

WINDY CITY TIMES

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Lesbian composer Jennifer Higdon, part of *More Than a Letter: A Celebration of LGBTQ Artists and Classical Music*. Photo by Candace diCarlo



PARTY PLANNING
Party Noire celebrates Black joy.
Photo by RJ Eldridge

17

NEW CLASSICS

'More Than a Letter,' Picnic present queer voices this spring

BY SCOTT C. MORGAN

Internationally acclaimed and award-winning transgender pianist Sara Davis

Buechner is more than happy to be a part of the Chicago Sinfonietta's upcoming concerts of "More Than a Letter: A Celebration of LGBTQ Artists." Buechner came aboard at

the invitation of guest conductor Michael Morgan, who is music director of the Oakland Symphony and a former assistant conductor

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JOHN CEPEK
LGBT ally dies at 69.
Photo of John and Char Cepek courtesy of Toni Weaver

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Photo by Adam Ouahmane

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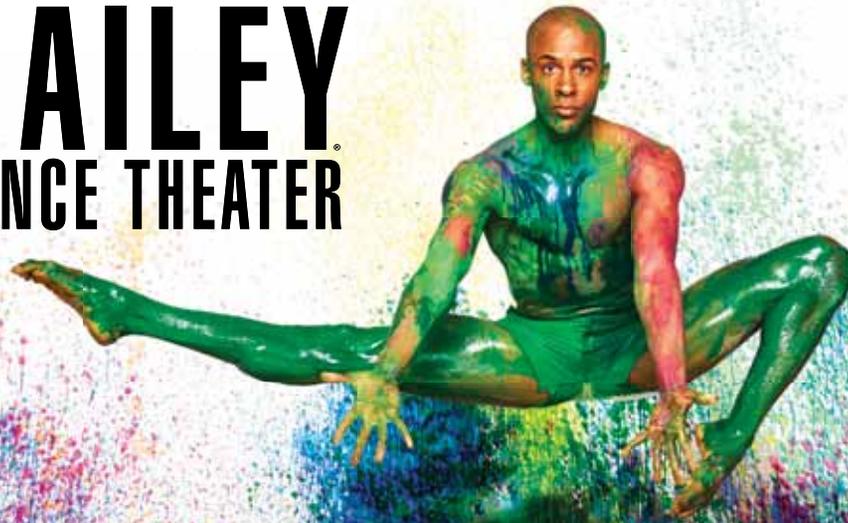
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Above: WCT reviews *The Wiz*.
Photo by Michael Brosilow

online exclusives at
www.WindyCityTimes.com



'PAIN' AND GAIN

Windy City Times reviews the theatrical production *Phantom Pain* (left).
Photo by John Lee Jennings

MEAT AND GREET



Bent Nights reviews shows by The Growlers and Meat Wave.
Photo of Meat Wave's Chris Sutter by Vern Hester

'BEAUTY' MARK

WCT reviews the hit movie remake *Beauty and the Beast*.

THAT'S SHOW BIZ

Find out the latest about RuPaul, Billie Jean King and the Power Rangers movie.

plus
DAILY BREAKING NEWS

ART AIDS AMERICA Chicago



Roger Brown. *Illusion*, 1985. Courtesy of the Roger Brown Estate Painting Collection, School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Photo: James Connolly.

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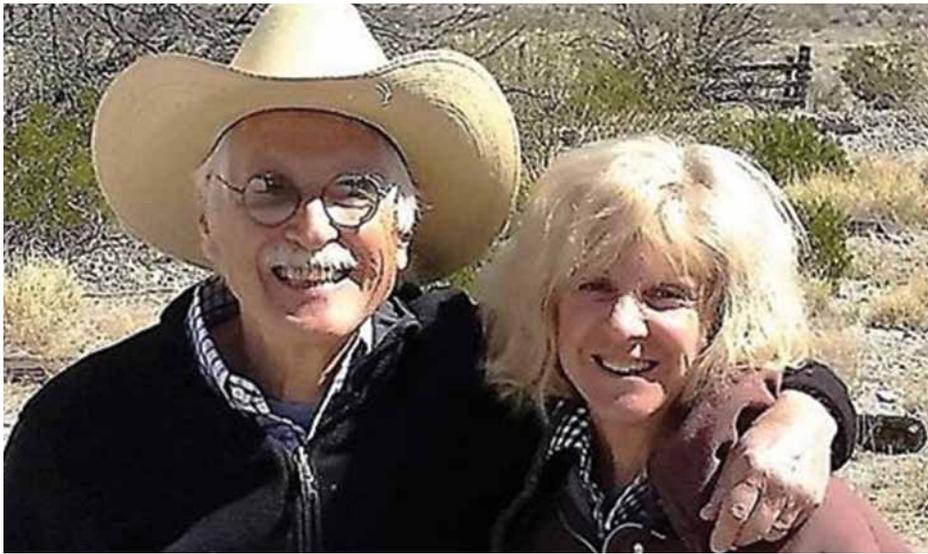
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ArtAIDSAmericaChicago.org

Art AIDS America was organized by Tacoma Art Museum in partnership with The Bronx Museum of the Arts. In Chicago, this exhibition is made possible by the Alphawood Foundation, a Chicago-based, grant-making private foundation working for an equitable, just and humane society.

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John and Char Cepek.
Photo courtesy of Toni Weaver

LGBT ally Cepek dies at age 69

John Cepek—an LGBT ally (through the group PFLAG, formerly known as Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) who suffered a brain injury Feb. 27 while traveling in Croatia with his wife Char—died March 15 at age 69.

Also on Feb. 27, in a separate incident, Char broke her wrist.

Son Michael wrote on Facebook, “A truly beautiful soul left the earth today. This afternoon, my father, John Richard Cepek, died peacefully in Munich, Germany, at the age of 69. I was at his side with my mother and brother. The cause of death was a traumatic brain injury suffered after he tripped and fell while on vacation in Croatia.

“So many people grew to know and love my dad over the years: through his committed activism as national president of Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG); through his decades of work for the University of Illinois at Chicago; and, most importantly, as the instantly likable and gentle guy whose humor, compassion, and love for people and animals were so,

so evident in everything he did. (The last word he uttered before he entered a coma was “Sammy,” the name of his beloved dog.)

“We are flooded with horrible grief, which will surely last for months and years. Eventually, though, we will take comfort as we watch his legacy of love, care, and struggle for justice continue to grow and make this world a better place. We will let everyone know when we arrange a remembrance ceremony for him in Chicago later this year. Rest in peace, Dad—you were the best, and we all love you so much.”

In 2010, John penned a letter in Windy City Times to youth. The letter is at WindyCityMediaGroup.com/gay/lesbian/news/ARTICLE.php?AID=29026. In November 2016, John and Char took part in the OUTspoken LGBTQ storytelling series at Sidetrack.

Funds are being raised related to Cepek’s recent hospitalization at GoFundMe.com.

Information about services will be revealed as they become known.

the search for the next CEO, who will be the seventh leader in the 102-year history of the foundation.

‘HIV & Aging’ panel March 22

The Care Plan Presents: HIV & Aging Panel—part of the Art AIDS America Chicago series—will take place Wed., March 22, 6-8 p.m., at the Alphawood Gallery, 2401 N. Halsted St.

Jackie Boyd—a longtime aging specialist and LGBTQI advocate and Founder of The Care Plan—will lead this discussion, which will address a generational shift in HIV/AIDS culture.

See ArtAIDSAmericaChicago.org.

Community trust CEO to retire

Terry Mazany has announced his plan to step down at the end of September after 16 years at the Chicago Community Trust—13 as president and CEO.

According to a statement, the trust has doubled in size and more than tripled its grant-making under Mazany’s leadership. “Since our founding in 1915, the trust has awarded more than \$2 billion in grant funding to more than 11,000 local nonprofit organizations—including more than \$229 million in 2016,” the statement said.

The trust’s executive committee will begin

GUEST COLUMN

BY TINA T. TRAN



No judgment. No shame. No guilt.

Who I am internally is so far removed from how I am seen. I have felt invisible and uncomfortable in my own skin for as long as I can remember. Moving to the Midwest and pursuing a career in the legal field have only amplified the discomfort and alienation I feel on a daily basis.

The legal world is as conservative as always. I’m reminded every day when I enter

ity. Based on a study conducted in 2016 by Prudential Financial about “The LGBT Financial Experience,” an overwhelming majority stated that they need more financial knowledge to reach their goals.

(Source: <http://corporate.prudential.com/media/managed/PrudentialLGBT2016-2017.pdf>.)

The same study reported that 41% of those surveyed say that they are struggling to make ends meet or unable to keep up with expenses. The statistics around youth experiencing homelessness who identify as persons of color or LGBTQ are even more grim. Worldwide, persons of color, LGBT people, especially women and transgender people, are discriminated against in the job market

“As hard as I may try, and as conservative as I dress and act, I will never measure up. Feeling like an outsider permeates through all aspects of my life.”

courtrooms that lawyers and judges are still predominantly middle-aged white men. As hard as I may try, and as conservative as I dress and act, I will never measure up. Feeling like an outsider permeates through all aspects of my life.

But enough about me. I want to talk about you. Have you heard the term “Bankruptcy”? Scary, right? Most likely, no one has talked to you about the possibility of declaring bankruptcy before. I know no one talked about it with me. Financial responsibility was never talked about at all in my household.

I know I’m not alone. It’s no secret that millennials, persons of color, and many of the LGBTQ community have limited knowledge when it comes to financial responsibility

and tend to fare poorly when it comes to financial stability and job security. Not only do they endure discrimination, but they often have to deal with a whole host of medical and psychological obstacles.

People within the LGBTQ community are more likely to be inundated with medical bills due to costly gender-affirming surgeries, or mental health medications and services. Financial problems can give rise to enormous stress that many of us are unequipped to handle. If your bills are becoming overwhelming, I would highly urge you to seek out advice from an attorney who will listen to your individual situation, and provide you with non-judgmental guidance. There is no shame in asking for help.

Tina T. Tran (aka Ty) is an Illinois attorney, transplanted from California. She is the owner of Needle & Thread Law LLC, a newly formed legal practice and debt relief agency. Contact: ttran@needlethreadlaw.com, (773) 609-3637.



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Remembering Fernando Ponce Jr.

BY DAVID THILL

When Kathy Kelly first met Fernando Ponce Jr.—or “Junior,” as his family and friends called him—he had just walked into her home “decked out in a sparkly pink jacket, dyed blond hair, and a perfect French manicure,” said Kelly. He was



Fernando Ponce Jr. (left) with father Fernando.
Photo from Ricky Rico

also holding a baby goat.

The goat—and with it, Ponce—stayed for the birthday party Kelly was hosting in her West Ridge home, and Kelly learned “right away that [Ponce] was extremely bright, extremely kind and a pointedly good-natured young man.”

Ponce, 19, of the Belmont Cragin neighborhood, died on March 9 of complications resulting from leukemia.

He enjoyed makeup and fashion, and one day hoped to practice cosmetology professionally, said his brother, Ricky Rico, 21. Rico described his brother as humorous and energetic, and above all, confident and comfortable with who he was. Rico often spent time with Ponce, and when they did, he said, Ponce made sure to look his best.

Ponce first became ill in 2014, and during his time at Lurie Children’s Hospital, he grew close to his doctors and nurses, said Rico.

In addition to his interest in fashion, Ponce enjoyed painting and drawing, and listening to music. (Rico said that one of his favorite singers was Nicki Minaj.)

In addition to Rico, Ponce is survived by his mother, father and sister.

“He was great,” said Rico.

PASSAGES Alan Portnoff

Longtime Touché bartender Alan H Portnoff passed away on Friday, March 10th after a prolonged battle following heart surgery. He was 66.

Alan was born in Chicago on Nov. 21, 1950, to Hyman and Mollie (Stewart) Portnoff. After graduating from Roosevelt High School, Alan went to New York to pursue his dream of acting, but soon returned to Chicago and the security of regular pay. Alan went on to work as a computer programmer before turning to bartending.

Coming out in 1993, Alan quickly made friends through the Lincoln Park Lagooners (LPL), and became a regular bowler and camper during the LPL rafting trips to Wisconsin. A lover of dogs, Alan’s “partner” at home and in the outdoors was his faithful Duke. Alan enjoyed movies, musicals and street festivals during his free time and was looking forward to retirement in a cabin by a lake with his buddy Duke. As a stable hand behind the bar at Touché for more than 20 years, Alan served thousands of regulars, many who count him as friend. His wit and humor over a drink will be sorely missed.



Alan Portnoff.

Photo from David Boyer

Alan is survived by his mother, Mollie; siblings Meredith and Larry; with wife Rosalie, his devoted daughter Anna; nieces Nancy and Monica; and his co-workers and many friends at the bar.

A celebration of Alan’s Life will be held at Touché, 6412 N. Clark St., on Sunday, March 26, beginning at 2 p.m. All of his family and friends are welcome to share their joys and stories of time with Alan. In lieu of flowers, donations to any no-kill animal shelter are encouraged.



