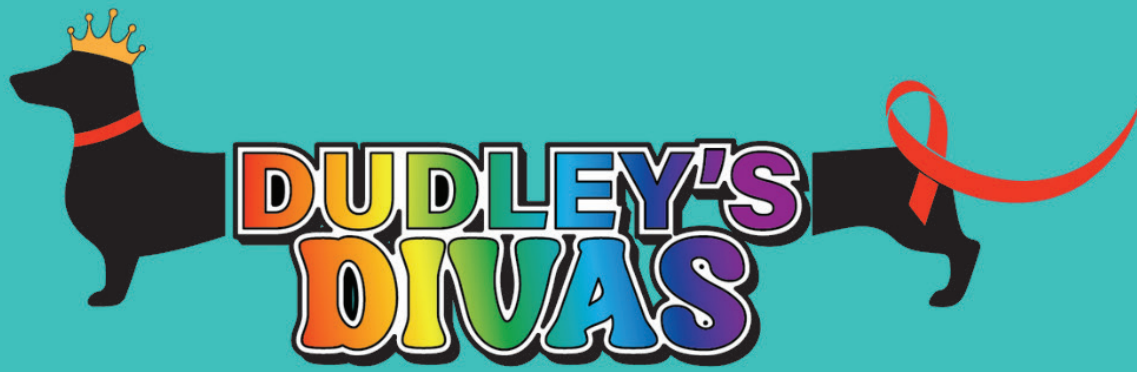
Charlotte's LGBTQ+ Community Then and Now



Legal tips for
LGBTQ+ folks
- pg 10

Interview with
Gina Gershon
- pg 15





To our incredible community

— thank you, truly, from the bottom of our heels.

Since December 2022, Dudley's Divas have been popping up here and there with our Drag Brunches, never fully knowing what each show might bring—but always feeling your love and support.

This past March, because of you, we raised over \$11,750 for the White Family Nutrition Department at Dudley's Place and Rosedale. And together, over time, these “little shows” have now contributed more than \$100,000 to support clients infected and affected by HIV.

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Your generosity, your energy, your presence—it means everything to us and to those we're able to help. You keep showing up, lifting us higher each time, and we promise to keep showing up too... heels high, hearts full, and ready to twirl.

With endless gratitude,

Dudley's Divas





contributors this issue

Writers: Kevin Hardy, Jaylen Jones, Taylor Heeden Larkins, David Aaron Moore, Terri Schlichenmeyer, Liz Schob, Gregg Shapiro, Connie Vetter

on the cover

Graphic Design by Danny A. Mannanov
Photographer: Facebook

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.

Pride Publishing & Typesetting, Inc.,
dba *Qnotes*

P.O. Box 221841, Charlotte, NC 28222
ph 704.531.9988 fx 704.531.1361

Publisher: Jim Yarbrough

Sales: x201 adsales@qnotescarolinas.com

Nat'l Sales: Rivendell Media, ph
212.242.6863

Managing Editor: Jim Yarbrough, x201,
editor@qnotescarolinas.com

Director of Strategic Initiatives:
Liz Schob

Digital Engagement Specialist:
Tim Kendra-Dell

Sr. Editor: David Aaron Moore,
Editor@qnotescarolinas.com

Copy Editor: Bailey Sides

Production: Danny A. Mannanov, x205,
production@qnotescarolinas.com

Printed on recycled paper.

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inside this issue



feature

12 Charlotte's LGBTQ+ community: Then and now



news

- 5 JD Mazuera Arias: A story of community
- 6 Former Charlotte resident, trans activist and drag performer killed in Virginia
- 6 LGBTQ+ Charlotte shows up at No Kings protest
- 6 HRC's 'Welcoming Schools' Book of the Month for April
- 6 Trouble for Tennessee trans folk
- 7 Survey reports on the experiences LGBTQ+ youth have in schools
- 7 The right-wing's 'Gender Exploratory Therapy' game
- 7 Supreme Court strikes down Colorado's ban on conversion therapy
- 8 Dudley's Place drag brunch keeps giving back
- 8 Luke Combs adds his voice in support of LGBTQ+ community
- 8 The pay gap between men and women widened in 2025, analysis finds



a&e

- 14 Out in Print: 'The Remarkable Life of Reed Peggram: The Man Who Stared Down World War II in the Name of Love'
- 8 Out on Film: Gina Gershon talks about film career, life and memoirs



life

- 10 LGBTQ+ legal concerns: What you can do to protect yourself in NC



views

- 4 Former NC Lt. Governor betrayed his state and party - now he's talking about his misdeeds



events

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



Former CLT resident, activist and performer killed in Virginia

Police in Petersburg, Virginia, responded to reports of gunfire to find former Charlotte resident Shyell Diamond Sanchez-McCray suffering from multiple gunshot wounds. She was pronounced dead at the scene and no arrests have been made.

PAGE 6

JD Mazuera Arias: a story of community

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PAGE 5



The People speak on Social Media



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Former NC Lt. Governor betrayed his state and party – now he’s talking about his misdeeds

Is humiliated Mark Robinson trying to jump start a dead career?



by Taylor Heeden Larkins
Qnotes Staff Writer

In the North Carolina political world, few figures have embodied contradiction and hypocrisy quite like Mark Robinson. Revelations during Robinson’s 2024 campaign regarding comments he made on the pornographic website Nude Africa were among some of the most damning evidence of the former lieutenant governor’s deceit to North Carolinians.

Now, over a year after the initial report tanked Robinson’s career, the disgraced politician has found himself in the headlines again. The latest wave of reporting from many statewide outlets only sharpens that paradox: a politician who built a brand on moral certitude now finds himself navigating personal admissions, financial scrutiny tied to his family and a long shadow cast by his own words.

In a March 2026 interview, Robinson acknowledged an “obsession with pornography” and conceded that “there’s some truth” to allegations he had previously denied about disturbing online comments. That admission marked a notable shift for a politician who had long dismissed such claims outright.

At the same time, scrutiny continues to surround his family’s nonprofit, Balanced Nutrition, run by his wife. State regulators determined the organization owed more than \$100,000 for disallowed expenses tied to a federally funded child nutrition program, following findings of inadequate record-keeping and improper reimbursements.

State officials have spent more than a year attempting to recover funds from Balanced Nutrition, a nonprofit formerly run by Yolanda Hill, the state’s ex-second lady, which has since closed its operations. According to a state audit conducted by the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), the nonprofit inaccurately reported its operating expenses.

Those reporting issues resulted in the state reimbursing the organization beyond what it was eligible to receive. Because Hill and several of her relatives who worked for the nonprofit were paid based on a percentage of overall expenditures, the inflated reimbursements effectively increased their compensation. Records indicate that over several years, Hill and her family members collected hundreds of thousands of dollars through the organization.

No criminal charges were filed as a result of the investigation. Instead, the state demanded repayment of the excess funds. DHHS and the North Carolina Department of Justice have since enlisted collection agencies to recover the money. As of last week, according to WRAL, DHHS reported that no payments had been made. The collection agency will manage the account for six months; if the debt remains unpaid after that period,

responsibility will revert to DHHS, according to an agency spokesperson.

Hill closed Balanced Nutrition shortly after Mark Robinson secured the Republican nomination for governor in early 2024, and the state’s investigation became public not long afterward. Initially, DHHS calculated the amount owed at \$132,000. That figure was later reduced to roughly \$101,000 after the nonprofit’s legal team presented additional information during a September meeting with state officials.

The review of Balanced Nutrition – which administered federal funds to help eligible daycare centers provide free meals – found multiple compliance issues. Investigators reported that the organization sometimes submitted duplicate receipts for reimbursement, overstated certain expenses and failed to meet required nutritional standards for meals.

Robinson and his allies have consistently framed the investigation as politically motivated, pointing to earlier audits they say found no major issues. But independent analyses of state records have found no evidence that the nonprofit was uniquely targeted compared to others. Taken together, these developments paint a picture of a political figure no longer fighting to win office – but to salvage credibility.

Yet Robinson’s current predicament cannot be understood without confronting the rhetoric that helped define and ultimately derail his rise.

For years, Robinson positioned himself as a culture warrior, frequently invoking religious language to justify harsh critiques of LGBTQ+ people. In a 2021 speech, he referred to “transgenderism and homosexuality” as “filth,” insisting such topics had no place in schools. After the 2016 Pulse nightclub massacre, he wrote that homosexuality was “an abominable sin.”

His comments extended beyond theology into policy and dehumanization. He suggested transgender people should be arrested for using restrooms that don’t align with their birth sex and at one point

has only revived those contradictions rather than resolving them.

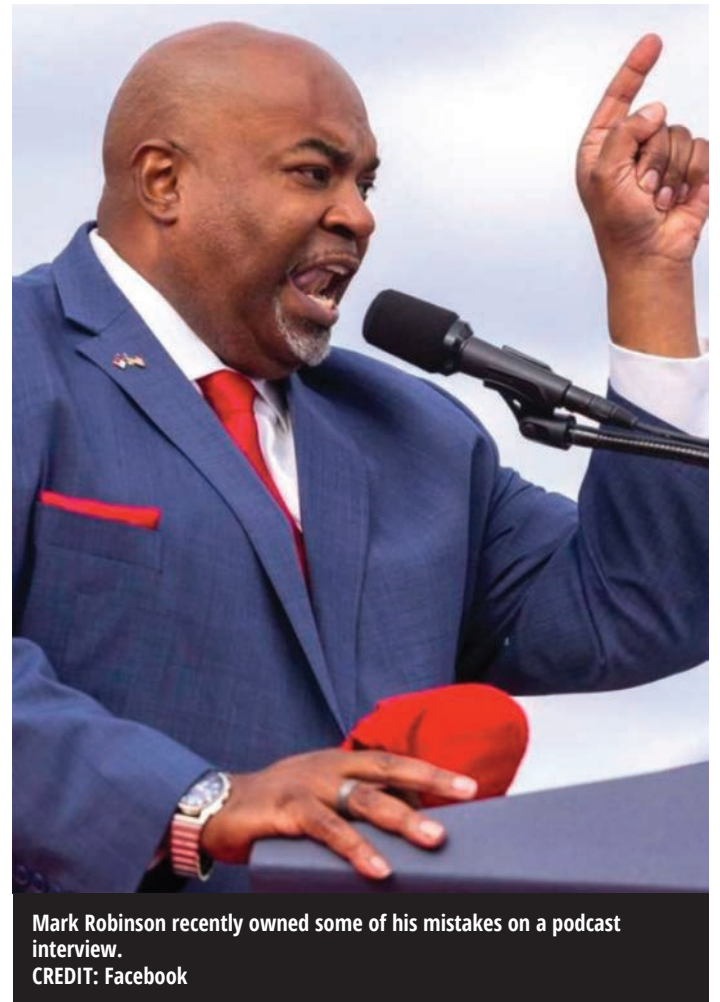
Robinson’s political appeal was rooted in a familiar American story: personal hardship, religious redemption, and blunt-spoken authenticity. For a time, that formula worked. He rose from viral speech maker to lieutenant governor and became a national conservative figure. But narratives built on moral authority are uniquely fragile. They depend not just on policy positions, but on perceived integrity. When the gap between rhetoric and reality widens – as it has with Robinson – it doesn’t merely dent a career; it reframes it.

