

# WINDY CITY TIMES

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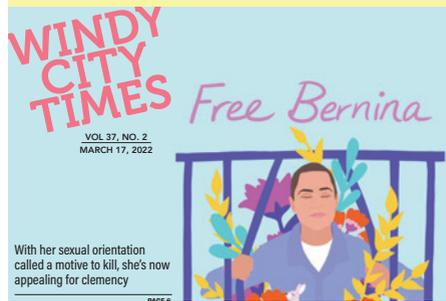
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# Jaylin McClinton

## Aiming for history in Cook County commissioner race

BY ANDREW DAVIS

Jaylin McClintock is running for the Cook County commissioner representing the 5th District—and, in so doing, is aiming for history.

Should he be elected, McClintock will be the first Black, openly gay Cook County and the second openly LGBTQ+ commissioner overall, after current commissioner Kevin Morrison—and he has already garnered the support of politicians like state Rep. Lamont Robinson, who has made history himself as the first Black, openly gay person in his position.

McClinton, who's about to graduate from law school, recently talked with *Windy City Times* about the reasons behind his run as well as things he's discovered about himself.

**Windy City Times: This is your first time running for something this important. Tell me a couple of the lessons you've learned so far in running this campaign.**

Jaylin McClintock: I think it's interesting because I've hovered around politics and public service my entire life, and I will tell you that one thing I realized very quickly is that being an operative and being a candidate are completely different. For me, some of the early values that have resonated [with me] are remaining steadfast in my convictions. Many people are so disenchanted with our democracy that when I'm knocking on doors, they're slammed in my face because people are so frustrated with the system and with the rampant neglect and corruption. Having grit and not feeding into the idea of rejection [are important].

I think it's also important to surround yourself with people who are truly supportive because politics can be lonely. For the better part of January and February, I was out knocking on doors in 19-degree weather just to get the minimum number of signatures—and that process is very lonely. You learn who your real friends are. But I'm excited about the opportunity to represent my community, which has raised me for 28 years.

Having a true commitment to community is so important. Frankly, I could choose to be anywhere in the world right now, right? I could be in New York City, California or Detroit—but there was something about being in this community that has always stood out to me. That's why I came back to Chicago after working in D.C.

**WCT: You're in Roseland. Why did you decide**

**to run for commissioner instead of an office that could more directly impact your community, like alderman?**

JM: That's a great question and it's one I get asked often. I think this region of Chicago and Cook County is one that's been neglected and ignored. I've always been infatuated by policy and this idea of being a lawyer-legislator—like Barack Obama and Abner Mikva—would allow [me] to help fundamentally change people's lives. I see it even more with people like Mondrae Jones so being an alderman never jumped out to me because I see these policy role models and what they do.

While there's an opportunity to impact policy, the role of alderman (quite frankly) is administrative in the sense that you're dealing with people's personalities and attitudes as they relate to their trash pickup, streetlights, tree removal, etc. I just didn't feel that was the right entry point for me, but I'm certainly looking forward to working with our next alderman, as the current one [Carrie Austin] has announced her retirement. Similarly, Deborah Sims [the current commissioner] is retiring, so I think there's an opportunity in this region to elect someone who's going to show up for the residents of the 5th District.

**WCT: If Commissioner Sims decided not to retire, would you still run?**

JM: Public service is something I've been thinking about actively for some time now, and in 2022 I was already contemplating a run for some office. This was one of the positions on the table for me. It just so happened that the stars aligned and she announced her retirement.

**WCT: I looked at your website, and did not see any issues on your platform. Candidates say they want to help people—but I don't know specifically HOW you want to help people.**

JM: Yes, and my website will be undergoing a facelift shortly. This first phase is about introducing myself to people.

There are four to five pillars. The first is healthcare. Simply put, we're still in a pandemic and it's affected Black and LGBTQ people disproportionately. Working to get out of it is a huge priority—and what better place to do that than at the place that [involves] the health and hospital systems? This district also has an overwhelming senior population. I live with my grandparents and I'm a caregiver to one who has Alzheimer's—so you better believe they're going to be senior

advisors to me about issues that affect that population in my district.

[Also], looking at the healthcare system, it'll be important to make sure that funding really supports our hospitals. Every time I look up, Roseland Hospital is on the chopping block. When you hear community members talk about the hospital, it's an asset—but they don't even want to go to the hospital to get service. We have to fix that.

I know *Windy City Times* caters to the LGBTQ population and, in that vein, we need to make sure medical professionals have the tools and the training to interface and interact with trans youth and LGBTQ people.

In addition, the county board recently passed an \$8-billion budget—and I have to wonder how much of that is going to the 5th District. Residents can expect me to be a true advocate for them about [bringing] revenue to the area in an equitable manner. I don't want them to get the short end of the stick.

Beyond that, there are wages. We're talking about a minimum wage of \$15/hour but, frankly, we need to be talking about more than that. We need to create diverse pathways for revenue.

Also, there are public safety and criminal-system reform, right? Having a voice that has been on both sides of the system—as I have, as a law student—is important. I've worked in my law school's criminal-defense clinic to advocate on behalf of my clients, and in my law firm, I'm doing plaintiff work for consumers. And there's the weight of being a Black man and interfacing with the criminal legal system, right? My mom and I have been pulled over simply just jamming to tunes; that adds a new layer to making decisions on the county level. I absolutely want to have safe neighborhoods but, with that, I don't think we should punish our way to public safety.

Now is the time to elect people who are going to reimagine what public safety and the criminal legal system are going to look like. Accountability is important, but we also need to invest in initiatives that really get to the root causes of why people commit some of these crimes in the first place; for example, people need access to mental-health services.

