

WINDY CITY TIMES

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Jenn and Leslie Henry discuss their life together—and the challenges living with Alzheimer's can pose

LIFE TOGETHER

BY JAKE WITTICH

Leslie and Jenn Henry, a lesbian couple active in Chicago's LGBTQ+ community for more than a decade before moving to Michigan, met in 2010 at the Back Lot Bash, an annual Pride party for queer women held in Andersonville.

Jenn, who had been partying all weekend, recalled hearing Leslie's voice for the first time. Leslie mentioned she was about to leave the festival early, to grab a coffee and head home to walk her dog.

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LIFE from cover

The encounter was brief, but the two ran into each other again a week later at a post-Pride Parade barbecue hosted by Jenn's ex-girlfriend, whom Jenn was still friends with. The two hit it off, and within a couple of weeks, they had their first date: drinks and dancing at Charlie's Nightclub in Andersonville.

"I had been drinking a little wine on my deck that afternoon, and then Leslie shows up and tells me she had just done a triathlon," Jenn said. "So she's leaving [Back Lot Bash] to get coffee and running triathlons like a complete overachiever. That's a level of responsibility I never had that she brings to my life."

The two dated for two years and got married Oct. 6, 2012. Since then, they've continued to bond over their love of community service and travel, while overcoming a range of challenges.

Those memories feel like "a different life now." Leslie was diagnosed with Early-Onset Alzheimer's Disease in 2023. That diagnosis completely upended their lives together, Jenn said.

Leslie left her job as a business project manager at Deloitte to navigate life with the disease, while Jenn is also staying home as her caregiver. Social outings like street festivals or bar nights have been replaced with nights in, watching true crime shows and working together to maintain a regular routine.

"It's challenging, but there's this daily hope that keeps us moving forward," Jenn said. "I hope everyday is a good day. I hope I'm a good caregiver. And I hope that Leslie always feels safe and happy. Those are my goals for this journey."

Receiving the Alzheimer's diagnosis

Alzheimer's, one of the most common forms of dementia, is a progressive disease that destroys memory and other important mental functions due to brain cells and their connections degenerating and dying. The disease is most common among older adults, but can affect people in their 30s through early 60s, which is known as Early-Onset Alzheimer's.

Leslie received her diagnosis at 53 years old. Her father has vascular dementia, but the family opted not to do genetic testing that would determine if it runs in the family.

When Leslie Henry first started showing signs of dementia, she and Jenn Henry attributed it to fatigue from being a workaholic. Leslie Henry spent more than a decade in leadership positions at Bank of America and nearly five years at Deloitte. She's also played an active role within the LGBTQ+ community.

"I remember going to T's Bar with Leslie not long into dating her and she warned me, 'I'm going to know a lot of people here,'" Jenn said. "And then we walked in and she was immediately accosted. She knew everybody in the community."

Leslie's community involvement continued throughout her career, she recalled. She served on the board of the Victory Fund, a political action committee dedicated to electing LGBTQ+ public officials, and served on the advisory board for Lesbians Who Tech, an organization

increasing representation for women in the technology field.

Other organizations Leslie Henry was involved in include Girls in the Game, Lambda Legal's Women's Diversity Council and DEI groups at Bank of America and Deloitte, she said.

So when Leslie Henry accidentally left the water running in 2019, causing minor flooding in the downstairs neighbor's bathroom, Leslie and Jenn attributed it to Leslie being overworked.

"She would always get so hyper-focused on what she was doing, so I just thought it was workaholicism or menopause," Jenn said.

But Leslie started to suspect the issue might be deeper when she started running red lights while driving and couldn't explain why.

"It was scary because I didn't know what was happening with me," Leslie said.

Things came to a head when Jenn Henry got a late payment notice on a credit card the two of them always kept locked in a safe. Leslie had somehow accessed the safe and used the card to make \$170 worth of app purchases, but had no recollection of doing so, Jenn said.

Jenn Henry reported the charges as fraud but realized hours later what had happened.

"That's when we made our appointment with the neurologist," Jenn Henry said.

On Feb. 22, 2022, the couple went into Trinity Health IHA Medical Group in Michigan for an evaluation. Leslie failed a mini cognitive test, leading the doctor to suspect the issue was Early-Onset Alzheimer's.

But the formal diagnosis wouldn't come until January 2023, after Leslie went through a series of doctor's visits, psychological tests, MRIs and speech therapy, Jenn recalled.

"It wasn't fun," Leslie Henry said. "Especially because I'm a workaholic. It was like, 'What do I do now?'"

Adapting to life with Alzheimer's

Leslie said Alzheimer's makes it harder for her to express thoughts in words or keep track of things, she said.

"I have trouble getting things out," Leslie said. "I also have difficulty with my phone, or sometimes I'll lose words or my things. Jenn is always like, 'Did you lose your phone again?' But there's nothing I can do about it."

Leslie manages the disease by staying active through working out and other activities, she said. Leslie stays physically active by using a Peloton and taking boxing classes.

"Jenn is my calendar," Leslie Henry said. "She's the one who got the Peloton and keeps me on track with all these activities, because it's so important to exercise your brain."

Maintaining a steady routine is also key, and straying from it can be "discombobulating," Jenn said.

"We really just take it one day at a time and keep very open communication between the two of us," Leslie said. "We're not afraid to talk about Alzheimer's."

The couple also found keeping a sense of humor helps navigate the challenges brought on by Alzheimer's, they said.

"Like the other day, she was trying to tell me to pull forward in the car, but the words

wouldn't come to her, so she just made a funny noise and silly gesture with her finger. We thought it was hilarious," Jenn said. "You have to be able to laugh when you're faced with this stark reality."

Leslie is also involved in support groups for the Alzheimer's Association, a nonprofit that leads research on the disease while supporting people living with it and their loved ones.

"It gives me other people to talk to, and a sense of purpose, if anyone in the group needs my help or someone to talk to about something," Leslie Henry said.

In April, Leslie and Jenn Henry traveled to Washington, D.C., for the Alzheimer's Association's Advocacy Days. There, they were able to connect with other people who are navigating life with dementia and share their story with legislators and other powerful decision-makers, Jenn.

