Spring 2010

Fusion Spring 2010

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POSITIVE

But HIV only defines part of Aaron Darr’s past, present and future.

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PRAY AWAY YOUR GAY?
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...SPEAKING OF QUEENS
DANYEL VASQUEZ
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AND
BOYS WEARING ALMOST NOTHING!
ON THE BACK COVER (AND PAGE 24)
We congratulate Fusion Magazine for its contribution to the literary arts in our communities.

PFLAG Cleveland
2332 Delaware Drive
Cleveland Heights, OH 44106
Information Line: (216) 556-1701
www.pflagcleveland.org

Monthly meetings, 7:30 PM
2nd Tuesday, Trinity Cathedral, Cleveland

Monthly Support Group,
The Next Step Group &
Straight Spouse Network

PFLAG Akron
PO Box 5471
Akron, OH 44113
(330) 342-5825

Monthly meetings, 7:00 PM
3rd Thursday, North Springfield
Presbyterian church
671 Canton Road
pflagakron.org

PFLAG National
1101 14th Street NW, Suite 1030
Washington, DC 20005
(202) 638-4200
pflagakron.org
email: info@pflag.org

PFLAG-AKRON
Helping families in the Akron area since 1982.

PFLAG-CLEVELAND
Helping families in the Greater Cleveland area since 1985.

PFLAG promotes the health and well-being of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered persons, their families and friends through:

Support To cope with an adverse society.

Education To enlighten an ill-informed public.

Advocacy To end discrimination and secure equal rights.

PFLAG CLEVELAND & AKRON are recognized as 501 (c) 3 organizations; your gifts are tax deductible and greatly appreciated.
The mission of Community AIDS Network has always been to reduce the rate of infection with HIV in Summit, Portage, and Medina counties. The Akron Pride Center has been advocating for the LGBT community since 1998. Together, our two agencies will work to combat the many problems facing us today, from our continued fight against HIV to our struggle for equal rights. Through the hard work and dedication of our staff and numerous volunteers, every year we come a little closer to achieving our goal of a HIV free community. If you would like to help us, or volunteer in any way, please don’t hesitate to contact our office. We are always looking for energetic individuals with our mission.

FREE HIV testing is offered every semester at Kent State University. Please call the Office of Health Promotion for more information.

“Some see a hopeless end, while others see endless hope”
- Author Unknown
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52 Last Thought

Photograph by Kevin Stone

PHOTOGRAPH BY KEVIN STONE

On the Covers

< Aaron Darr by Tessa Bargaminier at Kent State University, April 7, 2010

< by Daniel R. Doherty at Kent State University, April 9, 2010 Underwear by AussieBum and American Apparel
STRIPPERS + DJs
Tuesdays & Thursdays
10 p.m. til close

PIANO BAR
Wednesdays & Fridays
9 p.m. til close

JAZZ TRIO
Thursdays 8 p.m. til 11 p.m. at Pec's

THEME PARTIES
EVERY SATURDAY
with live DJs on
Fridays & Saturdays

HOUSE PARTY
Sundays
at 11:30 with live DJ

POOL TOURNAMENT
Wednesdays 9 p.m.

SERVICE INDUSTRY nite
Monday with Ben

MONDAY–SUNDAY
4:00 p.m. til 2:30 a.m.
College ID Night every Monday
MISSION

According to Merriam-Webster Dictionary, fusion is “a merging of diverse, distinct or separate elements into a unified whole.” Fusion magazine addresses sexual minority issues within the general university population. The magazine strives to unify people of different backgrounds through education and awareness.

DONATIONS/SUBSCRIPTIONS
Donations can be sent to the address below, payable to Fusion magazine. Also, subscriptions are available for $10/year (two issues). Visit ThatGayMagazine.com for more information.

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This issue of Fusion magazine was made possible with the support of Campus Progress, a project of the Center for American Progress, online at CampusProgress.org. Campus Progress works to help young people — advocates, activists, journalists, artists — make their voices heard on issues that matter. Learn more at CampusProgress.org.

Congratulations to all students involved in producing print and electronic media. Your creativity, integrity and inclusiveness make us proud.

President Lester A. Lefton
and the President’s Office Staff
I still have the text message. It's a long one. I typed it up and saved it on my computer. Then I printed a copy to shove in my dresser drawer. "I'm sorry to have to do this through a text," it began. "I've been meaning to tell you for a while, and you probably already know."

I knew. I knew after the first sentence. I'd known for years really. "I'm gay."

But actually seeing the words made my heart jump. "I've already told Mom and Dad, and they're cool with it. You were the first person I wanted to tell, but I just couldn't. I'm sorry. Don't hate me."

Of course I hated her. How could she do this? Didn't she know it would be easier for everyone, for her especially, to just keep this a secret? Of course I knew she was gay, but why did we have to address it? Didn't she know what it meant to burden me with this confession?

It was the worst weekend of my early college career. My boyfriend of a whole two weeks had just dropped a bomb on me. He needed to "be closer to God" and didn't have time to see me anymore. I had a history test to study for, and my self pity over the breakup was making it difficult. I sat bleary-eyed in front of my laptop trying to remember the reasons for the Spanish American War when my phone vibrated, and I read Katie's text.

I read it once over. Then again. A third and fourth time.

A few months later, I would find my head again. I'd overreacted in the worst way possible and made coming out even more difficult for her. My sister and I have grown even closer since I received her text message three years ago.

She's part of the reason I wanted to work for this magazine. I was never homophobic or discriminatory before, but if it weren't for her, I never would have become invested in her community — one that is still fighting for acceptance and equality. She's enriched my life by challenging me and testing my character.

I hope the stories in this issue challenge you to think differently, to embrace someone different from yourself and to continue to love those people in your lives who have tested your character, gay or otherwise.
The Makings of a Queen
Danyel Vasquez is a Northeast Ohio institution with national recognition. Find out what drives this diva on Page 40, and log on to the website to watch videos and see photos of her interviews and performances. By Justin McCraw. Photos by Tessa Bargainnier.

From Taiwan to Kent State
Emily Inverso talks with a Kent State graduate student from Taiwan about his experience as a gay man here and there.

LGBTQ Student Center
See video and more photos from the opening of Kent State’s LGBTQ Student Center. Read about the center on the next page.

All in the Family
TransFamily Cleveland is a support group for transgendered and transsexual people, their families and their friends. Randy Rininger finds out what it’s all about.

Outlining All the Concerns
An essay by Thisanjali Gangoda on why gay marriage isn’t the end all, be all, and how the gay liberation movement has made America a better place, if only incrementally.

The New Face of Gay Politics
Justin McCraw explores the idea of a shift in how gay culture is perceived as the generation gap seems to grow wider and what effect this has on the national discourse for equal rights.

...and the latest LGBT news
Daily headlines and story updates from around the world.
The uncharacteristically warm Thursday will be remembered as a landmark victory for diversity at Kent State. Something like this had never really happened before for the LGBT community here. The excitement in the room that afternoon was palpable. There was a lot to celebrate. I was honored to have been invited to speak at the ceremony. During the course of a few months this past fall, administrators moved quickly to make Kent State’s LGBTQ Student Center a reality. The center “represents the bringing together of many people, many departments and many divisions,” said Molly Merryman, co-coordinator of the LGBT Studies minor. “What’s happened here is we’ve seen that this is a good idea and an idea people care about.”

Such top-down motivation for visible LGBT equality at Kent State had been notably absent. By the time Alfreda Brown, the university’s first vice president for diversity, equity and inclusion, took charge of inclusive excellence in October, discussions were already underway for a space that would primarily serve LGBT Studies minor students. This groundbreaking ceremony proved such rumors were a reality and showed progress after long-absent commitment.

“The new center will serve as a gathering place, offering a way for students to feel more connected at the university,” Brown said. Students will be the visionaries to make this space come alive. “We are really looking to students coming to talk to us and tell us what they need,” Merryman told the Stater.

President Lester Lefton voiced his support. Max Blachman, Sen. Sherrod Brown’s Northeast Ohio representative, reinforced his boss’ commitment to the community’s concerns. Dolores Noll, former Kent Gay Liberation Front adviser and Kent State professor emerita, took home the first Diversity Trailblazer Award. And Sue Doerfer, executive director of Equality Ohio, drove home the impact of what was happening at Kent State.

“Centers are those places ... where people can go when they’re not quite sure why they’re walking in that door,” she said. “They can walk in and see somebody else who’s like them. And get that sense of, ‘I’m not alone, there are others like me.’ And that initial point, that initial moment, is so, so important. If that was available to me in college, I can’t imagine how my life would’ve been different.”

After years of lip service, it was amazing to be part of a milestone in the quest toward recognition of all the diversity in our Kent State community. Here’s to the perseverance of that vision. We’re on our way, and we must keep moving forward. — Adam Griffiths

A SPACE TO GROW IN
The new Kent State LGBTQ Student Center, Room 226M in the Student Center, features original work by local artist Jeff Leadbetter.

THE MOMENT
‘AN IDEA PEOPLE CARE ABOUT’
Kent State’s LGBTQ Student Center opening — 03.11.2010

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY UNIVERSITY COMMUNICATIONS AND MARKETING
Passage of an anti-homosexuality bill in Uganda, same-sex wedding arrests in Malawi, LGBT-related mob violence in Kenya and torture in Senegal. These events are among many Africans have faced within the last few years involving LGBT rights.

An NPR story broadcasted in February said gay and lesbian relationships are illegal in more than 30 countries. These issues are not new, says Scott Long, LGBT program director for Human Rights Watch. Africans have been struggling with LGBT rights for a long time.

Uganda has seen the most recent repercussions concerning gay men and lesbians. The Anti-Homosexuality Bill in front of Parliament forbids the promotion of homosexuality and could result in the death penalty for those who participate in “aggravated homosexuality” — the charge for gays and lesbians who have sex with anyone under 18 and “serial offenders” of homosexuality.

The Anti-Homosexuality Bill and other LGBT issues can be attributed to two historical events, Long says. This includes the end of apartheid in South Africa and Zimbabwe President Robert Mugabe’s use of homophobia as a political tool. With the end of the apartheid, South Africa’s campaign placed sexual orientation within the constitution, giving more LGBT people protection. Long says it also stimulated some backlash. When Mugabe began using homophobia as a political tool, Long says it influenced African leaders in other countries such as Namibia, Zambia and Kenya to do the same.

“What Africans hear from their government, from preachers, from political leaders is that homosexuality is un-African,” Long says.

She says opinions toward gays are traditional. “Africa has a strong bond with tradition and allegiance,” she says. “(Being gay) is considered a sin. It’s a sin and that’s it.”

When Biwole found out her best male friend had slept with a man from the government, she says she couldn’t believe it. “I was so shocked because he was in a seven-year relationship with a girlfriend,” Biwole said.