Quickly, there are two other areas. One is climate change. Cook County has jurisdiction over forest preserves; we need to think about how we use the space. And corruption needs to be tackled. Every time I look at the headlines, Chicago



Jaylin D. McClinton.  
Photo courtesy of  
McClinton

is in the news for corruption. There are a lot of things that can be done on the county level to curb corruption and bring in good government practices. It's not lost on me that the current incumbent is leaving after 28 years—my entire life—with a credible retaliation claim against her.

It's time for a leader with a fresh face and new perspectives.

**WCT: There's been a lot of criticism leveled at Cook County State's Attorney Kim Foxx. How do you think she's doing?**

JM: I would say State's Attorney Foxx is doing a good job, but that's a tough job. I'm not going to shy away from the fact that I supported her recent election. The voters have choices, right? They knew exactly what they were getting because she talked about all the things she wanted to do. With that, her job is very challenging and you're not going to solve everything overnight. In a system that's so complex, a lot of things come at you all at once.

As a Cook County commissioner, I certainly look forward to being a partner to promoting accountability and justice in a system where we may disagree.

**WCT: These past couple years have involved a pandemic for all and a racial awakening for some. There's been a lot of time for self-reflection. What have you learned about yourself these past two years?**

JM: It's interesting that you mention this racial point. I've been Black my entire life; obviously, that's not going to change. The racial [aspect] has never faded me; I'm excited with respect to truth and reconciliation. As long as Black people were held in bondage and mutilated throughout history, the longer we avoid [confronting] those things, the longer we're going to be in this cycle that we're in. Right now, there's a real opportunity to address those things, in my private life and as a public servant.

I've always had something to say, but I've always been timid about how I say it. These last two years have given me a platform and a voice to speak about who I am and the challenges our city, county, state and country are facing.

I'm excited to be the graduation speaker at my elementary school this year. I've been asked before but I always [declined] because I didn't know what to say to people. Now, I've challenged myself and I know I have a lot to say.

See <https://www.jaylindmcclinton.com/>

# Openly gay meteorologist makes play for 17th District congressional seat

BY MATT SIMONETTE

There has not been a meteorologist who has served in Congress in about half a century, said Eric Sorensen, an openly gay meteorologist who previously worked in broadcasting in various markets in northwest Illinois.

"With all the climate change challenges that we have, we need a meteorologist," Sorensen told Windy City Times. He is currently running for the 17th congressional district seat being vacated by U.S. Rep. Cheri Bustos, who announced her retirement in April 2021.

Bustos' announcement coincided with a pivotal moment for Sorensen, who lives in Moline and had been a broadcast meteorologist there for 11 years.

"Everybody in television has their 'contract year,' and [2021] was the year for me," he recalled. "I had to think about, 'Where am I called to serve?' I had to do a lot of soul-searching to be able to say, 'I have accomplished all of the things I want to do in my career in 22 years, but now I feel that, [since] the community has continued to support me all this time, I need to continue to support them.'"

He speaks fondly his broadcasting career in Illinois. In the early '00s, Sorensen took a \$12,000 pay cut to take a job in Rockford, his hometown, a few years after his employers at a Texas station told him he had to remain closeted in order to keep his job. He was already out to his family, and was determined not to hide his sexuality from the public any more.

"There's something about working in your hometown," he said. "I couldn't not be myself, because I was reporting the weather not only to my community, but my family. I was my authentic self. You know what happened? Nobody cared. Everyone accepted me."

Sorensen has been equally out since moving to Moline: "People know the name of my partner here, and the names of our two dogs."

Beyond climate change, Sorensen is now campaigning on a platform that includes strengthening healthcare access, investing in education resources, creating sustainable jobs and continuing to address the COVID-19 pandemic. He's especially passionate about connecting with students, he



Eric Sorensen.  
Photo courtesy of Joseph Goldberg

said, noting that the young people of today may just be the generation that makes discoveries for tornado detection or cancer cures, for example.

"Who is it going to be that does that?" Sorensen asked. "It's somebody who could be in a fifth-grade class today. We've got to make sure that we make it so that they have every opportunity. I don't want to see one child fall through the cracks. ... Education is super-important to me."

Sorensen has also served on the boards of Clock, Inc., an LGBTQ community center in Rock Island, Illinois; and The Project of the Quad Cities, a Moline-based mental-health services agency focused on people living with HIV as well as LGBTQ community members and people impacted by crime.

"I've always been connected to what's going on in my community," he said. "That's because I've been [a] witness to just about every newscast, every day. ... I've been the meteorologist who has played backup to the local newscasters, and been understanding of what's going on."

See [ericforillinois.com](http://ericforillinois.com).

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# With her sexual orientation called a motive to kill,

## Free Bernina



Illustration by Shirien Damra

BY CHLOE HILLES

*This story was initially produced by Injustice Watch, [www.injusticewatch.org/](http://www.injusticewatch.org/), a nonprofit newsroom focused on exposing institutional failures that obstruct justice and equality. Subscribe to its weekly newsletter.*

Prosecutors in Bernina Mata's 1999 murder trial made an unusual claim about her motive to kill: the fact that she identified as a lesbian.

Troy Owens, then an assistant state's attorney in Boone County, Illinois, prosecuted the case. He alleged that Mata was "a hardcore lesbian" who decided to kill John Draheim after he made a pass at her at a local bar in Belvidere, outside Rockford.

"A normal heterosexual woman would not be so offended by such conduct as to murder," Owens argued at Mata's trial.

Mata's attorneys said she acted in self-defense after Draheim came back to her apartment and tried to rape her. The attorneys argued that her sexual orientation had nothing to do with her actions.