Some of the issues affecting families navigating an Alzheimer's diagnosis include financial strains due to a lack of social security benefits for caregivers in some states, Jenn said. The conversations those days centered on reducing stigma.

"It was powerful because you see there's a lot of us going through this," Leslie said. "And by sharing our story, we're able to advocate for changes that will hopefully make this easier for people who live with Alzheimer's after us."

'Memories for us and experiences for less'

After Leslie Henry was diagnosed with Alzheimer's, she created a bucket list of things she wants to do before the disease progresses too far. She got the idea from a workbook she was gifted by one of her nieces or nephews, she said.

"There are some really funny things in there, like 'eat an insect,'" Leslie Henry said. "Well that's not happening. But it got me thinking about what I want to do."

One of the bucket list items Leslie Henry checked off last year was going to the Brandi Carlile concert at the Red Rocks Amphitheatre in Colorado. She also visited the National Museum of African American History and Culture while in Washington, D.C., for Advocacy Days.

In October, the couple plans to visit Salem, Massachusetts, to celebrate Halloween and then take a trip out to Niagara Falls, Leslie said.

"I'm most excited about that because my dad would take my brother, mom and I to Niagara Falls, but Jenn has never been," Leslie said. "It might be a little overwhelming because you're gonna be underneath the falls and just get drenched, but it's absolutely beautiful."

The couple also traveled to Phoenix, Arizona, last year to see Brittney Griner's home opener game at the Footprint Center. Many of Leslie's



Leslie (left) and Jenn Henry pose for a photo during the Alzheimer's Association's 2024 Advocacy Days.

Photo provided by Jenn Henry

bucket list items center around travel, but getting out of state is more difficult now due to the progressing Alzheimer's, Jenn said.

"It can be hard to navigate travel, but we've found that physically driving in a car is much easier than flying for us," Jenn said. "That's going to be the mode of travel for us going forward because you don't have to deal with the crowds, TSA lines and things like that."

The bucket list originally focused more on large trips, like to Europe or across the country, but as Alzheimer's has progressed, Leslie said she's more focused on spending quality time with her family.

"We're making memories for me and experiences for Leslie," Jenn said. "At the end of the day, this is what will sustain us: the memories."

For information about Alzheimer's, visit the Alzheimer's Association at alz.org.



Windy City Times revives its 30 Under 30 Awards with ceremony

BY ANDREW DAVIS

Windy City Times celebrated Pride Month by reviving its annual 30 Under 30 Awards.

The ceremony took place June 6 at LinkedIn's Chicago headquarters at 525 W. Monroe St. Event sponsors included AIDS Foundation Chicago (AFC), Pride Action Tank, Windy City Times, LinkedIn, Monarq Advisors, Geof and Joshua Brown, Center on Halsted, Equality Illinois, Chicago History Museum/OUT at CHM and Fifth Third Bank.

AFC Vice President of Special Projects & Innovation, Policy and Advocacy Kim Hunt (who is also executive director of Pride Action Tank) and LGBTQ+-rights activist Jose "Che-Che" Wilson co-hosted the ceremony.

The award recipients were honored for making substantial contributions to the Chicagoland LGBT community in the fields of entertainment, politics, health, activism, academics, sports or other areas. Hundreds of people have been honored by the paper in the more than 10 years since the awards were established.

—Andrew Davis

Photos by Kat Fitzgerald
(www.mysticimagesphotography.com)



Queer Chicagoan's skincare line becomes part of their mental health recovery

BY LU CALZADA

This story is part of the Digital Equity Local Voices Fellowship lab through News is Out. The lab initiative is made possible with support from Comcast NBCUniversal.

Note: This article contains discussion of mental health issues such as suicidal ideation and attempts.

When speaking with Tyris Manney, a few especially noticeable attributes come to the fore—his brilliant smile, his way with words and his almost literally glowing skin.

The latter is a result not just of his personal skincare line, but of a long journey to combat self-esteem issues. Starting in 2018, Tyris Manney Beauty has been more than just a passion product for the young Chicagoan—it's been an integral part of his mental health recovery journey.

Manney, 26, grew up on Chicago's South Side around the Chatham neighborhood. He comes from a big family and was raised by a single mother. His family has continued to be a major form of support for him throughout his adult life and business ventures.

Although Manney's mother initially tried to get him into baseball, he was never interested in sports. He always had an interest in beauty, fashion, music and other artistic pursuits.

In high school, he and a friend got the idea to start a business combining fashion, makeup and beauty. Once they graduated, Manney ended up starting his own clothing line; he revamped vintage clothes and fabrics to create new pieces, and ran it basically by word-of-mouth for a couple of years.

Around 2018, Manney started to experience more skin-related issues—dark spots, acne, clogged pores, etc.—with no products on the market really working for him physically or financially. He also dealt with serious mental health issues around this time. His skin issues only added onto his already low self-esteem.

That year, Manney attempted suicide. As he worked to recover and get his depression under control, he tried to determine how to improve his skin himself. With nothing currently on the market able to heal these physical and mental issues, he took matters into his own hands.

At the time, he thought skincare was just something chemists could do. But the "do or die situation" of his mental health pushed him to take the leap into creating products.

"I started learning to formulate my own skincare products by taking courses on formulation and the proper way of mixing ingredients," he

said. "I went to YouTube as well. I bought books. I did a whole bunch of stuff to prepare myself."

While creating products, Manney used simply-formulated, plant-based, organic ingredients—other products often required more professional equipment, or ingredients that were so harsh on the skin only small percentages of them could be used. He wanted his products to be accessible to everyone, helping all skin types on all types of people.

Manney started out with just two initial products for himself, but soon enough he was giving them to others. He was working at Buffalo Exchange at the time, and his first customer was a co-worker who asked if he could make her something for her skin—when Manney brought it to her, she slid her money under the table. Before long other coworkers would buy products from him every single week, and then in turn recommend him to more of their friends.

"I'd bring my products to work," Manney said. "And right after work I would be standing on the corner in Wicker Park giving people their orders."

Taija Weakley, one of Manney's friends since childhood, has followed his progress since he began his work. After seeing Manney post photos of his skin on social media, Weakley reached out to find out what products he was using. She's a personal fan of TMB products such as the Apple Juice serum, face cleanser and shea butter.