This, she says, was her first encounter with someone in the LGBT community. “In the Bible, it says it is written that God loves man, but doesn’t love the sin,” she says. “This is exactly how I felt at that moment. I love him so much, but I didn’t like what he was doing.”

Biwole went on to explain that because of Cameroon’s culture and a lack of freedom of expression, her friend would have been isolated or rejected in society. She says he’s now in the process of finding a wife. Those who continue to identify themselves as gay or lesbian often hide their sexuality and lead a double life.

While speculative, Biwole and Long both think political corruption has something to do with the repressive attitudes in Africa. “A lot of people from the government are doing compromising stuff to keep their position,” Biwole says.

Despite all the anti-gay action out of Africa, one country acknowledges marriage for same-sex couples. South Africa became the first African country to legalize same-sex marriage in 2006. In March, a play, “Like Cain and Abel,” aimed to tackle homosexuality in black communities in the country.

“I think in a lot of places, there’s evidence of more accepting attitudes that go back a long way,” Long says. “And you do have countries like South Africa, which have really led the way globally in affording positive protection to people based on sexual orientation.”

Long says he believes the most important voices at this point are the African voices.

“| Country | Issue |
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<tr>
<td>NORWAY</td>
<td>Legalized same-sex marriage last January.</td>
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<tr>
<td>SWEDEN</td>
<td>Transgender people are now able to adopt any name, despite its perceived gender. Same-sex couples have been able to marry for a year.</td>
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<tr>
<td>AUSTRIA</td>
<td>The 18th European nation to recognize same-sex partners still doesn’t allow adoption or registration of partnerships at city hall.</td>
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<tr>
<td>CANADA</td>
<td>Made history during the Vancouver Olympic games in March when its government held the first Olympic Village party for the gay community.</td>
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‘HOMOSEXUALITY IS UN-AFRICAN’

As reports suggest increasing homophobia in Africa, Alyssa Newman reveals it’s nothing new.

ACROSS THE GLOBE
1. We don’t all eat hummus all the time. That being said, I love hummus.

2. We didn’t become lesbians because we hate dick. In fact, I love dick. I own 10 of them.

3. Natural deodorant doesn’t work. Sorry, just had to get that out there.

4. We love Rachel Maddow. (Best out of her TV drag.) It’s true. We do.

5. We use Craigslist a lot for anonymous sex. OK, we actually don’t, but I’m trying to get that going.

6. We use condoms on our dildos, and no one is sure why. I’m gonna tell you: cat hair.

7. The patriarchy makes us sick.

8. So does war, poverty, lack of health care, racism, classism, xenophobia, abilism, transphobia, and normativity of any sort.

9. We don’t all identify as lesbian. Some are gay, dyke, transgender, womyn-loving-womyn, queer, femme, butch, stud, fish, kiki, andro, genderqueer, etc. Personally, I don’t care what you call me — just as long as you call me.

10. Being a lesbian is the best thing ever.

Halem currently lives in New Orleans and was nominated for “Best Female Comedian” at the Chicago Comedy Awards in 2008. Read more at her website, www.jessicahalem.com. — Kristine Gill
BANKING ON THE FUTURE

JUST 8 PERCENT OF 2,000 KENT STATE STUDENTS surveyed say they’ve started thinking about their retirement plans. Founder and president of Kent State’s Investment Club Jeffrey Wroe is one of the few who says he’s been saving since he was 18.

“There are a lot of people who should be retiring now, but they have no money because they thought the market would be completely different today,” he says. “Now, they might have to work another 10 years, and I don’t want to get stuck in that situation.”

Unlike Wroe, a senior finance major, most students don’t see the point in saving for retirement or don’t have the money to do so. What they don’t realize, though, is that putting $10 or $20 away each month will add up and serve as a starting ground for retirement.

Joshua Grandy, spokesperson for Vanguard, an investment management firm, says, “Anything you can do helps — the big thing is saving now. We urge investors to start looking early, have a plan in place and stick with the plan.”

Not saving between the ages of 21 and 26 has the biggest impact on the ending balance of a 65-year-old retirement account, says Michael Doshier, vice president of Fidelity’s workplace investing group.

“If people just get out and start on the right path, it is a very viable tool for saving for retirement,” he says. — Courtney Kerrigan

THE CASE AGAINST THE PLASTIC JUG

CONSIDER... The average Kent State graduate starts with a $36,000 salary and participates in an employer-sponsored 401(k) plan with an average 50 percent match. Assuming the graduate starts working at age 22 and works to the normal Social Security retirement age of 67, with an annual wage increase of 3 percent, that person would save $208,443 and receive an additional $104,222 employer match. If that person invests those savings and gets a 10 percent return, he or she would end with $3,707,426 at retirement.

BUT... If this same person chose to wait 10 years and started saving at 32, his or her lifetime savings would be reduced from $208,443 to $183,681. His or her retirement savings would be reduced from about $3.7 million to $1,829,742.

— Scenario by Kent State finance professor Ron Stolle

> Changing Face

How much bread would $1.00 in 2010 buy today and in the past?

Based on information from kpcnews.net

WHAT THE CREDIT CARD ACT OF 2009 MEANS FOR YOU

Limits fees such as those charged when consumers exceed their credit limits or pay bills online or by phone.

Restricts issuing and marketing credit cards to young adults and on college campuses.

 Bans double-cycle billing, in which card issuers charge interest over two billing cycles rather than one.

 Prevents credit card issuers from allocating monthly payments in ways that maximize interest charges to consumers.

 Limits upfront fees charged on subprime credit cards issued to people with bad credit.

 Bans shifting due dates so that payments will be due on the same day every month.

— creditcards.com
ON NEWSSTANDS NOW

Artemis.

Kent State University’s women’s issues magazine. Read exclusive stories at www.artemis.kent.edu. Follow us on Twitter @artemisksu.
SIGHTS & SOUNDS

STORIES FROM AROUND THE GLOBE

Each year, the Cleveland International Film Festival highlights 10 LGBT films that feature characters, themes and issues from filmmakers around the world. Adam Griffiths looks back at this year’s batch of insightful films worth tracking down.

**Hannah Free**

Sharon Gless (Debbie from the late “Queer as Folk”) stars in this intimate look at life from the edge of death. We learn about Hannah’s life from her bed in a nursing home and sneak out to steal a few last moments with the love of her life, Rachel, who’s in a coma down the hall. Elderly lesbians don’t get much treatment in popular culture, and this is a rare, touching glimpse. From the United States. Directed by Wendy Jo Carlton. www.hannahfree.com

**Beyond Gay: The Politics of Pride**

The disparity in rights for LGBT people worldwide is as much a star in this documentary as the journey of Ken Coolen, president of the Vancouver Pride Society, whose journeys from New York to Sao Paulo, Brazil reveal the international portrait painted in these festivals. We meet the man who sewed the first rainbow flag, see how Nikolai Alekseev (above) and other activists fight for the right to march in Moscow and learn not to take for granted our freedoms. From Canada. Directed by Bob Christine. www.biggaymovie.com

**City of Borders**

Lesbian and gays in Israel and Palestine face added threats from the continual clash between culture, politics and religion. But the movement is burgeoning, and this unprecedented look at gay life in the region reveals people questioning more than just their sexuality. Samira Saraya (top left), a Palestinian, and Ravit Geva, an Israeli, deal with differing views on having children. Former Israeli soldier Adam Russo (above right) and his boyfriend, Amit, just want to build a house and get married. In one of the most dangerous regions in the world, “City of Borders” drives home equality and acceptance as true universal tenets. From Israel, Palestine and the United States. Directed by Yun Suh. www.cityofborders.com

**The Big Gay Musical**

Yes, Michael Musso, we did need this “Big Gay Musical,” and the director of last year’s “Between Love & Goodbye” delivers a coming-of-age musical/comedy that capitalizes on clichés and stereotypes. Through a production of ‘Adam and Steve,’ the characters, and the audience, get a touching story of truth in the face of ignorance and uncertainty. Visit the website and get the T-shirt from the musical’s summer camp: Foundation Against Gayness Society. From the United States. Directed by Casper Andreas, Fred M. Caruso. www.thebiggaymusical.com

**Handsome Harry**

At 52, Harry’s divorced with a grown son, but well-liked and established in his small town. But a death wish from an old Navy friend sends Harry on a voyage around the country and down the road of a past self long forgotten. Something happened long ago that’s stayed with Harry forever. Make it to the end and learn a lesson about what happens to life when you’re not true to yourself. From the United States. Directed by Bette Gordon. www.handsomeharrythemovie.com

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**Summer Siren Songs**

Tracks you should’ve downloaded already.

- Baby I’m a Fool
  - Melody Gardot

- Silver Lining
  - Rilo Kiley

- Serve Them Well
  - swimming in speakers

- Dog Days Are Over
  - Florence + The Machines

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BEYOND GAY: BGM; BORDERS: YUN SUH; MUSICAL: FRED CARUSO; FLORENCE: UNIVERSAL.
Roy and Silo. Wendell and Cass. Dashik and Yehuda. Z and Vielpunkt. This isn’t a list of random couples. These are famous same-sex pairs within the animal kingdom. Homosexual behavior has been observed in more than 450 different species in every major geographic region and animal group, according to biologist Bruce Bagemihl’s book, “Biological Exuberance: Animal Homosexuality and Natural Diversity.”

Same-sex behaviors can be found in animals such as bonobos, Japanese macaques, birds, sheep, dolphins and rams, among others. The term homosexual brings constant controversy for some researchers and zookeepers who believe applying it to animals is not appropriate. Stan Searles, curator of birds and aquatics at Cleveland Metroparks Zoo, agrees. Searles says he prefers to call animals with same-sex preferences same-sex pairs.

Although animal sexuality is widely debated, Heather Caldwell, Kent State University biological sciences professor, says evidence seems to point toward some species of animals participating in same-sex sexual behaviors.

“For a long time, behaviorists kind of ignored homosexual behaviors thinking that was kind of the abnormality, but it does seem in some species that it’s not,” Caldwell says. “It’s just a part of the culture of the behavioral repertoire of some species. It’s just a part of who they are.”

When assessing same-sex sexual behavior, Caldwell says behaviorists typically look at mounting behavior to address same-sex pairs. However, this is not the only type of sexual behavior. Audra Gibson, head keeper of the African Forest Region at the Columbus Zoo, says female bonobos participate in G-G rubbing, when the animals rub their labia’s together. Gibson adds that male-male pairs rub their penises together and sometimes perform fellatio. Bagemihl also writes about mutual masturbation as a way for same-sex pairs to engage in sexual behaviors.

Along with sexual behaviors, the physical behaviors of same-sex pairs also differ from opposite-sex pairs. Searles says same-sex pairs of flamingos will build a mound and defend it. Because they can’t produce an egg, they sometimes steal one or sit on an empty nest of other objects.

