



The City Has Different Plans for Pittsburgh's Historic 'Fruit Loop'

A proposed maintenance facility on Prospect Drive would bring new development to a Schenley Park landscape shaped by generations of cruising, Pride, HIV outreach, queer community, and AIDS remembrance.

By Jim Sheppard

The City of Pittsburgh is planning a new Department of Public Works maintenance facility along Prospect Drive in Schenley Park, putting a new municipal building in an area with generations of LGBTQ history.

The City issued a request for proposals July 27 seeking architectural and engineering services for a new maintenance facility near the end of Prospect Drive. The proposed building would be approximately 10,000 to 11,000 square feet and would support Public Works crews responsible for maintaining Schenley Park and other nearby City parks.

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Allegheny County Records Lowest Number of New HIV Diagnoses in History

Photo courtesy of Allies for Health + Wellbeing



53 people were newly diagnosed in 2025, marking a 54% decline since 2016.

Allegheny County recorded the fewest new HIV diagnoses in its history in 2025, a major public health milestone shaped by decades of HIV activism, expanded access to prevention and testing, and advances in treatment.

According to newly released data from the Allegheny County Health Department, 53 people were newly diagnosed with HIV in 2025. That represents a 32% decrease from 2024 and a 54% decrease since 2016.

"This is an extraordinary public health achievement, and it is important that we recognize what these numbers tell us: public health investments work," Allegheny County Executive Sara Innamorato said in announcing the new figures.

The milestone comes more than four decades after the beginning of the HIV/AIDS crisis, which devastated queer communities while activists, volunteers, health care workers, and people living with HIV built much of the support infrastructure that exists today. In Pittsburgh, that history includes the Pittsburgh AIDS Task Force, founded in 1985 by Kerry Stoner and a group of volunteers as an offshoot of the Pitt Men's Study's Community Advisory Board. Now known as Allies for Health + Wellbeing, the organization was created at a time when people with AIDS faced not only a deadly and poorly understood disease but widespread stigma and discrimination.

Early volunteers helped people find medical
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Democratic upset in red Butler County could point to broader political shifts

A Democrat flipped a state House seat in red Butler County. Is it a special-election surprise or a sign that Pittsburgh's northern suburbs are turning purple?

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Helping Hands Builds Community for People Living With HIV

Helping Hands is bringing people living with HIV together to build friendships, find peer support, and extend that same care to others in their community.

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Faces & Places The Big Gay River Float!

Queer joy took over the Yough as 200 LGBTQ+ people and allies hit the water for the 4th Annual Big Gay River Float. Check out all the pictures!

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(HIV Diagnosis cont'd)

professionals willing to treat patients with HIV and AIDS, connected them with legal and government resources, operated an HIV/AIDS information hotline, and provided companionship to people dying from AIDS through its Buddy Program. The organization began offering HIV testing in 1987, two years after the first tests were approved by the FDA. "We really were first on the scene," Allies CEO Mary Bockovich said. "PATF was the public health initiative in many ways."

Today, HIV is a dramatically different diagnosis. Modern antiretroviral treatment allows people living with HIV to live long, healthy lives. People who achieve and maintain an undetectable viral load do not sexually transmit HIV, the scientific consensus commonly known as Undetectable = Untransmittable, or U=U.

People who are HIV-negative also have highly effective prevention options, including pre-exposure prophylaxis, or PrEP. AIDS Free Pittsburgh estimates that PrEP use in the region has increased by approximately 400% since the initiative began in 2015.

AIDS Free Pittsburgh, managed by the Jewish Healthcare Foundation, now brings together more than 50 partners working on HIV prevention, testing, treatment, education, and outreach. Allegheny County became the second county in the United States to commit to ending the HIV epidemic by 2030.

"This milestone belongs to the entire community," Richard Smith, vice president of the Jewish Healthcare Foundation, said. "The organizations delivering care, the public health professionals coordinating these efforts, and the individuals who sought testing, prevention and treatment all contributed to this historic achievement."

Progress remains unequal

The record-low number of diagnoses does not mean HIV has disappeared, nor has the progress been experienced equally across Allegheny County.

Black residents have been disproportionately affected by new HIV diagnoses for nearly a decade, with Black individuals 10 times more likely than white individuals to receive an HIV diagnosis, according to the county.

Men who have sex with men continue to account for most new diagnoses, while heterosexual contact accounted for 23% of cases in 2025.

Those disparities underscore why public health officials and HIV advocates are cautioning against treating the new numbers as a reason to pull back funding, outreach, testing, or prevention programs.

"The science and tools exist to end the HIV epidemic," said Dr. Sarah McBeth, clinical director at UPMC Pittsburgh Area Center for Treatment and medical director at Allies. "We have made tremendous progress because people have had greater access to prevention, testing, treatment and care. Our challenge now is making sure those tools reach every person who can benefit from them, particularly people and communities who continue to experience barriers to care."

For Allies, the milestone also offers a chance to reflect on how profoundly Pittsburgh's response to HIV has changed since the darkest years of the AIDS crisis and on the community organizing that helped make that transformation possible.

"This is a moment to celebrate our achievements as a community dedicated to eradicating HIV," Bockovich said. "We are proud of the role PATF and Allies has played in getting us to this point, and we are looking forward to continuing this important work." Allegheny County officials similarly stressed that reaching a historic low is not the same as reaching zero.

"This success is the result of years of sustained investment and hard work, and it will be lost if we stop now," said Dr. Jillian Irwin, medical director and deputy director for clinical services at the Allegheny County Health Department. "We must seize this moment of progress to accelerate our efforts toward zero new HIV transmissions."

The county has also launched an HIV and STI dashboard allowing residents, health care providers, researchers, and community organizations to track local data and identify disparities.

For a region that has lived through more than 40 years of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, 53 diagnoses represent the possibility of getting closer to a

future with no new HIV transmissions.

Getting there, however, will depend on maintaining the prevention, treatment, public health infrastructure, and community work that made this milestone possible.



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(Fruit Loop cont'd)

For most Pittsburghers, Prospect Drive may look like an unremarkable road ending in a grassy circle surrounded by woods.

For generations of LGBTQ Pittsburghers, it has had another name: the Fruit Loop.

The Fruit Loop has been a cruising ground. It has also been a place to sunbathe, picnic, play volleyball, meet friends, celebrate Pride, distribute condoms, and remember people lost to HIV/AIDS. And queer Pittsburghers are still gathering in the area today.

More than a cruising spot

Exactly when LGBTQ people began gathering in Schenley Park is difficult to pin down.

There is evidence of gay activity in the park dating as far back as the 1940s and 1950s. In notes to his biography Warhol, author Blake Gopnik cites a 2014 interview with Pittsburgher Bill Wood, who remembered Schenley Park as a site of gay activity during his youth.

By the 1970s and 80s, there are firsthand accounts from the location that would become widely known as the Fruit Loop.

Cruising was central to the Fruit Loop's identity. Before smartphones, apps, and widespread LGBTQ acceptance, parks and other semi-public places were part of the informal geography through which queer people found one another.

Sometimes that meant sex. But at the Fruit Loop, finding other gay people didn't necessarily end there.

In an August 20, 2005 letter to the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette titled "We deserve space," long-time LGBTQ community advocate Randy Forrester pushed back against a newspaper editorial that had focused on sexual activity at Prospect Drive. Forrester acknowledged the area's history as a cruising ground but described a different scene on sunny weekends. LGBTQ people sunbathing, picnicking, talking with friends, walking dogs and playing volleyball.

Writer Casey Allen remembered something similar in a 2010 article in Pittsburgh's Out, now preserved in QBurgh's Q Archives. Allen called the Fruit Loop a once "revered social gathering spot for gay people in the city," recalling summer Sundays with pickup volleyball and potluck cookouts.