Weakley said Manney has always been a very hardworking and determined person, and she's enjoyed watching him and his brand grow.

"He's very ambitious, he's very about his business and he knows what he's doing," she said. "He's a very kind-hearted person. He's a very strong person."

Recently, Manney went through Chicago's LGBT Chamber of Commerce bootcamp. Although it was an intense experience, he said, it taught him about marketing and branding. For 10 weeks, participants needed to be ready to work on their business plans while assessing themselves outside of the boot camp.



The program allowed Manney to learn about his own work ethic and the potential for his business to go to the next level. He also connected with other entrepreneurs and learned from their experiences and skill sets.

Being Black and queer in the beauty space has been difficult, but Manney has received support from his family and boyfriend throughout the process of growing his business. He said he also had felt that same support when he first came out as gay.

"My foundation has always been really solid," he said. "I've always been able to hold my head high with my identity."

While he's a minority in his industry, he met lots of Black entrepreneurs through his experience in the boot camp and built community with them. But he's been acutely aware of the lack of representation within the beauty industry and its lack of resources for folks like him. He knows he has to be the one to breaking barriers and creating welcoming spaces.

About two years ago, Manney did a pop-up shop where he met future recurring customer Trell Winters. Winters said seeing Manney's products at the event, which was promoting

Main photo: Tyris Manney.
Photo by Moorcroft Photography

Below: Tyris Manney Beauty promo images.
@quoiasroots and @plantfringe

small Black-owned business, was gratifying, and he's been buying them ever since.

He described Manney's apple juice product as "liquid gold."

"It's not as many steps or processes as the competitors are," Winters said. "When I think of skincare, I think of having to do this and that and don't forget this, but his is so simple."

Manney's beauty line is a fully self-funded business, and he recently jumped into running it full time, leaving a corporate job behind.

Within the next year, Manney has set a goal for \$113,000 in sales. Although it's a big leap from under \$50,000 this year,

he said the boot camp gave him the confidence to believe that, if he puts in the work, he can make it happen. Two years from now, he hopes to also outsource the creation of products. Right now, it's just him and as-needed help from family, along with freelancers for social media and photography. By three years from now, he's hoping to be able to place products in stores like Ulta.

Manney is also considering a fundraising campaign on his website, to both fund marketing campaigns and continue providing ethical skincare. He also plans to reach out for partnerships with mental health organizations.

Now nearing five years of running his brand, he's no stranger to positive customer feedback. Throughout his brand's existence, he's received messages from folks who are proud he's continued to pursue his passion for skincare. He's rebranded a few times as well, and each time he's felt the excitement from people around him and gotten to see their testimonies about his products.

"People support people that they know, they like, they love, and they trust," he said. "The fact that I've been in it for so long and they personally know someone [running a] skincare line, I've gotten so much love."

If you are in crisis, please call, text or chat with the Suicide and Crisis Lifeline at 988, or contact the Crisis Text Line by texting TALK to 741741.

Queer Liberation Library

makes LGBTQ+ literature accessible across U.S.

BY KAYLEIGH PADAR

A group of librarians recently launched a free online LGBTQ+ library with more than a thousand ebooks and audiobooks that anyone in the United States can access.

Queer Liberation Library—or QLL, pronounced “quill”—launched in October 2023 and its volunteer curators are dedicated to creating a collection that reflects the diversity of the LGBTQ+ community.

Users sign up for a virtual library card at the website. Once their application is approved, they can access items from the library’s collection on Libby, a free app that libraries use to distribute online materials to their patrons.

Queer Liberation Library was founded by a small group of volunteers who wanted to ensure queer reading materials were accessible to people throughout the country, regardless of what’s available at local libraries.

“With the current climate and book bans and lack of access, there’s a need that we’re happy to fulfill,” said volunteer Amber Dierking. “But there’s also just such a delight and joy to be able to do something like this. So, we’re not just filling a need but also having fun with it along the way.”

It took nearly two years to raise funds, create a website and build out the resource. Organizers chose to create a digital library because it required fewer resources to launch and the collection would be more widely accessible, Dierking explained.

More than 40,000 people currently use the library. Tens of thousands of people signed up for library cards after a TikTok showcasing the resource went viral.

New materials are added to the library each month and its organizers regularly survey members to learn more about what they’re interested in checking out. People can also suggest titles on the library’s website.

Queer Liberation Library is filled with more than a thousand materials that “inspire, celebrate, entertain and educate queer folks,” according to its website. Dierking said they’re trying to provide texts that might be difficult to access in other libraries and prioritizing content from independent creators and living authors.

“When libraries buy copies of something, authors get a portion of those royalties,” Dierking explained. “We love to support authors in that way. We’re trying to balance buying from indie publishers with getting popular books that people really want to read. We hope to keep expanding over time.”

Organizers are “committed to curating a collection that reflects the diversity of queer lives and imaginations,” according to the library’s website. BIPOC voices are a core component of the collection, and curators are working to better highlight other areas of the LGBTQ+ community that have also been historically under-represented.

