The last men’s hotel

For those who live there, the Ewing Annex Hotel is a refuge, an artifact, and a last chance. The man who’s been holding it together for more than 20 years is about to retire.

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On the cover: Photo by Lloyd DeGrane. For more of DeGrane’s work, go to lloyddegrane.com.

Photo caption: Bob Boardman, an on-and-off 20-year resident at the Evanston Annex Hotel, in his room.

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RESTAURANT REVIEW

Bobby Morelli is the sausage king of Bronzeville

A father-and-daughter team sling loaded wiener from a storage container.

By Mike Sula

Bobby Morelli has no professional culinary experience. He’s an R&B and pop recording artist with a web design and marketing agency whose plans for those projects tanked with the onset of the pandemic. He’s also a borderline pescatarian who since August has more or less become the sausage king of Bronzeville.

That’s when, after just a few weeks of planning, he threw himself into The Hot Dog Box, a steel shipping container fronting 51st street at Boxville Marketplace, with a growing menu of loaded wiener whose ambition and audacity hasn’t been seen since the glory days of Hot Doug’s.

Morelli released a new album, Life on Replay, last April but quickly had to cancel scheduled tour dates in Atlanta, Miami, and Dallas. A lot of his small business clients closed or downsized, and he was searching for the proverbial pandemic pivot when he teamed up with a partner to open a cookies and ice cream concept at the seven-year-old container market. Then, three weeks before opening, his partner who was to handle the cookie end of the business bailed, and Morelli scrambled to come up with a new business model.

“What else can I do that would be simple but still fun that would make this business be year round vs. seasonal,” he says. “I was like ‘Well, hot dogs. I’m walking through the grocery store and I’m thinking, ‘What can I do to make a hot dog that stands out?’”

Morelli opened on August 1 with a classic Chicago-style Vienna Beef natural casing dog, dragged through the garden, and another Vienna dog dressed far off the traditional template.

“I love to drench my hot dog in barbecue sauce,” he says. “My wife and I make a special bourbon barbecue sauce, sweet with a hint of smokiness. I would just eat it plain but I knew I needed more texture.” He layered on a carrot-cabbage slaw, sport peppers, and crumbled bacon, and dubbed it the Bronzeville Bourbon Dog, which remains his best seller.

Morelli was looking to hire outside help, but instead brought on his nine-year-old daughter Brooklyn, who was already a regular presence on his recordings and videos. When she wasn’t in her online classes, she helped taking orders, washing dishes, and shopping. Together they’ve become the father-daughter Instagram (@thehotdogboxchicago) face of the business, cracking corny jokes and playing Connect Four by the takeout window. Brooklyn takes a starring turn in the full choreographed video they released during the slow winter months.

Her celebrity threatens to overtake her father’s. “People started asking for Brooklyn on days when she’s not here,” he says.

Morelli experimented with new dog varieties over the months, but a key adoption was a four-ounce filet mignon dog over the winter, with a pronounced heft and beefiness that could stand up to increasingly dense strata of toppings. These include the surf-and-turf Compass Steak Dog, piled with snappy shrimp, spinach, and a creamy chipotle honey sauce he started to bottle and sell along with the cranberry honey mustard that appeared on the Prairie Blues Steak dog, with collard greens, carrots, and feta cheese. Morelli also brought on a salmon sausage with teriyaki and jerk expressions, and added chicken and vegan sausage substitute options.

He’s still in R&D mode, currently testing recipes for summer limited editions, like a chicken-and-waffle dog, and a steak dog with Moroccan-style tomato and onion relish, feta, sour cream, and spinach. He’s also toying with the idea of an alligator dog, which he worries might be ahead of its time in the neighborhood, but he didn’t come to Bronzeville to not push things.

“It’s definitely gonna be out there,” he says. “But it’ll still make sense.”

Clockwise from left: The Compass Steak Dog, the Yeah Man Jerk Salmon Hot Dog, and the Bronzeville Bourbon Steak Dog © MICHAEL WURTZ FOR CHICAGO READER

Vienna dog dressed far off the traditional template.

He opened on August 1 with a classic Chicago-style Vienna Beef natural casing dog, dragged through the garden, and another
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School board politics
The billions of reasons to keep the schools under mayoral control

By Ben Joravsky

At the risk of sounding like Richard Nixon, I want to make something perfectly clear…

My support for an elected school board is not a knee-jerk reaction to the people who oppose it. Namely that’s a coalition of the civic, corporate, and editorial elite of Chicago, who are more than happy to keep the schools controlled by a mayor they think they can count on to do what they want to do when it comes to dividing up the economic-development pie.

In other words, their opposition to an elected school board has little to do with anything remotely connected to what goes on in a classroom and much more to do with doling out handouts to powerful interests who don’t need them.

Oh, I know that sounds cynical. And reading it, you might conclude that I must have spent the last 40 years of my life following Chicago politics to be so jaded.

And you would be right. So, OK—maybe part of the reason I’m for an elected school board is because of the people who oppose it.

Let me point out that much of the opposition comes from the same cast of characters who were cheerleaders for really atrocious mayoral ideas over the past 15 or so years. A list of money-wasters that includes…

Mayor Daley’s Olympics, Mayor Rahm’s South Loop basketball/hotel scam (the money wound up going to Navy Pier), Mayor Rahm’s $1.3 billion Lincoln Yards boondoggle, and, of course, the failed effort by Mayor Rahm and Governor Rauner to fork over billions to Amazon.

So far there have been no super-duper-bad, money-wasting ideas from Mayor Lightfoot, which suggests that she’s a) less of a tool of corporate elites, or b) she’s been so preoccupied with the pandemic she’s had no time to come up with new ways to waste our tax dollars by doling them out to rich people who don’t need them.

Take your pick, Chicago.

Anyway, the reason the elected school board is on my mind is that I’ve noticed an uptick in the number of op-ed pieces and editorials from corporate leaders and from groups like the Commercial Club urging Chicagoans to stick with an appointed board.

Working from the assumption that there are no coincidences in life, I’ve concluded that Mayor Lightfoot is rounding up corporate support as she takes her opposition to an elected board another step. That is—she’s planning to propose a hybrid plan that would mix elected members with mayoral appointees. With the mayor having the greatest say, most likely.

At the moment, there is an elected school board bill on state legislators’ agenda.

It’s sponsored by northwest-side state senator Rob Martwick, who’s been championing the issue for years. Martwick says it’s an outrage that Chicago remains the only municipality in the state without an elected school board.

His bill—sponsored in the house by state representative Delia Ramirez—would divide Chicago into 20 districts. Each district would elect one school board member. And there’d be a school board president elected citywide.

In the past, former senate president John Cullerton did Mayor Rahm’s bidding, killing Martwick’s bill in the senate.

But Cullerton has retired—replaced by Oak Park senator Don Harmon. He didn’t bring the bill to a vote in the lame-duck session earlier this year, largely as a favor to Mayor Lightfoot, who opposes it, even though as a candidate she supported the concept.

Why the mayoral opposition? Well, there’s the publicly stated reason, and then there’s my theory.

The public reason, as expressed by Mayors Rahm and Lightfoot, is that an elected school board would be too unwieldy. Too many districts. Too many members. It would politicize the schools.

I like to point out that Chicago’s school system is already very much politicized. It’s largely a political tool used by mayors to make them look good.

So that every hike in test scores or graduation rates—no matter how exaggerated—is hyped up as evidence that our mayor is an exalted leader we must worship.

Think of Eddie Murphy in Coming 2 America, where scantily clad attendants throw flowers before him as he walks their way.

As for my theory, it goes like this. Filling the board with mayoral appointees pretty much guarantees that there will be no opposition from the schools to really bad mayoral development deals, even if they’re financed with money diverted from the schools.

Like, for instance, a good chunk of the billions of TIF dollars that Rahm and Rauner were so eager to give to Amazon. Or the $1.3 billion that Mayor Rahm got the City Council to give to Lincoln Yards.

As such, mayors want rubber-stampers on the school board so that there’s no opposition from CPS when money gets diverted from the schools for various development schemes.

And so, there’ve been nothing but yes men and women at the school board since 1995, when the state passed a “reform” law, giving Mayor Daley a free hand in naming them.

Years ago, one Daley school board aide explained it to me this way: If you want to be on the mayor’s team, you gotta do what the mayor demands.

And that explains why no school board member or CEO has ever opposed projects like the Olympics, Amazon, or Lincoln Yards—no matter how much money those projects diverted from the schools.

Let’s go back to the Amazon deal for a moment. Jeff Bezos turned down Mayor Rahm’s offer and decided to split his corporate headquarters between New York City and suburban Virginia.

But then Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez tweeted out opposition, and one thing led to another and pretty soon some unions in New York City were demanding that Amazon allow warehouse workers to unionize. Eventually, Amazon decided not to move its headquarters to New York.

One independent-minded school board member, like AOC, could do a lot of damage to some of the big publicly funded development deals around here. No wonder the powers that be want to keep schools under mayoral control.
When I Think Of You

By Rocío Franco

I hear your bells chiming in my ear
A summons for a smooth, simple treat
Respite from scorch of summer and sweat pooling at my feet
I run after you like hailing a cab to an unnamed destination
Discovering at the end of the ride, a chock full of possibilities
Strawberry like red blush forming on my cheeks
Tamarindo lightly sours but quenches dry desert lips
Limon, tangy green neon sign to the last days of summer
Chocolate like the hands of the boy I’m in love with
You are always a reliable friend for those few months
when the city thaws and climbs out of a winter slumber
Cold, solid, and rectangular; your sturdiness on wooden sticks
disguises the taste bud tornado that bursts on the tongue
The simplicity of your flavors delight children and adults alike
Reminding us of small joys that relieve a day burdened
by the humidity of the hood and the stickiness of the streets
Emerging as the days stretch and put us in a haze,
Paletas, you are so much more than popsicle
You are my abuelita giving me her last dollar tucked away in her apron
You are colors of a country that I don’t visit as much as I’d like to
You are the fieldworkers that pick the fruit to sculpt you
You are a reminder of ancestor and the connection
to all the flavors they try to assimilate and mass produce
But they can’t mass produce this flood of memories
melting what rushes to numb me.

Rocío Franco is a Latinx poet and activist from Chicago, IL. She’s a 2020 Frost Conference on Poetry Alum. Her poems have appeared in The Acentos Review and Outpatient Press. She works as a health insurance counselor at a non-profit union health fund and strongly believes in universal healthcare. She loves exploring the city with her family on the weekends, practicing Brazilian Jiu Jitsu, and approaches the world with a social justice lens.

Poem curated by José Olivarez: José Olivarez is the son of Mexican immigrants. His debut book of poems, Citizen Illegal, was a finalist for the PEN/ Jean Stein Award and a winner of the 2018 Chicago Review of Books Poetry Prize.

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Monumental undertaking

The Chicago Monuments Project wants us to rethink our public art.

By Deanna Isaacs

As much as we’d like to think that we’re doing everything right, right now, we’re not. Not totally.

In a century or so, the folks who’ve taken our place here on the shore of Lake Michigan (assuming that we’re not messing up so badly that there’s not still a Lake Michigan) will recognize our failings.

They’ll wonder how we could have been so ignorant and careless. Or worse, so craven. They’ll attempt to set things right. And, with the benefit of history’s rearview mirror, they’ll decide the fate of any monuments to false heroes or disastrous causes we may have left behind.

With luck, their task won’t be as difficult as the one that’s been handed to the Chicago Monuments Project.

Begun by Mayor Lori Lightfoot in response to the protests last summer that also prompted her to cause Christopher Columbus statues to vanish from public parks, the Monuments Project is led by a 30-member advisory committee that includes artists, architects, scholars, and civic leaders.

They’re turning an overdue critical eye on the city’s stock of public art and historical markers, looking, in particular, at the way history’s been presented. Or, rather, misrepresented. They’ll be making recommendations about what to do about that now, and how to avoid it in the future.

Cochaired by DCASE commissioner Mark Kelly, Landmarks Illinois president Bonnie McDonald, and Jane Addams Hull-House museum director Jennifer Scott, the committee began meeting in September.

The project aims to deal with the fact that “many of our existing monuments perpetuate harmful and untrue narratives that are offensive to many people,” and to “address the hard truths of Chicago’s racial history.”

To start a public discussion about that, the committee came up with a list of 41 problematic pieces, all created between 1893 and the 1930s, when mythmaking about the founding of the city and the nation buried issues like slavery and genocide while (among other things) “promoting narratives of white supremacy.”

The monuments range from images of Leif Erikson, Abraham Lincoln, and Columbus, to the golden replica of the “The Republic” that stands in Jackson Park.

There’s been some pushback.

Last week, after drawing heat for previous sessions held in private, the advisory committee met publicly, on Zoom. You can still access that meeting (and other past public events) at the project website. If you do, you’ll hear co-chair Mark Kelly addressing misconceptions about the project. “This is not an effort to tear it all down,” Kelly says, but is more about “re-purposing, recontextualizing, reimagining.”

“We’re not here to rewrite history. We’re looking to understand the omissions and half-truths that are represented in our public monuments.”

And you’ll hear 38th Ward alderman Nick Sposato say that “when I hear ‘reimagine,’ it bothers me.” And, “We need to add in, not get rid of.”

Some of what follows, in nearly two hours of comments by committee members, are suggestions that future monuments don’t have to be statues, but can be, for example, gathering places, and that they should be less about prominent individuals and more about women, people of color, and the collective experience. DCASE staffers report that 125 artists submitted ideas for new monuments, and that, after Chicago, no place is more interested in the project website than Croatia, homeland of sculptor Ivan Meštrović, whose Bowman and Spearman sculptures (at Michigan and Ida B. Wells Drive) are on the list.

There are also remarks from two members of the public, allowed just three minutes each to comment. Anthony Onesti argues for keeping the controversial Balbo monument in Burnham Park (a gift from one fascist memorializing another; see John Greenfield’s reporting on this), and Ron Onesti allows that “the narrative should be broadened,” but notes that “our Columbus statues were the only statues taken down,” and “we want them back.”

Last week, Onesti, president of the Joint Civic Committee of Italian Americans, sent Chicago Park District head Michael Kelly a letter announcing that, thanks to FOIA document releases, the JCCIA has discovered an agreement signed by the Park District in 1973 that requires permission from their organization before the Columbus statue in Little Italy’s Arrigo Park—originally displayed at the 1893 World’s Fair, and one of those abruptly placed in storage by Lightfoot—can be removed.

On Monday, the Park District replied that the agreement only calls for JCCIA approval for “substantial changes,” and that since this removal (nine months ago and counting) is temporary, “No substantial changes were made to the statue or plaza therefore the Chicago Park District is not in violation of the agreement.”

The Monuments Project is hosting a series of public events that run into June, many of them in partnership with other organizations. I caught two of those in the last week: one co-hosted by the Chicago Cultural Alliance (with presentations by the Bronzeville Historical Society, the Haitian American Museum, and the Puerto Rican Arts Alliance), the other by the Mother Jones Heritage Project, which wants to put a statue of its namesake on Wacker Drive, just off Michigan Avenue.

Did you know that Mother (Mary) Jones immigrated to America from Ireland as a child, lost her husband and four children to an epidemic of yellow fever, and moved to Chicago (for a second time) in 1867, setting up a dressmaking business that was wiped out in the Great Fire before embarking on her legendary career as a labor organizer?

Mother Jones wasn’t perfect; she failed to embrace the cause of women’s suffrage. But she raised hell to get children out of the mines and factories.

In the next week or so the Monuments Project is offering programs on “North Lawndale Monuments” and the “Indian Boundary Line Marker,” with the “Three Patriots Statue,” the “Chicago Race Riot,” and much more coming up. Check the website (chicagomonuments.org) for the schedule.

@Deannalsaacs
In 2018, William Thomas C. was caught with 18 pounds of cannabis a few days after returning home from vacation with his grandchildren. He was charged with cannabis trafficking and manufacturing or delivering more than 5,000 grams of cannabis, according to court records. Before then, William, better known as Tom, ran a family farm and a lawn care business in Bloomington, Illinois. Since Tom has been serving a nine-year sentence at Centralia Correctional Center, his sister Tara C. has managed his businesses and talks with him several times a week.

Tara, who asked for her last name to be withheld to preserve her career, said Tom suffered a terrible motorcycle accident several years ago and turned to marijuana to help with his pain management as an alternative to prescription medications. During Tom’s trial, his family had to sell assets to pay for his attorney’s fees. But following his conviction, Tara reached out to the Last Prisoner Project, a Denver-based nonprofit which advocates for the freedom and welfare of people imprisoned for cannabis convictions, to help free Tom.

Tom is one of dozens incarcerated on cannabis offenses despite Illinois legalizing marijuana for recreational and medicinal use. In Illinois and in other states where cannabis has been legalized, there’s generally no resentencing or commutation procedures for those who are incarcerated, the only mechanism for expungement or sealing cannabis criminal records, said Sarah Gersten, executive director and general counsel of the Last Prisoner Project.

Now that the state has legalized recreational and medicinal cannabis use, 108 inmates remain incarcerated for offenses ranging from producing less than 200 cannabis plants to trafficking, according to the Illinois Department of Financial and Professional Regulation—nonprofits have stepped up to help free people incarcerated on cannabis offenses and remove those convictions from their records.

The irony of Tom’s imprisonment isn’t lost on him and his family. Tom’s mother wondered why her son remained incarcerated even after the state legalized weed. He’s been asking Tara to research charitable organizations that could help him get released. Tara said she felt conflicted.

“I am a firm believer if you break the law, you have to suffer the consequences,” Tara said. “I don’t think that he should—because he’s a nice guy and comes from a great background and has a great family and whatever—that he shouldn’t have to pay the price. But does the punishment fit the crime?”

Of course, Tom’s family isn’t alone in wondering how soon before cannabis prisoners serving lengthy sentences will be released. Gersten said the organization has been in contact with Governor Pritzker’s office. Toi Hutchinson, the senior adviser on cannabis control, seemed very interested in working with the organization on identifying more inmates incarcerated in state prisons for cannabis crimes. The nonprofit, however, has run into administrative holdups as it seeks to do the same for other prisoners.

“Most states, including Illinois, it seems, don’t necessarily have that data readily available. You know, oftentimes, the systems that they’re using are antiquated,” Gersten said. “So, it takes a proactive initiative and a willingness for the state to want to just start the process and work to get that data, and work to identify those individuals. That I would say is, sort of, you know, the next biggest hurdle in Illinois.”

Though COVID-19 has taken many governors’ attention away from releasing cannabis prisoners, Gersten said the pandemic has also created newfound urgency to decarcerate inmates as the coronavirus spreads within prisons. Correctional facilities aren’t
The Illinois Department of Corrections did not respond to multiple interview requests from the Reader.

Hutchinson maintains that there’s no disconnect between the governor’s office and the organizations seeking to free cannabis prisoners. The government was already slow, but the pandemic has further complicated the state’s ability to operate. Still, Hutchinson commended the effort to expunge cannabis offenses so far.

“There’s nothing normal about life right now,” Hutchinson said. “Every single day, we do as much as we can from as many different directions as we can.”

Once the state law took effect on January 1, 2020, legalizing recreational cannabis, Illinois had to begin expunging certain classes of offenses over a five-year period, Hutchinson said. When asked at what point Pritzker would begin examining more complex cannabis offenses, Hutchinson said, “we’re doing that now.”