For some queer Pittsburghers, the same place where you could find a hookup was also somewhere you could spend a Sunday surrounded by other LGBTQ people.

Pride came to Prospect Drive

Schenley Park has a broader LGBTQ history beyond the Fruit Loop.

Pittsburgh's first Gay Pride march in June 1973 ended at Flagstaff Hill. That summer, Pittsburgh Gay News advertised weekly gay worship services there.

By 1992, organized Pride activities had reached Prospect Drive itself.

Pittsburgh City Council adopted a resolution that year recognizing the city's LGBTQ Pride celebration. The resolution noted that the June 27 Pride parade would be followed by a "picnic and community festival on Prospect Drive in Schenley Park."

Writer Brian Broome, who arrived in Pittsburgh that year, later recalled discovering the Fruit Loop and finding a flyer directing people there in connection with Pride activities.

By then, the Fruit Loop wasn't simply an underground place to cruise. It was also somewhere Pittsburgh's LGBTQ community gathered openly.

AIDS and the Fruit Loop

Prospect Drive also became part of Pittsburgh's response to the AIDS epidemic.

In 1998, Pittsburgh's Out reported that Pittsburgh AIDS Task Force workers and volunteers were conducting outreach there, distributing condoms, lubricant and HIV risk-reduction information.

The community also used Prospect Drive to remember people who died. An AIDS memorial garden once stood at the Fruit Loop.

Forrester described it in his 2005 letter as a "spontaneous community project of the '80s," created during the years when AIDS was devastating Pittsburgh's gay community.

The garden was still standing when he wrote that letter in August 2005. It isn't there today.

Shepherd Wellness Community has documented that the City later removed what the organization

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(Fruit Loop cont'd)

calls the AIDS Memorial Rose Garden. Shepherd Wellness preserved the garden's last remaining rose bush, along with name plaques and wooden memorial posts.

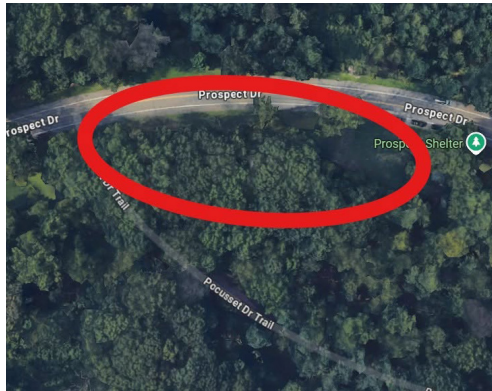
The rose now grows at Shepherd Wellness' Bloomfield location, while other surviving pieces were incorporated into a memorial art installation.

There may also be a living remnant still at Prospect Drive.

Sister Petra Pyper Pictapekhov, a local Sister of Perpetual Indulgence, has speculated that daffodils from the former memorial were moved around the large tree in the center of Prospect Circle after the garden was removed. QBurgh has not independently confirmed that account.

The City has tried this before

This new proposal has an unusual historical echo.



In 2005, Pittsburgh also considered putting a Public Works maintenance facility around Prospect Drive.

Forrester's letter was written during that controversy. He criticized what he described as the City's desire to choose "the only gay community spot in our city parks" for a large maintenance facility.

That project was never built. Twenty-one years later, the City is again considering a maintenance facility along Prospect Drive. The current proposal is already drawing opposition, although not solely because of the area's queer history.

Friends of Schenley Park has called on the City to locate the facility outside the park.

"Schenley Park is not a land bank," the group wrote following an August 10 informational meeting with Public Works. "We believe that the park should be preserved as a park, not as a location for municipal maintenance operations and non-recreational facilities."

The City says the new facility is necessary to provide adequate space for park maintenance crews. The RFP calls for a new building, utilities, accessibility and stormwater work at the site. The project remains in its design phase.

Still a queer gathering place

The LGBTQ connection to Prospect Drive isn't only history.

Pittsburgh Black Pride continues to hold community events in the Prospect area. Its 31st annual Community BBQ was held at Schenley Park's Prospect Grove on July 26, one day before the City released the RFP.

The City of Pittsburgh's LGBTQIA+ Commission was expected to discuss the maintenance facility at its August meeting. That discussion has been postponed until the Commission's next meeting on September 15. For now, there is no marker at Prospect Drive explaining any of this history.

Nothing tells someone driving around the circle about the LGBTQ people who found community there, the Sunday volleyball games, Pride gatherings, HIV outreach or the AIDS memorial that once grew there.

That's one of the difficulties of preserving queer history. It doesn't always come with a historic building. Sometimes it is a road, a patch of woods, or a grassy clearing that looks ordinary unless you know where to look.

For generations of LGBTQ Pittsburghers, Prospect Drive is a place to find friendship, community, celebration, and remembrance.

Now the City is planning something different there, and we still deserve space.

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Democratic upset in red Butler County could point to broader political shifts

Brandon Dukes' special-election win came amid suburban growth, heightened Democratic enthusiasm and national headwinds for Republicans — raising questions about whether a longtime GOP stronghold is becoming more competitive ahead of November

By Cassandra Harris and Zach Zimmerman (Pittsburgh Media Partnership, Butler Eagle)
Photo by Matthew Brown, Butler Eagle

Longtime Butler County resident Susan Collier said she wasn't completely surprised that voters chose a Democrat over a Republican in a recent special election — even in this traditionally red area.

"I think people are frustrated at the top, and so they're voting this way," she said Thursday

while at the Zelienople library with her two grandchildren. She added that some people she knows in the area are so frustrated that they either don't want to discuss politics or become argumentative when they do.

Democrat Brandon Dukes leads Republican Scott Timko by 97 votes in unofficial results from the Aug. 18 special election for Pennsylvania's House District 12

The district covers much of southwestern Butler County, including Cranberry Township, Adams Township, Mars, and Zelienople. The election was called to fill the remainder of former Republican state Rep. Stephenie Scialabba's term. Scialabba, who had held the seat since 2023 and won reelection in 2024 with nearly 65% of the vote, resigned in March. Collier has lived in Butler County for more than 30 years, and in that time, the district has traditionally favored Republicans, though the district's boundaries have changed. For more than two decades, it was represented by former Daryl Metcalfe, a conservative Republican whose combative style frequently drew statewide and national attention.

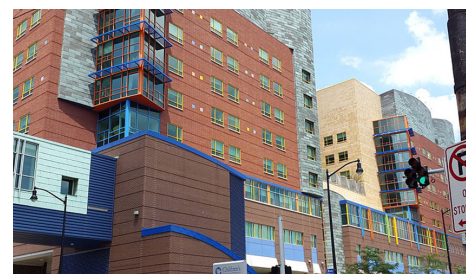
The LGBTQ Context

Daryl Metcalfe, who represented parts of Butler County in the state House from 1999 to 2022, was a prominent opponent of LGBTQ rights during his time in Harrisburg. He sponsored efforts to amend Pennsylvania's Constitution to

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Trump DOJ Backs Down in Fight for UPMC Trans Youth Medical Records.

The federal government is abandoning its appeal after Pittsburgh families fought to keep deeply personal healthcare information out of its hands.



The Trump administration is backing away from its attempt to obtain private medical records connected to young transgender patients who received gender-affirming care through UPMC Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh.

The U.S. Department of Justice has moved to voluntarily dismiss its appeal of a federal court ruling that blocked its subpoena seeking patient information from UPMC. The patients and families who intervened to fight the subpoena do not oppose the dismissal.

The move brings a significant legal victory for Pittsburgh families who spent more than a year fighting to keep sensitive healthcare information out of the federal government's hands.