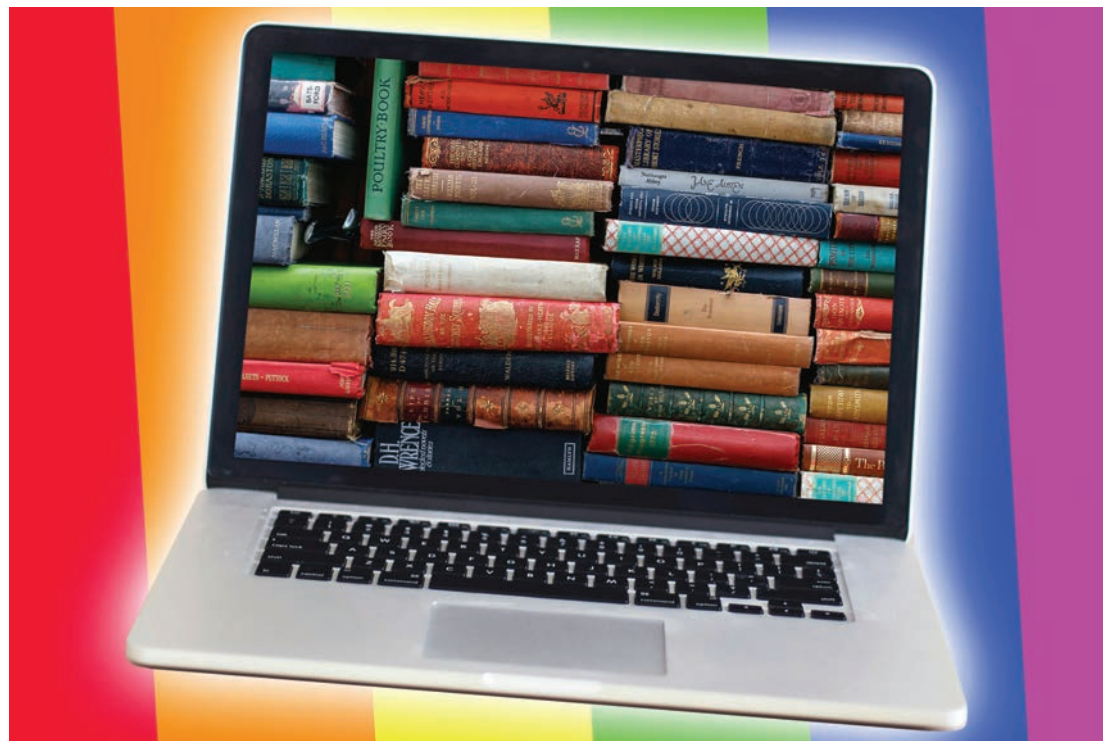
“It is a simple fact that more books have been published about cis gay men than aromantics or intersex people, for example,” Queer Liberation Library’s website reads. “Knowing this, we will actively seek out materials from all parts of the LGBTQ+ community, to resist replicating the historical and ongoing bias within the publishing world.”

Queer Liberation Library is funded entirely by donations. Purchasing ebooks and other on-

remain in the collection.

“We’re trying to be smart about building a sustainable collection and trying to be thoughtful with the kinds of licenses we’re buying so we can get the most out of the limited amount we have to spend,” Dierking said.

People can make recurring donations to support Queer Liberation Library’s work, which help organizers to plan for the future. Signing up for a library card is another way to show support,



Collage with photos by Ed Robertson and Kari Shea/Unsplash

line resources can be more expensive than buying physical copies, and each copy comes with its own requirements surrounding how many people can use it at once and how long it can

since that helps organizers demonstrate there is a need for this resource when fundraising and applying for grants, Dierking explained.

See www.queerliberationlibrary.org.

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Right: The prom court of the School of Asians and Friends.

Below: Alderwoman Leni Manaa Hoppenworth (center) with Principal Dorathy Peach and Nurse Fuzzy Peach.

Photos by Vern Hester



Prom season

On May 18, Asians and Friends held its first LGBTQ+ prom at the Holiday Club, 4000 N. Sheridan Rd. The event both benefited Humble Hearts, a local organization providing support for under-resourced Chicagoans, and previewed the oceanic theme of the organization's float in the 2024 Chicago Pride Parade.



Photo: Lisa Howe-Ebright

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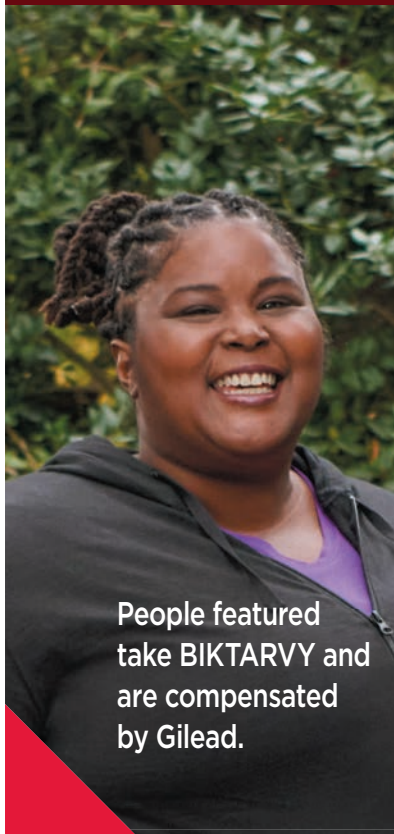
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**KEEP
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Rob Anderson teaches some lessons in 'Gay Science'

BY JERRY NUNN

New York comedian and author Rob Anderson just released a new book called *Gay Science: The Totally Scientific Examination of LGBTQ+ Culture, Myths, and Stereotypes*. Inspired by his viral Gay Science video series, Anderson's now gone back and recreated several lessons from the series for the page.

Gay Science contains 60 topics including nutrition, genetics and chemistry, among many other science-related subjects. Anderson met up for lunch before his Chicago book signing at City Lit Books in Logan Square.

WCT: Did you study science in school?

RA: The basics and what was required for college. I always loved it, but I didn't major in it or have a degree in science.

WCT: Did you ever make a science project?

RA: Of course. I feel like we have all done them! I once made a science project about color and light. I had filters with magenta and cyan to show how they work, but it wasn't thrilling or anything.

WCT: You were making rainbows even back then.

RA: Actually, yes! I always wanted to make the stereotypical volcano thing, but I don't know if anyone actually makes them.

WCT: Like *The Brady Bunch!* Was this at the Carly Gay Jepsen University?

RA: Yes! [laughs]

WCT: Gay history and science aren't taught in schools because of politics.

RA: No and we have to be curious enough to find out on our own. That's not just the case for queer history, but different races with their history that were also not taught. I would say it

is getting better, but it is actually getting worse.

WCT: At least it is somewhat better with higher education. What photo shoot did you most enjoy creating for this book?

RA: The photo for the bidet and getting the hose outside didn't work. It was a fun try and in the end, it was effective and looked like it was in a lab.

WCT: How much research did you do for the gray sweatpants section?

RA: My whole life I have been researching and I still do to this day! When I was creating the book around the episodes I was posting about it and it kept getting taken down. They are just gray sweatpants, but people were reporting it to be removed.

