

# WINDY CITY TIMES

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## AFT@30

About Face Theatre marks 30 years with plans to expand LGBTQ+ mission

BY ALEC KARAM

About Face Theatre is celebrating its 30th anniversary this year, heralding its mission and looking to expand beyond the theater's physical boundaries.

Founded in 1995 as About Face Collective, the organization has strived to tell queer stories through the art of theater, evolving into the digital age and through the COVID-19 pandemic.

It's a "dedicated space where LGBTQ+ folks can let their guard down and be fully themselves, bring the fullness of their visions and talents and ideas into the space to push the form and push what theater can be," according to artistic director Megan Carney, who has served in her role since 2017.

"We spend so much time creating a space where people can say, 'Okay, I can relax here,'" Carney added. "And

Continued on page 2



### ELI TEA BAR

A-ville spot becomes queer sober haven

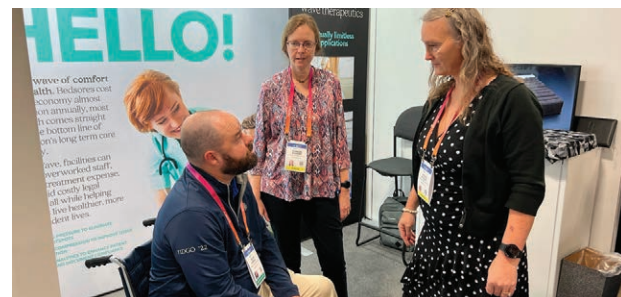
10



### THETA RHO NU

Brotherhood for SGL men

4

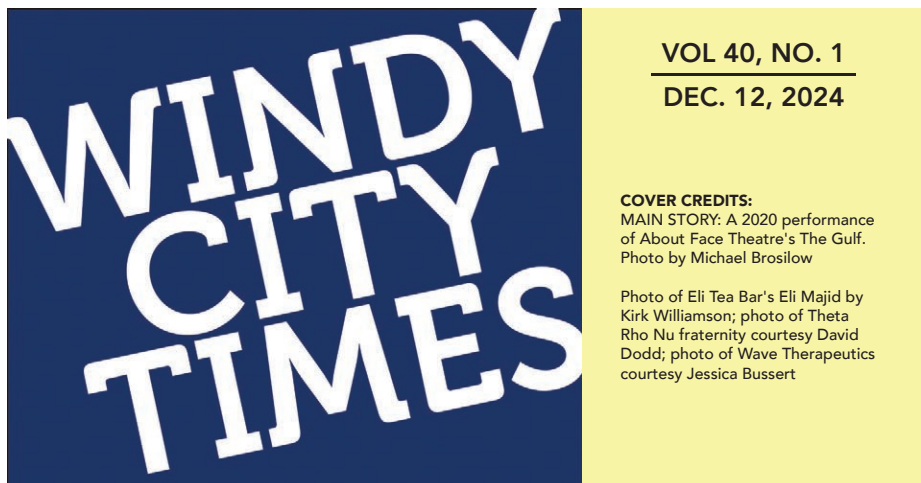


### WAVE THERAPEUTICS

Trans-owned startup is improving lives

12





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**COVER CREDITS:**

MAIN STORY: A 2020 performance of About Face Theatre's The Gulf. Photo by Michael Brosilow

Photo of Eli Tea Bar's Eli Majid by Kirk Williamson; photo of Theta Rho Nu fraternity courtesy David Dodd; photo of Wave Therapeutics courtesy Jessica Bussert

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**AFT from cover**

when you can relax and settle into your full self, you get to make amazing things."

About Face recently wrapped its latest show, We Could Be, an interactive production that gives the audience a role in the drivers' seat. The show, emulating choose-your-own-adventure games, allowed audiences to vote on which paths the story will take, allowing the cast to practice in front of numerous audiences at the Rivendell Theatre before going on tour.

The show's ethos has been rooted at the core of the theater collective's mission since Day One, Carney shared.

"Heading into the 30th anniversary year and returning to our roots, and having a strong, fun program that can hit the road, has provided a full return for us," she said.

Archivists with Gerber/Hart Library & Archives have organized a collection of the theater's 30-year history that was on display at the Nov. 7 party at Venue West, 221 N. Paulina St., allowing both former and current participants to get a

glimpse of the organization's rich history.

But About Face "has never been a company that's rooted in nostalgia," Carney said, looking to the future. Having learned from the pandemic, Carney said they want to lean more into hybrid shows to connect to audiences outside of Chicago.

"We're in Chicago. We're in Illinois, which is a sanctuary state, but we're just one theater," Carney added. "Some of the exciting ideas that we're working on are, how do we blend what's happening live on stage in Chicago with this broader reach around the region, and let there be more of a mutual exchange in the Midwest?"

About Face intends to continue offering full union productions year-round alongside "robust" education work, going full steam ahead as the organization looks forward to its next 30 years.

"I hope we will keep changing as the industry changes and culture changes," Carney said.

*More coverage online of the Nov. 7 30th anniversary event online at [windycitytimes.com](http://windycitytimes.com).*

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# Theta Rho Nu: A new fraternity for Black SGL men

BY ANDREW DAVIS

From left: Tony Mize Jr., David Dodd, Matthew Richardson and Kenneth R. Freeman II of Theta Rho Nu fraternity.  
Courtesy David Dodd



**D**issatisfied with what he experienced with NPHC (National Pan-Hellenic Council) fraternities, Chicago resident David Dodd has become a founder, marketer and managing member of a new fraternity, Theta Rho Nu.