The Balanced Nutrition controversy reinforces that dynamic. A politician who railed against government dependency now faces questions about a family-run nonprofit sustained by public funds and flagged for financial mismanagement. Meanwhile, his recent interview suggests a man attempting to pivot from denial to confession – less a campaign strategy than a personal reckoning. Whether voters interpret that as accountability or opportunism is an open question.

Robinson is no longer on the ballot, but his story still matters. It illustrates how modern political careers can rise quickly on provocation – and fall just as quickly under the weight of accumulated contradictions. His podcast appearance and seeming willingness to “come clean” about previous controversy begs the question: is Mark Robinson eyeing for a return to the N.C. GOP scene?

Why would Robinson – after doubling down on his denial of wrongdoing, even taking CNN to court over his crazy comments on Nude Africa – come out of his exile to own up to his shortcomings?

Court filings show that American Express sued the Robinsons’ now defunct nonprofit and its director, Yolanda Hill, in January, seeking to collect more than \$19,000 in outstanding credit card debt. Hill is also being pursued in a separate case by the lender SoFi, which alleges she owes \$26,844 on a personal loan taken out in 2023.



Mark Robinson recently owned some of his mistakes on a podcast interview.
CREDIT: Facebook

After closing the nonprofit that had distributed federal funding for childcare meal programs, Hill launched an accounting business last year. It remains unclear whether Robinson has taken on new employment since leaving office. However, his Facebook page features a steady stream of political commentary, memes and videos, along with regular prompts encouraging followers to pay 99 cents per month to subscribe.

In January 2025, Robinson said he did not intend to run for office again, though he has kept his campaign account open. Financial records indicate he spent about \$97,000 from that account during the latter half of 2025, including \$50,000 on “political analytics” and additional payments to four separate law firms. One of those legal-related expenditures in September went to a Florida consulting firm run by his former campaign manager, Matt Hurley, who took over following Robinson’s scandal. Hurley also owns the media startup responsible for producing Robinson’s recent podcast appearance.

North Carolinians made it clear in 2024: we demand better than Mark Robinson and his questionable approach to politics. Transparency is the key to trust, and Robinson has destroyed any hope of gaining that trust back with voters. North Carolinians must reject Robinson and his attempts to resuscitate his political career to send a message: we will not allow incompetence and dishonesty to become the standard. ::



said they should “find a corner outside somewhere.” He also compared homosexuality to things like “maggots” and “cow manure,” arguing it “creates nothing.”

Critics across the political spectrum condemned the rhetoric as extreme, and it became a defining liability during his gubernatorial campaign.

What made the controversy more explosive were later reports alleging Robinson had posted explicit and contradictory content on pornographic forums – material that clashed sharply with his public moralizing. His recent admission of past behavior

JD Mazuera Arias: A story of community

Charlotte District 5 councilmember navigates growth, power and representation



by Liz Schob
Qnotes Staff Writer

Four months into his first term on Charlotte City Council, JD Mazuera Arias is still adjusting to the role and the expectations that come with it. The work moves quickly, the volume of information is constant and the stakes are often immediate.

"It's like drinking from a fire hose," he said, describing the early months of his term. That pace is not just about learning procedures or policy. It reflects a broader reality that Charlotte is growing faster than the systems currently designed to govern it.

Sworn in on Dec. 1, 2025, Mazuera Arias entered office at a moment when both the council and the city itself were in transition. New members joined the body following closely contested races, and Charlotte continues to grow at a pace that is reshaping how the city functions. That growth is visible across neighborhoods, but inside City Hall, he said, the systems in place do not always reflect the scale of the city today.

His path to this moment was defined by a race that came down to 34 votes. In 2025, he defeated incumbent Marjorie Molina in the District 5 Democratic primary after a recount confirmed the narrow margin. That outcome has stayed with him, not as a point of political advantage, but as a reminder of what the position represents. "This seat isn't mine," he said after the election. "It belongs to everyone."

That belief continues to shape how he approaches the role. Rather than treating the win as a mandate for a specific agenda,



Mazuera Arias speaking at HRC NC Dinner in Charlotte on March 21, 2026.
CREDIT: Facebook

he describes it as a responsibility to a district that is both diverse and often overlooked.

Throughout his campaign, Mazuera Arias focused on what he calls "kitchen table issues," emphasizing affordability, housing and safety in a district where those concerns cut across political identity. "It [doesn't] matter whether you are Republican, Independent, Democratic," he said. "Everyone deserves safety. Everyone deserves the dignity of living without worrying about being displaced."

The city's growth is often positioned as a success story, defined by new development and expanding opportunity. For Mazuera Arias, the more important question is what that growth means for the people who have been here all along. "What about the people that already live here?" he said. "Are we making their lives better?" It is a question that reverberates throughout East Charlotte, a deeply diverse and historically underinvested part of the city. Growth, in his view, is not inherently a problem. The concern is whether it happens in a way that displaces the communities that built the city in the first place. "We can grow," he said, "but let's make sure that growth doesn't displace people."

For Mazuera Arias, that understanding is rooted in his own experience. Born in Colombia and raised in East Charlotte, he spent much of his life undocumented before becoming a naturalized U.S. citizen in 2021. Navigating systems that were not designed for immigrants like him informs how he understands policy, access and belonging, and how he responds in moments of tension. During ICE and Border Patrol activity in East Charlotte last November, when federal

agents disrupted businesses and daily life along Central Avenue, he said he made a point to be present. "When CBP was in town, I stood with my immigrant community on Central Avenue," he said.

In practice, that approach is not limited to moments of crisis. Mazuera Arias describes his time in community spaces as a continuation of his role. "I don't spend time with community because I want to get votes," he said. "I spend time with community because they're my community." The distinction matters to him. It reflects a belief that public service is not just about decision-making inside City Hall, but about maintaining relationships outside of it. "Who am I if community doesn't exist?" he said.

At the same time, his approach to leadership has been shaped by time spent outside Charlotte. Before returning to the city, he lived and worked in Washington, D.C. and New York City, including time in the office of Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. In those environments, he said, disagreement was part of the process. "In D.C. and New York, disagreement and debate was how we came to solutions," he said. Returning to Charlotte, he found a different dynamic, one where conversations about race and difference are often more limited. "There's this idea that we can't talk about race, we can't talk about differences," he said. Bringing a more direct approach has not always been easy. "The response has been pushback," he said. Still, he sees those conversations as necessary if the city is going to address the realities it faces.

Those realities become especially clear inside City Hall. One of the most significant adjustments, he said, has been understanding how limited the role can be. Charlotte operates within a council-manager system and under state law that gives the North Carolina General Assembly broad authority over what cities can and cannot do, often referred to as Dillon's Rule, which holds that municipalities can only exercise powers explicitly granted by the state. "Council rarely has any authority at all," he said, noting that rezonings are one of the few areas where council exercises direct control. That structure shapes how decisions are approached and what options are even on the table. "We are typically answering the question of what we can't do rather than what we can do," he said.

His identity as a queer Latino council-

member is part of how he understands that work, but he does not treat representation as an endpoint. "Not all skin folk are kin folk," he said, emphasizing that shared identity does not automatically translate to shared priorities. Instead, he focuses on whether leadership reflects the needs and realities of the communities it serves. That perspective was visible in his recent appearance as a speaker at the HRC North Carolina Dinner, where he described the experience as both meaningful and reflective. "It felt like a passing of the baton," he said, situating himself within a longer history of LGBTQ+ advocacy. At the same time, he acknowledged the broader climate facing those communities. "Our mere existence is threatening to so many people," he said.



Mazuera Arias with community members at the Charlotte No Kings event on March 28, 2026.
CREDIT: Facebook

When asked why his story matters in this moment, Mazuera Arias returns to the idea of community rather than individual achievement. "I was a statistic that wasn't supposed to be in this seat," he said. But he rejects the idea that his path is self-made. "I made it out because I had family and community," he said, pointing to the people and support systems that shaped his path. "When you flip the page, you're not just going to read my story. You're going to read the stories of so many people. My story is a story of community."

As Charlotte continues to grow and change, Mazuera Arias is still navigating the limits of the system he now operates within, while balancing the expectations and needs of a rapidly evolving city. At the same time, he is working to expand who has a voice in shaping what comes next and to ensure that the communities that built the city are not left out of its future. ::



Mazuera Arias with the owners of Tacos El Nevado, a family-owned restaurant in East Charlotte.
CREDIT: Facebook



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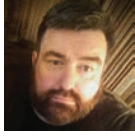


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Massages 24/7

Former Charlotte resident, trans activist and drag performer killed in Virginia

Shyyell Diamond Sanchez-McCray was a much-loved performer in the CLT drag scene



by David Aaron Moore
Qnotes Staff Writer

Police in Petersburg, Va., responded to reports of gunfire at a home there March 13, to find former Charlotte resident Shyyell Diamond Sanchez-McCray suffering from multiple gunshot wounds. She was pronounced dead at the scene and authorities have released limited information about suspects or motive. As of the latest reports, no arrests have been announced.