She went on to tout the Illinois State Police Department and the Illinois Prisoner Review Board’s efforts to expunge nearly 500,000 arrest records ahead of schedule. A spokesperson told the Sun-Times that the governor has pardoned more than 20,000 cannabis convictions. Meanwhile, State Representative Mary Flowers has introduced a bill that aims to automatically expunge criminal records and free people who are incarcerated for cannabis crimes.

“The thing that’s so . . . sad about this topic is that the sheer number of records that there are shows you how prolific the overpolicing and targeting was,” Hutchinson said. “Remember, we are trying to undo 87 years of a horrible drug problem, and this is our first attempt. And it’s a very, very strong one. But . . . we should never again be lulled to sleep and think that our work is done on one effort.”

As the state expunges low-level cannabis offenses, some have remained in prison for crimes pertaining to more than 30 grams, an amount of cannabis that “seems like an incredibly small amount to me just to have for personal use,” Gersten said. “Now, we’ve decided that cannabis is legal, people should profit off of it, but, of course, only certain people are profiting off of it. And the individuals that were in the cannabis business before it became a legal business, they’re not able to take advantage of these laws.”

For people with cannabis criminal records seeking to get them expunged, the state has funded New Leaf Illinois, an initiative aiming to provide free legal representation or information. Illinois Legal Aid Online, one of 20 organizations involved in the effort, has created a collection of online tools to help users through the process of getting their records cleared. The state’s third universal form used for the people with more complex cannabis cases is expected to be approved sometime in early 2021, at which point Illinois Legal Aid will create an automated form for the public, said Andrew Sharp, content director at Illinois Legal Aid.

People with cannabis criminal records often come to the organization with questions about whether their case qualifies for automatic expungement or requires them to file a motion, as well as to ask about their rights with regard to consumption, and how that changes with employment and immigration status, Sharp said.

“There’s a lot of instances where your rights are limited by the fact that it’s still illegal at the federal level,” Sharp said. “Even people who are using cannabis medically still have to worry about some of these federal repercussions.”

Besides the federal law complicating expungement for folks with cannabis records, the complexity of Illinois’s local court systems is another hurdle for people navigating the process, Sharp said. Though Pritzker, state legislators, and the Illinois Supreme Court are doing what they can to streamline the process, each circuit court has its own clerks and the Illinois Prisoner Review Board hearings for determining which cases to recommend for pardoning aren’t transparent or open to the public to attend, he said.

The federal prohibition of cannabis continues to complicate lives, said Beth Johnson, project manager for the Illinois Equal Justice Foundation. Johnson pointed out that state sentences for cannabis offenses can be shorter than federal ones, which could last for more than 20 years, so state offenders could be released before commutations procedures begin. But once released from prison, having a cannabis offense may hinder someone’s ability to get jobs, federal public housing, firearms, state licensing, and schooling, she said.

“No matter what you’ve done in your life, there are points in time and different opportunities that a background check can ruin all of that,” Johnson said. “It’s just [a] lack of opportunities, whether it’s an absolute barrier to you getting it or it’s making you settle for something less because of something in your past.”

The House passage of the Marijuana Opportunity Reinvestment and Expungement Act (MORE) in December 2020 is a sign that the federal government could decriminalize cannabis, which paves the way for people incarcerated on federal crimes to regain their freedom, Gersten said. But the Senate referred the legislation to the Committee on Finance.

“I think in the new administration, we will see progress,” Gersten said. “I just think it defies logic for lawmakers to continue to believe that individuals should remain incarcerated while others are profiting off of this same activity.”

Tom’s incarceration has taken a toll on his family, Tara said. She and his other siblings will support Tom once he’s released, and their mother is handling the situation better than expected, Tara said. However, Tom’s incarceration has been difficult for his two adult sons, she noted.

“There’s a lot of hurt, but we’re a very close family. We’re very supportive. He’ll have a lot of support when he does get out,” Tara said. “Hopefully, there’ll be a life for him when he gets out and he can still be a productive human being and give back to society in a good way.”

Tara noted that Tom has exercised, continued taking his blood pressure medication, and received his COVID-19 vaccine. She hopes Tom will continue this healthy lifestyle. She foresees him returning to Michigan, where they grew up, and enjoying nature, but wondered what limits would be placed on her brother after he’s released.

“He loves a snowmobile, and he loves to hunt—although he can’t hunt because [he] can’t have a gun,” Tara said. “He loves the outdoors stuff, and I would love for him to get back to that area and be able to go where he’s always wanted.”

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For those who live there, the Ewing Annex Hotel is a refuge, an artifact, and a last chance. The man who’s been holding it together for more than 20 years is about to retire.

By Katie Prout

When Mike Bush was 12, all knees and soft eyes, he won a scholarship to attend youth classes at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. It was summer 1968, hot and angry and hopeful, and while it would end with young anti-war protesters getting beaten with billy clubs by Chicago police at the Democratic National Convention downtown, it began with Mike, a young Black aspiring artist from the Wild Hundreds by way of Memphis, slinging his bag of paper and pencils over his shoulder and stepping out into the sun.

“105th and Moore, to 111th and Michigan. Thirty-four [bus] from Michigan to 95th, 95th to Adams and Wabash,” Mike recites to me 53 years later. From there, he’d walk one block due east, the promise of the Art Institute’s tall columns and Lake Michigan’s cool waters pulling him home. Mike has lived in the Ewing Annex Hotel, located in the South Loop, for the last 24 years, working as the manager for 22. It’s the last of Chicago’s men’s-only hotels, left over from an earlier era in an earlier century when meatpacking and manufacturing were the city’s golden coin of promise, and hotels like this were a common way for men, single and attached alike, to live on the cheap as they saved up for an apartment of their own or sent their wages back to their country families. In this century, it’s the final refuge for many of the 200-plus men who live there now, between themselves and homelessness, where small rooms—sometimes called cubicles and sometimes called cages—rent for $19 a night, and where many, like Mike, live for decades of their lives.

A single stairwell lit by fluorescent lights runs from the ground floor on up to the fourth, linking the hotel’s two wings like a spine. To choose your wing, your room, and...
your future, you must first open the thin glass door that's sandwiched between Cocco's Fried Lobster and a nameless party store advertising scratch-offs and Bud Light. Follow the stairs to a landing where Mike, serene in his black zip-up and mask and lacquered behind COVID-protective glass, greets you. From here, any door besides the lobby requires permission from staff and a buzzer to open if you're a male resident, or the buzzer plus the accompaniment of Mike if you're a woman like me.

To the right of the stairs are the private rooms, many of them offices until the 1980s, when this wing was purchased and renovated by Wayne and Randy Cohen, two brothers who own the hotel, the pawnshop, and four other businesses on the same block. These rooms range in size from space enough to host a small fridge, a desk, and a guest to just a couple inches wider than the twin bed. In the room of one man I meet, a 66-year-old artist named Louie Albarron, there is no bed, only art he's made with what he's found in dumpsters: paintings of the lakefront and La Madonna, jean jackets he's embroidered with explosive reds and golds, earrings of twisted copper and small spoons that dangle from his ears. A single window shines clear sunlight on his guitar and photos of his ex-wife, her blonde hair piled dreamily on top of her head.

By day, Louis uses the room as his studio; by night, he blows up an air mattress and sleeps on the floor. Other rooms contain other wonders: potosh vines trailing out of water-filled jam jars; carefully constructed miniature trains lined up on tiny tracks; a family of black and brown belts, still pinned with their security tags, that slink over the back of chairs like snakes. Some of the rooms on this side have windows, some do not. The price ranges from $400 a month to $450, with the higher end providing air conditioning and, perhaps, a sink. It's quieter in this wing, where only five men live on each floor and where all the rooms have ceilings.

To the left of the stairwell is the original hotel, the part that began as The Workingman's Exchange. On this side you find wood floors, not tile; narrow hallways, not wide. Two men can't pass each other without at least one turning sideways. Each floor holds 54 of the famous cubicles: each cubicle, for $19 a night, $120 a week, or $360 a month, provides a door that locks, an outlet that works, a twin-size bed with a sheet, and a ceiling of chicken wire that lets your neighbor's conversations, odors, and dust drift through—hence the “cage” nickname. A century of graffiti painted over in brown and cream still glimmers through, and the new additions shine outright: Christ is life. Don't knock on this door unless you got a pussy. Pictures of foreign cities cut from magazines taped to one door, sunflowers on another. No air conditioning here, though the windows at each floor's end are frequently open and the whirl of steel fans encourages the hot, heavy air to flow.

Mike lives in the quieter wing, as does his son Demetrius, handsome with his father's quiet manners and slow smile who, now that he's out of prison, is leaving the hotel soon to pursue a career as a personal assistant for people with disabilities. He stayed longer than he planned to help his dad, something Mike regrets now. “I feel like I'm kind of holding him back from what he wanted,” he tells me. I've never seen Mike's room, which he lives in as part of his wages, but I know that these days, a friend in Englewood stores Mike's artwork because his room is too small for most of his paintings, his drawings, and the found materials he wants to turn into large-scale sculptures. This friend touches the paint up and mows the lawn of every unoccupied home on his block. He uses solar light to power his home and a few of the others.

Mike loves that this friend cares enough about the empty homes in his neighborhood to tend to their possibility, to work towards a future in which they're homes again.

Like his friend and like his son, Mike strongly believes in caring for what and who are already here. In every one of the many conversations we have from May 2020 to February 2021, he shares with me, in his quiet, passionate voice, his vision: shuttered schools across the south and west sides re-modeled, their doors opening like petals for women and children fleeing violent homes, or for other Chicagoans in need of shelter while they wait for housing vouchers to come through. Classrooms converted to dormitories, cafeterias serving whoever needs to eat. With his words, long dark factories light back up in their second lives as clinics treating substance use disorders. Other factories are once again noisy, this time with the sounds of job training, or maybe a second life in manufacturing masks and other high-demand health care products. Homes sunk by predatory mortgages could offer day care, or even, with city financial help, become homes again once more.

Mike's home is the hotel. At any given day, the same is true for up to 210 men, some of whom stay for a night and vanish, some of whom check in and out and in again, and others who have lived there for decades. They are as old as 86 and as young as 18. At the front desk, they show driver's licenses, state IDs, passports. They were born in Cicero, they were born in Ghana, they were born on a table in Cabrini-Green. They work as substitute teachers, as security guards, as dishwashers, as panhandlers, as personal aides. They're retired. Some are veterans, others former competitive swimmers. Many have been to jail. To stay alive, many rely on daily medications: for their heart, their blood pressure, the mental illnesses that make it difficult for them to distinguish reality from hallucination, threat from friend.

For 22 years, Mike has arbitrated fights, administered Narcan, arranged flu clinics and holiday meals, coaxed residents into taking their meds, connected those looking to outside housing, and, for some, made sure their bodies were properly cared for after being carried out the door. This year, he's leaving.

T he Workingman’s Exchange was built in the 1890s to make money and meet a need. Men needed cheap housing, and Alderman Michael Kennea needed their votes. Before his rise to City Council, he worked as a committeeeman churning out votes for the city's infamous Democratic machine. While Kennea didn't run the hotel, he did run its adjoining saloon. Nicknamed “The Hinky Dink,” a nod to the powerful Kennea's slight height, “this was Kennea's ‘philanthropic’ saloon,” Chicago's first historian emeritus Tim Samuelson wrote to me, “offering huge, inexpensive glasses of beer and free lunch for the working poor of the area.”

The men of the Exchange were hungry and eager, with sweethearts they were moving towards or families they were fleeing, with the promise of a job but little money in their pockets, or small fortunes and a desire to dis-appear. They spoke English, Swedish, Can-tonese. They came from all over the country, they took boats across oceans, they hopped a train from Indiana, and they ended up here, at 426 S. Clark.

Like their historical brothers, the men of the hotel today are racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse. In a city notorious for housing segregation, the hotel is “the United Nations of Poor People,” laughs Mike. And, like in the past, there are rumors of idiosyn- cratic millionaires or the fallen rich living here from time to time. In 1946, the Chicago Tribune reported that after a man died in the cubicle he'd lived in for years, detectives doing a routine search of his room found $40,000 in bonds (worth over half a million dollars today), bits of bread and cheese, and a large box of cigarette stubs with traces of lipstick on their ends. Mike says two Enron executives flashed their work IDs when he asked for identification during their stay in late 2001.

The Ewing Annex Hotel exists today in a weird blurry space: beds are advertised for men in transition, but many residents stay for years. It's a hotel that asks if you've been incarcerated in the last six months during check-in, a home where the front door to your building doesn’t lock, and where you drop off your keys to your room at the front desk every time you leave. A four-story building without elevators that rents to many with disabilities, including those who use crutches, wheelchairs, and those who are amputees.

In his two decades on the job, the number of elderly, disabled, or ill residents has increased so much that Mike has a collection of abandoned walkers and wheelchairs piled three high in the crawl space above one of the lobby's vending machines.

On one day I visit, Mike is on the phone with a resident recovering in the hospital from heart surgery. “Some of the equipment he's gonna need outside of the hospital is too much for the normal-size room even,” he explains to me. The man is adamant. He doesn't want to go to a nursing home, which, to him, represents poor care and certain decline till death. He wants to return to the hotel.

The second time I meet Bob Boardman, he doesn’t remember the first. It's May 2020. I'm at the hotel, with photographer Lloyd DeGrane, to talk to him for a story we're working on about opioid users who've had access to their drugs or medications cut off by the early shutdowns of COVID-19.

Bob is white, 65, wears great jackets and layers outrageous sweaters on his thin frame, and nearly always has a bandana around his long, gray-yellow hair. He looks like an anti-war hippie, but no middle class pretense and not all peace. He carries two doses of Narcan at all times. He's a good listener and a good conversationalist, though his laugh
Mike does everything he can to avoid calling the police. “Save tax dollars and their time,” he explains to me one day in mid-February, breath condensing in our masks. Out of every ten calls he does make to the cops, Mike estimates that five are related to a mental health crisis. While Mike says that many cops interact with show restraint and patience, other times, “A lot of them don’t know how to handle that situation. It’s not always pulling a billy club and taser out all the time. Sometimes it’s just a matter of talking to the person.” And so, at first, he tries to de-escale the situation himself with calm words and clear directions. If that doesn’t work, he has handcuffs. “Yeah, I do,” he laughs. “Couple cases, I had to actually hand-cuff ’em to the radiators.” Mike asks how he got the handcuffs, but his answer is murky: he says he found them, he “always had a key.” Regardless of their origin, Mike is grateful they exist. “One day, I had to use them,” he tells me. “And thank god I [did], ’cause the guy was actually trying to jump out the window on me.” After being tackled, the man fought so hard “I was getting ready to lose the fight, so my only recourse was to cuff him to the radiator.” Soon, an ambulance came, and the man was released from the radiator and taken to the hospital. During every hotel check-in, residents-to-be are asked if they take any medication for mental illness, return. As he says, “I have nowhere else to go.”

One day in June, not long after Mayor Lightfoot’s decision to raise downtown bridges during Black Lives Matter protests leads to police kicking, punching, and shoving protesters on Wabash Bridge, Mike is back to the hotel. The day is hot and bright, but the sunlight doesn’t glint off the glass windows I pass—they’re all boarded up. After locking up and nodding to the men smoking nearby, I head up the stairs, where I meet Lloyd at the desk. Mike is elsewhere in the hotel, putting out fires metaphorical or real, and Nelson is covering for him, so he’s who I hang with after Lloyd is buzzed in the stairwell door to go rouse Bob.

“Are you OK?” Nelson asks me. “I heard you sneeze.” I assure him that I’m fine—no COVID, just dust. He glances at my mask. “Try not to get the disposable ones,” he advises me. Nelson favors cloth masks he can wash every day, but really wants one he saw a commercial for on the lobby’s endless TV. “It’s beautiful,” he tells me enthusiastically, black, $29 or less, with copper in it. “The copper, if you get sick inside, it heals you. And if anything touches you, you’ll still be healing.”

Nelson is 58 years old and white, with short hair and an earnest face and movements that remind me of a rooster. A resident interrupts our conversation to check his mail. Nelson helps him, then starts talking again, only now, the subject has changed: “But you know, one of my best friends went into my room. ‘What the hell are you doing here?’ I mean, nobody’s ever, in 20, 25 years, no one’s ever gone in my room while I was sleeping.” Like Mike, Nelson lives at the hotel.

Recently the guy in the cubicle next door to him died. “Russian guy,” Nelson says. “Always taking his medication with that booze like it was water. He fell between the bed and the stand.” His friend, I realize Nelson is telling me, came into the room to check on him, worried that it was Nelson’s body who made that thump.

Nelson says he always carries Narcan, always wears gloves. He’s one of four or five clerks who work the hotel desk in shifts. He grew up in Rogers Park without biological family, moving through five different foster homes across the city until the age of 21. After that, he was on his own. “All I used to do is swim,” he tells me, and laughs a little at the memory. “Thousands and thousands of miles. And I won a lot of gold medals.” Fake gold, he assures me, handed out by park district staff. “But man, I just had a stack of ‘em, like Mark Spitz, you know? I was just taking it all.” One day, his apartment got robbed. Gone were the medals he’d carefully brought with him through every move. Later, he saw them in a pawnshop. “I said to myself, how much they give you, a dollar? I said, man I earned those. I really earned those.”

Despite growing up in The Great Lakes State, I didn’t learn how to swim until I was nearly 30. When I go home, I look Mark Spitz up. I learn about his cheeky mustache, his nine Olympic medals, his perfect white teeth. Nelson would’ve been ten in 1972, the summer Spitz won seven gold medals and set a world record with each. I like to imagine Nelson diving into a city pool, feeling his body slice through the water, his triumph golden and real.
“So they kept searching me. ‘Where’s the money? Where’s the money?’” Mike’s voice grows deeper, louder, his shoulders thrusting out as he imitates the cops of his memory. “What money?” he continues in his normal tone. “What happened was, she came in and asked me for change from a bill that they gave.”

He was arrested on the spot. While locked up, Mike says the state’s attorney kept pressuring him to plead out. “Well, if you don’t sign these papers to agree on this,” Mike recounts, “then you gonna wind up getting 30 years.’ And I’m—I’ve never been in trouble before, so I’m scared for my life, you know? Thirty years? I’m in my 30s now! You know what I’m saying?” And so, Mike pled guilty to something he says he didn’t do. In exchange, he served three years probation. “I even lost a job because I didn’t put that down [on my application] at the time,” he tells me now, in the lobby of the hotel. Recently, he heard some senior housing won’t admit residents with a felony on their record. He’s worried.

Do you think you will fight it now? I ask.

Mike nods.

“Yeah,” he says, “Imma have to. Before I leave—”

Chicago, I interrupt, thinking of his upcoming move south, but Mike continues: “—this earth. Because I don’t want to die with that on my name. I didn’t do that. I didn’t do that.”

The sound of floor fans hum here year-round; the TV in the lobby is always on, always loud. The lobby smells like whatever was microwaved last. In the winter when I come home from the hotel, my coat and hair smell like cigarettes even though no one I interviewed indoors was smoking. The aroma, seeping out of the walls like an invisible fog, is stronger when it rains.