“We do it because we want to encourage more people to test for HIV. We need young people to stand up and make their health a priority.”

— Benjamin and Christopher

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Adler president reveals HIV status

BY MATT SIMONETTE

For Raymond Crossman—president of Adler University, a Chicago school for social and health sciences—the recent weeks under the Trump Administration have played out eerily similar to the years under the Reagan Administration.

That unease led Crossman to make an important decision. On March 11, Salon printed a commentary wherein Crossman publicly disclosed his HIV status for the first time.

“I have lived with HIV for about 30 years, and yet this disclosure is a new one for me to offer in my professional life,” Crossman wrote. “I

am a university president who has been out as a gay man across my career, but up until now, disclosure about my HIV status has been on a need-to-know basis.”

Crossman told Windy City Times that “an uneasy déjà vu” compelled the article.

“The [current] time really made me feel the same way that the ‘80s and ‘90s felt for me as a gay man growing up in New York City,” he explained. “With the context of a lot of hate speech being directed at members of my community, government indifference, oppression and all of the resulting consequences.”

He eschewed the idea of making comparisons



Ray Crossman.

Photo from Adler University

between marginalized groups in past decades and now, but said, “What I can say is, I know how I felt being in a marginalized group in the ‘80s. I know that I felt that the government had given up on me. We believed everyone hated us, because we heard it all the time. It does make me wonder if the experience of other marginalized groups feels something like mine did in the ‘80s. That is one of the drivers that led me to want to speak out about this.”

He has headed Adler University for about 13 years, which is, by the standards of higher education, a long tenure in a presidency role; the average length is about five years, he said. Crossman said that Adler’s culture—which has a strong component for social justice—was another impetus for the disclosure. Colleagues have been supportive of his decision to go public.

“Other university presidents don’t have the privilege of doing this,” he said. “I’m very grateful for the context in which I work at Adler.”

City Council to open meetings for public comment

BY MATT SIMONETTE

Following a 2016 lawsuit from gay-rights activists, city lawyers, on March 17, said that they would not appeal a ruling forcing public comment during City Council meetings.

Activists Andy Thayer and Rick Garcia filed the lawsuit when they were barred from entering council meetings, ostensibly due to space concerns, in 2016. Although Thayer and Garcia were among the first in line to enter, seating in the Council’s gallery was already full since guests and associates of the Council and city staff had previously been seated.

The suit also noted that the public had no opportunity to voice their opinions at the full Council meetings. Thayer had intended to protest a \$15.8 million tax increment financing (or TIF) subsidy toward a \$125-million luxury project on the site of the former Columbus Maryville Academy near the lakefront. The council approved the proposal at the June meeting, so Thayer and Garcia maintained that the vote should be cancelled out, since, they said, the vote took place in what was essentially a closed meeting. The council has only been hearing public comment during committee meetings.

Judge Diane Larsen issued a partial ruling in December that the council’s admissions policies and meeting formats were squelching public-comment opportunities. Larsen did not address the Council’s seating policy in that ruling.

Chicago Sun-Times reported March 17 that the city would not appeal the ruling, as it originally planned.

“The City of Chicago and its City Council will be adding an opportunity for residents, community leaders, stakeholders and others to speak during City Council meetings,” law department spokesman Bill McCaffrey said in an email to the Sun-Times. “As such, the City is withdrawing its appeal and will begin drafting a rule to give the

public another opportunity to speak during the legislative process.”

In a Facebook post, Thayer said he will keep pushing for the reversal of the June TIF vote, adding, “This is a win that hopefully all left forces in the City can use to our advantage going forward.

“For those of us fighting against displacement of working class and people of color in Uptown, this is but an important first step. The illegal City Council meetings that we sued about resulted in the Council passing a \$15.8 million subsidy for luxury housing, just yards away from where people sleep underneath bridge viaducts. We demand that the \$15.8 million instead go to building public housing for homeless people, rather than feed the profit margins of rich, politically connected developers.”

Chicago Sun-Times’ article is at <http://bit.ly/2mCOFPa>.

Transgender marker bill sent to House

BY MATT SIMONETTE

Legislation easing requirements for transgender Illinoisans wishing to change the gender-marker on their state-issued identification, on March 15, cleared the House Human Services committee by a vote of seven to four.

HB 1785, sponsored by state Rep. Greg Harris (D-Chicago), would allow transgender individuals wishing to change their ID gender markers to do so with proof of clinically appropriate treatment. The state has allowed for changing gender-markers since the ‘50s, but the current law requires the applicant to show proof that they have undergone gender-reassignment surgery, which some transgender persons may not be willing or able to undergo.

Harris reintroduced the bill in February, saying at the time that it reflected more current standards in medical care for transgender persons. The bill now goes to the House for a full vote.

In a statement, John Knight, director of ACLU Illinois’ LGBT and HIV Project, said, “The Com-

mittee today took an important step to protect people in Illinois who are transgender or intersex. No one should face the dilemma of being denied a birth certificate that conforms with their gender simply because they are unable—or cannot afford—to undergo surgery that the medical community agrees is not necessary for everyone who transitions.

“...People who are transgender and intersex should make their own medical decisions with the guidance of medical health professionals—not politicians. We thank Representative Greg Harris for his leadership, and we hope the House acts quickly to pass this bill and send it to the Senate.”

South Side trans woman reported missing

BY GRETCHEN RACHEL HAMMOND

A South Side transgender woman Sherry Nicholas (AKA Sherry Berry) has been reported missing for the second time since her first disappearance in April 2015.

According to the Chicago Police Department (CPD), Berry was last seen in the area of 7900 S. Marquette Ave. on March 9 and may need medical treatment.

Her father, Jerry Nicholas, told Windy City Times that both friends and family members are extremely worried for his daughter’s safety.

“She is addicted to alcohol,” Nicholas said. “She’s been found on the streets unconscious because of that and she gets into stranger’s cars. We’re worried that she’s got hurt. Last month on Valentine’s Day she was with some guy. We don’t know who he was, but she got a black eye from it.”

He added that the phone Sherry carried has been disconnected.

“She’s not calling anyone so it makes us think that the worst has happened,” Nicholas said. “Nobody who knows her as heard from her. The CPD haven’t come up with anything either. They haven’t assigned a detective to the case yet.”

Nicholas is appealing for the public’s help in locating her.

Sherry had brain surgery in at Rush Hospital



Sherry Nicholas.

Photo from Jerry Nicholas

on April 25, 2015. She vanished from the facility in early May and was located a week later living at her Aunt’s house on the North Side.

However, Nicholas says, this time, Sherry is not with her aunt.

“This is different because usually she calls someone,” he said. “But no one is getting a call from her and it’s been 10 days now.”

Anyone with information as to the whereabouts of Sherry Nicholas is asked to call Area South Special Victims Unit at 312-847-7274.

Illinois Women March on Springfield April 25 for progressive agenda

More than 50 organizations have joined a coalition to educate and organize around dozens of progressive bills being proposed in the Illinois House and Senate this session.

They will bring together people across the state for the Illinois Women March on Springfield for a progressive agenda and responsible budget for all, Tuesday, April 25.

The bills include the Women's Agenda, the People's Agenda of labor issues, plus issues including immigration, homelessness, criminal legal reform, the environment, LGBTQ, gun-safety efforts, healthcare, economics, education and passing a responsible budget in Illinois.

The complete agenda, with more bills expected, is available on the march website: IllinoisWomenMarchOnSpringfield.org.

The march is in the spirit of the Jan. 21 women's marches around the world, and just as those events attracted a wide diversity of people, the Springfield event is expected to bring together thousands of people across a range of intersectional issues.

The program will start at noon with a rally in front of the Lincoln statue at the Capitol Building, followed by a march around the capitol complex, and lobbying elected officials inside. At 2:30 p.m., there will be a final rally in the rotunda, including next steps on organizing support for the legislation still pending in Springfield. People are encouraged to make April 25 appointments now with their representatives and senators, and lobby for legislation from now until the end of May, when this session ends.

Illinois Women March on Springfield is co-chaired by Jaquie Algee (SEIU Healthcare and Women's March on Chicago), Tracy Baim (Windy City Times and Pride Action Tank), and from Springfield, Jennifer Camille Lee (Action Illinois and Women Rising-Illinois).

Other partners for the March include the Chicago Foundation for Women, Crossroads Fund, In-



divisible Illinois, Planned Parenthood, the ACLU, Illinois NOW, CAIR-Chicago, Amalgamated Transit Union 308 (ATU), AFSCME, Chicago Women Take Action, G-PAC, Citizen Action, OFA, Mujeres Latinas en Accion, National Immigrant Justice Center, Sergeant Shriver National Center on Poverty Law, Women Employed, Women's March Illinois, and the YWCA of Metropolitan Chicago. See many more online.

The website has a process where organizations and elected officials can join the effort, and people can suggest legislation. It also will have lobbying tips, and connections to how-to-find-your-legislator.

Visit IllinoisWomenMarchOnSpringfield.org and (on Facebook) <https://www.facebook.com/Illinois-Women-March-on-Springfield-1293918460687078/>.

PFLAG official talks transgender workplace support

BY MATT SIMONETTE

Jean-Marie Navetta, director of learning and inclusion for PFLAG National, led a March 16 workshop on being a supportive and respectful ally to transgender people in the workplace. Among the issues Navetta addressed were pronoun usage, disclosure etiquette and gender-based stereotyping. About 80 people attended.

Navetta's talk was presented under the auspices of PFLAG's Straight for Equality Project, a national outreach and education to "invite, educate, and engage new allies in the effort to achieve full inclusion for LGBTQ people," according to the organization. The event was part of Out & Equal Chicagoland's 2017 Citywide Pride event series, and was hosted by Publicis Groupe, a multinational communications firm.

Navetta said that PFLAG has "always been sort of the 'family side' of the LGBT movement," but that organization officials in recent years had noticed a significant shift in its membership: More people were working with the organization in order to be more supportive of a friend who is a member of the LGBT community. In other words, PFLAG was reaching beyond friends and family members.

"Becoming an ally is not an overnight transi-



Jean-Marie Navetta.

Photo by Matt Simonette

tion for most people," Navetta said. "The only way they can take this journey is if we take this journey along with them. It takes a lot of work, because this is scary for a lot of us."

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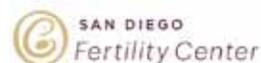
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Mell's office burglarized

The office of Chicago Ald. Deborah Mell, of the 33rd Ward, was apparently burglarized in the early morning hours of March 20, WLS reported.

Authorities said a male suspect threw an object through the glass door of the office at about 3:25 a.m.; he then stole a piece of computer equipment.

Mell represents an area that includes the neighborhoods of Albany Park, Avondale, Irving Park and Ravenswood Manor.

Mell—along with Aids. Carlos Ramirez-Rosa (35th Ward), Raymond Lopez (15th), Tom Tun-



Ald. Deb Mell.

ney (44th) and James Cappleman (46th)—make up the city council's LGBT caucus.

The WLS item is at <http://abc7chicago.com/news/alderman-deb-mells-office-burglarized/1808909/>.

Trans veteran running for board position at Illinois college

BY GRETCHEN RACHEL HAMMOND

During his Jan. 10 farewell address in Chicago, President Barack Obama suggested, "If something needs fixing, then lace up your shoes and do some organizing. If you're disappointed by your elected officials, grab a clip board, get some signatures, and run for office yourself."

For the transgender community, seeking a leadership role in government of any kind has become essential as decisions have or are being made, on state and federal levels, about their civil rights and place in society by cisgender politicians, often with little or no knowledge of the lives or voices of transgender and gender-nonconforming people.

On April 4, there will be an election in Champaign, Illinois, to decide four open seats on the board of trustees at Parkland College—a 50-year-old community college offering associate degrees in arts and sciences to an annual roll of 20,000 students. Of the four Board seats available, three are for six-year-terms and one is for a two-year term.

According to the News-Gazette, vying for the seats are "the largest group of board hopefuls in at least 35 years and is believed to be the greatest number in the 50-year history of Parkland."

Among them is Kathleen Robbins. She is one of four candidates seeking a two-year term. Robbins' history encompasses that of a decorated veteran who served in the Air Force during the Vietnam War, service in the Peace Corps, a Doctorate in Ministry and four decades in business

leadership.

Answering a March 5 News-Gazette questionnaire, Robbins asserted that she brings "a unique perspective (an engineering mind, extensive high-level business experience and the heart of a social entrepreneur) that will enhance Parkland's ability to remain a 'premier community college' even during this difficult time."

There is another level of experience the retired nonprofit director offers to what Parkland College calls "a melting pot of student life, with cultures as diverse as the communities we serve." She is transgender.

Born in Oak Park, Robbins spent her formative years in cities across the country, including Dallas, Minneapolis, Seattle and Tampa.