In the days following her death at the age of 42, misreporting about her identity left many loved ones confused. Early media accounts misgendered Sanchez-McCray, while family members and advocacy groups later worked to clarify her trans identity.

In a statement, the Human Rights Campaign emphasized the importance of respecting her identity and legacy: "Shyyell Diamond Sanchez-McCray was a beloved member of her community whose life was taken far too soon. We must honor her by continuing the fight for safety and dignity

for all transgender people."

Her death has been widely recognized as one of the first reported killings of a transgender or gender-nonconforming person in the United States in 2026, reminding us of the persistent violence faced by Black trans women and gender-diverse people. Friends and fellow performers have been more direct in their grief. "She lit up every room she walked into," one Charlotte-based drag performer said in a social media post. "She wasn't just a performer - she was family to so many of us."

Sanchez-McCray was well known in Charlotte, where she became a vibrant figure in the city's drag and ballroom communities. She competed in pageants, mentored younger performers and helped organize events that celebrated Black LGBTQ+ artistry. Her presence was both commanding and nurturing - equal parts performer and community builder.

Her accomplishments in Charlotte's pageant scene reflected both talent and determination. She earned multiple titles that placed her among respected performers in regional and national circuits. In another social media post, a fellow pageant competitor

recalled her impact this way: "Shyyell didn't just compete, she elevated the whole stage. She made you want to be better, to stand taller, to represent yourself with pride."

Beyond the stage, she worked as a promoter and entrepreneur, running events and even a catering business that tied her creativity to her livelihood. But Sanchez-McCray's life in Charlotte was not defined by performance alone. She was also a dedicated activist, particularly around issues of racism in LGBTQ+ spaces.

Her willingness to speak out - even when it risked backlash - earned her both admiration and controversy. That conviction shaped both her activism and her artistry. Whether walking a runway or organizing a protest, she carried the same message: Black queer and trans lives deserve visibility, dignity and respect.

Eventually, Sanchez-McCray returned to Virginia, where she had roots and connections. In Petersburg, she remained active in local LGBTQ+ circles, continuing to perform, organize and support others. Though substantially smaller than Charlotte's scene, the community she joined there became another extension of the network she had spent years building across state lines.

Her death has reverberated intensely across both regions. In Charlotte, where she helped shape a generation of performers and activists, tributes have poured in from those who knew her as a leader and friend. In Virginia, vigils and memorials have honored her as a hometown figure whose

life bridged artistry and advocacy.

In a post on Facebook dated the day before her death, Sanchez-McCray asked her social media family a question that now seems almost cryptic and leaves many wondering how - if in anyway - it might be related to the case: "Has there been any more info on the people who got stabbed on Spring Street yesterday? Did they catch who did it?"

In the absence of clear answers about her killing, what remains most visible is the life she lived: one marked by resilience, creativity and a refusal to be silent. Sanchez-McCray's story, stretching from Charlotte's stages to a quiet home in Petersburg, is now part of a larger and ongoing saga about the safety, visibility and humanity of Black transgender and gender-diverse people in America. ::



Shyyell Diamond Sanchez-McCray: equal parts performer and community builder.
CREDIT: Facebook

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LGBTQ+ Charlotte shows up at No Kings protest

At First Ward Park on Saturday, March 28, Charlotte's latest "No Kings" protest brought thousands into the streets, including a strong showing from the city's LGBTQ+ community. Bishop Tonyia Rawls was in attendance. Freedom Center for Social Justice Executive Director Cameron Pruette addressed many of the people on hand. Charlotte City Councilmembers Danté Anderson and JD Mazuera Arias were also present.

The rally, one of more than 3,000 held nationwide, was organized by a coalition of local groups including Indivisible Charlotte. Speakers included author and historian Ibram X. Kendi and Pruette. After the program, participants marched through Uptown before returning to the park.

For organizers, the goal was not just turnout, but connection.

Carolyn Eberly, a volunteer organizer with Indivisible Charlotte, described the event as a way for people to see one another and recognize shared concern. "This is the Charlotte area coming together for a

peaceful, visible gathering of the community," Eberly said. "People are here to defend democracy and their freedoms."

She also emphasized the rally as a starting point, particularly for those attending for the first time or looking to get involved. "This is an entry point [for] people to get involved," Eberly said. "We're hoping that people leave this event feeling a little less alone and a little more connected, and that they'll keep showing up."

That throughline carried into the crowd.

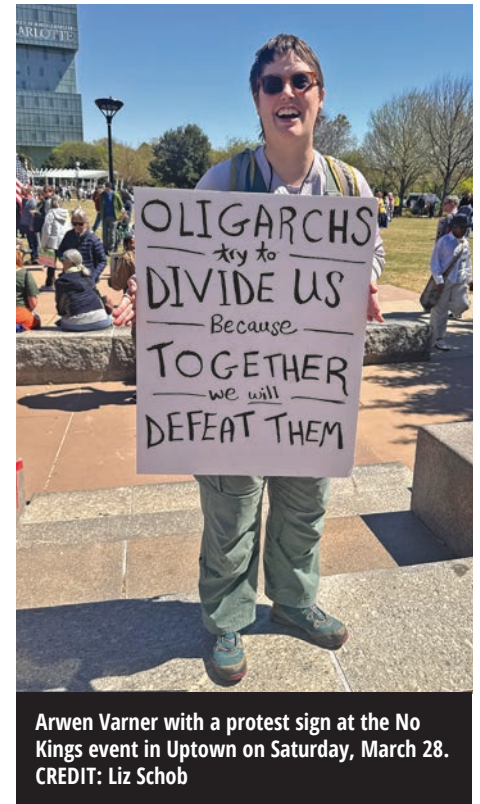
Arwen Varner, an LGBTQ+ community member attending their first "No Kings" protest, said they came because of concerns about immigration enforcement, due process and broader political conditions. "I'm here because I'm deeply concerned about what is happening with ICE, kidnapping and detaining people, the lack of due process, the escalation of war and many other things," Varner said. "Whatever happens, I want to know that I tried to get involved and do something about it."

For Varner, the structure of the event itself stood out, particularly the mix of speakers, music and participation. "It was excellent," they said. "I was so honored to hear Dr. Kendi speaking to us. I also thought the music, art and the amount of inclusion that went into it really warmed my heart and backed up the words everyone was saying with action."

They also pointed to something more direct about why LGBTQ+ people show up in spaces like this. "We've done a pretty good job of building community within the LGBTQ+ community," Varner said. "But the truth is, we are percentage wise a minority, and to advocate for our own rights, we need to build relationships outside of the community. Events like this are the perfect place to do that."

What happened next was less visible, but no less important to the day itself. The conversations that began in the park, the relationships formed across communities, and the entry points Eberly described continued beyond the march. For those who showed up, including LGBTQ+ attendees navigating both their own concerns and those shared more broadly, the day was not only about being present, but about what comes next. ::

— Liz Schob



Arwen Varner with a protest sign at the No Kings event in Uptown on Saturday, March 28. CREDIT: Liz Schob

HRC's 'Welcoming Schools' Book of the Month for April

Reading is one of the most powerful ways to model inclu-



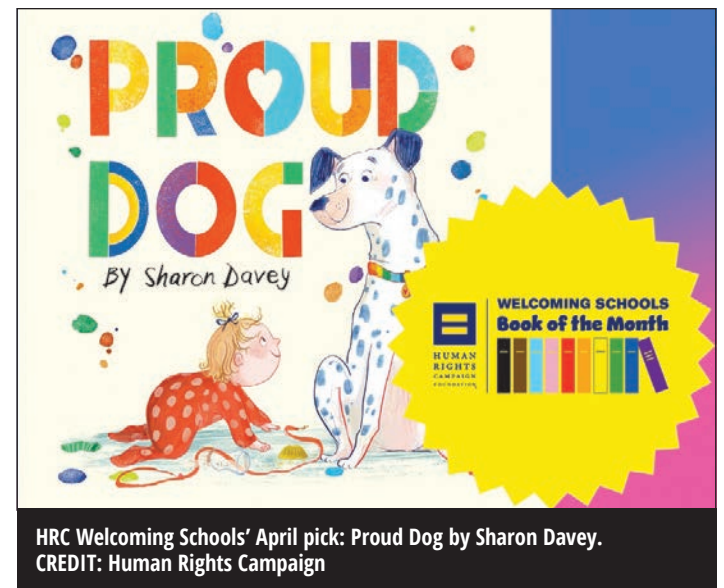
sion and nurture empathy. HRC's Welcoming Schools develop the Book of the Month series to create compassionate dialogue and elevate uplifting stories of authentic LGBTQ+ lives, building monthly engagement and momentum leading up to our National Day of Reading each February.

This month, we're reading "Proud Dog" by Sharon Davey. "Proud Dog" is a delightful tale of love, adaptation and the unbreakable bond of family. Dorothy, a loving dog with two

wonderful dads, leads a life filled with fun. But everything changes when her dads bring home a new addition – a baby! Dorothy misses the calm days when it was just her and her dads. All it takes, though, is one sweet moment for Dorothy to realize that the baby might not be so bad after all. With new found love and understanding, Dorothy embraces the baby as her best little buddy and proudly parades her family's excellent training to the world.

See the full list of highlighted books and their accompanying discussion guides in both English and Spanish at <https://welcomingschools.org/resources/book-of-the-month>. ::

— Human Rights Campaign



HRC Welcoming Schools' April pick: Proud Dog by Sharon Davey. CREDIT: Human Rights Campaign

Trouble for Tennessee trans folk

A bill moving through our neighboring state of Tennessee's General Assembly is drawing scrutiny from LGBTQ+ advocates over new requirements tied to gender-affirming care.

House Bill 754, sponsored by Tennessee State Representative Jeremy Faison, was introduced last year, but was not placed on the regular calendar for debate, amendment and approval or denial until March 19.