“I’ve seen birds, all kinds of birds, during breeding seasons in colony-like areas incubate rocks for six weeks,” Searles says. “I’ve seen them incubate sticks. The trigger — so much of bird behavior, so much of animal behavior, depending on who you read, so much of human behavior — has to do with hardwiring.”

This hardwiring can be attributed to the development of animal hormones earlier in life, Caldwell says.

“It’s thought that in other species, including humans, that there are differential exposures to hormones during development that may play a role in a (subset) of individuals,” Caldwell says. She says exposure to those certain hormones during development has been associated with whether a human or animal is homosexual.

These behaviors, especially in a zoo, are often a reflection of being in an exhibit with only male species or only female species, Searles says. “If you have 10 penguins in an exhibit, and they’re all males, you will establish some same-sex pairs because they have no option,” she says.

Gibson agrees. “I don’t believe that the zoo does anything to discourage same-sex pairings,” she says. The purpose of zoos is to breed genetically valuable individuals, which entails placing animals in breeding pairs or groups. However, Gibson says the pairs are not changed if the same-sex pair is not needed for breeding.

Leaving same-sex pairs in a relationship is not always bad. According to Searles, same-sex pairs sometimes do better than opposite-sex pairs. He says male-male pairs are as successful, if not more successful than male-female pairs because they’re more aggressive and therefore, they are more likely to win against a male-female pair in protecting their nest.

In the meantime, the sexuality of animals is still debated and research continues. “Certainly there is a wide variety of sexual selection going on in nature just as there is in humans as well,” Caldwell says.
DYKE IT UP, DRINK IT DOWN

Marchaè Grair explains what makes one Akron dive the area’s lesbian destination.

Maybe it’s the perfect lighting — slightly romantic, yet enchanting. Or maybe it’s the curling wallpaper and the old-fashioned arcade machine, which are classically Roseto’s Night Club, aging but steadfast. Perhaps it’s the smile of the unlikely owner, whose small stature and gray ringlets are anything but typical for a bartender.

There are few lesbian traditions in the Kent and Akron area, but Roseto’s in Akron is definitely one of the oldest and dearest to the lesbian community. Something about Roseto’s makes lesbians feel at home. The bar is a safe haven for lesbians in the area and offers a comforting environment where many come to relax.

“There is no other women’s gay bar in the area,” door person and Roseto’s employee Deb Tomes says. Tomes started coming to Roseto’s eight years ago and liked the bar so much that she started working for Ana, the owner.

One of the busiest nights of the week is Friday, especially during the warmer months of spring and summer. Saturday nights are home to a hip-hop dance night and have a special treat for those who want to see girls in drag. Roseto’s is the unofficial home for Friday night performances by The Rubber City Royals, a group of drag kings who perform locally. A drag performance and benefit at Roseto’s for Rubber City Royals member, Theodore Trimm, was even featured last year on the hit MTV series, “True Life.”

The bar may find itself in the limelight, but few characteristics about it shine brighter than the charisma of its owner. Ana, mighty in spirit, owns Roseto’s and functions as the primary bartender. The mixture of her New York-style bartending and silver hair make Ana more than just a bartender — she’s a Roseto’s staple.

“I really love the bartender,” patron Lynn Keaton says. “She’s the nicest lady I’ve ever met. But she doesn’t put up with any bull.”

Women who are both straight and lesbian — and out of or in the closet — come to mingle in an environment where diverse sexual orientations are understood but not necessarily required.

“It’s a much, much more comfortable atmosphere than a straight bar where guys come and say, ‘You just haven’t had the right guy yet,’” patron Nicole Smith says.

“We are more inclusive about different types of women,” Tomes says. “Just another aspect of the comfort in our club is how we love our girls. They need to come here. It’s a safe place.”

ROSETO’S NIGHT CLUB
627 S. Arlington
Akron, OH
Opens at 9 p.m.
Tuesday-Saturday

WEDNESDAYS
Dykes with mics karaoke

FRIDAYS
Ladies night, with the Rubber City Royals kings and queens, and free hot dogs

Saturdays
Hip-hop night

PHOTOGRAPH BY TESSA BARGAINNIER
ROAD TRIP

‘Burgher Weekend

SARAH STEIMER ON HOW TO SPEND TWO DAYS IN THE CITY OF CHAMPIONS (A.K.A. PITTSBURGH). PHOTOGRAPHS BY TESSA BARGAINNIER.
The days of steel mills full of hard-working tough guys are over. The days of smoke-filled air that made the view from Mount Washington nearly despicable are long gone. Pittsburgh is in the middle of a serious rebirth, and if you know anything about trends, you should probably get there quick before it fully explodes. The Steel Town is less than two hours away from Kent, just right for a cheap weekend getaway. Terrible Towels are optional.

FRIDAY

5 P.M. The Renaissance Hotel
(107 6th Street; (412) 562-1200; www.mariott.com) in downtown Pittsburgh sits right across the river from PNC Park and offers beautiful views of the city ($139 per night). If there’s a Pirates game while you stay here, you may catch a few fireworks from your window, depending on what side of the hotel you’re on of course. Oh, and if the Pirates actually win a game, rooms downstairs were once a barbershop and a bar. Atria’s feels like the cozy home it once was, and the food is everything you wish Mom would make. Definitely try the Pot Roast Nachos ($10.99).

7 P.M. The hardest part of writing a guide for a Pittsburgh visit is deciding which restaurants to suggest. The city is a food lover’s haven. For your first night, head to Mount Lebanon’s Atria’s Restaurant & Tavern (110 Beverly Road, Mt. Lebanon; (412) 343-2411; www.atrias.com). The restaurant has a few locations in the greater Pittsburgh area, but this South Hills spot is the original. It was the former house of the Atria family, and the two

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MIDNIGHT It’s a throwback to old high school days — well, maybe your parents’ old high school days. Every Friday and Saturday night, the Carnegie Science Center (One Allegheny Avenue; (412) 237-3400; www.carnegiesciencecenter.org) hosts laser shows ($8). The musical themes change from month to month for the 8 to 11 p.m. shows, but the Pink Floyd laser show is a standard at midnight. This is what people did before “Avatar” came out in 3-D. If the kid in khakis and a letterman jacket next to you smells like pot, don’t be too surprised.

SATURDAY

10 A.M. When many think of Pittsburgh, maybe a burly steelworker on his way home from the mill comes to mind. But, alas, the city is not merely a gritty home to men and women with mullets. The town's gay population is alive and well, thank you very much. Some of the more popular gay bars are on Liberty Avenue in the heart of downtown Pittsburgh. One of them, 941 Saloon (941 Liberty Ave.), is a comfortable, small bar featuring theme nights and decent alcohol specials. The best part? Head upstairs to House of Tilden for some after-hours partying. There’s nothing better than being able to start and finish the night in one place.

10 A.M. If it’s good enough for President Obama, you better believe it’s good enough for you. During the president’s campaign in 2008, he stopped at Pamela’s Diner (60 21st Street; (412) 281-6366; www.pamelasdiner.com) to try the restaurant’s signature crepe-style hot cakes. He loved his meal so much he invited the owners to come to the White House on Labor Day last year to cook breakfast for his family. You probably won’t get the same attention, but it’s worth the stop. Plus, the diner sits right in Pittsburgh’s Strip District. Ethnic restaurants and markets share space with street vendors who can provide you with some of the coolest and cheapest Steelers gear around. You know you want that Terrible Towel.
noon Pittsburgh is home to plenty of great museums, most notably the Andy Warhol Museum and the Carnegie Art Museum. But go ahead and bypass those and impress your friends by going to the Mattress Factory art museum (500 Sampsonia Way; (412) 231-3169; www.mattress.org; $7 for students). The museum is known for its contemporary art and room-sized exhibits. It’s downright incredible, from its orange-spotted mannequins to its outdoor rock garden. If you must, the Andy Warhol Museum (117 Sandusky Street; (412) 237-8300; www.warhol.org; $8 for students) is also located in the North Side. It’s always worth it for, if nothing else, the silver Mylar balloon room.

2 p.m. The South Side is one of the best neighborhoods in Pittsburgh, known for its dining, entertainment, bars, eclectic stores and beyond. First stop has to be for lunch, and no trip to Pittsburgh is complete without a sandwich from Primanti Bros. (1832 E. Carson St.; (412) 381-2583; www.primantibros.com). Their second best-seller is the Pitts-burgher Cheese Steak, loaded with fresh-cut french fries, tomato and coleslaw on Italian bread ($5.99). The best-seller, you ask? Iron City beer. Although, may I suggest a Yuengling instead?

3 p.m. While you’re still in South Side, you must shop. There are two parts of East Carson Street: new and old. On the old end, you’ll find The Culture Shop (1602 E. Carson St.; (412) 481-8284), a small store selling all sorts of Middle Eastern fare and hand-crafted goods. Silver relics drip from the ceiling alongside colorful tapestries and incense. A few blocks up is Groovy! Pop Culture Emporium (1304 E. Carson St.; (412) 381-8010), which houses every toy you ever played with in your youth. The store is crammed with G.I. Joes and My Little Ponies. It even has a whole wall dedicated to old lunch boxes and board games you never meant to forget. Be sure to also stop at one of the many bookstores and the green E House (1511 E. Carson St.; (412) 488-7455) that sells everything from license plate purses to miniature compost bins.

6 p.m. In the “new” end of East Carson Street sits Southside Works (441 Cinema Drive; www.southsideworks.com). The outdoor mall is home to a cinema, Urban Outfitters, H&M, Sur La Table, American Eagle Outfitters (and the retailer’s headquarters), The Cheesecake Factory and more.

8 p.m. The Hofbräuhaus (2705 S. Water St.; (412) 224-2328; www.hofbrauhauspittsburgh.com) is one of only a few such breweries in the world. The traditional German atmosphere is modeled directly off the Hofbräuhaus in Munich, built more than 400 years ago. The food is exactly what you would expect: lots of ‘wursts, potatoes and sauerkraut — but much of what they make has a great apple flavor. But let’s be honest: You’re not there for the food as much as you’re there for the beer, and if you like it well enough, you can get a mug of it as big as your head. The brewery hosts a band every night on the weekends, and by 9 p.m., people are usually standing on their seats singing along (which, by the way, is not only allowed but encouraged). You’ll learn the German drinking salute in no time.

midnight Now that you’ve got some good food and drink to get your night started, head over to Cattivo (146 44th St.; (412) 687-2157; www.cativo.biz) at its nearly hidden location in Lawrenceville, a few blocks off the main drag but one of the best-known lesbian bars in the city. It’s home to a great bar and ample dance space, which is perfect for its DJs and dance parties. But take caution: You’d better be a damn good pool player if you want to win over one of Cattivo’s two pool tables. These women are geniuses on the felt.

sunday 11 a.m. The Zenith (86 S. 26th St.; (412) 481-4833; www.zenithpgh.com) has a great vegetarian brunch and a wide selection of teas that surely will help you re-energize.
RED, WHITE AND QUEER

This year, Cincinnati Pride falls on our nation’s birthday. We know, we know — Cincinnati. But give it a chance. The Queen City is joining the big leagues.