According to its website, "the purpose of Theta Rho Nu is to provide synergetic connection between men excelling in scholastic and career advancement who are of similar life experience."

In a recent talk with Windy City Times, Dodd talked about the beginnings, goals and parameters of the organization—and a lot more.

*NOTE: This conversation was edited for clarity and length.*

## Windy City Times: Tell me about the genesis of Theta Rho Nu.

David Dodd: So, the genesis of Theta Rho Nu came about in March 2021. A colleague named Kenneth Freeman—the president and one of the founders of the organization—and I came up with the idea then. However, we were previously part of another organization that was similar to Theta Rho Nu; Black gay Greek culture is a phenomenon, and so we're just one of many organizations that's under that umbrella. We chose to walk away from that organization because it no longer served our interests and where we felt the organization should be going.

So, we came up with the concept of Theta Rho Nu, also called Throne, by the way; "THR" was, like, the acronym for "throne." We really liked this idea of Black gay men serving as kings, and the crown is one of our emblems.

The purpose of the organization is centered on the intersectionality of being Black, gay and male, but also centered on academic and professional endeavors. We don't really talk about or come together in that vein often, and we really wanted to center all the intersectionalities of who we are but in a professional environment. We want to harness all the collective energy of all these wonderful individuals and create great things for our community; we all want to help build men in our community who are trying to achieve greatness in their careers.

## WCT: And this has been years in the making.

DD: Yes. Kenneth was in a space where he said, "Okay—I need to bring some folks on board and further this effort." He brought on myself, Matt Richardson and Tony Mize Jr., and we all came together to carve out what the next steps would be to take the organization to the next level—centering the work of the organization, confirming bylaws and policies, [composing the] financial structure, putting together the process for initiation of membership, marketing and more. That's how we all came into the fold; that all happened last year. We then worked together for the launch, which is taking place this fall.

## WCT: So can any Black professional SGL [same-gender-loving] man apply?

DD: Yes. Any Black SGL man can apply—but there are requirements. Being at least 25 is one of them; also, we require applicants to have a high-school diploma; be in or have graduated from an advanced degree program; have letters of recommendation—that kind of thing. But, yes, we're accepting anyone nationally. Our goal is that, once we understand that centering, we would grow the organization in those respective areas so we understand who's coming to the table.

## WCT: So you will have chapters?

DD: Most definitely... Quite a few people have hit me up in Chicago about wanting to participate so I anticipate that when we go through this first membership process, I will have some members from Chicago so we'll start a Chicago chapter of Theta Rho Nu.

## WCT: So what's the hazing going to be like? I'm joking, of course.

DD: [Laughs] Everyone asks that question, but it's a good one. When people think of Greek culture, they think there's some crazy stuff you've got to do, like running through the fields at night.

Our process is pretty simple. We want to start the first line in January 2025, and we're going to run an eight-to-10-week process during which you'll have to learn about the organization. You'll meet with us on a regular basis, as a group and as a team. There will be knowledge checks to make sure you're learning about the organization, and then there will actually be a culminating event in March 2025 in Raleigh, North Carolina, where the organization [was] founded.

## WCT: I remember reporting earlier this year on two fraternities of the so-called "Divine Nine"—Alpha Phi Alpha and Phi Beta Sigma—who had instituted anti-trans policies. What is your fraternity's position regarding trans applicants?

DD: We are probably going to focus—at least, at this time—on cisgender men. I try to make sure that we can support someone in their total experience. Often, I—as a cisgender male—don't know what the trans male experience is, and



I want to honor that in a real way. I wouldn't say that we're anti-trans but I think, right now, we're trying to focus on cisgender men. We have talked about growing to potentially include the trans male experience, but we want to make sure it makes sense and is the proper thing to do.

I don't think you can have real inclusivity without being intentional about it—making sure you're doing it for the right reasons and making sure you honor that experience. I don't want to do that in the wrong way. I want to take the time to understand and bring in someone who can help us go in that direction. That is our goal.

I don't plan to be in this seat for 20 years. My goals are to have the fraternity evolve and continue to work with the community. I'm always open to what growth, change and evolution look like. Talking with trans friends, I've learned that it has to be real. I don't want to bring trans folks in and then we're not doing the work; I want to make sure we have the right resources and tools.

**WCT: And you may spawn similar fraternities down the line.**

DD: Yes. It's funny that you speak of that because any great LGBTQ space will focus on the trans male and trans female experiences as well as those who are non-binary—and even those organizations are looking to be more inclusive. But I think the beauty of the LGBTQ Greek world—from the lens that I've seen, for about 25 years—is that it creates the opportunity for us to honor all of our experiences under the umbrella.

**WCT: Would the political affiliation of an applicant matter?**

DD: No. None of that matters to us. We're accepting folks for who they are. Political affiliation and connections don't matter to us. We're trying to be agnostic. We do ask that applicants be registered voters, but political affiliation doesn't matter to us.

**WCT: Is there anything else you wish to say about Theta Rho Nu?**

DD: Yes. It's a labor of love and it's something I feel we deserve to have in our community. We need to have an organization that is willing to pull the collective resources of our community to further us as men in our personal and professional endeavors. But also, how can we take this information and energy, and create something great for the community that's going to help it achieve the same thing? We need to continue and grow that.