Faison, a Republican lawmaker from Cosby, Tenn., claims filing the measure is a part of a broader push by state legislators to regulate healthcare practices related to transgender patients.

As written, HB 754 would require medical facilities that receive state funding and provide gender transition procedures to also offer "detransition" services. The bill further mandates that insurance companies

covering gender-affirming care must also cover "detransition" procedures.

And in a particularly Orwellian move by the state legislature, facilities and insurers would be required to report data on gen-



Tennessee's HB 754 contains content that reads like a trans community shadow dossier.

der-affirming care to the state, which critics argue would function as a public registry of transgender residents.

Additionally, providers could potentially be required to submit information that would include county of residence, age, biological sex, diagnosis and details of care to the state, which would be published in an annual report on a public website.

While the bill claims it will not share "individually identifiable health information," opponents argue that combining data such as county and specific diagnoses could make patients receiving services, particularly those in small communities, easily identifiable.

Supporters of the legislation argue the measure is intended to ensure continuity of care and expand options for patients who seek to reverse earlier medical decisions. Critics, however, say the bill imposes burdensome requirements on providers and could discourage clinics from offering gender-affirming services at all.

LGBTQ+ advocacy groups in Tennessee

have voiced strong opposition. The Tennessee Equality Project, a statewide advocacy organization, has criticized the measure as intrusive and harmful to transgender patients. In testimony shared publicly, representatives described the bill as unnecessary government interference in medical care, with one advocate calling it "a data grab targeting transgender healthcare."

Advocates argue that requiring clinics to provide detransition services, regardless of their specialty, could strain resources and create additional regulatory hurdles.

They also warn that mandated reporting requirements could raise privacy concerns for patients seeking care. ::

Qnotes routinely covers significant LGBTQ+ developments from our direct neighbor states and others in the southeast region. Actions by nearby lawmakers often influence politicians and private citizens in our immediate area. Our goal is always to keep our readership well informed.

— David Aaron Moore

Survey reports on the experiences LGBTQ+ youth have in schools

Glisten (formerly known as GLSEN and dedicated to creating safe and respectful learning environments for youth in our community) recently released the 2025 National School Climate Survey, which gathered data from lived experiences in schools across the nation. The study explores experiences of “safety, bullying and harassment, feelings of school belonging and self-esteem, participation in school and community activities like sports and academics.” The questions center on youth belonging, whether students look forward to school, if they feel they can be themselves, how educators show support, and what LGBTQ+ life is like in school.

2025 National School Climate Survey results
LGBTQ+ youth reported that their

schools were more hostile during the 2024-2025 school year because of the political climate. Two-thirds of students feel unsafe because of their sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression. More than 70 percent of trans and non-traditional gender-expansive individuals felt unsafe about their identity.

The study showed that LGBTQ+ youth school safety does not only include reducing harm and harassment, but also creating a supportive and affirming space to be themselves. A 10th-grade student answered, “It’s nice to just be friends with someone that’s also queer...we will come together as a little community, and we protect one another from the bullying.”

Though LGBTQ+ students attempt to

build a community, many feel their schools are trying to tear it down. Sixty-two percent of youth said they had no LGBTQ+ content in their classes, and 58 percent lack inclusive LGBTQ+ books. A student explained, “Something they could do better when it comes to curriculum and with clubs is intersectionality...if we talked about a disability of [a historical figure]...or show more representation when it comes to all these different attributes.”

Goals and how schools could change

For schools to better support LGBTQ+ students, they should affirm and protect their youth by taking reports of bullying seriously. They should also provide staff support to queer students, implement zero-tolerance policies and hold peers and families accountable.

Glisten hopes to “present a realistic and holistic view of the K-12 school climate for LGBTQ+ students in our study...to present these complexities, especially the strengths



LGBTQ+ youth and ally protesters holding signs in front of the U.S. Capitol.
CREDIT: Social Media

and aspirations of LGBTQ+ youth, so that they feel seen, heard and valued.” ::

— Jaylen Jones

The right-wing’s ‘Gender Exploratory Therapy’ game

It’s not anything new: When an organization or a group with any kind of agenda (positive or negative) realizes their label, acronym or title is potentially offensive, not as impactful as it once was or simply seems outdated by evolving culture, it gets changed.

Everybody does it. From the far left to the far right. Now the right’s trying to pull a fast one with the term “conversion therapy.” Their new words (apparently designed to soften the harshness with a few select adjectives) are “Gender Exploratory Therapy” and “Gender Exploration Therapy.”

Because of these new terms, organizations like GLAAD, the American Medical Association (AMA) and the American Psychological Association (APA) have urged media platforms to create stronger measures to prevent advertising on the discriminatory practice.

“Conversion Therapy” is a dangerous and traumatic practice that attempts to suppress LGBTQ+ desires or feelings. AMA explains that it “often includes unethical techniques including electric shock, deprivation of food and liquid, chemically induced nausea and masturbation reconditioning.”

These practices, AMA continues, can lead to “suicidal behaviors and cause significant psychological distress, anxiety, lowered self-esteem, internalized homophobia, self-blame, intrusive imagery and sexual dysfunction.”

In 2024, a report from the Global Project on Hate and Extremism explains how social media companies and search engines are failing to mitigate harmful content and ads on “Conversion Therapy.” The report highlights the enormous amount of work media platforms need to do and lists ways to improve their policies.

Because of the irreversible damage that comes from “Conversion Therapy” or the newly coined version “Gender Exploration Therapy, GLAAD has worked with social media platforms to better their policies. They have helped platforms like TikTok update their community guidelines to include adding “clarity to the types of hateful [ideology] prohibited on such platform. This includes...



A list of platforms that prohibit harmful ‘Conversion Therapy’ content.
CREDIT: GLAAD

content that supports or promotes conversion therapy programs.”

YouTube and Twitter (now X) have added “Conversion Therapy” to their content and ad guidelines. X does not have a policy for conversion therapy, and YouTube has not implemented information about the practice in its Hate Speech Policy.

Other companies like Facebook, Instagram and Threads have policies, but are separated from other tiers of hate speech.

How to report anti-LGBTQ+ hate speech and harassment on social media platforms

Most major platforms have some sort of policy that prohibits hate speech on the basis of protected characteristics, including sexual orientation and gender identity. If you’re affected by hate speech, be sure to take a screenshot of the comments and continue to monitor what’s happening. Learn how to create a safer experience on the internet with GLAAD’s LGBTQ Digital Safety Guide, which you can find here: <https://glaad.org/smsi/lgbtq-digital-safety-guide/>. ::

— Jaylen Jones

Supreme Court strikes down Colorado’s ban on conversion therapy

In a landmark decision issued Tuesday, March 31, the U.S. Supreme Court struck down Colorado’s ban on conversion therapy for minors, ruling 8-1 that the law violates First Amendment protections of free speech.

The case, *Chiles v. Salazar*, centered on a 2019 Colorado law that prohibited licensed therapists from attempting to change a minor’s sexual orientation or gender identity. Writing for the majority, Justice Neil Gorsuch said the statute amounted to unconstitutional “viewpoint discrimination,” arguing the state could not allow one perspective while banning another in therapeutic conversations.

The Court sided with Colorado counselor Kaley Chiles, who challenged the law on free speech grounds, saying it restricted her ability to counsel clients consistent with their beliefs. The ruling reverses a lower court decision and requires further review under stricter constitutional scrutiny.

Chiles, not surprisingly, was represented by longtime anti-LGBTQ+ legal group Alliance Defending Freedom, which has a history of seeking to ban marriage equality, prohibit equal protections for transgender

people, and undo reproductive freedom and women’s rights. According to GLAAD,



Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson, the lone dissenting voice among all nine justices: ‘To do anything else opens a dangerous can of worms,’ Jackson wrote.
CREDIT: Facebook

the SCOTUS decision does not invalidate Colorado law or any other state law protecting LGBTQ youth from the dangerous practice, though it may open them to additional legal challenges. It does not undo decades of research showing the harm and ineffectiveness of such practices. So-called conversion therapy remains medical malpractice and consumer fraud, and legal recourse remains for anyone harmed by it.

Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson was the lone dissenting voice among all nine justices, including two other liberals. “To do anything else opens a dangerous can of worms,” Jackson wrote. “It threatens to impair States’ ability to regulate the provision of medical care in any respect. It extends the Constitution into uncharted territory in an utterly irrational fashion. And it ultimately risks grave harm to Americans’ health and wellbeing.”

In remarks delivered from the bench, she called the ruling a “slippery slope” that could erode public health protections.

LGBTQ advocacy organizations swiftly condemned the decision.

“[This] reckless decision means more American kids will suffer,” said HRC President Kelley Robinson. “The Court has weaponized free-speech in order to prioritize anti-LGBTQ+ bias over the safety, health and well-being of children.

“So-called ‘conversion therapy’ is pseudoscience, not real therapy. It has been condemned by every mainstream medical and mental health association and harms families, traumatizes children and robs people of their faith communities. It is cruel and should never be offered under the guise of legitimate mental healthcare.”

“The Supreme Court’s decision to treat the dangerous practice of conversion therapy as constitutionally protected speech is a tragic step backward for our country that will put young lives at risk,” said Trevor Project CEO, Jaymes Black. “These efforts, no matter what any court says, are still proven to cause lasting psychological harm.”

Clearly, the decision has immediate and far-reaching implications. More than 20 states and Washington, D.C., have enacted similar bans on conversion therapy for minors.

For LGBTQ+ individuals and advocates across the country, the ruling marks a pivotal moment. Supporters of the decision frame it as a victory for free expression and religious liberty, while opponents warn it could weaken safeguards for vulnerable youth and reshape how states regulate mental health care – setting the stage for expected legal battles ahead in courts across the United States. ::

— David Aaron Moore

Dudley's Place drag brunch keeps giving back

Charlotte showed up again for Dudley's Place on March 29, filling both events for



Dudley's Divas and supporters at the sold-out "Disco & Divas" drag brunch on March 29
CREDIT: Dudley's Place

the organization's latest drag brunch at the NoDa restaurant The Degenerate. The 1970s-themed "Disco & Divas" event followed a pattern that has defined the series over the past two years: strong turnout, steady community support and funding that moves directly into services for people living with and affected by HIV.