"My dad was part of corporate America in the '50s," she told Windy City Times. "He was with Northwest Airlines for 45 years and he'd been a Navy pilot in World War II."

It was during a move from Seattle to Dallas after she completed third grade that Robbins began to nurture a dream.

"We drove past the Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs. They were just building it at the time," she recalled. "I told my parents 'I want to go there.'"

Robbins followed her parent's advice and excelled in school. She joined the Academy when she was 17.

"The way I describe the Academy is it's a great place to be from and the best view is in the rear-view mirror," she said. "It was difficult but great at the same time. I'd hoped to be an astronaut.



Kathleen Robbins.

Photo from Robbins

One of my classmates became a space shuttle commander. But my eyes went bad while I was there so I ended up being a navigator instead of a pilot."

Throughout, she remained closeted.

"I grew up knowing that I wanted to be a little girl," Robbins said. "But I also knew that it was impossible and shameful, so I buried it as deep as I could. It was before the internet so I had no clue that there was anyone else in the world like me. I didn't know about the difference between gender identity and sexual orientation. I was still under the mistaken belief that they went together. It was like being separated from half of yourself while carrying around this giant secret."

Six months after she graduated from the Academy, Robbins married a chemistry teacher.

"To my shame, I didn't tell my future wife about my feelings," she said. "I thought I would outgrow or get over them. When I did tell her, we went to a civilian therapist and that was a debacle. It was basically aversion therapy."

Robbins graduated first in her class at Navigator School. She was based at Clark Air Base on Luzon Island in the Philippines and flew C-130 Hercules turboprops.

"We would go to Vietnam for 15 days at a time," she said. "We did everything from carrying people killed or wounded in action to dropping 15,000 pound bombs. It was 99 percent boredom interspersed with one percent sheer terror. I was not worried about dying as much as I was worried about being shot down and captured. By the time I got there in '69, the word was out about how prisoners were being treated in Hanoi. The Air Force would give us a \$50 million airplane and say, 'Bring it back in one piece' and the oldest person on the crew was the 30-year-old flight engineer."

After Vietnam and 11 years in the Air Force, Robbins realized that a career as a navigator was ultimately going to go nowhere as even civilian planes began to switch to automation, so she attended night school and achieved her MBA in finance and began her career as a manager in the production department of Proctor & Gamble.

"I learned leadership from the ground up," she said. "I was put in charge of a warehouse team and I learned how important it is to take care of people."

Meanwhile, Robbins began working with another therapist and finally learned about her identity. She started hormones in 1980. In the same

year, her wife was diagnosed with a brain tumor.

"I stopped the transition to take care of my wife and son," Robbins said. "We tried an unconventional treatment and it took care of the tumor. We moved to Dallas and I started the hormones again. We separated and, within six weeks, the tumor was back again."

Her wife passed away in 1989—the same year her son graduated from high school.

"The single hardest thing I've ever done was to tell my son about my transition after he had lost his mother less than a year before," Robbins said. "It was really difficult but, now, we have a great relationship."

Looking back, Robbins believes she was "incredibly fortunate" in her transition. Her landlord didn't care and there were no issues with a burgeoning career in technology and business, which eventually took her to Central Illinois as CEO of Cellular One in the region. Meanwhile, she had been back to school and earned her Doctorate in Ministry.

"To those whom much is given, much is expected," Robbins said.

It is a philosophy that spurred her to resign her position in 2003 and take her expertise to developing countries such as Haiti and Botswana in order to build 21st Century cellular and internet technology there. Robbins spent 15 months working amidst the horrific poverty in Port-au-Prince Haiti before returning to Central Illinois where she entered the nonprofit sector.

She took the helm of an organization still reeling from the economic collapse of 2008. By the time Robbins resigned in 2016, the organization was solvent.

"One of the things that Vietnam taught me is that it's not a crisis unless there's blood involved or somebody has died," Robbins said. "People in the nonprofit world are highly motivated and caring people. Leadership is critical in whichever organization you're in and, for me, that comes down to servant leadership. If leaders take care of the people and the people take care of their consumers, the consumers will take care of the organization. In the United States today, there is such a disparity between the bottom and the top that it's totally out of balance."

Balance is something Robbins has tried to instill in her own life and career roles. It is something she wants to bring to a position on the Parkland College Board, serving and inspiring future generations of leaders should she prevail next month.

"My priority is funding," Robbins said. "Community colleges in Illinois are just having a hell of time surviving let alone thriving. I'm also bringing in an outside view and the experience of living in Botswana, Haiti and the Philippines in ways that, if you've lived in Central Illinois all your life, you just can't do."

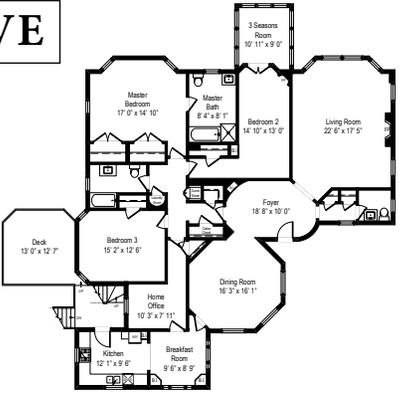
Robbins believes that her transgender identity will not be an issue with voters who will instead focus upon both her life resume, philosophy and vision for Parkland College—one that is in line with the institution's goal of reducing its reliance on State funding.

The budget impasse has been a hard lesson for those nonprofits which have counted on money that has evaporated under partisan squabbling.

Turn to page 9

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Monument backers gather at Sidetrack

Supporters of a new monument to honor the service of LGBTQ military members and veterans gathered at Lake View spot Sidetrack on March 18.

The Chicago chapter of the American Veterans for Equal Rights (AVER) has spearheaded the design, construction and approval of the installation of a stone monument near the former police station at the northwest corner of Halsted and Addison streets. It is to be dedicated in a ceremony on Memorial Day.

AVER is a national non-profit, chapter-based association, primarily LGBT, of active, reserve and veteran service members and allies, dedicated to full and equal rights and equitable treatment for all present and former members of the United States Armed Forces.

Fundraising is still going on, with a goal of \$20,000. Contributions to this 501(c)(3) organization are tax-deductible. Donations can be sent to AVER-Chicago, P.O. Box 29317, Chicago, IL 60629 or GoFundMe.com/lgbtq-veterans-halsted-st-monument. Questions can be sent to Tim Zylstra at timothy.zylstra@yahoo.com.

In 2015, Chicago AVER built and dedicated the first LGBT Veterans Memorial Monument in a national cemetery.



Left: Artist's rendering of the monument. Right: Congressman Mike Quigley (third from right) joined AVER at Sidetrack. Photo by Tracy Baim

VETERAN from page 8

"Part of the draw for Parkland College is the cost benefit ratio," Robbins said. "A semester at Parkland is much less expensive than it is at the University of Illinois, plus you get the benefit of smaller classes and teachers who are focused on teaching and not research or writing. One of the big topics that everybody is skirting around is how much local property tax payers are going to be asked to pay. There hasn't been an increase since '06 and, if Parkland decides to do that, how are they going to explain that to the community? The reality is the state's in a horrible financial position and it's going to take some hard decisions that both Democrats and Republicans have been reluctant to make. Parkland's doing the only thing it can in planning on not getting state support."

Her April 4 bid is the first time Robbins has ever run for public office and she admits to some nervousness.

Nevertheless, Robbins believes her "business and leadership background can be of service."

"It's an opportunity to give back," she said. "My college and grad school were paid for and a lot of the kids who end up at Parkland don't have that opportunity. Parkland is a way for them to move forward in the world and a bridge to their future is something I feel strongly about. The students are our bottom line. How do you break the cycle of poverty? Through opportunity. Part of my focus is going to be retaining students once they start and making sure they're getting the support they need to be successful."

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Evanston HS committee to send locker-room policy to full board

BY MATT SIMONETTE

Officials from Evanston Township High School (ETHS) Board of Education Policy Committee, on March 16, said they would draft a policy permitting trans students to use the locker-room facilities designated for the gender for which they identify; that policy will go before the full board at its meeting next month.

ETHS already has robust diversity policies in place, but the matter of locker room-access for trans students has been unresolved. Students have been using a third, gender-neutral locker room if they are uncomfortable using the changing facility for the gender which they were assigned at birth.

School officials previously drafted a locker

room policy in 2015 but hadn't enacted it. In the ensuing months, various school districts, some in the Chicago region, grappled with the legal implications of trans-affirming policies while the federal government vacillated in student guidelines once the executive branch changed hands. The Supreme Court had been expected to weigh in on the issue, but ultimately decided against hearing the case of Gavin Grimm, a transgender boy suing for public-accommodations access at his school in Virginia, meaning that no legal precedent is likely to serve as guide in the near future.

Many school officials, students and advocates now want the ETHS board to adopt a position, so the matter of locker room access was assigned to the Policy Committee, which consists of two board members, Gretchen Livingston and Pat



Gretchen Livingston and Evanston Township High School board member Jonathan Baum.

Photo by Matt Simonette

Savage-Williams.

At the March 16 meeting, which was attended by other board members, community members and several ETHS students, Livingston urged action on the matter. When the district's lawyer spoke of the risk of a lawsuit similar to one filed by student families in the Northwest suburbs over privacy rights, Livingston noted that there was also a risk that ETHS could be sued by a student seeking better access.

"We need to make this happen, for our students who are here right now," said Livingston.

All ETHS students who spoke at the hearing asked for a more inclusive policy; many held up signs showing their support. Grey Miller, a trans student, said the gender-neutral locker room "was very dear to me" but pointed out that public-accommodations access had been key to many civil-rights struggles and urged for a policy that didn't automatically result in segregation.

Board member Mark Metz suggested that "students are a lot more open than we think. Maybe this is more about the adults than the kids."

EI makes school board endorsements

In light of Palatine-based Township High School District 211 becoming a site of the fight to protect the civil rights of transgender students, Equality Illinois (EI) has weighed in on the school election by endorsing Anna Klimkowicz, Robert Lefevre and Edward Yung.

These candidates are being challenged by opponents who want to rescind the district's policy that affirms trans students and who are affiliated with what the Southern Poverty Law Center calls "an anti-LGBTQ extremist organization."

The EI PAC, the statewide LGBTQ political action committee, announced the endorsements

in advance of the April 4 school board election. District 211 is the largest high school district in Illinois and includes Hoffman Estates, Inverness, Palatine and Schaumburg.

The group Parents for Privacy seeks to repeal a district policy that affirms transgender students. Parents for Privacy is allied with the Alliance Defending Freedom, an Arizona-based organization that the Southern Poverty Law Center recently called an anti-LGBTQ extremist organization.

Nominations wanted for Hall of Fame

Nominations are now being taken for the 2017 class of the Chicago LGBT Hall of Fame. Inductees

to the Hall of Fame are recognized for their contributions to Chicago's LGBT community. Names can be submitted in one of three categories: Individual, Organization, or Friend of the Community.

Through the Chicago LGBT Hall of Fame, residents of Chicago and the world are made aware of the contributions of Chicago's LGBT communities and the communities' efforts to eradicate homophobic bias and discrimination.

Since the Hall of Fame's inception in 1991, the mission has continued to expand. In addition

to the selection of each year's new inductees, a large portion of time is devoted to being custodian of records for the exemplary inductees the group has honored and of the history that is remembered through their stories.

Please note that this year there will be a firm nomination deadline of Wed., May 31.

Submission details and guidelines can be found at the Chicago LGBT Hall of Fame website, chicago-lgbt-halloffame.org/nominate/.

Organizer: Pride Parade will not become a march this year

BY MATT SIMONETTE

Although other cities anticipate that their LGBT Pride events might be significantly changed—or even cancelled—thanks to a LGBT demonstration in Washington, D.C., in June and calls for more politically infused marches, organizers of the Chicago Pride Parade have no current plans to alter the format of their event, the organizer told Windy City Times.

Gay City News reported March 16 that organizers of the New York City Pride Parade were under pressure from activists to foreground members of groups that were protesting Republican leadership in the federal government.

"One way or another, these resistance groups are going to take over this parade," Cathy Marino-Thomas, a member of Gays Against Guns, told the leadership of Heritage of Pride March 13. "I predict that if there is no give here, this will be the first time there will be arrests."

The Los Angeles pride parade, which would

fall the same weekend as the Washington, D.C., event, will be replaced by a political-protest march this year.

But Pride Parade organizer Richard Pfeiffer told Windy City Times that there has been no call to alter Chicago's format this year and that parade entries can be either "political or social," based on the plans of participants.

"There will be people demonstrating against Trump at the parade, and there will be floats that are both political and social," he said, adding that many organizations have had their entries' plans in place for a year.

Local Chicago groups, however, will be holding demonstrations to coincide with the June 11 LGBT march on Washington, D.C., according to reports; one will likely take place downtown and the other will be as part of Andersonville's Midsommarfest.

Gay City News' article is at <http://gaycitynews.nyc/push-for-resistance-hop/>.