I do most of my interviews in this lobby, criss-cross from a donations table where church groups and other organizations drop off clothes and packaged food and where hotel staff puts goods salvaged from cleaning out rooms after residents leave. Decades of handmade and printed signs are taped or nailed up: for veterans help hotlines, information about free meals in the city, a chicken curry special from the Indian restaurant a few storefronts down.

The third or fourth time I’m here, Wesley Duran comes out from behind the desk with a
Wesley works his ass off. Everyone who works at the hotel does, but Wesley, or Wes, tends to be working the shifts I drop by, so I see him most often: hustling to mop the bathroom, giving returning residents their keys to their rooms when a clerk needs to step out, offering me an orange pop from the vending machine and refusing my money for it. I’m not sure what his exact title is. He’s white, wears a thin ponytail, and favors baggy T-shirts.

Wes is from Cicero. “I grew up on very strong fundamental groundwork in loyalty, in being someone you can count on,” he says. He moved into the hotel in 2006. He’s an avid reader, a studier of philosophy, and deeply suspicious of cable news. Wes loves that I’m a writer. Like Nelson, like at least half a dozen other men I meet over the course of the year, for the majority of his adult life, Wes’s career was delivering the paper.

“I’ve got 33 years between the Tribune and the Sun-Times,” he tells me. Thousands on thousands of days loading up trucks and riding out in the predawn dark to make sure the rest of the city had the day’s news to read over their coffee or on their commute. “That had purpose,” he says. “I had a point.” When he started at the Tribune, Wesley says there were eight unions. He liked working at a place with such collective strength.

He lost his job on October 18, 2010, when the Sun-Times merged delivery services with the Tribune. These days, there’s no Tribune trucks rolling, either: both papers have switched to independent, contract drivers.

“When someone moves, Wesley cleans the room, he scrubs it down, he burns what has to be burned,” Bob says, including torching radiators to save their lives, protect his own, or protect other residents. Mental health services and addiction services rank high on the list of resources he wishes the city provided to his residents, but the list is long, full of items he’s been pushing for years. He wants to install elevators. He wants to repaint the walls. He wants to put in water fountains: with no kitchen, the only water for those in the cubicles comes from bathroom taps.

Usually during the hot summer, I fill those containers up there with ice water and allow people to sit in here where the air conditioner is. Some people have health issues, they can’t be in the heat. That’s why I was trying to access the TIF funding, to put the air conditioning, industrial air conditioning, in the upper floors. So it would make it more comfortable for the people that live here,” he says.

TIF, or Tax Increment Financing, is a funding tool used by the city to “promote public and private investment” via development. Under state law, an area must meet numerous “blighting factors” for TIF consideration, but the 2018 approval by former Mayor Rahm Emanuel of a $1.3 billion TIF in Lincoln Park—one of the wealthiest and whitest neighborhoods in the city—continues to raise questions about the equity of this process. Several years ago, Mike says he asked the city how to apply for TIF funding for the hotel, but was told it wasn’t eligible.

The Ewing is not technically an emergency shelter or a congregate living center, even if it frequently functions like one. For example, back in 2005, “the city of Chicago brought and introduced a person that was heading for housing for the Hurricane Katrina victims,” Mike says. As he tells it, after that initial official meeting, one survivor was relocated to the Ewing with the understanding that the city would foot his rent for the duration of his six-month stay. “He stayed here, but we never received payment.”

It’s not a mental health services center either, though, according to a survey of the hotel completed by the Chicago Coalition
for the Homeless in 2013 (the most recent year for which information is available), 25 percent of residents are veterans and 42 percent identify as having a “mental or physical disability.” During my visits, I met several men who told me that, after completing programs at Thresholds, an Illinois nonprofit that supports people with mental illness and substance use disorders, they were “sent” by Thresholds workers to the hotel. From that point on, they live at the hotel while social workers managing their SSI money come in once a month to pay their rent. Thresholds told me that while they don’t have a “formal relationship” with the Ewing, they do manage rent payments on the behalf of some men who live there who are also enrolled in Thresholds programs, via a process known as representative pay.

“During this pandemic, a lot of these guys work either day labor places or in factory settings where they weren’t able to go to work,” Mike tells me. Although the CDC moratorium on evictions doesn’t include hotels or motels, no one was evicted from the Ewing. Indeed, resident after resident tells me stories of at some point, during their tenure, being unable to pay rent for weeks that turn into months, but never are they threatened with eviction. Instead, Mike works out deals with men who need them. If a resident usually paid by the week, for example, when they start making money again, they resume paying by the week, “plus a couple few dollars toward what they owe.”

Over the years, in an attempt to help his aging, ill residents thrive, Mike has connected regularly with local organizations like the Night Ministry, which provides health care to people who are homeless or in poverty. In 2020, they stopped by twice to administer COVID tests, but he wants more care, and he wants it from the city. Mike’s angry. “We should be able to get somebody to come, a company to come through that specialize in sanitizing hospitals for the virus,” he says. Even though they’re eligible, it would be very difficult for many residents to make an appointment at the United Center, where the city has set up mass vaccinations for eligible residents, let alone get there and back twice. He wants the health department to come by and vaccinate residents, but tells me he’s given up on calling them. For now, the Night Ministry has been able to provide first doses to a handful of men at the hotel.

In 2013, two aldermen tried to shut down every cubic-style hotel left in the city. One of them, Alderman Brendan Reilly, whose ward borders the Ewing, said, “Average Chicagoans wouldn’t want to house their dogs in this type of facility.” Housing activists, along with the residents of these hotels themselves, pushed back against that language, which they found insulting, and against the closure of their homes without any input from the residents themselves. Mike shows me the handmade T-shirts he and others wore to ensuing City Council meetings and protests. Please Don’t Make Us Homeless, they read. Ultimately, the proposed ordinance did not pass, but eight years later, the Ewing Annex Hotel is the last of its kind.

Several men told me that, although the Ewing is noisy, at times dirty, and the bedbugs drive them nuts, here they’re able to come and go as they please, with their autonomy and dignity intact. There are no benchmarks to meet, no curfews, no religious services they’re required to attend in order to keep their beds. This is their home; they choose it. In their home, these men deserve, like everyone else, to live safely and well.

Death comes to the hotel unevenly, but it does come. Some years, two men die. Last year, it was eight. They pass from old age or overdose, heart attack or stroke. This is why he asks for emergency contacts during check-in, Mike explains to potential residents. He’s seen too many men buried unclaimed, unmourned, but not alone—in Cook County, unclaimed remains are cremated and buried up to 20 urns per casket—to not try and get a name and number for each resident’s records, just in case.

Several years ago, an 86-year-old named Sid Weinstein called Mike from the hospital and asked him to bring something. He’d lived at the hotel even longer than Mike, and while the younger man used to sometimes give him rides back and forth to doctor’s appointments, they weren’t exactly friends. Sid didn’t really have those. Fairly regularly, Mike would be in the lobby, checking someone in and minding his business when the sound of stomping and shouting would drift in through the old floorboards above his head.

“Two old guys, slipping and sliding on the floor,” Mike tells me. He shakes his head, but his eyes are smiling. “One throw a punch and miss, the other throw a punch, he misses.” Each time, Mike’d give them a minute of dignity before breaking it up. “OK. You swung enough, guys?” Panting and glowing, Sid and his neighbor would slink back to their rooms.

A Jewish, white, hot-tempered veteran and a Black artist whose whole life had been a lesson in the necessity of de-escalation for survival, they had little in common but the address they shared. But when Sid called, Mike answered. Mike no longer remembers what it was that Sid asked him to bring to the hospital that day. He only remembers what Sid told him once he was there.

“Before you leave the hospital today, I need to talk to you about something. I’m gonna trust you to take care of my business when I pass. Here’s my bank card. There’s enough money to bury me decently,” Mike recalls. Do that for me, Sid said. Whatever is left in the account, I want you to have.

Mike knew Jewish burials had to be done a certain way, but he didn’t know what that way was, and Sid died in the hospital before Mike could ask. In between his duties as the hotel manager, he tried to learn. He also wanted Sid to get a military burial, full honors, but he says the VA never returned his calls. Finally, the funeral home rang. They couldn’t continue to hold Sid for much longer.

So Mike, the way he’s done countless times before as manager of the Ewing Annex Hotel, made the best decision he could with what he had. He took out a plot for Sid in the military section of the cemetery, thinking that at least then, he’d be among comrades. He picked a nondenominational service. Mike felt bad that time had run out before he could sort out what Jewish rites to follow. He felt worse when, the day of Sid’s memorial, among all the chairs the funeral home staff had set up for mourners to come and pay their respects to this old, fighting man, he mostly sat there alone. “Nobody should have to go like that,” he says.

As Mike sat at the service with his artist’s eye for detail, he paid attention. He noticed the light coming in the windows and how it hit the floor. He watched as a woman with long gray hair and a fur coat stride in, whispered something to Sid’s casket, and took a seat, where she remained until the memorial’s end. And he saw, once outside after the memorial’s end, the Star of David engraved above the door. It was then that Mike realized: in a previous life, it had been a Jewish funeral home until the mid-20th century.

Mike is really good at his job. He notices detail and cares about people. “Well,” he says quietly after I tell him this, “somebody cared about me at one time.” After summer 1968, Mike qualified on scholarship to attend weekend SAIC classes for three more years. During those classes, he made sculptures, watercolors, and sketches.

The care Mike takes of the Ewing and the men who call it home is obvious, but so is the labor required to, in so many ways, pull it off alone. It’s why he’s quitting, I think, or part of it. He’s excited to leave. He’s excited to pursue his art, to mount an exhibition, to live out a wonderfully boyish dream of living in a repurposed firehouse, sliding down a pole from his bedroom to his art studio every morning, to finally go home to Memphis, the place he’s never quite gotten over. But while avoiding sanctifying him, I don’t know what the hotel is going to be like without him.

In my eyes the city, and perhaps other institutions with power, have come to rely on the hotel to catch men they otherwise will let fall through, but it’s a reliance based on evasion: as long as they don’t look too closely, they don’t have to do anything about it. When they do look closely, some see a hotel from a nearly bygone area that’s “not fit for dogs” taking up space where high-priced condos, and the different clientele they bring, might be. But these men aren’t bygone. They’re still here, in this hotel, that some of them hate and some of them love and all of them call their home.

Mike is right, of course, to remind me that it takes no special goodness to pay attention to someone, only effort—repeated, ordinary, every day. It’s also right to note that the fate of hundreds shouldn’t rest on the effort of one, especially not when powerful institutions with power, have come to rely on the fate of hundreds shouldn’t rest on the one, especially not when powerful institutions with power, have come to rely on the fate of hundreds shouldn’t rest on the one, especially not when powerful institutions with power, have come to rely on the fate of hundreds shouldn’t rest on the one, especially not when powerful institutions with power, have come to rely on the fate of hundreds shouldn’t rest on the one, especially not when powerful institutions with power, have come to rely on the fate of hundred.
In 1996, feminist scholar Susan Wendell wrote: “What can I know if I can’t know what I am feeling in my own body? How can I remain connected to a world that denies I am in pain, or dizzy, or nauseated, when I myself cannot deny that I am?”

Vaginismus is fairly common, impacting 5 to 17 percent of people in a clinical setting. The number is likely higher, as many patients don’t come forward or talk to a doctor about their condition due to embarrassment or anxiety. During intercourse, or while inserting a tampon or finger, the pelvic muscles contract and patients feel so much pain that any type of penetration becomes impossible. Some folks describe it as burning and aching while others say it’s like hitting a wall. Vaginismus is essentially the body’s natural fear reaction to protect the individual from pain, but by doing so, more pain is induced. Muscles tighten without any control.

Imagine this: if someone puts their finger near your eye, you automatically flinch or shut your eye. You can’t control it. That’s vaginismus.

The reasons for the condition vary widely—some are psychological and stem from sexual abuse, fear of sex, or religious upbringing, while others don’t have a history in any of these areas.

In the same vein, vaginismus is difficult to diagnose due to similar side effects crossing over among various pelvic and vulvar dysfunctions, disorders, and diseases. Vaginal pain could be a yeast infection, a side effect from birth control, ovarian cysts, endometriosis, an STI—the list goes on. However, for many patients, doctors dismiss them, deny them an answer, and leave them with no treatment. Painful sex becomes a reality with no cure.

A 2014 online survey found that 2,400 women in the U.S. live with chronic pain and 91 percent felt that their doctors discriminated against them for being women. Almost half of the participants in the study were told that their pain is in their heads. And vaginismus patients are no strangers to this type of dismissal. This common method of medical gaslighting is incredibly damaging to patients. Folks begin to feel alienated and don’t reach out for help. Relationships suffer. The body-to-mind connection falters.

Claire, 34, who prefers to only go by her first name, said her history of assault is one of the biggest triggers for vaginismus. “I hadn’t realized how much I relied on alcohol and drugs for me to be able to be intimate until I went sober in 2015,” she says. When she finally made major progress with a partner, doctors discovered precancerous cells on her cervix due to HPV. Her doctor suggested a loop electrosurgical excision procedure (LEEP) that cuts out the abnormal cells and the area of the affected cervix. “My healing after the LEEP procedure was longer than expected and I was in pain a lot longer than my doctor had suggested I would be. It took me a couple of months after the procedure to feel comfortable having sex again and when I did it was painful,” explains Claire. In addition to this recovery, she began to get ovarian cysts, a result of her Mirena IUD. After deciding to get it removed, she thought sex would be pain-free again. “Instead the pain kept getting worse to where I physically could not have intercourse,” she explains.

Vaginismus pain can vary from person to person. No two symptoms are the same. For Claire, she started with a tight and dry feeling, even when she was aroused. After she had sex, she would begin to burn and it would be painful to urinate. Light bleeding was sometimes present, too. Over time, the pain began to increase and the entrance to her vagina would begin to burn. “Even with lots of lube and foreplay my body felt completely closed off to sex,” she says. Like many vaginismus patients, Claire says it feels like her partner was hitting a rock wall. This “closed off” feeling is a common thread between patients, a blocked-off muscle reaction that hurts like hell.

The emotional and mental exhaustion of vaginismus can be overwhelming. Many folks begin to feel a loss of self-esteem and confidence, in the bedroom and out of it. The thought of being intimate began to initiate panic attacks for Claire, who has been with a long-term partner of five years. “There were fights with my partner at the beginning when we didn’t understand what was happening and I was starting to shut down. I was eventually unable to communicate my physical and emotional pain. I did not want to admit that this was happening to me and to us,” she explains.

In 2008, Christine Labuski gained a PhD in cultural anthropology after she left work as a nurse practitioner in the fields of gynecology, sexuality, and queer health. She was interested in “lived experiences” like STIs and abortions. Her dissertation turned into her book, It Hurts Down There. Now, Labuski teaches women’s and gender studies at Virginia Tech.

Labuski’s research has looked at the emotional toll and mental health impact that chronic vulvovaginal pain can cause. Many of the people who Labuski spoke to said they shut down and shut out the idea of sex. Many of them were concerned that when a partner kissed them, they would want to have sex and that sex would ultimately result in pain. This cycle of anxiety and stress led many folks to consider themselves “abnormal.”

“This meant that a lot of people with these pain conditions were cutting physical and emotional affection out of their lives, due to their fear of painful penetrative intercourse,” she says.

Community is essential. Ten years ago, there were virtually no articles or studies on vaginismus. No one was talking about it. The Internet was mute. That’s why Chicago-based podcast Tight Lipped, which focuses on pain during intimacy, is such a sigh of relief. Noa Fleishacker, cohost and producer, opens up about her chronic vulvar pain and interviews writers, patients, and activists who share their stories and experiences—all so painfully similar to Claire’s experience. Feeling any kind of pain is a claustrophobic experience, and to mix in the inability to have sex is incredibly overwhelming. In 2019, Tight Lipped launched a zine called Opening Up in which more than 50 contributors shared their stories about vulvovaginal and pelvic pain through art, poetry, and prose. Virtual events have also kicked off during the pandemic where folks can connect and build community over state lines.

“It seems like, in the U.S., we need a celebrity or some other well-known person to open up about a stigmatized experience before we’ll talk about it,” says Labuski. We see this type of advocacy and awareness about endometriosis, for example, where celebrities like Chrissy Teigen and Tia Mowry have been open about their pregnancies and their endo journeys. Vaginismus hasn’t hit the mainstream yet. There isn’t an advocate in the limelight preaching about their intercourse woes.

Claire blamed herself, as many people who are on the receiving end of pain do. With the lack of education surrounding vaginismus, people think this pain is unique to them. And with doctors lacking research and misdiagnosing pain, studies and data are largely absent from medical textbooks. “I had constant anxiety that my partner would want to break up with me,” says Claire. “I questioned daily why they were with me. We had not had sex in two years by the time I found a doctor that could help me.”

Labuski says that folks should redefine the word “sex” so that they “don’t have to feel like they are missing out on ‘sexual’ pleasure because one specific act is too uncomfortable for them.” Experimenting with outercourse, like kissing, massaging, or including sex toys can create a more explorative and intimate space in the bedroom. It’s imperative to make sure your partner is working alongside you, understanding you, and communicating as much as possible. Vaginismus is a two-way street.

So, how is vaginismus treated? What makes the condition difficult to treat is the fact that
it is a mixture of physical and emotional response. Where dilators may physically train the body to accept objects inside, the mind-body block may cause the body to tense up and many folks describe a severe loss of libido. This will also cause painful sex. It becomes a cyclical battle between mind and body.

“One of my committee members joked that the physical therapists were the ‘heroes’ of my dissertation. And they were right!” says Labuski. Styles and treatments range for people with painful sex, but most people do well when physical therapy includes cognitive therapy.

Claire began seeking physical therapy, where she would go to downtown Chicago once a week to have specialists vaginally release tensions and tightness. Occasionally, anal releases were also done since it is tied to the pelvic floor. Many suggestions from PTs are pelvic floor exercises and stretches that are linked to yoga. Additionally, she began using silicone dilators (tube-shaped devices that are inserted into the vagina) and a vibrating wand every other night. Slowly, patients should work up in dilator sizes to retrain the vagina to accept foreign objects. Eventually, a phallic object can be introduced.

Since pelvic pain awareness has been budding at a grassroots level, penis bumpers like the OhNut ($65) have also hit the market. The device slides onto a person’s shaft, or a toy, and shortens the length, and serves as a bumper, to eliminate deep pain inside of a person.

“Hot baths with CBD/THC bath bombs are magic when it comes to relaxing your pelvic floor. I make sure to do a bath with CBD/THC at least every other week,” says Claire.

While Claire is still recovering, she says she is more hopeful. “I know what my body needs to help stay relaxed, and I feel confident with the tool kit that my PT taught me. I don’t feel ashamed or anxious anymore that sex has not been a part of my relationship lately, because I realized that we had developed intimacy in other ways that are also important to a healthy relationship,” she explains.

She still has an emotional block when it comes to intimacy, impacting her ability to orgasm. She says, “When I am ready for sex, I want to be able to enjoy it fully. I am currently working on learning how to be intimate with myself and what my body needs now that we have gone through this together.”