It also leaves standing a forceful rebuke from Chief U.S. District Judge Cathy Bissoon, who

repeatedly rejected the Justice Department's attempts to obtain the records.

The dispute began after the Justice Department issued a sweeping subpoena seeking sensitive medical and personal information from UPMC patients in 2025.

Patients and their families intervened in federal court to prevent their information from being disclosed. They were represented by the Public Interest Law Center and Ballard Spahr.

In December 2025, Bissoon quashed the subpoena. The Justice Department subsequently proposed obtaining anonymized records instead, but the judge rejected that effort as well.

As QBurgh reported in March, Bissoon found that even supposedly anonymized information could put patients at risk of being identified. Her ruling also included an extraordinary

condemnation of the federal government's treatment of transgender people.

Bissoon wrote that the administration's rhetoric surrounding gender-affirming healthcare reflected "callous indifference, if not abject cruelty."

Addressing the government's motivations for seeking the records, Bissoon wrote that the circumstances carried more than a "whiff" of ill intent.

"Arguably, it is closer to a stench," she wrote. In a public statement released Monday by the Public Interest Law Center, legal director Mimi McKenzie said the end of the appeal means the patients whose records were at stake no longer have to fear that their personal information will be turned over to the administration.

"The children we represented, their families,

Continue reading pg. 7

(Democratic Upset... cont'd)

define marriage as between a man and a woman and, while chair of the House State Government Committee, opposed efforts to advance statewide LGBTQ nondiscrimination protections.

Metcalf also drew national attention in 2013 when he helped prevent openly gay state Rep. Brian Sims from speaking on the House floor about the U.S. Supreme Court's ruling against part of the Defense of Marriage Act. Metcalf said Sims' planned remarks represented "open rebellion against God's law." His long tenure made southwestern Butler County an important backdrop to Pennsylvania's decades-long political battles over LGBTQ equality. Metcalf left the state House at the end of 2022 after choosing not to seek reelection.



Dukes was endorsed by the Steel City Stonewall Democrats, western Pennsylvania's only LGBTQ political group.

But as southwestern Butler County has grown and changed, experts question whether the area's political makeup is changing too — shifting from red to purple, like other growing suburban areas around the country.

Christopher Borick, a professor of political science at Lehigh University, said the race was driven less by demographic changes and more by short-term political factors nationally. "The president's standing, the president's performance, his performance on key issues, economic issues, inflation, cost of living, the war with Iran," Borick said. "All these things are weighing on Republicans, and that's, I

think, driving the moment right now."

University of Pittsburgh history professor Lara Putnam said several factors may have contributed to the Democratic victory, including national backlash against President Donald Trump and changing demographics of communities such as Cranberry Township. "Even during the Biden presidency, Democrats were doing better in low turnout and special elections than you would have expected," said Putnam, who studies grassroots political movements. "And Republicans were doing worse in those special elections."

Stacey Palmer, chair of the Butler County Republican Committee of Pennsylvania, said the party has taken away lessons from the special election. But Republicans push back against the idea that Cranberry is now "purple." Cranberry is "not a progressive town," she said. "It's a conservative one."

"Brandon Dukes is a self-described progressive," Palmer said. "Scott Timko shares the conservative values that the hard-working people of Cranberry and the 12th district hold." The special election received widespread attention from both parties in the final days. Timko was aided by the Republican Party of Pennsylvania, with supporters ranging from Slippery Rock Mayor Jondavid Longo to conservative activist Scott Presler, who knocked on doors in the district. Attorney General Dave Sunday also posted his support for Timko the day before the election.

Brandon Dukes received support from statewide Democrats, with Lt. Governor Austin Davis and U.S. Rep. Chris Deluzio, D-17, campaigning for him.

With Dukes and Timko set for a rematch on Nov. 3, Democrats see an opportunity to compete for a seat Republicans have long held. "It's a combination of all of the above, I think. The Cranberry area where he was running is becoming more purple," said Don Vigliotti, chair of the Butler County Democratic Committee. "I also think people are tired of high prices, and what we're seeing from the current administration. Gas prices being high all the time; these things affect Butler County." Vickie Sadaka has lived in Cranberry since 2005. She said she was shocked by the election results. She said she wasn't thrilled with Timko, but felt he was the better choice. "There's been a lot of people moving into the area," Sadaka said. "But I feel like most of the

people that I've talked to anyway, and granted, it's probably the older people, but I feel like they're more conservative."

Sadaka was at the Mars library playing a card game with three friends, surrounded by tables lined with clothes for a children's clothing swap program.

"He stands for things that none of us stand for," she said of Dukes. "Not anybody I know either, and so we were very upset about it." Challenge ahead

Earlier this year, data showed Democratic candidates outperforming Kamala Harris' 2024 results in a majority of state and federal special elections nationwide, by anywhere from 5 to more than 20 percentage points.

Borick said the Nov. 3 general election will prove more challenging for Democrats. Conditions will be more favorable for Republicans looking to flip the seat back, he said, though they will still have to work hard to do so.

"Democrats are much more enthusiastic right now about this election cycle," Borick said. "That enthusiasm is realized in greater turnout."

Incumbent Gov. Josh Shapiro will also face a November election against his Republican opponent, state Treasurer Stacy Garrity. A poll partially sponsored by PennLive has Shapiro leading 53% to 28%. Quinnipiac has Shapiro up 53% to 40%. The data was not broken down by region.

Borick said that two months is only a little time for Dukes to prove to District 12 constituents that he's worth re-election.

"It's very unlikely any proposed legislation will move through in a few months," he said. "But if he wants to show people in the district that he's listening to their concerns, he can act on it by at least coming to the House and proposing something that he thinks would help."

In recent weeks, Trump's approval rating has ranged from 33% to 37% in national polls from The Economist, Reuters, The New York Times and CNN. In Pennsylvania, research firm Civiqs put Trump's approval at 37% as of Aug. 19

Collier said she agrees with some of Trump's policies but is frustrated by his "lack of verbal control."

"If he could not offend so many people, it might be a little easier," she said. 'Candidates matter'

Chris Rieger, a Democrat who had run for the state House District 12 seat against Metcalf in 2016, watched the special election closely. Rieger, now a Dormont council member, previously lived in Cranberry Township and Seven Fields. He said he found himself reflecting on his previous campaign as he celebrated Dukes' win.

"I don't believe it was necessarily a fluke performance in a special election. You don't get a result like that without years of organizing. Candidates matter, and Dukes was a good candidate," Rieger said. "He got help from officials around the state. I don't think there would have been that kind of investment without something to build off of, without infrastructure in place."

"I can't predict what's going to happen in November, but I would still expect a strong performance from Dukes for that very reason," Rieger said. "Grassroots organizers in Western PA are aware of what the stakes are."

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(Trump DOJ... cont'd)

and all minor patients from UPMC's gender-affirming care clinic can now rest easy that their personal information will not be exposed to a hostile administration," McKenzie said in the statement.

But McKenzie emphasized that reaching this point came at a substantial cost to the families involved.

"That's a win for patients. But it came with a great cost," she said.

For more than a year, families faced the possibility that deeply personal healthcare information about their children could be obtained amid a much broader federal campaign targeting gender-affirming healthcare and transgender people.

According to the Public Interest Law Center's statement, McKenzie characterized the government's effort to obtain the records as part of an attempt to frighten patients away from gender-affirming healthcare and intimidate medical providers offering it.

The Fight Over UPMC Isn't Over

The end of this particular court battle does not resolve another major issue facing

transgender young people and their families in Pittsburgh: UPMC's decision to stop providing gender-affirming medical care to patients under 19.

UPMC ended that care on June 30, 2025, citing the threat of federal criminal prosecution against clinicians. The decision left families searching for alternatives.