The drag brunch started in December 2022 as a way to support a holiday food drive. What began as a single event has grown into an ongoing fundraiser that has raised more than \$100,000, primarily used to stock pantry items and provide essential goods for clients. According to Dudley's Place, every dollar raised through ticket sales, tips and donations goes directly to client needs, with no funds used for administrative or operating expenses.

That approach has been in place from the beginning. Letty's on Shamrock hosted the early brunches, providing space and buffet meals at no cost. Performers, DJs and volunteers donated their time, and performers returned all tips to Dudley's Place. That model continues today, with the event operating as a fully community-supported effort.

The performances are led by Dudley's Divas, including Dale Pierce's charity persona Mink Shoals alongside Karen Affection, Nova Stella and Lili Frost, who joined the cast in December 2025. Each event also features a rotating guest performer and local DJs, and nearly every brunch has sold out across two seatings.

After Letty's closed in 2024, the series paused briefly while organizers searched for a new venue. It returned around World AIDS Day and found a new home at The Degenerate in NoDa. Since then, attendance has remained strong, including the March 29 event, where tips and donations once again supported Dudley's Place programs.

Dudley's Place, founded in 2019, serves more than 1,500 individuals living with HIV or enrolled in prevention services in the Charlotte area. The organization partners with Rosedale Health and Wellness to

connect clients to medical care while also supporting mental health, nutrition and day-to-day needs.

The services supported by the drag brunch extend beyond immediate food assistance. Dudley's Place offers mental health support through peer groups and counseling, nutrition programs that include cooking demonstrations and access to fresh produce, and prevention services such as HIV and STI testing and PrEP education. Clients can also access benefits advocacy, pharmaceutical assistance, emergency food vouchers and essential items, all designed to support stability and ongoing care.

The drag brunch has become one of the most visible ways the community connects to that work, but its impact remains straightforward. Tickets, tips and donations from each event move directly into the programs clients rely on. For Dudley's Place, the drag brunch has become a steady, community-driven way to meet real needs, with each event directly supporting clients across Charlotte.

To learn more about Dudley's Place, visit <https://www.dudleysplace.org/> ::

— Liz Schob

Luke Combs adds his voice in support of LGBTQ+ community

Country music has long been shaped by tradition, identity and cultural expectations, but it has also faced criticism for its lack of LGBTQ+ inclusion. In that context, recent comments from Luke Combs are drawing attention for their clarity and intent, particularly around support for LGBTQ+ youth.

Combs, one of the genre's most commercially successful artists and a native of Huntersville, N.C., spoke about his song "Whoever You Turn Out to Be," which he wrote for his children as a reflection on unconditional love. While the song is rooted in his own experience as a father, Combs said its message was always meant to extend beyond his family.

"That was part of the design," Combs said when asked whether the song was intended to resonate with parents of queer kids.

He went on to speak directly about identity and the pressure many young people face when coming to terms with who they are. "I am a firm believer that you don't



Combs introduced a new generation to "Fast Car" with his 2023 cover of the song by queer artist Tracy Chapman.
CREDIT: Wikimedia

get to choose," he said. "You don't get to choose who you want to be with, and I can't imagine feeling the pressure a child would experience coming to terms with those things on their own."

Combs also acknowledged the added fear that can come from uncertainty within families. "And then having the pressure of not knowing if your parents would be okay with that, or disown[ing] them?" he said.

That perspective is reflected in the lyrics of "Whoever You Turn Out to Be," which reject the idea that children must follow a predetermined path shaped by upbringing or expectation. Instead, the song centers acceptance, with lines that emphasize that love is not conditional on identity or conformity.

For many listeners, that message carries particular weight coming from a mainstream country artist. The genre has often been described as slower to embrace LGBTQ+ inclusion, with some

artists and fans reinforcing traditional or exclusionary views. In 2023, singer Maren Morris said she was stepping away from country music, citing its culture and politics.

Moments like this, from artists with wide reach, can help shift how those cultural boundaries are defined. Combs's comments do not frame support as a political stance, but rather as an extension of empathy and parenthood, centered on the idea that children deserve to be loved without conditions.

His broader work has also reflected a willingness to engage with stories outside traditional country narratives. His 2023 cover of "Fast Car" by Tracy Chapman introduced the song to a new generation of listeners and helped bring renewed attention to Chapman's catalog.

For LGBTQ+ listeners, especially young people navigating questions of identity and acceptance, hearing a message of support from a widely recognized country artist can feel significant. In a genre where representation and affirmation have not always been consistent, statements like Combs's signal a shift, even if gradual, toward a more inclusive understanding of who country music is for. ::

— Liz Schob

The pay gap between men and women widened in 2025, analysis finds

The earnings gap between men and women slightly widened last year, according to a new report from the Economic Policy Institute, which calculated women last year earned 18.6 percent less than men per hour on average. That's up slightly from 2024, when the wage gap narrowed slightly to 18 percent.

The wage analysis, which examines several federal data sets and independent research papers, controls for race, ethnicity, education, age, marital status and geography.

The findings were published ahead of Equal Pay Day on March 26, a symbolic date marking how far into 2026 women would have to work on top of their 2025 hours to match what men earned in 2025.

The new analysis found the wage gap is

smallest among lower-wage workers, in part because minimum wages create a uniform wage floor. But women are paid less than men across all education levels — women with a graduate degree on average earn less than men with only a college degree, it said.

The analysis found the widest wage gap among Black and Hispanic women: Black women are paid only 68.3 percent of white men's median wages. That's a gap of \$9.87 per hour — translating to roughly \$20,500 lower annual earnings for a full-time worker.

The institute says women earn less because of occupational differences, societal norms and the devaluation of women's work.

The organization suggests states enact pay transparency laws, mandate employ-

ers provide paid family and medical leave, raise the minimum wage, fund universal child care and remove laws that make it

harder to join labor unions. But conservative lawmakers and private employers argue that many of those policies would lead to reduced work forces or higher prices.

"Closing pay gaps by gender and by race and ethnicity will require policy solutions on multiple fronts," the report confirms. "Although attacks on gender and racial equity continue at the federal level, state lawmakers can and must take steps to address the gender wage gap." ::

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— Kevin Hardy / Stateline



A new analysis of federal data found the gender pay gap between women and men widened last year.
CREDIT: Adobe Stock

LGBTQ+ legal concerns: What you can do to protect yourself in NC

Be prepared for potential changes and make sure your voice is heard



by **Connie Vetter, Attorney at Law, PLLC**

Hatred and power-mongering in the political realm harms people in real, cruel and tangible ways. We are experiencing it daily with this president, his administration, his enablers and his followers, including elected officials in North Carolina and other states. For LGBTQ+ people in North Carolina, where do things stand and what can we do?

What Hasn't Changed

• **Marriage** - Marriage equality is intact. The U.S. Supreme Court turned away a challenge to our marriages last November. If you are married, you are married. If you are considering marriage, you can get married. And if you don't want to marry, you don't have to. That said, pay attention because the people who don't want us to marry are continuing to challenge our rights.

• **Adoption** - Married couples can adopt children in North Carolina. Single people can

adopt in North Carolina. For unmarried partners (couples, triads, quads, etc.), one partner can adopt but North Carolina law does not allow the other unmarried partner(s) to join the adoption (other states may allow it, though. Talk to a knowledgeable attorney).

• **Family Building** - LGBTQ+ people are still building their families through birth, adoption and surrogacy in North Carolina.

• **Name Changes** - Name changes under North Carolina law are still happening for adults and children, including trans children and adults. Nothing has changed except the requirement to post the notice at the courthouse has been removed, which is good.

• **Birth Certificate Gender Marker Corrections** - People born in North Carolina can correct the gender marker on their birth certificate. Unfortunately, a new law requires the old birth certificate to be attached to the new, corrected birth certificate when it is re-issued.

• **North Carolina Driver's License or ID** - People with a North Carolina driver's license

or state ID can still correct the gender marker on it.

• **Last Will & Testament and Estate Planning** - People can still do their legal planning with a Last Will & Testament and other legal documents that meet their needs.

What now?

Let's cheer for anti-LGBTQ+ Republican state Senator Phil Berger being voted out of office. Berger is responsible for years of anti-gay and anti-trans legislation. If you ever wonder if your vote counts, it was only 23 votes that ended his reign of hate. Yes, every single vote counts.

Also, state legislators Nelson Majeed and Carla Cunningham, both Democrats who voted with Republicans to pass anti-LGBTQ+ legislation (Majeed) and anti-immigrant legislation (Cunningham), were voted out of office. Also, two other Democrats who supported anti-trans legislation lost: Shelly Willingham lost in the District 23 primary and Michael Wray lost a primary race to try to re-take his seat in District 27. Your vote counts!

The Republicans in the North Carolina General Assembly no longer have a veto proof super majority. If they pass a law and Governor Josh Stein, an ally, vetoes it, they



LGBTQ+ individuals and families still have their rights intact, but it's important to stay informed.

can only override the veto with the help of Democrats. This is one of the places we can assert our power – calling the governor and our elected representatives and telling them what we want. Don't want to talk to a person? Fine, call after hours and leave a message. It takes less than a minute.

What else can each of us do? If we have privilege, use it. Call out hate when we see it. We can live our lives and tell our stories. If you aren't registered to vote, register. And vote in every single election. Join the organizations doing the work. Donate to them. Volunteer with them. Share their resources. ::

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More info you need to know

The North Carolina General Assembly, U.S. Congress, the President and the Supreme Court have targeted queer and trans individuals. Most recently, on March 31, 2026, the Supreme Court ruled a ban on so-called conversion therapy violates the First Amendment to the Constitution. This ruling will harm people by allowing disproven, life-threatening "treatment" trying to change people's sexual orientation and/or gender identity.

The Supreme Court ruling comes after five other anti-trans rulings including upholding bans on gender affirming healthcare for trans youth, the ruling on forced outing of trans students, the ban on trans service members, the ruling that passports can only have the sex assigned at birth and the ruling that a parent can opt their children out of school materials and lesson plans that the parent says violates their religious beliefs.