**Meet the Reader**

**As we look forward to our 50th Anniversary on October 1st we celebrate the staff of the Reader who make the paper possible.**

**Interviews by Nicole Lane**

**Mariah Neuroth**

**Strategic Innovation Director**

Mariah Neuroth joined the Reader just before Chicago went into lockdown in March 2020 and has since become a central nervous system of innovation across every side of the organization—essentially translating what happens on the page into real-world applications. “The Reader has always been the cultural heartbeat of Chicago and it is a privilege to contribute to the work,” she says. The northern New York native first landed in the midwest as a student at the University of Missouri, and she later earned her Master’s in youth development at the University of Illinois at Chicago. As a Gemini, Mariah is full of good vibes and positive energy, which she brings to her work, as well as her favorite Chicago activities, such as swimming at Promontory Point and checking out live music at the Metro. If you weren’t already convinced that Mariah is a jill-of-all-trades, she’s also a fourth-generation maple sugarer who spends what little free time she has converting a minibus into a tiny home and being an excellent cat mom to Lady Logan (aka Go Go). She also claims she does a “mean goat impression,” and while she hasn’t shown it off at work yet, we trust that it lives up to the hype. Is there anything Mariah can’t do?

Instagram: @ChiRiah | Facebook: facebook.com/mariah.neuroth

**Adam Rhodes**

**Social Justice Reporting Fellow**

In 2019, they left the Big Apple for the Windy City, where they earned their Master’s in journalism at Northwestern University’s Medill School shortly before starting their fellowship with the paper. “Working at the Reader is a dream job,” Adam says. “I’ve never felt safer and more encouraged to bring my whole self to work, and it means the world to have leadership that supports me 100 percent. And I get to do the work I’ve always dreamed of with the coolest people in the business.” Adam says. As a Pisces and relative newcomer to the city, they enjoy exploring Chicago’s neighborhoods and stumbling upon its diverse local shops and restaurants, and though some of their discovery process has been hampered by the pandemic, they’ve already become a big fan of Lost Lake in Logan Square. Back at home, you can catch Adam spending time with their magnificently snuggly four-year-old beagle, Hibachi.

Facebook: facebook.com/kirkwilliamson

**Kirk Williamson**

**Production Manager**

Production manager and resident Pixies enthusiast Kirk Williamson officially joined the Reader in October 2020 after a stunning nearly two-decade run at the Windy City Times. Born in Gary, Indiana and raised in Wheaton, Illinois, Kirk attended Wheaton Central High School (now Wheaton Warrenville South) before heading off to Beloit College, where he earned his degree in Russian. A Scorpio, Kirk is intelligent, inquisitive, and charismatic, which is probably why he’s got a knack for hosting and emceeing, which he does with aplomb at his weekly Kwizmaster Trivia nights. When he’s out and about, Kirk enjoys spending time at the Rogers Park Social, but he’s equally happy to chill in his living room while watching episodes of a triffecta of classic sitcoms that includes The Golden Girls, The Nanny, and Frasier. Sitcom or otherwise, if there was a TV show about his life, he’d be played by Jordan Peele (who ideally would also direct). Despite his own star appeal, Kirk remains incredibly modest. When asked about working at the Reader he said, “It’s a joy to be collaborating with such an innovative group of creators. I’m thankful that they regard me as being equal to their talents.” Right back atcha, Kirk!

**Social media: @byadamrhodes**

**Meet the Reader**

**Brianna Wellen**

**Culture Editor**

Cancers are said to be loyal, intuitive, and caring, and those words describe the Reader’s culture editor Brianna Wellen to a T. The Rockton, Illinois native earned her bachelor’s degree in journalism at Columbia College before she joined the Reader crew in the spring of 2013. “Working at the Reader was always my dream job,” she says. “Just to be able to tell the stories and come to work to work every day, I still get to do that every day, and the fact that all my colleagues are weirdos like me makes it that much dreamier.” Along with all those weirdos, Brianna enjoys spending time with her siblings Lily and Lenny Wellen, her roommates Amira Jazeera and Atom Eyzed, and her cats / Reader Zoom-meeting regulars Tofu and Miso. A prolific comedic storyteller, Brianna has co-produced live lit series including Feminist Happy Hour, and she is the ONLY person on the paper’s staff who has starred in not one, but multiple hot dog commercials. Brianna’s list of favorite Chicago places could fill a small phone book of culture, comedy, and nightlife hotspots, with a few beloved dives including Parrots Bar & Grill, Late Bar, and Sidekicks thrown in for good measure. And like all true Chicagoans, she loves the lakefront. “There are truly too many more favorites to mention,” Brianna says. “This city is the best.”

Twitter: @briannawellen | Instagram: @breezamarie

**Social media: @briannawellen**

**Mariah Neuroth**

**Strategic Innovation Director**

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Instagram: @ChiRiah | Facebook: facebook.com/mariah.neuroth

**Social media: @briannawellen | Instagram: @breezamarie**
WEED FOR WELLNESS

The future of CBD is female
Two local women entrepreneurs entering the cannabis industry are bringing holistic wellness, better access, and equity to the game.

By Ariel Parrella-Aureli

"The reality is women actually run the world," Ida Nelson told me over the phone last week, which got me laughing and clapping at the same time. Women know this statement as fact, but we still have to prove ourselves and our worth within mostly white, male-dominated industries. Nelson is using the hustle from the pandemic to change that and showcase her strength in entrepreneurship within the cannabis industry, which has grown tremendously in Illinois since the state legalized recreational marijuana in 2020.

While the local cannabis industry has had its own slew of equity and diversity issues and still lacks a Black majority-owned dispensary, women and people of color are slowly climbing the ladder and creating a space for themselves in the industry that’s also climbing at a steep rate, both for its medical and recreational benefits. Less than 2 percent of Illinois dispensary owners were Black or Latino and less than 25 percent were women as of last June, according to a state report. Nationally, the percentage of women in senior-level executive positions at cannabis companies has teetered since 2015 and currently stands at just under 37 percent, according to a 2019 Marijuana Business Daily survey that questioned 567 U.S. marijuana senior executives, owners, and founders.

The global legal marijuana market size is expected to reach $84 billion by 2028, according to a March 2021 report by consulting company Grand View Research, Inc. It’s no surprise the U.S. is leading the charge, as cities and states have legalized recreational marijuana in recent years. Illinois raked in more than $1 billion in legal cannabis sales in 2020 and set yet another marijuana sales record in January, with nearly $89 million in adult-use cannabis purchases in the first month of the year.

Women like Nelson, who is a single mother of five from Lawndale, sees the financial potential in being part of the growing sector, but for the self-described “serial momtrepreneur,” it’s more than just about the money. “Representation is important,” Nelson says. “I feel like right now we are in a Harlem Renaissance as a people. A lot of people are starting to find their voice, find their power, and there has been an uprising in Black power in a positive way.”

Like most folks who sought out new opportunities because of the pandemic, she started two businesses in 2020 and built off her passions of baking, women’s wellness, and community empowerment. After getting laid off from her corporate job in May, she launched Ida’s Artisan Ice Cream & Treats and made a line with organic cannabidiol, or CBD, which was the city’s first local CBD-infused ice cream. The ice cream comes in seven flavors including peach cobbler, caramel crunch, and turtle cheesecake, each with 50 mg of CBD oil, and they are smooth, creamy, very rich, and yes, very relaxing (I ordered five pints). To order some, folks can check out the menu online and then text Nelson at 773-956-3353—or she or her daughter will deliver it to you over the weekend.

In December, she rode the wave of her CBD ice cream’s success and founded her solo project called Ida, BE WELL, a cannabis company that sells products like CBD tinctures, chamomile teas, and pre-rolled joints to encourage people to take hold of their wellness naturally. She also aims to provide greater access to cannabis for Black people and educate them about its powers—as well as dismantle the mental health stigma in the Black community.

The company is in its early stages, but the founder hopes to work with local grocery chains to sell her products and hire Black folks from the neighborhood to sell her products so they can gain business experience and build up their community. “I want to educate and empower the people of Lawndale and East Garfield Park to be able to understand the benefits of cannabis or CBD,” she says. “A lot of people don’t know how to even acquire it.”

With the high stress, depression, and PTSD from constant police brutality and violence toward people of color, Nelson saw 2020 as a prime time to start her CBD endeavors. She also wants to change the reputation of Black women.

“When someone says to me, ‘You are such a strong Black woman,’ it’s not a badge of honor,” she says. “I don’t want to be a strong Black woman, I just want to be a woman. It’s important for us to step into our power in an authentic way. We should be able to inspire each other in a way that isn’t inspired by our ability to struggle. I want to unnormalize the struggle.”

Chloe Millard, founder of Rose & Jade, also started her company last year to normalize a different kind of struggle: seeking help to relieve chronic pain, particularly for new mothers. Like Nelson, Millard experienced chronic pain from anxiety, stress, and pandemic life. After her second pregnancy, the 29-year-old was diagnosed with degenerative disc disease, an ailment in which discs between the vertebrae of the spine deteriorate or break down. With a professional background in medical devices and pharmaceuticals, she didn’t want to get addicted to narcotic pain meds.

“I really suffered in silence for a while. It was brutal,” says Millard, who recently moved to the western suburbs. “I stumbled upon [CBD] really out of desperation.” She admits that when she discovered CBD, she didn’t know anything about it and had never smoked marijuana. But she started taking oils daily for her pain and anxiety and balancing being a mom. “It gave me my life back,” she says.

Rose & Jade sources cannabis oil from Colorado and sells CBD oil drops, gummies, and bath salts, and even CBD for dogs. Before launching, Millard and her small team—which includes her husband and an assistant—interviewed women around the country to see what they wanted in CBD pain relief. She found that there was a “big silent market” of women who wanted natural assistance but didn’t know where to turn—or who were afraid to speak up because of stereotyped ideas about marijuana.

“There are a lot of women using cannabis and CBD, and I am excited for the day that it won’t be such a hush-hush topic," she says. “People are ashamed to raise their hands and say, ‘Hey, I need help.’”

As she expands her products to appeal to women and begins working with mom-and-pop vendors nationwide, she also hopes to steer her customers away from alcohol abuse as a coping mechanism and instead highlight the medicinal properties of cannabis, which is largely spearheaded by younger generations. “People are finally noticing CBD is a safe alternative; it’s natural and anxiety-relieving—like, why are we not doing this more?” she says.

Millard sees the women-led growth in the cannabis industry as a reflection of the times, and how people respond to new methods of natural treatment, especially as it gains legal and mainstream traction. And a big part of that is representation: as more women start cannabis businesses, their clients feel more confident in speaking up about their needs. Local entrepreneurs like Millard and Nelson are positively impacting their communities by opening up new doors glazed with hope for better wellness, access, and equality within the industry.

“We cannot wait for someone to say we are enough," Nelson says. “I need to find some way to empower myself. We can build our own community and lean on one another to heal.”
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Rika Lin bridges centuries of tradition

The choreographer uses classical Japanese forms to examine gender and identity.

By Irene Hsiao

Black hair. A jilted woman. A sacrifice.

Snow. “She’s a geisha who falls in love with a samurai. They have their one secret night together, but she realizes the future of the clan depends on his marrying this other woman, so she says, ‘Go.’ It’s their wedding night. She’s alone and undoing her hair. It’s black hair—a symbol of youth, the strength of a woman, resilience, beauty,” says choreographer Rika Lin on Kurokami ("Black Hair"), an excerpt from the now-lost 18th-century kabuki play Ookinai hirugakojima. "If you listen to the lyrics, it sounds like she was this innocent girl, and he went, ‘We’ll be together forever, baby!’ But if you know the play, she’s in anguish and bitter because she chose this sacrifice."

Now Lin, in collaboration with musicians Matsuya Nozawa and Tatsu Aoki, calligrapher Hekiun Oda, director Subhash Maskara, user interface designer Derrick Fields, and software engineer Michael Flood, is developing Kurokami e{murge}, a contemporary rendition of this classical work for virtual reality presentation—the latest project in a body of work that examines gender and tradition through the lens of Japanese classical dance.

Born in Chicago to first-generation immigrants from Japan, Lin began dancing after her younger sister, Rina, got a taste of Japanese classical dance one summer in Japan. Upon her return, Rina continued at Shubukai, the Chicago school of Japanese classical dance founded by grandmaster Fujima Shunojo in 1976—and their mother took Rika, a self-described “tomboy” who practiced martial arts, along. “Japanese classical dance in the conventional older ways was one more line in your ‘I’m going to be a good wife’ resume,” says Lin. "Can you do the tea ceremony? Do you do flower arrangement? Do you dance? I’m sure my mom was thinking, ‘Here’s my butch daughter who likes karate; I better get her something so she’s presentable.’ So I went and had my lesson, and it was this rare thing, a male dance teacher. [Japan is] a male-dominated society, but all the Japanese classical dance teachers were women.”

“There are five major schools of Japanese classical dance,” she says. “The Fujima school is known for having very intricate, complex choreography and a strong connection to kabuki.” When Fujima Shunojo began his apprenticeship in Japan, as the youngest of a cohort with several boys, it was decided that he would learn the female dances. “It was an unusual thing that there were so many male apprentices in his teacher’s school. So it was fate.”

Lin continued training in both Japanese classical dance and Shotokan karate. “The dojo [JKA Chicago Sugiyama Dojo, founded by Shojiro Sugiyama] was on the second floor, and my dance teacher worked on the first floor,” she recalls. “In karate, my teacher would say, ‘You’re dancing! This is karate!’ And I’d go to dance, and it would be, ‘You’re doing karate—this is dance!’ And I’d be like, ‘What am I doing?’”

Yet Lin was drawn to dance in spite of herself. “The characters and the dances had a complete story. You knew your character. It was comforting to know. You are dancing a woman, and you’re selling your flowers, and this is how a woman moves, this is her class, this is what she’s wearing. It’s a comforting security that there’s this path, this is what you do, and you try to do it as best you can. I always figured, growing up, you have this track to follow. This expectation, you’re supposed to have ‘osmified’ into you by your family: you get good grades, undergrad, med school. It was planned. It was secure. So dance was a way to not worry about the real world. It was an escape,” she says. (An escape that looks just like the trap, I suggest. I never thought about it that way, she laughs.)

Dance was also a connection to Japanese culture as Lin grew up in a predominantly white neighborhood in Warrenville. “My first language was Japanese, but in the burbs, there were no other Japanese people at all. My father [a radiology physicist] would moonlight at checking MRI machines in hospitals. We would go to Iowa—a big family vacation!—and
we were across from the hospital in a playground, and I distinctly remember a Caucasian boy in a station wagon with a window open and he’s standing on his seat, and he goes, ‘Chineese!’ I go, ‘Where?—oh, he’s talking about us!’” she recalls.

Yet, as a result of American hostility towards Japan and those of Japanese descent before, during, and after World War II, relationships even among Japanese Americans can be complex: “During the internment, there was a line drawn between nationals, people who came from Japan, and families who were interned and went through the camps. Typically they don’t speak Japanese because they were trying to assimilate. So nationals were kind of deemed the enemy,” notes Lin. On the other side, her Japanese teachers expressed ambivalence about becoming American. “My karate teacher, we always used to ask him, ‘You’re not going to get your green card?’ He experienced the war in Japan. He would say, ‘If women, the bodies float downwards, and men they float upwards.’ He was giving an explanation after a firebombing or something. We were stupidly lighthearted, like, ‘Why won’t you become an American citizen? Go, America!’ And he’d start telling these stories. He saw that.”

In college at Northwestern, Lin found herself surrounded by Asian friends for the first time (“everybody was premed”)—yet her activities set her apart. “I scheduled my classes to make sure I could hit my dance teacher’s classes Monday, Friday, Saturday, and my karate classes Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday. While I was going to karate and dance, my friends were studying their butts off. They’d go out while I was studying, so my path diverged from everyone else’s.” One day, in frustration, she said, “Why do I have to be a doctor, Mom?” Her mother replied, “No one told you you had to be a doctor.”

So Lin became a physical therapist instead—and continued to dance. “The only time I missed the annual performance was in grad school, because there was no way. When I became a physical therapist, half the time to break the ice with my patients, I’m talking about dance. It’s this ‘super hobby’ that’s all you do. When you go home, you’re doing dance.” As she rose through the ranks at Shubukai, she assumed more responsibilities—“coordinating performances or calling and making arrangements or stage managing”—and eventually sought her professional stage name with the intention of continuing her teacher’s school.

“The Fujima school operates under a headmaster system, like most cultural arts in Japan. Usually it’s a family. The headmaster controls the knowledge and certifies the teachers that then teach that style. When you receive your professional stage name, you’re a representative of the school.” Following a training process that can only be completed in Japan, recipients of the Fujima name acknowledge their professional status with the performance of one of three hour-long dances—the white heron maiden, the lion dance, or the temple maiden (“your teacher will choose according to your personality”). “I didn’t realize it cost a lot of money. My parents were against it because there’s no future in it. I refinanced my condo and I got my professional name against my parents’ wishes. But, being stubborn, I was like, ‘Well, I guess I’m just going to do it,’” she says. “I’m still paying off my stage name”: Fujima Yoshinoko, which acknowledges the lineage of her training by combining the name of the school with the names of her teachers.

But before Lin could officially teach or choreograph, she still needed to acquire a grandmaster license, which requires years more training and an arduous exam before the headmaster: “When I got my grandmasters license, then I was able to do Beyond the Box”—her first self-produced show at Links Hall in 2017, which included duets with Ayako Kato (Swathe) and Lenora Lee (Anger and the Bell), a piece with her students in collaboration with composer Eric Leonardson (Quantum Monk II), and a solo (Mai Ougi). Beyond the Box 4.3, an iteration of Kurokami developed in collaboration with puppeteer Tom Lee, continues at Links Hall this May.

The ten years between stage name and grandmaster license—during which she “scrambled and had different grants and begged and borrowed”—allowed Lin’s choreographic voice to simmer to the surface. “I don’t have the typical body type to be a Japanese dancer—to even be Japanese,” she says. “I remember when I was five, they’d be like, ‘You’re kind of fat!’ When I started training for the exam, they’d say, ‘You’re sweating too much!’ That’s a dealbreaker, if you’re sweating. But I’m living! If I think about it, I’m going to sweat! Seeing all these boundaries and all these walls and having things told to me about my body type and my natural stance—‘Why are you dancing it that way?’ ‘What do you mean? I’m as small as I can get!’—all these questions throughout my training, I thought, ‘What if I do it in a way that’s more applicable to myself, to the times, to differences?’ My body type is my body type. I excelled more in the male dances. And I did karate and all that, too. It was an opportunity, as fate would have it, that my male teacher who excels in women’s dances was teaching me when I’m good at male dances.”

These observations of boundaries, boundary-crossings, and the ingenuity of necessity began with and extend to her teacher Fujima Shunjo and the Shubukai school, prompting her to launch Revitalizing Tradition, an annual program in its 14th season this April (with a year skipped for the pandemic).