It also triggered sustained resistance. Families and activists organized protests and public actions while young patients and their families described the consequences of suddenly losing access to care. Five former patients also filed a discrimination complaint with the Pennsylvania Human Relations Commission.

Parents have also questioned whether UPMC did enough to resist federal pressure. In September 2025, Pittsburgh-area parents publicly demanded that UPMC challenge the subpoena and protect their children's medical privacy.

UPMC eventually entered the court fight, but stopped short of challenging the subpoena itself. In a November court filing, UPMC asked that no records be released while the families' challenge was pending, while taking a neutral position on the subpoena itself.

Before You Get Down This Fall, Let's Talk Mpox

Your fall calendar may be filling up and maybe your DMs are, too. Here's what you need to know about mpox before getting up close and personal.

By Aaron Valentic

When fall begins to roll in, it's like New Year's; just hear me out. The majority of the world appears to still be on vacation, school starts over again, and according to F. Scott Fitzgerald, "Life starts all over again when it gets crisp in the fall", made famous in his classic American novel, "The Great Gatsby." In my humble opinion, it's one of the most exciting times of the year.

However, the one thing I am not looking

forward to is the potential for the spread of mpox in Pittsburgh, and with the influx of college students flooding into the city as first-year college freshmen, it's important to remind everyone of the safety precautions you need to take into consideration when getting down.

What is mpox?

Mpox is a disease caused by a virus in the same family grouping as smallpox, with similar symptoms that are more mild and rarely fatal. An individual would be able to contract the disease when they come into contact with sores, scabs or bodily fluids of an infected person. These types of infections occur through close, intimate situations (think cuddling, kissing and sexual contact) or by touching contaminated materials, such as bedding, clothing or other linens used by an infected individual.

The first known case of mpox hit Allegheny County in 2022, with a staggering 71 confirmed cases the county saw that year.

The legal effort to quash the subpoena was pursued by patients and their families.

McKenzie used Monday's public statement to warn UPMC against yielding to further pressure from the Trump administration.

"Gender-affirming care is legal in Pennsylvania, and gender-based discrimination is not," McKenzie said. "UPMC must follow the law and not cave to a hostile administration."

The Justice Department abandoning its appeal protects the sensitive records at the center of this case. It does not restore the gender-affirming healthcare UPMC stopped providing to young patients last year.

For Pittsburgh's trans community, those are two separate fights.

In one, families successfully stood between the federal government and their children's private healthcare information.

The larger fight over whether transgender young people in Western Pennsylvania can reliably access medically appropriate, gender-affirming healthcare close to home remains unresolved.

Since then, there has been ebbs and flows with the cases year after year. So far for 2026, Allegheny County has had 13 confirmed cases, which is up by 7 cases from last year.

What are the symptoms?

The symptoms one might experience with mpox are not limited to, but might include the following:

- Rash
- Fever
- Chills
- Headache
- Muscle Aches
- Fatigue
- Swollen Lymph Nodes

It's important to note that sometimes, people have flu-like symptoms prior to having a rash. In other cases, some individuals report having the rash first, then flu-like symptoms, while on occasion, others experience only a rash.

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(MPOX.. cont'd)

Some individuals that acquire mpox only have a few sores; typically, people with mpox get a rash that may be located on or near the genitals (penis, testicles, labia and vagina) or anus (butthole) and could also be on other areas like the hands, feet, chest, face or mouth. As a gentle reminder, it is critical for those infected or potentially exposed to the virus and develop a rash, to get tested to limit the spread of the disease.

Where can you get tested, treated, or the vaccine?

Most of the healthcare facilities in Allegheny County (think hospitals, emergency departments, urgent cares, clinics, etc). Within the City of Pittsburgh, you'll find dedicated health clinics that can help to test and vaccinate you:

ACHD Sexual Health Clinic, 425 Fifth Avenue, 4th Floor, Pittsburgh, PA 15219

Allies for Health + Wellbeing, 211 N. Whitfield St., Suite 500, Pittsburgh, PA 15206

Central Outreach Wellness Center, 127 Anderson Street, Suite 101, Pittsburgh, PA 15212

Metro Community Health Center, 1789 S Braddock Ave #410, Pittsburgh, PA 15218

University of Pittsburgh Vaccination and Health Connection Hub, Nordenberg Hall

The vaccine may help to prevent the disease if given before exposure or within four days of exposure to the virus. Per the Allegheny County Health Department (ACHD), people who should get vaccinated include the following:

- *Have had sexual or intimate contact with someone who may have mpox. Get vaccinated as soon as possible after exposure, regardless of your sexual or gender identity.*
- *Are a gay, bisexual, or other same-gender loving man who has sex with men or are transgender, gender non-binary, or gender-diverse and in the last 6 months, have had or expect to have:*
 - One or more sexually transmitted infections
 - More than one sexual partner, or anonymous sexual or intimate contact
 - Sex at a commercial sex venue
 - Sex in association with a large public event in a geographic area where mpox transmission is occurring
 - Have had sexual or intimate contact with a person who is at risk of mpox as described above

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Helping Hands Builds Community for People Living With HIV

Sponsored by Allies for Health + Wellbeing



Around the time the pandemic was heating up, Crystal McKee noticed something alarming at the clinic at Allies for Health + Wellbeing. “I noticed there were African American young males who were testing positive,” said McKee, PrEP navigator for Allies. “We had two clients a week, two months in a row, in the age bracket 18 to 34. We’d get them into care, but I could only do but so much because they needed to find their safe space, their people.”

Though many people believe that HIV is a thing of the past, the disease is still being spread, and young people are getting diagnosed with HIV. According to data from the Allegheny

County Health Department, between 2014 and 2023, most new cases of HIV were among 25- 34-year-olds.

“It was a lot to see because I could be their mom, and some of them, they looked at me like I was their mom, because a lot of parents are not supportive,” McKee said. “What do they do now? Where can they go? I wanted to do more. I didn’t know how yet, or even if it was possible.”

But she didn’t let that stop her. Instead, she immediately set about to create that safe space for them.

“I put pen to paper — ‘OK, what kind of group is this going to be?’ It must be peer-led, for example, and open to everyone living with HIV.

And that’s how Allies’ Helping Hands support group came to be. The group meets monthly, and about eight to 10 people attend regularly. “It is important for me for them to make friendships,” McKee said, about why Helping Hands being peer-led is crucial. “I am not living with HIV. I can help you on the medical side and bring you all together, but there are some conversations they may not be comfortable

having with me. Seeing them asking each other for help, it’s nice.”

Watching friendships form that are positive and uplifting is an amazing feeling for McKee. She notes this group is one of the few places that can happen for many living with HIV.

“There’s AA, there are all different types of self-help groups, but where is the group for individuals who really, really need that peer support? Because no one who contracted HIV asked for it,” she said. “They were all misled. That’s a different type of pain and experience because their trust was broken. That is common and everybody in the group has experienced that.”

The group allows them to share how that makes them feel, and what they did to move on from being stuck there.

“Because that’s a lot,” McKee said. “Yes, there’s meds, you can live a long happy life, but you still have a diagnosis of HIV, and that’s not changing.”

Recently, she was touched to see a young man, who she calls a sweetheart, forge a bond that is helping him grow.

“He doesn’t know how to stand up for himself, and another member is helping him,” McKee said. “For an older individual to guide him, and he calls her his best friend — that is something.”

The meetings open with the participants breaking bread with each other, a check-in to see if everyone is taking their meds, then they set to planning out their activities. But the group members want to do more than share their experiences with each other – they want to extend helping hands to others. They have decided to start a collection drive to hand out items to unhoused people who are also living with HIV.

