

LOOKOUT



Leaving or staying? The fight for Arizona's queer communities. Pg. 3

LOOKOUT



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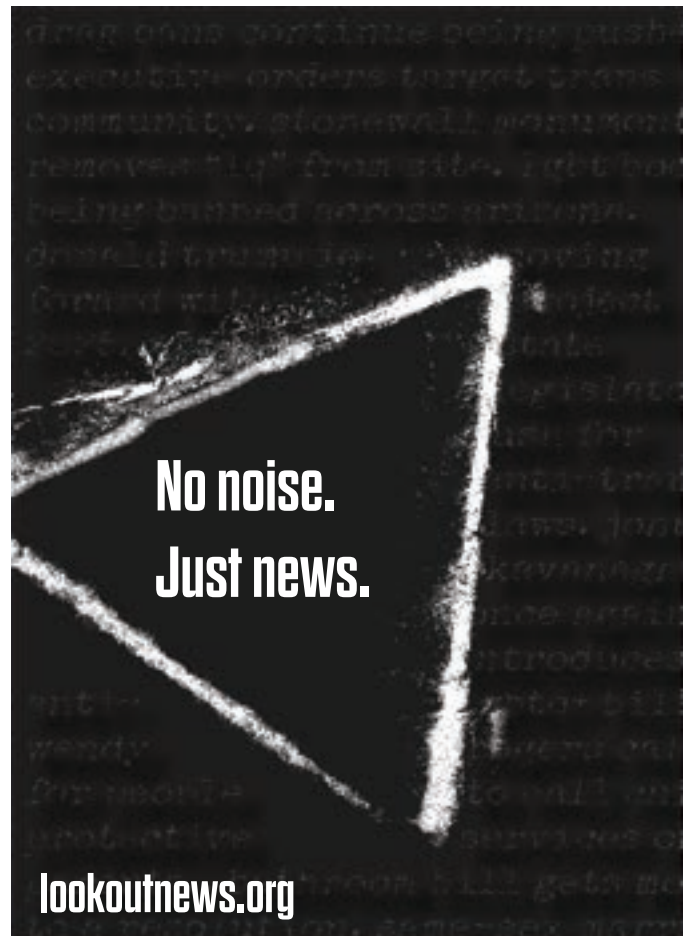
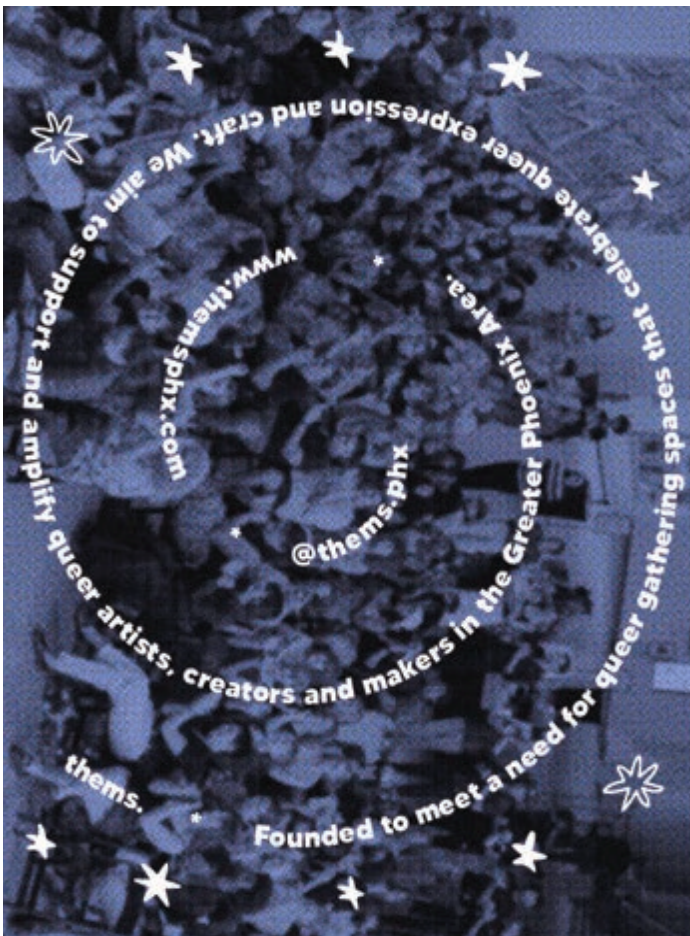
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LOOKOUT is dedicated to delivering fearless journalism and dynamic community events that amplify and expand LGBTQ+ representation in news coverage. Our mission is to engage, empower, and strengthen LGBTQ+ communities and their allies by telling authentic, impactful stories that transcend stereotypes, hold power to account, and champion equality and respect for all.

Our vision is to inspire and accelerate a queer experience that is free from injustice, fulfilling the promise of equal respect, rights, and opportunities for everyone. We strive to ensure that LGBTQ+ news is not just present but prominent, fostering a society where every voice is heard, every story is elevated, and every individual is celebrated.



Letter from the Editor

We can face this storm together.

The past few months have been difficult for many. Across Arizona, people are feeling the storm of policies and decisions that directly affect their communities. For some, it's the reality of immigration policies that tear families apart like a raging wind, and for others, it's the constant sense of looming rainclouds—knowing that, at any moment, the storm could shift above them.

For many in the LGBTQ+ community, that storm has been especially destructive. Gay and lesbian Arizonans, who once believed they were shielded from the tempest of laws targeting transgender people, are now faced with a reality where their own rights are at risk. Marriage equality—once a hard-won victory—now feels uncertain, and attacks on diversity initiatives threaten to wash away the support structures that have allowed queer-owned businesses and artists to thrive. We stand at a crossroads, where rights we thought were secure could be swept away, and the question we face is whether we will allow the storm to wash us all away.

At *LOOKOUT*, we're committed to confronting this gathering storm head-on. As a nonprofit, nonpartisan news outlet, *LOOKOUT* is committed to truth, not to the false balance that so often dominates today's media. I understand that many of the stories we publish may appear partisan, but let me be clear: Our mission is not to offer balance—it is to offer truth. For too long, the concept of balance in journalism has meant giving equal weight to voices that seek to do harm, whose actions and rhetoric have real-world consequences on the most vulnerable among us. In times like these, it is vital to recognize that some truths must be spoken, regardless of who they may discomfort. One of the most fundamental ethical principles I hold dear is this: Journalism is not meant to cause harm. It is meant to shine a light on injustice, to amplify voices that are often silenced, and to uncover the truths that shape our world.

Our main story in this issue focuses on the people who are fleeing Arizona—those who feel they can no longer weather a state that no longer feels safe or welcoming. Arizona once prided itself on being a place where people could live freely, regardless of background or identity. But that

sense of openness is increasingly being replaced by a political climate where the storm clouds of division darken the skies. Dialogue is being stifled, and policies are being shaped by those who either don't understand or, worse, don't care about the real consequences on our communities.

In reporting on this exodus, we reached out to leaders across the state to hear their thoughts on the migration of people and the long-term impact it could have on Arizona's future. They shared insights on what it means to live in a place where people may feel unwelcome. The message was clear: Arizona's future is at a crossroads, and they understand why people feel the need to search for a place where they can live without fear.

But even amid the tempest, one thing has become abundantly clear: The best way to protect our communities is to come together. It's time to focus on the organizations and individuals who are working every day to create safe spaces, protect rights, and fight for the dignity of all people. In this issue, we've included a list of 12 organizations across Arizona that are doing vital work to support and protect the queer community. This list is not exhaustive, but it is a start—a lifeline for those who want to get involved and help calm the turbulence.

Arizona's future is uncertain, and the storm may not be over, but one thing is for sure: We cannot afford to sit idly by and let the storm rage on. We must stand together, support one another, and fight for a future where all people—regardless of identity—can live with dignity, security, and freedom. The winds are changing, but we can be the force that pushes back.

Now is the time to find those who are working for change, support their efforts, and ensure that those fighting to protect us are never left behind. We can weather this out together.



A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'JD Jaafari', written over a light pink background.

Joseph Darius Jaafari
Editor in Chief, Founder



Queer Arizonans are feeling the need to flee their homes

A mixture of the state's political shift to the right mixed with unease about the future has people moving to protect their marriages and bodies.

STORY BY Joseph Darius Jaafari

Nova Galloway graduated from Grand Canyon University with one goal: become the kind of teacher students would not only be excited to learn from, but also feel safe enough to confide in.

Galloway, who lives in Tempe, a city neighboring Phoenix, said the first few years of teaching were manageable. But then the pandemic hit, and frustrations grew over the lack of resources provided to teachers, the little technology offered to students to learn from home, and backsliding on in-person schooling despite rising COVID numbers in the state. At the same time, the state legislature was passing stricter laws on how teachers could address student issues, particularly around sexuality and gender.