“If you’re in Japan, you have a professional wigmaker, costume maker, makeup artist, musicians. But I grew up watching him do everything. Traditionally, the teacher does the first and last dance. Here, he does the first and last dance and changes everybody in between. I started helping with the dressing, makeup, wigs, and props—and thought, ‘Good grief, I wish I could just watch my teacher dance for once!’ So I proposed to him, ‘How about we do a program where only you dance, and we have some time to talk about it?”’ For the first program, her teacher performed two dances, one “male” and one “female” (she notes that these performances of gender were invented by men: “The classical dance aesthetics were coming from kabuki, the male ideal of a woman”). After the first year, her teacher invited Lin to dance as well—he would continue to perform female roles, and she would dance male roles—and guests including lecturers, calligraphers, and students could contribute to the program as well: “This year we’re flipping it for the first time—he’s going to dance a male role; I’m going to dance female.”

Lin views the virtual reality edition of Kurokami (scheduled to premiere in summer 2021) and its continuing evolution with a particular focus on the freedoms and constraints of the futuristic medium. Virtual reality, like film, “makes you focus on certain things,” she says. “You are given a sense of freedom, but it’s not really there. You’re forced to perceive and think of [certain] things, even as you might not realize you don’t have a choice. I think it’s a good example of the model of life. One of our hashtags is #choosetheyrealreality. It’s a revealing perspective for an Asian American choreographer bridging centuries of tradition with emerging technology in a lifetime of navigating choice and fate. “How you live your life appears in your dance.”

@IreneCHsiao
The Convent of Pleasure, written by Cavendish and published in 1668, as the first in their new reading series, For Your (Re)Consideration, which explores the works of historically overlooked female playwrights.

Cavendish’s play is the first of what will be weekly Sunday readings broadcast through May 2, and all performances will be available for streaming on-demand through May 9. In addition to being an overlooked, female-written script, The Convent of Pleasure, as Ghostlight emphasizes, is a queer, nonbinary narrative, too; Lady Happy falls in love with a woman, a princess who arrives at the convent and who inexplicably becomes a prince at the end of the play.

“We’re gathering together as a community to tell some really important and impactful stories and celebrate the narratives of the unheard and overlooked throughout history,” says Andrew Coopman, a Seattle-based storytelling interdisciplinary artist, who directed The Convent of Pleasure for Ghostlight. “The sharing of this piece wasn’t about the performance, it was about the sharing and celebration of this narrative that had been overlooked.”

The Convent of Pleasure was never performed during Cavendish’s lifetime (she died in 1673), meaning that—even for the play’s author—the play wasn’t exactly about performance, so much as it was about the opportunity to gather together and discuss the various sexy and heady themes Cavendish explores: marriage, sexuality, power, performance, and more. It was originally written by Cavendish as a closet drama, the formatting of which translated perfectly to the Zoom platform.

“Translating Convent of Pleasure to online performance was really centered in this idea of: how do we make it campy and fun?” Coopman says. “As a closet drama, it was about a group of Margaret Cavendish’s closest friends gathering in the parlor, probably with some sherry, and reading this play together, and having a good time doing it. And so for us it was like, ‘Well, let’s just gather online and get campy and get creative and tell this story.’”

Coopman says the campy approach they took to the script allowed for more heartfelt conversations around the play’s subject matter amongst the cast. Cavendish published this play under her own name—a rarity for the time—but as much as it’s groundbreaking for its authorship and subject matter, it is not without its problematic aspects, Coopman says.

“This beautiful romance comedy about two women falling in love is suddenly overtaken by Margaret’s husband in the fourth act for no explicit reason,” Coopman explains. Two sections of the play are denoted as “Written by My Lord Duke.”

“Maybe he was embarrassed by this love story that his wife wrote, who knows?” Coopman says. “Maybe Margaret was experiencing real questions about her gender identity. I think that’s where the idea of queer identity not being a revolutionary idea of the 1980s and the rise of the AIDS epidemic comes in. Queer humans have been here throughout history. We’ve always been here, we’ve always been queer, and it’s time for our stories to get told.”

“I’m immensely collaborative in my work,” Coopman says. “I consider myself a very collaborative director that welcomes the creativity of all the artists to the table, and [what resulted] was the manifestation of creativity and conversation about this play from 1668, centered in the goal of having fun.”

Ghostlight Ensemble member Holly Robison curated the (Re)Consideration series after initially having the idea a few years ago, which is when she first came across The Enchantment by Victoria Benedictsson, who was said to be an inspiration for the much-lauded Henrik Ibsen’s Hedda Gabler, as well as August Strindberg’s Miss Julie. As a performer and burgeoning director, Robison says she was inspired to seek out more female playwrights and scripts by women that would inevitably include varied and dynamic female roles, rather than just one great female character of a man’s creation.

“In my research, I came across this description of Victoria Benedictsson as a contemporary of Ibsen and Strindberg, and [Ibsen and Strindberg] are produced consistently and constantly and over and over again,” Robison says. “I thought, ‘Why have I heard of so many productions of these plays, but I’ve never heard of this woman?’”

Robison is directing Clare Bayley’s adaptation of The Enchantment for Ghostlight on May 2.

As a whole, the (Re)Consideration series is about challenging the idea that anything outside the heteronormative, white male creative realm is in any way “revolutionary” or a product of recent culture.

“It’s not that they weren’t there, but they were either marginalized or they weren’t cultivated the way the mainstream gatekeepers cultivated [male playwrights],” Robison says. “It’s not just, ‘Well those are clearly masterpieces, I’m not going to argue that [male-produced] works aren’t masterpieces, but also who [else] didn’t get the cultivation? When you’re a playwright, you’re writing a play that you’re handing off to an ecosystem to create and develop, and if that doesn’t happen, your skill and your talent will not get cultivated.”

Women, people of color, and queer humans have been writing and creating since the dawn of time. And their work has always been revolutionary in its own way, even if the celebration of such is some 300 years delayed.

Holly Robison and Andrew Coopman by Burrough, Adam Fontana

By Kaylen Ralph

A group of unmarried women decide to encloister together on an idyllic estate inherited by their ringleader, Lady Happy. No men are allowed on the premises at any time. The women’s chambers are lush and seasonally thematic. There are fresh flowers everywhere and the wine never stops flowing. Only the choicest cuts of meat are served. Every room has the perfect selfie mirror. And again—no men allowed.

What sounds like an amalgamation of a modern-day women’s communal utopia, the campiest and most luxurious you can imagine, was actually the brainchild of Margaret Cavendish, a 17th-century author and philosopher. Which means that for more than three centuries, women have been in pursuit of pleasure unadulterated by men, however “modern” that idea might seem now.

On April 4, Ghostlight Ensemble broadcast The Enchantment for Ghostlight on May 2, and all performances will be available for streaming on-demand through May 9. In addition to being an overlooked, female-written script, The Convent of Pleasure, as Ghostlight emphasizes, is a queer, nonbinary narrative, too; Lady Happy falls in love with a woman, a princess who arrives at the convent and who inexplicably becomes a prince at the end of the play.

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Ben Joravsky’s Greatest Hits is a collection of profiles and features hand-picked by Ben from his 40 years of writing for the Reader. Each article offers a distinctive portrait of an activist, politician, writer, or sports personality who has left an indelible imprint on Chicago.

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Now playing: a return to the movies

After several pandemic pivots and herd immunity on the horizon, local movie theaters and film programs are returning to business not-quite-as-usual.

By Kathleen Sachs

This time last year, the film-loving farceur behind the Music Box Theatre’s beloved Twitter account—now restored to its former glory after a bogus several-week suspension due to supposed copyright infringement—replied to a tweet from a film fan in a conversation about Christopher Nolan: “Keep your fingers crossed that this is all over in time for TENET in July!”

July came around, the pandemic was very much not over, and the response to Tenet, which Warner Brothers released to theaters despite hesitancy among exhibitors and audiences alike, was lukewarm in all respects. Moviegoers were wary about the prospect, and, if they did journey out to see it, were largely disappointed by what they found: a film that was too loud, too confusing, and, perhaps most frustratingly, was being viewed in an atmosphere devoid of the usual joviality that surrounds such summer behemoths, good or bad.

Now, more than a full year after the initial lockdown, amidst the rollout of a vaccine few thought would have arrived so soon, audiences are returning to theaters in double-masked, socially-distanced droves for the spectacle that is Adam Wingard’s Godzilla vs. Kong—the keyword here being spectacle. Catching up recently with the Music Box Theatre’s general manager, Ryan Oestreich, he confessed that seeing the two titans of cinema battle it out was the big-screen display he’d hoped Tenet would be, so much so that it caused a distinct emotional response. “I . . . might have teared up a little bit,” he says. Later, he elaborated, “No matter if you love arthouse films or specific genres of movies, whatever it is that you love, there’s something that pulls you to the cinema.”

The Music Box is one of several local theaters, film festivals, and organizations dedicated to cinema that have felt the strain of the past year but are nevertheless hopeful about the future. In conversations with managers, programmers, and theater workers around the city (most of whom, full disclosure, I know from my own tenure in the Chicago film community), a few consistent themes emerged, the most prevalent being optimism, tenacity, and a yearning to finally be back at the movies while looking to apply lessons gleaned during the pandemic. The Music Box, specifically, has been one of the less-commercial venues pioneering the in-person experience; they reopened for the first time in July (just in time for Tenet), closed again in November, reopened again in February, and recently expanded their showtimes to seven days a week in late March.

This progress comes after a hellish year for exhibitors who rely on in-person screenings for most or all of their revenue. “Sadly we lost hundreds of thousands of dollars,” says Oestreich. “We had to let go of veteran staff who know the business, who know the job.” With the extended showtimes and the possibility of expanding their capacity in coming weeks or months, he says they’ll first look to hire back workers they let go, though it’s possible some will have moved on to other jobs. This is another theme among exhibitors—the first right of refusal for previously existing and even new positions being reserved for staff who had been laid off.

After Godzilla vs. Kong, the Music Box will present, in addition to their ongoing virtual cinema, a week of Oscar contenders, the much-lauded “pig movie” Gunda, a series of heist films, and, in early May, they’ll reopen their garden for movies on the patio seven nights a week. Horror fans can look forward to a “Halfoween” drive-in event with Creepy Co. at the end of April and the beginning of May, and the annual Music Box of Horrors is already planned.

Another way the Music Box has made up for lost revenue is through theater rentals, a tactic being employed by various players across the city, ranging from neighborhood theaters, like the New 400 Theater and the Davis Theater, to sprawling multiplexes, with theater chains such as AMC (whose Navy Pier IMAX location, however, has closed permanently) and Showplace ICON offering new and older releases for private screenings at some locations alongside truncated showtimes open to the public. Showplace ICON is even offering audiences the chance to rent out theaters to play video games; meanwhile locations for another prominent chain, Regal Cinemas, have remained closed indefinitely. Some theaters are operating exclusively in the rental space, like the New 400 and the Harper Theater, whose event planner, Brittany Low-Lipsey, remarked that the dearth of new releases is partly the reason for that. “Once Hollywood opens completely and starts sending movies to theaters, then we will open to the public,” she says. “At the moment, the private theater rental is working better for us.”

Facets is another local theater dabbling in virtual releases and private rentals. Long-time programmer Charles Coleman said the theater is planning a “ramped-up reopening” beginning in late June, when the Facets Film Camps will also return using a hybrid model. In order to keep audiences safe, and despite their revenue decreasing by 35 percent, they’ve invested in “ventilation upgrades and will implement reserved spaced-out seating along with mask guidelines and increased cleanings,” Coleman says, echoing the precautions being taken by other theaters. Some upgrades, however, are a little more fun: “We have given our public first floor spaces a facelift,” he says, “creating hangout spaces for cinema lovers with an expanded snack and coffee menu.”

While other theaters have already or anticipate opening at reduced capacities, the Gene Siskel Film Center says they won’t—they can’t, really—open until they’re able to do so at full capacity. “We can’t make payroll and everything if we’re not at 100 percent,” says executive director Jean de St. Aubin. “We can’t cover all of our expenses.” The Film Center had been thinking about late July as a potential opening date but are reconsidering that—as many theaters likely are—as COVID-19 cases rise amidst the dreaded fourth wave. Still, she says that much of what they’ve learned this past year will continue even as the theater reopens, specifically referencing their virtual cinema, the Screen to Screen conversations, and their robust lecture series, which has brought such luminaries as critics Jonathan Rosenbaum and Ann Hornaday, programmer Sergio Mims, and filmmakers John Sayles and Jennifer Reeder to audiences across the country in the comfort and safety of their homes.

During this time, partly because of the shutdown but mostly due to the events of last summer, many theaters and institutions are reevaluating the diversity of both their organizational structures and their programming. “One of the other silver linings of this year, this pause, is really looking at our program-
ming, and our staff, and our board, and the cultural makeup of the city, and of us,” says de St. Aubin. “And our staff does not reflect our diverse programming or the cultural makeup of the city. One of our priorities as we start rehiring is really making sure that we’re inclusive and that we’re diverse. That’s really a top priority.”

There’s a lot to look forward to when the Film Center reopens, though it may be a slow rollout, with events geared toward members and donors to thank them for their support during this time. That will also allow for the theater’s staff, returning and new, to become reacquainted with the ins and outs of running a movie theater, especially during what we all hope will be the tail end of a global pandemic. In some ways, “it’s like opening a movie theater for the first time,” says the Film Center’s programming director, Rebecca Fons, who did just that when she rehabilitated an old theater in her hometown. It’s an apt metaphor for theater workers and moviegoers alike, for whom a return to cinemas may feel like the first time, so physically and mentally unfamiliar that the experience seems as people adjust to the world post-COVID. It will, of course, be worth it: the Siskel, for example, is already planning what they’ll show when they’re fully reopened, including retrospectives and events such as their annual Black Harvest Film Festival, which both de St. Aubin and Fons are confident will be in-person, though there will still be a virtual component, as it allows for the filmmakers involved to receive even more exposure.

Conversations at the Edge (CATE), a program of the Department of Film, Video, New Media, and Animation at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, which takes place at the Film Center, will also embrace a hybrid model in the fall, with micro-cinemas such as the Nightingale Cinema and filmmaker having ceased in-person screenings indefinitely. In addition to being a cinema, the Nightingale is also a residence currently occupied by three people. Its director, Emily Eddy, says that “it would feel complicated and a bit scary to invite the public into our living space,” a dilemma faced by many DIY venues where community members also live. The organizers behind filmmaker, Malia Haines-Stewart and Alan Medina, who also run the bookshop Inga in the space, face similar conundrums but have embraced the respite during this era of tumultuousness. “[We’ve] given ourselves permission to take time off and let the project and ourselves rest during this transitional time,” says Haines-Stewart. “Since we’re not part of a larger organization or a ticket-selling/profit model, there isn’t necessarily the same urgency to reopen. In some ways we’re in a more flexible position, but also without the structure, there’s less support in a challenging time.” Both venues plan to pursue outdoor screenings going into the summer.

One of the biggest pandemic pivots has been whole film festivals transitioning from in-person events to online, often with a few drive-in screenings to supplement the digital offerings. This was the case for last year’s Chicago Underground Film Festival, whose next edition, cofounder and artistic director Bryan Wendorf tells me, is on hold until they’re able to be back in theaters at full capacity. This year’s Chicago Latino Film Festival also has a drive-in component, though it’s otherwise entirely online. The festival’s founder, Pepe Vargas, plans to continue with the virtual screenings, even as they’ll “be at the theaters most definitely” this time next year. Also in progress right now is the Asian Pop-Up Cinema, a festival-like film series that transitioned online with select screenings at the drive-in, including upcoming shows of Minari, a nominee for Best Picture at this year’s Oscars. Coming up in early summer, the Onion City Experimental Film and Video Festival will take place online with some outdoor screenings and installations accessible outside from a distance.

Mimi Plauché, artistic director of the Chicago International Film Festival, says, “Right now we’re preparing to be ready for both in-person and online” for their annual fall event. Though they still have some months ahead of them before this year’s edition of the festival, Plauché says she and her team are assessing how it went last year and looking to apply those insights to this year. “There were some really nice outcomes from last year, despite the circumstances,” she says.

“The past year . . . has given us the opportunity to evaluate who we are, how we do what we do, and how we can do it better. As many challenges as it presented, I think there’s also the possibility of continuing to have positive outcomes, that once we get through it, it will further be able to elevate film as an artistic medium that both changes the way we see the world and brings people together.”

Along those lines, the Chicago Film Society—who, pre-pandemic, showed a variety of films on 16-millimeter, 35-millimeter, and 70-millimeter at Northeastern Illinois University and the Music Box Theatre—has taken this time to focus on a lot of things more tangentially related to film exhibition. They’ve released two issues of a zine, Infuriating Times, and started a projector loan program, which allows people to borrow projectors and films to project at home—there’s currently a two-month wait list. They’ve also gotten a new office space, where they’re storing many of the prints from their collection, and will be collaborating with the Metrograph in New York on a virtual guest program. They have an outdoor screening planned for early July with Comfort Film at Comfort Station, who themselves are planning for three months of open-air programming this summer, including collaborations with Sophia Wong Boccio from Asian Pop-Up Cinema and South Side Projectons, as well as a continuation of their Silent Films and Loud Music series.

Exhibition-wise, Rebecca Hall and Rebecca Lyon from the Chicago Film Society say they’re thinking that they’ll return to in-person screenings in the fall, though that’s subject to change. “We just started working on a plan for a possible fall program that we could implement pretty affordably,” says Lyon, “meaning probably prints from our own collection.” Considering how crucial the communal moviegving experience is to the organization’s ethos, it follows that they’re being especially thoughtful and diligent in how they’ll eventually return to theaters. “It’s really important that when we go back,” says Hall, “it’s doing justice to that part of our mission.”

It’s possible and even likely that some of this will change. It’s much too soon to determine the future of moviegving in Chicago, though there’s no doubt that the outlook is hopeful, as curveyors and audiences of film around the city anticipate watching movies on screens bigger than those we have in our homes, anything from a little-known experimental gem to the excesses of Hollywood, and again with other people—strangers in the darkness but still old friends who many of us are desperate to see again.
Kyra Jones flips the script on sexual assault films

Go to the Body explores healing, justice, and what it actually looks like to protect Black women.

By Noëlle D. Lilley

The year 2021 has already been a whirlwind for Kyra Jones. In the span of just a few months, the 28-year-old Chicagoan has landed her first full-time position as a staff writer for Hulu's Woke, made plans to move to Los Angeles, and released the proof-of-concept trailer for her upcoming feature film, Go to the Body.

“A month ago I couldn’t get any managers or agents or whatever to read my stuff and now they’re blowing me up,” Jones says through laughter over a Zoom call on a Tuesday morning from her home in Uptown.

The Northwestern grad, who is typically known for her comedy work, like her 2019 award-winning webseries about dating in the digital age, The Right Swipe, says her latest project is “a lot darker than the other things that I write.” The film follows Sanaa, a Black female organizer who is sexually assaulted by a fellow activist, and details the aftermath of the event as she tries to move on with her life.

“I’ve always seen such an unrealistic portrayal of the aftermath of sexual assault,” Jones says. “I know people who have survived an assault and don’t cry at all, or cover it up with humor . . . Everyone’s healing looks different.”

Go to the Body is Jones’s directorial debut. The project is a shorter version of what will eventually be Jones’s feature-length film, which she’s currently raising money for. She hopes to shoot in the spring of 2022 and premiere in 2023. The project won The Pitch at the Chicago International Film Festival in October, and the proof-of-concept will be screened with OTV on April 19 as part of “Unpacking Intimacy on Brave Sets,” a discussion with Jones and others about intimacy coordination and hand-to-hand combat on film sets.