“We are going to partner with Second Ave Commons to distribute our bags — toiletries,” McKee said. “The point for me, for the title, is we can always be a helping hand to someone. Even though your situation is not perfect, there is always someone doing worse than you.”

Helping Hands support group meets monthly and is facilitated by Crystal McKee, PrEP navigator at Allies. For more information or to sign up, contact Crystal at 412-523-2079.

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09/02- White Elephant Bingo @ Mary's 5:30pm

09/03- Soft Launch Poetry @ The Soft Spot 6:30pm

09/03- Steel Carabiner @ Blue Moon 9pm

09/08- Lesbiyinz in Space @ Space Bar 6pm

09/08- Sapphic Silent Book Club @ The Soft Spot 7pm

09/09- Lesbi Friends Book Club @ The Soft Spot 7pm

09/09- Sapphic Pool Club @ Squirrel Hill Sports Bar 6pm

09/10- Late Bloomers @ The Soft Spot 7pm

09/13- Sunday Scaries (Dyke Movie Night)
@ Squirrel Hill Sports Bar 6pm

09/13- Dyke Field Day @ Bloomfield Park 3pm

09/17- Steel Carabiner @ Blue Moon 9pm

09/18- Crush Hour @ Strange Roots (Millvale) 6pm

09/18- Sapphics Play Poker @ Elements Wellness 6pm

09/22- Leather Dykes Meetup @ The Soft Spot 6pm

09/23- Sapphos's Playhouse @ Mary's 6pm

09/25- Cherry Bomb @ Spirit 9pm

09/26- SZR Day Party @ 5801 4pm

09/28 RADAR- Sapphic Singles Night @ The Soft Spot 6pm

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Steel City Softball League Wraps Its 45th Season

Little Pigs, Aces & Bases, Gracie Lou Freebushes, and Lavender Menace took home regular-season and playoff honors as Pittsburgh's queer softball league wrapped its 45th season.

By Jeff Freedman



Photo courtesy of the Steel City Softball League.

The Steel City Softball League (SCSL), Pittsburgh's queer softball league, recently concluded its 45th season with its playoffs held at Dan Isaac fields in West Mifflin.

This year, the league was divided into three divisions to ensure safety, fairness, and competitive balance among the league members. The skill divisions used for the Steel City league are C, D, and E.

The teams competing this year in the C Division were the Little Pigs and Trash Pandas. The D Division included the Aces & Bases, Gracie Lou Freebushes, Growlers B, Outcry, Power Bottoms of the Ninth, and the RBGs. Playing in the E Division were the Bottoms of the Ninth, Glitter Bombs, Growlers A, Lavender Menace, Riveters, and the Slayers.

Games were played weekly during the summer to determine a regular league season champion, and then, based on the season's regular standings, a separate playoff weekend was held for all teams, and a playoff champion was crowned. Here are the Champions:

Next up on the agenda for the SCSL is Fall

Ball. So far there are 80 participants, but there is room for more.

Additionally, the Gracie Lou Freebushes will be representing the Steel City Softball League at the 2026 International Pride Gay Softball World Series in Columbus, Ohio. The Freebushes will compete among 256 teams from 58 cities across the United States and Canada. Heading to the World Series is expensive. If anyone would like to donate to the Team Fund, they can do so here. The Freebushes thank you for your contribution.

Thank you to the volunteer SCSL board members for their hard work throughout the year: Bobby Angelo (Commissioner), Wayne Dotson and Matt Jenkins (Assistant Commissioners), Harry Caskey (Secretary), Robert Hickman (Treasurer), Amy Haushalter (Fields Chairperson), Leah McKown (Membership Chair), and Stephanie Olsen (Marketing Chair).

Huge congrats to the Steel City Softball League on knocking another great season out of the park!

More info at steelcitysoftball.org.

DIVISION	REGULAR SEASON	PLAYOFFS
C	Little Pigs	Little Pigs
D	Aces & Bases	Gracie Lou Freebushes
E	Lavender Menace	Lavender Menace



Seniors Gift 'Bridges and Belonging' Mosaic to Residents of Mosaic Apartments

The large mosaic was created by approximately 60 older adults from The Willows, Westminster Place, and Woodside Place, who painted more than 1,000 wooden circles, hexagons, and squares over the course of five weeks. The project began during Pride Month on June 3 and concluded in early July.

Created as a gift for the residents of Mosaic Apartments, the artwork celebrates community, diversity, and support for LGBTQ+ people. Artistic direction was provided by Dana Capsambelis of Dandelion Days, and the project was funded through a grant from Awesome Pittsburgh.

Mosaic Apartments, located at 3221 Forbes Avenue in Oakland, opened in November 2025 as western Pennsylvania's first LGBTQ+-friendly affordable housing community and the second of its kind in Pennsylvania.

The dedication ceremony brought together Presbyterian SeniorCare Network leaders and Mosaic Apartments residents to celebrate the installation, highlighting connections across generations and affirming the importance of welcoming, inclusive spaces for LGBTQ+ older adults.



Residents of Presbyterian SeniorCare Network's Oakmont campus unveiled a new collaborative art installation, "Bridges and Belonging," at Mosaic Apartments in Oakland on Monday afternoon.

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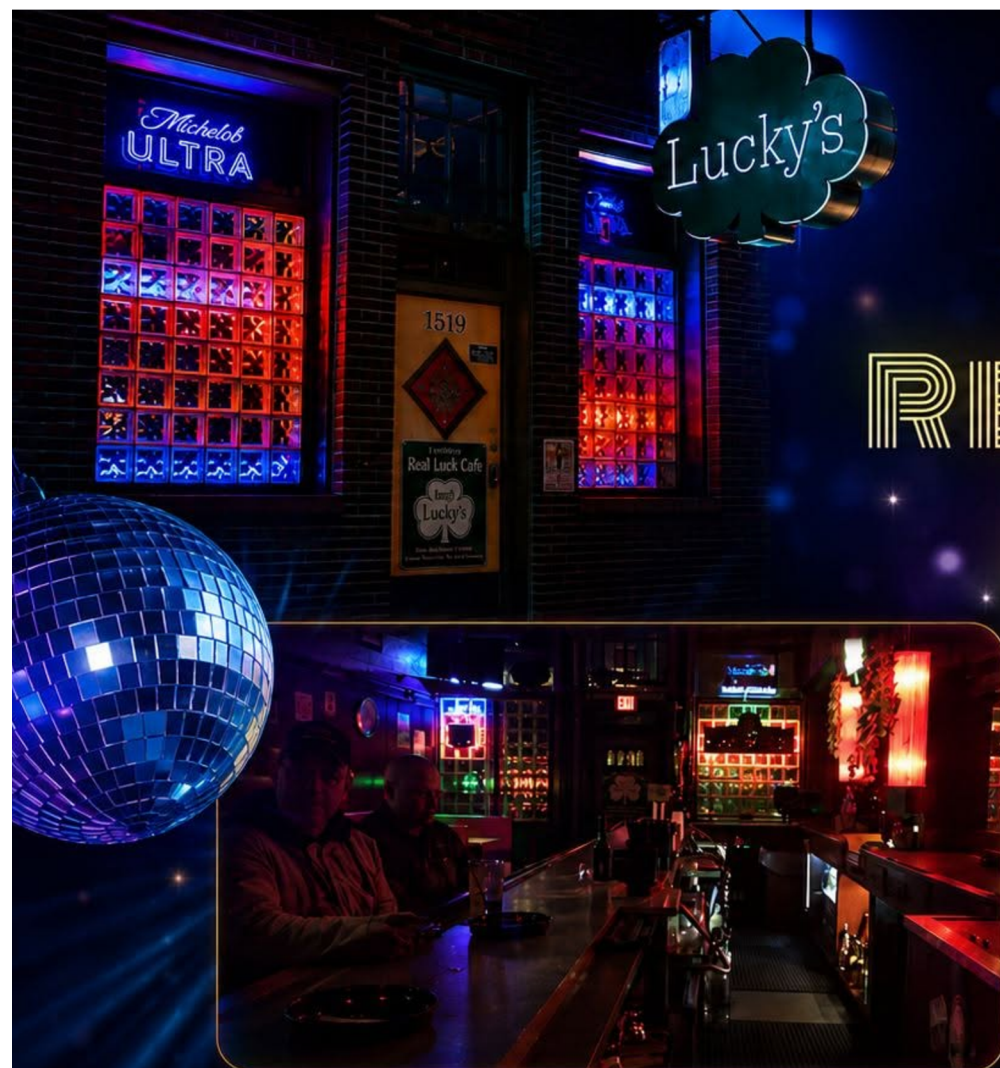
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4th Annual Big Gay River Float Brings 200 LGBTQ+ People and Allies to the Yough



The growing community event returned Sunday with a new shuttle service and Solo Floater program aimed at making a day on the river more accessible.