Teachers across the state — and the country — were starting to be called “groomers” by school board officials and parents for discussing sexual health issues, utilizing books with LGBTQ+ characters, or even teaching proper pronoun usage. In Arizona, one teacher had a rock thrown through a window at their home after a school board member posted their address, allegedly targeting them for being non-

binary, and another had death threats after her phone number was leaked by local far-right media because they lead a local group for parents of trans youth.

Galloway believed in keeping a low profile. But in the past few years, Galloway also began to recognize they didn't feel comfortable with their sex assigned at birth. They started using different pronouns and a new name outside of school, which students caught wind of when they found Galloway's TikTok account.

Afraid of broaching subjects that could land her on leave or dismissed from their position, Galloway continued to try to keep to themselves. But the stress of closeting oneself has been too much. And after years of a brewing — and arguably successful — culture war against gender and sexuality in public schools, Galloway is moving toward a new future outside of teaching, and out of Arizona, entirely.

“I just feel like anything can happen, and I don't want to be here for it,” Galloway said.

Galloway is one of many LGBTQ+ people fleeing Arizona, where LGBTQ+ rights are hotly contested. *LOOKOUT* spoke with more than a dozen queer individuals over the course of

two months who have either recently left the state, wanted to move, or are planning to move out of Arizona due to concerns about what the next four years or longer might look like. Their reasons for leaving vary, from health care to protecting their marriages. But there was one common thread:

Arizona is no longer safe.

Arizona has built a reputation for its independent political streak. Former Sen. Kyrsten Sinema, originally a Democrat, often clashed with her party's efforts to enact sweeping changes. The late Sen. John McCain, a Republican, faced backlash from MAGA-aligned lawmakers for blocking his party's attempt to repeal Obamacare during Donald Trump's first term. Meanwhile, current Democratic Sens. Ruben Gallego and Mark Kelly have recently voted in near lockstep with Republicans more than other Democrats on key Senate bills and Trump-era confirmations.

At the state level, Arizona politics reflect a similar centrist trend. In the 2022 election, voters elected Democrats to the state's three most powerful positions: governor, secretary of state

and attorney general.

In the 2024 general election, voters approved a ballot measure adding abortion protections to the state constitution and rejected far-right Senate candidate Kari Lake. However, in that same election, Republicans — including far-right conservatives — won key positions that were seen to be safe for Democrats, securing seats in Maricopa County's Attorney's Office, Sheriff's Office, school superintendent, and the state's Corporation Commission.

And while Republicans previously held only a narrow majority by one vote in both chambers before this year, the party now has a four-seat advantage in the Senate and six seats in the House of Representatives. Though not a veto-proof majority, it's enough to pass state resolutions and place measures on the 2026 ballot. Some of those proposals already under discussion target LGBTQ+ rights, including pronoun usage and bathroom bills.

While Democratic Gov. Katie Hobbs still holds the power to veto bills targeting queer people — and she's vetoed every one that's come across her desk, so far — living at the mercy of someone else's pen stroke has not provided a sense of safety for many Arizonans.

And the governor's vetoes aren't a guarantee: Last session, when Republicans attempted to bypass the governor's veto regarding pronoun usage in schools and a bathroom ban for transgender children, Sen. John Kavanagh (R-Fountain Hills) introduced a Senate resolution that would have gone to voters. It failed by one vote — cast by moderate Republican Sen. Ken Bennett of Prescott, who was later defeated in his primary, largely due to that decision.

As a result of those political shifts, many Arizonans who were once proud to be part of a devil-may-care and Wild West state are now fleeing to other parts of the nation — and the world — where they foresee a more secure future.

In the past decade, multiple states across the South and Midwest passed laws banning drag from public spaces, hanging LGBTQ+ flags in schools or on public grounds, pushing for parental rights in schools, setting up tip lines for people to report teachers instructing “gender ideology,” and banning transgender students from playing in sports. Multiple LGBTQ+ advocacy groups advised queer people to avoid traveling to states such as Texas or Florida over safety concerns.

In that time period, there was an influx of stories where people — particularly parents of trans youth — moved their kids out of unsafe states to places where their children could live without politics bearing down on their lives.

Arizona was one of them.

“I couldn't imagine moving back,” said Robert Chevaleau, who left Arizona for California in 2020 with his wife and two queer children.

While in Arizona, Chevaleau sought help with school policies that discriminated against one of his children, who is transgender. But no matter where he turned — from administrators

to elected officials — he faced resistance.

“I expected my daughter could have long hair at school, wear a dress, wear earrings — I'm not even talking about bathrooms, just a dress. Surely that's not unreasonable,” he said. He went from teachers to principals to school boards and finally the CEO of his daughter's charter school to find someone to reason with. “And I was really surprised it wasn't there.”

“This was the first time we felt like we had to move. If we don't move, our kids will not grow up to be confident and secure people.”

- Robert Chevaleau

After multiple attempts to meet with local lawmakers in the House of Representatives and trying to negotiate with school leaders who were pushing anti-trans rules in schools, he and his wife decided it was time to leave.

“We've lived all over ... you move for work or family and say, ‘OK, this will be a new adventure,’” Chevaleau said. “This was the first time we felt like we had to move. If we don't move, our kids will not grow up to be confident and secure people.”

Shortly after the family moved, former Republican Gov. Doug Ducey signed two bills targeting transgender children — banning surgeries and barring transgender girls from playing in girls' sports.

Now, Chevaleau said both of his children are thriving away from the politics of Arizona, and doesn't question his move. “When you have no one in leadership supporting you, it's hard to get ahead and it's hard to find your feet,” he said. “It's just hard to catch your breath, which is really important when you're a kid.”

But the attacks on trans people are extending beyond that community with conservatives who have long argued against same-sex marriage and legal protections for LGBTQ+ people. In Arizona, that would have far-reaching consequences if those were ripped away.

In 2022, 16 states had adopted marriage equality laws through legislation or voter initiatives. Today, 29 states — including Arizona — still have anti-LGBTQ+ laws, including same-sex marriage bans, in their constitutions or state statutes that have not been removed since the U.S. Supreme Court legalized same-sex marriage nationwide in 2015 with the *Obergefell v. Hodges* ruling.

That Supreme Court decision established that states had to recognize same-sex marriages and grant all people with marriage licenses the same state rights as everyone else, including property rights and rights of survivorship. In 2022, when the Supreme Court ruled in *Dobbs*

v. Jackson Women's Health Organization to overturn abortion as a right, Justice Clarence Thomas wrote in a concurring opinion alongside the majority that the same reasoning for overturning abortion should be applied to same-sex marriage, as well as sodomy laws.

Since that ruling, LGBTQ+ advocates have been bracing for a worst-case scenario of seeing a same-sex marriage case make its way to the Supreme Court.

In Colorado, voters amended the state constitution to allow same-sex marriage in the 2024 general election. In Virginia, lawmakers are advancing a resolution to place a similar measure on the 2026 ballot.

However, in Arizona, efforts to remove the ban from the state constitution have been blocked by Republican lawmakers, who have refused to allow bills on the issue to be heard in committee or receive public input.

Rep. Oscar De Los Santos, a Democrat from Phoenix and the state House minority leader, introduced a bill last year that would have put the issue before voters in the general election, but it was never given a hearing. This year, Rep. Brian Garcia, D-Phoenix, is attempting the same ahead of the 2026 midterms but has faced the same roadblocks of not being heard in a committee, which is the first step to getting a bill passed.

There is a stop-gap Arizonans are leaning on: Congress passed the Respect for Marriage Act in 2022, requiring states to recognize marriage licenses from other states. The federal law allows couples to leave their state to marry and return with their union recognized. But it remains unclear what would happen to marriages in Arizona and other states where bans are still in place.

Some advocates believe existing marriages would be grandfathered in, but no further marriage licenses would be issued. But others believe state bans could void marriages, stripping couples of key rights, including property ownership, medical visitation, automatic parentage and wrongful death claims, unless they marry outside the state. That outcome is less likely, they say.

The concerns extend beyond same-sex marriage. Arizona has no hate crime statute, despite multiple attempts by lawmakers to pass one. While there is broad support for non-discrimination protections across Arizona, the state has no law preventing LGBTQ+ people from being evicted, fired or denied services. Protections exist only through a patchwork of city ordinances and an executive order shielding state employees — an order that a future governor could reverse.

Married couple Blake Reeves and Nick Earl say they see “the writing on the wall” and are choosing to leave before their marriage rights could be challenged by the state.