The film’s central relationship between Sanaa (Al Kelly) and her fiancé Kendrick (Brian Keys) explores how the effects of sexual violence can reach far beyond the victim. “The survivor isn’t the only one affected,” Jones says. “It’s hard to figure out how best to support the person you love.”

Kendrick is a boxer and pushes Sanaa to fight back, to not let her rapist “get away with it,” as he urges in one scene. In most films about sexual violence, a survivor seeks justice through reporting their assault to law enforcement. Despite experiencing sexual violence at higher rates than other groups of women, Black women are less likely to report a rape or sexual assault. In fact, for every Black woman who reports rape, 15 others do not report according to the American Psychological Association. This can often be out of fear of being stigmatized or not believed. In the case of Sanaa and many other Black women, there’s also a distrust of a criminal justice system that unfairly targets people of color—Sanaa struggles with being responsible for potentially putting another Black man behind bars.

Jones’s film challenges viewers to think about what justice looks like outside of the carceral system, especially when the abuser is someone the survivor is in community with.

“It’s so hard to figure out what to do to hold those people accountable,” Jones says. “If this character does not believe in police and prisons, what are her next steps?”

One route that some survivors may take is through restorative justice, a process that focuses on the rehabilitation of offenders through reconciliation with their victims and the greater community, which may include a meeting between the victim and the abuser with a mediator. Jones herself is a survivor of sexual assault and has spoken publicly about her experience with restorative justice. The original draft of Go to the Body included a restorative justice process that did not make the final cut. Jones plans to have the upcoming OTV screening and others for the proof of concept and eventual feature film to include Q&A and workshops that discuss the themes of the film.

“How can we support Black women survivors in a way that doesn’t further the carceral system?” she says. “What does protecting Black women actually look like?”

The film is dedicated to Oluwatoyin “Toyin” Salau, a 19-year-old Black female activist from Florida who disappeared in June of 2020 shortly after tweeting about being sexually assaulted by a Black man who offered to give her a ride. Salau was later found dead and that same man allegedly confessed to her murder. Salau’s death prompted a wave of conversation online about how Black women and femmes can advocate for justice and liberation for Black people, but still be at risk of violence from the same men whose lives they are protesting for. The phrase “protect Black women” can be seen in hashtags and in real life: on T-shirts, buttons, tote bags.

“The phrase is overused and I don’t know what people mean when they say it anymore,” Jones says. Jones adds that oftentimes when Black women ask for protection, they don’t mean through physical violence. Go to the Body paints this picture well: Kendrick’s physical ability as a boxer may seem like the logical route for Sanaa to take after she is assaulted, but the film explores if this is what she truly needs.

“Protecting Black women doesn’t [always] just mean squad up and get your guns . . . You have to be aware of all the other types of harm,” Jones says. “You know that your homeboy is creepy? Make sure that he’s not hitting on that intoxicated Black woman in the corner.”

Following the #MeToo movement, portrayals of sexual assault have been depicted more frequently in film and media. Most recently, Jones hated Promising Young Woman but loved HBO’s I May Destroy You. Jones is glad to see more nuanced depictions of sexual violence and rape culture, but she still believes that there’s room for improvement: she wants to see more intersectional survivor stories that center women of color. She says putting these stories in the hands of Black women is a step in the right direction, something she hopes Go to the Body can contribute to.

“Sanaa’s story is just sadly way too common,” Jones says with a sigh. “Even if you don’t know about it, everybody loves someone who has been assaulted.”
French Exit

Famous Manhattanite widow Frances Price (Michelle Pfeiffer) has just been told that she’s bank-
rupt. It’s not a surprise—her financial adviser has been warning her for years—she just figured she’d be dead by the time it happened. With nothing else to do, Frances abruptly takes her adult son Malcolm (Lucas Hedges) to a friend’s apartment in Paris, smuggling in their cat Small Frank (Tracy Letts), who’s mutually understood to be the late Franklin Price reincarnated. Resigned to her fate as a cliche-come-to-life, Frances is isolated and unpredictable, hinting that once her cash supply runs out, she’ll go ahead and kill herself. Played by a
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Night in Paradise

The lead of Night in Paradise, Park Tae-goo (Uhm Tae-goo), is a respected member of a mid-level
crime organization who upon the murder of his family
enacts a brutal revenge on a rival organization. Forced
to flee to the relatively remote Jeju island off the coast
of South Korea, Tae-goo is given shelter by a local arms
dealer and his troubled niece Jae-yeon (Jeon Yeo-been).
An uneasy friendship develops between Tae-goo and
Jae-yeon, but as the past intercedes, they’re forced to
come to terms with events they’d both rather forget.
Director Park Hoon-jung creates a well-composed,
contemporary noir despite being just a tad bit overplotted.
Um Tae-goo and Jeon Yeo-been are both captivating
in their sardonic chemistry, while Cha Seung-won, as
the rival mob lieutenant Chief Ma, is delightful in his
bombastic cruelty. Jeju island serves as an ideal location
to emphasize a somber and contemplative beauty inter-
cut with a violent tension lingering under the surface.
The action sequences are both well-choreographed
and somewhat gratuitous in their violence, with the final
third of the film reaching levels of violence that may
bring into question whether viewing the film is in fact an
enjoyable experience. In its resolution however, Night
in Paradise offers an entertaining end, tying up a film
that is sure to please existing Korean action film fans.
—Adam Mullins-Khatiw 127 min. Netflix

Wolfwalkers

The latest from the humble Irish animation
studio Cartoon Saloon (The Secret of Kells, Song of the
Sea, The Breadwinner) is a mesmerizing marvel that
should put them on the map. Based on Celtic folklore,
Wolfwalkers follows a plucky aspiring hunter Robyn
Goodfellowe ( Honor Kneafsey) who moves to a mystical
version of Ireland with her father—who is tasked with
destroying the last remaining wolfpack. But when Robyn
meets Mebh (Eva Whittaker), a member of a tribe that is
rumored to be able to shift into wolves, her perception
of who she is and what her family is trying to eradicate
gets completely upended. Wolfwalkers is an incredibly
charming tale with a huge heart, but it’s in the lush
and kaleidoscopic animation style where it shines the
brightest—and manages to outpace and outshine the
far more resourced animation giants that rival them.
— Cody Corrall 103 min. 4/18-4/21, Music Box
Theatre; Apple TV

Better Days

Chinese student Chen Nian (Zhou Dongyu) falls in love with petty criminal Liu Beishan (Jackson
Yee) after they become prime suspects in the murder of
a school bully, Wei Lai, in Kwok Cheung Tsang’s Better
Days. Chen Nian is a smart student ready for college
with a well-meaning but absent mother. After showing
an act of kindness to a student who commits suicide,
Chen Nian finds herself the victim of bullying from the
popular girls at school, led by the spoiled and vicious
Wei Lai. It’s part romance, part thriller with a meet-cute
fitting of the young adult-genre book it’s adapted from.
It also plainly shows the challenges victims face: when
Chen Nian reports the bullying, it only escalates. Better
Days has quite a few twists as flashbacks tell the truth
of what really happened to Wei Lai. The characters
experience the struggles nearly every teenager has
ever faced, like the pressure to succeed or the many
ways adults fail them. It’s a genre-bending film with an
important message that will connect with those who
are young just as much as those who are no longer. In
Mandarin with English subtitles. —Noëlle D. Lilley
138 min. Through 5/6: Gene Siskel Film Center From
Your Sofa

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138 min. Through 5/6: Gene Siskel Film Center From
Your Sofa

French Exit

Famous Manhattanite widow Frances Price
(Michelle Pfeiffer) has just been told that she’s bank-
rupt. It’s not a surprise—her financial adviser has been
warning her for years—she just figured she’d be dead by
the time it happened. With nothing else to do, Frances
abruptly takes her adult son Malcolm (Lucas Hedges)
to a friend’s apartment in Paris, smuggling in their cat
Small Frank (Tracy Letts), who’s mutually understood
to be the late Franklin Price reincarnated. Resigned
to her fate as a cliche-come-to-life, Frances is isolated
and unpredictable, hinting that once her cash supply
runs out, she’ll go ahead and kill herself. Played by a
delightfully erratic Pfeiffer, Frances carries the dramatic
comedy French Exit alongside a slow-growing cast of
offbeat secondary characters who find themselves tied
up in her and Malcolm’s affairs. (Valerie Mahaffey stands
out as a hauntingly awkward Madame Reynard, a fan of
Frances and fellow widow who brings both humor and
incredible cringe-horror elements to the film.)

At face value, it’s a meandering rich white people
movie, adjacent to being a knock-off Wes Anderson
film with a toned-down aesthetic, but there’s something
about French Exit that feels compelling in an intangible
way. It’s a film that’s hard to read, with its present-day
setting and characters riddled with anachronisms, and
its occasional supernatural moments, but those couple
with a solid cast and score to mold French Exit’s identity.
Patrick deWitt’s screenplay, based on his book of the
same name, contains smart humor and self-aware
characters in no hurry to divulge details or backstories.
It has its own set of rules that the audience never quite
learns, but that just contributes to the antiquated
dreaminess that director Azazel Jacobs fosters in the
film. Accept that you’re living in Frances Price’s reality—
which Pfeiffer makes easy—and French Exit will feel
like a fascinating escape. —Taryn Allen 115 min. AMC
Theatres, Landmark Century Centre Cinema

Monday

At the center of Monday is the evergreen ques-
tion, can love and life coexist harmoniously? Following a
whirlwind weekend, where Mickey (Sebastian Stan) and
Chloe (Denise Gough), two Americans in their mid-30s
living in Athens, meet and quickly bone on a beach,
Monday asks what happens after the hint of happily
ever after. For Chloe, this means giving up a job back
home, and for Mickey, it means navigating how his new
love interest and son will coexist. The pressure seems
exceptionally high, but in reality, it’s pretty run-of-the-
mill. That’s the beauty of Argyris Papadimitropoulos’s
follow-up to Sundance, it’s a movie that accurately reflects
the highs and lows of relationships once the dust of a
flying starts to settle and the work begins. It’s a reality
slap caught on camera that makes Mickey and Chloe’s
relationship more endearing than any overly romanti-
cized version of the events could. —Becca James 116
min. Glen Art Theatre, IFC VOD
‘It opened my mind to the possibilities of what music could be’

The Jefferson Park EXP concert series brings a wild diversity of sounds to a neighborhood library—and to the Internet.

By Noah Berlatsky

For her livestreamed concert in the Jefferson Park EXP series last December, Chicago experimental musician Kimberly Sutton trained her camera on a pair of lit candles and several speaker cones of various sizes, resting on their backs like bowls and filled with water or sand. As the vibrations from the speakers increased, liquid and sand and flame started to tremble and flicker, forming restless and intricate interference patterns. Eventually the hums and throbs grew intense enough that the water began to bubble and spatter; you could see the sound leaping free of its cages and making a bid for freedom.

Keith Helt, 42, organizer of Jefferson Park EXP, has been coaxing experimental sounds out of their cones in Chicago for more than a decade. The live series has been running since 2017, and it arose from the work of a netlabel called Pan y Rosas Discos that he started in the late 2000s.

Helt grew up in Woodstock, one of the last stops on the Union Pacific Northwest Metra line. Like many a future experimental musician, he got interested in punk music early and started a band with a friend. “Aside from piano lessons, we didn’t know how to play any instruments, but we played what we had,” he says. “A Casio Rapman, some random pieces of metal, buckets, an old record player-receiver combo, cheap electronic toys, and microphones from Kmart.”

Helt moved to Chicago in 1998 to study writing at Columbia College; he also started playing guitar and putting together other bands. The most stable of these was the Rories, which he began as a one-person recording project in the early 2000s. The album *Four in One Combine* collects some of the Rories’ early output, which sounds like bedroom pop punk—if the bedroom in question were a hole in the ground lined with corrugated tin.

Helt put out *Four in One Combine* in 2008,
the same year he properly launched Pan y Rosas Discos as a netlabel. It had started informally a couple years before, but at that point it was little more than a name to put on what he calls “slightly fancy” CD-R releases of his band’s music. Around the time of *Four in One Combine*, he decided CD-Rs were too much trouble and started just releasing Rories tracks as MP3s. It was so easy that he realized he could do the same for his friends.

The first non-Rories release, also in 2008, was an 18-minute live set by Piss Piss Piss Moan Moan Moan, a noise project that included latter-day Rories bandmate Alejandro Morales. Later that year he released a full-length by Black Math, a darkwave punk trio with keyboards and drum machine by Jimmy Lacy, a friend from library school. (Lacy went on to play inPopulation and currently releases music as Sip.)

All Pan y Rosas Discos downloads have always been free. Originally, that was because Helt didn’t see the Rories as a money-making venture. “We all had regular jobs, and our primary goal was to be heard,” he says. “We wanted people to hear our music and maybe come to our shows sometimes. So just making the music available and accessible was paramount.”

Pan y Rosas has no revenue and provides its artists with no compensation—just a curated platform and Helt’s labor. Over time, as the label expanded, its refusal to put a price on its music became a more intentional act. “The act of releasing music for free and in an organized way is resistance to capitalism, however small,” Helt says. The label, he explains, provides “a means for art to exist outside of capitalist systems. I like to think that in some small way it contributes to the development of envisioning new futures.”

As the label’s politics became more radical, so did its output. The Rories were based in rock and punk, but in the late 2000s, Helt began immersing himself in Chicago’s free jazz, improv, and experimental scenes. “I dreamed of being able to release music by these improv musicians I was getting really inspired by,” he says.

The label’s expanded purview includes the 2012 release *String Theory* by Chicago composer, cellist, and electronic musician Sarah J. Ritch. “It has some of my traditional tonal acoustic music compositions,” she says. “And then I also had a couple of my electronic pieces and some electroacoustic hybrids.” The album is a marvelous hodgepodge of Ritch’s interests across classical and improv. “Oftentimes when I try to describe my music, some feedback I’ve gotten is that it’s not focused,” she admits, laughing.

Helt immediately found Ritch’s range and eclecticism exciting, though, and since *String Theory* he’s released several more albums featuring Ritch. Over the past five years or so, the two of them have frequently recorded themselves jamming together, and they’re putting the finishing touches on an edited album of those recordings that they hope to release on Pan y Rosas within the next year.

As the label has evolved, Helt has also developed a commitment to releasing work by women. Many experimental labels, he’s noticed, are very male dominated. “Basically it comes down to, there are lots of women creating music, but because our society’s default is white dude, that is what currently rises up,” he says. “Without taking specific action to counter that inertia, white dude is what will perpetuate itself. It’s not only in experimental music—it’s all music. But experimental music is where I have a platform and where I can try to make a change.” He says he doesn’t have a quota, but he’s aiming for gender parity in the Pan y Rosas catalog.

Lauren Sarah Hayes, a Scottish musician who teaches at the Phoenix campus of Arizona State University, believes that Helt’s concerns about gender bias are well-founded. “There’s still many academic studies that demonstrate gender and also racial bias in the experimental music community and the institutions that support it,” she says. “So I think Keith’s approach is absolutely valid and important.”

Hayes has recorded for Pan y Rosas Discos herself. In 2016 the label released her album *Manipulation*, whose poptronica improvisations feel almost danceable until the floor collapses and synthetic life-forms start to ooze and flop and skitter in. The electronic instrument she uses on *Manipulation* (and in much of her music) is of her own design, but she hasn’t named it. “I’m really interested in the idea from queer theory of not overcategorizing things,” she says. “It’s just my instrument, I guess.”

Helt still puts out music through Pan y Rosas Discos: the label’s 301st album, *Drop Shadow on Airport Runway* by French electronic musician Nicolas Tourney, came out March 15, and a free-jazz release by Argentinian guitarist and sound artist Luciana BASS is in the works. And though Jefferson Park EXP has had to suspend its in-person shows at the Jefferson Park library, it’s continued as a livestream series.
that a handful of older patrons were initially a little taken aback. Staff have tried to be careful to put up signage so people will know that the library is going to be less quiet than usual.

Many patrons have appreciated the chance to hear something different, though, and Dohnalek has too. “For me, the first performers, in March of 2017, were the most memorable, mostly because the music was so different than what I would define as music,” Dohnalek says. “It opened my mind to the possibilities of what music could be, beyond traditional genres like rock, folk, or classical.”

Sarah J. Ritch gave the first performance on March 18, 2017, playing cello and electronics. Helt uploads video of Jefferson Park EXP concerts to Vimeo, and during Ritch’s set you can occasionally hear a child’s exclamation from off-screen. The space, Ritch says, “is surprisingly great for intimate, quiet sounds, and also can handle the louder feedback.” The audience is typically a mix of experimental music fans who’ve come for the performance and people who just happen to be in the library. “You might think that the people who just wandered in would turn around and leave,” Ritch says. “But they always stick around, which is really nice.”

One of Helt’s favorite entries in the series is a 2018 performance by Chicago video artist and poet Shrine, aka Sara Goodman, assisted by fellow Chicago experimental musicians Jim Jam and Alexander Adams. Goodman’s work involves the projection and manipulation of nostalgic video, and it fits with comfortable eeriness into the library space, evoking school slideshows and educational programming from decades past. Grazing deer roam around the screen, but then the gentle nature-special visuals dissolve into drippy rainbow patterns; meanwhile, ambient throbbing and barely audible voices suggest teachers and PBS narrators gathered for a meeting in a distant boiler room.

Jefferson Park EXP hosted in-person concerts roughly once per month until the library closed for renovations in summer 2018, and it had only just resumed in late 2019 when the pandemic shut it down. Its livestreams, which began in July 2020 via Twitch, have been more irregular—sometimes three in one month, sometimes none for two months. Helt has hated losing neighborhood audiences and face-to-face interactions to COVID restrictions, but moving Jefferson Park EXP online has created possibilities and opportunities too. Kimberly Sutton’s speaker-cone installation probably wouldn’t have worked as a library concert, for example; you need to be up close to see the liquid and sand shaking and trembling.

The shift to livestreams has also made it much easier for Helt to invite performers from beyond Chicago. Lauren Sarah Hayes was back in Phoenix after her first live tour when lockdown arrived in March 2020, and she loved the idea of being able to perform for an audience in some form. Her half-hour Jefferson Park EXP concert in November 2020 takes full advantage of the format to create an audio-visual assault. The screen shifts and segments with colors and effects, through which you can sometimes see Hayes speaking into a microphone or manipulating what looks like a video game controller to create power-electronics squalls and blasts of noise. Even further afield, Mariela Arzadun, aka Florconvenas, contributed a performance from Buenos Aires in August. She soundtracked a series of overlapping abstract visuals and nature videos with minimalist electronic patterns evolving into drones—it’s like watching some ominous extradimensional life cycle.

Helt is still working with Chicago artists too, including one of the newer additions to the Pan y Rosas catalog. Helt found self-taught noise musician Helena Ford on Bandcamp and reached out, and her album Wir Brauchen Angst. Und Schade. came out on the label last November—the same month she appeared on a Jefferson Park EXP livestream.

The album’s 13 drone tracks total more than two hours; the longest is more than 15 minutes. The length, Ford says, is a way to “expose to my listeners what it’s like to be going through the process of becoming transgender, or what it’s like being transgender.” Each track is sometimes crystalline and lovely, sometimes hammering and painful, evoking a process that seems to go on forever.