By Grace Dobush.
The city’s 2010 Pride will happen downtown for the first time, a result of the Greater Cincinnati Gay Chamber of Commerce taking the reins. It’s a big change for Cincinnati; the hip Northside neighborhood had hosted Pride since its inception. “The Community Center did such a good job with Pride that they outgrew Northside,” Pride chair George Crawford says. “I don’t think Northside residents should be sad—they should be proud, and the gay community should thank them for their support.”

Crawford and the chamber put on last year’s Equinox Ball, a party that drew nearly 550 people. Equinox Cincinnati is the umbrella brand for all of the Pride weekend events.

City officials have greeted Equinox with great support, Crawford says, and the city police will walk in the Pride parade for the first time. Pride banners will line Fifth Street the week of Pride, and there are plans to light up downtown’s skyscrapers in the colors of the rainbow.

The weekend will begin with a Friday night pub crawl, and shuttle buses will take revelers to a string of LGBT bars in Cincinnati and Northern Kentucky. Pride Splash will turn Fountain Square into a water park Saturday afternoon, followed by a tea dance and pool party at the Millennium Hotel and the Equinox Ball that night at the Duke Energy Convention Center. The parade will start at 11 a.m. Sunday, and the festival takes place all day.

In hopes of making Equinox as inclusive as possible, organizers will support any small group wishing to march in the parade, Crawford says. A group of couples together for more than 10 years will have its own banner, and student groups are invited to take part. Crawford, owner of the Gateway Quarter store Metronation, studied business at Kent State in the ’80s before finishing his degree in Cincinnati.

Moving the events downtown is a strategic move that will finally put the city’s Pride on par with those of Columbus and Indianapolis. Crawford has been collaborating with the organizers of those events to ease Cincinnati Pride’s transition from the “gay neighborhood” to the central business district.

“I think people who are still homophobic here just don’t know many gay people,” he says. “And if we keep marginalizing ourselves, that’s not going to change.”
FUSION PICK  **Millennium Hotel**  
This hotel is the sponsor host of Pride and is offering a special rate of $89 per night for Pride attendees. See www.equinoxcincinnati.com for details. 150 W. Fifth St.  (513) 352-2100 www.millionlhotels.com/millenniumcincinnati $135-175 per night

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**Where to Go Out**  
Downtown and Northside are the places to be if you’re out and want to have a good time. Take advantage of the Equinox pub crawl Friday night to get to know all these LGBT establishments.

### Downtown

**Below Zero Lounge**  
This classy two-level hot spot is known for its martini, hot young professionals and chill atmosphere. 1122 Walnut St.  (513) 421-9376 www.belowzerolounge.com

**Morning Glory Bed & Breakfast**  
233 W. Seventh St.  Covington, Ky.  (859) 468-4820 www.3kynorningglory.com $95-115 per night

**Radisson Cincinnati Riverfront Hotel**  
600 W. Third St.  Covington, Ky.  (859) 481-1200 www.radisson.com/covingtonky $124-189 per night

### Shooters

**Come here for country-western guys and line dancing.**  
927 Race St.  (513) 381-9900

### Simon Says

One of the oldest gay bars in the city, Simon Says is now more mixed. 643 Bakewell St.  Covington, Ky.  (859) 291-9707

### The Dock Complex

This dance bar has volleyball leagues in the summer, a DJ every night and plenty of straight allies. 603 W. Pete Rose Way  (513) 241-5623 www.thedockcomplex.com

### On Broadway Bar

**Hosting drag, bear and leather events, along with karaoke and euche tournaments, this all-guns bar opens daily at 4 p.m.**  
817 Broadway St.  (513) 421-2555 www.myspace.com/onbroadwaybar

### The Subway Lounge

**Open Monday through Saturday. Subway is right across the street from the Aronoff Center for the Arts.**  
609 Walnut St.  (513) 421-1294 thesubwayhomestead.com/subway.html

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### Northen Kentucky

**Blue Bar**  
In the heart of the Covington Arts District, Blue Bar has an impressive drink menu and an open mic night on Sundays. 266 W. Pike St.  Covington, Ky.  (859) 261-7599 www.myspace.com/pkstreetbluebar

**The Crazy Fox**  
More of a neighborhood bar than a gay bar, this off-the-beaten-path pub welcomes everyone. 901 Washington Ave., Newport, Ky.  (859) 261-2143

**Rosie’s Tavern**  
Mainly a lesbian bar in past, the clientele at this bar just off Mainstrasse is now more mixed. 643 Bakewell St.  Covington, Ky.  (859) 291-9707

**Club Yadda**  
The pre-eminent lesbian bar in Cincinnati has beachy décor and a poppin’ dance floor. 404 Pike St., Covington, Ky.  (859) 491-5600 www.myspace.com/yaddacub

**Elsewhere**  
**Little Bit Bar**  
A haven for sporty lesbians and college students, the Little Bit Bar is within walking distance of the University of Cincinnati. 2401 Vine St., Clifton  (513) 721-8484 www.freewebs.com/littlebitbar

### Serpent

The Serpent caters to the leather crowd and is open daily at 9 p.m. — follow the dress code or pay the price. 4042 Hamilton Ave., Northside  (513) 681-6096 www.serpentbar.com

### Adonis

This East End gay bar isn’t open Fridays but has knock-down, drag-out shows Saturdays and a pool that’s open in the summer. 4601 Kellogg Ave.  (513) 871-1542 www.adonishenightclub.com

### Golden Lions Lounge

The crowd at this dive bar is often a mix of college students, old guard gays and up-and-coming queers. Don’t miss karaoke night on Saturdays. 340 Ludlow Ave., Clifton  (513) 281-4179

### Old Street Saloon

This establishment north of the city is open Wednesday through Saturdays. Motto: “It’s like ‘Cheers’ for queers.” 13 Old St., Monroe, Ohio  (513) 539-9183 www.oldstreetbar.com

### Bronz

**The crowd at Bronz for pool tables make this place to be.**  
4029 Hamilton Ave., Northside  (513) 591-2100 www.myspace.com/bronzbar

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PHOTOGRAPHS BY CAROLINE TOMPKIS
Where to Eat

Downtown
Arnold’s
Eclectic menu in an East Village setting with full bar to boot.
Price range: $10-20
210 E. Eighth St.
(513) 421-6234
www.arnoldsbarandgrill.com

It’s Just Crepes
Made-to-order savory or sweet crepes — why not have both?
Price range: under $10
39 E. Court St.
(513) 632-7373
www.itjustcrepes.com

Lavomatic
A wine bar with an upper-crust pedigree.
Price range: $20-40
1211 Vine St.
(513) 621-1999
www.lavomaticcafe.com

Local 127
Adventurous dishes made with locally sourced ingredients. Make sure to stop by Tonic next door for an after-dinner drink.
Price range: $30-40
127 W. Fourth St.
(513) 721-1345
www.mylocal127.com

Nada Restaurant
Upscale Mexican cuisine with killer sangria and a lovely patio.
Price range: $20-30
600 Walnut St.
(513) 721-6232
www.eatdrinknada.com

Scotti’s Italian Restaurant
Delectable Italian food in a nearly century-old restaurant.
Price range: $30-50
919 Vine St.
(513) 721-9484
www.scottiscincinnati.com

Shanghai Mama’s
Chinese food till 3 a.m. on the weekends.
Price range: under $10
216 E. Sixth St.
(513) 241-7777
www.shanghaimamas.com

FUSION PICK  Hamburger Mary’s
A burger chain that caters to gays? Absolutely! This new addition to Cincinnati’s downtown has proven itself a bustling center of gay-friendly activity, with bingo nights, “Mary-Oke” and dance parties on the regular.
Open daily 5 p.m.-2:30 a.m. Price range: $10-20 — 909 Vine St., Downtown, (513) 421-6279, www.hamburgermaryscincinnati.com
Where to Shop

Shopping centers

La Mexicana
Delicious, authentic Mexican food for cheap.
Price range: under $10
642 Monmouth St., Covington, Ky.
(859) 643-1234
www.lamexicanakoreanrestaurant.com

Korean Riverside Restaurant
Small restaurant with big flavor and traditional Korean dishes.
Price range: $10-20
512 Madison Ave., Covington, Ky.
(859) 291-1484
riverridekoreanrestaurant.com

Chalk Food & Wine
Covington’s only four-star restaurant serves up small plates of locally sourced food.
Price range: $20-50
318 Greenup St., Covington, Ky.
(859) 643-1234
www.jamesbeardaward.com

Amazing pastries and ever-changing brunch menus.
Price range: under $10
4035 Hamilton Ave.
(513) 681-8100
www.ottosonmain.com

Take the Cake Café
Amazing pastries and ever-changing brunch menus.
Price range: under $10
4035 Hamilton Ave.
(513) 681-8100
takethecakecincinnati.com

Northern Kentucky
Anchor Grill
Try the goetta at this dive diner; open late.
Price range: under $10
438 Pike St., Covington, Ky.
(859) 431-9498

Cute bistro in the heart of Covington’s only four-star restaurant.
Price range: $10-20
512 Madison Ave., Covington, Ky.
(859) 291-1484
riverridekoreanrestaurant.com

Fusion Pick
Park + Vine
If it’s eco-friendly, you’ll find it here.
This urban general store offers green clothing, home décor, personal care products, food and drinks. Plus, owner Dan Korman frequently puts up shows of local artists’ work.
1109 Vine St., Over-the-Rhine
(513) 721-7275
www.parkandwine.com

Price range: under $10

Otto’s
Cute bistro in the heart of Mainstrasse.
Price range: $10-30
521 Main St., Covington, Ky.
(859) 491-8678
www.ottoсонmain.com

Newport on the Levee
Along with the AMC 20-screen theater, this shopping center includes a Barnes & Noble and many restaurants just across the river from downtown.
1 Levee Way, Newport, Ky.
www.newportonthelevee.com

Northside
Melt Eclectic Deli
Fantastic sandwiches and soups, with lots of offerings for vegans.
Price range: under $10
4165 Hamilton Ave.
(513) 681-6358
www.meltcincy.com

Take the Cake Café
Amazing pastries and ever-changing brunch menus.
Price range: under $10
4035 Hamilton Ave.
(513) 681-8100
takethecakecincinnati.com

Boswell Alley
A bar with a surprisingly good kitchen.
Price range: under $10
1686 Blue Rock St.
(513) 591-0123
www.boswellalley.com

Melt Eclectic Deli
Fantastic sandwiches and soups, with lots of offerings for vegans.
Price range: under $10
4165 Hamilton Ave.
(513) 681-6358
www.meltcincy.com

Cluxton Alley Coffee Roasters
Fresh roasted beans and delicious pastries available all day Saturday.
4037 Hamilton Ave.
(513) 698-2966
cluxtonalleyroasters.com