Both men grew up in Arizona: Reeves in the Phoenix suburbs, Earl in Lake Havasu City in northwestern Arizona. When they bought their home in Phoenix's midtown area, they intended to make it their forever home.

“We always joked about leaving, but we really like Phoenix,” Reeves said, explaining that they had no plans to leave the mid-century home they had renovated.

Both men’s families and all their friends still live in the state. They feel an affinity for the desert heat and the beauty of Arizona — to which Earl said he feels a “spiritual connection.” They never considered how politics might affect their lives as a couple.

“This is home, even if it comes with flaws we were OK with pushing through,” Earl said.

That is, until now. Reeves and Earl said they feel in limbo, unsure of what to do if the U.S. Supreme Court were to overturn its 2015 ruling in *Obergefell v. Hodges*, which granted them the right to marry in their home state.

With Trump’s second term, they’ve noticed how emboldened conservatives have become in trying to reverse that decision. And their concern is not unfounded: In Idaho, the state’s Republican legislature filed a letter with the Supreme Court asking them to reverse the *Obergefell* ruling.

The Arizona-based Alliance Defending Freedom, which helped get *Roe v. Wade* overturned and lobbied for the Supreme Court case that removed discrimination protections for LGBTQ+ people, is pushing to overturn same-sex marriage.

Late last year, Reeves received an offer to relocate his job to San Francisco, and the couple saw it as an opportunity to escape.

“I don’t want to sit around and wait for something to happen and it’s too late,” Reeves said.

What’s worse, they said, is that they don’t know if anyone with power in the state would — or even could — stand up for them.

“After the election, we saw officials in other states really take a stand and say that LGBT people would be protected,” Earl said. “It’s been crickets in Arizona.”

It’s unclear how many people are actually trying to flee Arizona. While there is a growing body of data analyzing LGBTQ+ migration into the United States and certain states, research on migration patterns of queer populations between states is not as robust.

The Trevor Project, a national LGBTQ+ advocacy group, identified in 2022 that Arizona was one of 10 states where transgender people, specifically, had moved out of due to state laws that targeted them or their families. Out of more than 90,000 transgender respondents, 5% said they had already relocated out of states such as Alabama, Arizona, Texas, Florida, Georgia and Ohio.

Last year, Data for Progress surveyed 1,036 people and found that 5% of all LGBTQ+ people surveyed across the nation had moved out of a state because of anti-LGBTQ+ laws. For people who identified as nonbinary or transgender, the number rose to 21%.

And just this year, The Trevor Project and Movement Advancement Project found that

many LGBTQ+ young people and their families have had to consider leaving their state. Nearly two in five young people reported thinking about moving, and 4 percent of all respondents relocated.

But overall numbers are difficult to obtain: Other data, such as real estate listings, are less revealing since records only reflect a small portion of queer people who are married, own property together, and might be selling their homes. They don’t account for renters or unmarried couples looking to sell or rent out their homes.

To gauge the exodus in Arizona, there are only anecdotes from those who have already left or are planning to move.

But moving isn’t easy, and some people *LOOKOUT* spoke with have encountered roadblocks, whether due to a lack of finances to relocate to a safer place or, for those trying to leave the United States, immigration issues.

Galloway, the teacher from Tempe, is renting out their home and plans to move to Uruguay by the summer. However, before doing so, they need to renew their passport, which still lists their sex assigned at birth. Due to a new executive order and Secretary of State Marco Rubio’s decision to freeze applications with an X gender marker, Galloway has come to terms with the fact they won’t be able to change the legal documents to reflect their gender or name on their passport — a personal goal they had for the year. LGBTQ+ advocacy and civil rights groups, including the ACLU, are advising people who need gender markers changed on their passports to not do so right now.

For others, such as Jo and their wife, Cristine, the decision to move was complicated by finances. Both asked that their last names not be used, as one works for the federal government and fears retaliation.

The couple moved back to Arizona during the pandemic and had plans to stay. But with the recent election, they planned to use savings from moving home to buy a place in Northern California. They contacted a real estate agent and had put a bid down on a home close to San Francisco, but the house they were under contract with required extensive repairs — more money than they had.

When they were looking at other places they could afford in more rural areas, the people and politics of the region reminded them of the same areas they wanted to leave behind. So, they’re staying.

“The universe was just telling us things, and we decided to stay in Arizona, put our head between our knees and hunker down,” Jo said.

Because Arizona has community property rights for married couples, they felt the need to buy a home in Arizona to secure their financial future in case their marriage was no longer recognized. The only place they could afford was Florence, Arizona — a rural and bright red town that is mainly known for its state prison and famously MAGA-friendly Pinal County Sheriff Mark Lamb.

“Not all of us queers can afford to live in the Melrose district,” Jo said, referring to Phoenix’s de facto gayborhood. “You’ve gotta be a certain kind of queer to afford that, and we’re not those queers.”

Buying a house should have been a celebratory moment, Jo said. “It’s sad. It’s surreal. We’re first-time homebuyers, and we should be ecstatic about it, but I can’t even enjoy it because I don’t know what’s going to happen to us.” ▼

This story was published in partnership with *The 19th*, an independent nonprofit newsroom reporting on gender, politics and policy.



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Illustration by Joseph Darius Jaafari
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These lawmakers are working for LGBTQ+ rights, but they need your help

With the fear of more LGBTQ+ rights restrictions, possible discrimination, and a culture that appears to be labeling diversity as a threat, Democratic lawmakers are scrambling for how to help fix it.

Since President Donald Trump took office in January, transgender people and immigrants have faced heavy realities, the biggest being that Arizona—a state that has swung politically from deep red to light blue to purple and now back to solidly red—may not be the safe haven it was once thought to be.

With same-sex marriage increasingly in doubt at the U.S. Supreme Court since Republicans in other states are working to overturn the 2015 ruling that made it legal nationwide, gay and lesbian individuals who may have felt shielded from the conservative-led transgender panic in the Legislature are now also considering alternatives.

Because of that, many people who *LOOKOUT* spoke with that are planning to leave or left already described themselves “political refugees” — a complicated but emotionally charged political term.

We spoke with three prominent Arizona lawmakers about what the future holds and how they plan to support the community. Their key takeaway: They understand why people want to leave.

These interviews have been edited for clarity, style, and brevity.

“It’s a stain on the state of Arizona”

STORY BY *Celina Jiménez* (she/her)



State Senator Analise Ortiz

State Sen. Analise Ortiz is a TikTok star, a firebrand progressive, and an up-and-coming name in progressive politics across the nation. Ortiz’s career spans from being a former reporter to a communications assistant with Arizona’s ACLU chapter, to state representative, and now senator for her home in Maryvale, a suburb of West Phoenix.

Ortiz has gained notoriety for her bluntness on progressive issues, whether calling out Democrats for moving too far to the right or making national headlines alongside LGBTQ+ caucus colleague Oscar De Los Santos as they chanted “shame” on the House floor after last year’s abortion ruling. However, she has also faced criticism from progressive groups for working in bipartisan ways—such as collaborating with Freedom Caucus member Rep. Alex Kolodin on a criminal justice reform bill—with some claiming she betrayed her constituents.

In a state like Arizona, where Democrats often struggle to advance their passion projects without working with political opponents, Ortiz stands out as a figure to watch. LOOKOUT’s Public Safety Fellow Celina Jimenez sat down with Ortiz just before the new year, ahead of Donald Trump’s inauguration and a flurry of executive orders, to discuss what is at stake for the future of Arizona’s queer communities and how people can get involved.

Celina Jiménez (LOOKOUT): Some people have expressed that they feel like they can’t rely on state leaders to protect them. They’re feeling like their only choice is to flee the state, especially right now. As a state leader, how does this make you feel?

Analise Ortiz (AO): It’s horrible. I feel ashamed that we are in this position where people in the LGBTQ community are feeling as though they are not safe here. The direct hostility towards the LGBTQ community that is coming from the Trump administration – and also members of the state legislature – is just absolutely unacceptable.

And people are afraid that with the incoming administration, the cost of these hateful

policies could lead to someone not being able to file their exemption anymore, or someone losing a career they’ve worked hard for, or not being able to find a place to live because of discrimination. So it hurts my heart to hear that folks are moving out of the state because of fears that they are not safe, and it makes me want to be more committed and double down on my support as a member of the LGBTQ+ caucus and as a legislator to continue pushing for a statewide non-discrimination order.

“... I’m going to continue to be a vocal voice within our LGBTQ+ community, because everyone should feel welcome. And they always will be welcome within my office and at the state capitol as long as I am there.”

CJ: Since we can’t pass that non-discrimination bill statewide right now, what do you feel like that tells our LGBTQ population about how much we, as a state, value them and their ability to live freely?