I've seen that in Chicago. There are some amazing men here who are doing some wonderful things in the community and who have these talents—and we don't know about them. We need to bring those energies together to create greatness. And, hopefully—through Theta Rho Nu—we're able to do that. We want to have brotherhood and service, but we want to make sure we bring in the right people across this country to help achieve that and to give back to the community.

# Babe's Sports Bar

## will soon provide space to enjoy women's sports in Logan Square

BY KAYLEIGH PADAR

Once co-captains of their college rugby team, Nora McConnell-Johnson and Torra Spillane are now working to open Babe's Sports Bar in Logan Square, where people will be able to watch women's sports next spring.

Babe's, 3017 W. Armitage Ave., is expected to open in early spring 2025, just in time for March Madness, according to its website.

"I love sports as a venue for heartbreak, but also complete awe," McConnell-Johnson said. "Like, getting to see such high-level play and the respect between teams and players is just such a beautiful thing. We don't have very many spaces in our society where we get to see this high level excellence and celebrate it, especially for women who have not been taken seriously as athletes for a long time."

The bar's atmosphere will feel "old-school," with elements of vintage gymnasiums. For example, the bar top will be made out of flooring that was ripped out of a ballet studio.

The bar's name honors women's sports trailblazer Babe Didrikson Zaharias, who competed in golf, baseball, basketball and pool in the '30s and '40s. She is the only athlete to win individual Olympic medals in separate running, throwing and jumping events.

"The way I'm envisioning the space is like, 'What if she wasn't an exception?'" McConnell-Johnson said. "What if she was the norm of athletes, and women like her were celebrated and able to access sports at a high level, ever since the '30s and '40s? It feels like a futurist project."

Longtime friends McConnell-Johnson and Spillane are working with the women-owned design firm, Siren Betty, to create a concept for the space that's inclusive, accessible and centers women. Many bars' counters and stools are taller to accommodate men, but the one at Babe's Sports Bar will be slightly shorter and built specifically with women in mind.

They're also working with Clean Air Club, a group that helps venues improve indoor air quality, to ensure the bar has a good air filtration system to protect people from spreading



Nora McConnell-Johnson is working to open Babe's Sports Bar in Logan Square next spring.

Courtesy Babe's Sports Bar

COVID-19 and other illnesses.

"I really believe that doing right by people is the best way to go," McConnell-Johnson explained. "We really want to create a beautiful space that's also accessible."

A lifelong fan of sports of all kinds, McConnell-Johnson has often thought about how hard it is to find places to watch women's sports in bars with other people, so she wanted to create a space where people can come together to celebrate women's athletics.

Whiskeygirl Tavern, a lesbian-owned bar in Edgewater, is also known as a haven for women's sports fans. McConnell-Johnson loves spending time there and said she's gone to the owners for advice throughout the process of creating Babe's.

"It's very exciting [that] we already do have such a cool space to work off in Chicago, and I love that they are so supportive," McConnell-Johnson said.

When McConnell-Johnson was in high school, she was the captain of an all-boys

soccer team, and it gave her insight into what it feels like to be a woman athlete in a male-dominated space, which some men found threatening.

"I realized how hard it is to find women's sports on TV and in bars, which really aligns with my experience throughout my life as a woman athlete," McConnell-Johnson said. "We have these structural issues stacked against us that impede our ability to really be full athletes and just focus on the sport itself."

Prior to this project, McConnell-Johnson spent most of her career as an educator, and previously taught middle school students. She said her classroom felt pretty similar to a rowdy bar at times.

"It's a big pivot, but it doesn't feel like that, honestly," McConnell-Johnson explained. "If you can get good at being a middle school teacher, you can be good at anything. It feels very aligned with how I've always been somebody who wants to create space for people who don't always have a good space to be together."



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# Artist Nicole McNamara

## discusses personal transformations through work and love

BY CARRIE MAXWELL



**Nicole McNamara in her studio.**  
Sarah Merryweather Photography



**Judging Me, oil on canvas, by Nicole McNamara.**



**Kat Truman (left) and Nicole McNamara.**  
Sarah Merryweather Photography

Art has long been part of Nicole McNamara's life since "the moment I picked up a crayon as a toddler."

The Glen Ellyn-based abstract artist explained, "The world of art has captivated me. Yet, as I grew older, my passion was sidelined by my parents' well-meaning advice, steering me toward a degree in advertising. For years, life took me in many different directions—I built a career, got married and started a family. Yet the yearning to create never faded."

McNamara grew up in Nashville and graduated from the University of Tennessee with a bachelor's degree in advertising. She landed in the Learning and Development world for the majority of her early career years, where she helped others grow professionally.

"After that, I stepped away from the corporate world to be a stay-at-home mom for 12 years, which was a rewarding chapter of my life," said McNamara.

### An existential turning point

Then, at age 38, McNamara reached a turning point in her life. She had what she calls "a deeply personal crisis that brought me to rock bottom," where she had to find a way to "reconnect with myself, that inner child who had been quieted."

McNamara said that, to outsiders, it would seem as if she had the perfect life and was "living the dream," but that was the furthest thing from the truth. She developed deep depression and crippling anxiety and could not see a way out. This scared her, as well as her family, so much that she underwent intensive treatment at an inpatient facility for a week.