Korean Riverside Restaurant
Small restaurant with big flavor and traditional Korean dishes.
Price range: $10-20
512 Madison Ave., Covington, Ky.
(859) 291-1484
riverridekoreanrestaurant.com

Cute bistro in the heart of Covington’s only four-star restaurant.
Price range: $10-20
512 Madison Ave., Covington, Ky.
(859) 291-1484
riverridekoreanrestaurant.com

What Else To Do in Cincinnati

Northside Rock N Roll
Fourth of July Parade
The neighborhood’s annual celebration includes local bands, food and an all-day festival.
Hamilton Avenue, Northside
www.northsidejuly4.com

Cincinnati Guerrilla Queer Bar
This queer culture-jamming group congregates at a random straight bar the first Friday of each month.
cincinnati Guerrilla Queer Bar.
b.blogspot.com

Know Theatre
This alternative theater attracts a diverse crowd.
1120 Jackson St., Over-the-Rhine
(513) 200-5669
www.knowtheatre.com

Hustler Hollywood
Cincinnati’s got a long legacy of censorship — pay your respects with a trip to Hustler’s sex shop.
411 Elm St., (513) 421-7323
www.hustlerhollywood.com

Iris Book Cafe
This sweet café is fully stacked with used books. Get some ice cream, while you’re at it, and browse for hours.
1331 Main St.
(513) 381-2665
sites.google.com/site/irisbookcafe

Mica 12/v
Gorgeous handicrafts, work from local artists and Cincinnati-centric accessories.
1201 Vine St.
(513) 541-2394
www.shopmica.com

Northside
Cluxton Alley Coffee Roasters
Fresh roasted beans and delicious pastries available all day Saturday.
4037 Hamilton Ave.
(513) 698-2966
cluxtonalleyroasters.com

Mica 12/v
Gorgeous handicrafts, work from local artists and Cincinnati-centric accessories.
1201 Vine St.
(513) 541-2394
www.shopmica.com

Fusion
Spring 2010

Still not feeling Cinci?
See what to do at Columbus Pride
ATTHATGAYMAGAZINE.COM.
a collection to wear with Pride

PHOTOGRAPHS Daniel R. Doherty
Get These Undies at
www.aussiebum.com
www.americanapparel.com

Our Models (The ones in underwear)
LEFT TO RIGHT Anthony Leonette, Anthony Cajka, Will Riddle, Dominick Arquilla, Jeremy Brobson, Scottie Core, Ryan Scott Collins, Alex Gabor, Randy Rininger* (not pictured)

Hair & Makeup (Those in black)
LEFT TO RIGHT Simone Spencer, Lexy Uzariski, Marissa Reed from the Ohio Academy, a Paul Mitchell School

Special thanks to Jon at American Apparel and Lloyd at AussieBum.
MORE THAN YOU’D EXPECT
COSTS LESS THAN YOU’D THINK

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APARTMENT FEATURES:
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- Individual Bathrooms
- Fully Furnished

COMMUNITY HIGHLIGHTS:
- FREE Tanning
- Sparkling Pool & Sundeck
- 24/7 Hi-Tech Fitness Center
- Fully Loaded Computer Lab
- Basketball & Sand Volleyball Courts
- Gameroom w/Poker, Billiards & Arcade

*Based on area averages. Amenities, rates, costs & specials subject to change.

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CAMPUSPOINTEKENT.COM - 330.673.2202
1841 ASHTON LANE - KENT, OHIO 44240
There’s a “Cure”

Twenty-six years ago, a clergyman who had a gay experience decided he was not gay and wanted help for himself for the sake of his marriage and faith.

That man was Elton Moose, founder of the ex-gay ministry New Pathways, Inc., in Springfield, a small city west of Columbus.

“I was a married man and had a family. Of course I wanted to respect my family and stay married,” Moose says. “My faith played a very big part in my change and recovery. When I first was exposed, we had to leave the ministry.”

New Pathways is a group that “helps individuals to overcome the power of homosexuality” and whose “services are available to anyone struggling with homosexual feelings or activity, as well as to family and friends of homosexuals,” according to its website. The group serves six counties in the Springfield area.

Moose has formally conducted counseling at New Pathways for 17 years.

“I run a support group for individuals who, for whatever reason, desire to be free from homosexuality,” Moose says. “Some of it’s their conflict with their father. Some reasons are because of bad experiences in the homosexual lifestyle. The only requirement we have is that you have the desire to change.”

Moose says reparative therapy, a term used to describe ex-gay therapy, is pretty successful in terms of “curing” the individual.

“When you compare it with curing alcoholism, drug addiction and such, those statistics are pretty good,” Moose says.

Reparative therapists believe being gay can be linked to circumstances rather than biological makeup. “We have to learn to deal with our own sexual feelings,” Moose says.

“We look at what were the home influences and what were the peer influences. I’ve had some who didn’t feel they were accepted by their peers. They didn’t feel comfortable showing their masculinity or femininity ... I’ll use boys for example: if the mother is more aggressive in her behavior, and the father is more laid-back, many times this will encourage the boys’ feelings for boys.”

Moose even cites athleticism, or lack thereof, as a possible cause for being gay.

“Many people in the homosexual lifestyle are not highly athletic,” Moose says. “Many that...
try to keep up with all of the studies going on to
teaching himself. He said a lot about uplifting marriage, so you see that God's intention
was for people to live in heterosexual marriage.”
— Elton Moose, founder of the ex-gay ministry New Pathways, Inc.

are in my group are clumsy at athletics. They felt like they were different, separate from the
other guys.”
Moose, and many ex-gay counselors, reject the idea that they are doing anything hateful
toward gays and lesbians.
“Society believes if we’re tolerant, then you have to agree,” Moose says. “Tolerance does
not mean that. Tolerance means to me that we respect each other’s opinions and ideas. We
are tolerant in that sense. We don’t condemn people who live the lifestyle, but we help those
who want to make changes.”
Likewise, Moose believes rejecting gay relationships and marriage has less to do with
equality and more to do with morality.
“You look at Jesus Christ’s teaching himself, and he said a lot about uplifting marriage, so
you see that God’s intention was for people to live in heterosexual marriage,” Moose
says. “In schools, kids are being encouraged to experiment to see if they are gay. If you
experiment, you can develop that desire. When young teens are encouraged to see if they are
gay, they can get caught up with that.”
New Pathways is affiliated with Exodus International, which touts itself as the “largest
information and referral industry in the world addressing homosexual issues,” according to its
website. Moose receives many resources from Exodus for counseling because he is not licensed
through the state, and therefore must do his counseling within the boundaries of the church.
Moose does, however, have a doctorate in philosophy and says he uses many psychological
techniques in his therapy sessions.
He also associates with NARTH, the National Association for Research and
Therapy of Homosexuality. “They are a group of counselors and doctors,” Moose says. “We
try to keep up with all of the studies going on to
determine their validity.” Moose is referring to
the validity of studies which rule homosexuality as something which can be cured.
“One of our specialists is a geneticist,” Moose says. “He said while there are a few gay genes,
but to have a definite genetic influence, you have to have clumps of genetic genes that are
the same. And that’s been very helpful to us; to discover that we cannot discover genetic makeup
to this. There were also the twin studies where they studied identical twins. The thing is, only
52 percent were both gay. If it was genetic, why wouldn’t that percentage be higher?”

Denying Who You Are

Of the bad times in his life, Philip Lowe
remembers ex-gay therapy as one of the worst. It was August 2007. Lowe was looking for an
escape. A string of a few bad partners made Lowe question the nature of his sexuality.
“The last relationship I was in, there were some problems with him using me for money
and with him being dishonest with what he was doing with his time when he wasn’t with me,”
Lowe says. “In 2007, I was dealing with the effects of that relationship. I got tired of guys
saying they were interested in relationships and were only interested in one-night stands. I got
fed up with getting used for pleasure only. I began to question if the problems were with the
relationship or with me being gay.”
Lowe went searching for answers about life, especially concerning partners, and thought
he found comfort in the Catholic Church. He became a member of Courage, a Catholic ex-
idea found in Alcoholics Anonymous.”
The group would gather and talk about the
week’s temptations, including thoughts of gay
attraction or masturbation. In the Courage
program, Lowe was told there was a reason
for his sexual orientation, other than it simply
being his emotions.
“They prefer they think of themselves as
people with ‘same-sex attractions,’ which is a
sexual disorder,” Lowe says. “They say we are
not born with it, but neither do we choose it.
Everything from bad relationships, a rejection
of our masculinity. Everything from anger, to
sexual abuse, to plain self-esteem abuses.”
Lowe was involved with Courage for 17
months until one meeting when he reached his
breaking point. At this last meeting, a man was
upset because he did not believe he could get
married and have children.
“Another member said, ‘There are plenty
of homosexual men married (to women) and
doing just fine, and if he wanted to do it, he
would be OK,’” Lowe says. “I think my relationship with my partner proves that’s not true. We are very much in
love. Right now, I am currently unemployed, and my partner has never given up on me. We
don’t give up on each other.”
Lowe’s family has always supported his
decisions about his sexual orientation, and the
journey he took from Courage and back was
more about discovering his own values. “It’s
important to surround yourself with healthy
relationships,” he says, “no matter who you are or
what you are with people who still appreciate
you and still love you.”
Lowe has since joined Beyond Ex-Gay, a
group identifying as ex-gay survivors. His story is
even a testament on the organization’s website
to encourage those who might go through
similar experiences to speak out about them.
“They aren’t just coming out of (ex-gay
experiences) because they are bad. They are coming out of them because they are
damaging.”
Akron Brother Circle hosts Many Men, Many Voices (3MV) Retreats. Many Men, Many Voices is a seven-week, group-level intervention program aimed at preventing HIV and sexually transmitted diseases among black men who have sex with men (MSM) who may or may not identify themselves as gay. The intervention addresses factors that influence the behavior of Black MSM including cultural, social and religious issues; interactions between HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases; sexual relationship dynamics; and the social influences that racism and homophobia have on HIV risk behaviors.
Sue Doerfer has a lot on her mind.
The 47-year-old Milwaukee native’s interview is punctuated by taps on the back from passersby — greetings from friends, acquaintances and associates leaving the fete for the opening of Kent State’s new LGBTQ Center. Doerfer was a keynote speaker for the event. And you’d think that as the newly appointed executive director of Equality Ohio, the state’s leading advocacy group for LGBT rights, she’d be comfortable taking the podium in a banquet room full of supporters. She is, after all, a career activist.

But you’d be wrong.

“Now, I’m introduced as the lesbian,” Doerfer says of her public appearances for Equality Ohio. “When I’m introduced as the executive-director-of, I feel like I have a big sign on my head. And I still know what that feels like to walk into a room where I’m going to be the only one, or to walk into a room full of people who think I’m going to burn in hell for eternity, but still say it out loud.”