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in the LIFE

Alberto Lazcurain

TEXT BY ROSS FORMAN
PHOTOS FROM LAZCURAIN

- **Age**
33
- **Relationship status**
Single
- **Hobbies**
Working out, listening to music, dancing, reading books, spending time with family and friends.
- **Orientation**
Gay
- **Favorite TV show**
America's Funniest Home Videos
- **Favorite musicians**
Alicia Keys, Christina Aguilera and Andra Day
- **Favorite movie**
Gladiator
- **Little-known fact**
"I am a] chocolate lover and I love cooking."

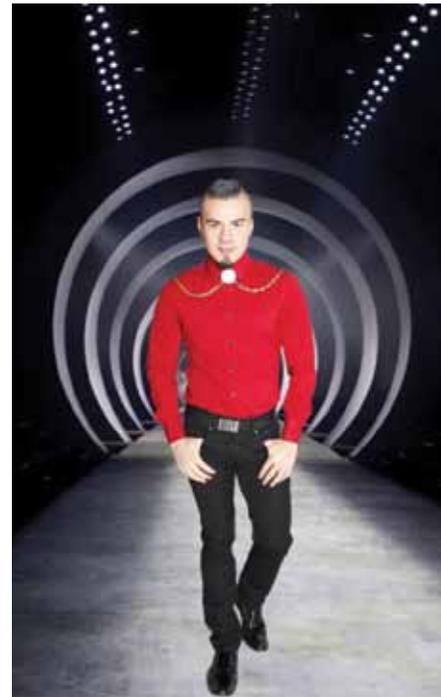
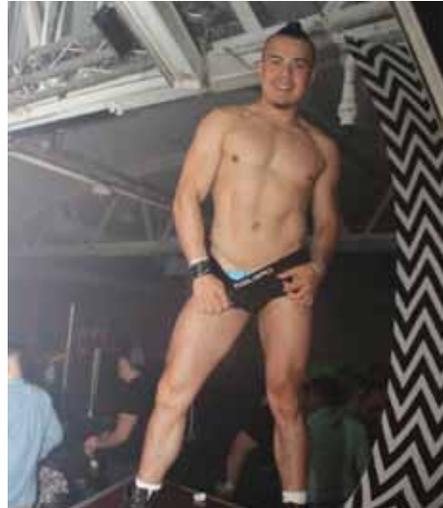
Alberto Lazcurain works in construction and repair, which he likes although it is hard work.

But dancing is his passion.

"I remember dancing [when] I was very young [and] easily adapted to any rhythm," said Lazcurain, who won multiple dancing competitions while growing up. "I like to dance differently [than most], but sexy [dancing]."

Lazcurain came to Chicago on vacation years ago and was taking a break from being a lawyer. That's when he saw go-go dancers—and decided that's what he wanted to do as well.

"My job as a dancer has been great fun, knowing many people as co-workers always make a good team and of course [thinking we are doing] very well."



Lazcurain has danced locally at Circuit Nightclub and Fantasy as the venue is now know. He also has worked at Hydrate, Sanctuary Nightclub and Club Krave.

"I've had excellent experiences in each [venue]," he said.

Dancing has given Lazcurain positive and negative experiences, he said. He's grown as a person from each, he said.

Dancing, he added, is a "[personal] expression of myself, my feelings, my joys, my sorrows. To feel the music running in my veins, to feel the different rhythms in each one of its notes, that makes me explode of emotions."

So what's the worst part of his go-go run?

When the music ends on his dance, he said.

"I am a kind, happy, spontaneous, respectful and honest person," Lazcurain said. "In my scale of values, I [shoot to be] an excellent friend, person and companion—and all that [comes from] the education my parents gave me, and I love them."



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MOMBIAN

Adoption rules spark need for 'public outrage'

An increasing number of states are risking harm to children in foster care by allowing discrimination against LGBTQ people and others who wish to foster or adopt them.

South Dakota, on March 10, enacted a law stating that no child-placement agency may be required to provide service that conflicts with its "sincerely-held religious belief or moral conviction," even if they are receiving public funds or tax benefits—a move widely seen as targeting LGBTQ prospective parents. The Alabama House advanced a similar bill March 16, Georgia did so the next day, and others are pending in Oklahoma and Texas. Michigan, North Dakota, and Virginia already have such laws in place.

Unlike the public outcry when Indiana and North Carolina passed anti-LGBTQ laws in 2015 and 2016, respectively, the public response to the latest bills seems tepid at best. "There's not the same level of mobilization," said Emily Hecht-McGowan, chief policy officer of Family Equality Council, in an interview.

Part of this may be because of a misconception about which course of action better serves children. Proponents of the child-placement bills say that forcing agencies to close rather than to comply with nondiscrimination laws causes harm by reducing the number of agencies available to serve children. They point to agencies affiliated with Catholic Charities in Massachusetts, Illinois, and Washington, D.C., which closed rather than comply with state laws saying they must not discriminate against same-sex couples.

Hecht-McGowan asserts, however, that the clos-

ing of these agencies has made "no discernable impact" on children finding homes. First, these agencies did not make that many public placements to begin with. Catholic Charities' own annual surveys showed that nationally, they finalized 2,000 to 2,500 adoptions per year between 2008 and 2011 (when they stopped reporting this data), only about four percent of all adoptions.

Yes, it is troubling if even one child in need does not find a home. The providers that closed, however, transferred all their cases to other agencies. In fact, when Illinois cancelled its contract with Catholic Charities in 2012, the percentage of adoptions performed by public child welfare agencies in the state went up four percent. The reasons why are unclear, but the data argues against the idea that shuttering discriminatory agencies reduces the number of placements.

It is the current crop of bills, not their absence, that is harmful, Hecht-McGowan said. "All this does is target children. The problem is lack of families, not lack of social service providers."

The need for families is urgent. There are nearly 428,000 children in foster care in the United States, with 103,000 of them awaiting adoption, according to data from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Of those, 26 percent wait more than two years and six percent wait more than five years before finding a permanent home. Between 23,000 and 24,000 foster children turn 18 each year without ever finding one.

Children who lack permanent homes have added risk of major difficulties in transitioning to a healthy adulthood, the Movement Advancement Project (MAP) reminds us in its recent Issue Brief, "License to Discriminate." And on an economic level, the longer children are in care, the greater the costs to the child welfare system.

MAP tells us, too, that "States consistently report that one of the biggest obstacles to placing children is finding interested, qualified families." LGBTQ people play an important role in addressing this. Same-sex couples are four times more likely than married different-sex couples to be raising adopted children and six times more likely to be raising foster children, with an estimated 16,000 same-sex couples raising more than 22,000 adopted children in the U.S. as of 2013, per UCLA's

Williams Institute.

While LGBTQ prospective parents in some locations may simply be able to go to agencies they feel will not discriminate, this is harder in places where there are fewer agencies to choose from, Hecht-McGowan noted.

Youth in care, moreover, don't get a choice of agency or caseworker, she added. Under the new legislation, agencies could cite religious beliefs to place LGBTQ children into homes where the parents might try to "pray away the gay" or force them to undergo the discredited practice of conversion therapy.

The danger isn't just for LGBTQ children, either. HRC noted on its blog March 16 that this legislation means that agencies could refuse to place foster children (of any identity) with LGBTQ relatives, even though placement with extended family is "often considered to be in the best interest of the child." LGBTQ people aside, MAP adds, "A child who just lost both his or her parents could be denied adoption by an aunt who is an unmarried mother."

What to do? Family Equality, HRC, and the ACLU are among the organizations variously testifying in state hearings, identifying local families who can testify to the negative impact of these bills, and working to raise awareness.

Individuals in any of the states with pending legislation should call (not just email) their legislators, Hecht-McGowan says. If a bill passes, call the governor and ask for a veto.

MAP has also created a guide for "Talking About Religious Exemptions and Adoption Discrimination," which may be helpful to those advocating with either legislators or neighbors. Read it at lgbtmap.org.

If you are a former foster child, an adoptive child, or a foster or adoptive parent, Hecht-McGowan advises, "Tell your story. When people learn an issue impacts someone they love, it changes minds."

And everyone should help spread the word. "Laws like this help no one," Hecht-McGowan affirms, but adds, "We need public outrage and momentum and energy" to stop them.

Dana Rudolph is the founder and publisher of Mombian (mombian.com), a GLAAD Media Award-winning blog and resource directory for LGBTQ parents.

Letters to the editor

Reaching out to Ron

I am both amazed and humbled by Ron Clewer's letter to the editor in Windy City Times (the March 15 issue) concerning his late brother's murder.

Ron, my prayers are with you and your family. You honor your brother's memory by this act.

In this age of unbridled ego, as is shown by the me generation, you gave me pause for thought in this season of Lent. You spoke not so much to my head as you did to both my heart and soul.

Thank you for the journey you have taken and even more for sharing it in this letter to the editor. I am sure you have touched many More impor-

tantly, your compassion is a sign of hope for many in this community.

In my opinion, your act of love will be a pebble dropped in the many ponds of our community—and whose ripple effect will touch many.

Thank you,
Joe Murray

**Send columns or letters to Andrew@WindyCityMediaGroup.com.
Letters may be edited for brevity or clarity.**

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'Spam' I am

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WCT reviews Spamilton (and talks with its creator, below).

Photo by Michael Brosilow

NUNN ON ONE: THEATER

Alessandrini riffs on 'Spamilton'

BY JERRY NUNN

Started in New York by author Gerard Alessandrini, Spamilton has now moved to Chicago in a cabaret space.

This hilarious production takes the popular Hamilton and lampoons it along with dozens of other musicals in 90 minutes. The story begins with Barack and Michelle Obama listening to the Hamilton soundtrack before they go to sleep, and the jokes keep coming through various other characters at a fast pace until the end.

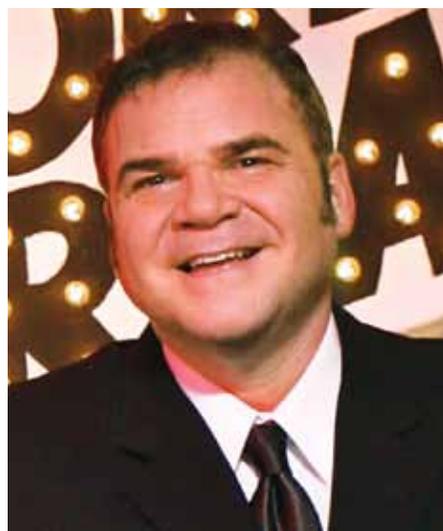
The Boston-born funnyman grew up in Needham, Massachusetts, before graduating from the Boston Conservatory of Music. He started with Forbidden Broadway back in 1982 and created 25 versions of it over the years. Through the years this author has received an Obie Award, four Drama Desk Awards, an Outer Critics Circle Award, and two Lucille Lortel Awards. To top it off he took home the Drama League for Lifetime Achievement in Musical Theatre Award.

Judging from the success and reactions of Spamilton in the Windy City, more awards look to be in his future.

Windy City Times: What made you want to make musical parodies in the first place?

Gerard Alessandrini: I was working as a performer and always liked parodies. For myself and my friends, I invented Forbidden Broadway. That was a spoof of all of the musicals currently on Broadway then—much the way Spamilton is—except it was show by show. I would take one song per show and change the lyrics, then go to the next musical down the line.

That was my primary job for many years, just



Gerard Alessandrini.

Photo courtesy of Facebook

doing all the editions of Forbidden Broadway. I did 25 editions in 27 years. We ran it off-Broadway and tour. Chicago was on one of those tours.

WCT: Sounds like a lot of work.

GA: It was and I performed on the side, also. I did some writing for celebrities for TV specials, and helped with their records, like Angela Lansbury, Barbra Streisand, and Carol Burnett. Angela I worked with on a special with Bob Hope, I recently wrote a parody with Barbra for her new album, and Carol's special Men, Movies, and Carol I wrote some sketches for.

WCT: How did you decide on Hamilton?

GA: I was known for spoofing musicals and it was the biggest show in New York. I happen to love it, too. Nothing has changed or revolutionized theater as much. I felt I had to spoof it.

It was great fun to do and right up my alley. It was a good combination to do a mashup of those genres.

I think it is successful because of the great Chicago cast. They added so much to it and I am very happy with the outcome.

WCT: It has only been in New York before this?

GA: Yes; it was at the Triad Theater, which is similar to the Royal George, but it more of a cabaret style with tables and drinks. It is about the same size and number of seats.

WCT: You live in New York now?

GA: Actually, I live in Connecticut, as many New Englanders do. I still have family in Boston so I am there a lot. For many years, I was in New York. This may all change.

WCT: You have a longtime partner?

GA: Yes, I do. His name is Glenn Bassett and he is very sweet. He plays the King in the New York production of Spamilton. He is very good.

The reason he is in the show is because when we started off it was very low budget. We didn't know if it would work. We paid the cast but I asked him to do it for nothing. I told him we could pay him later if it is a hit. Who else but a longtime partner would do that?