WCT: Why do you feel "Dolly Parton lives in every cell of gay people," as stated in the book?

RA: Dolly is a force with a gay mentality. During any interview that I have watched, she is so cool. She is honest, doesn't take herself too seriously and is still a good person. The essence of Dolly Parton is so queer to me. It is the best part of us and that is why I think she is in all of us. She is in drag in a way too!

WCT: You mentioned Kim Petras in your book as well. Are you a fan?

RA: I love Kim Petras. I have met her and we have done videos together. In the book, I was making a comment about how gay people like her sexualized music.

WCT: What audience are you looking for with this book?

RA: The book was "dedicated to the girls, gays, and theys," so that is who the book is for. It is for everyone in the queer community, and I

tried to be as inclusive as possible.

The video series was mainly about gay men and lesbians, just because that was who I was familiar with the most in my life. That is really saying more about our culture because we all socialize within our own groups so much. I wanted to have chapters for intersex, trans and asexual people across the spectrum, but that was difficult because I don't have that as my experience. As a gay man, I know what I can say about gay men, but I don't know what I can say about the rest of the community.

The chapters about different groups are about the people who misunderstand them. I punch up at those people, not at our community.

WCT: What would you like readers to take away?

RA: I want them to have fun. It is a pure source of entertainment. I hope they laugh and take a break from the negativity that is surrounding us politically. We are fun people who like to make fun of ourselves. Sometimes we are not allowed to because we are fighting for equality or equal rights.

It is a source of entertainment, although there are nuggets of real points that I am mak-

ing along the way. It's mixed in and out of the satire, so some people may miss the references.

WCT: Why did you start your video series in the first place?

RA: I wanted to explain why gay men love iced coffee, which was a hilarious stereotype that is true for me and my friends. Everyone enjoyed the video so I made another one. I did that for three years and made over 50 of them.

I wanted to make a textbook version of the videos with little sidebars that readers could try at home.

WCT: Would you ever make a sequel to your book?

RA: I will definitely write another book. I loved the process of it. I liked taking the page and cramming a bunch of Easter eggs and jokes into it. I wanted it to feel like a video where someone missed a joke so they would reread it.

Gay Science is 240 pages of jokes about queer culture and it was a lot! I wrote every word and made every chart. It is all from my brain and will be good for a long time!



Comedian Rob Anderson, author of *Gay Science*.

Courtesy of Anderson



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For Deb Robertson, the end-of-life issue is very real

BY ANDREW DAVIS

For just about everyone, life is hard enough. However, talking about ending that life—especially when one is terminally ill—is just as difficult.

Ten states have authorized medical aid in dying, although Illinois is not one of them. Deb Robertson, a 65-year-old Lombard resident (and member of the LGBTQ+ community) who is a retired social worker, would like for this state's status to change.

Robertson has a very good reason for that. She has been diagnosed with incurable stage four neuroendocrine carcinoma—a rare form of cancer that is very aggressive.

"Two years ago, I was diagnosed with [this] terminal cancer," Robertson said. "I was a very healthy individual. I was working a lot and was very much into pickleball. I'm sad and angry that I can't play like I used to.

"I was cold-cocked [by the diagnosis]. I went to the doctor for a slight pain in my side and it turned out to be this carcinoma. The doctors gave me less than a year to live and I've outdone that, and they nicknamed me 'The Warrior.'

"Of course, my whole life changed. I had to retire and I couldn't play because they put me on chemo, which worked well initially. But [the cancer] came back within three months and it's progressing a little more—and I can feel it. I'm on my fourth different kind of chemo."

Robertson said she believes that the extra time she has "been given from God is so I can

be an advocate for medical aid in dying. When I originally got involved with medical aid in dying with [end-of-life advocacy group] Compassion & Choices, I had always been an advocate. My whole life, I've worked with young people and I've developed programs for homeless and marginalized—especially LGBTQ+—youth. I did that for 30 years; all of a sudden, to not be able to work was devastating to me.

"What I decided was that I needed to find something I was truly passionate about again, to take up the time while I was dealing with all of these life-changing things. So I did research on medical aid in dying, and I called Compassion & Choices."

However, Robertson revealed that she had "thought about medical aid in dying long before I was diagnosed with this cancer. When I was about 21—my mother's a doctor and both of my sisters-in-law are nurses—I would always say, 'I don't want to die all shriveled up, in excruciating pain and with someone wiping my rear end. So I need someone to commit to that not happening to me.' I never thought I'd really have to think about this possibility."

Having this disease has provided Robertson an opportunity to connect with others who have the illness—but there is a serious downside: "I have a group of people all over the world who are on a Zoom call on Thursday nights. Because it's such a rare cancer, they can't do clinical trials and research. There are 11 people I've watched in the past 18 months who have died painfully from this cancer, so I know it's going to get ugly and that there's a possibility I won't be here for the approval of the bill."

The bill Robertson referred to is the End of Life Options for Terminally Ill Patients Act (SB 3499), which activists hope the Illinois legislature passes during the spring session. Introduced by Democratic state Sen. Linda Holmes, the measure authorizes a qualified patient with a terminal disease to request that a physician prescribe aid-in-dying medication that will allow the patient to end the patient's life in a peaceful manner.

Some critics have contended that doctors would be violating the Hippocratic oath by participating in terminating someone's life; the opponents also question what the patient's state of mind might be when making this decision and some also adhere to religion as a reason. Robertson has heard these criticisms and even



Deb Robertson.

Photo courtesy of Robertson

had to convince someone close to her: "My brother was a doctor—and he didn't support [medical aid in dying], initially. So we sat down and talked about it. Now, he understands the whole process. When that bill passes, he will have that option to participate—or not participate. Now he's supportive of it."

Robertson feels that religion is a dominant factor as well as the oath, but noted, "My response to [the oath argument] is that people become doctors because they want to help people. Some doctors offer palliative care, but sometimes that's just not enough. Being shot up with morphine until you're not moving is [not necessarily helpful]—you don't know if people are still in pain because they can't communicate because they're all doped up. Also, if the cancer [spreads to] my brain, communication will be an issue.