The moments Doerfer has to be self-effacing are rare. She’s tasked with working full time to combat Ohio’s oppressive legacy of neglecting, if not outright ignoring, LGBT rights. The Buckeye state ranks dead last in the country on LGBT issues, she says. It’s a daunting task for anyone, she’ll concede. While some states wrestle with the high-profile same-sex marriage debate, Ohioans can still be fired from a job for being openly gay, without the option of recourse.

So Doerfer and her colleagues are taking baby steps.

“It’s legal for me to be a lesbian,” she says. “The problem is if someone perceives me that way, they can discriminate against me. It’s about the freedom to express ourselves sexually, but also outwardly. So it’s OK to wear a dress one day and a tuxedo the next if you’re a woman, or if you’re a man.”

Doerfer spearheads Equality Ohio’s burgeoning lobbying efforts in Columbus, raising the organization’s profile with lawmakers and crafting a message for straight Ohioans — gay rights are for you, too.

“How’s Sue sees it

After five years in charge of the LGBT Center of Greater Cleveland, Sue Doerfer is now Ohio’s loudest LGBT voice influencing policymakers in Columbus. Jenna Staul catches up with the woman who has made a career out of pushing for full recognition in a state that, to most, ranks dead last for equality.

“Here’s the really big thing,” Doerfer says, leaning in. “It’s not just about being gay or lesbian or transgendered. It’s about sexual freedom. It’s about control over our own bodies. It’s about reproductive rights. It’s about abortion.”

If Doerfer takes a decidedly populist approach to her work as executive director, it’s because of her roots in social work. She graduated with a degree in psychology from St. Ambrose University in Iowa. She wanted to “understand what makes us tick,” but she felt disenchanted with her career path. It was through an internship at a domestic violence and rape crisis organization that Doerfer became acquainted with social work.

Her family in Milwaukee was nervous their daughter had chosen a career path that entailed long hours and little money. But citing Chicago’s Hull House as an example, Doerfer says she was pulled toward social work because of its history of change and progressivism, one quite different from its current focus on private practice and psychotherapy.
"The founding of social work was all about organizing communities," Doerfer says. "It was about advocating for social change, while you're helping people. But it was all about bigger change."

She worked toward that bigger change in the late 1980s as the social services director of a nursing facility in Newark, N.J., that treated patients with HIV and AIDS. It was a field she would remain in until 2001, and one that would ultimately bring her to Cleveland.

"That position taught me that I can do just about anything I put my mind to," Doerfer says. "I also learned that when people allow you to be a part of their lives, it's a privilege that should not be taken lightly. During my time there, the residents of Broadway House were mostly people of color, mostly poor, most had a history of drug use and many had served time in prison. I learned a huge lesson about the commonality of people."

But before all that, Doerfer was a teenage girl who shyly came out of the closet to her apprehensive mother.

"I was 17. I was in high school, and I was in love. And my mother suspected, probably just because of the way we looked at each other. So my mother kept asking me over and over, and I just said 'OK, you're right.' And everything erupted. My family struggled with it a lot."

Doerfer lived uncomfortably with that admission through her early 20s, spending years "hiding and coming back out of the closet."

"I know how scary it is," Doerfer says. "I know what it feels like to risk rejection from people you count on the most."

And though her work at Equality Ohio often finds her focused on the impersonal — cold policy and lobbying practices — she isn't divorced from her background in the sometimes messy world of social work. It's a world that would leave a profound impact on her.

"The moment when I met a 7-year-old trans-gendered little girl who had told her parents — when she was 5 years old — that she was a girl and, 'If I have to live my life as a boy, I will kill myself.' The moment when an 84-year-old man walked into the (Cleveland LGBT) Center just because he needed to say 'I'm gay' out loud for the first time in his life. It is these moments that are the hardest, and it is these moments that keep me going."

Rev. Mike Castle, an Equality Ohio board member, says he was immediately taken with Doerfer's "vivacious and confident personality."

He says the board hired Doerfer in December because of her grassroots background and political savvy. "We just need to strengthen our presence in the state," he says. "We're still a baby organization. And we still have a long way to go."

Doerfer is keenly aware of how long that way is. With a modest budget and lofty goals, she must prioritize. First, she has her eye on the Employment, Housing and Public Accommodations Act. Passed by the Ohio House of Representatives last September, the state Senate must now approve the legislation which would make it illegal to fire a worker based on anything other than his or her job performance or to discriminate in housing practices.

Gay marriage in Ohio? Someday, Doerfer says. In the meantime, she hopes gay youths in Ohio will simply set up roots at home.

"It's a rough proposition," Doerfer says about staying in Ohio. "Except that there is so much to do and so much potential."
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George Washington flags wave in a show of patriotism. The green-paper tents held between two fingers gyrate to the beat of the music at the Interbelt Nite Club as people start to gather.

A woman throws back the curtains behind the stage and rushes out to the jungle mix blaring from speakers with too much boom. Feathers stick out from her head. Like a leopard-print peacock, plumed, she searches for a mate. Brown eyes scan the crowd, scan the stage, scan the air, and then a scream erupts as the jungle song rages on. This wild bird-woman dances across the stage more gracefully than her body would suggest. She spins, leaps and makes faces in a show of exoticism. The crowd loves it. It goes wild and cheers as she retreats to her curtained lair, gorged with cash, until next time.

She returns from the curtain, mic in hand, and thanks the crowd for its support, plopping down into a folding chair, exhausted. A stagehand brings her a cup of water with ice and a bendy straw. She makes a suggestive “O” with her lips and starts to sip, all part of the drag queen performance. But Danyel Vasquez is no ordinary drag queen, and her performance is no ordinary show.

**AKRON’S OWN MATERIAL GIRL**

Danyel Vasquez emerges onto the stage at the Interbelt Nite Club for her performance of “He’s a Man” on Madonna Night.
Transitioning to Queen

Danyel Vasquez was born in 1972 Akron to a gay father who would later leave and a straight mother who would do the best she could. But while Danyel was provided for, she never felt complete. Born as Jeremy, Danyel says it’s taking a lifetime to transition into the woman she yearns to be. As a boy, she didn’t like traditionally masculine things, such as playing sports with the neighborhood kids, preferring instead to play with dolls and model her mother’s dresses. “But I didn’t know what that feeling was,” she remembers. “It was just kind of a part of me for many years.”

In junior high, things changed. The punk rock scene formed niche student groups and with it a place for a questioning kid to thrive. “You could wear, like, fishnets and be androgynous,” Danyel recalls, “and wear more feminine things than masculine and get away with it because that was the look, you know what I mean?”

She kept up her look into high school, where she says many in that alternative scene labeled themselves bisexual. Going one step further, she says many in that alternative scene labeled themselves gay, but I wasn’t gay. I’m transgender, so what she’s about to say registers, “I thought I was gay, but I wasn’t gay. I’m transgender, so I’m really not gay — I’m straight.”

Six or seven years ago, Danyel began physically transitioning from man to woman, although the transition began long before. Danyel looks back and sees the stages of being straight, bisexual, gay and then straight again as part of the process, without realizing what she really was because she’d never heard it labeled before. She used drag as an excuse to be a woman before she transitioned, but she reiterates that drag is strictly a show — Danyel the queen is the performer, while Danyel the woman is just trying to live a life.

In the beginning, she grew her hair out, removed other hair with laser treatments and shaving cream, got lip and cheek injections and started taking hormones. Later, she threw out all of her men clothes, the final pieces of Jeremy. Down the road, she wants to lose 40 pounds and get breast implants but doesn’t feel a full sex change is necessary for her happiness. Looking at Danyel, you wouldn’t think she was anything but a woman. Her slightly feathered waves of natural hair frame soft cheeks. Her feminine lips protrude slightly from the injections, seductive. Her visible neckline connects to her shoulders which segue to her breasts, perhaps too small now given her stature, but defining in her physical transformation to female, authentic accessories during a show.

Danyel first performed to Amii Stewart’s “Knock on Wood” 17 years ago during an amateur contest. She took first place. “I felt really uncomfortable, though,” she says, a slight smile waxing across her face, eyes looking up into her memory. “Like, real uncomfortable — hyperventilating before I went out.” But others encouraged her to keep going, and after winning her first pageant a year later, she was offered a job at the Interbelt in Akron as a show director and hostess. “Danyel” because someone gave it to her. “Vasquez” from Junior Vasquez, a New York disc jockey, and because people thought she looked Puerto Rican. She says she would do it differently, although the names define her brand now. A graphic design student at Kent State at the time of the job offer, Danyel “left it all for drag.”

Roy, a bartender at the Interbelt who preferred his last name be withheld, has known Danyel for 16 years. His favorite memory of her is when “she got her titties and became a real woman.” Applying star pasties — nipple covers — and performing, Danyel only increased in popularity and showmanship, he explains, following her transition. Roy and others agree that she’ll probably never retire, performing well into her later years. “She’s really a good person and a good entertainer,” he says. “Like I said, people love her.”

Danyel worked 15 years at the Interbelt before quitting last year, pursuing better opportunities at Utopia in Youngstown. She says drag performers don’t get as much respect from bar owners in comparison to the crowds they attract. As Utopia’s entertainment manager, Danyel is in charge of the club’s performances. “We’re a part of it, definitely,” she says on behalf of drag queens. “Most bar owners don’t seem to want to appreciate that, at least up this way. … Some girls just perform for free, for tips, you know what I mean?”

When not in full regalia, Danyel finds sanctuary in sleep, costuming, friends and reality television. “Pretty boring,” she laments, “because I’m always in clubs. When I’m off, I just like to sit at home and watch my shows that I’ve DVR’d.” VH1 reality shows are among her...
favorite, although she admits "some of them are horrible." After a show, she says she goes home and stays up until 6 or 7 a.m. watching them and updating her social networks.

Danyel owns a house in Akron’s Firestone Park but is often found in clubs where she has some celebrity status. Her followers on Twitter, Facebook, and MySpace keep her grounded by showing their support through Tweets, wall posts and comments. She says this is why she’s a performer, because even though they don’t have to, the fans take time to tell her how much they care. And Danyel appreciates it. She puts everything into her performances to be that person for her fans — the person they look up to.

“I don’t drink. I don’t smoke. I don’t do drugs,” she says, “I never have. … I’ve always tried to be a little bit more classy and not trashy, I guess. I do cuss a lot on the mic, but I don’t do that in my normal life. You have to do that to, you know, make people laugh and stuff like that.”

**Applying the Crown**

The dressing room at the Interbelt rests atop the coat check, up the stairs, around the corner, adjacent to the audio booth. It’s about 15-by-16 feet, larger than most college students’ bedrooms, but sorely missing space when packed with five drag queens, two dudes, a photographer and a reporter. And hair. Lots of hair. Lots of BIG hair.