On the North Carolina state level, lawmakers have:

• **Banned gender affirming care,** including puberty-delaying medication and hormone therapy for people under 18 even when advised by their doctors and to which their parents consented, unless the person was already receiving treatment before Aug. 1, 2023.

• **Prohibited teachers** from discussions of gender identity, sexual activity or sexual-ity in K-4th grade.

• **Required schools** to allow parents to inspect and review all textbooks and instructional materials used in their child's

school, as well as access their child's records at the school library.

• **Required school personnel** to notify parents if their child changes the name or pronoun the child uses at school.

• **Prohibited transgender girls and women** from participating on girls'/women's school sports teams from middle school through college. Also allows other student athletes who claim they are harmed to sue for money damages, among other relief.

• **Declared only two sexes,** male and female, as determined at birth.

• **Required North Carolina birth certificates** that are updated for the sex marker must now be a multi-page document with the old birth certificate attached.

• **Changed the statute of limitations** to bring a medical malpractice lawsuit against a gender affirming healthcare provider from four years to 10 years.

• **Prohibited state funds** from being used for gender-affirming care for people who are incarcerated.

• **Expanded parental opt outs** for school content and activities for any reason and allowed parents to prohibit their children from borrowing library material the parent doesn't want them to borrow.

• **Required students on overnight school trips** to be housed according to sex assigned at birth rather than gender. ::



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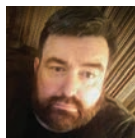
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Charlotte's LGBTQ+ community: Then and now

A look at the Queen City from the 1950s to the 2020s



by David Aaron Moore
Qnotes Staff Writer

The story of LGBTQ+ life in Charlotte is a mixture of quiet beginnings, clandestine spaces, resilience, survival and eventual visibility. It was shaped by local courage as much as it was by national change.

In the 1950s, queer life in Charlotte existed largely undercover. Across the United States, sexuality other than hetero was criminalized, pathologized and surveilled. Nationally, organizations like the Daughters of Bilitis began forming in 1955, offering rare support networks and publications like *The Ladder*.

In Charlotte, however, no formal gay bars or publications openly existed as of yet. Instead, the community relied on coded meeting places such as lounges in hotels like The Barringer and The Mayfair, private homes and occasional bars that quietly welcomed gay patrons on certain nights. Oral histories suggest that places like a bar called Casablanca and a handful of others existed, but because details were often hidden from the city at large, information from that time is fragmentary.

Police raids, social stigma and the risk of losing employment or family made visibility dangerous. For many, life was defined by limitation: limited spaces, limited language, limited safety.

The First Open Doors: Late 1960s–1970s

Although vague accounts of another gay club called The Neptune are mentioned in some oral recollections as a gay club in the city that existed earlier, from all indications, 1968 marked the opening of two foundational spaces: Oleen's and The Scorpio Lounge. These were among the first clearly documented gay bars in Charlotte, arriving at the same moment that a national gay movement was igniting around events like the Stonewall Riots.

Oleen's, opened by a forward thinking and LGBTQ+ ally named **Oleen Love**, be-



In the city: Charlotte's LGBTQ+ community found few connections, although some of the downtown city hotel bars looked the other way for gay patrons.
CREDIT: Charlotte The Past & Present

came known as "The Show Bar of the South," hosting drag performances and creating a space where gender expression could flourish and gay men and lesbians could socialize, make friends and connect for casual encounters or romantic relationships.

The Scorpio Lounge – established by Oakey and Marion Tyson – also cultivated a diverse crowd. Gay men, lesbians and drag performers came together at a time when integrated social spaces were rare in the segregated South.

Inside these bars, a different kind of life emerged. People formed chosen families. Friendships replaced the kinship many had lost. For a few hours each night, patrons could exist openly. Outside those doors, however, discrimination persisted. Police scrutiny remained common, and social acceptance was minimal.

Charlotte saw its first gay community publication in 1976. Known as *The Free Press*, it carried stories about developments in the city, the state and the country, as well. As the first publication of its kind in North Carolina, it served as an interconnection between LGBTQ+ communities throughout the state with ads from night clubs, restaurants, bars

and retail businesses from one end of the state to the other. It sunset in just a short couple of years.

Charlotte's first gayborhood also became evident: Dilworth. Historically, it was one of the city's first few street car suburbs, and it was full of historic architecture that was showing its age and offered plenty of rental and purchase properties that were affordable and attractive to the gay and lesbian community of the time. Centrally located, it offered

easy access to the best of everything the city had to offer: nearby bars, restaurants and the city's largest urban park. Indeed, it was the perfect place for our community to call home.

"That is correct," said Craig Shelton, a Charlotte resident who grew up in the Dilworth neighborhood in the 1970s.

"I was just a kid," he said in an interview with *Qnotes* about the neighborhood. "But gay people were pretty much everywhere in Dilworth back then. I wasn't able to go out because I wasn't old enough, but I knew where all the businesses were."

Shelton recalled experiences of sneaking out of his family home late at night and going to a nearby restaurant called the White Tower to get a milkshake, where he was able to hang out with a crowd of mostly gay patrons.

"It was around the same time the bars would be closing down, so lots of drag queens and gay guys would go there after clubs like Oleen's closed. They knew I was just a kid, but they were friendly, and they would talk to me."

As a result of those conversations, Shelton got an early education about Dilworth's gay culture. "There were multiple clubs and restaurants that were gay and gay-friendly," he recalled. "The office for *The Free Press*, which was right at the corner of East and West Boulevard, a gay and lesbian gift and book store called Friends of Dorothy was on East Boulevard and there was a gay bath house on South Boulevard."

By the late '70s, the music of the gay scene had hopped from underground to mainstream and nightclubs leaning heavily on the popular disco music sound were popping up all over Charlotte.

A gay nightclub known as **The Odyssey** became an extremely popular go-to spot for dancing the night away in a sense of style the community had not seen before. Former local resident Sid Stroupe shared his thoughts about the club and the scene of the time in a post on Facebook.

"[The Odyssey] originally stood at the corner of South Tryon and Morehead Streets and was home to two of Charlotte's earliest Queer Bars. From roughly 1978 to 1981, the Odyssey was located on the second floor of the building," Stroupe wrote. During that period another gay bar

known as the **Brass Rail** was located on the first floor at Tryon and Morehead. The Brass Rail was a somewhat traditional "city uptown" bar with lots of leather backed bar chairs and booths, low-key, low lights and candles. Not a dive bar in any way, quite sophisticated, actually.

"The interior [of the Odyssey at that time] was a tight space but cool with glorious views out north-facing windows of the Charlotte night time skyline. We twirled many a night away with Donna Summer driving us to the crowded dance floor with 'Last Dance' and Michael Jackson's 'Don't Stop Till You Get Enough.'

"Then in 1981, the club relocated itself to a strip shopping center on Eastway Drive," Stroupe continued. "Formerly this new location for the Odyssey had been a large, big-box retailer of some sort, ergo the square footage of this new venue was enormous! The 'new Odyssey' was born and it was fabulous, with all the latest sounds and technology: synchronized lighting system; three huge (eight feet high) plexiglass cylinders filled with strobing, pulsating multi-color neon light strips that lowered to the center of the dance floor upon command from the DJ. Not to be outdone by other clubs in the southeast, the owners installed a snow machine above the dance floor that dropped a ton of (artificial) snow onto the spinning, sweaty (mostly male) clients once every Saturday night, usually after midnight."

"Around that same time, the Brass Rail moved to Wilkinson Boulevard in west Charlotte, to a small, standalone building more to the liking of its western/levi clientele. Its interior was relaxed, [with] rough wood construction, [and] very cruisy."



This building was once home to two gay bars popular in the late 1970s and the early 1980s: The Brass Rail and The Odyssey.
CREDIT: Charlotte The Past & Present

Growth, Crisis and Community: The 1980s

By the 1980s, Charlotte's LGBTQ+ scene had become more structured and visible. New venues emerged, and at the same time, organizations and publications began to form.

Around 1980, Charlotte's first Metropolitan Community Church, Christian teachings aimed specifically at what was then referred to as the gay and lesbian community, opened in the city.

Known as New Life MCC, the church grew and expanded, eventually moving to Gastonia. A group separated from New Life and formed MCC Charlotte in 1983 and later purchased their own building in 2000 before closing their doors approximately 20 years later.

In 2006, Pastor Tonyia Rawls planted a new Unity Fellowship Church serving



Oleen Love, owner/operator of Oleen's on South Boulevard until it closed in 1997.
CREDIT: Facebook



North Carolina's first gay publication: The Free Press.
CREDIT: Archive image

Charlotte's LGBTQ+ people of color.

Through multiple decades, different locations and ministers, these churches have offered Christian worship services for the LGBTQ+ community for some 40 years. Today countless churches of different denominations have become welcoming and affirming in the Charlotte Metro area and around the globe.

Another important development for the QC came in 1981, when the Gay/Lesbian Switchboard of Charlotte launched as a crisis hotline and information service, connecting isolated individuals to resources.

Two years later, the publication *Qnotes* began as a grassroots newsletter offering news, advocacy and a sense of shared identity. Within a few years, it would emerge as a community newsprint publication.

But the 1980s also brought devastation: the AIDS crisis. While few cases appeared in the Queen City before the late 1980s, an estimated 10,000 individuals died from AIDS-related causes by the late 1990s throughout North Carolina.

Bars like Oleen's and Scorpio became informal support centers as the epidemic hit Charlotte's gay community hard. Patrons cared for one another, raised funds and mourned losses together. In this decade,

the meaning of "community" deepened. It was no longer just about nightlife – it was about survival.

Visibility and Transition: The 1990s

By the 1990s, Charlotte's LGBTQ+ community had expanded significantly. More than 20 gay and lesbian bars operated at various points, reflecting both growth and diversification.

Venues varied widely: dance clubs, leather bars, lesbian spaces and mixed venues where identities overlapped. Bars were no longer just a refuge – they were cultural hubs, hosting drag competitions, political organizing and social events.