WCT: Did you hear that Wayne Brady and many of the cast members of Chicago's Hamilton came to opening night of Spamilton?

GA: I did. Even before Spamilton existed someone told me to call Wayne Brady if I did a new Forbidden Broadway. They heard he would love to do it. I am glad he came to see it.

WCT: Has Lin-Manuel Miranda seen Spamilton in New York?

GA: He saw it twice. The first time he came was with the director. I only saw them from the back but they were going crazy laughing. He must have liked the show because he stayed for over

an hour after and talked to us.

Then he came back with his family. Our cast album came out the same week so I asked him if we could use the quote on the sticker that he tweeted, "I laughed my brains out!"

He approved and mentioned that he went to the record store to buy the Forbidden Broadway Strikes Back album spoofing Rent in his youth. I guess he likes the idea that now he is the target.

WCT: How long did you do Forbidden Broadway?

GA: From 1982 to 2014. I did other shows, but Forbidden Broadway got all the publicity because it had such a following.

WCT: Why so many mentions about Stephen Sondheim in Spamilton?

GA: I always find him fun to spoof. Lin Manuel likes Sondheim because he mentioned him when he won the Tony for In the Heights. In the book Hamilton: The Revolution there is a chapter of Lin talking to Sondheim. I figured we had to go there.

WCT: Do you have a favorite musical?

GA: I will pick one from each century—of the old ones My Fair Lady, and the new ones Hamilton.

I think My Face Lady is the most perfect musical. It has tango, and waltzes among a variety of Broadway influences. There is all types of music in it. That is not dissimilar to Hamilton. People will say it's all rap but it isn't. He uses swing and Mozart style music, even influences from the '50s.

Maybe that is why I like those two musicals because they have such a big palette of music.

WCT: You have a section in Spamilton about the evolution of current musicals. Do you feel musicals are becoming more straight?

GA: With so many shows everyone is gay, all the writers and performers, but with Hamilton it seems like everyone is straight. Where are the gay men? Where is Bob Mackie doing the costumes? [Laughs]

Spamilton pokes fun until May 28 at Royal George Theatre, 1641 N. Halsted St. Tickets can be found atTheRoyalGeorgeTheatre.com.

THEATER REVIEW

The Wiz

Playwright: Music and lyrics by Charlie Smalls, book by William F. Brown
 At: Kokandy Productions at Theater Wit, 1229 W. Belmont Ave.
 Tickets: \$33-\$38
 Runs through: April 16

BY MARY SHEN BARNIDGE

If the brothers and sisters of Huckleberry Finn, Peer Gynt, Alice Liddell or Ebenezer Scrooge were not to be found in every culture the world over, their stories would have faded from memory with their generation, rather than endure to achieve the status of a “classic.” L. Frank Baum’s tale of a farm girl in 1900 learning life lessons on an odyssey through a magical land should have easily adapted itself to Charlie Smalls and William F. Brown’s 1974 reimagining of the familiar fable rendered universal by its cinematic incarnation in 1939, but while a rural midwest-dwelling African-American Dorothy is hardly extraordinary,



Part of The Wiz cast.
 Photo by Michael Brosilow

the Great Migration of the 20th century led to the cities, spawning the legacy reflected in the distinctive Soul Music harmonies showcased in Smalls’ score.

Director Lilli-Anne Brown acknowledges history by locating our heroine, not on the prairies, but in the “Kansas Homes” CHA projects, where Dorothy’s Aunt Em peddles T-shirts from a sidewalk

stand, where the enchanted shoes are glittering hi-tops and the yellow brick road is a pavement crossing. Gangsta-wannabes taunt the scarecrow, a touch of oil turns the tin man into a crooner in Marvin Gaye mode and the lion arrives clad in pimp-finery, flanked by a pair of flygirls. The Emerald City denizens are posturing clubbers, the good Witch of the North wears Caribbean gear,

and her Southside sister, a satin aviator suit. The wicked Witch of the West operates a sweatshop factory and the Wiz styles out in Joan Crawford shoulders and spike heels.

It’s not enough to simply dress up the same old Hollywood razzle-dazzle in street wear, though. Breon Arzell’s choreography dispenses with old-school tap-and-kick formations to instead reflect the influence of street dance—a wise move when the “ease on down the road” requires six hoofers to occupy a lane spanning barely three by 14 feet.

Sydney Charles endows Dorothy with pipes as expressive of defiance as of supplication. Indeed, the entire cast (and the likewise exuberant band camped on the overpass) exhibits full-bodied vocal ranges lending gusto to a lush roster of video-ready compact musical extravaganzas so catalyzed by the intimate configuration of the north studio at Theater Wit that audience members could be heard spontaneously witnessing along with the chorus on the roof-raising “Brand New Day.” March may have come in like a lamb this year, but this Kokandy production ensures its going out like a you-know-what.

THEATER REVIEW

Sycamore

Playwright: Sarah Sander
 At: Raven Theatre, 6157 N. Clark
 Tickets: 773-338-2177;
 RavenTheatre.org; \$46
 Runs through: April 29

BY JONATHAN ABARBANEL

I don’t understand this play’s title. No one is named Sycamore, or lives on Sycamore Lane, or talks of sycamore trees. What the play does have is a helluva lot of angst. Only one character appears angst-free, and that may be because she’s newly divorced and liberally self-medicates.

Of particular note is teenage angst, perhaps the juiciest kind (equaled only by misunderstood artist angst). Celia (Selina Fillinger) is 18 and artsy; her brother, Henry (Julian Larach), is 16 and a gay overachiever (jock and student council prez). Their new next-door neighbor, John (Johnathan Nieves), 18, is—well, I’m not certain about his issue is. Maybe it’s his splitsville ‘rents. Things get tricky when Henry crushes on John but John crushes on Celia, who crushes on John, too, but is standoffish to counter her easy-girl school reputation. John spends a lot of time hanging with Henry, who says John hasn’t figured out his sexuality yet. Still, John firmly resists Henry’s overt come-on, triggering Henry’s meltdown and suicidal cries. It’s not the first time: Henry tried to kill himself a year earlier when he caught Celia fucking his boyfriend. Now, he’s on meds.

Celia and Henry’s ‘rents don’t help much. Mom (Robyn Coffin) tries to stay cool but panics easily. Dad (Tom Hickey) is a part-time college professor who makes ends meet as a diner line cook—a sideline beginning to dominate his life. John’s wine-drinking mom (Jaslene Gonzalez) is a sculptor, and seems to be the only one in the play having a good time. Under director Devon de Mayo, the kids walk off with the show. Nieves already is a familiar face but Fillinger and Larach are new to me, and they hit the nail on the head.

Sycamore is a small play, not just in the intimacy of its cast and setting but also in its ideas. We’ve seen many similar situations, although the competing teens may not be siblings. The parents are woefully underdeveloped and don’t contribute to the plot significantly. The teens are exceedingly fragile (which is truthful enough) but they also

are very self-aware—especially Henry (who’s cute and knows it). Henry’s family accepts him and so does his school community, so things already are pretty good for him.

Right now, this 75-minute world premiere is unfinished. It needs more development and a definitive ending. Sycamore comes to a stop rather than completing the story or character arcs. At one point, Celia comments about how she and Henry have to take care of their parents—a reversal of usual roles. I was there myself at 17 dealing with my divorcing parents’ emotional needs. The role-reversal circumstance could be something for playwright Sander to explore.

THEATER REVIEW

The Kid Thing

Written by: Sarah Gubbins
 Directed by: Jake Freund
 At: Berger Park Cultural Center,
 6205 N. Sheridan Rd.
 Tickets: NothingWithoutACompany.org; \$20
 Runs through: April 15

BY ERIC KARAS

Nothing Without a Company presents Sarah Gubbins’ play *The Kid Thing*—the first time it has presented a known work over a new one. It’s easy to see why Gubbins’ play about two lesbian couples debating parenthood is a strong character piece and an extremely well-written production. Presented in the company’s intimate space, the audience is literally in the living room as the characters spar with one another.

Darcy (Shalyn Welch) and Leigh (Samantha Michelle Nava) are a couple who get broadsided by the announcement by friends Nate (Anna Rose



Anna Rose II-Epstein in *The Kid Thing*.
 Photo by Christopher Semel

II-Epstein) and Margo (Taylor Raye) that they are expecting a baby. This brings up the subject of having a baby—or “the kid thing”—between Darcy and Leigh. Things get more complicated when we add the donor father Jacob (Gabriel Fries), who is under consideration as a donor for Leigh as well. The drama touches on the relationships of these couples, infidelity, par-

enting roles and ultimately identity. Hopefully, the discussion at the end of the play about kids being teased at school about LGBT parents will become dated some day.

This play lives and dies with the casting of Darcy, the lesbian who “dresses like Cary Grant,” has a very strong personality and whose issues really drive the action of the story. Shalyn Welch is perfectly cast and up to the task; she is infuriating and strong but conflicted. Nava’s Leigh is the perfect amount of sunshine and want; her scene with Jacob is very funny, and she really brings it to life.

As far as the rest of the cast, Raye’s Margo is mature and emotional. Epstein’s Nate is an enthusiastic “skater punk” but I do wish she would slow down her climactic scene a bit to bring more emotion out of it. Fries’ Jacob is lovable and funny, but we cringe at the awkward situation that includes him.

Overall, this theater company with a small space and an even smaller budget really delivers. Freund’s direction keeps things moving, even with the limitations.

CRITICS’ PICKS

American Hwangap, A-Squared Theatre & Halcyon Theatre at Christ Lutheran Church, through April 1. Immigrants of all ethnicities will see themselves in Lloyd Suh’s candid look at a long-absent father’s attempt to reconnect with his estranged family. MSB

Bootycandy, Windy City Playhouse, through April 15. Author/director Robert O’Hara effectively disguises a serious, satirical play—about sex, Black culture and race relations among other things—with lots of laughs, exaggerated acting and comic strip style. It works, but it ain’t for prudes or the faint-of-heart. Sissies, yes! JA

Henry V, Babes With Blades Theatre Company at City Lit Theater, through April 1. Diana Coates renders Shakespeare’s war hero both a fiery battlefield commander and a wise peacetime ruler in this all-female production. MSB

Saturday Night Fever, Drury Lane Theatre, Oakbrook Terrace, extended through April 9. A new script and director/choreographer Dan Knechtges all help to make a strong and dazzling case for the latest screen-to-stage adaptation of the iconic 1977 disco film. Hunky Adrian Aguilar exudes manly charisma in the John Travolta role of Tony Manero. SCM

—By Abarbanel, Barnidge and Morgan

DOUBLE REVIEW

Spamilton

Creator: Gerard Alessandrini

At: Royal George Theatre, 1641 N. Halsted St.

Tickets: 312-988-9000 or Spamilton.com;
\$59-\$99

Runs through: May 28

10 Out of 12

Playwright: Anne Washburn

At: Theater Wit, 1229 W. Belmont Ave.

Tickets: 773-975-8150 or

TheaterWit.org; \$24-\$36

Runs through: April 23

BY SCOTT C. MORGAN

Two recent acclaimed off-Broadway shows making strong Chicago debuts are allowing audiences to feel like the ultimate theater insiders. The Royal George Theatre hosts the 2016 musical spoof Spamilton by Forbidden Broadway creator Gerard Alessandrini, while the 2015 comic drama 10 Out of 12, by Mr. Burns playwright Anne Washburn, is at Theater Wit.

With Spamilton, Alessandrini shows his creative and marketing savvy at hitching what is essentially another edition of Forbidden Broadway to the pop cultural phenomenon that is Hamilton. Alessandrini also shows once again why he is the master at skewering all things Broadway by poking fun at all the hype, hip-hop wordiness and surrounding Broadway jealousy about Lin-Manuel Miranda's money-spinning and history-inspired hit.

Alessandrini himself adroitly directs, and he has assembled a top-notch Chicago company to constantly shapeshift vocally under music director Adam LaSalle to make Spamilton a non-stop laughathon. It would be of no surprise if the company of Yando Lopez, Donterrio Johnson, Eric Andrew Lewis, David Robbins and Michelle Lauto were poached to appear in future companies of Hamilton.

As an added bonus, Forbidden Broadway guest diva Christine Pedi perfectly (and ruthlessly) also embodies an array of Broadway leading ladies trying to score Hamilton tickets through the course of the show. I won't say which divas Pedi becomes because that would ruin the delightful



Spamilton's Yando Lopez and Eric Andrew Lewis.

Photo by Michael Brosilow

surprises.

True, some of the Broadway insider references in Spamilton might go over the heads of general audiences (like jokes tied to now-closed musicals like American Psycho or Shuffle Along). But there's so much hilarity and targeted humor throughout Spamilton that it won't just be theater aficionados who will be splitting their sides from constant laughter.