The reconnection with her inner child, and the new tools gained through treatment to confront her inner demons, gave McNamara permission to finally pursue her lifelong artistic dreams. She taught herself "how to oil paint by studying the scientific aspects of composition and color theory, art history and plain old trial-and-error. For the next seven years, it was a therapeutic process for me: a hobby, not a profession."

McNamara describes her abstract art as "these tiny worlds of safety that I can live in and explore because there are an infinite amount of safe spaces." She began to express her fear, anxiety, tension, anger, depression, yearning and an evolving maturity and joy in her art. McNamara also "sees an incredible amount of depth, which is reflective of my desire to make my emotions and life more tangible, trying to gain a sense of control, stability in a world that much of the time has felt very unstable."

"I began to paint while living in New Orleans, and when I moved to Glen Ellyn, I felt these unexpected connections to my past. The first place I noticed when searching for a home around here was 504 Crescent—ironically, 504 is the area code for New Orleans, and the city is known as the Crescent City. The fact that 504 Crescent in Glen Ellyn was also home to a Cajun restaurant called Rue made it feel like fate. Rue became the first place where I ever showcased my art, and it felt like a sign that I was meant to be here."

### Further revelations

Another realization changed McNamara's life. She had always felt like something was absent in her romantic life, but didn't know what that

was until she walked into her team's tennis drill two-and-a-half years ago and saw their new assistant coach, Kat Truman.

"I was instantly drawn to her; I had to meet her—just like I had been drawn to painting," said McNamara. "It was as if I needed to meet her for my heart and soul. That same feeling hit me when I saw Kat; it was like the moment in The Wizard of Oz when Dorothy steps into Oz and everything bursts into Technicolor. Life suddenly felt vibrant and exciting, something I had never experienced before."

"The challenge was that I was married to a man at the time. This realization would obviously lead to a difficult and painful transition for many, especially our children. I wanted to tell people immediately that I was gay, and had found the love of my life—and I did within two weeks of having met Kat. I didn't want to keep it quiet or put this revelation back into the box. I was ready to live my life authentically. I told my family immediately. Both of my daughters embraced the news. One of them even said 'Cool.' The whole situation has been a transition for everyone."

For Truman, this new relationship with McNamara started out as a great friendship with someone with whom she could have excellent conversations. Truman said they connected quickly and "I had never felt more seen, heard or understood in my life. As Nic said, my black and white world suddenly was bursting with color and a deeper understanding of life became clear to me. There was a deep understanding that she was someone very important to me, despite only knowing each other for a very short time. The most important person ever. I soon realized that my feelings for her were more than friendship."

When McNamara isn't focused on her art and children, she loves to play tennis with Truman. They also do a lot of house and yard projects, play games, go for walks and ponder life questions in the news. McNamara and Truman are currently engaged but have not set a wedding date.

Through her painting and new found authenticity and security, McNamara eventually found the courage to investigate what she had always suspected were symptoms of ADHD.

"I always felt a lot of fear and shame around what an official diagnosis would mean," said McNamara. "A branding of sorts that something was wrong with me. I couldn't have been more wrong, as getting support and learning more about ADHD actually answered so many questions about my life. It was liberating."

One of the ways Truman has helped McNamara achieve her artistic dreams is to encourage her to turn her hobby into a business. Together they launched Nicole McNamara Art in March 2024 to showcase and sell her prints as ready-to-hang wall art.

"Customers are purchasing art that not only enhances their environment, but also encourages them to live their most authentic life," said McNamara. "We empower people, at any stage of life, to embrace their most authentic selves, inspiring them to navigate the necessary changes to live with purpose and truth."

McNamara has a number of showings of her work planned. Dates and locations are on her website's Events page. She invites her audience "to connect with my work on a personal level—there's nothing quite like feeling the energy and passion firsthand."



Juan Gutierrez—corporate pastry chef for Lettuce Entertain You Restaurants and executive pastry chef for the St. Regis Chicago—is one of two Chicago competitors on the new Food Network show *Harry Potter: Wizards of Baking* (The Fifty/50 Restaurant Group Director of Food & Beverage Chris Teixeira is the other local entrant.) Gutierrez is quite the reality-show veteran, as he has won the Netflix competition series *School of Chocolate* and the second season of Food Network's *Chopped Sweets*. (As if that isn't enough, he also took the title in the 2022 iteration of *Dancing with Chicago Celebrities*.)

In a recent talk with Windy City Times, Gutierrez discussed his competitive nature, the allure of the baking show and his response about why a queer chef would be on *Harry Potter: Wizards of Baking*, given Harry Potter author J.K. Rowling's anti-trans stance.

*NOTE: This conversation was edited for clarity and length.*

**Windy City Times: Hi, Juan. I haven't talked with you since you were at the [Four Seasons restaurant] Adorn.**

Juan Gutierrez: Yes! I remember.

**WCT: You seem to have a competitive nature, having won a couple other reality shows as well as *Dancing with Chicago Celebrities*. Why do you think you're so competitive?**

JG: Well, first of all, I'm Latino [laughs], so that comes with the territory! But I've actually always pushed myself to be better. It's not that I want to win—I just want to show the best of me. I always try to push myself to those limits and outside of the box.