Mata's roommate at the time testified for the prosecution that Mata had told him she planned to murder Draheim because she was angry that he touched her at the bar. (He pleaded guilty to helping dispose of the body and was sentenced to four years in prison.) The jury sided with the prosecution and sentenced Mata to death. In 2003, then-Gov. George Ryan commuted her sentence to life in prison, along with the sentences of everyone else on death row in Illinois.

In 2006, an appeals court found there was sufficient evidence to prove that Mata had planned the murder in advance.

Now, Mata's lawyers are asking Gov. J.B. Pritzker to grant her release from prison to fix what they call a "horrendous wrong." They filed a petition for executive clemency Tuesday. The petition will now go to the Illinois Prisoner Review Board, which will hold a hearing in April and then make a recommendation to Pritzker.

"Essentially, our criminal legal system is replicating the very forces and dynamics and oppression that some of us say we're against," said Joey Mogul, a partner at the People's Law Office who has represented Mata since 2002. "I think Bernina Mata's story exemplifies that — how racism and anti-lesbian oppression was used to incarcer-

# she's now appealing for clemency

ate and try to kill her.”

Owens, who is now an attorney in private practice, said in an interview with Injustice Watch the arguments he made at trial about her lesbian identity were “not biased.”

A dozen local organizations are backing Mata's bid for clemency, and advocates are working to support her through the process and raise awareness about her case.

“These last 23 years have been very hard for me,” Mata wrote in a letter to her supporters in October. “I am not the same person I was all those years ago. I am 51 years old now and would really love a second chance at life.”

But Mogul and the rest of Mata's “freedom team” face long odds in their fight for her release. Since 2014, Illinois governors have granted less than 10% of clemency petitions that they've reviewed, according to an analysis of the data from the Prisoner Review Board through October 2021. In just the past two years, Pritzker has granted over 90 commutations — which is over three times more than have been granted in the previous decade — but still a small percentage of the requests that he has received.

Women with history of abuse are more vulnerable to incarceration

Mata is one of 44 women serving life sentences in Illinois as of September. Like many other incarcerated women, Mata is a survivor of abuse. She was sexually abused as a child by her father and stepfather, Mogul said.

Mata's attorneys say Draheim was trying to rape Mata at the time of the murder. The clemency petition cites his history of domestic violence, including a 1995 conviction for domestic battery and an order of protection filed against him by his ex-wife in 1997.

Before Mata went on trial for Draheim's murder, a forensic psychologist examined her and determined that she was suffering from rape trauma syndrome, post-traumatic stress disorder, and had flashbacks of her abusive father at the time of the crime, according to Mogul.

Women and members of the LGBTQ community who have experienced abuse are more vulnerable than men to arrest and incarceration, said attorney Rachel White-Domain, director of the Women & Survivors Project at the Illinois Prison Project and part of Mata's legal team. The pattern is known as the “abuse-to-prison pipeline.”

Research shows that most women in prison have experienced abuse or trauma. According a

report by the Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority in 2010 ([www.jrsa.org/awards/winners/10\\_Victimization\\_Help\\_Seeking\\_Behaviors\\_Female\\_Prisoners\\_Illinois.pdf](http://www.jrsa.org/awards/winners/10_Victimization_Help_Seeking_Behaviors_Female_Prisoners_Illinois.pdf)) — the most recent on the subject — 99% of incarcerated women in Illinois reported having experienced emotional, physical, and/or sexual abuse at some point in their lives.

A recent report by the Sentencing Project, a nonprofit research organization that promotes criminal justice reform, suggests that women face gender-based stigmas and biases in the courts that can affect their sentencing outcomes. Those biases are compounded for women of color, such as Mata, who is Latinx, Mogul said.

Mata's attorneys say that happened in her case. The prosecutors, judge, and jury failed to take her history of abuse into account, instead relying on outdated and incorrect stereotypes about her lesbian identity, Mogul said.

“If it wasn't for these ways of demonizing her based on her race and sexual identity, she never would have been charged with capital murder,” Mogul said. “She would have never been given a death sentence, let alone have a life sentence, and it's likely she could be out to this day.”

Owens defended his handling of the case and his use of Mata's sexual orientation as a motive for murder.

“If there was a heterosexual motive to kill, we would have argued that — if it existed,” Owens said. “If there was any other basis to argue that she had to kill, then we would have used that as a basis for motive.”

Clemency has an established history with lawyers and abolitionists as a tool to free criminalized survivors of abuse. In the late 1980s, as self-defense laws changed nationally, clemency campaigns for “battered women” began popping up in various states, White-Domain said. She said the Illinois Clemency Project for Battered Women had dozens of successes in the 1990s.

More recently, “participatory defense campaigns” have been an abolitionist organizing strategy to support survivors, especially people of color and members of the LGBTQ community. Groups like Love & Protect, a Chicago organization that supports criminalized survivors, have successfully helped free survivors, such as Marissa Alexander, Tewkunzi Green, and Bresha Meadows.

Effective defense campaigns demonstrate care for incarcerated people through letter-writing

campaigns, prison visits, and financial support, according to members of Love & Protect. They also work to raise public awareness about a case and push for legal remedies, such as getting prosecutors to drop charges, asking courts to review a wrongful conviction, or petitioning a governor to commute a sentence.

“Clemency is an extremely proper vehicle to address exactly the sort of problems that we see in Bernina's case — mainly not recognizing or understanding trauma and abuse and how they can affect someone's mindset,” White-Domain said. “I think there's agreement that we have come a very, very long way since 1998 on issues like that.”

## ‘A check on the excesses of the judicial system’

Illinois abolished discretionary parole in 1978, which means that people serving life sentences, such as Mata, have only one avenue for release: executive clemency.

The Illinois constitution gives the governor broad powers to grant pardons, which eliminate a person's criminal record (usually after the state releases them from prison), and commutations, which shorten a person's sentence.