As for 10 Out of 12 (a theater term for a professional 12-hour technical rehearsal with a two-hour break), it's much more an exercise by Washburn revealing how the theater sausage is made. In illuminating moments throughout one of these rehearsals, audiences get to see the di-hard craft of the lighting, sound and costume designers as they hash out everything cue by cue.

What's more, the audience gets to listen in to the headset chatter thanks to individual earphones at each seat. Some might find all this gimmicky, but the eavesdropping gives an extra dimension to 10 Out of 12 that is extra insightful.

Director Jeremy Wechsler with his great acting company and expert design team rightfully get across all the tedium and unexpected dramatic flare-ups that might transpire during such a necessary rehearsal (it's also great that Washburn has customized her script to Chicago). This production may be too inwardly meta for many audiences' tastes, but it does celebrate all the hard work and dedication that goes into creating live theater.

How do you define yourself? How do others define you? In *More Than a Letter* we will reflect on self-identity and self-expression through the artistry of LGBTQ composers and musicians, celebrating difference, finding common ground and embracing the beauty of authenticity.

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SPOTLIGHT

Former Saturday Night Live star Rachel Dratch, former 30 Rock star Scott Adsit and Community creator Dan Harmon are the headliners for the **20th Annual Chicago Improv Festival**. More than 145 improv groups from the U.S., Canada and India are in the mix, including returning troupes like Frangela, SIRENS and Damaged Goods. The 20th Annual Chicago Improv Festival plays at multiple venues between Monday, March 27, through Sunday, April 2. Chicago locations include: Stage 773, 1225 W. Belmont Ave.; Athenaeum Theatre, 2936 N. Southport Ave.; Annoyance Theatre, 851 W. Belmont Ave.;



and Second City e.t.c., 1616 N. Wells St. Tickets are \$5-\$35; visit ChicagoImprovFestival.org.

Caption: Rocky Williams, Stefan Gearhart and Parker Bowles of the improv troupe Damaged Goods based out of Louisville, Kentucky. Photo courtesy of Chicago Improv Festival

NUNN ON ONE: TELEVISION

Chicago's Coulee competes for the crown on 'Drag Race'

BY JERRY NUNN



Shea Coulee.
Photo courtesy of LOGO

The drag scene in Chicago continues to grow each year and Hollywood has taken notice.

RuPaul's Drag Race has cast several of our dolls in past seasons, starting from the very first with Jade Sotomayor. Over the years the Windy City has been represented with fierce competitors like DiDa Ritz, Monica Beverly Hillz and Phi Phi O'Hara. Pageant queen Naysha Lopez returned for a second chance after being voted off and Kim Chi almost won last season. This made Chicago even thirstier for a win, so we can almost taste it with the latest contestant Shea Coulee.

Windy City Times: Start off with where you are originally from.

Shea Coulee: I was born in Warsaw, Indiana. I grew up in a southwest suburb of Chicago called Plainfield. I moved into the city in 2007. I went to Columbia College for costume design.

WCT: That was a good move! How long have you been performing in drag?

SC: It will be six years in July.

WCT: What inspired you to start?

SC: I am a RuPaul's Drag Race baby. Watching the show inspired me to do drag, specifically season three with Raja. I had injured my foot so had to be off of it for a few days, so I binge watched the show. I loved it so much. When it got to the Hair Ball, when they had to make outfits out of hair, I was inspired by the creativity that went into that challenge. It made me want to do drag. It looked like fun. The rest is history!

WCT: Explain your drag name.

SC: Shea is my middle name. It is Swahili, meaning "beautiful boy." That was given to me by my late father. I wanted to have something that felt personal.

I picked Coulee because I wanted it to sound like a French supermodel. There is an African riddle that uses the name about building unity.

WCT: You speak French?

SC: *Juste un petit peu* [just a little bit].

WCT: What was your journey to season nine of RuPaul's Drag Race?

SC: I have auditioned every year since I started doing drag. After five years trying, I finally made it.

WCT: What sets you apart from the rest of the current contestants?

SC: My individual brand. People are usually put in different boxes in the drag world. I am a very well-rounded queen, whether it is performance, makeup, sewing, acting or singing. Those are all areas that I have experience in. I have been doing theater since I was nine years old. I went in with a heavy skill set that allowed me to do well in the challenges given.

WCT: Do you feel taking a while to get cast worked out in your favor?

SC: Absolutely. I am a firm believer that things happen when they are supposed to.

I got to meet Lady Gaga on the first episode so hell yeah! It was such a dream come true. She was so nice and down to earth. I was blown away that I could have a casual conversation with her. It was surprising how small she was. I wanted to pick her up and put her in my pocket, but security would have stopped me!

WCT: Did any past Chicago contestants give you advice about the show?

SC: I started doing drag with Kim Chi. We are like sisters. We used to live across the hall from

each other. We would have craft kakis every day where we would work on things. She called me up and gave me a wealth of knowledge. It was much appreciated.

She texts me all the time to give me advice on how to handle things.

WCT: You life will be a roller-coaster this year.

SC: Thankfully I love roller-coasters!

WCT: Was there anything that surprised you, from doing the show?

SC: I was surprised how fast I could work when put to the test. When it comes to shows like that, there is so much production that goes into it. You don't have the luxury to twirl around and think about what you want to create. You have to trust your instincts and go!

It taught me a lot to just dive into something, commit, and do it as fast and efficiently as possible.

WCT: What is the first thing RuPaul said to you?

SC: She said she liked my outfit, and orange is her favorite color. I was wearing an orange coat. It is my favorite color, too.

WCT: With your first entrance into the workroom, was that a club kid-inspired look?

SC: That look was featured in my short film, Lipstick City, located at my website, SheaCoulee.com. I try to be smart and cross-brand myself.

WCT: I spotted lots of Chicago people and places in Lipstick City.

SC: It was a great opportunity to work with the Chicago queer community. I was able to create a fun, fanciful short that was derived from what happens here in Chicago nightlife.

WCT: I know you have been involved with Neverland dance parties. Any more plans for Chicago events?

SC: I am working on some projects right now that I can't talk about. They will be coming out

Turn to page 22

Lambda Literary finalists announced

LGBT organization Lambda Literary announced the finalists of the 29th Annual Lambda Literary Awards, or the "Lammys."

They were chosen from nearly 900 submissions and more than 300 publishers. The winners will be announced at a gala ceremony on Monday, June 12, at New York City's NYU Skirball Center for the Performing Arts.

Just a few of the nominated works include Jacqueline Woodson's *Another Brooklyn* (Lesbian Fiction), Darryl Pinckney's *Black Duets/land* (Gay Fiction), Samuel Peterson's *Trunky* (Transgender Junky): *A Memoir* (Transgender Nonfiction), Alexa Black's *Steel and Promise* (LGBTQ Erotica), Abigail Child's *Mouth to Mouth* (Bisexual Fiction), E. Patrick Johnson's *No Tea, No Shade: New Writings in Black Queer Studies* (LGBTQ Anthology) and Kokumo's *Reacquainted with Life* (Transgender Poetry).

For more information and to buy tickets, visit LambdaLiterary.org/awards/buy-tickets/.

Party Noire events all about female Black joy

BY MELISSA WASSERMAN

Chicagoans can dance it out when Party Noire plays Black joy on repeat.

Party Noire is a dance party that began as an idea to bring Black creative millennials together for the celebration of “melanin+women,” as the organizers call the concept. Lauren Ash, Nick Alder and DJ Rae Chardonnay co-founded Party Noire and kicked off the series in September 2015 when they saw a lack of these types of spaces and the need to have a social gathering for celebrating Black women.

“We, prior to Party Noire, had all met and kind of vibed together and respected one another’s individual projects and individual energies,” said Ash. “So, when we got together, we all agreed that what we saw missing from the landscape of Chicago at the time was a party, in particular a day party space that centered on Black women and that also provided a platform for Black female DJs to do their thing. We were just really passionate about starting something that also focused on this idea of Black joy.”

Party Noire celebrates womanhood along the gender spectrum and holds space especially for queer, trans and gender non-conforming Black people. The event exists with the tag line “Black joy. In all ways. Always.”

Chardonnay described the scene as an elevated space in terms of energy and is extremely dance friendly, adding that from the beginning the team knew that music was a huge component of the party.

Old- and new-school hip-hop, funk, R&B, soul, house and everything in between is spun at Party Noire. All the music keeps with the theme of embracing Blackness as it is either composed, written or performed by artists of color.

The co-founders emphasized the idea of intersectionality at Party Noire, saying people “can be their most free authentic, Black, colorful and queer self.”

“I think every party is definitely unique in its

own right because we take time to curate experiences that are expansive of just different things,” said Alder. “We never have the same experience at every single party, but what makes us unique and what makes us different is our mission of Black joy that should be highlighted and expressed.”

With its home base being The Promontory, Party Noire also activates other spaces around Chicago and beyond and has multiple parties throughout the month, which are listed on its website. The Party Noire also collaborates with various other organizations as hosts.

This year the co-founders said Party Noire will be expanding with some non-party activations, while using the Party Noire model and additionally traveling more to bring the party to other major cities.

“It’s not to say that there aren’t dope Black people who care about Black joy and Black community and things like that everywhere, but the particular way we’re holding the space and crafting the space is really necessary and is, I think, really cathartic and also still real fun and altogether meaningful, so we’re really excited to continue to pop up in various cities and share the love,” said Ash.

“I think it’s important for Black women, in general, to have a presence,” said Chardonnay. “Particularly, with who we are choosing to collaborate with, those organizations or those people are already putting Black women at the forefront and Black people at the forefront, so if we could use our platform to continue or to help do that or broaden that, I think that it’s important that we do that and that we have the room to do that and the organizations and people we collaborate with trust us to do that. There’s actually a growing number of Black women and Black people at the forefront of many things, and I think that it’s important that we’re maintaining that across the board as often as we can.”

To learn more about Party Noire, visit ThePartyNoire.com.



Party Noire co-founders (from left) Nick Alder, DJ Rae Chardonnay and Lauren Ash. Photo by RJ Eldridge

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Strawdog moves to North Center

Strawdog Theatre Company announced that the company has signed a three-year lease for the former Signal Ensemble Theater, 1802 W. Berenice Ave.

The space was also briefly home to Oracle Productions following Signal’s closure, and has a 99-seat venue. Strawdog’s 30th-anniversary season, to be celebrated during 2017-18, is to be announced.

Strawdog Theatre Company’s final production of the 2016-17 season will take place at the new Factory Theater in Rogers Park, 1621 W. Howard St. The Night Season, written by Rebecca Lenkiewicz and directed by Elly Green,

runs May 11-June 24.

Strawdog Theater on Berenice takes residence immediately, with the space available for rentals to itinerant companies. See Strawdog.org.

‘Carmen’ ends March 25

Lyric Opera of Chicago will run the story of a deadly love triangle in Bizet’s *Carmen*, directed by Tony and Emmy Award-winning director/choreographer Rob Ashford, who returns to Lyric after *Carousel*.

Carmen runs through Saturday, March 25, at Lyric’s Civic Opera House, 20 N. Wacker Dr.

Tickets start at \$34; visit LyricOpera.org/Carmen or call 312-827-5600.

CLASSICS from cover

of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. (The group Allegrezza Singers and Curie High School organization Musicality, which has been on the TV show America's Got Talent, will also be in "More Than a Letter.")

For More Than a Letter, Morgan programmed theatrical overtures by late LGBTQ composers like Leonard Bernstein (Candide, West Side Story) and Samuel Barber (School for Scandal). There's also the Chicago premieres of works by living LGBTQ composers like Jennifer Higdon (Peachtree Street) and David Conte (Elegy for Matthew, which was written to honor the murdered gay college student Matthew Shepard).

"This is something in my own estimation that is long overdue in terms of classical music and how we market these concerts and how we get people to listen to great music," said Buechner, glad to also know that the Chicago Sinfonietta regularly reaches out to other diverse communities with annual holiday concerts scheduled around Martin Luther King Jr. Day and the Day of the Dead.

"You're going to get people coming to the concert hall realizing that the music is for them, about them and connected to their lives," Buechner said. An example, Buechner pointed out that gay San Francisco Symphony music director Michael Tilson Thomas has previously "made great appeals to his LGBTQ audiences there and it's terrific."

In More Than a Letter, Buechner is set to perform the virtuosic piano solo in Rachmaninoff's popular Variations on a Theme by Paganini. It was composed not long before Rachmaninoff's death in 1943, and Buechner calls it an extremely emotional piece.

"It has all the flamboyance and carelessness of youth, but Rachmaninoff turns it upside down and changes the key in the 18th variation and it becomes the most beautiful, beatific salute to the love of life possible," Buechner said. "It's a great meditative reflection."

Buechner also said the piece is featured in the 1991 Kenneth Branagh/Emma Thompson film thriller Dead Again. But that's nothing new for Rachmaninoff, who has strong pop cultural recognition since his famed third and second



Allegrezza singers.
PR photo

piano concertos respectively appear throughout the movies Shine (1996) and Brief Encounter (1945). Rather than looking down on this fact, Buechner said the films help classical music to reach wider audiences, including her own personal exposure to Rachmaninoff.