AO: It’s incredibly frustrating that we cannot pass a statewide non-discrimination ordinance because Republicans, who are the majority in the legislature, continue to block legislation year after year. I do have hope that there are cities and towns that have passed non-discrimination ordinances within their own city limits, and I think that really signals that there are safe places within the state of Arizona that value our LGBTQ community.

We also have a strong ally in Governor Hobbs, who has vetoed every single anti-LGBT piece of legislation that has come to her desk.

As for my constituents in LD 24, I’m going to continue to be a vocal voice within our LGBTQ+ community, because everyone should feel welcome. And they always will be welcome within my office and at the state capitol as long as I am there.

CJ: Is this sentiment something that you were already familiar with? Is this something that your constituents and your colleagues have been talking to you about?

AO: I hadn’t heard people say that they actually had plans to leave the state, but I will say that throughout this last campaign, it was very common that as I was knocking on doors, I would meet LGBTQ+ constituents who told me that this was their top concern. There are so many members of my community in Maryvale and Glendale who had told me that when *Roe v. Wade* was overturned, their first thought was that the Supreme Court is going to come after *Obergefell v. Hodges* next. They expect marriage to go next. And that really made people start to reconsider.

They started asking themselves, do I need to get married to my partner now? Do I need to put some safety plans in place? And it shouldn’t be the reality that we are living in. But yes, I will say that that fear was very palpable prior to November 5th.

CJ: What do you feel like it will do to Arizona’s culture if these groups of people do go forward with their plans to flee for more progressive states?

AO: Every time this anti-LGBTQ legislature is part of the conversation, we tell Republicans again and again that this is business. It is bad for the economy. We are going to lose valuable members of our community, or maybe people that are thinking about moving here will no longer move here.

And not just individuals – this also impacts businesses. If there are businesses that really value the LGBTQ+ community that are considering moving to Arizona, they might reconsider if they see that we do not have the policies in place to make sure their employees can live

safe, free, authentic lives within our state. So this is an economic development issue, it is a business issue, and it is a culture issue. We want to have thriving neighborhoods. We want to have the art and culture that is part of the rich diversity that our LGBTQ+ community brings to this state. And if we are to continue to see these terrible, hostile bills, that's going to dwindle away and create more isolation within the LGBTQ+ community. And that is not a future that I want for Arizona as a pansexual woman.

CJ: When you were going door-to-door speaking with some of your LGBTQ constituents, did you hear any of them refer to themselves as 'refugees of our state,' or is that idea something you've been made aware of at all?

AO: That's not a term that I've heard, but I would really understand if somebody feels that they truly are a refugee because they can't live their full lives here.

CJ: We've spoken a little bit about what message that sends to people within our own communities and even nationwide – but what about to the world? What does it tell the world that these people are calling themselves refugees of our state?

AO: It's a stain on the state of Arizona if even one single person doesn't feel safe here to live out their life as an LGBTQ+ person. We should not be in that position, and it's a reputation that I am committed to turning around.

And we need to do that through policy. That's why I'm looking forward to co-sponsoring the non-discrimination ordinance. I'm also sponsoring a bill related to creating the state's first LGBTQ+ license plate. And we're going to continue to have a trans youth day at the Capitol.

We're going to continue to celebrate the diversity and the richness of our community. And the Republicans in power cannot scare us away from doing that.

CJ: Are there any other personal plans you have in place in the event that federal rules and laws do take away more of our rights?

AO: I personally want to dig in deeper with my community so that no matter what happens at the federal level, we will have the safety net on the ground to take care of one another. That's a real thing that we need to prepare for, and I plan to just show up for my community and for my loved ones who are LGBTQ to make sure that they have what they need if things get to that point on the federal level. And I'm encouraged by organizations like the Human Rights Campaign that have long been doing that work to build community on a hyper-local level. I think those are the organizations that really have the resources to be able to help shepherd us through this moment. ▼

“There are no guarantees in this environment.”

STORY BY Geri Koeppel (she/her)



Representative Patty Contreras

Last year, Phoenix Democrat Rep. Patty Contreras sat in the Capitol and listened as one of her fellow representatives, Lupe Diaz of Benson, said the U.S. was “unrighteous” because of people like her, who are part of the LGBTQ+ community.

That moment sticks in Contreras' mind as an example of the “ignorance” she said consumes many people with the Republican Party in power at the Capitol.

But that hasn't stopped Contreras from continuing to fight for the dignity of her community. Reporter Geri Koeppel spoke with Contreras about that moment, as well as the future of progressive legislation and how she and her wife are planning for a future in which same-sex marriage is taken away.

Geri Koeppel (LOOKOUT): Thanks for taking the time to talk with me, Patty. First off, do you have a sense of the type and number of anti-LGBTQ+ bills that might come up again in the legislative session?

Rep. Patty Contreras: I'm not sure how many will come up, but unfortunately, we're seeing hundreds of them throughout the country—these anti-LGBTQ+ bills. I know Senator Kavanagh has already dropped a couple of bills. And it's unfortunate because we're just regular people, and here they want to make

us into “others.” Senator [John] Kavanagh [of Fountain Hills] seems to have such an issue with gay people, especially our trans population. That's very unfortunate because they're just trying to live their own lives.

GK: On that note: As a lesbian, you have to work with these folks—lawmakers with fairly extreme viewpoints on the community—who openly intimidate and try to take away the rights of LGBTQ+ people who want to live in peace. Do you see any hope for building bridges with these fellow legislators like Kavanagh someday?

PC: It's unfortunate, but I don't think we can get through to some of these folks. I mean, I work with them, and they all seem like decent people. I hope they think I'm a decent person. But some of them are just so—I don't know what word to use; I'll say ignorant—so ignorant of the fact that we exist. We've existed for as long as humans have existed—lesbians, gay people, trans people, and more. I'm really offended that they think they need to make laws to dictate my life—how I live and who I love.

I'll give an example of their ignorance. Last year, Easter coincided with Trans Day of Visibility, which is always on March 31st. One of the legislators, who is a pastor, got up the next day and practically delivered a sermon vilifying

trans people and the fact that the President had made a statement about Trans Day of Visibility. Easter falls on a different day every year, but Trans Day of Visibility is always March 31st. It just happened to overlap that year. He acted like, "How dare they, on the holiest day of the year, bring up trans people." I thought, "Oh my God, you are so ignorant." It infuriated me and made me so mad that they can't see beyond their ignorance.

GK: When you hear those things from somebody you have to work with and negotiate with, how does that make you feel?

PC: I feel like I'm not being heard. Unfortunately, he's entrenched in his view as much as I am in mine. I think people should figure out how to live together and respect each other. His view is, "You're gay, you're bad," and I think my view is much more respectful of people than his. It's really hard for me to get beyond that. We need mutual respect—yes—but you need to respect me if you expect me to respect you.

"Our LGBTQ+ caucus in the state Legislature is out there for [young queer people]. We will protect them to the best of our ability. We fight on the floor and in committees for gays, lesbians, trans people—all of our community—because it's so important that they understand there are people out there supporting them."

GK: So, extrapolating that to your constituents and other LGBTQ+ people in the state, what message does it send to the state and the world when legislators have such extreme stances that they make people feel like refugees?

PC: I get people telling me they're afraid to be out and be who they are. I've been out for over 40 years, but 40 years ago, it was a whole different time. I was basically closeted. I wouldn't say, "I'm gay, I'm lesbian," but I never hid it if people asked. Nowadays, with social media being so prominent, young people are hearing all these negative things about gay people, and it's hurting them.

Our LGBTQ+ caucus in the state Legislature is out there for them. We will protect them

to the best of our ability. We fight on the floor and in committees for gays, lesbians, trans people—all of our community—because it's so important that they understand there are people out there supporting them.

GK: How exactly can legislators like you and other like-minded people support them when you can't get legislation passed and can't often block the hate legislation?

PC: The hate legislation does go through, and that's very unfortunate. I've seen testimony from young people laying their lives on the line, talking about how hard it is for them with bullying and non-acceptance. Yet, we have legislators who will still vote against these young people who are just trying to live their authentic lives. Unfortunately, as a Democratic minority, we can't get the votes. But we can make our stand on the floor and in committees. Right now, we have Governor Hobbs to back us up and veto hateful bills. That veto is a powerful tool, and it's so important we have Katie Hobbs there because, without her, such crazy bills could pass.

GK: How does it make you feel personally when people say they don't feel safe here and their only choice is to leave the state?

PC: I get that. My wife is one of those people. She thinks everything is going to come down on us, that they're going to round us up or take away our rights. Right now, we have a Democratic attorney general and governor who will protect our rights, but the future is uncertain. My wife and I are meeting with lawyers to make sure our wills and trusts are in order in case something happens. We need to have what we want documented and lawful.