“It's supposed to be a check on the excesses of the judicial system,” White-Domain said.

But historically, governors have denied clemency petitions far more often than they've granted them.

Since 2004, Illinois governors have granted about 1,150 pardons and 117 commutations out of more than 11,000 clemency petitions heard by the Prisoner Review Board. More than 75% of the commutations over that period were granted by Pritzker from January 2020 through October 2021. (The Prisoner Review Board did not respond to our request for updated data.)

Since he came into office in January 2019, Pritzker has granted more than 200 pardons and nearly 100 commutations, according to the data from the Prisoner Review Board. That's about one-quarter of the petitions that he has acted upon. Many of those came as the Covid-19 pandemic swept through prisons last year, killing at least 88 incarcerated people. Pritzker also pardoned more than 11,000 people for marijuana possession in December 2019, on the eve of cannabis legalization in the state, the Chicago Tribune reported. But those pardons are not included in the Prisoner Review Board's data.

The Prisoner Review Board heard about 650 clemency petitions per year, on average, from 2004 to 2019. The board makes a confidential recommendation to the governor, who has no deadline to decide.

Former Gov. Bruce Rauner, a Republican, approved less than 5% of clemency petitions that he reviewed, according to an Injustice Watch analysis of the data. From 2009 to 2015, former Gov. Pat Quinn, a Democrat, approved 25% of clemency petitions that he reviewed, many of which were backlogged from his predecessor, former Gov. Rod Blagojevich. Blagojevich, a Democrat who had his sentence on federal corruption charges commuted last year by former President Donald Trump, granted 65 pardons. That was less than 1% of petitions heard by the Prisoner Review Board during his six years in office, according to the Prisoner Review Board data.

Filing for clemency is typically the last option for incarcerated people after they've exhausted all avenues for appeal. Many incarcerated people file clemency petitions without the help of an outside attorney, said Anthony Jones, a paralegal who served almost 30 years in prison. He helped dozens of other prisoners file clemency petitions while he was in Stateville Correctional Center, he said. Those petitions are less likely to be approved but no less worthy of mercy, said Jones, whose petition for clemency was granted by Pritzker last year. He currently works as a community educator at the Illinois Prison Project.

While incarcerated at Logan Correctional Center in Lincoln, Illinois, Mata received her GED certificate, has taken college courses, trained service dogs, and helped care for incarcerated people with disabilities, Mogul said. Her freedom team hopes that her accomplishments in prison, along with the details of her prosecution, will be enough to convince the Prisoner Review Board and Pritzker to give her a chance at freedom.

“We're really fortunate that we have this tremendous team of people who are supporting Bernina and wrapping their arms around her,” Mogul said, “and showing the (Prisoner Review Board) that she is a valuable human being, like all human beings, that she's loved, that she's cared for.”

**Chloe Hilles is a senior at Northwestern University studying journalism and political science. She was an intern at Injustice Watch in Fall 2021.**

# PASSING THE TORCH

## How generations of trans women approach activism, advocacy

BY MAX LUBBERS

As part of an older generation of transgender women in Chicago (including icon Gloria Allen), advocate Channyn Lynne Parker knows the work will outlast her. That's why she thinks of advocacy like a marathon, not a sprint—and believes that in order to win, trans leaders must continuously pass the torch.

"Oftentimes, we say things like, 'I am lighting the path for the generations to come,'" Parker said. "But I think what's more appropriate to say is 'I am giving this generation to come the fire to light their own path.'"

Reaching across generations, trans women of color continue to light the way toward liberation. But the fight is not as easy as the metaphor might paint it.

As Parker first began her advocacy more than a decade ago, she had no model to turn toward. Trans visibility was low, and trans women were excluded from leadership in many service organizations. To Parker's knowledge, she was one of the first to hold a title. In that tenuous atmosphere, she knew what needed to be said and done—but had to walk a balance.

"It's not that my generation is complicit, but we were more afraid," she said. "Repercussions were great. Who can honestly blame a person for choosing survival amid oppression?"

They did what they could, she said—and now, she is thankful to see younger generations building on that work. The goal has shifted from surviving to thriving.

However, many of the systemic issues that faced Parker's generation persist today, with trans women of color continuing to experience housing insecurity, employment discrimination and high levels of violence.

To address these issues, there needs to be community-based and community-centered solutions, said activist LaSaia Wade. In 2017, she founded Brave Space Alliance, the first Black- and trans-led center on the South Side.

While she holds a lot of respect for older generations, Wade also said she's learned what not to do from them. If the world is changing, she said she wants to change with it—and to push the boundaries herself.

Now in her early 30s, she began activism in her college years, but her work has taken on new meaning after her son was born in 2020. She fights for herself and other trans women in Chicago and beyond, but she also fights for the generation to come, wanting a better world for her child.

"As of right now, the world sees him as a Black boy, so what are all the steps that I could pos-



During the 2021 Trans Day of Remembrance, younger activists honored Lia Stokes, Iyanna Frantz, Reyna Ortiz and Trisha Lee Holloway. Photo by Max Lubbers

sibly do to make sure when he hits 12 years old, he won't be seen as an enemy to the city or the state?" she said. "What am I doing to make sure that not only my LGBTQ youth are not going to be targeted...but also make sure I'm including their voices?"

As Wade looks to the generations below her, Parker is now looking to the generations above. She said many services are youth-focused, and as trans people begin to get older, they may not have the privilege of family networks to support them or access to retirement money. When they enter into senior care, they may detransition in order to avoid harassment by their caretakers.

"What does retirement look like for a 60-year-old trans woman?" Parker said. "We're headed for

a crisis. We are living a lot longer than we once did, and that's a beautiful thing, but it also begs the question of what to do for the seniors to live a comfortable life."