"The argument about medical aid-in-dying being suicide is ridiculous. I spent 30 years helping people not commit suicide and they were struggling with mental-health, gender and LGBTQ+ issues as well as trauma."

One factor in Robertson's favor is her support system. "My family, my grandchildren and my wife [Kathleen] told me that they'd continue [advocating] if I'm not around to see the end," Robertson said, her voice choking with emotion. "It's about saying goodbye the way I

want to say goodbye.

"I individually met with my grandsons, who are 15 and 17, to explain to them what it's all about, because we've been getting some press. One of them is emotional and asked, 'Granny, if it becomes legal, does that mean you're going to die next week?' The other grandson is very [logical] and asked, 'Granny, I just don't understand why the other states aren't making this okay.' That, to me, was very telling."

And regarding Kathleen, Robertson said, "My wife is very emotional, and always has been. It's been a lot for her. She's 66 and is still working because we need the insurance for my medications and chemo. If we went on Medicare, a lot of the medicines are not necessarily recognized by the medical profession.

People have suggested to Robertson that she could move to a state that allows medical aid-in-dying—but she steadfastly refuses. "Why in God's name would I leave my family and friends to go to a strange place with strange doctors?" she asked. "It makes no sense."

"I want to do everything that I possibly can while I can speak," Robertson added. "I think a lot of it is about education—to help people understand what medical aid in dying is really about. It's not physician-assisted suicide or something related to Dr. Kevoorkian. It's really a well-thought-out decision that I think everyone should be able to make on their own. It's fine if you don't want to do it; just don't stand in the way of it being an option for me. It's about respecting someone's beliefs and journey. I didn't choose to have this diagnosis. This passion is what keeps me going."

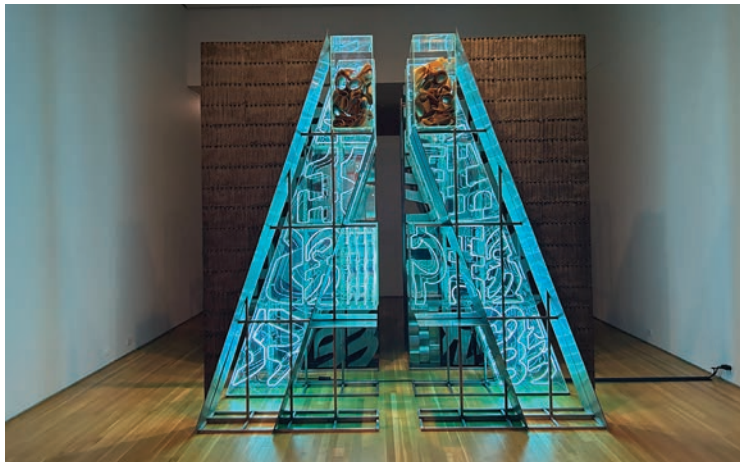
When asked what she wanted her legacy to be, Robertson responded, "It's funny that you ask that. That's one of the first things I thought about when I was diagnosed. I want to be remembered for trying to make a difference in the world. Medical aid-in-dying is my [current] passion, but I really want to be recognized for my efforts in helping young people."

She recently received an award from Naperville-based 360 Youth Services for being its most influential employee ever: "I was with them for [more than 20] years. Getting that award was huge for me, because I retired but still served on committees and was a consultant."

And, now, this warrior will keep fighting a very personal battle.

THE VOICE OF CHICAGO'S GAY,
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The Gates of Time Square is considered Chryssa's magnum opus. Photo by Jake Wittich

'Chryssa & New York' exhibition spotlights queer sculptor who worked in neon

BY JAKE WITTICH

Dozens of sculptures by Chryssa, a queer woman who was a pioneering neon-bending artist in the '50s and '60s, are now on display at Wrightwood 659, 659 W. Wrightwood Ave., in Lincoln Park.

"Chryssa & New York" features more than 80 works by the artist that were made during her time in New York City, where she emigrated from Greece. The exhibition runs through July 27.

Chryssa, who died in 2013 and only used her first name professionally, was a leading figure in New York's avant-garde circles thanks to her innovative approach using light and shadows to activate her sculptures. She also worked with neon, signs and text in creative ways that paved the way for pop artists like Andy Warhol, who she was friends with.

"But her work has been vastly underrecognized," said co-curator Michelle White, senior curator of the Menil Collection in Houston. "This is not an uncommon story for a woman artist, especially for a woman artist who was ahead of her time."

White curated the exhibition, which is on the final stop of a national tour, with Megan Holly Witko, external curator for the Beacon, New York-based Dia Art Foundation. It's the first major survey of Chryssa's work in 40 years and it sparked Ashley Janke, assistant curator at Wrightwood 659, to research Chryssa's brief time in Chicago for a subsection within the gallery.

Central to the exhibition is Chryssa's large-scale sculpture "The Gates to Time Square" (1964-1966), which Holly Witko called the artist's "magnum opus."

The towering sculpture pays homage to the dazzle of New York's famous intersection by mixing materials like neon, plexiglass and metal to mirror the signage there. It was restored for this exhibition in partnership with the Buffalo AKG Art Museum.

Another large piece, "Americanoom," was created in 1963, when Chryssa pivoted toward working with neon and typography. The sculp-

ture features a grid of six squares, each displaying materials like metal, typography and neon tubing in different ways.

Chryssa gathered her materials by visiting the metal and neon-bending shops that made New York's signs, White said.

The exhibition also shows some work Chryssa completed prior to her experiments with metal and neon. The "Cycladic Books" series (1954-1957), inspired by ancient Mediterranean art, uses plaster and clay to create boxy figures whose shadows take on varying appearances dependent on lighting.