I actually have a friend in Florida who's changing his name to match his partner's so they'll be considered "brothers" legally if gay marriage is overturned. Arizona still has anti-gay laws on the books, and if the federal government dissolves legalized marriage, those laws could come back into effect. My wife and I were married in 2008 in California during a brief window when it was allowed. I'd hope we'd be grandfathered in, but there are no guarantees in this environment.

GK: How do you feel when lifelong residents of Arizona say they don't feel they have a future here?

PC: It's heartbreaking. I'm a third-generation Arizonan, and I've tried to live my life authentically. I worked for the City of Phoenix, which had gay rights protections, and that was great. People need to find supportive communities and jobs. But I get that people feel unsafe and worry about their families. It's so unfortunate because Arizona is such a beautiful state. I just wish this wasn't an issue. We're just regular people trying to live our lives, have families, and be productive members of society. ▼



Representative Yassamin Ansari

From competing in Speech and Debate at an East Valley high school to becoming Arizona's newest congressional representative, Yassamin Ansari has much to look forward to. At 32, she is one of the youngest representatives in Washington and only the second Iranian-American to be elected to represent a U.S. district in Congress.

However, Ansari's campaign last November faced criticism, with some claiming she was too centrist to represent District 3, which includes most of metropolitan Phoenix and parts of the West Valley. Despite this, during her time as vice mayor of Phoenix under Mayor Kate Gallego, Ansari championed cultural initiatives. She advocated for a "15-minute city" design to accommodate Phoenix's growth and organized the city's first Nowruz festival celebrating the Persian New Year, as well as the annual Pride in the Park festival.

LOOKOUT reporter Zach Buchanan managed to carve out 15 minutes from the congresswoman's schedule just after Trump's inauguration to discuss the future of Arizona's queer population. Many are either bracing for their rights to be taken away or have already seen some of those rights jeopardized by President Donald Trump's executive orders and cabinet appointments.

Zach Buchanan (LOOKOUT): Congratulations on your win! We only have a few minutes with you so let's jump into questions: With this new campaign and the new year, there's a lot of uncertainty for Arizona's queer communities. I'm wondering: what might you do to ensure the LGBTQ+ population is safe if federal rules and laws take away some of their rights?

YA: Well, thanks so much for the question. I couldn't agree with you more that so many communities will be impacted by this administration and their harmful policies. The truth is, with a Republican trifecta in Congress, it will be quite difficult. The good news is that Republicans have a very small majority in the House, so I intend to work relentlessly with colleagues across the aisle who may be more sympathetic

“It’s heartbreaking for the community”

STORY BY Zach Bradshaw (he/him)

on this issue to ensure their most extreme policies don’t reach President Trump’s desk. I will also do everything I can to speak out against this extremism, vocally support the LGBTQ community, and work with local organizations in the district to make sure they have the resources and support they need.

There have already been a couple of instances of very harmful, anti-LGBTQ legislation coming through Congress that I’ve stood against, alongside the entire Democratic caucus. I also think there are opportunities to work with state and local leaders to ensure LGBTQ+ people are protected. Finally, we need to work with and support state attorneys general, such as ours, Kris Mayes, who will challenge extreme and unconstitutional policies in court.

“I want folks to know they wholeheartedly have an ally on their side in Congress. There are thousands, if not millions, of Arizonans who support them as well.”

ZB: You mentioned the anti-LGBTQ bills that have been introduced. In 2024, 11 of them were introduced in Arizona. None ended up passing due to not clearing the legislature or being vetoed by Governor Hobbs. But, of course, this is a new political cycle with some new and markedly anti-LGBTQ politicians elected in November. Do you think there will be an uptick in anti-LGBTQ bills being introduced or passed in Arizona?

YA: At the state level, there is a Republican majority in both the House and Senate. But the good news is we have a governor who is a strong ally to the LGBTQ community, and I have complete faith she will continue to veto that

legislation. Whether more bills will be introduced is very possible. State legislators tend to follow the lead of the federal government, and given the very Republican—and unfortunately very extreme—majority in Congress, I anticipate we’ll continue to see harmful legislation at the federal level, which could influence similar actions at the state level.

ZB: President Trump has already announced his intention for the government to recognize only male and female sexes. According to the Williams Institute, roughly 1.5% of Arizona’s youth population—those under the age of 18—identify as transgender. From your standpoint, what does Trump’s recent announcement mean for those youth in Arizona?

YA: First of all, I think it’s outrageous that this is what he’s focused on. Trump claims to care about the economy and working people, yet none of the dozens of executive orders he’s signed have anything to do with lowering the cost of living for everyday Americans. The fact that one of those orders targets gender is absolutely outrageous.

It’s heartbreaking for the community. I want folks to know they wholeheartedly have an ally on their side in Congress. There are thousands, if not millions, of Arizonans who support them as well. We will work hand in hand with local nonprofits like One-n-Ten and HRC, which fight daily for the community, and with allies at the federal level. This will undoubtedly become a public health crisis—we are perpetuating hatred and stigma that young people should not have to face anymore.

ZB: Absolutely. You mentioned HRC, which endorsed you during your campaign. Do you expect other elected officials endorsed by HRC to also advocate for the LGBTQ community? How might that play out over the next two years?

YA: Yes, I think there are many allies in Arizona and in Congress. Here in Washington, DC, I’ve joined the Congressional Equality Caucus to promote and defend LGBTQIA rights. A vast

majority of Democrats are part of this caucus.

The caucus played a big role in voting against the so-called “Protection of Women and Girls in Sports Act,” which is really just a hateful bill barring transgender women and girls from participating in sports. It’s been great to see the level of support here at the federal level, and people are ready to fight on this issue.

“Democrats need to push back as hard as possible to ensure Americans are aware of what’s happening and to challenge these harmful policies.”

ZB: President Trump and his cabinet have recently been firing people who aren’t loyal to him or go against his beliefs. As an elected official, do you fear being attacked for your stance on LGBTQ rights?

YA: I do. This administration, along with Trump’s close allies, has been very vengeful. You have figures like Elon Musk threatening to fund primary campaigns against both Republicans and Democrats with unlimited resources. Others, like Tom Homan—the former border czar—have threatened to jail local elected officials who oppose certain immigration policies.

I very much believe Trump and his allies when they make these threats. It’s a scary time, but we cannot let that deter us. Democrats need to push back as hard as possible to ensure Americans are aware of what’s happening and to challenge these harmful policies. Personally, I gain solace and strength from my colleagues—especially those who’ve been here longer than I have—by learning from them and strategizing on how to protect ourselves and our communities. ▼



Holding Space

...for the lesser known queer organizations working to help Arizonans navigate the future.

STORY BY LOOKOUT Staff

Finding your community in Arizona's queer scene can feel a bit aloof. While there has been incredible growth with Arizona's LGBTQ+ population, many of the events that happen focus around spending money at markets, getting drunk at bars, or going to circuit parties. What's a gay to do?

Arizona is home to a wide variety of organizations, spaces, and groups offering everything from resources and support to vibrant entertainment and community connection. Whether you're looking for a quiet book club, a weightlifting group, or a sparkling drag performance, there's something for everyone across the state.

At *LOOKOUT*, we went through and gathered 12 different organizations that you should definitely know about. Some of them you may have heard of, some of them not. We invite you to check them out if you're travelling somewhere new, or just looking for a new kind of event that doesn't involve a bar.

Let's take a closer look at some of the best places where you can find your people.