The needs of one generation of trans women may not be the same as the next—and their definitions of transness and language they use to describe their experiences also differ. Because of that, Wade said it can sometimes be painful to engage in intergenerational conversations. She lacks the energy to debate some beliefs held by older trans women, even if she understands their perspectives were shaped by another time.

Meanwhile, older trans women may be accused of being "has-beens" or harboring jealousy toward younger women, said Lia Stokes, also known

as the performer Amailia Black. She said the community could benefit from some mutual respect between generations.

"I hope that [younger women] will never forget to remember that there were some very powerful women that came before them, and to never lose sight of that journey that we traveled," she said. "Oftentimes, when someone older tries to give someone younger some advice, especially in the trans community, it's very quickly pushed aside."

Rather than listen to simply respond to one another, people need to listen to hear each other, Parker added. Though younger generations shouldn't forsake the lessons of their elders, they should mold those lessons to their own purposes,



Brave Space Alliance founder LaSaia Wade.  
Photo by Matt Simonette

she said. It's great to push forward with progress, but she hopes youth will take some time to remind older trans women that they're still needed and they still matter.

This intergenerational solidarity is important, said activist Zahara Bassett. For years, she had felt alone. When she realized that other people shared her experiences, and there was a gap in resources and services for trans individuals on the West Side, she founded Life Is Work.

But without the support of older trans women to guide and encourage her, Bassett would have had a much harder time navigating the world of activism.

"I'm surrounded by generations of trans leaders that poured into me, that pushed me and helped me thrive as a Black trans woman in this work," Bassett said. "To have that circle of women who call me their own...I've learned a great deal of knowing how to lead with love."

Bassett hopes to continue the trend and give support to younger generations. But regardless of age, these women each hold a voice and perspective to contribute. As they shared the best advice they'd given or received, a steady theme arose across generations: Don't doubt yourself. Don't lose hope. Instead, when it's time, pass the torch.

"As much pain, as much hurt, as many deaths, just don't stop," Wade said. "We have proven as trans people, we do not stop. Regardless of what it looks like, we continue to grow."

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BOOKS

# VOICING HISTORY

Chicago historian “invites the audience to the party” that is queer history

BY KAYLEIGH PADAR

The book *Voices in Isolation: 4 Queer Plays at a Social Distance* is a collection of stories about the LGBTQ+ community designed to preserve “fading memories” of queer history and experiences by “inviting the audience to the party,” said author and Chicago historian Owen Keehnen.

The pieces memorialize vibrant queer spaces and figures—such as The Belmont Rocks and the iconic drag performer Wanda Lust—through characters speaking about their personal experiences almost as if they’re gossiping with the audience.

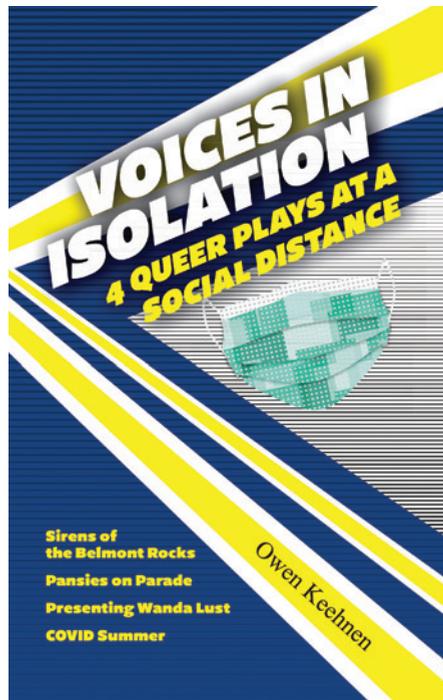
“A lot of times, the way that we’re given history, especially as queer people, is sort of dusty,” Keehnen said. “I wanted to show that our history is full of a lot of fascinating people and let them tell their stories.”

The four performance pieces fill in personal details about what it’s been like to live as a queer person at various points in time.

“For me, it’s much easier to connect with history if I can connect with the people,” Keehnen said. “I want to know where the people went to have fun and what they did on the weekends. I think that when you preserve history in a way that captures the people you connect across generations.”

By highlighting everyday experiences in history, Keehnen hopes he can help queer people today “get a glimpse of how much they can learn from LGBTQ+ seniors.”

“Writing about the fun parts of being queer back then, I hope can be a bridge or an avenue of



communication between the generations,” Keehnen said. “The generations seem like they have so much in common but it’s like we’ve adopted that generational gap from the other world.”

The Belmont Rocks—a stretch of grass and stone along Lake Michigan between Belmont and Diversey—were one lost space Keehnen brought

back to life in the book by weaving together the voices of various characters reflecting on spending time together.

The space was “a sanctuary” that formed “organically” in the ‘60s, according to Keehnen. It was bulldozed in 2003 as part of a project to safeguard against shoreline erosion.

“We claimed this land right in the middle of the city for ourselves,” Keehnen said. “Just the fact of being LGBTQ+ people hanging out in the sun in a time when our bars still had blackened windows was so empowering psychologically for people.”

Keehnen started working on the book before the pandemic, but he said the current political moment made him feel that passing on queer history was more important than ever.

In the preface of the book Keehnen explains the pieces are “an attempt to explore an added queer aspect to social distance in all its forms—from assimilation to separatism, from past to present, from onstage to offstage, and from whom we are to who society defines us as being.”

He hopes the book can provide a fuller picture of the LGBTQ+ community’s history and all its quirks.

“For example, I tried to show in the piece “Pansies on Parade” how there was this stretch of time where nothing was hotter than seeing a man in a tuxedo being as effeminate as he possibly could,” Keehnen said. “So much of our past is just glossed over, and I think remembering every part of it enriches it. It’s all part of our story and the more we get down on paper, the better.”