**WCT: Yeah, when I heard a couple years ago that you were competing on *Dancing*, I said, "Oh, I didn't know that!" So a belated congratulations on that...**

JG: Thank you! It was really important for me because of my mom. I remember practicing every week because—listen—I am literally the worst Latino, in terms of dancing. I know how to shake just like a maraca—that's it. So it was really fun getting into the groove of the dancing. They asked me what I wanted to do; I wanted to showcase voguing, to represent my gay community, but I also wanted something that represented the

## Juan Gutierrez talks about competing on 'Harry Potter' baking show

BY ANDREW DAVIS

Latino community. Everybody does salsa and bachata so I asked, "Why don't we step it up a notch and do a tango?" It's so sexy. So we combined tango with voguing—it was so fun!

**WCT: You mentioned your mom. You started being a pastry chef by baking with her, correct?**

JG: Yes. Some days, my mom and grandmother used to make things at home. My mom used to make the most delicious brownies—I'll never forget them. They were just brownies from a box, but they were the best boxed brownies you'll ever have.

It was the best experience just being there and meeting the cast [chefs/judges Carla Hall and Jozef Youssef as well as hosts/*Harry Potter* actors James and Oliver Phelps]. I don't know if you've seen the trailer, you hear a person say, "Oh, my God! Oh, my God!" That's me. [Laughs] I was surprised and excited, and I felt like I had magic. I almost lost it the day that Luna [guest judge Evanna Lynch] came out. I was shaking.

**WCT: And how did Elizabeth Rowe come to be your partner? [Note: The show is a competition involving two-person teams.]**

JG: That was the magic of the Harry Potter world; they put us together. I couldn't have asked for a better partner. Nobody knew each other, although I knew who she was. I was so intimidated by her because she's so talented. I knew I had to step up my game even more because I didn't want to let her down.

**WCT: Of course, you have to believe in your own talent, too.**

JG: Oh, yes—I know. I know myself but seeing her talent was so fun and exciting, but I was also, like, "She's so good!"

**WCT: Did you have any hesitation about being on the show because of J.K. Rowling's beliefs?**

JG: To be honest, of course. I want to support the community in any way.

Being in the kitchen or pastry is a really traditional career. But we are the new chefs who are rising up and taking over the world. We need to change; I tell my team, "My past struggles should never be your struggles." When I found out about the show, I thought, "This goes against everything I believe—something that affects some of my friends." But I wanted to be there because I wanted to show that nobody else is going to take our shine because of how they think. I really want to showcase the true love of ourselves. We have the op-



Juan Gutierrez in front of Hogwarts Express.  
Courtesy Food Network

**WCT: And then you came to Chicago to go to school?**

JG: Correct. So I left Colombia at a really young age and I went to Chicago's French Pastry School to study. After that, I just stayed here and started that journey.

**WCT: For our readers, can you describe**

**what being on *Harry Potter: Wizards of Baking* was like?**

JG: I was asked so many times on that show, "How do you guys feel?" And my answer all the time was "I don't have words." This show is so special; I didn't feel like it was a competition. I was so into knowing that I was part of the Harry Potter world and that fantasy. That was more than enough. Every day, I was constantly in awe of being there.

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portunity to use our voice—and it's about how we use it.

**WCT: And these other chefs...**

JG: The amount of talent in that room—there are no words to express how talented they are.

They're from all over the world, not just the country. We have me, from Colombia. We have someone from France. We have people from London. We have Hemu [Basumatary], who's from India; she's just the most beautiful human being, ever. Mitzi [Reyes] is my fellow Latina and she's from Mexico; the way she puts her heart into everything is amazing and she makes her country proud. That's why we do this and why we want to showcase everything.

**WCT: Is there anything else you want to say about this show?**

JG: It was just such a cool show to do. It just brings you back to how you were as a kid.





Eli Tea Bar owner Eli Majid prepares a kombucha-nada.  
Kirk Williamson

## Tea time:

### Eli Tea Bar continues to grow as a Chicago non-alcoholic queer haven

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.*

When people talk about non-alcoholic queer spaces in Chicago, one of the first places mentioned is often Eli Tea Bar. And although owner Eli Majid didn't initially open the store with that vision in mind, he's glad it has grown into its community role.

Eli Tea Bar opened nearly three years ago in Chicago's Andersonville neighborhood and has evolved into a community staple. While the queer community can head to Northalsted for a night of bar-hopping, they can come to the tea bar during the day or in the evening for a variety of promoted activities.

The original Eli Tea Bar in Birmingham, Michigan will be 10 years old this December. Before the shop's inception, Majid simply sold teas as a side business at local farmer's markets.

"It was definitely to create a job that I couldn't find," he said. "It was to create a space I didn't see, but also I've always kept in mind that this business I'm creating has to be sustainable for myself and as a company."

Majid graduated from Loyola University with an undergraduate degree in plant biology, and has always been interested in both tea and business. He views his shop as a cross between a wine bar and a coffee shop, since teas also lend themselves to discussing blends, regions, cultures and more. He said he gravitated towards running a business around tea because it's a beverage that more easily extends into the evening, unlike coffee.

Outside of the shops themselves, Eli Tea Bar supplies tea to establishments such as cafes,

restaurants and hotels. Many of the teas are house blends, but some of them are also direct imports. In the near future, Majid said they'll be launching canned non-alcoholic tonics, as well.

Although he didn't intend to make the shop a well-known non-alcoholic—though he did envision it as queer—space, he said it's been fun to see it grow in that direction. Over the past ten years, he said both shops have become this type of needed space.