Danyel, who works there on Thursdays, explains her craft while reflecting from a vanity mirror, the edges illuminated like some Broadway marquee. A base coat of makeup is slathered on before being blended with an over-sized makeup sponge. Daubing a different complexion, she works it into her face, transforming slowly from a somber, cat-like woman into a comic book vixen.

Safety pins hold two maroon curtains to an exposed pipe overhead. Cracks run along the walls and into the ceiling. An escape ladder waits in between three converging mirrors layered in dirt, makeup and remnants of Duct tape. Five light bulbs are missing from the mirrors’ halos. A black, shoebox-sized hole recedes into the ceiling. “There was a bird in here earlier,” Danyel says. “I thought it was a bat.”

Danyel does her eyes, does her eyebrows, does her lips. She makes them all pop. “I’ve always tried to be the type of queen that puts a lot of that back into my drag,” she tells me. “I always have new outfits, and I always have new hair, and I try to have new mixes. I’m always trying to stay as current as possible, but I like to do a variety of things, as well. I like to do old-school music. I like to do characters or R&B or rock or just something different. I don’t want people to know exactly what I’m going to do when I come out.” She attaches a spiderly eyelash to her lower lid and blinks, satisfied.

The other queens wheel their luggage into the room and start to assemble their personas. They take out their wigs and dust them off, fluff them up. They give them a few tosses with a teaser comb before attaching them to their heads — a sports team donning their helmets before the big game. Danyel shimmies over to her luggage and unpacks her outfits. She’ll only need one tonight but brought three, just the same, matching shoes for each. Tonight she doesn’t need the hair — big hair — so she puts it back, an animal resting on a lap of sequin and geisha sleeves.

A self-taught seamstress, Danyel makes the majority of her costumes and tries to never wear the same thing twice. She tells me drag has become a joke to her, with some queens wearing their “store-bought clothes” and going on stage and thinking that’s drag. “Drag is over-the-top costumes,” she reassures me. “If you want to see a real woman, then you can just do that in the audience.”

**NOT AN ACT, A LIFESTYLE** “Drag is over-the-top costumes,” Danyel says. “If you want to see a real woman, then you can just do that in the audience.”

The crowd grew from five or six to around 45 during the show’s peak. Danyel says the normal draw is 75, but tonight is slow. The snow is keeping people home. She sucks at her ice water while sowing trash with Mary-Kate Rockafeller, another, taller drag queen. Stagehands retrieve abandoned dollar bills from the floor before the performers converge for a final hurrah. One guy’s just turned 21, a lesbian 44. Both join the entertainers at the behest of so much hair and makeup. “I’m not paying for ‘Happy Birthday,’” Danyel shouts into the mic before violating the copyright. Everyone gets a piece of cake.

A birthday table sits on the perimeter of the dance floor. Three balloons tug at strings attached to nearby chairs. After the show, Lady Gaga’s “Telephone” starts to play, sending gay boys and gay girls out to the linoleum and stripper poles with their strawberry Long Island iced teas and cigarette packs tucked close to hips and thighs. What happened tonight isn’t magic. This is all just another Thursday at the Interbelt with your hostess, Danyel Vasquez.
Chances are if we hadn’t told you already, you’d never know Aaron Darr has HIV. But the teenager has been positive for more than two years, and while it’s already taken its toll, this Jackson High School senior is not letting it stand in the way of his career goals, his social life or his stage presence. A very true story, told in eight scenes.

The IMPORTANCE OF Being AARON

STORY Laura Lofgren
PHOTOGRAPHS Tessa Bargainnier
Jackson High School Auditorium, January.
The stage for “The Importance of Being Earnest” is set as a parlor.
Enter Aaron Durr as Dr. Chasuble.

And now, dear Mr. Worthing, I will not intrude any longer into a house of sorrow. I would merely beg you not to be too much bowed down by grief. What seem to us bitter trials are often blessings in disguise.”
The skinny, blond boy comes across as a practiced thespian. He walks across the wood stage like he owns the place — it is his home. The spotlight beams follow Aaron as he walks, his hands waving back and forth with each line. He’s confident. His performance seems to make the others more confident with their lines. A few slip-ups from Cecily and Algernon, the lights dim, and the actors skip off stage, giggling and smiling all the while.

Aaron comes down the side stairs of the stage and collapses into a purple auditorium seat. He looks tired, but the grin on his face says differently. The scene could have gone better. He says he should know his lines better. He will eventually.
The 19-year-old senior has loved the theater ever since he can remember. It’s his career. He’s been accepted to The American Musical and Dramatic Academy in New York City where he hopes to fulfill his dream of becoming a Broadway baby. He has also applied to Baldwin Wallace as a back-up. He says if New York doesn’t work out, he can hone his talent at a smaller, local program and work from there.

“Admirably! Admirably!”

And now, dear Mr. Worthing, I will not intrude any longer into a house of sorrow. I would merely beg you not to be too much bowed down by grief. What seem to us bitter trials are often blessings in disguise.”

GETTING IT RIGHT
Aaron laughs after messing up his lines while rehearsing for “The Importance of Being Earnest” backstage at Jackson High School with his castmates Rachel Szeles (left) and Hannah Hovan.
Aaron’s cat, who, he says, doesn’t have a name, leaps up to meet him at the foot of the bed. The cat’s purring fills the blue room as Aaron moves closer to my notepad. He tells me about the posters lining the wall above the head of the bed. They’re all for musicals, with many of them autographed by an entire cast. They’re from shows that have played at Cleveland’s Playhouse Square, as well as Weather Vane Playhouse in Akron, where Aaron frequently performs. He has worked on almost half of the plays shown here in some form or another.

He smiles, proud. His eyes match the blue hue of the walls. He points out the poster for “Wicked,” for which, he tells me, he spent extra to get the autographed version.

Along with his burgeoning theater career, Aaron volunteers his spare time at HIV/AIDS organizations, such as the Stark Regional HIV Prevention and Education Planning Advisory Group, or RAG. It’s a youth committee that plans HIV-related events, including days to get tested for HIV/AIDS and other STDs at local clinics. In May 2009, an AIDS vigil was held in downtown Canton. Aaron and the RAG team took turns reading about hundreds of people who have died from AIDS. In memory of the people, the group lit candles and tried to get people off the street to get tested.

Aaron has been an active part of RAG as well as the Tri-County AIDS Coalition, headed by Bill Weaver. The fundraising group, Weaver says, holds Broadway dinner theater events to raise money. He says Aaron wants to create change. “People should applaud him for that,” Weaver says.

It’s a Friday morning. Aaron wakes up. The groggy teenager shuffles into his bathroom and looks at himself in the mirror. His eyes, fuzzy from a night’s sleep, take a moment to adjust to the bright light. As he is looking at himself in the mirror, he feels a small, reddish-pink sore on the inside of his mouth. “Aw, damn it, I have herpes,” he thinks to himself. After getting ready for his day, Aaron calls a local health clinic to schedule an STD screening. He makes his appointment for the following Tuesday.

Sprawled out on the bed, the cat looks up at Aaron for attention. She gets up and rubs her furry body against his legs. Aaron pushes her off the bed and, as if he has room to talk, calls her an attention whore. He tells me about a night in January 2008 when he was invited to a party in Akron. He had met a guy, and the 26-year-old was having a party. I ask Aaron how he met this guy, and over time I get three answers. He met him at the party. They had met previously outside a club in Akron. Aaron was with his friend, Brittany, and Aaron says the guy approached him. They exchanged numbers, and the next night Aaron went to the guy’s place. Or they met online through some mutual friends. They hung out a few times prior to the party. Aaron says he was eager to go to the party but nervous.

The house was in a part of Akron not many frequent. It was dark, except for the few lamps lighting the way to the front door. Aaron walked up the cement way to a dimly lit complex near the center of Akron. He knocked on one of the doors. And the man he was meeting greeted him with a drink. His roommate had his boyfriend over, and some of his friends were there. People were playing Wii, playing games and watching movies.

He introduced Aaron to the other guys at the party. They all drank and flirted. Drank and flirted some more. A few hours later, Aaron and his friend went back to a bedroom. They began kissing. One thing led to another. The touching and tasting progressed quickly and before a second thought, their clothes were off, and Aaron was on his knees.

“My way of honestly thinking was, ‘I’m 17 — I’m not going to get anything,’” Aaron says.

“It was consensual,” Aaron tells me. “He told me he was actually negative.”

A pause.

“I dated him for a quite a bit on and off for a couple of months.”

A pause.

“I did it to get back at my ex.”

Aaron explains how, to him, gay boys in high school are like straight girls in high school — they want to date someone older to feel more mature or to make someone else jealous. Aaron was dating an older boy at his high school at the time. They fought on and off, broke up every other week.

Days after their first sexual encounter, Aaron began feeling sick to the point where he had to be hospitalized. He was nauseous and had flu-like symptoms. Doctors ran tests. They tested him for mono. But they only told him there was some kind of virus in his body, and he would have to let it run its course.

Aaron felt better after a few days and was back to his usual self.
Near his queen-sized bed, Aaron has a nightstand with a lamp and two pill bottles on it. Aaron grabs them and opens both, popping out a few pills in each of the palm of his hand.

He has a small tattoo on his wrist. He catches me looking at it and tells me about a drunken night and a friend with a tattoo gun. Aaron was wearing an Abercrombie and Fitch necklace with its trademark moose logo pendant. That’s what the tattoo is.

After his aside, Aaron looks back to the pills still in his hands. Intolerance is taken twice a day. It is dissolved in water once in the morning and once in the evening. The second pill, Truvada, is a larger blue pill that Aaron crushes up and takes at bedtime.

The two pills are part of Aaron’s combination therapy. Laughing, he says they make him feel like a straight man — always hungry, always tired, always horny.

Prior to his current regimen, Aaron took Atripla — a cocktail drug containing three HIV medicines in one pill — Sustiva, Emtriva and Viracept. Atripla is supposed to lower the amount of HIV in the blood, known as the “viral load,” by interfering with the way HIV replicates itself.

Aaron took Atripla for a week and a half. Ten pills. Ten excruciating days. Side effects from the pill turned Aaron crimson from head to toe. He had an allergic reaction to the Sustiva, which caused his skin to itch all over so intensely that he couldn’t sleep. During his treatment, Aaron was in and out of the hospital, receiving steroid pills and cortisone shots to help with the itching. Those failed to do much except make his muscles hurt.

After 10 days, Aaron decided to end his Atripla treatment. “These pills really just do kill you,” he says. “They’re like chemotherapy in a pill. It’s putting toxins into your body that it’s not used to.”

SCENE VI

Aaron, Ashley and Lynn are nervous as they get out of the tan minivan. Ashley Taylor, Aaron’s friend since freshman year, holds his hand tightly as they walk in to the clinic, followed by Lynn, her mother.