Owen Keehnen.  
Photo by Israel Wright

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# BRANCHING OUT

## Chicago-based queer writer Julian Randall and 'Pilar Ramirez'

BY ANDREW DAVIS

Julian Randall—a Black queer Dominican American writer who lives in Chicago—has, up to this point, been known for his award-winning poems that cover a wide range of themes.

However, he now has released a novel, *Pilar Ramirez and the Escape from Zafa*. The contemporary middle-grade fantasy centers on the 12-year-old Chicago-based title character, who searches for answers connected to the disappearance of her cousin Natasha—who vanished in the Dominican Republic 50 years ago, during the Trujillo dictatorship. Ramirez lands on Zafa, an island with fantastical creatures—and a magical prison where her cousin is being held captive.

**Windy City Times:** This book is a bit different than your previous work. What compelled you to go this route?

Julian Randall: In 2018, I put out my first book of poems, called *Refuse*. And throughout the time of that tour, there'd be parents who brought in their kids—including multiracial families. People would say, "I can't wait until my [child] is old enough to read this." On one hand, I was really excited but I also thought about adolescent anxiety and pain; I kinda wrote this book to help that kid. I started thinking, "How can I take my gifts and help kids while they're still kids?"

I eventually linked up with my amazing agent, Patrice Caldwell, and she asked me if I wanted to pitch a middle-grade Dominican fantasy. I have to say that I love poetry. I'm not a super-spiritual person, but I have to say that writing for young people has me feeling what people who do believe in spirituality call a "divine purpose." It feels like what I was built to do.

**WCT:** One of the things I noticed about the book is that the text is not quite Spanglish, but there are Spanish words [interspersed] throughout. Was that to reflect your background, to expand the readers' vocabulary or something else?

JR: There are two tiers to this answer. On [one] level, it's how Pilar's voice appeared to me. And I was able to build on the [source] of this voice. Pilar grew up in a household that was full of Spanish but she doesn't necessarily have a full grip on fluency. Like many third-genera-



Julian Randall.

Photo by Johnny Lee Chapman III

so important—and being in Chicago helps Pilar understand not only the world she's born into but the world she transitions into.

**WCT:** You wrote a poem called "Chicago," and there's a line that reads, "The city breathes too hard." What did you mean by that?

JR: "I am from Logan Square/in Illinois there are tornadoes/In Chicago the city breathes too hard/we make our own disasters."

What Lori Lightfoot said today is probably a good place to start with that. [WCT: What did she say?] Every time I see her talk, I feel that something bad is going to happen.

On a policy level, on an attitude level, there's just so much displacement that is happening inside the city that is the epicenter of dopeness in the modern world. We are in this constant struggle between people who are ruining the city and the folks who live in the city and who are trying to preserve. We have to breathe too hard because [those who are in charge] are not really listening.

**WCT:** How has sexuality informed your work?

JR: Yeah... This is something my partner was helping me make some sense of: For both of us, coming into our queerness is not just about sexuality but is about understanding every piece of information that has come into our trajectories. The world's trajectory and your own deserve to be questioned and reformatted in order to best serve you and your community.

I have all these different drafts of myself—including the days when I was supposedly straight—from which I can pull in order to [compose] characters and reimagine scenes. That period of reimagination allows me to accept my sexuality and to continuously reinvent myself so I understand myself. To quote Prince, "I am an experience."

**WCT:** I want to conclude this interview with a question I've asked a variety of people. People have had a lot of time to self-reflect these past two years thanks to COVID, and some have had a racial awakening. What have you learned about yourself during this time?

JR: Whoo... This is going to sound corny, but I learned a little bit more about the other side of my dream, and what it takes to sustain that is going to be way different than I had been living previously. What I mean is that I come from a regular family of really hard workers and hustlers—that Chicago work ethic. That carried me through for years and then I went to college; I became a writer but I didn't [abandon] that work ethic.

I think I also believed that gentleness was antithetical to progress. I have to reconceptualize what that means going forward. There's still so much more going on in my head that I want to show people.

**More about Julian Randall as well as works (including *Pilar Ramirez and the Escape from Zafa*) is at <https://juliandavidrandall.com/>. He can be found on Twitter @JulianThePoet.**