"It was something that happened, but it was something where I could see the customers raising their hands, if that makes sense," Majid said. "At some point, I think I had the initial idea, and then I think over time I actually gained the confidence to really run with the idea."

Those ideas—especially those involving his evening events—have been the crux of the Chicago business. Eli Tea Bar boasts a variety of ac-

tivities from open mics to writing groups to art creation nights and more. And they're a big hit—Majid said the business is often hitting capacity.

Melissa Erikson has been doing stand up comedy for two years and began hosting the Friday open-mic nights at Eli for around a year ago. She became interested in Eli after seeing it was not only a queer place but one actually owned by a queer person, which is important to her as a trans woman.

"Queer spaces are so important to me to feel safe, to see myself reflected in my story, reflected in other people, to know that I'm less alone," she said. "I'm turning 30 this year, but especially when I was younger, being in spaces like that [was] probably a little life-saving for me, I can say in many ways. And now they're just life-affirming."

Even when she's tired after long weeks,

Erikson said her mood does a "total 180" after attending the Friday events and spending time with the community. She said that every week she sees people exchanging art and numbers, complimenting each other and forming relationships.

The Chicago shop has been growing, gaining more business and revenue every year, Majid said. He also thinks that the rise of people becoming sober-curious during and post-peak pandemic has added to the desire for non-alcoholic spaces. They're also looking to have more dynamic social lives with nighttime options besides going to bars.

"What we're doing did not exist when I was in college," he said. "What we're doing did not exist 10 years ago, five years ago and whatnot ... I think the bars will always have a place in the queer community, and I love going out too. But what people are seeking now is, they're seeking more quiet spaces. They're seeking introvert-friendly spaces. They're really interested in being nerds."

He's also open to ideas from the community—tarot events, writing fun PowerPoints, anything "slow fun, living room fun." He said he is always looking for new events to cater to different parts of the community.

Although Majid said he doesn't have any sort of metrics he uses to gauge "success," he's busy every night. And while other Chicago business owners he knew were telling him about being down in sales this past winter, Eli Tea Bar surpassed all its sales goals. There's no expansion plans currently in place, but he said the team is "always keeping [its] eyes open."

"We are proof of the concept that a sober space is needed," he said. "We have lots of programming. We have a diverse amount of customers—every age, every cultural background. And it's authentically forming."



Eli Tea Bar hosts an open mic each Friday.

Courtesy Eli Tea Bar



Lansing, Michigan, the state's vibrant capital, is a city brimming with cultural diversity, historical richness, and a rapidly evolving urban landscape. From its renowned Lansing Pride festival to unique dining spots like Veg Head and the dynamic Lansing Shuffle, there is something for everyone in this bustling Midwestern city. Add to this a plethora of attractions such as the Broad Museum of Art, Potter Park Zoo, and the historically significant districts of Old Town Lansing and REO Town, and Lansing stands out as a must-visit destination.

One of Lansing's most cherished events is the annual **Lansing Pride festival**. This celebration of LGBTQ+ culture and community has grown significantly over the years, drawing thousands of attendees from across the state and beyond. Lansing Pride features live performances, local vendors, and family-friendly activities, all set against the backdrop of Lansing's welcoming atmosphere in Old Town. The festival not only fosters a sense of community but also emphasizes Lansing's commitment to inclusivity and equality.

While in Old Town, visit one of the area's many locally owned boutiques, cafes, and art galleries. This walkable neighborhood is full of charm and the perfect way to begin your Lansing adventure. The district also hosts a variety of events throughout the year, including festivals, art walks, and live performances, which contribute to its lively and welcoming atmosphere.

For those seeking a unique culinary experience, **Veg Head** in Lansing is a standout choice. This LGBTQ-owned vegetarian and vegan-friendly eatery offers a diverse menu that caters to a variety of dietary preferences without compromising on flavor. Veg Head's innovative dishes, made with fresh, locally sourced ingredients, have earned it a loyal following. Whether you're a committed vegan or simply exploring plant-based options, Veg Head promises a delightful dining experience that showcases the best of Lansing's culinary creativity. We ordered the roasted Brussels for the table which came topped with harissa sauce, crumbled cheese and pepitas. For our entrees, we tried the signature sweet potato burger as well as the cauliflower street tacos, which were prepared with roasted cauliflower, salsa verde, avocado puree, crumbled cheese, pickled onions, cilantro and corn tortillas. All the items were

## Pride Journey: Lansing, Michigan

BY JOEY AMATO



Joey at the Michigan State Capitol.  
Courtesy Joey Amato

delicious and made me forget I was at a vegetarian restaurant. For those meat-eaters out there, a trip to Veg Head will make you change your mind about vegetarian cuisine.

Visitors seeking stylish and comfortable accommodation during their stay should check out **AC Hotel Lansing**. Situated within close proximity to downtown Lansing, this modern hotel combines contemporary design with top-notch amenities. The AC Hotel Lansing is also conveniently located near many of the city's major attractions, making it an ideal base for exploring all that Lansing has to offer. Their king suite offers an additional seating area and of course an extra-large room fit for any king ... or queen.

After some rest, check out **Lansing Shuffle**, another jewel in the city's crown, offering a dynamic space for entertainment and community engagement. This multi-purpose venue hosts a variety of events, from live music and drag performances to food festivals and markets. Lansing Shuffle is designed to be a flexible space that adapts to the diverse interests of Lansing's residents and visitors. With its vibrant atmosphere and ever-changing lineup of events, Lansing Shuffle is a testament to the city's lively and inclusive spirit.