Ford is relatively new to the Chicago experimental scene. She grew up here but didn’t start creating noise music till she was in college at Lawrence University in Wisconsin. She graduated in 2018 and returned to Chicago, and since then she’s self-released most of her music—so when Helt contacted her through Bandcamp about putting out an album, she was thrilled. “It was a huge, huge honor,” she says. “I really felt like I achieved something by releasing something through an established record label.”

“Experimental music is a really diverse space that allows people to break away from the conventions of academic classical music, and really allows people to get involved in their own thing,” Ford continues. “And I think that’s really wonderful.”

The next livestream is Sunday, April 25—a return engagement by Argentinean artist Mariela Arzadun and a set by Chicago multi-instrumentalist Reid Karris. It’s followed on Monday, April 26, by performances from two Chicago acts, indie-pop four-piece Impulsive Hearts and guitarist Cinchel. Helt hopes to restart the library concerts when COVID is controlled. He’s already musing about ways to continue including faraway artists, perhaps by projecting streams for library patrons as well as booking in-person performers. Whether that’s possible or not, Pan y Rosas Discos and Jefferson Park EXP will keep going for the foreseeable future, opening minds and splashing unusual sounds around.
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PICK IT UP UNTIL IT’S GONE!
Better read this if you are 62 or older and still making mortgage payments.

More than 1 million seniors have taken advantage of this “retirement secret.”

It’s a well-known fact that for many older Americans, the home is their single biggest asset, often accounting for more than 45% of their total net worth. And with interest rates near all-time lows while home values are still high, this combination creates the perfect dynamic for getting the most out of your built-up equity.

But, many aren’t taking advantage of this unprecedented period. According to new statistics from the mortgage industry, senior homeowners in the U.S. are now sitting on more than $7.7 trillion* dollars of unused home equity.

Not only are people living longer than ever before, but there is also greater uncertainty in the economy. With home prices back up again, ignoring this “hidden wealth” may prove to be short sighted when looking for the best long-term outcome.

All things considered, it’s not surprising that more than a million homeowners have already used a government-insured Home Equity Conversion Mortgage (HECM) loan to turn their home equity into extra cash for retirement.

It’s a fact: no monthly mortgage payments are required with a government-insured HECM loan; however the borrowers are still responsible for paying the maintenance of their home, property taxes, homeowner’s insurance and, if required, their HOA fees.

Today, HECM loans are simply an effective way for homeowners 62 and older to get the extra cash they need to enjoy retirement.

Although today’s HECM loans have been improved to provide even greater financial protection for homeowners, there are still many misconceptions.

For example, a lot of people mistakenly believe the home must be paid off in full in order to qualify for a HECM loan, which is not the case. In fact, one key advantage of a HECM is that the proceeds will first be used to pay off any existing liens on the property, which frees up cash flow, a huge blessing for seniors living on a fixed income.

Unfortunately, many senior homeowners who might be better off with a HECM loan don’t even bother to get more information because of rumors they’ve heard.

In fact, a recent survey by American Advisors Group (AAG), the nation’s number one HECM lender, found that over 98% of their clients are satisfied with their loans. While these special loans are not for everyone, they can be a real lifesaver for senior homeowners - especially in times like these.

The cash from a HECM loan can be used for almost any purpose. Other common uses include making home improvements, paying off medical bills or helping other family members. Some people simply need the extra cash for everyday expenses while others are now using it as a safety net for financial emergencies.

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Reverse mortgage loan terms include occupying the home as your primary residence, maintaining the home, paying property taxes and homeowners insurance. Although these costs may be substantial, AAG does not establish an escrow account for these payments. However, a set-aside account can be set up for taxes and insurance, and in some cases may be required. Not all interest on a reverse mortgage is tax-deductible and to the extent that it is, such deduction is not available until the loan is partially or fully repaid.

AAG charges an origination fee, mortgage insurance premium (where required by HUD), closing costs and servicing fees, rolled into the balance of the loan. AAG charges interest on the balance, which grows over time. When the last borrower or eligible non-borrowing spouse dies, sells the home, permanently moves out, or fails to comply with the loan terms, the loan becomes due and payable (and the property may become subject to foreclosure). When this happens, some or all of the equity in the property no longer belongs to the borrowers, who may need to sell the home or otherwise repay the loan balance. V2020.12.22

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Annie Saunders, veterinarian and founder of Punk House Chicago

“The focus is not as much on the bands as it is on communal life and the weird things you get up to when you’re making minimum wage and you’re bored.”

As told to Jamie Ludwig

Annie Saunders, 46, grew up in the Chicago area, and as a teenager she moved into a punk house and began putting on shows. These days, she works as a veterinarian in Wisconsin and sings and plays bass in Chicago-based punk and power-pop band Time Thieves. Inspired by the Instagram page @punkhouseoakland, Saunders launched @punkhousechicago last month to document the city’s punk houses past and present. She’s accepting photo submissions at punkhousechicago@gmail.com.

I grew up in Bensenville, just outside of Chicago, and when I was about 14 I was introduced to punk rock. It started mostly with well-known bands like the Misfits and the Sex Pistols, but when I was 15 I went to a local DIY show and my whole world exploded. I spent a lot of time as a teenager at McGregor’s, the Fireside Bowl, and tons of house shows.

After I graduated high school, I moved into a house called the Haven House in Elmhurst, where my friends and I started putting on shows. Los Crudos played there; the Mushuganas played there. Maximum Rocknroll used to put out this yearly magazine called Book Your Own Fuckin’ Life. If you put on shows, you could send in your information, so we started getting bands from as far away as Georgia and Canada too.

I moved to Chicago in ’97, and a year later my friends and I moved into this space over a bar in Rogers Park. That turned into the Community Shower Loft, and it was even more expansive as far as the bands coming through—there was even a band from Italy that stayed with us.

The whole concept of a punk house, at least to me, is that you could live with your friends for cheap while you learn how to navigate the world. It creates a tight-knit community that might be lacking elsewhere. That’s what’s reflected on Punk House Chicago. The focus is not as much on the bands as it is on communal life and the weird things you get up to when you’re making minimum wage and you’re bored.

I’m still friends with the friends I made when I was 15. We’re all still playing music, and it’s just amazing. I also learned a lot from the people that came through, which helped shape my values and ethics and teach me a lot of new ideas, politically and socially. I don’t think I’d be the person I am today if I hadn’t lived in those two houses.

It sounds cliche to say “Punk made me a better person,” but it did. Our place was so small and intimate that we were able to provide a really safe space. We didn’t tolerate sexual harassment, and because kids as young as 14 and 15 would come out, we had to make sure they were safe and not threatened by anything.

Punk also instilled me with a mad respect for animals. At 22 or 23 I was going to UIC for labor history (specifically Chicago labor history from the 1880s). The school made a really horrible administrative error that caused me to have to drop out for a semester. I quickly found a job at a doggy day care, and I fell in love with it. Then a job opened at Higgins Animal Clinic, where they trained me on the spot to be a vet assistant. I took off running and never really looked back.

I now live in Wisconsin, where I work as a shelter veterinarian at a Humane Society. I feel like it’s an extension of my punk rock sensibilities to care for animals. It’s also given me a lot of empathy.

I’ve played in Time Thieves for exactly three years this month. Before Wisconsin, I spent two years in Washington, but I’d save up any expendable income to come back to Chicago every six months or so to record or play shows for a weekend.

Before the pandemic hit, my whole social structure was built around the music scene and the friends I’ve made through music. Having that taken away so suddenly was a struggle. One day I stumbled across Punk House Oakland, which is run by Elizabeth Whitney. I lived in the Bay Area for about a decade, and I noticed a lot of familiar faces on the page. The more she posted, the more it sprouted these great memories. I realized I had this whole shoebox of pictures sitting around, so I wrote her and asked if she’d be OK if I started a page for Chicago. She got really excited and gave it her blessing.

It’s still early, but I’m starting to get photo submissions from other people, and that’s really my goal. It’s not about reliving the old days; it’s about celebrating how amazing Chicago is, and how close-knit and intertwined the DIY scene is from the north side to the south side. That’s a really important thing, especially when we’re all feeling so isolated.

Had the pandemic not happened, I probably wouldn’t have launched this. It’s a way to connect while we can’t be together in person, and it’s been nothing but positive so far. Even if someone hasn’t been directly involved in a punk rock house, they can see the human connections—even if the people have spiky green hair and studded jackets.

It’s about the sense of community and what we’re bonded by, which for most of us was local punk music. Though it’s called Punk House Chicago, it isn’t limited to just the houses that we lived in. I’ve got a few pictures from the Mutiny and the Fireside and other small venues too. To me, they’re just as important as photos of people dressing up in their living room on a Monday for no reason.

Most of the photos so far are from the mid-90s through the early 00s, but that’s just one tiny slice of a much larger deep dish pizza. There were plenty of punk houses in the early 80s. And there are plenty now. There’s no time limit on these photos—punk is punk. If people feel inclined to share, I’m honored to be involved. If anybody wants their photo down, there’s no questions asked or explanation necessary.

Even though I don’t physically live in Chicago right now, I still feel as much a part of the community as I did as a teenager. I hope that someday soon we can play live music with our friends again, but I don’t see the page ending in the near future. Along with Punk House Chicago, there’s now Punk House Philly, Punk House Reno, and pages from all these other cities. I feel like we owe it all to Elizabeth, and it’s been exciting to watch it grow—it’s like one big punk house.
Chicago-born shoegaze group Fauvely roll back the distortion on Beautiful Places

FAUVELY, BEAUTIFUL PLACES
Self-released
fauvely.bandcamp.com/album/beautiful-places

Fauvely FRONT WOMAN SOPHIE BROCHU has built a creative life working with the warm, distorted tones of shoegaze; for much of the 2010s, she explored the style's indie-pop possibilities in Chicago five-piece Videotape, and she's helped push amps to their breaking points as part of the live lineup for Scott Cortez's wall-of-sound project Astrobrite. Brochu launched Fauvely as a solo outlet in 2017, but she's since turned it into a full-fledged band with the addition of guitarist-keyboardist Dale Price, drummer Dave Piscotti, and bassist Phil Conklin. The musicians recorded their new self-released debut full-length, Beautiful Places, last summer at Jamdek, and as they recently told Chicago Crowd Surfer, that fall Brochu and her husband relocated to her hometown of Savannah, Georgia, because the pandemic had crushed their plans to open a restaurant in Chicago. The couple's move is temporary, though, and the band plan to stay together till they return. On Beautiful Places, Fauvely recall the romance of classic doo-wop and the relaxed confidence of slacker college rock—Brochu and company tamp down the saturating shoegaze atmospherics till there's only just enough gauzy majesty to tease out every song's dreamy potential. On “Haunts Me,” they begin with a drifting melody that sounds like it could dissolve at a moment's notice, then transform it into a headstrong ballad, helped along by Brochu's performance—she intensifies her tender voice to deliver steely, serrated lines, singing about lingering hardships from her past with a resolve that suggests she's on a better path now. —LEOR GALIL

PICK OF THE WEEK

ANDREW CS, *
Leaving
andrewcs.bandcamp.com/album/-3

Multidisciplinary artist Andrew CS moved to Chicago from Rockford, Illinois, in the mid-2010s to study interaction design at Columbia College, and then began booking intimate Sunday DIY shows—but long before either of those things happened, he'd developed an interest in field recordings by playing indie video games. "The first mode of creation that I got into was game development—specifically indie game development," Andrew told Darwin Grosse in a 2019 interview for the podcast Art + Music + Technology. "I figured just to do that, I need to figure out how to code." He started coding in middle school, and during his freshman year in high school he asked his parents for a Zone so he could make his own field recordings. Fast-forward to 2019, and his growing catalog of ambient electronic music had helped land him a deal with Leaving Records, an experimental label run by producer Matthew “Mathewdavid” McQueen. Andrew's newest release for Leaving, an EP that bears the minimalist title *, mixes digital reveries with naturalistic atmospheres, sometimes by turns and sometimes alongside each other. The phalanx of bird-calls that swirls through "Fallen Log Bridge Island" feeds directly into the overheated fanlike whirr of "Fusebox Photograph," illuminating how these subtle sounds color our daily lives. On "Dead Leaves / Morgan Brown," Andrew combines gentle, yawning synth tones with what might be a recording of dry leaves crunching or burning, in the process building the kind of immersive sound world that can carry you away from mundane daily tasks. This past year I've had trouble making time to explore nearby forest preserves, but Andrew's work reminds me that the solitude I've hoped to find in the woods is always within reach. —LEOR GALIL

BIG|BRAVE, VITAL
Southern Lord
bigbravesl.bandcamp.com/album/vital

Quebec trio Big|Brave have always been great at drawing things out. Most of their songs pass the ten-minute mark, and they've made a hallmark of deftly adding heady layers of emotion to minimal, glacial drone rock. On the brand-new Vital (Southern Lord), though, the band lean further into doom metal—and this dramatically less minimal sound works astounding well for them. The elements that make Big|Brave so beautiful and special— the folkly flourishes, the incredible dynamic range, the lofty, gut-wrenching vocals of guitarist and front woman Robin Wattie—but they coexist with a new focus on crushing volume, walls of guitar, and sludgy drums. With the trio's slamming rhythm section relentlessly hammering the depth and majesty of the songs into your skull, assisted by blistering but pristine production from Seth Manchester, Vital is the best Big|Brave album to date. It's heavy, uncompromising, and powerful, and it elevates an already excellent band to a new level of greatness. Though the year is still young, Vital will be a hard record to top in 2021. —LUCA CIMARUSTI
BONGZILLA, WEEDSCONSIN
Heavy Psych Sounds
heavypsychsoundrecords.bandcamp.com/album/bongzilla-weedscconsin

It’s hard to believe it’s been 16 years since Madison stoner giants Bongzilla dropped a studio album—surely at least a few people rocking out to their brand-new Weedscconsin LP were in diapers back then. The band, formed as one of a four-piece in 1995, had a lengthy run as one of the Midwest’s finest purveyors of slow, sludgy metal before going on hiatus in 2009. They reemerged as a trio in 2015 and have put out a few compilations and a self-titled box set of their previous albums—but Weedscconsin is their first new recording since then. The album is dedicated to sound engineer John Hopkins, who worked with Sleep, the Melvins, High on Fire, Neurosis, Boris, and many other heavy bands; he passed away in November 2020, a month after recording and mixing Weedscconsin. I imagine its title may be a response to the fact that the Badger State has yet to join neighboring Illinois and Michigan in allowing residents to purchase and enjoy the sweet leaf legally, but no matter the inspiration, Bongzilla have put out a few compilations and a self-titled brand-new album that’s sure to knock down Bongzilla! —MONICA KENDRICK

GUSTAVO CORTIÑAS, DESAFÍO CANDENTE
Woolgathering
gustavocortinasmusic.com/discography/desafio-candente

The third release by Gustavo Cortiñas, Desafío Candente (“Incandescent defiance”), is an epic set of jazz and spoken word inspired by Las Venas Abiertas de Latinoamérica (“The Open Veins of Latin America”), an iconic series of historical essays by Uruguayan author and poet Eduardo Galeano. The Chicago-based drummer and composer invited more than 30 musicians and speakers from 11 countries to appear on the recording, in addition to his usual sextet: double bassist Kitt Lyles, pianist Joaquín García, reedist Artie Black, trumpeter Drew Hansen, trombonist Evan Edmonds, and guitarist Matt Gold. The 14 tracks on Desafío Candidente address milestones in the sprawling unfolding of forces that have shaped Latin America—colonialism, slavery, imperialism, neoliberalism, and revolution. The tracks are presented as chapters; each opens with an incisive spoken-word segment in Spanish, Trotzil, or Nahuatl (subtitled in English in the accompanying videos), then segues into cinematic, muscular music that invites reflection. The ensemble’s rhythms provide rich accompaniment for the spoken word, and on most tracks the horns add their voices to the instrumental narratives. “VII. Combustible Humano” (“Human Fuel”) begins with words about the first enslaved persons from Africa to arrive in Brazil, and then ambling, horn-laced Brazilian rhythms build dramatically to a violent, explosive finale. “X. Los Caudillos Campesinos” (“The Peasant Leaders”) riffs on Galeano’s text and the words of Chiapas insurgent leader Subcomandante Marcos, with horns issuing laments within a riveting track that seems driven by the anger arising from the economic and social frustrations of Latin American revolutionaries. “Ill. Pachacuti / The World Upside Down” builds on a Nahuatl account of the last days of the Aztec empire, starting with an ominous military march interspersed with notes that evoke an orchestra tuning up in preparation for a performance. The horns then layer into a chaotic, mournful finale, heralding bloodshed and the destruction of ancient regional cultures and civilizations by European colonizers and their armies. Despite Desafío Candente’s despairing explorations of the tragedies throughout our history, the album left me with a sense of triumph—it ultimately feels like a celebration of the many cultures and peoples who came together, survived against all odds, and continue to create beauty today. The closing piece, “XIV. Un Mundo en que Quepan Muchos Mundos” (“A World in Which Many Worlds Fit”), is a lush soundscape that creates the impression of stepping into a primordial jungle. Rife with elements of jazz and sounds from nature (including what seem to be frog croaks), it summons visions of new beginnings and possibilities ahead. —CATALINA MARIA JOHNSON

DAMON LOCKS & BLACK MONUMENT ENSEMBLE, NOW
International Anthem
intlanthem.bandcamp.com/album/now

Flipping through television channels. Flicking through radio stations. They’re quotidian actions—until they’re not. When you’ve lived through a year like 2020, every frequency delivers the same nightmare from a different angle. On Now (International Anthem), Chicago sound collagist Damon Locks and his Black Monument Ensemble confidently grasp the tuning dial of history. Like 2019’s Where Future Unfolds, the new album blends Locks’s archival samples with the talents of a generous and bountiful collective of musicians and singers—and it somehow packs an even greater wallop than its predecessor. Now was recorded in two sessions at Experimental Sound Studio as summer 2020 turned to fall, and the samples used throughout the record suggest similar dualities—reunited but isolated, healing but hurting. They include an interview with a wrongly convicted Black man, a sound bite of an extinguished community organizer, and an audio snippet from the 1969 made-for-TV movie J.T., a bittersweet tale of how a Harlem boy’s decisions are circumscribed by poverty. The blooming theme of the harp-dusted title track flows effortlessly into a soulful “duet” between the Black Monument Ensemble’s vocalists and the keening choir of cicadas that surround ESS’s back patio during the group’s outdoor recording session; the insects’ song stamps the track with a seasonal watermark, but its spirit transcends temporality. (“That was a forever momentary space,” clarinetist Angel Bat Dawid declares at the end of the recording.) Later on, the psychedelically grooving “Keep Your Mind Free” exhorts audiences to do just that, despite physical and systemic constraints. Exuberant, clarinet-streaked album closer “The Body Is Electric” urges us to “Listen close to the stories told / Behind us is a crowded street.” As the talk-show sample leading into that track muses, “If you know ‘now’ fully, it’s past, present, and future.” On Now the past, present, and future all wail in concord, and the louder they roar, the more people will listen. —HANNAH EDGAR

D2X, THE COLOR BLUE
Self-released
dzxmusic.bandcamp.com/album/the-color-blue

Chicago rapper D2x has poured all 23 years of his life so far into his debut album, The Color Blue. Across its 13 tracks, he delivers lines about his childhood in the south suburbs, his time playing basketball as a student at Western Illinois University, his struggles with depression, his faith in God, his...
continued from 39

recent marriage—and his desire to make a classic album that sums it all up. D2x began releasing music in 2017, and since then he’s stood out with a cohesive combination of soulful beats and focused verses. Rapping about making an iconic rap record, as he does on 2019’s “Go” (“My tape gon’ rock, gonna sell out in stores,” he boasts), may seem absurd, but he’s taking part in a long-standing hip-hop tradition. The likes of the Notorious B.I.G. (“Juicy”), Rich Gang (“Lifestyle”), and Lil Tecca (“Ransom”) have all attempted to conjure reality from speech—as if rapping about success could bring it their way.