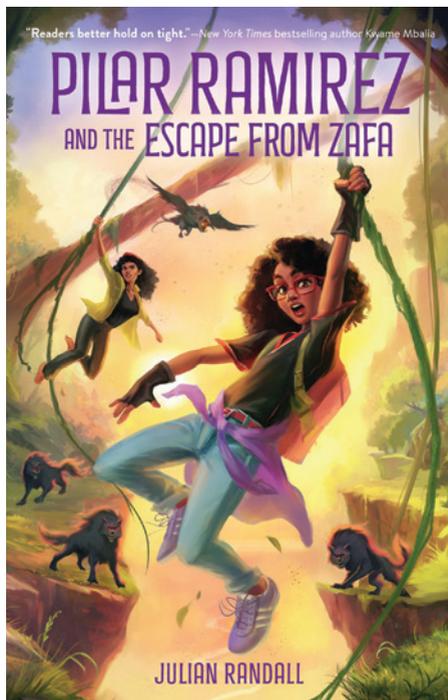


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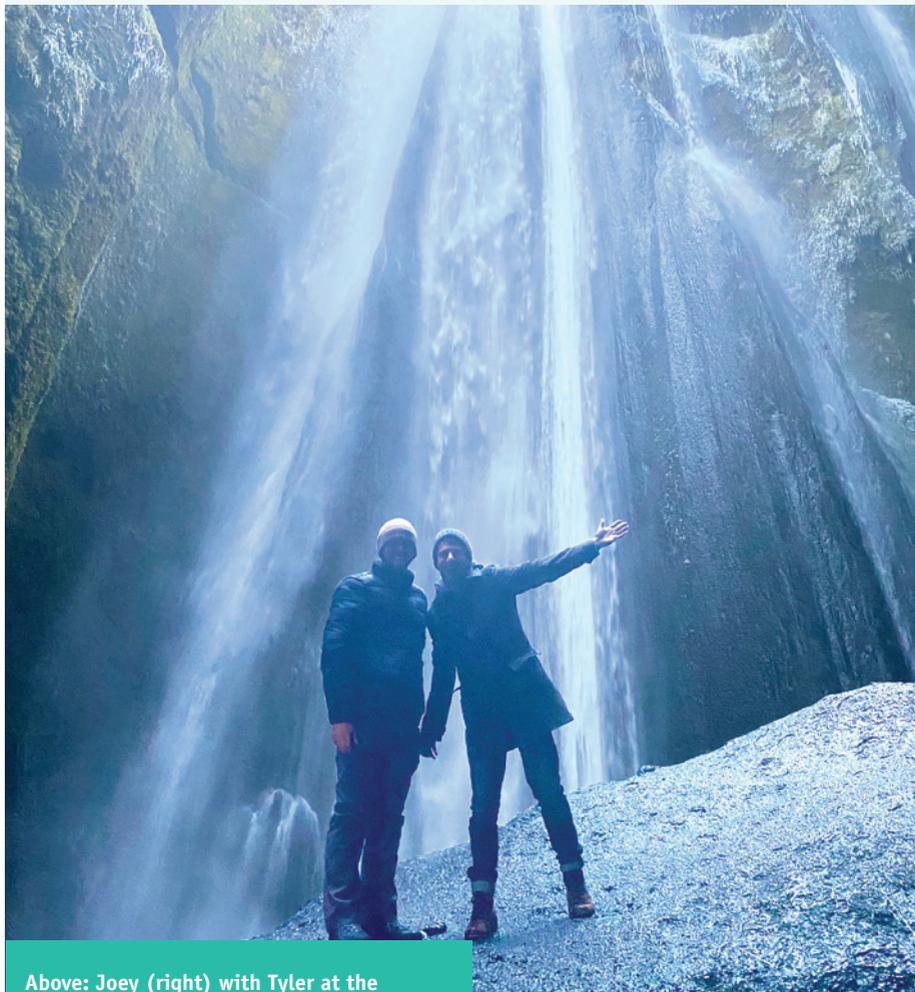
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# Pride Journey: ICELAND

BY JOEY AMATO



Above: Joey (right) with Tyler at the Seljalandsfoss and Skógafoss waterfalls.  
Below: Sun Voyager sculpture in Reykjavik.  
Photos by Joey Amato



The only way to describe Iceland is ... magical. It truly is. Iceland is like no other place I've visited in the world. It's topography, climate, people, culture, history, and nightlife blended together make Iceland a surreal adventure that everyone should experience at least once in their lifetime. In my case, this is my second visit to the country, and probably not my last.

The first time I set foot on the island, I was on a mission to see the elusive northern lights. While they evaded me during that visit, this time was different. I didn't see Aurora dancing through the sky, but I did see a hint of the lights, enough to make me stop and stare in awe of their beauty.

One of Iceland's many strengths is its people. I met an incredible group of people who helped make this visit extremely memorable, including openly gay Icelandic pop star Friðrik Ómar, who invited me to his Christmas concert. Although most of the concert was in sung in Icelandic, many of the songs were recognizable, including a fabulous version of Mariah Carey's "All I Want for Christmas". Friðrik was a former contestant on Eurovision, and it was easy to see why. His vocals and stage presence were extraordinary, reminiscent of George Michael.

Book your stay at the Reykjavik Konsulat hotel located in the heart of the downtown Reykjavik, just a short walk from all of the city's main attractions including Harpa concert hall, Sun Voyager and the iconic Hallgrímskirkja cathedral, the largest church in the country which towers over the center of Reykjavik. Its 240-foot-high tower provides a wonderful 360° view of the city. Visitors can either walk up the stairs to the top or pay a small fee to use the elevator.

Our spacious room at Reykjavik Konsulat included a walk-in shower, king bed with ultra-luxurious linens as well as a seating area. Every day the hotel offers a complimentary happy hour as well as a delicious breakfast buffet, featuring a variety of local specialties including smoked salmon. The hotel also offers a nice fitness center as well as bath house complete with sauna and hot tub. Don't get too excited, bath house means something completely different in Iceland than it does in the United States.

Going to Iceland in the winter is an adventure. It definitely isn't a relaxing trip; more like a journey to the most extraordinary ends of the earth you will ever discover. With that in mind, book a full day private excursion to the South Coast with Friend In Iceland. Our wonderful guide Gunnar picked us up from our hotel in a Mercedes mini-bus and we were off to explore a part of the country I hadn't been to on my prior visit.

The nearly 9-hour tour took us to Seljalandsfoss and Skógafoss waterfalls where we had the opportunity to stand at the base and feel the power of these natural wonders. Next, we journeyed up to the top of a cliff which provided views of the ocean as well as a rock formation jutting out into the sea which connects to Reynisfjara black sand beach. Words can't describe how beautiful this moment was. I'm almost in tears again just thinking about it. The waves

crashing on the beach coupled with a clear sky and mesmerizing sunrise made for an absolutely majestic view.

Gunnar then brought us to a cute restaurant where we had lunch which consisted of pizza and a sandwich, not typical Icelandic cuisine, but it was delicious non the less.

Reykjavik is home to one gay bar, called Kiki. Although it was closed during this visit due to COVID-19 restrictions, we did happen to meet the owner who invited us back to the country this summer for their pride celebration. 2022 marks the 23rd annual Reykjavik Pride, which is held in early August. The festival attracts over 100,000 people to the city for a week-long celebration including a festival, parade, and numerous parties.