Swing by **Soup Spoon** for breakfast and be sure to order any one of their delicious omelets or scrambles before heading to **REO Town**, an-

other historic district that has seen significant revitalization. Named after the REO Motor Car Company—which was once headquartered here—REO Town has undergone a remarkable transformation in recent years. Today, it is a thriving neighborhood known for its eclectic mix of businesses, including coffee shops, breweries and vintage stores. The area also features murals and public art installations that reflect its unique character and history. REO Town's vibrant community spirit and creative energy make it an exciting place to explore and experience.

Art enthusiasts will find much to admire at the **Eli and Edythe Broad Art Museum at Michigan State University**. This contemporary art museum is renowned for its striking architecture, designed by the internationally acclaimed architect Zaha Hadid. **The Broad Museum's** collection features an impressive array of modern and contemporary art, including works by both established and emerging artists. With its innovative exhibitions and educational programs, the museum is a cornerstone of Lansing's cultural landscape, offering visitors a chance to engage with thought-provoking art from around the world.

Speaking of art, the **Lansing Art Gallery & Education Center** recently held the LGBTQ+ Artist in Michigan exhibition, a group exhibition of artists who identify as a member of the LGBTQ+ community. This exhibition was in partnership with Suits and the City, whose mission is to promote the interests of LGBTQ+ persons in the Mid-Michigan area through education and advocacy.

Lansing's unique combination of cultural richness, historical significance, and modern amenities makes it a standout destination in the Midwest. The city's commitment to inclusivity all contributes to Lansing's distinctive and welcoming character. Whether you're exploring its historic neighborhoods, enjoying its vibrant festivals, or simply taking in the local culture, Lansing offers a truly memorable experience.

**Enjoy the Journey!**

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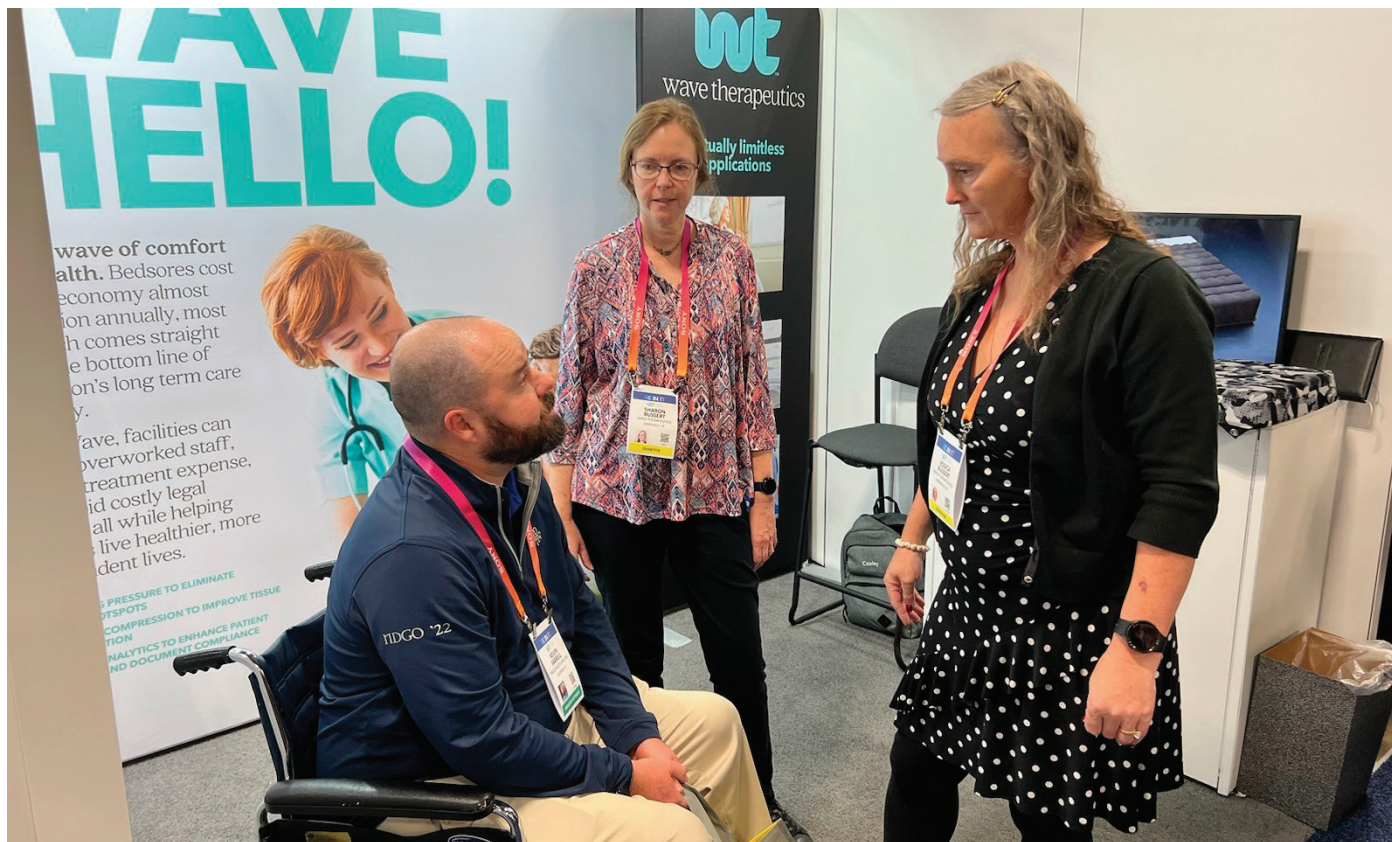
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**Wave Therapeutics' current project is creating an affordable and comfortable wheelchair cushion to help relieve and prevent pressure injuries.**

Courtesy Jessica Bussert

# Trans start-up founder seeks to improve lives of wheelchair users

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.*

Although Wave Therapeutics' work combines many of Jessica Bussert's interests, a chance encounter in adult life provided the spark she needed to start her business.