An estimated 200 LGBTQ+ people and allies took to the Youghiogheny River Sunday for Pittsburgh's 4th Annual Big Gay River Float, continuing the growth of the free community event while introducing new ways to make it easier for people to participate.

Floater gathered at the Smithton Beach Boat Launch before launching onto the Yough and making their way downstream to Cedar Creek Park in Belle Vernon. The trip typically takes three to four hours, giving participants an afternoon of sunshine, swimming, floating, and queer community on the river.

The event has grown from around 150 participants last year to an estimated 200 this year.

For founder and head organizer Dennis Myers, that growth has been especially meaningful. Myers describes the Big Gay River Float as a passion project, one built around bringing together the many different parts of Pittsburgh's LGBTQ+ community.

"My goal for this has always been to keep it accessible with a low barrier of entry to bring everyone together and get them outside," Myers told QBurgh.

Keeping that barrier low is central to the Float. The event remains free to attend and family-friendly, with participants providing their own tubes and other flotation devices.

This year, organizers also responded to feedback from previous floats by offering a shuttle service to help participants navigate one of the trickier parts of a river trip: getting people and vehicles between the launch and the endpoint.

The shuttle made two trips carrying 50 people each, with approximately 100 attendees using the service.

Another addition this year was the "Solo Floater" program. People attending without a group could sign up before the event, and organizers would help connect them with other participants ahead of the launch.

The effort reflected the larger purpose behind the Float: making an outdoor LGBTQ+ gathering approachable even for someone who doesn't already have a group of friends to bring along.

Now in its fourth year, the Big Gay River Float remains a largely DIY operation powered by Myers, volunteers, and community participation. As the Float has grown, so has the work required to keep it accessible, but Myers remains committed to the project and to seeing different corners of the LGBTQ+ community come together on the water.

What began as an opportunity to bring LGBTQ+ people together outside has steadily become a summertime tradition, filling the Yough with an increasingly large flotilla of tubes, coolers, friends, families, and more than a little queer chaos.

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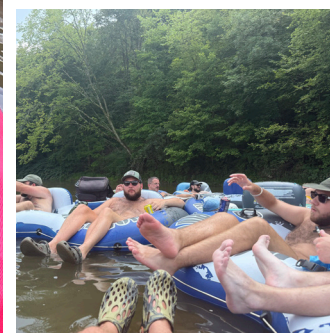
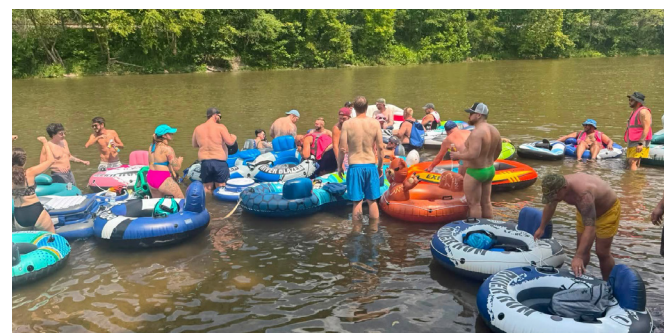
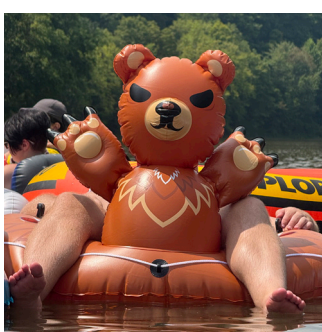
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FACES & PLACES

The Big Gay River Float!

Photos by the floaters!
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QBurgh.com/tag/faces-places/





WHAT'S QUEER SEPT. AND GOING ON

- Sept. 2** | **LesbiYinz White Elephant Bingo**
Mary's
- Sept. 3** | **Open SLAYge**
Harold's Haunt
- Sept. 4-5** | **Feral Fest**
Babylon Morgantown
- Sept. 4** | **Kori King Black Barbie Tour**
City Winery Pittsburgh
- Sept. 5** | **Gayer Than a Picnic Basket**
Washington Park, Washington PA
- Sept. 6** | **Snoozefest**
P Town Bar
- Sept. 8** | **Silent Book Club**
the Soft Spot
- Sept. 10** | **Eddieoke**
P Town Bar
- Sept. 12** | **Brookline Pride**
Brookline Blvd
- Sept. 12** | **Pitch, Please**
Pitch Social Pittsburgh
- Sept. 13** | **Fall Potluck**
Pittsburgh Equality Center
- Sept. 19** | **SZR Sapphic Day Party**
5801 Video Lounge
- Sept. 19** | **The Rocky Horror Picture Show**
with JCCP Row House Hollywood
- Sept. 23** | **Rainbow Kitten**
Stage AE
- Sept. 25** | **Monster F**kers**
the Soft Spot
- Sept. 26** | **Vice Versa Reunion Rainbow Party**
Babylon Morgantown

OCT.

- Oct. 1** | **Kathy Griffin: New Face, New Tour**
Carnegie Music Hall
- Oct. 4** | **Queer Fight Club**
RSVP
- Oct. 5** | **Reel Q Film Festival Screening**
City of Asylum
- Oct. 6** | **Cozy Vinyl night**
Harold's Haunt

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LGBTQ+ Veterans Protest VA Restrictions on Transgender Care

By Jaxon Fox
Photo by Jaxon Fox



A promise made at enlistment — that the nation will care for those who serve — has become increasingly uncertain for the nation's LGBTQ+ veterans.

On Saturday, members of Common Defense, a veteran-led movement dedicated to upholding their oath long after active duty has ended, rallied outside the VA hospital in Pittsburgh's Oakland neighborhood to voice their opposition to changes to treatment policies that have a significant impact on the care they currently receive.

"Today we are showing up to speak out against a June 12 memo that extends the rulings in the VA under two executive orders put under the Trump Administration that are cutting care for LGBTQIA+ veterans at the VA," said Rayven Greer, Common Defense's Veteran LGBT Caucus Co-Chair. She said that showing up sends a message to both veterans and VA staff that they will not let care for other veterans decline in quality. The changes to treatment policies have raised serious doubts in the queer community regarding the continued care provided by the Department of Veterans Affairs. An internal memorandum issued on June 12, 2026, by the Under Secretary for Health

John Bartram heavily weakens benefits that afforded LGBTQ+ veterans access to designated care coordinators, allowing them to access care for transgender-related diagnoses. The memo carried the subject line of "Reiterating Executive Order Compliance Responsibilities".

The memorandum was issued, in part, to comply with Executive Order 14168 Defending Women from Gender Ideology Extremism and Restoring Biological Truth to the Federal Government, which prohibits government funds, time, facilities, or resources from being used to promote "gender-ideology or gender-identity." The Order was issued by President Trump in January 2025.