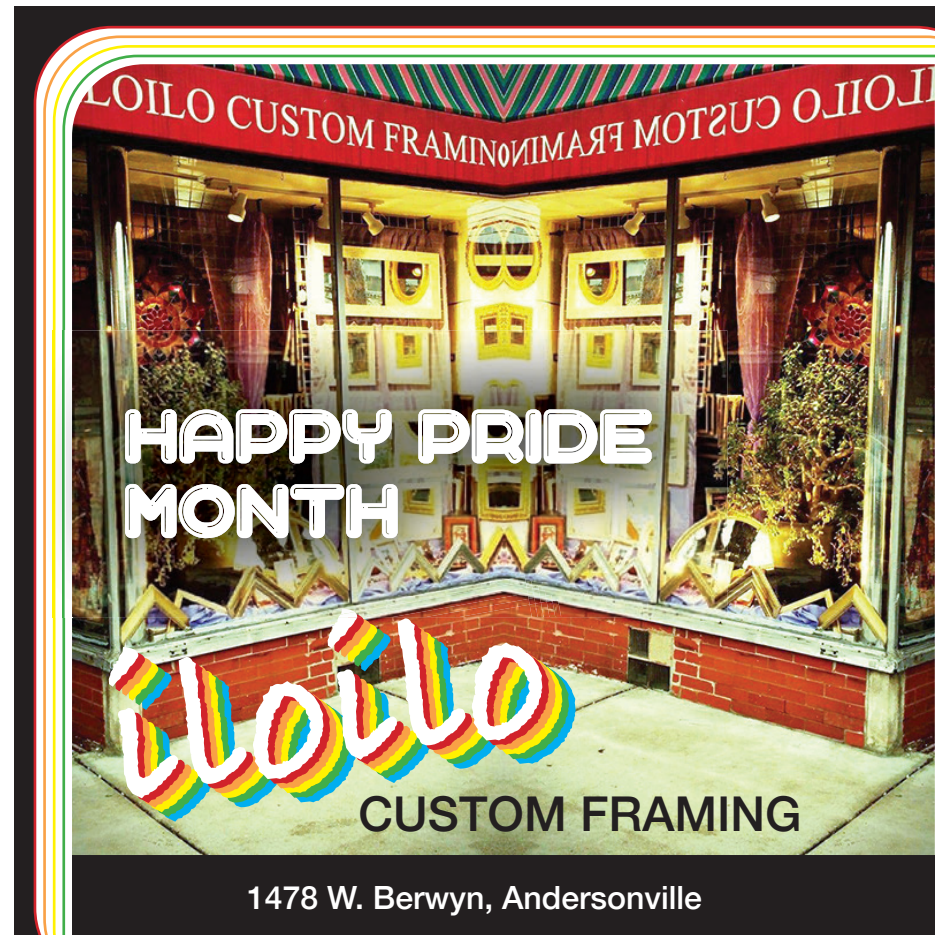
"She's really interested in the way in which light is activating these surfaces, and the subtle patterns of light throughout the day or year," Holly Witko said. "Even her early work like this shows how she was thinking about light as a medium."

Janke noted that Chryssa was active in Chicago around the '70s and '80s, when she was commissioned by architecture firm Skidmore, Owings & Merrill (SOM) to create a 70-foot-tall sculpture for one of their buildings at 33 W. Monroe St. The building, along with the sculpture, was demolished in the early 2000s, Janke said.

"Chryssa & Chicago" also includes documents from a proposal Chryssa made to the Art Institute of Chicago for a sculpture, "The Chicago Gates," similar to the "The Gates of Time Square." The sculpture never came to fruition, but Janke was able to uncover its design from archival documents.

Because there is no formal archive of Chryssa's work, many details on her life are still unknown. But the artist is believed to have been a queer woman who had a relationship with artist Agnes Martin.

"There's a lot of indication they were in a relationship and we believe that to be the case, but [there are] no letters between the two of them that we've found," Holly Witko said. "... How do we address her queer identity without an archive, because that's something we totally don't want to erase, but how do we pose it?"



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IML 2024

Queer summer in Chicago starts with Memorial Day weekend and International Mr. Leather. This year's victor is Jamal Herrera-O'Malley (center in left photo), flanked by first runner-up Steven Crespo (right) and second runner-up El Bandido (left). Photos by Joseph Stevens



Nestled along the shores of the Gulf of Mexico, Pensacola, Florida, offers a unique blend of history, culture, and coastal charm along with a vibrant LGBTQ+ community. From its lively markets to its delectable dining options and picturesque natural wonders, Pensacola has something to offer every visitor. Let's take a closer look at some of the must-visit attractions in this captivating city.

I began my journey through Pensacola at the **Palafox Market**, where the community comes alive every Saturday morning. Located in the heart of downtown Pensacola, this bustling market offers a diverse array of locally grown produce, artisanal crafts, and delicious treats. Stroll through the rows of vendors, chat with local artisans, and immerse yourself in the vibrant atmosphere of this beloved community gathering. If I had brought more than a carry-on, I probably would have purchased a few items to bring home.

After exploring the market, treat yourself to a memorable dining experience at **The Kennedy** (<https://www.thekennedy.bar/>). This quaint but well-appointed establishment is the perfect place to grab a craft cocktail and samples some local fare. I opted for an Old Fashioned, which happened to be a Happy Hour special, as well as an order of the Pork Gyoza and Pork Belly Deviled Eggs. The music-inspired restaurant was right up my

Pride Journey: Pensacola, Florida

BY JOEY AMATO

alley, and the laid-back atmosphere was the perfect way to start the evening.

Pensacola boasts a thriving LGBTQ+ nightlife scene, with an array of bars, clubs, and restaurants that cater to the community. Check out **The Roundup** and **Cabaret**, two bars offering a variety of LGBTQ+ events and activities throughout the week.

Check in to the **Holiday Inn Express Pensacola Beach** for your stay. Located right on the beach, this is not your everyday Holiday Inn Express. The rooms are elegantly appointed, and every room comes complete with unobstructed views of the Gulf. Stroll along the beach to witness both the sunrise and sunset. This section of the beach is less crowded with tourists so at moments you'll feel as if you're the only one on the sand. I woke up early each day to watch the sunrise and it was magical.

History enthusiasts won't want to miss a visit to **Fort Pickens**, a historic military fort located on the western tip of Santa Rosa Island. Built in the early 19th century, Fort Pickens played a crucial role in defending the Gulf Coast during the Civil War and World War II. Today, visitors can explore the well-preserved fortifications, stroll along the scenic nature trails, and learn about the rich history of this fascinating landmark. Don't forget to bring your camera to capture breathtaking views of the Gulf and surrounding coastline.