NORTHERN ARIZONA

Prescott - PRISM Network

When you speak to most people about gay life in Prescott, there's a good chance people will look at you quizzically. It's not without good reason, the city has had its own (recent) history of promoting anti-LGBTQ+ legislation, and is home to some pretty prominent evangelical groups. But PRISM Network serves as northern Arizona's LGBTQ+ community hub, similar to a Pride organization or LGBTQ+ center. It's a space where various programs come together, including NAZGEM, a transgender-led support initiative for transgender, gender-diverse, and questioning individuals. prismaz.net

Flagstaff - Forest Rainbows Network

Flagstaff is often spoken of as being a queer bastion, but the people there might tell you a bit different. That's why a handful of people, mostly former members of Flagstaff Pride, found Forest Rainbows. It's a grassroots group made up of queer and Indigenous folks in Flagstaff working to build community through town halls, group meetings, and small events. It's a space where locals can connect in meaningful, intimate ways. linktr.ee/forestrainbowsnet

Prescott - Northland Cares

Though they don't necessarily put on events, Northland Cares is a regional figurehead for LGBTQ+ health services. It's a nonprofit dedicated to serving the HIV/AIDS community in northern Arizona. Despite the estimated 1,200–1,400 cases in the region, only 10% of individuals are currently accessing services. Northland Cares provides compassionate, inclusive programs for anyone in need, ensuring accessibility regardless of language, identity, or ability to pay. northlandcares.org

Sedona - PFLAG Sedona/Verde Valley

There's a lot to want in places like Sedona, which is historically a more granola part of the state, but still doesn't boast any kind of Pride groups that put on consistent programming for families. PFLAG Sedona/Verde Valley provides a confidential and welcoming space for open dialogue. Dedicated to celebrating diversity and dispelling myths about LGBTQ+ individuals, this group holds monthly meetings at the Sedona Public Library. It's a fantastic resource for allies and LGBTQ+ folks alike. pflagsedona.org

PHOENIX

Arcadia - Everybody Lifting Club

If the idea of lifting weights in a traditional gym makes you cringe, Everybody Lifting Club might just be your new haven. This nonprofit meets twice a week to teach proper weightlifting techniques in a safe, inclusive environment. It's the perfect place for queer folks to get strong and feel supported. linktr.ee/everybody.lifting

Downtown Phoenix - Marigold Bookstore

For the bookish queers, Marigold Bookstore is a must. This dues-driven group meets monthly at The Churchill, with events geared toward femme and trans folks. Their pop-up bookstore features handpicked selections, making it a cozy spot to explore new ideas and make connections. marigoldphx.com

Midtown Phoenix - Wasted Ink

Recently relocated from Roosevelt Row, Wasted Ink is a zine distribution center that's all about amplifying marginalized voices. They offer printing services, host PHX Zine Fest, and house a library of independent publications. Wasted Ink celebrates self-publishing as a powerful tool for resistance and storytelling. wizd-az.com

North Phoenix - The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence

The Arizona chapter of this iconic queer order is the state's longest-running LGBTQ+ organization. Known for their humor, flamboyance, and charitable work, the Grand Canyon Sisters uplift the community through fundraising, education, and entertainment. They're a fabulous example of how joy can be a form of activism. azsisters.org

TUCSON

Downtown Tucson - Flux Productions

Flux Productions is a nonprofit fostering queer culture through arts, advocacy, and community programs. They run the Southern Arizona Gender Alliance, which supports transgender individuals with meet-ups, a Name Change Clinic, and a 13-week drag program. The program culminates in a dazzling showcase celebrating identity and creativity. fluxproductions.org

Adobe District - Splinter Art

This collective is focused on liberation and equity, centering marginalized identities such as BIPOC, LGBTQ+, disabled, and neurodivergent individuals. Splinter's work spans housing justice, mutual aid, and art-driven community organizing. It's a hub for those seeking meaningful change and deep connection. splintercollective.org

Historic Fourth Avenue - Antigone Books

Antigone Books has been a Tucson staple since 1973. Originally a lesbian-owned feminist bookstore, it has evolved into a community-centered space offering boundary-pushing literature. Still women-run, the store remains a haven for book lovers and a cornerstone of Tucson's LGBTQ+ community. antigonebooks.com

Downtown Tucson - Queer AF

When it comes to events, Queer AF delivers. From drag brunches and open mic nights to video screenings and dance parties, this group knows how to bring the fun. Their events sell out quickly, so snag your tickets early and get ready for a great time. [@queer.af.az](http://queer.af.az)

BOOKS FOR THE UNBOOTHERED QUEER



PINK TRIANGLE LEGACIES: COMING OUT IN THE SHADOW OF THE HOLOCAUST

W. Jake Newsom
Cornell University Press, 2022

A couple of years ago, I stumbled upon a TikTok of Laverne Cox passionately recommending a book that, she claimed, every queer person absolutely must read. Intrigued, I rushed to check it out. The book was *The Pink Triangle Legacies* by W. Jake Newsom, and it's been one of the most eye-opening reads of my life.

The book delves into the harrowing history of how pre-WWII Germany, once a haven of sexual freedom and progressive expression, descended into the horrific grip of Nazi rule. Newsom thoughtfully explores this transformation through the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ people during that time—making the history feel shockingly relevant, even today.

I've read the book twice now, and both times, I found myself marking the pages with "WOW!" every few paragraphs. Whether it's learning about how the pink triangle was used to brand LGBTQ+ individuals and force them into concentration camps, or discovering how that same symbol later became a rallying cry for resilience, *The Pink Triangle Legacies* makes history feel personal. Newsom's storytelling shows just how deeply queer history is entwined with the struggles for identity, dignity, and survival.

-Joseph Darius Jaafari

Submit your own book recommendations at editor@lookoutnews.org





How Poetry and Practice Has Helped Tucson's Queer Poet Laureate

From growing up in Tennessee to creating staying power in Southern Arizona, TC Tolbert is on a mission to let us all be kind to ourselves.

STORY BY Royal Young (they/them)

TC Tolbert is a poet, educator, and community advocate whose work is deeply rooted in the intersections of identity, language, and activism. As the Tucson Poet Laureate, TC has used poetry as a platform to amplify queer and trans voices, cultivate inclusive literary spaces, and foster meaningful dialogue.

Even TC's email signature shows nuance in language and how it can change the way we interact with words on a page. The poet in real life goes by he/him, but loves being called "GRRRRRL" in public, and uses s/he pronouns in writing.

"Isn't language fun?" TC writes at the end of the email signature.

And though the journey from an aspiring high school English teacher to a nationally recognized poet came with challenges—particularly in how to wield one's privilege to help communities without hogging the mic—it reflects a commitment to both personal and collective transformation.

In Arizona, where LGBTQ+ communities continue to navigate both progress and backlash, TC's work holds particular urgency. Through workshops, public readings, and mentorship, s/he has created vital spaces for queer and trans writers to explore their voices in a state where policies often threaten their existence. And centering marginalized narratives, TC's poetry challenges dominant narratives while offering refuge and solidarity to those who need it most.

LOOKOUT writer Royal Young got a chance to talk to TC over the phone, and spoke about the journey to be one of the U.S.'s few genderqueer poet laureates, what it means to make mistakes in the community, and how we need to "hold each other gently" in the coming years:

This interview has been condensed and edited for length and clarity.

Royal Young (LOOKOUT): Hey, TC—let's start with your path to becoming Tucson's Poet Laureate and what that entails.

TC Tolbert: There was a call for applications, and two different people asked if they could nominate me. At first, I felt sheepish, but when the second person asked, I thought, "Okay, well, I guess there's two people."

RY: Sometimes we need that push.

TT: Exactly. Like many writers, I started writing as a kid but never thought of it beyond a hobby. I got my degree in education to become a high school English teacher. But after hiking the Appalachian Trail, I realized I needed to address two big things: my gender and poetry.

RY: Those are big things.

TT: And they're kind of related.

RY: Funny how that works out.

TT: Exactly. So, I went back to my undergrad mentor and asked if I could study poetry. He said, "There's a whole world of that," and suggested a program in Tucson. I was in Tennessee at the time, but I got into the master's program here. Instead of picking a top school strategically, I just thought, "Tucson seems like a place I could live."

RY: The desert pulled you in. That's how I ended up here too.

TT: It's amazing. When I arrived, I immediately met trans people. At the time, I was presenting as masculine—a dyke boy—I don't think I even knew the word "genderqueer." I was just like, "Oh my god, this place is amazing." Everyone here is queer—which, unfortunately, isn't totally true, but kind of true.

RY: We can get into that later.

TT: Long story short, it wasn't until 2001-2002 that I realized writing could be a serious pursuit. I went to grad school, stayed in Tucson, and rooted myself deeply in the queer and arts communities. Eventually, people started saying, "Maybe you should be the poet laureate."

RY: What a cool journey. Your writing and poetry seem deeply tied to identity, education, and community—things that feel embedded in the role of poet laureate.

TT: Absolutely. Some poets have a solitary writing life, and that's great. But for me, writing has always been about working with language and placing things next to each other—it all feels like a metaphor for how you live. It's always felt important to be in conversation with other poets and to create space for people to tinker on the page and in their hearts.

RY: What are the duties of a poet laureate? How do you activate your title?

TT: It's shifted over the years. Initially, it was a three-year term, but it was extended when I won a national poet laureate fellowship. These public arts titles are an honor, but they don't necessarily pay the bills, so you have to balance other work while leveraging the position. I focused on poetry workshops, particularly with queer and trans folks, and public readings. I think it was also a moment of positive representation for queer and trans people. As far as I know, (in 2017), I was the first openly queer and trans poet laureate at either the state or city level in the country.

RY: That's incredible.