While the VA policy does not eliminate transgender veterans' general eligibility for disability compensation, pensions, education assistance or home loans, it can disrupt ongoing care for those already receiving medical and mental health benefits through the Veterans Administration, and act as a barrier to care for those seeking these benefits for the first time.

"Recently we just lost our LGBT Care Coordinators, so now we have no 'GPS' to go to care or doctors who understand our troubles, said Greer. "Every time I go in for my HRT, my doctor tells me 'we might not be here for you tomorrow'."

In March 2025, the VA announced that it would phase out medical treatment for gender dysphoria. Under the policy, veterans already receiving hormone therapy through the VA could continue treatment, provided they were receiving that care on or before that date, and had a diagnosis of gender dysphoria. Veterans newly entering the system, however, could not begin such therapy unless they had received it while serving in the military.

VA Secretary Doug Collins maintained that transgender veterans remained welcome and would receive the services they had earned. "I mean no disrespect to anyone, but VA should not be focused on helping Veterans attempt to change their sex. The vast majority of Veterans and Americans agree, and that is why this is the right decision," *Continue reading pg. 15*



On Heavy Rotation

What's keeping Pittsburgh's DJs, drag artists, and nightlife icons moving? Every month, we ask a member of our community to share the five tracks soundtracking their life right now.

OATMILK PRINCESS' TOP 5

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Faceshopping — SOPHIE
Hard Beat — Boy Harsher
Future Starts Now — Kim Petras

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Email us at HeavyRotation@qburgh.com!



(LGBTQ Veterans.. cont'd)

said Secretary Collins. “All eligible Veterans – including trans-identified Veterans – will always be welcome at VA and will always receive the benefits and services they’ve earned under the law. But if Veterans want to attempt to change their sex, they can do so on their own dime.” He argued that savings would be redirected toward veterans with paralysis and severe injuries.

Critics reject that framing. They argue that gender-affirming treatment is health care prescribed by clinicians — not an optional benefit competing with wheelchairs, prosthetics or rehabilitation. They also note that hormone medications remain available when prescribed for other conditions. The restriction therefore turns not only on the treatment itself, but on the identity and diagnosis of the patient receiving it.

The practical consequences extend beyond the cost of medication. Interrupting or denying medically indicated care can increase distress and discourage patients from seeking unrelated services. An empirical study by the American Psychological Association from 2014 shows that less than a third of LGBTQ+ veterans and providers viewed the VA as welcoming. Half of the providers surveyed indicated they do not assess sexual orientation with any of their patients, or alter their treatment plans even

if they know the veteran is lesbian, gay, or bisexual. In a related study by the APA from 2014, nearly 54% of veterans who identified as a sexual and gender minority reported at least one suicide attempt as compared to 28% among those who identified as heterosexual non-transgender.

Female and younger LGBTQ+ veterans appear far less likely to access VHA benefits for health care compared to their cisgender, heterosexual peers. A study published by the National Institutes of Health (NIH) in the American Journal of Public Health noted that between 2006 and 2013, nearly 33,000 VHA users had a transgender-related diagnosis. The report also showed transgender veterans are seeing VA care at an increasing rate and showed that in the two years following the 2011 directive, there was a 40% increase in new diagnoses.

A transgender veteran who expects hostility at a VA facility may postpone a cancer screening, mental-health appointment, or routine physical. In a 2017 study titled “Transgender Veterans’ Satisfaction with Care and Unmet Health Needs”, the VA itself acknowledges that LGBTQ+ veterans face distinctive mental-health pressures and the most frequent barrier to seeking care is provider reactions to their gender identity or sexual orientation.

Military Times reported that critics expect the changes to cause some LGBTQ+ veterans to

avoid treatment. In a now-removed resource on the VA’s website it had at least one LGBTQ+ care coordinator at each of its 142 facilities.

This retrenchment is especially significant because transgender people have served through repeated reversals in military policy. Some endured harassment or concealed their identities to remain in uniform. Others left service with discharge records connected to earlier anti-LGBTQ+ rules, creating additional obstacles to benefits. Lawmakers have proposed legislation to improve eligibility for people separated solely because of sexual orientation or gender identity, but those efforts underscore how past discrimination can follow veterans long after discharge.

Common Defense has been working with lawmakers defending against cuts to VHA benefits. Rep. Mark Takano (CA-39), Chair of the Congressional Equity Caucus and Ranking Member of the House Committee on Veterans’ Affairs, said that the decision to recind VHA Directive 1341(4) is “both shameful and cruel”. In a written statement in March, he said, “I wanted to make it clear to every trans, nonbinary and intersex veteran: my Democratic colleagues in Congress and I value your sacrifices and service to our nation. We are — and will keep — fighting for you, because you matter and deserve the same rights and treatment as every other veteran and American.”

Supporters of the VA’s approach say the government may define the scope of its medical package and prioritize treatments it considers most closely connected to military service. Yet the VA routinely treats conditions regardless of whether they began in uniform, and its health system is intended to provide comprehensive care to eligible veterans. Excluding one category of clinically prescribed treatment therefore raises serious questions about whether political definitions are replacing individualized medical judgment.

Transgender veterans have not, as a class, lost every VA benefit. A qualified veteran can still apply for disability compensation, use a VA-backed mortgage or receive treatment for many physical and psychological conditions. But access on paper is not the same as meaningful access. When specialized care is withdrawn, navigation support is diluted, and patients no longer trust the institution serving them, the value of the remaining benefits diminishes. Military service is built on reciprocal obligation. Veterans accept extraordinary demands, and the country promises not to abandon them afterward. Whether that promise applies equally should not depend on a veteran’s gender identity or on which administration controls Washington.



I’m 22, Single, and Not Waiting for My Life to Start

Relationships aren’t the only sign that your life is moving forward—and being single doesn’t mean you’re standing still.

By Michelangelo Pellis
Photo by Ivan Resnik.

I opened my phone to a screenshot from a little birdie: My ex had hard-launched his new boyfriend on Instagram.

I think they call it a “hard launch” because it’s hard to look at. Which it was, at first.

The post itself was unremarkable; they always are. One day you’re scrolling your feed and you see Johnny with two ice cream cones instead

of one. And sure enough, there’s Joey licking the other cone.

What bothered me was not that my ex had found someone else. It was the tiny, involuntary feeling that came with seeing it: He was moving forward. Was I?

At 22, I have been single for most of my life. Aside from a few high school romances and one longer relationship in college, I have spent most of my adult life without a partner in crime.

This has made me something of a singlehood guru among my friends and family. I am the sounding board for relationships for friends who aren’t single, and the breakup coach for the ones who suddenly become so. Somehow, I have become the person people call when their relationships stop working.

Growing up queer in a small town, I never expected to become that person.

Continue reading pg. 16



(I'm 22, single.. cont'd)

For years, I thought romance would set me free. I imagined that finding someone would make the loneliness of growing up queer disappear, that being loved by another person would somehow confirm that I had finally arrived at the life I was supposed to be living. Then I turned 20.

Shortly afterward, I became single. And somewhere between the breakup and figuring out how to live on my own, I realized that romance was not necessary for freedom. Sometimes, it actually gets in the way of it.

My twentieth birthday was spent with people I had only met that year: my then-boyfriend and his friends. I remember being surrounded by these people, eating in silence, and realizing, almost inexplicably, that I needed to break up with him.

It was not a dramatic birthday revelation. I didn't storm out of the restaurant into the snow. There was no cinematic fight.

But I remembered my mom saying she wished I wanted to spend my birthday with her. I remembered every year when my best friends got me the most thoughtful gifts I could imagine. And as I looked at the snow falling outside the restaurant through the large mirror on the wall, I just knew.