On The Color Blue, D2x presents a charming everyman persona, taking more than a few cues from Kanye West’s 2004 debut, The College Dropout. D2x maintains a similar focus on major-key samples and thumping drums, and when he raps about daydreaming on the clock on “Day Job,” he recalls Kanye’s verses about the frustrations of working a nine-to-five. “My tapon’ rock,” he rhymes, “gona sell out in stores.”

The Color Blue largely sidesteps the trappings of contemporary rap hits (Auto-Tuned vocals, triplet flows, morose attitudes) in favor of densely packed rhymes, live instrumentation, and frequent references to D2x’s Christianity. But he includes modern sounds too—the electric piano and drum patterns on “It Was Written” recall Kanye’s verses about the frustrations of working a nine-to-five. “My tap on’ rock,” he rhymes, “gona sell out in stores.”

On the closing track “Spaceship,” he artfully drags his voice across a sun-drenched soul instrumental in a performance for “Ashland,” he artfully drags his voice across a

F.A.B.L.E., DUCKWEED (A HERMIT’S ODYSSEY)

Storybook

First year Englewood rapper, multi-instrumentalist, and studio engineer Christopher Horace, aka F.A.B.L.E., grew frustrated with his lack of progress on an ambitious full-length and released the EP (IX) The Hermit as a stopgap, throwing it together in an effort to break his creative blocks. The EP’s seven impressively joyful songs have become some of my most cherished music over the past 12 months, so my expectations were high when I heard that Horace was finally about to drop the album he’d been working on when he made them. The new Duckweed (A Hermit’s Odyssey), released on his Storybook Records label, doesn’t disappoint.

Horace sounds as comfortable on the mike as he does juggling different instrumental styles; on “The Pond” he half-sings his verses atop an acoustic guitar, and on “Sum Bout God” he squeezes his words into crowded lines that almost overlap. On the hook for “Ashland,” he artfully drags his voice across a sun-drenched soul instrumental in a performance so impeccable that any Chicago hip-hop playlist is incomplete without it. Duckweed puts Horace in a league with some of the great local MCs who’ve helped enrich hip-hop on an international level, and with any luck he’ll soon be recognized as one of Chicago’s strongest new voices. —JACK RIEDY

NATURAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WITH EVAN PARKER, DESCENSION (OUT OF OUR CONSTRUCTIONS)

Eremite

While it’s impossible to pinpoint a single peak in John Coltrane’s vast discography, Ascension is one of his most intense expressions of transcendental intent. Local musician Joshua Abrams knows his Coltrane, so it’s no accident that he’s given the name Descension to this summit between his group, Natural Information Society and English saxophonist (and fellow Coltrane aficionado) Evan Parker, recorded in 2019 at London’s Cafe Oto. The title of the 75-minute piece suggests downward movement, but the recording proves just as effective as Coltrane’s music at inducing an ecstatic state—even though it incorporates influences that never showed up in the master’s work. Abrams is a multi-instrumentalist who has worked as a jazz and pop bassist, a free improviser, a DJ, and a soundtrack composer, and he understands the importance of bringing the right tool to the job. With NIS, he plays the guimbri, a Moroccan three-string lute that’s often used in prayer and healing ceremonies by the Gnawa (an ethnic group descended from an enslaved population brought to Morocco from the Sahel). Abrams is fully cognizant of the instrument’s spiritual role in traditional contexts, but he’s also characterized it as “the original 808” because of its visceral bass tones. The大厅ling rhythms that he and drummer Mikkel Avery lay down on Descension sound like a convergence of Gnawa ritual rhythms with disco and house beats, and bass clarinetist Jason Stein and harmonium player Lisa Alvarado braid spiraling melodies and flickering textures into those grooves. While NIS are quite capable of evoking rapture on their own, the intricate and astounding lengthly lyrics that Parker threads through their playing put the music over the top. —BILL MEYER

PANSY, PANSY

Earth Libraries

Chicago multi-instrumentalist and recording engineer Vivian McCall helped turn Andrew Smith’s bedroom project, Jungle Green, into a bona fide six-piece band when she joined in 2017. Since they all began playing together, she’s engineered sessions for projects by the band’s other members, and she’s also stepped out on her own with her self-titled solo debut as Pansy. The nine-track album came out early this month via Earth Libraries, a label in Birmingham, Alabama, whose catalog includes punk, experimental, and lo-fi music. McCall harnesses the contemplative power of intimate home recordings and the emotional punch of effervescent power pop to document her journey as a trans woman. She began her transition a few years ago, and she has a gift for expressing that complex experience in undeniable hooks, which she rolls out in a variety of distinctive indie-rock subgenres. Throughout Pansy she covers a lot of emotional territory: at one moment she longs for a lover who will see her as she sees herself (in the plainspoken, hushed acoustic number “Who Will Love Me Enough?”), and at the next she rages at her body mid-transition (in the fuzzy, lo-fi rocker “Anybody Help Me”). McCall’s resolve and magnetism carry her easily through these stylistic changes, and even in the album’s most disconsolate moments she sounds like she can overcome anything. —LEON GALL

Christopher Horace, aka F.A.B.L.E.  CECELIA CARLSON

Vivian McCall, aka Pansy  EMMANUELLE COLLINS

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40 CHICAGO READER  APRIL 15, 2021
We can’t know how many decades it will take for humanity to heal from the physical and psychological damage of the COVID-19 pandemic, but musicians are already honoring in song the dignity of the sick, suffering, and dead—and the bravery of their caregivers. The folks at Bellissima Opera, an incubator run by Chicago nonprofit Working in Concert, were so moved by the plight of healthcare workers that they created the hour-long Zoom opera On Call: COVID-19. Soprano Christine Steyer wrote the libretto, and pianist David Shenton composed the music; the opera portrays Zoom calls among six medical professionals in New York City, Seoul, Rio de Janeiro, Chicago, the Lombardy region of Italy, and a Syrian refugee camp. The opera’s format, designed by director Carl Ratner, kept the cast safe—they all recorded at home. Tickets for the premiere (Saturday, April 17, at 7 PM and Sunday, April 18, at 2:30 PM) are available online.Bellissima’s website, for an extra $10, which includes day, April 17, at 7 PM and Sunday, April 18, at 2:30 PM, Peters hosts a virtual postshow meet and greet. For more information, visit the opera’s website; for an extra $10, which includes

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COURTESY MARY MOLLMAN

It was a habit of Mary Mollman’s to casually scout storefronts, in the hopes that she’d find the perfect location to fulfill her longtime dream of owning a bookstore. After jumping at the chance to start her business in the West Loop, COVID-19 put her plans to a screeching halt.

“When the store went dark on March 16,” Mollman remembers, “I had no idea how we would survive without a customer base. Word of mouth and some very thoughtful, well-placed articles saved us. Slowly, the orders started to trickle in. People started telling their friends and neighbors. Our upstairs neighbors told their family. We had a guardian angel who sent a monthly check. Soon we had orders coming in.”

Madison Street Books has opened and closed throughout the past year based on health and safety mandates, but the storefront is currently open. Up to six customers may browse at a time, and both single-use gloves (provided) and masks are required.

When the world reopens and business feels stable, Madison Street Books hopes to really anchor the West Loop community. Their store’s information and events billboard remains fairly empty, but they are already active members of Madison Row and the West Central Association, the West Loop Chamber of Commerce. Madison Street Books works with neighborhood schools on fundraisers, and they host Dawn-Marie Rocks, a sing-along with Miss Dawn-Marie Hamilton that’s broadcast on Facebook Live and available in-store for up to four families on a first-come, first-serve basis. More events for both children and adults are in the works.

On a larger scale, Mollman comments, “Chicago has always been a city that does it our own way. We dig deep from within our own neighborhoods to provide ourselves with what we need. We have one of the best literary communities in the country. From the writers who put the words on the page, to the printers and publishers who turn them into books, to people who read those books, we are a city that celebrates the written word. It is only natural that we esteem an independent, neighborhood book shop where one can lose themselves in the shelves and find an old favorite or a new release.”

She continues, “It is in an independent bookstore that one can get a recommendation from a bookseller, who has actually read that book, and can converse on it. It is in an independent bookstore that a recommendation will lead one to a sleeper story that will become the next new ‘must read.’ It is in an independent bookstore where one’s child can turn the pages of a picture book or listen to a lively story hour, while they engage in a discussion on the merits of their favorite author. Who would want to live in a city or a world without that?”

Mollman is incredibly proud of her staff and the fact that Madison Street Books is still in business. However, despite slow reopenings, year two will be more difficult. A few weeks ago, the team launched a GoFundMe, and while they’re making progress, the goal has yet to be reached. Contribute at www.gofundme.com/f/madison-street-books-year-2.

INDEPENDENT BOOKSTORE PROFILE: MADISON STREET BOOKS

WRITTEN BY TARYN ALLEN


To advertise, email ads@chicagoreader.com
She and her husband Rodney currently live in Hyde Park with their four daughters.

Moore reports at WBEZ and writes a monthly column for the Chicago Sun-Times, but her work has also been published in Essence, Ebony, the Chicago Reporter, Bitch, In These Times, the Chicago Tribune, the New York Times, the Washington Post, and the Guardian. Just some of her awards include the Chicago Library Foundation’s 21st Century Award in 2017; the Chicago Review of Books award, the Chicago Reader, a collection Rent, ownership, and neighborhood struggle since the collapse of public housing

Maya Dukmasova - Moderator

Maya Dukmasova is a senior writer at the Reader, where she’s been on staff since 2016. Her work is focused on housing, the courts, policing, local government, and social justice movements. She’ve won several local and national journalism awards for feature writing and investigative reporting and been the recipient of fellowships and grants to support long-term projects. Her writing and translations have also appeared in The Appeal, Places, Harper’s, Broadly, Truthout, The Progressive, In These Times, Jacobin, and Slate. A Home in Chicago: Rent, ownership, and neighborhood struggle since the collapse of public housing, a collection of her reporting on city housing issues, was published by the Reader in December 2020.

Rebecca Makkai - Author

Rebecca Makkai’s latest novel, The Great Believers, was a finalist for both the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award; it was the winner of the ALA Carnegie Medal, the Stonewall Book Award, the LA Times Book Prize, the Clark Fiction Prize, the Midwest Independent Booksellers Award, and the Chicago Review of Books Award; and it was one of the New York Times’ Ten Best Books of 2018. Her other books are the novels The Bowery and The Hundred-Year House, and the collection Music for Wartime—four stories which appeared in The Best American Short Stories. Rebecca is on the MFA faculties of Sierra Nevada College and Northwestern University. She is Artistic Director of StoryStudio Chicago. Visit her at RebeccaMakkai.com or on twitter @rebeccamakkai.

Tracy Baim - Moderator

Tracy Baim is co-publisher of the Chicago Reader newspaper. She is co-founder and former publisher of Windy City Times. Baim received the 2013 Chicago Headline Club Lifetime Achievement Award. In 2014, she was inducted into the National Lesbian and Gay Journalists Association Hall of Fame. She was inducted into the Association for Women Journalists-Chicago Chapter Hall of Fame in 2018. She is also in the Chicago LGBT Hall of Fame. Robert Feder named her to his Top 20 Women in Chicago Journalism list. She has won numerous LGBTQ+ community and journalism honors, including the Community Media Workshop’s Studs Terkel Award in 2005. Baim has written and/or edited 12 books. Her most recent books are Kuda: Gay & Proud and Barbara Gittings: Gay Pioneer. Her other books include Gay Press, Gay Power: The Growth of LGBT Community Newspapers in America; Obama and the Gays: A Political Marriage; and Out and Proud in Chicago. Baim was executive producer of the lesbian film Hannah Free, starring Sharon Gless, and Scrooge & Marley. She directed and produced e. nina jay’s Body of Rooms film. She is creator of That’s So Gay, an LGBTQ+ trivia game. Baim is the founder of the Pride Action Tank and the Illinois LGBT Chamber of Commerce. She was also co-vice chair of Gay Games VII in Chicago, and in 2013 was founder of the March on Springfield for Marriage Equality.

She received the American Institute of Architects-Chicago Presidential Citation Award in 2016 for her work on tiny homes for the homeless. Additional awards include those from the Chicago Coalition for the Homeless, the LGBT Chamber of Commerce of Illinois, and Unity Parenting.
My depressed ex is now dating a man

I’m so angry. Was he just closets and wasting my time?

By Dan Savage

Q: I’m a female in my late 20s. I broke up with a toxic ex about a year ago and I’ve been walking around (my house!) thinking I was over it. I never missed him and rarely thought about him. A brief backstory: In the final months of us living together, we started having more discussions about children and making a lifelong commitment. He told me he wanted both, yet at this exact time his moderate depression became more severe and he refused to get help. I tolerated his cruel behavior because I knew how badly he was hurting. This ranged from icing me out to berating me and demanding I leave the home that we shared—my house—citing his need for “alone” time. One time he demanded I get up and leave in the middle of the night and go to a friend’s house. It’s worth noting the sex was mediocre at best, which I chalked it up to him being a decade older. My self-esteem suffered. I finally left.

Fast forward to now. I find out he’s been dating a man. I can barely cope with the anger I feel about this. I feel like a casualty of his shame. We have progressive friends! His sister has dated women! His parents are accepting! None of the reasons you list as appropriate ones for staying closeted apply to him, Dan. His inability to accept himself caused me the most severe emotional trauma of my life and I just feel enraged. I logically know this is not about me. It’s about him. So why does this retroactively bother me so much? Part of me wants to say something to him but I’m not sure that would make me feel better. I’d be very appreciative of any guidance you may have. Not sure what to think. —BITTERLY ENRAGED AND REALLY DISTRESSED

A: I don’t want to add to your rage, BEARD, but that night he made you go to a friend’s house? It wasn’t “alone time” he was after. Dude was hosting. Before I tell you what to do about your rage, BEARD, there’s something I wanna clear up: I don’t think having the opposite of everything your ex-boyfriend had—I don’t think having conservative friends instead of progressive friends, straight sisters instead of bi or heterosexual sisters, shitty parents instead of accepting parents—are appropriate reasons for a grown-ass man in his 30s to stay closeted. When people are young and dependent on their parents, sure, having shitty parents and no support from friends or siblings is good reason to stay closeted in high school and maybe until after college. But it’s no excuse for remaining closeted into your 30s—and it’s certainly no excuse for using someone the way your ex appears to have used you, i.e. as a beard, BEARD. (Urban Dictionary: “The girlfriend or boyfriend of a closeted homosexual, used to conceal their homosexuality.”)

Another thing I wanna clear up: there are lots of guys out there in their 30s and 40s and 50s and beyond who are good at sex and lots of guys in their 20s who are mediocre at best.

Alright, BEARD, you have every right to be angry. You put a lot of time and effort into this relationship and if it turns out your ex is gay, well, that means he was lying to you and using you and wasting your time. It’s possible he’s bisexual, however, in which case he wasn’t being fully honest with you but may not have been using you or wasting your time. But gay or bi, your ex treated you very poorly and the news that he’s dating a man now is making you reassess your relationship and his depression, to say nothing of that night he threw you out of your own apartment because he needed “alone time.” To look back on a relationship and think, “I did what I could and it didn’t work out but at least I tried,” is different than looking back and knowing, “Nothing I did would have made any difference and I was cruelly used.”

I think there are two things you need to do now: resolve to never make excuses for someone who treats you with cruelty again. We all have our moments, of course, but someone who can’t treat their partners with some modicum of respect and compassion even when they’re struggling isn’t in good enough working order to be in a relationship in the first place. And I think you should write him a letter and really unload on him. Tell him you’re angry, tell him why. You may or may not get a response—you may or may not want one—but you’ll feel better after writing the letter. And who knows? If he responds with a heartfelt apology, BEARD, you may feel even better.

Send letters to mail@savagelove.net. Download the Savage Lovecast at savagelovecast.com. Twitter @fakedansavage
OBITUARY

David Paul Leoschke, 62 (July 23, 1958 to February 8, 2021). David was born in Fort Wayne, Indiana to Alice Ruth Leoschke (nee Detjen) from Crosstown, Missouri and Floyd Laverne Leoschke from Lockport, New York. He moved to Glenview, Illinois with his parents at the age of 3, attending Immanuel Lutheran School and Glenbrook South High School. David graduated from Harper College and received a Bachelor’s Degree in political science from the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. He lived in several northwest suburbs, but spent most of his adult life as a resident of Chicago. David worked for the U.S. Postal Service, United Airlines, the Chicago Reader and the Ten Cat Tavern.

During the 1980’s David was active in organizations that advocated for a more enlightened United States government policy in Central America such as People’s Alliance on Central America and Casa Nicaraguan.

Family, relatives and friends were very important to David. He enjoyed visiting his father, three brothers, his parents’ families and friends.

David was a lifelong baseball fan and a Chicago Cubs fanatic who was fortunate enough to finally witness a World Series win for his favorite team. He also followed the University of Illinois men’s basketball and Northwestern University football. David enjoyed camping and loved overseas travel especially to London, England.

David was obsessed with music and radio from a young age, had a large music collection and was a naturally gifted musician. He shared his love of all types of music as a disc jockey at radio station WCBR, as well as volunteering for years as a disc jockey at the student radio stations at Northeastern Illinois University and Loyola University. David would also share his love of music as a disc jockey at numerous Chicago bars. In recent years he took guitar lessons at the Old Town School of Folk Music.

David was preceded in death by his mother, his stepfather Lynn Houtler Manley, his stepmother Dorothy Houtler Leoschke and his father Floyd Leoschke. David is survived by his brothers Tim Leoschke (Karen), Joel Leoschke and Mark Leoschke; his nephew Tyler Leoschke; his stepbrothers David Houtler, Jeff (Jenni-f) Houtler and Wayne (Carol) Houtler; and his partner Kate DePriest.

The support and care provided by Kate’s parents, Valerie and Bill DePriest, in David’s final year cannot be expressed in mere words and can never be compensated for.

A memorial will be held later this year when it is safe for people to travel and gather to share their memories of David.
CIMA
Chicago Independent Media Alliance

A coalition of 68 independent, diverse, and community-driven media entities coming together in the spirit of collaboration to create a viable, self-sustaining media ecosystem in Chicago.

CIMA is a project of the Chicago Reader. Read more at chicagoreader.com/CIMA.

Second annual joint media fundraiser coming in May.

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