TT: Later, I applied for a fellowship to run poetry workshops focused exclusively on queer and trans writers. LGBTQ+ voices are often included in workshops, but I wanted to flip that—where straight and cis participants could engage with poetry by queer writers. I got the fellowship in 2019, and the workshops were supposed to run through 2020, but then COVID happened. I shifted everything online and ended up hosting about 30 workshops across libraries and community groups. I'm still running a free weekly Zoom session.

RY: That's very cool. In an odd way, COVID expanded access—especially for differently abled people or those who can't always attend

in-person events.

TT: Exactly. We're about to start our fifth year, which is wild. During peak lockdown, people would Zoom in from across the world. One person always joined at 1 a.m. their time.

RY: That shows how much we need these spaces. So, this issue of *LOOKOUT Magazine* focuses on queer people not feeling safe in our state. Many are considering leaving. You first experienced Tucson as a queer-positive place, but discrimination persists. Can you talk about that?

TT: I grew up in Chattanooga, Tennessee, so I'm familiar with terrible state policies. Tucson is a badass queer bubble, but Arizona as a whole is different. Tucson has had a non-discrimination policy for over 20 years. In the '90s, it even had a trans mental health hotline and support groups. But right now, it's a devastating moment, especially for queer and trans youth. That's why I'm committed to staying—to help hold and sustain the networks that have supported me.

RY: It feels like a backlash against progress.

TT: 100%. Every forward movement gets pushback, and that's exactly what's happening now.

RY: I feel that. I'm turning 40 in June, and as a '90s kid in Manhattan, I've seen a lot—growing up around AIDS, drugs, and social activism. Seeing resilience through tough times gives me hope.

TT: Totally. Our job at our age is to remind younger folks that we've been here, and we've got them.

RY: And history is important—showing we've always been here and have generations of activists to draw from.

TT: Absolutely.

RY: I love that your website acknowledges that we live on Tohono O'odham and Pascua Yaqui land. How does disrupting colonialism fit into your work as poet laureate?

TT: I see myself as a listener, learner, and sharer. I make an intentional effort to bring Indigenous poets into the conversation and introduce students to their work—especially those who are also queer and trans. It's not hard to do a little research and uplift these

voices—the internet is big. Every event is an opportunity to reflect our real community.

RY: Absolutely. Practicing these things in our daily lives adds up.

TT: I love that word—practice. It's never about perfection or finishing the work.

RY: And privilege shouldn't feel like a burden—it should be a practice of continued engagement.

TT: Exactly. Even something as simple as showing up to a poetry reading as an audience member is important. Not just when you or your friends are reading—just being there to receive the art is a beautiful space to inhabit.

RY: Absolutely. And that ties into the power of poetry—to connect people, illuminate experiences, and break down barriers. Even when I know nothing about someone's life, their poem can be that flashpoint.

TT: Yes! Poetry creates a space where we drop our posturing and just connect as humans with complicated experiences. It's sacred and special. You don't find that in most other settings.

RY: 100%. Any final words of wisdom?

TT: Cultivate trust and tenderness with yourself. Remember, in queer and trans spaces, we're interacting with people who are multiply injured, traumatized, and oppressed. Sometimes, we turn our defenses on each other. Boundaries are good, but we should also hold each other gently. And keep some of that mystery! Poetry reminds us that we don't actually know all the answers. ▼

"Poetry creates a space where we drop our posturing and just connect as humans with complicated experiences. It's sacred and special. You don't find that in most other settings."

Drag, Defiance, & Dirty Jokes

Lady Bunny on Wigstock, Queer Resistance, and Political Games

The nightlife legend talks about the golden age of NYC drag, why mainstream LGBTQ+ orgs are failing, and how America keeps using trans people as a political pawn.

STORY BY Royal Young (they/them)
IMAGES BY Steven Menendez, courtesy of Lady Bunny

Creative spaces for artistic and self-expression have always been a central part of queer culture. Historically, these spaces have also been safe havens for gender diverse people to express themselves. From William Dorsey Swann, a formerly enslaved African American who held drag gatherings in 1880's Washington D.C., to the South Side of Chicago's racially-inclusive and gender-expansive drag balls of the 1920's through 1950's.

In this tradition, *Wigstock*, hosted by co-creator Lady Bunny, was an outdoor drag festival in New York City's Tompkins Square public park which started in 1984. What began as spill-over from nearby Pyramid Club and a handful of drag performers grew over the next twenty years to become a highly-visible celebration of LGBTQ+ people, as well as neighborhood allies in downtown Manhattan who enjoyed the festival's diverse range of performers.

Never heard of it? You most likely have seen it before. If you've watched viral online footage of RuPaul performing on an outdoor stage in the 1990's, it is likely at *Wigstock*. Other iconic performers to take the *Wigstock* stage have been Amanda Lepore, Kevin Aviance, Debbie

Harry, Boy George, Neil Patrick Harris and John Cameron Mitchell (both as Hedwig from the Broadway show *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*).

Lady Bunny has remained an icon of the drag community, performing as a DJ, a sharp-witted and brash comedian, and a nightlife legend. Her one-woman shows have brought international acclaim, and her song-writing chops have led to her solo dance single "*Take Me Up High*" as well as two duets with RuPaul.

Now, as Lady Bunny embarks on touring with her latest show, "*Don't Bring The Kids*," which came to Phoenix this past February, America is facing a cultural moment where drag and creative spaces for queer, trans and non-binary people are under imminent threat.

LOOKOUT writer Royal Young got a chance to talk to Lady Bunny over the phone, and spoke about the origins of *Wigstock*, the importance of queer visibility, how Lady Bunny became politically aware, her take on trans rights, and how we can move forward as a country, as well as her perspective on how gender and drag have changed over the decades.

This interview has been condensed and edited for length and clarity.

Royal Young (LOOKOUT): I saw *Wigstock* as a little non-binary baby growing up in downtown Manhattan. For me, seeing that space of joy and celebration, and seeing people on a gender spectrum was really powerful in such a positive way.

Lady Bunny: I came here as a go-go dancer on the bar of the Pyramid Club, so it wasn't like I was a gentrifier driving up prices, I was probably driving them down.

RY: They weren't opening any Whole Foods because of you.

LB: No, but my hole may have become food for several lucky homeless men in Tompkins Square Park.

RY: And that's how *Wigstock* began.

LB: [laughs] Right.

RY: But in seriousness, what do you think allowed a cultural event like that to happen and could it happen today?

LB: I think it could definitely happen today. But in New York, there's no way to get a space for it, it would cost a fortune. When we started, we were producing it in Tompkins Square Park and all we needed was to rent a sound system

and pay a \$50 admission fee to the City to apply for a park's permit.

RY: I remember Tompkins Square as a place where we had the anti-police riots, also as my elementary school playground and a very creative hub. Let's talk about the cultural backdrop where Wigstock was happening.

LB: Wigstock was an offshoot of the Pyramid Club, which was pretty much caddy corner to Tompkins Square Park. It was very gritty, this was 1983 and 1984, so you had everything from skinheads and punks, to this being a Polish, Jewish and Puerto Rican neighborhood. Wigstock kind of just took over the neighborhood on Labor Day weekend. You always had a different crowd, there would be homeless people dancing. You mentioned the riots, that year they didn't let us do it because they thought we would whip up a homeless right. I was like no honey, I might be homely but we're just trying to put on a drag show.

RY: Well you were that energizing, they thought I don't know this drag music could lead to another revolt.

LB: [laughs] The other thing that made Wigstock unique, was the Pyramid was a rock club. So I wanted to showcase the wonderful acts there, I thought we could attract a bigger audience. The reason I thought that was that I loved drag in Atlanta, drag was very serious with rules. I got to the Pyramid and I would impersonate rarefied 1950's diva Yma Sumac. Or there was literally a junkie named Baby Gregor who didn't really do drag much, but he had a character called Jelly Joplin who looked and sang exactly like Janis Joplin. It was not the pageant scene, we didn't take ourselves very seriously, and we were mixed in with the rock bands.

My personal taste was the incredible House music I hadn't heard much until I moved to New York. That was the soundtrack to our lives, CeCe Peniston, Crystal Waters, Barbara Tucker, these were the hit records playing all over the world and the DJs who produced them like Little Louie Vega and Frankie Knuckles, they were actually playing at the clubs we went to. New York and music and drag and pop culture was having a moment.

RY: It was such a beautiful wild west in New York City at that time, because downtown was largely neglected by officials, which allowed for so much creative growth. You also had Ballroom culture in there.

LB: Oh yes, I just died seeing Dorian Corey perform at Wigstock, Octavia St. Laurent performed and she sang beautifully. Willie Ninja always came out, and even after so many years when he had difficulty walking. I don't want to be shady, but not everyone in the Ballroom culture was as sweet as Willie. We were friends. And I wanted to mix.