Media and organizations matured as well. *Qnotes* expanded into a major regional newspaper, this year celebrating 40 years of service, with a substantial readership. Many community groups became more visible in civic life. As the decade drew to a close, Oleen's closed in 1997, marking the end of an era.

Even as visibility increased, so did tensions – around race, gender inclusion, and the evolving identities within the LGBTQ+ umbrella. Still, by 1999, Charlotte's queer community had moved from secrecy to presence. It was no longer invisible.

A New Century: Change during 2000–2019

The 21st century has brought profound transformation. Nationally, milestones such as the *Lawrence v. Texas* case that overturned so-called sodomy laws (2003) and the Supreme Court's decision in *Obergefell v. Hodges*, which legalized same-sex marriage (2015), reshaped public opinion, perception and legal rights.

Locally, Charlotte and the surrounding metro area has seen the rise of multiple Pride festivals, numerous LGBTQ+ nonprofits and more inclusive spaces. **The Scorpio** continues to operate (in a new location, now approaching its 60th anniversary), as does **The Hideaway** (in metro area Rock Hill since 1989), along with a plethora of venues like **Argon**, Chasers, Petra's, The Woodshed and Sidelines and hybrid spaces that are always welcoming or have different themed nights that include events for our community.

Technological developments and culture changes have had a clear-cut impact on the way we interact with each other in the 2020s. Many younger folks prefer online groups or specialty social organizations to the bar scene. And – as acceptance has grown – some traditional gay bars have rebranded as LGBTQ-friendly or welcoming, rather than exclusively queer spaces. This reflects both progress and loss: greater



Almost 60 years in business: Scorpio.
CREDIT: Facebook

integration into mainstream society, but fewer dedicated spaces.

Charlotte also became a national focal point in 2016 with the passage of HB2 (North Carolina Public Facilities Privacy & Security Act) – commonly known as the "bathroom bill" – sparked nationwide controversy over transgender rights, placing the city at the center of a cultural and political storm (that continues unabated at the behest of Donald Trump and zealous Republicans) across the country even today.

Progress and Persistent Challenges: 2020-The Present

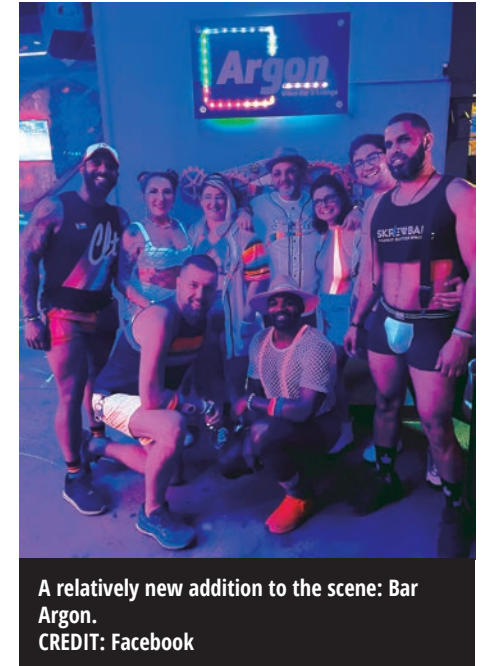
Today, LGBTQ+ life in Charlotte is more visible and accepted than ever before. The Pride parades, advocacy groups, inclusive workplaces and community resources – unimaginable in the 1950s – are part and parcel of Charlotte's culture as a whole. LGBTQ+ youth can often come out earlier, with far more support than could have been dreamed about 70 years ago.

Yet, challenges remain – especially at the national level. Under Trump's political movements and those aligned with it, LGBTQ+ rights – particularly those of transgender individuals – have faced renewed scrutiny.

Policies and proposals have included:

- Barring and discharging transgender individuals from military service
- Efforts to limit access to gender-affirming healthcare
- Legal challenges to workplace and education protections
- State-level laws restricting bathroom access and participation in sports

These developments have had real consequences. Transgender individuals



A relatively new addition to the scene: Bar Argon.
CREDIT: Facebook

in particular face heightened vulnerability – both legally and socially. Although no such law exists in North Carolina, the neighboring state of Tennessee has passed House Bill 1473, which would allow private individuals, organizations and businesses to refuse to recognize same-sex marriages. As has been shown before, the politics of one state can often negatively impact its neighbor. Hopefully that will never be the case here, but it is cause for concern. Even as Charlotte has grown more inclusive, it exists alongside a broader national landscape where rights can expand in one moment and contract in another.

A Story Still Being Written

From whispered gatherings in the 1950s and crowded dance floors in the 1980s, to the pain of the AIDS pandemic of the '80s and '90s and the celebrations of Pride in the 21st century, Charlotte's LGBTQ+ history is one of resilience.

Bars like Oleen's and The Scorpio were more than nightlife – they were lifelines. Publications like *The Free Press* and *Qnotes* gave voice to a community. *Qnotes* continues to do so in 2026.

Today, the landscape is broader, more visible and more complex. Acceptance has grown, but so have new challenges. The story of LGBTQ+ life in Charlotte is not just about where people gathered – it is about how they survived, adapted and insisted on being seen.

And it is not finished yet. ::



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'The Remarkable Life of Reed Peggram: The Man Who Stared Down World War II in the Name of Love'

Out in Print



by Terri Schlichenmeyer
Contributing Writer

"The Remarkable Life of Reed Peggram: The Man Who Stared Down World War II in the Name of Love" by Ethelene Whitmire ©2026, Viking \$30.00 308 pages



Author Ethelene Whitmire.
CREDIT: Hope Kelham

You couldn't escape it. When you fell in love, that was it: You were there for good. Leaving your amour's side was unthinkable, turning away was impossible. You'd do anything for that person you loved - even, as in the new biography, "The Remarkable Life of Reed Peggram" by Ethelene Whitmire, you'd escape toward danger.

On Aug. 28, 1938, Reed Peggram boarded a ship from Hoboken, N.J., hoping to "become a proper gentleman" and fulfill his dreams. A prolific writer and Harvard scholar of comparative literature, he'd recently been awarded the Rosenwald Fellowship, which put him in the company of literary stars like

Du Bois, Hurston and Hughes. Both Peggram's mother and grandmother were then domestic workers, and they

had big expectations for him. Reed himself was eager to study abroad, for professional and personal reasons; he was "determined to become a French professor and an accomplished linguist" and "He also hoped to find love."

What better place to do it than in Paris?

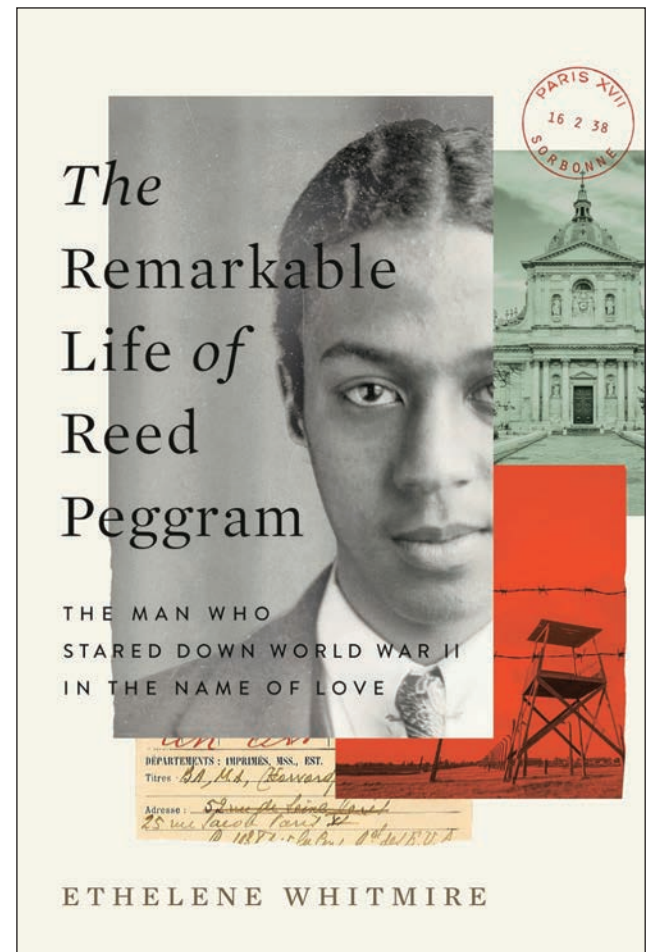
Outgoing and confident, Peggram made friends easily and had no trouble moving "through the world of his white male peers." Where he faltered was in his lack of funds. He relied on the kindness of his many friends - one of whom introduced Peggram to a "man who would become so pivotal in his life," a Danish man named Arne.

Peggram and Arne had a lot in common, and they began to enmesh their lives and dreams of living in the United States. But there were complications: homosexuality was largely forbidden, World War II was in its early stages, and it quickly became apparent that it was dangerous to stay in Europe.

And yet, Peggram loved Arne. He refused to leave without him and so, while most visiting Black Americans fled the war in Europe, "Reed was trying to stay."

There's so much more to the story inside "The Remarkable Life of Reed Peggram," so much to know about Reed himself. Problem is, it's a long haul to get to the good stuff.

In her introduction, author Ethelene Whitmire explains how she came to this tale and yes, it needs telling but probably not with the staggering number of inconsequential details here. Peggram moved homes a *lot*, and many people were involved in keeping him in Europe. That alone can be overwhelming; add the fact that costs and other monetary issues are



mentioned in what seems like nearly every page, and you may wonder if you'll ever find the reason for the books' subtitle.

It's there, nearly halfway through the book, which is when the tale takes a tender, urgent turn - albeit one with determination, rashness and a dash of faux nonchalance. Also, if you're expecting an unhappily-ever-after because, after all, it's a World War II tale, don't assume anything...