"My parents were not classical musicians, but when my brother and I were very small, they made sure that good music like that was played in the house," Buechner said. "They figured that was music that would help bring us to a higher station in life than they had reached, and they were very, very right about that."

U.S. concert work started drying up for Buechner after her gender reassignment surgery in 2003 (something she wrote about in a 2013 op-ed piece for The New York Times). Yet Buechner found herself very welcome in Canada with more performances there and a teaching position at the University of British Columbia. Buechner ironically laughed about her poor political timing, since she recently moved back to the U.S. to accept an assistant professorship

position with Temple University in Philadelphia.

"Right after the election, some of my lovely colleagues at Temple took me aside in the hallway to say, 'Oh my god! I'm so sorry that you've come out of Canada.' But no, I think it is perfect timing because my country needs me," Buechner said. "I'm not sure if we have so much forward progress actually to make. In the time I was living in Canada, (the U.S.) changed so much and so much social progress was made for gays and lesbians in terms of marriage and so forth. Just social awareness of people as people, which is the most important progress we can make and continue to make. So coming back to the States, I find my career is expanding in many ways that I wouldn't have imagined."

The Chicago Sinfonietta concerts of More Than a Letter: A Celebration of LGBTQ Artists and Classical Music are at two locations: first at 8 p.m. Saturday, March 25, at North Central College's Wentz Concert Hall, 171 E. Chicago Ave., Naperville (\$48-\$60), then at 7:30 p.m. Monday, March 27, at Symphony Center, 220 S.

Michigan Ave. (\$18-\$99). There is special \$10 student pricing at both venues. Call 312-248-1554 or visit ChicagoSinfonietta.org.

A queer 'Picnic'

Will Davis, the new transgender artistic director of American Theater Company, is well aware that many eyebrows were raised at his unconventional casting for Picnic, a 1953 Pulitzer Prize-winning drama by the late gay playwright William Inge.

For example, the real-life romantic couple of 500 Clown veteran Molly Brennan and self-described "gender warrior" Malic White are respectively cast as the drifter Hal and the ingénue Madge—roles famously played in the 1955 film version of Picnic by William Holden and Kim Novak.

"Picnic has always really struck a deep chord with me," Davis said in an interview before preview performances began last week. "It's a play about a group of people who are yearning for a personal freedom that they will not allow themselves to have and also the community will not allow themselves to have."

Davis also reflected on the times that an extremely closeted (and eventually suicidal) Inge lived in during the 20th century. Davis said Inge often posited through his characters what tragic things might happen if they actually pursued their inner desires.

"I feel like [Inge] is both trying to explore his fantasy, and also writing this cautionary tale that keeps him in the closet," Davis said. "I very purposefully wanted to cast a group of queer-identified people who have that lived experience and put them onstage in this mid-century classic that is often not inhabited by people who identify that way and just pull to the surface all of these themes that really are speaking so loudly to me in Picnic but I've never seen—these themes about internalized homophobia, longing for something you're certain you can't have and how you're afraid of your own longing."

Picnic continues through Sunday, April 23, at American Theater Company, 1909 W. Byron St. Performances are at 8 p.m. Thursdays and Fridays, 2 and 8 p.m. Saturdays and 2 p.m. Sundays. Tickets are \$20-\$38; call 773-409-4125 or visit ATCweb.org.

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CULTURE CLUB

Television festival through March 23

Cinema/Chicago announced initial programming details for the 53rd Chicago International Television Festival, which runs March 21-23 at AMC River East, 322 E. Illinois St.

Called a "micro-festival," the event celebrates the best in local, national and international television and advertising productions with free screenings and insightful panel discussions.

The festival culminates with an awards night honoring the achievements of producers, content creators and advertisers from around the world, while also celebrating the careers of exceptional performers, journalists and content producers. Also, Cinema/Chicago will honor WGN entertainment reporter Dean Richards, television commercial producer Joe Sedelmaier and Amazon Studios at the March 23 award ceremony.

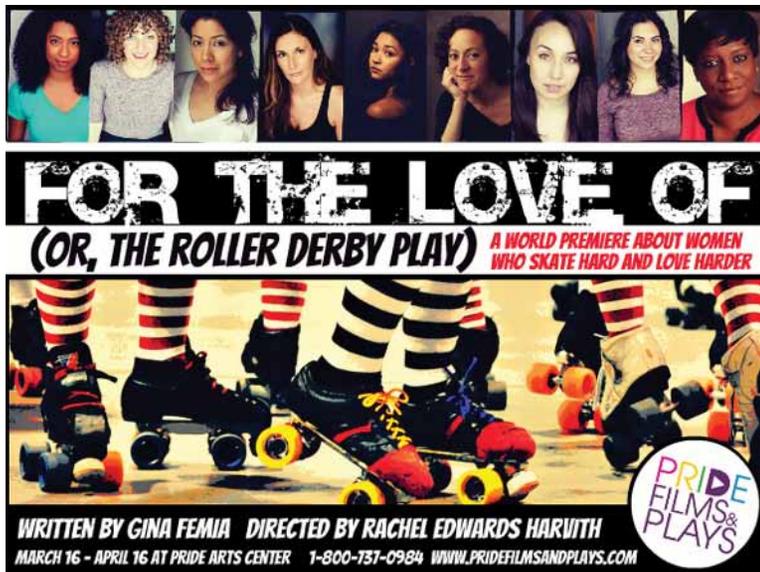
Visit ChicagoFilmFestival.com/television-festival/.

Newton-John in Joliet on May 8

Olivia Newton-John will perform at Joliet's Rialto Square Theatre, 102 N. Chicago St., on Thursday, May 8, at 7:30 p.m.

Newton-John's career includes four Grammys; numerous Country Music, American Music, Billboard and People's Choice awards; an Emmy; 10 number-one hits; and more than 15 top 10 singles. Among her many hits are "Physical," "Magic" and "Make a Move on Me." She has also been in TV and film projects such as Grease and Xanadu.

Tickets are \$49-\$89 each; visit the Rialto box office or Ticketmaster.com, or call 800-745-3000.



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Children's Museum hosts inclusive castle exhibit

Chicago Children's Museum (CCM) invites young imaginations to reign in a castle fit for royalty at their new Once Upon a Castle, now open. In this original exhibit, children hold the power to play in a castle complete with secret tunnels, a rope bridge, tower, dungeon, throne room, wizard's room, kitchen, feasting table, market and more.

The Once Upon a Castle exhibit, conceived by CCM staff and designed by Luci Creative, takes a modern approach to the familiar theme of castles. By providing this fresh take, Chicago Children's Museum is thoughtfully presenting a space in which children get to lead the boundless play possibilities.

Visitors will be inspired to dress up like royalty, guard a secret dungeon, prepare a mighty feast, sell goods in the market, search for a mystery dragon and more. Children will be able to choose from hundreds of custom-made costumes and props, allowing them the role-playing freedom to create their own uniquely individual adventures.

Once Upon a Castle will be open through May 14, and is included in museum admission (\$14 for adults and children, \$13 for seniors) and membership.



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RuPaul.
Photo courtesy of LOGO

Gentlemen, start your engines ...

Spring is never really sprung until the new crop of queens from **RuPaul's Drag Race** make their first showing. And March showers are gonna bring drag flowers this **Friday, March 24**, when season nine debuts at 7 pm on VH1.

Here is our breakdown of the best viewing parties, both for the premiere and the whole hot mess of a season. Start your engines!

Join hostess Dixie Lynn Cartwright and her pit crew at **Sidetrack**, 3349 N. Halsted St., for the first episode on one HUGE screen, plus dozens of smaller ones. This is Chicago's official RPDR viewing party and will take place each Friday throughout the season. Resident Sidetrack divas The Vixen and Drag Race alum DiDa Ritz will be serving up "Ru-formances" during the night. Start your engines with games, exclusive RuPaul's Drag Race swag and a bunch of fun surprises. Shantay, you stay after the show for Friday night fun with party music until 2 am.

Hometown girl Shea Coulee guest-hosts the premiere at **Roscoe's**, 3356 N. Halsted St., along with RPDR alums Shangela and Naomi Smalls, plus Chicago's very own Trannika Rex. Doors open at 5 and you can bolster your booze intake with the unlimited burger bar from 6-9 pm. Immediately following the episode, there will be a Q&A with the hosts. A them your Qs until 9, when a photo line will form. Stick around to see Shangela, Shea and Naomi performing live at 11 pm and 12:30 am.

Did you know that Hamburger Mary's is an official sponsor of this season's Untucked? Stop up to **Mary's Attic**, 5400 N. Clark St., for the premiere party and come back each week, as starting with the second week, each night's festivities will kick off with the airing of the previous week's Untucked, just to get you up to speed. Mary's has developed a special contest for viewers to win bar tabs, cash and other prizes. Doors open at 6:30 for the premiere party and will be open at 6 in following weeks, with the Untucked airing beginning at 6:30 to precede the main Ru-vent.

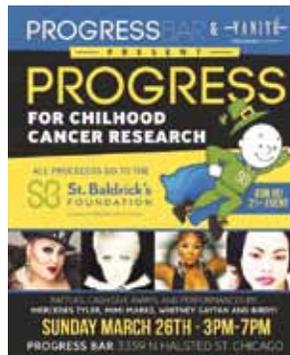
Kick back at **The Sofa Tap**, 4923 N. Clark St., and enjoy the show with host Thomas Andrews, \$7 Big Miller Lites, \$4 Fireball shots and \$2 PBR cans. And if the show gets you all hot and bothered, continue to heat up the night with their weekly bear party, GRRR, It's Friday, beginning at 9 pm.

Big Chicks, 5024 N. Sheridan Rd., has a party with food and drink specials fit for a queen. Strap on your heels and snatch that lacefront down from the shelf, because each week, a \$15 bar tab will go to the most creative look. At the season finale party, all winners will have a chance to come back and compete for the grand prize.

D.S. Tequila Co., 3352 N. Halsted St., hosts a weekly viewing party which promises "all screens, full sound, some drama."

Crew Bar + Grill, 4804 N. Broadway, takes a brief break from the ball sports to gag you with eleganza on all screens with sound, \$5 Lagunitas drafts and bottles and \$4 select shots.

Hydrate, 3458 N. Halsted St., features a \$4 Belvedere cocktail from when the doors open at 6 until the end of the show at 8. You are encouraged to get there early, so as to snatch up a top space.



Progress For Childhood Cancer Research show, Sun., March 26

Progress Bar, 3359 N. Halsted St., and **Vanité** will host Progress For Childhood Cancer Research, a special drag show and party, with all proceeds going to benefit the St. Baldrick's Foundation, Sunday, March 26, from 3 to 7 pm.

The party will feature raffles, cash giveaways and, of course, performances by local drag luminaries Mercedes Tyler, Mimi Marks, Whitney Gaytan and Birdy.

Windy City Times is a proud sponsor of this event, along with Ketel One Vodka, Grab Magazine, Cram Fashion, Captain Morgan, Pulp/Ink and the Lakeview East Chamber of Commerce.

Happy 48th anniversary, Baton Show Lounge!



A million thanks to special **Nightspots** enjoy Mercedes Tyler for snapping these few pics last weekend at the big 48th anniversary celebration for The Baton. Ya don't look a day over 30!

the DISH

Weekly Dining Guide in
WINDY CITY TIMES

SAVOR PR Italian Bistro

BY BRONSON PETTITT

Stefano Roman and Juliana Montebello-Roman love hosting parties—and it shows.

Visit the married duo's PR Italian Bistro (3908 N. Sheridan Rd.; PRItalianBistro.com) and it's as if you were going to their dinner party—a welcoming, friendly vibe where Juliana greets and seats you while chef Stefano prepares creative

The Porca Loca at PR Italian Bistro.

Photo by Bronson Pettitt



Mediterranean cuisine with international flavors.

Somewhere between casual, romantic and rustic, PR's expansive glass facade, full-service bar, exposed-brick walls and open kitchen make for a

tasty and tasteful experience.

With a blackboard menu that changes daily, Stefano "is out shopping four or five times a week," Juliana said.

Start off with a burrata: mozzarella and arugula doused in balsamic, pesto, red peppers and a side of crostini.

My dining companion and I recommend the ravioli costexine, stuffed with savory, tender-braised rib covered with butter sage sauce. Also recommended is the pizza Bistro, an intriguing-sounding mix of housemade Italian sausage, onion, wild cherries, goat cheese and fennel.

For vegetarians, pansotti pistacchio is beet-stuffed pasta topped with goat cheese and brown butter sauce. The orange zest was overwhelming at first, but we began to appreciate the earthy-citrus balance.

Wines, beers and cocktails abound, but try the Dancing Buffalo, with bourbon, prosecco, elderflower liqueur, lemon and sage.