After signing in, Aaron follows a nurse to a room alone and waits. She takes samples, including urine, blood, throat-swab and a penis swab. He text messages Ashley and tells her what they had done. The two will text back and forth for hours, waiting for Aaron’s results.

The nurse comes back and begins to explain his results.

“Mouth swab is fine,” she says. His urine test and penis swab are, too. Aaron asks her what the sore in his mouth was. It’s a canker sore, and she tells him he had been irritating it by brushing around it too much. Thinking he’s good to go, Aaron begins putting on his coat and scarf when he notices the woman’s demeanor change.

“You might want to sit down,” she says.

“You tested preliminary positive for HIV.” (Preliminary positive is when HIV antibodies are found in the blood stream, but their level is uncertain.)

“Shut the fuck up,” Aaron replies.

He begins to cry as the nurse goes to get Ashley and Lynn. The three women enter the room to Aaron, shrunken in the chair. He doesn’t look up. He can’t talk. He can’t tell them what he has just found out. The nurse begins to explain what happened when Aaron bursts out and tells them. He gets up and hugs Lynn, crumpling in her arms, crying. She holds Aaron until it’s time to leave.

After another blood test, the nurse leads Aaron to talk to a nurse named Joy about how HIV is contracted, and Joy tells him that, because of his age and sexual orientation, he is part of an “at risk” population. She gives him pamphlets for a support group and packets about treatment options.

After thanking the clinicians and leaving, the world changes for Aaron. The cold, fresh air hits the teenager’s face as Ashley and Lynn walk him to the van.

“It made me step outside of myself,” Aaron says. “It was so surreal. Everything changed right after I walked out of the health clinic. The scenery. The snow. Something took over me and made the world look completely different.”

About HIV

Dr. Douglas P. Van Auken, M.D. says HIV symptoms can occur abruptly after the infection, or it may take years for a person to notice anything. The first few weeks after infection, several symptoms can occur: fever, fatigue, weight loss, rashes, pneumonia and swollen glands. Blood tests are done to determine how low a person’s T-cell count is. T-cells are white blood cells in the lymphocyte family. They are the coordinators of the body’s immune system. HIV attacks these cells. Van Auken says if the T-cell count is fewer than 200, a person is diagnosed with AIDS — acquired immune deficiency syndrome.

The staff physician at the Metro Health Medical Center in Cleveland says HIV can make other viruses become more prominent in a person. Chicken pox, for example, can reactivate as shingles and produce a line of dots down the body.

Van Auken has seen a lot of early 20-somethings come into his LGBT Pride Clinic. “Barebacking,” he says. Many gay men have sex without condoms. Rectal and oral sex are the most transmittable ways to acquire HIV. “(Rectal) is more than one hundred times riskier than oral. Maybe even thousands.”

Christina R. Henning, RS, MPH, an epidemiologist at the Canton Health Department, says there are more than 14,000 people in Ohio diagnosed with HIV or AIDS. New infections in those aged 20 to 24 are increasing significantly. At the end of 2007, the Centers for Disease Control estimated more than 570,000 people live with HIV/AIDS in the 39 states and territories that have a history of confidential name-based HIV reporting, including Ohio. (These numbers are based on reported diagnoses and deaths.)

The total number of people living in the United States with HIV/AIDS is believed to be around 1.1 million, according to AVERT, an international AIDS charity. The discrepancy between these figures is because of several factors. Confidential name-based reporting of HIV diagnoses has not yet been implemented in all states. Anonymous tests, including home tests, are excluded from case reports. And according to AVERT, one in every five people living with HIV has not even had their infection diagnosed, let alone reported.

The three get into the vehicle and begin the drive back to Aaron’s house, where he will have to tell his mother and her boyfriend the news. “I took a step back and realized ‘The world doesn’t revolve around Aaron.’ I realized life was short,” he says.

When they get home, Ashley rubs Aaron’s back in his room as his mother tells Tammie Kamphus, Aaron’s mother, what had happened.

“Aaron! Aaron! What is wrong with you?” Tammie wails. Tammie flies up the stairs, following her boyfriend, Robby. The couple bound around the bannister and into Aaron’s room. “How could you do this to your mother?” Robby asks.

Tammie pushes past and hugs her son. She tells him he is just a baby; he is so young. The two cry together. They let go, and Tammie walks away. “My first reaction was to cry and scream,” Tammie says. “I can’t even explain it. I just went in the bathroom and cried. I still cry.”

Two weeks later, on Jan. 5, 2009, Aaron officially tests reactive for HIV.
Patty Rhodes, Aaron's best friend since eighth grade, says he had a rough time with the gossip at school. “I found out about it through friends,” she says. Today, people still talk about Aaron being positive and spread rumors, but he doesn’t take it to heart. “He’s been a help to people, I think,” she says. “Aaron’s really good at giving advice. He explains things well.”

But just after he turned 18, Aaron, feeling lost, sick, and angry, accepted an offer from a local club entertainment director to audition to become a stripper. Of course, he got the gig. He developed a routine. He’d get to the club around 8 at night. He’d start drinking. He says it gave him a boost of confidence to go out and dance in front of everyone. He says he was making roughly $500 each week and began hanging with a crowd of heavy partiers and drug users.

In July, after about three months of stripping and drinking heavily, Aaron says he woke up one day and realized what was happening to him. He had to take control of his situation, focus on his life and deal with his HIV, rather than stripping and drinking to avoid it. As of his last visit to the doctor at the end of March, Aaron’s viral load went from 57,000 to 24,600 and his CD4 count from 414 to 403. CD4 cells, or T-cells, are specialized immunity cells attacked by HIV. When attacked by HIV, they make copies of the virus and weaken the body’s immune system.

Today, Aaron stays busy with his theater work, including last month’s “Fiddler on the Roof,” the hardest musical he says he’s done so far in his career. It’s the elaborate Russian and Jewish dances that are rough on his body. But Aaron perseveres. He says theater is like his boyfriend.

Aaron says he has taken his disease as a sign from God that he was put here to educate people about the dangers of unprotected sex. He has talked at several HIV/AIDS group meetings and has talked to the kids at his high school about having the virus. He says if he can prevent one person from becoming infected, then he has done his part. He deliberately tries to lead as normal life as possible. But he’s 19. He still goes out on the weekends. He’s still dating. He’s focused and doesn’t let it bring him down — most of the time.

“I think about it, but I don’t think about it,” he says. “One mistake I made, I have to pay for that forever. I know what I’m going to die from, and I’m going to die from AIDS.”

The show must go on
Aaron takes a bow at the end of the debut performance of “The Importance of Being Earnest.”
START HERE

Does she wear boxers?

YES

Under her jeans?

YES

GAY

NO

Does she watch "America's Next Top Model"?

YES

Does she hate the pretty girls?

GAY

NO

Does she shop at American Eagle?

YES

On the men's side?

YES

GAY

NO

Does she drink heavily and often?

YES

STRAIGHT

NO

Does she have a tattoo?

YES

STRAIGHT

NO

Does she have something other than her ears pierced?

YES

STRAIGHT

NO

Does she shower at least weekly?

YES

STRAIGHT

NO

Is she in a sorority?

YES

GAY

NO

Is she a vegetarian?

YES

STRAIGHT

NO

Is she a physical education major

NO

STRAIGHT

More totally cliché conclusions by Kristine Gill
When I was 12, I was in the barber shop with my dad, and I saw this guy walk by, and I was just like “WOW, that’s cool.” Though I kind of repressed it and pretended it wasn’t the case. I didn’t come out to myself until I was 18. It was a six-year struggle of repressing it and pretending it wasn’t there, and telling myself that I was straight; dating girls and educating myself that I was essentially attracted to them. It took me until I was 18, to say “Yeah, maybe, not so much.”

Darren Stevenson, sophomore nursing major

I’ve always been different, but the moment I realized I was gay, I was in the locker room. Everyone was getting naked, and I was just wowed. I actually had my first crush in sixth grade. I came out to everyone in eighth grade, but everyone has always known since I was born that I was gay. I played with Barbies when I was younger; I did all the gay things.

Scott Core, freshman undeclared major

Probably when I was eight or nine because I used to mess around with my neighbor and didn’t think anything of it. And then his dad caught us, and I didn’t know why I got in trouble. I didn’t think there was anything wrong with it. And then that summer, we went to visit my uncle who’s gay and lives in San Francisco. So, we walked around seeing guys holding hands like no problem and I thought “OK, that’s me.” It seemed so natural. I don’t think I fully understood it, but as I grew older and hit puberty, I thought “What the hell, I don’t like girls.” Then it got suicidal and crazy and finally came out happy.

Ray Gardner, freshman nursing major

For the longest time, I thought I was bisexual. It was all through high school pretty much. And it wasn’t until coming out week of PRIDE!(Kent) in November that I heard the term asexual. I was attracted to both genders equally, but never really had the desire to have sex. It was a shock to me, but it was the realization that I was waiting for.

Emily Vernon, sophomore anthropology major

It was my sophomore year of high school. Me and my friend were just playing around, and we thought we were bisexual. Then we kissed and just experimented, and I said “Wait, I actually like this.” So, I thought I was gay, but I went through the bisexual time for a little bit before I actually came out and said I was a lesbian. I came out my senior year of high school. It was a struggle because it is against my religion. I kept fighting with myself a lot, saying “OK, this isn’t right, and I’m going to go the hell.” But at the same time, I kept hiding myself because I couldn’t be who I truly was, so I just had to come out because it was better for me and more healthy for myself than to try to please other people.

Lauren Carpenter, freshman fashion merchandising major

The realization was really scary because I thought to myself “Oh my God, I’m in for a world of hurt.” But it wasn’t even like that because I am happier than I thought I would be.

Annie Omalley, rehab counseling graduate student

Since I was in elementary school, I just liked girls, and I knew I wanted to marry a girl. I remember asking adults why girls can’t marry girls, and they would usually tell me “cause it’s not supposed to be that way.” I never knew the terms gay and lesbian, so I thought there was something wrong with me. To me, it was just out of the question. I convinced myself in middle school that I was straight, taught myself how to be attracted to guys and it worked out until about three years ago when I finally came out. The realization was really scary because I thought to myself “Oh my God, I’m in for a world of hurt.” But, actually, it wasn’t even like that because I am happier than I thought I would be.

Annie Omalley, rehab counseling graduate student

I first realized I wasn’t straight halfway through my junior year of high school. I figured out I was bisexual because I had a huge crush on my one friend, but I was still attracted to guys. The summer after that, I dated the only guy I’ve ever dated, but something felt odd about being physical with him. So, last November, after getting involved in PRIDE!(Kent) and seeing other people that are transgender, I realized I was, too.

Christine Stout, freshman visual communication design major

Have an idea for next issue’s Last Thought? E-mail us at kentfusion@gmail.com.
You have to sometimes think about who you are. At first, I was like, ‘Oh man, what will people think about me?’ You don’t pass up an opportunity to share your story.” — Ray Campbell

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