From growing up with an interest in technology to moving into the business and healthcare spheres, Jessica has had a long road—often dealing with rampant transphobia since her transition in the mid-2000's. But now she's running a company aimed at improving the lives of wheelchair users by creating an ideal and affordable chair cushion.

Jessica had always been interested in the tech world. She taught herself about electronics when she was 10, how to code when she was 12, and by 15 had her own door-to-door IP consulting business.

"This was the very beginning of the personal computer age, and nobody knew how to use this thing," she said. "And I did."

Once she got to college, she turned it into a C Corporation to help support her young family. After running that business for years, she then led a Fortune 100 company's European business

consulting and professional services

Part of the reason Jessica wanted to sell her own company and work for someone else, she said, was due to England's passage of some of the first anti-bigotry laws that included transgender people.

"I knew I wanted to transition, but I was afraid to do so in the States and I thought moving to Europe, I'd finally be in a safer environment," she said. "Well, unfortunately, that didn't happen."

When Jessica transitioned about 20 years ago, she lost her job and her career—nobody would hire her. At the same time, a trans discrimination lawsuit she filed was gaining large amounts of publicity, taking away her option for a quiet life. She said paparazzi and news media followed her around and outed her to the world, derailing everything she'd worked for up to that point.

A little while later, Jessica said she and her family received notice from the British government they had 28 days to leave due to the loss of her work permit. They moved back home to the States and to a little log cabin in southern Indiana they had bought years before. Although Jessica and her family only intended to live there a few weeks, she could not obtain employment.

Jessica sank into a deep depression after two years of job searching. However, she began

to take note of her surroundings in her small town—no hospital, mostly volunteer emergency services and two ambulances for the whole county. She began volunteering with the fire department and gained a strong sense of purpose, which inspired her to go back to school and become first an EMT, and later an ER nurse.

After dealing with further transgender discrimination in the nursing field, Jessica found work at a small hospital, which she later left to pursue travel nursing.

On one of her travel gigs, she met a bilateral amputee veteran who was using a cheaply-made wheelchair. He came in with some of the worst bed sores she had ever seen and was septic due to infections and wounds. Once he was stabilized, Jessica learned how his doctor had prescribed a \$4,000 wheelchair cushion which he couldn't afford. His story moved her, and soon enough she was tinkering with potential ideas.

"That night I asked myself, 'You know, I've got all these years and years of engineering experience, and I've got this healthcare knowledge,'" she said. "'Could I design a better solution that can be manufactured and sold affordably?'"

In 2019, Jessica officially incorporated Wave Therapeutics and started working on creating the ideal wheelchair cushion nearly full time. She only took one other nursing contract after that—to work at a New York City hospital

during the peak of COVID-19.

There are two full-time people in the company, Jessica and her spouse and cofounder, Sharon Bussert, along with a handful of part-time workers.

Sharon met Jessica in a chance encounter when a northern Indiana snowstorm forced recent college graduate Sharon to take the bus one day, and Jessica, who was still in college at the time, was waiting for it at the same stop. The pair were friends for a while according to Sharon, and then began dating.

Wave Therapeutics isn't the first business they've run together. Sharon said she had a skillset Jessica needed—more experience working behind the scenes on technical and financial aspects—which made them a great match for working together.

With chair cushions on the market running up high costs, one of Wave Therapeutics' main focuses is making sure an affordable product is available to everyone, not just for those who already have major injuries and can more easily get costs covered by insurance.

"I believe that if we can get this project launched and into market, it will change the standard of care for pressure injury prevention," Sharon said.

As of now, they've done over 500 customer discovery interviews and created 10 generations of prototypes. In their early tests, Jessica said Wave Therapeutics' cushion delivers almost two times as much oxygen to affected cells as the current market-leading product.

The cushion is not on the market yet, with fundraising being the biggest limiting factor. They now are dealing with outside investors, with some even telling Jessica they are "not going to get involved in that culture war," and stepping away.

Beyond this first product, Jessica has big dreams for what Wave Therapeutics can accomplish in the future. They're looking into creating hospital beds, products for surgical suites and even items for a mass consumer market, such as comfort devices for long haul truckers or anyone sitting for long periods of time.

Jessica and her family moved to Chicago's West Loop area about a year-and-a-half ago. Since coming to the city, they've been able to find more resources for LGBTQ+ business owners and trans folks in general.

As one of few trans women in business leadership positions, Jessica said she'd like to see more opportunities with adequate support for trans folks to realize their own dreams.

"The far majority of us are either unemployed or underemployed," she said. "I've got friends that have doctorates that are flipping burgers just to pay bills. It's such an incredible waste of resources."