RY: Let's talk about the culture wars in the 90's and I can't believe we're still talking about Neil Giuliani. But you had a bubble and this amazing moment of inclusion in the neighborhood. Wigstock was celebrated, I was an ele-



mentary school kid playing in that same park and there was no fear that the drag queens were bad for the children. For me, that was a very positive example.

LB: Well, Tompkins Square had heavy metal bands that would play all day long on the weekends and the whole neighborhood could hear it. To me, that music was dreadful. I just thought, I could do something better than this. I've always been that person that as a child, taped a sheet between two trees and put on some dumb show. I'm so glad we didn't have cell phones back then.

I only became politically aware after 9/11. I really just went along with the Democrats and did the gay marriage benefits, but I didn't feel I had anything serious to offer because I was a clown. We needed the clowns at a time when our friends were dropping dead from AIDS. I just thought it would be easy to give in to total grief, so the Wigstock festival had a Mardi Gras feeling. People were encouraged to come in costumes, so maybe you're a bodybuilder who put on a wig and no make-up, or people would put wigs on their dogs. It became something silly to do and participatory.

The audience felt safe to be in whatever form of drag. So there really weren't too many incidents. This was happening at the time Giuliani was in office and he was cracking down on gay clubs using an archaic cabaret law rule which specified that unless a venue had been grandfathered in with a cabaret license, you could shut their dancing down. I'm no fan of Giuliani then or now, but I always wondered why people weren't trying to get rid of that old law.

RY: Coming from that in our last century, let's talk about where we are now. You're still bringing audiences together and performing but the world you're doing that in has changed a lot.

LB: Well, how do you think it has changed a lot? From where I'm standing the Republicans and Democrats are two sides of the same coin.

RY: Yeah, two sides of the same coin of power. When I say change I mean more in terms of we have the internet, technologically. In terms of who holds power—no I don't think it's changed that much. In terms of othering communities—no I don't think it's changed that much. I think prejudice is much more out in the open now. In the era we're talking about, specifically New York City, which is not America, it was so diverse in a way that was accepting but also acknowledging people's differences. It doesn't feel that way to me today.

LB: Well listen, if younger people in the last ten or fifteen years want more diversity and have included different people who have never been included, that's wonderful. For myself, I was inspired to do what I do because of a trans woman of color Natasha Khan in Chattanooga Tennessee, and you never had to tell me to go run and find the trans women or the people of color, because I was always with

them. So I'm glad others caught up, but I didn't need to try to be inclusive because I just naturally was.

For example: Nex Benedict. Democrats had both houses of congress from 2020 to 2022 and the White House, they did not pass the Equality Act which would guard against discrimination in schools, in housing, in employment. They did not do that, yet gays religiously give them their vote, because Republicans are worse on gay stuff.

“The gay community accepts crumbs, they are like ‘Omg Joe Biden said trans!’ So? That is a virtue signalling nothing. Put that money you spent killing Gazans, and give it to the trans community.”

But at the same time, I am not in sync with what the Human Rights Campaign and GLAAD are pushing at all. I consider myself very, very lucky to both take an interest in trans people—mostly women—but of all ages, and so glad they have welcomed me into their lives, treat me like a sister and talk to me. So I would never say anything like this unless I had conferred with dozens of trans friends. But when you were growing up in New York, if you met a trans woman at a party or a premiere and she was dressed up you would never ask her pronouns. And a trans woman would knock you for that, because it suggests you don't know what look she's doing for.

An NPR interviewer asked me this when I was doing a show in Chicago. He thought we needed to heat up his piece with more issues, so he called me back and asked, “What do you think about the violence against trans women of color?” I said, saying the names is a wonderful part of the grieving process, but you don't get brownie points from me as a politician for saying the names once a year. What they need to do is put their money where their mouth is, and I'm not a detective, but ask, who is killing trans women and under what circumstances?

The gay community accepts crumbs, they are like “Omg Joe Biden said trans!” So? That is a virtue signalling nothing. Put that money you spent killing Gazans, and give it to the trans community. They say some of these trans women are being murdered while doing legalized sex work. I saw a group say don't just legalize it, decriminalize it. I don't know what that means, but I'm all for it. Is Joe Biden? No. Is Kamala Harris? No. None of the conservative Democratic leadership is.

RY: Absolutely. And I think really scarily, we're seeing that with people falling in line so fast with these illegitimate Executive Orders about trans and non-binary people. It feels like they couldn't wait to drop pronouns.

LB: Okay, but I have to just say—

RY: You don't like pronouns?

LB: No, no, I'm just confused by the pronouns. I did a movie and everyone on set was they/them. I went out with one of the actors after, and they asked me my pronouns. I said I guess she, because I'm in drag and asked their pronouns and they said, “she/they.” Okay, so told them I'm older and not really into pronouns but they didn't get offended, and when they told me their pronouns I didn't say, “What the fuck does that mean?” I called a friend of mine who is trans and feels the same way, that pronouns have less to do with actual trans people who transition than it does for people on the gender spectrum.

I'm part of that gender spectrum too, I just don't feel that way. People everywhere are not going to care about your pronouns. So for my trans friends, if you need and want to use them in your own circles, I certainly have no idea of stopping anyone from going by what they want. I'm a 62 year-old fat man who goes by Lady Bunny. But I feel in most cases, just get your bus pass stamped and it doesn't matter your gender binaries. They don't need to know that and they don't need to pick a fight with that. You're asking strangers to talk about something that doesn't make any sense to them at all.

My allegiance is to the trans community, but I'm a drag queen, my wig comes off at night and I go do my errands as a male. Would it be nice if everyone got your pronouns right wherever you went if you had a beard and eye make-up on? I guess so, I just don't think that's going to happen. If politicians want to feign support for gay, trans and non-binary people because they are marginalized, then let's unite the country. Because everybody, all the voters want affordable insurance, housing, jobs that pay a livable wage and school that is affordable. So when you lift up everybody, you lift up the marginalized and they become less marginalized.

RY: We're past the point of performative bullshit.

LB: Well so much of what we see online is performative. The other thing I talk about in my show is I have no interest in performing for kids. I cut my teeth performing for drunk and high people in clubs. So I was encouraged to be as sick, and wild and raunchy. Children could never see what I do, they couldn't even get into the bar. So of course, Republicans are lying when they say that drag queens story-hours are used to sexually groomed children. I mean, I know some dumb drag queens but none dumb enough to think yeah, I want to groom some kids in a fluorescent lit public library at noon with their parents right there.

RY: Absolutely absurd.

LB: Absolutely. But the other part of this, by the other part of this that the left doesn't want to talk about is that some of these queens are reading books like *The Drag Queen Goes Swish* and *I Have Two Daddies*. So, I don't have children, I think it would be nice to have a drag queen come read a story to me, because I am a drag queen. And as a kid, that would have made me feel less twisted. Like if this person could come to my school where I was getting so much negativity from classmates, that would have made me feel like, wow there's a future for me. But since I don't have kids, or create a curriculum, I do not know or claim to know if maybe we should wait to read them books like that till they are older and maybe thinking more about their identity.

RY: Transition is not an easy or overnight decision for anyone, so no one is just rushing out to transition or push that on other people. It should be okay for an individual to explore their own gender and journey, it's okay to go

through different phases of that, or for that to look different for different people. We should be able to accept whoever they are.

LB: Listen, I grew up with people who were afraid you would turn gay if you played with Barbies. I've been mixing my own eyeshadow since I was eight years-old. I'm not saying for people to not be who they are. I was that and I became that. But if there are some parents who are wary of talking about transgender issues that's okay. Trans people make up about 1% of the population, so I wish we could talk about them in the percentage there are and not use them as wedge issues, which both the Left and the Right do.

Another one is the bathrooms. Honey, there is a solution, no one wants to talk about, single occupancy bathrooms. Big enough for a wheelchair, there's a bar for an old drag queen to lower herself down on the toilet and get back up, there's condoms, tampax and hormones, a baby-changing table, you go in there

do your business and no one is wiser.

There are many people on the Left and maybe even on the Right who support trans' peoples right to exist, and transition, but they feel differently about the grey areas.

RY: Let's talk about your new show and how your life experiences and your unique perspective on the current moment play into your show.

LB: I do a song about drag queen story hours, and I do a bit about the state of Montana, which was trying to ban hormones for adult trans people. But there's also filthy songs, one-liners, RuPauls' Drag Race reads, I do the worst Cher impersonation in the world, it's very high energy. Some people tell me, my god! You have so much energy for your age. I mean I gotta work to get a standing ovation, I'm not RuPaul. I can't just walk out on stage and mumble a few words. I gotta get up there and make it good, because I don't have any income from fracking. ▼



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