Wake up early the next morning and get ready for your next Icelandic adventure in the Golden Circle. Although this region is easily drivable from Reykjavik in the summer, I wouldn't recommend venturing on your own during the winter months as many of the roads are icy and the weather can be quite spontaneous. One moment it will be sunny and then 30-minutes later you can find yourself in a winter storm with 40-mile per hour wind gusts.

Begin your Golden Circle tour with a trip to Thingvellir National Park, a UNESCO heritage site and home to Gullfoss, also known as the 'Golden Waterfall', one of the most beautiful and powerful waterfalls in Iceland. I recommend descended the stairs to the lower viewing area to really comprehend the size and scope of this natural treasure. Not too far away is Geysir, Iceland's version of Old Faithful. The geyser erupts about every 7 minutes, so keep your camera ready.

Finally, end your tour with a snowmobile ride on the Langjökull glacier. This is also something I didn't experience on my first visit, and I can honestly say it was one of the coolest (literally) experiences of my life. We had to jump off our luxurious tour bus and board a souped-up monster truck looking bus which transports you to the glacier where a team is ready to outfit you with protective gear and teach you how to use the snowmobiles. The hour tour of the glacier will make you feel like you were on another planet. There are points where the sky and the glacier meet, and you can't tell them apart. I was fooled by a few optical illusions a few times.

Iceland can be inexpensive to get to, but then very expensive while you are there, so please plan accordingly. Food and alcohol can add up really quickly, so pace yourself when visiting the bars. One of my favorite restaurants we visited in Reykjavik was Noodle Station. Guests can order soup three ways: with chicken, beef, or just vegetables. It is the perfect way to end a long day spent playing in the ice and snow and quite affordable. Do your research before visiting to find some of the city's hidden gems and cheap eats.

Icelandair offers direct flights to Reykjavik for relatively low prices from Boston, New York, Chicago, Raleigh-Durham, and a few other U.S. cities, so check their website regularly to catch a great deal.

Enjoy the journey!

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PHOTOGRAPHY

# STUD

## Fairy Stud Mother, Stud Model Project normalizing images of masculine-presenting people

BY KAYLEIGH PADAR

While she was growing up, Teresa Morcho “didn’t have the words” to describe the masculine parts of her identity. She just knew she hated wearing her white Confirmation dress so much that she showed up to prom in a suit.

“It was those little moments that I think about now,” Morcho remembered. “I knew that femininity wasn’t necessarily something for me. It was a constant battle.”

Now, dubbed by her coworkers the “Fairy Stud Mother,” Morcho helps to mentor and promote masculine-presenting people through the modeling organization she founded, the Stud Model Project.

The project aims to increase the visibility of people like her, who were assigned female at birth and have a masculine style. Morcho started the organization in 2012 after noticing it was difficult to find stock images of masculine women when she was working as a LGBTQ+ party promoter.

“It’s not exactly a modeling agency; instead, we develop you,” Morcho said. “We kind of try to connect all the dots and help people out.”

Morcho explained models can choose to buy their photos to build their own portfolios or allow the organization to edit the photos and create profiles for them. On the other side of things, the organization sells the images to companies, with a focus on “normalizing” masculine-presenting people in everyday advertisements.

“Imagine if you’re a transgender man and you’re pregnant and you need to look for an OBGYN, wouldn’t it be beautiful if you went on someone’s website and you saw someone that looked like you?” Morcho said. “I want you to drive down the highway and see a photo of a queer woman on a huge billboard or the side of a truck.”

For Morcho, the most rewarding part of her work is seeing the models bond with each other in an accepting space.



Stud Model Project. Photo by Teresa Morcho

“The model project allows me to honor that masculine energy because I know that there are people out there who just can’t do it,” Morcho said. “I want to normalize seeing this kind of group of people.”

Models who are in Morcho’s 12-month program have access to monthly training videos about all things fashion, beauty, skincare and modeling. They also receive both a remote challenge designed to bring models out of their comfort zones and two themed photoshoots each month.

“It became a network of fellowship, a community, and you can see that when they come together—it’s just so beautiful,” Morcho said. “They meet each other for the first time, and before you know it, this brotherhood happens, and that’s when my heart is like, ‘Oh, my babies!’”

As a mentor, Morcho also advocates for people to take care of their mental health and seek resources from people who are familiar with the Black LGBTQ+ community.

In addition to the Stud Model Project, Morcho

started her company Mopao, which helps businesses develop an online presence.

"Especially, in the Black community, they just lack the resources—or the knowledge, I should say—in the space of technology," Morcho said. "So, I try to fill that space in kind of a fun way."

Morcho explained activism is intertwined with each of her projects because she sees it as her duty.

She moved to the U.S. from Cameroon when she was 11, and said she's "almost embarrassed to say" it took her some time to understand the oppression Black people face in the United States. After doing her research, she started to better comprehend the racism she encountered, especially as a Black woman serving in the military and working in the tech industry.

Morcho said she "always volunteers to be in the room" to speak up for marginalized groups, since "there are so many boxes she checks" as a Black queer woman, an immigrant and a disabled veteran.

"Here I am, a girl from Africa living in America and getting to enjoy being an openly gay woman and not being killed for it," Morcho said. "How dare I live in this country, benefitting from what Black Americans went through so I could enjoy that privilege, knowing I have a strong voice and not using it to advocate?"

For more information about the Stud Model Project, see [studmodelproject.com/models](http://studmodelproject.com/models). For more information about Morcho's company, MAPAO, see [www.mopao.co/](http://www.mopao.co/).



Teresa Morcho. Photo courtesy of Morcho

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