Conclude your journey with a visit to the **Gulf Islands National Seashore**, a pristine stretch of coastline renowned for its sugar-white sands and crystal-clear waters. Take a leisurely stroll along the shore, go for a refreshing swim, or simply relax and soak up the sun on one of the many secluded beaches.

Continue your day with a visit to the **Pensacola Beach Pier**, where you can try your hand at fishing or simply admire the panoramic views of the Gulf and Pensacola Beach. The newly reopened pier is 1,471 feet in length and is one of the most popular attractions along the beach. By the time you walk to the end of the pier, you'll be hovering almost dozens of feet over the Gulf of Mexico. It's the perfect place to watch the waves or catch the stunning sunset.

Pensacola is a vibrant hub of LGBTQ+ culture and community along the Florida panhandle. From colorful events and supportive organizations to inclusive spaces and advocacy efforts, Pensacola shines as a beacon of LGBTQ+ culture. Pensacola's LGBTQ+ community is as diverse as the city itself, encompassing people of all ages, backgrounds and identities. PFLAG operates a chapter in Pensacola and the city is home to numerous events throughout the year including the **Pensacola Pride Festival** (<https://www.johnnychisholm.com/>), held annually over Memorial Day weekend and is the perfect kickoff to Pride month. This year marks the 30th anniversary of the festival which will be highlighted with performances by DJ Dan Slater, DJ Abel and Trixie Mattel and is a highlight of the city's calendar, featuring a colorful parade, live music and drag performances. Pensacola Pride draws tens of thousands of visitors and is one of the largest and most unique pride experiences in the country.

Another not-to-be-missed event in Pensacola is their annual LGBTQ+ film festival called **Stamped**. **Stamped Film Festival** (<https://www.stampedfilmfest.com/>) was spearheaded in 2012 by Sara Latshaw to create a more accepting, safe, and educated community. The film festival board and organization has continued to grow over the years with increased attendance at the annual film festival and by hosting other outreach activities. Stamped showcases the artistic contribution of LGBTQ+ film and filmmakers from all over the world. In 2015, the festival re-branded itself from Pensacola LGBTQ+ Film Fest to 'Stamped Film Festival', a name paying homage to the days when Memorial Day Weekend LGBTQ+ tourists stamped their money to demonstrate their significant impact on the local economy.

For cat lovers, I highly recommend a visit to the **Coastal Cat Café** (<https://www.coastalcatsby.com/>) to play with and/or adopt one of their beautiful feline friends. The café is opened a few months ago, and reservations are recommended to

visit.

About 20 cats roam freely between two rooms where they interact with visitors who are encouraged to give them some of their favorite treats. Unfortunately, my hotel didn't allow animals otherwise I may have added a new member to my family. So far almost 50 cats have been adopted by café visitors.

Foodies searching for authentic Gulf Coast flavors should head to **Flounder's Chowder House** (<https://flounderschowderhouse.com/>), a beloved local institution since 1979. Located on the scenic Pensacola Beach Boardwalk, this laid-back eatery specializes in fresh seafood dishes, including their famous chowder and signature crab cakes. Relax on the outdoor patio, feel the gentle sea breeze, and savor the flavors of the Gulf as you dine overlooking the pristine white sands and emerald waters of Pensacola Beach. I ordered the legendary Bushwacker, a milkshake-style cocktail created in Pensacola, to accompany my entrée which consisted of blackened red snapper with sauteed asparagus. The snapper was cooked to perfection and was accompanied by a delicious sauce.

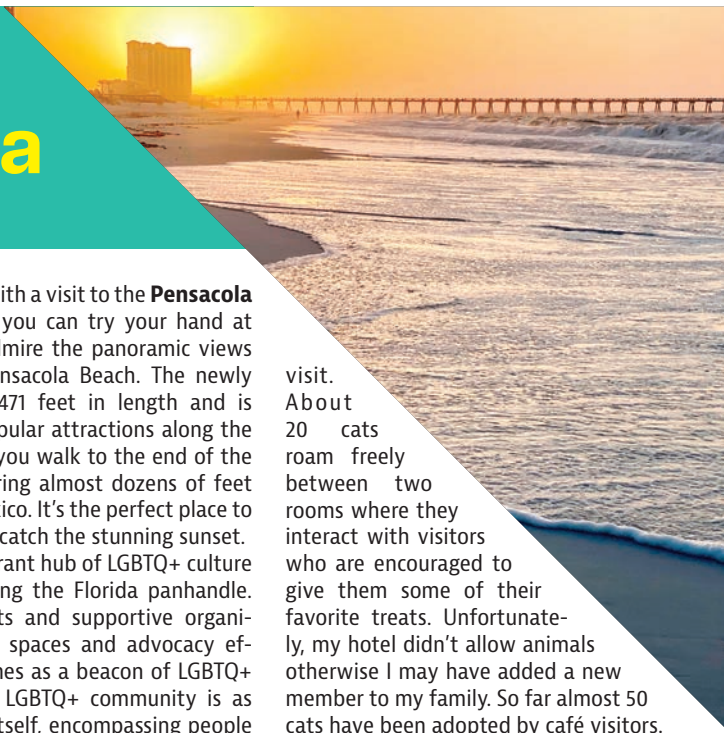
End your visit to Pensacola with a sunset dolphin cruise with **Frisky Mermaid Boat Tours** (<https://www.friskyboattours.com/>). My particular excursion was led by an all-female crew and was wonderful despite only getting to see a few dorsal fins. The tour lasts for about two hours and the friendly crew try their best to seek out as many beautiful dolphins as possible, although sometimes they can be hard to find. Nature can be unpredictable.

Pensacola offers a wealth of experiences for visitors to discover. From vibrant markets and culinary delights to historic landmarks and natural wonders, this charming city has something for everyone. Whether you're exploring its rich cultural heritage or simply basking in the beauty of its coastal landscapes, Pensacola is sure to leave a lasting impression on all who visit.

Enjoy the Journey!

Top right: Pensacola sunset. Left: Joey checks out the Pensacola Pier and the Coastal Cat Café.

Photos courtesy of Joey Amato



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