Come dessert time and you're feeling decadent, order the salted caramel cake, or if you're on the brink of a food coma then go for the lemon-

Turn to page 21



If you're anything like me (and I believe at least some of you are), you can never have enough **Tennessee Williams**. Recently, I dashed back to Boston to see *Night of the Iguana* with **Elizabeth Ashley**, **Amanda Plummer** and **James Earl Jones**. Last week, it was a play about Tennessee Williams at the Pasadena Playhouse starring **Al Pacino**, **Garrett Clayton** and **Judith Light**. This new play was billed as a "development production," but it sure seemed pretty polished, from the star-laden cast to the swanky set to the ticket prices. Mind you, I'm not complaining—the rare chance to see Al Pacino at work is worth every penny.

The play is a fascinating character study of the final years of Williams' life told through the eyes of one of his last beaux, playwright Dotson Rader. On stage, Rader was portrayed by **Miles Gaston Villanueva**, and if his name is not as familiar as his colleagues', he was no less talented (or, for that matter, hunky).

Garrett Clayton has been on quite a roll. He starred in *King Cobra* (based on gay-porn pup **Brent Corrigan**), he was a lead in *Hairspray: Live and now, he's holding his own opposite Al Pacino*. That he's holding his own clad in some skimpy undies only gilds the lily. I must note the breathtaking **Andrew Dits**, who makes the most of one brief scene. Judith Light, who never disappoints, tackles a character clearly based on the trustee of Williams' legacy, Lady Maria St. Just—who has been described as neither a lady, nor a saint, nor just! Light is one of those rare stage creatures who stalks rather than walks, who intones rather than recites, who becomes rather than acts. She is never less than riveting.

It would all be for naught without a galvanizing presence at the center, and Pacino (or "Mr. P" as Light calls him) is certainly that. In a masterful performance that could easily become a caricature, he etches a painfully nuanced portrait of an artist in decline. He even captures Williams' almost musical vocal cadence. The play has some rough edges, but it's a tantalizing morsel of things to come. Should anyone want my notes, all they have to do is ask. For once, I refrained from spouting my unsolicited opinions backstage.

In one weekend, I saw more Busch than I did in my 30s! The divine **Charles Busch** was touring California with two very different cabaret shows and, as a completist, I had to see both. The *Lady at the Mike* is his loving tribute to leading ladies he both worked with and admired. The material runs the gamut—from **Elaine Stritch** to **Joan Rivers**, from **Helen Morgan** to **Julie Wilson**. Like all great artists, he makes the material his own without ever imitating. "That Girl/That Boy" begins with Dolores Gray's "Thanks A Lot, But No Thanks" and doesn't let up until Lucille Ball's "Hey Look Me Over." His "Surabaya Johnny" was one of the more persuasive I've heard—more Lempert than Lenya—and makes a real argument for a full Weill/Brecht show. The audiences ate him up at Costa Mesa's Segerstrom Center, and



Billy Masters (right) and Al Pacino.
Photo courtesy of Masters

there was near-pandemonium at Rockwell Table & Stage in Los Angeles. Nothing turns me on more than talent, and Busch has that in abundance. Should you be so fortunate to get to see him, go!

On March 9, Oklahoma **Sen. Ralph Shortey** was found in a motel room with an underage male. Yawn—another married politician found sleeping with a boy. But this Republican was Trump's campaign chair in Oklahoma! The details may make the situation worse for him, but I find them quite amusing. Police responded to a "check welfare" call from someone who saw the senator and youth enter a Super 8 motel—oh, the humanity. When the cops knocked on the door, Shortey said he was alone and refused to let them in. Once they threatened to enter with a pass key, he opened the door and police found him with a 17-year-old boy, who claimed to have known the senator for a year. "I used to sell weed to him," the lad said.

Uncovered texts show the tyke asking Shortey if he could help him make some money for spring break. The senator said, "I don't really have any legitimate things I need help with right now. Would you be interested in 'sexual' stuff?" The boy's dad says that his son "has a history of soliciting himself on Craigslist for sexual conduct." So I guess he's into "sexual stuff." And yet Shortey wasn't arrested—at least not for a week. He was eventually charged with three felonies—engaging in child prostitution, transporting a minor for prostitution, and engaging in prostitution within 1,000 feet of a church! Call me old fashioned, but I think we can drop that last charge if it's a Catholic church! Upon his arrest, the State Senate passed a resolution stripping Shortey's name from all legislation and barring him from using his office or parking spot. No—not the parking spot!!!

When I can almost see Garrett Clayton's "busch," it's definitely time to end yet another column. Remind me to tell you all about meeting Pacino—it's quite a story. You can read loads of other stories on www.BillyMasters.com—the site that is into all kinds of "sexual stuff." Send your questions along to Billy@BillyMasters.com and I promise to get back to you before the GOP asks Super 8 for a corporate rate! Until next time, remember: One man's filth is another man's bible.

DISH from page 20

stuffed lemon sorbet: a frozen lemon carved and stuffed with light, refreshing sorbet.

PR is just south of the Sheridan Red Line station in the Sheridan Station Corridor, two bustling blocks of local businesses that will soon be home to a few high-rise developments.

Founded 12 years ago as Pizza Rustica, PR's clientele includes families, couples, neighborhood regulars, employees craving an after-work drink, and as of recently, weekend brunch-goers.

"We morphed into what we are today because we can cook. We never set out to own a restaurant, we never set out to move to a bigger space," said Juliana, who has a background in real estate. "None of this was planned. We built it and they came, and here we are."

Note: Restaurant profiles/events are based on invitations arranged from restaurants and/or firms.

COMMUNITY CALENDAR

Wed., March 22

Chicago Flower & Garden Show: "Chicago's Blooming!" Presented by Mariano's. Garden build-outs, featuring Chicago L Tracks and Bungalows. Aquascapes. Kids' Activity Garden. Butterfly cage where guests feed the Monarchs. Fashion Show Fleurotica. Through March 26. \$5 - \$17 10:00am Navy Pier <http://chicagoflower.com/>

HIV and Aging panel With continued advances in healthcare treatment and therapy, early detection, and preventative tests for seropositive individuals, life expectancy of HIV+ populations has created the possibility of senior years. Art AIDS America exhibit hall. 6:00pm - 8:00pm Alphawood Gallery, 2401 N. Halsted St., Chicago 773-687-7676 <http://the-care-plan.com>

DIFFA's 'Art for Life' benefit The Design Industries Foundation Fighting AIDS/Chicago (DIFFA/Chicago) has announced a juried art exhibit and auction is the newest extension of DIFFA Chicago, created to benefit those living with and vulnerable to HIV/AIDS. @ArtForLifeChicago and using the hashtag #AFLCHI. \$100. 6:00pm Venue One, 1034 W. Randolph St. <https://www.artforlifechicago.org>



AILEY NEWS Through March 26

The Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater is at Auditorium Theatre.
Photo by Paul Kolnik

forlifechicago.org
Cancer & the LGBTQIA+ Communities: What's Different? Limited programs address cancer in the LGBTQIA+ communities. Gilda's Club Chicago is offering an educational lecture and the opportunity to voice opinions about what kind of support best suits LGBTQIA cancer needs. Free with RSVP 6:30pm

- 7:30pm Gilda's Club Chicago 537 N Wells St, Chicago <http://www.gildasclubchicago.org>

Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater
Three new works: Deep, by Mauro Bigonzetti and set to the music of global music stars Ibeyi; r-Evolution, Dream, by company member Hope Boykin, inspired by Martin Luther King Jr. and set to narration by Tony winner Leslie Odom Jr. (Hamilton) and original music; and Untitled America, which examines the impact of incarceration on African-American families. Through March 26. 7:30pm Auditorium Theatre of Roosevelt University 50 E Congress Pkwy Chicago 312-341-2300 Tickets: <http://AuditoriumTheatre.org>

Thursday, March 23

2017 IMPACT awards Honoring women leaders including Esther Saks. 5:00pm Venue Six10 Spertis Institute 610 S. Michigan Ave.; <https://www.cfw.org/2017ia/>

Youth Empowerment Performance Project presents Forging from Fire Ensemble members share personal experiences of physical, verbal, sexual violence, DCFS, foster-home system, incarceration of TGNC, domestic violence, self-harm, mental health, suicide and how circumstances, behaviors and choices can create compromising situations. 7:00pm The Athenaeum Theatre 2936 N Southport Ave.; Tickets: <https://web.ovationtix.com/trs/pr/968520>

Friday, March 24

HIV Training and Lunch & Learn with Gilead: Presentation on HIV ODEFSEY ODEFSEY is a complete 1-pill, once-a-day HIV-1 medicine. Presenter: Dr. Thomas R. Klein, M.D. Free lunch will be provided. FREE but advance registration is required. 2:00pm - 3:00pm Center on Halsted 3656 N Halsted St.; Tickets: <https://community.centeronhalsted.org/LunchLearn>

Saturday, March 25

Chicago Sinfonietta, More Than a Letter: Celebration of LGBTQ Artists and Classical Music Reflecting on self-identity and self-expression through the artistry of LGBTQ composers and musicians, celebrating difference, finding common ground and embracing the beauty of authenticity. 8:00pm Wentz Concert Hall 171 E. Chicago Ave Naperville, IL 6040 <http://www.chicagosinfonietta.org/1617season/more-than-a-letter/>
Sami Grisafe's House Party benefiting the Chicago Force Doors open at 8:30pm. \$15advance, \$20door, 21+ 9:00pm - 2:00am Martyrs' 3855 N Lincoln Ave Chicago <http://martyrslive.com/sat-mar-25-9pm-15adv20door>

Sunday, March 26

Talk: Trans Liberation NOW! (Vives Q Lab) Latinx LGBTQ comunidad and a trans-led panel and discussion. March Vives Q Lab is a partnership with TaskForce Prevention and Community

Services. Taskforce Prevention & Community Services in Chicago, Illinois 2:00pm - 5:00pm Taskforce Prevention & Community Services, 9 N Cicero Ave, Chicago <https://www.facebook.com/events/1460059090684523/>

Monday, March 27

NGLCC National Legal Industry Council Roundtable Exploring opportunities to partner with firms and corporations in the National Gay & Lesbian Chamber of Commerce 8:30am - 10:30am Baker McKenzie, 300 E. Randolph St.; Tickets: <http://www.nglcc.com>

Tuesday, March 28

How to be an ally to LGBTQ youth in Illinois Part of Equality Illinois "Spring to Action" agenda, presented with Rainbow Cafe and Illinois Safe Schools Alliance. 6:00pm - 8:30pm Carbondale Unitarian Fellowship, 105 N Parrish Lane, Carbondale <http://EqualityIllinois.org/2017trainings>
Author Camille Paglia, "Free Women, Free Men: Sex, Gender, Feminism" From the fiery intellectual provocateur, an essay collection that celebrates and challenges modern feminism. Fiery words an intellectual foundation. 6:00pm Harold Washington College 30 E. Lake St.; <https://chipublib.bibliocommons.com/events/search/index>

COULEE from page 16

in the next few months—all things in due time.

WCT: Was Untucked filmed this season for YouTube?

SC: Yes, they did.

WCT: I saw your makeup tutorial with James St. James on YouTube.

SC: I did an episode of Transformations with James St. James. He is legendary and it was so great getting a chance to meet him.

WCT: What is the latest song you like to perform?

SC: "Distraction," by Kehlani. It has a '90s R&B vibe to it. It is about having a cute relationship with someone with no strings attached.

WCT: What would you like to do with the money if you win RuPaul's Drag Race?

SC: I lost my dad to cancer a month and a half ago. When having a sick relative, there are a lot of medical bills, so I would use that money to help take care of my mom. I want to take stress of of her because it was a long, tough journey that she dealt with. I know a hundred thousand dollars would help her out a lot.

WCT: Chicago is rooting for you to bring home the crown.

SC: I am really excited to represent my hometown!

Start your engines as season nine begins on Friday, March 24, on VH1.

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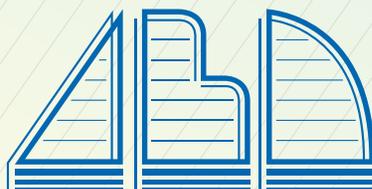
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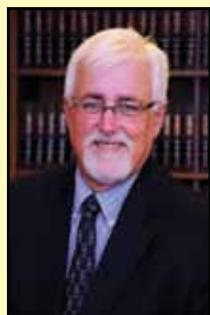
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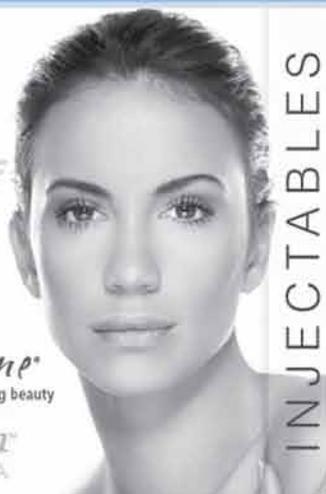
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