Reading this book will take a certain amount of patience, so skip it if you don't have that fortitude. If you're okay with minuscule details and want a heart-pounder, though, "The Remarkable Life of Reed Peggram" might be a good escape. ::

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Gina Gershon talks about film career, life and memoirs

Out on Film



by Gregg Shapiro
Contributing Writer

Few actors are as versatile as Gina Gershon. From her early role alongside Tom Cruise for her first onscreen love scene in “Cocktail” and her role in Robert Altman’s “The Player” to back-to-back lauded performances in “Showgirls” and “Bound,” she’s long been a queer favorite. Along with such 21st century standouts like “Prey for Rock & Roll” and “Killer Joe,” Gershon has established herself as a go-to actor. She has also added writer to her resume with a few books, including her latest, the collection of true stories, “Alpha Pussy: How I Survived the Valley and Learned to Love My Boobs” (Akashic Books, 2026).

Gregg Shapiro: In October 2003 you were in Chicago for the “Prey for Rock & Roll” concert. In your new literary work you talk about musician and publisher Johnny Temple playing in your touring band. Did you ever imagine that a few years later Johnny would be your publisher for “Alpha Pussy?”

Gina Gershon: No! It’s so funny. We were on tour because I had to promote “Prey for Rock & Roll.” After a gig, we’d be like, “Oh, let’s go out,” and Johnny would just be surrounded by manuscripts. I said, “Dude, what are you doing?” He said, “I’m starting a publishing company.” I said, “You’re doing what?” Over the years, he’s done really well. It’s a groovy independent book company. When I started thinking about doing this book, and I logged into the name, I was like, “It’s going to be like this, and this is what I’m going to talk [about]...I’ve done two other books before with bigger publishers. With the last [publisher], I thought they’re gonna be like, “You can’t call it that! Can you put a picture of yourself on the cover?” I didn’t want a picture of myself on the cover. The Valley picture is exactly what I wanted.

GS: It’s great, with that vintage movie marquee.

GG: It’s cool, right?

GS: Yes, totally!

GG: I thought, “Johnny’s gonna be a better publisher for this.” Listen, it’s great getting advances, it’s great getting all this more money, but you’re kind of rolling the dice. You bet on yourself and the book. If the book does well, you do well. If not, it doesn’t. But you get to write exactly what you want to write.

GS: Some years passed between the publication of your first memoir, “In Search of Cleo,” and its follow-up, “Alpha Pussy.” Why was now the time to put out “Alpha Pussy?”

GG: I started writing this during COVID. My book agent kept saying, “You’re sitting on a crazy book with ‘Showgirls.’ Why don’t you just start sending me stories? You’re stuck inside anyway. I’m bored! Send me stories!” I started writing these stories because I have a lot of those. Then he said, “Great! I’m going out with this. This could be a big advance. This is gonna be huge.” Then I thought, “I don’t want to write this book. This is not who I am. It doesn’t feel right to me.” And yet, it



Gina Gershon in the lesbian favorite film ‘Bound’ (1996) and today, aging like fine wine at the age of 63. CREDIT: Publicity/Screen Capture

was interesting starting a process of just writing stories down that I thought people would enjoy. Like the Prince story. Even as an exercise, how do I make this into a four-page story, like an essay, like little short stories? As I started to remember certain stories, I thought, “I’ve got to write it down before I forget the story.” Then, through a series of maybe self-examination and maybe therapy, and then, also, my mom wasn’t doing well, the Valley stories started just percolating. Old memories started showing up. Once I started examining those, I thought, “Whoa, that’s kind of gnarly.” It’s almost like my unconscious brought it up. Once the alpha pussy story came, because I had that as a real story – I used to say, “I’m just gonna alpha pussy the situation,” and people always thought it was a funny term. This is what it means! That’s what this book is. It gave me a theme to hang the stories on.

GS: I’m glad you mentioned remembering things because you made mention of a journal in the 10th chapter. Were you a consistent journal keeper, or did you have to rely on memory for the book?

GG: I was a pretty intense journal keeper for a while. I kept a journal of my dreams. I would write my dreams down a lot because I always had very vivid dreams, and I would write them down. I knew they meant something. I was always very analytical. If I wasn’t an actor, I would have been a dream psychologist. Through my acting work, I do a lot of sense memory work. I’ve been trained to go into certain moments and really explore that moment. Visually, but also how I was feeling and what was happening. It’s almost like a camera into my memory. I have that tool that I’ve used for a long time. I almost approached a lot of the stories like some of my acting scenes or my dream work. I would go into it, and then I would see the whole story reveal itself. Then I would just try to write it down as accurately as I remembered it.

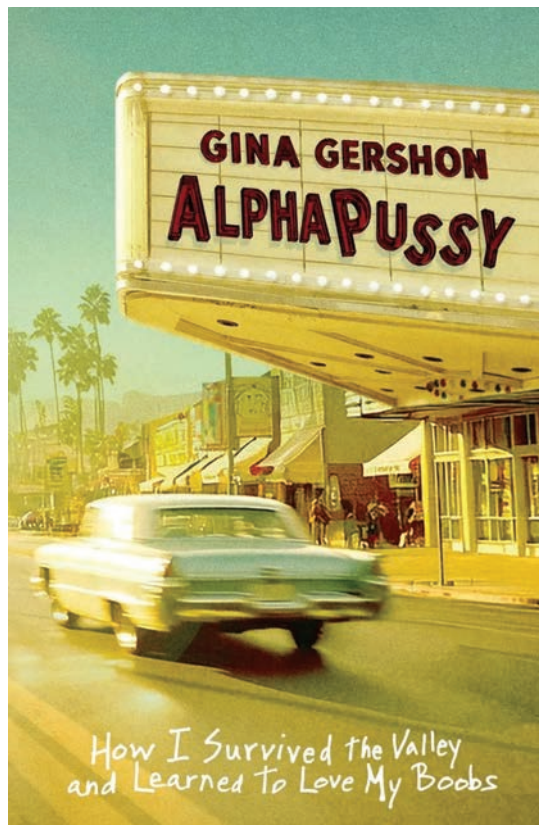
GS: You wrote a lot about your late parents, as well as your siblings. How do your siblings feel about the way they are represented?

GG: Oh, my God, you’re reminding me. I’ve got to send a book to my brother. I gave it to my sister early on. She was like, “Wait

a second! You’re making him sound better than me!” I’m like, “Tracy, I’m giving you props in this thing.” I think my brother will think it’s funny. I’m not throwing anyone under the bus. That was never my intention. I think there’s a story about him when he hangs me upside down on the bar and it was traumatizing. Honestly, he’s still my big brother, and he just laughs. He’s like, “See! It made you tough.” I think Tracy, my sister, said, “Wow! I didn’t know a lot of this stuff was going on.” I said, “I was living in the

same house, but you guys were doing your thing. This is what I was going through.”

GS: To me, “Alpha Pussy” reads like a memoir crossed with a cautionary tale for actors. Does that sound like an accurate description to you?



GG: I think it’s a slight memoir because they’re all true stories. Cautionary tale? I don’t know if it’s just for actors. I think it’s just for anyone creative who wants to have some sort of autonomy or have sovereignty and be free to do what it is they want to do. You have so many people saying, “No, you should do this. You should do that.” If it’s not what you want to do, maybe they are cautionary tales. These are just my stories. If people get something out of it like that, great! But everyone has different reasons for doing everything. What is my journey may not be appropriate for someone else’s journey. They might be like, “Oh, you’re an idiot! You should have done that movie with Prince. You should have stayed on that TV show.” Maybe they’re right. Maybe that was a mistake. But it’s what I did for whatever reason.

GS: Clothes are a popular subject in the book, with mentions of an Etro dress, as well as Chemin de Fer and Dittos jeans, among other brands. Do you consider yourself a fashionista?

GG: [Laughs] No. I like fashion. I feel like I should be more of a fashionista. I’ve been lucky that I’ve had friends who have been designers. They say, “You’re wearing this.” I’m like, “Great!” I like to spend time with them, so they dress me. I have friends around me who are definitely fashionistas. If I ever get stuck, I ask, “Does this look okay? Is this good?” I have my own sense of what I think looks good, although sometimes, when I look back at pictures and think, “Huh. That really didn’t work right, but okay.”

GS: I am an Emerson College alum, and I was fortunate to have Denis Leary as a teacher for a literature class and a comedy writing workshop.

GG: I wish I had done that. I really screwed up.

GS: In chapter 27, you talk about Denis being a friend and how you took part in his roast. Were those seeds planted when you were enrolled at Emerson?

GG: I didn’t know him at Emerson. I only attended Emerson for one year. I was studying acting. I really wanted to be an actress. Honestly, their acting program at that moment wasn’t that strong. I think I recognized that. I said, “Fuck this! I want to go to New York.” I was secretly writing, but I didn’t consider myself a writer. One of the things I regret is not taking more comedy writing and not taking writing classes, especially starting at Emerson. I wish I had taken Denis’ classes. That was a strong department. I was so single-minded: “No, I must act!” I even had an agent at the time saying, “You’re really funny, I think you should be writing.” I said, “Yeah, yeah, yeah. No, I’m an actress!” That was very short-sighted on my part. That’s the mistake I made, I think.

GS: You laid the groundwork for a queer following with “Showgirls,” and then cemented it with “Bound,” which you followed up by playing Sally Bowles in “Cabaret” on Broadway. What does your LGBTQ+ fanbase mean to you?

GG: I have to say, I’m really happy. Some people get the EGOT: the Emmy, the Grammy, the Oscar, the Tony. I just finally finished my LGBTQ. I made my first trans movie. I’ve got the T! I had the L and all the other initials. It hasn’t come out yet, but I think it’s pretty cute. It means a lot to me, actually. They’re incredible fans. They’re really appreciative of “Bound.” I feel very happy that a lot of women have come up to me and said, “You helped me come out as a lesbian.” It certainly wasn’t my intention going in, but it seemed to have affected their lives in a really positive way. That, of course, makes me feel good.

GS: Finally, if a biopic were made from “Alpha Pussy,” who would be your choice to play you?

GG: Oh, God, that’s a really funny question. Am I too old to be me [laughs]?

GS: No! Who would play the younger you?

GG: I’d have to see auditions. I don’t know. No one comes to mind. I’d have to see; it’s an energy. That would be fun, wouldn’t it? ::

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