I was surrounded by people, and I wanted to be alone. That contradiction has stayed with me. Because I think we have become very good at treating relationships as evidence that our lives are moving forward, when sometimes they are holding us back.

The order of operations is familiar: single, talking, exclusive, relationship, serious relationship. Each stage is supposed to bring

us closer to some final destination. If the relationship ends somewhere along the way, we tend to call it a failure. But what if it wasn't? What if dating someone for three weeks, having long conversations, going to restaurants, realizing you are incompatible and moving on was not a failed relationship? What if that was the point?

You met someone. You learned something. You had an experience. You figured out a little more about yourself. That doesn't sound like a failure to me. It sounds like your twenties. There is a particular freedom to being in your twenties. For many people, these are the years when the scaffolding of childhood begins to disappear.

You might move away from home for the first time, graduate from college, start a career or realize that the career you thought you wanted isn't actually for you. You begin figuring out what you like: the clothes you wear, the books you read, the music you insist belongs on every playlist.

You also begin looking backward.

For perhaps the first time, you can examine your childhood and upbringing with enough distance to decide what you want to keep and what you want to leave behind.

In that sense, your twenties can feel like a second childhood.

The first time around, everything is new and someone else is usually there to steer you. Then comes adolescence, when all you want is independence. And finally, in your twenties, everything is new and you are the captain of your own soul, with the strange privilege of independence for the first time.

So why are so many of us so eager to give it away? Perhaps part of the answer is that relationships offer something that your twenties often don't: stability.

Everything else is changing. Friendships shift. Jobs begin and end. You move. You leave people behind. You meet new ones. The future feels both impossibly far away and alarmingly close.

A relationship can feel like an anchor. But sometimes anchors are what keep you from moving.

A friend reminded me of something a few

weeks ago that seems obvious only after someone else says it: Casual dating is part of being single.

We don't have to "go steady," as they called it in the olden days, to be involved with someone. I think we should romanticize going on dates again—not just Netflix and chilling. Go somewhere. Talk. Eat dinner. Find out what someone thinks about the world. Discover that you like them. Discover that you don't. There is something valuable about allowing a date to simply be a date.

That may be particularly relevant for a

generation whose relationship with sex and intimacy looks different from the generations before it. Research from the Kinsey Institute has found that a significant share of Gen Z adults in its studies have never had partnered sex, contributing to a broader conversation about whether young people are becoming less interested in traditional forms of intimacy. If that is the direction we're moving in, I don't necessarily think it is something to fear.

There is something beautiful about choosing someone when there is no obligation to do so—to become devoted to another person simply because you want them in your life and they want you in theirs.

But I don't think we need to rush toward that in our twenties. I think we should be allowed to figure out what we want first.

That is one of the things I learned from Kimmy, my hairstylist at the salon in Market Square. Kimmy is single in her forties and has three children. She has long, bohemian bronde hair, sharp eyewear, and an all-black wardrobe. She is fabulous. More importantly, she is completely content with her life on her own.

I told her at my last appointment that I had been thinking about relationships and being single. I don't know what advice I expected from someone with more than twice my life experience, but what she said was simple.

"Your relationship with yourself is the most important relationship you will have your entire life," she told me. "When you break up with someone, or someone leaves, or someone dies, you are left with you."

Kimmy knows what it means to be left with herself.

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(I'm 22, single.. cont'd)

She told me that surviving the death of someone close to her showed her that she could get through anything. It gave her a perspective on loss that most people in their twenties simply haven't had the opportunity to develop. Age really is just a number; perspective is everything.

At 22, I have experienced heartbreak. I have experienced loneliness. I have experienced the particular kind of grief that comes with realizing that the future you imagined with someone is no longer going to happen.

But there is still so much I haven't experienced. I haven't lived long enough to know what I will lose.

And maybe that is why I am so convinced that my twenties should be about figuring things out.

Kimmy still likes meeting people. She still chats with people and goes on dinner dates. She isn't against relationships, quite the opposite: she is selective about them.

"Once you are good with yourself, then you become very selective of who you let into your life," she said. "Someone who only adds to your life, not takes away."

Her life also complicates my argument in a way I appreciate.

Kimmy told me that if she hadn't gotten married at 21, she wouldn't have her children, who are her rock.

So no, I don't think everyone should be single in their twenties.

I don't think getting married young is inherently wrong. I don't think being in love makes you less independent. And I certainly don't think there is anything inherently superior about being alone.

What I do think is that we should stop treating one path as the destination and everything else as a detour. A relationship that ends after two weeks isn't necessarily a failure. Neither is a relationship that ends after two years.

A date that doesn't become a relationship still happened. A relationship that doesn't become a marriage still mattered. And being single isn't evidence that you are standing still.

Perhaps the problem is that we have confused permanence with progress. I think about that whenever I see another hard launch or engagement announcement pop up on my social media timeline.

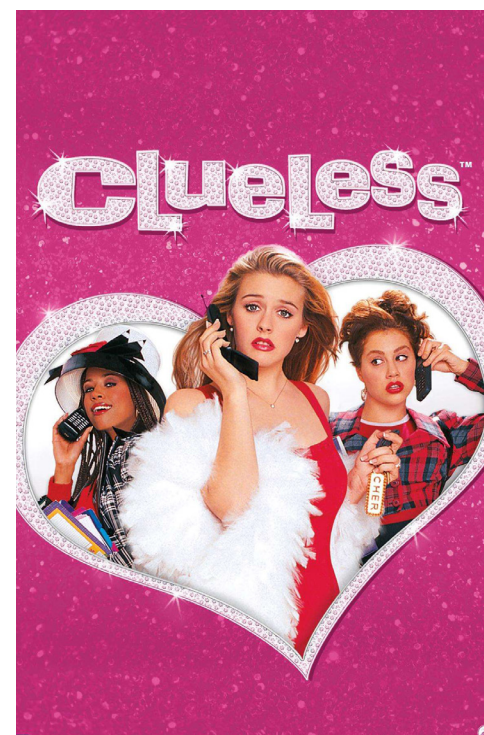
For a moment, it is easy to look at someone else's relationship and imagine that they have figured something out that you haven't. They have someone. They have plans. They have a person whose hand appears in their photographs.

But I have a life, too.

I have friends who come over and play Jackbox on the television after dinner. I have nights on the back deck where a conversation about absolutely nothing turns into a publishable essay. I have dates. I have books. I have work I care about. I have an increasingly clear sense of who I am becoming.

And maybe that is what I want from my twenties—not to find someone as quickly as possible, but to become someone I know how to live with.

Because eventually, if I do meet someone I want to settle down with, I want to recognize myself when I get there. And for now, I want to be good being on my own.



Deep Inside Hollywood

By Romeo San Vicente

Image courtesy of Paramount Pictures.

"Heartstopper" star Kit Connor puts on the Cyclops visor

Now that Netflix's queer teen romance "Heartstopper" has ended, breakout star Kit Connor is leaping into new projects. First there was the Alex Garland film "Warfare," and soon the "Elden Ring" film adaptation, but the big news of the moment is the new Marvel Studios "X-Men" film in the works from director Jake Schreier and writers Lee Sung Jin ("Beef") and Joanna Calo ("The Bear"). In the long-awaited project, currently casting, Connor will step into the role of X-Men leader Scott Summers/Cyclops, joining Samara Weaving, who's taking the role of Emma Frost.

Connor will be the third actor to step into the role, taking over from Tye Sheridan and, earlier, James Marsden. (In the meantime, Marsden will reprise the character one more time in this December's "Avengers: Doomsday.") It's all in the early stages, so stand by for more updates. And for "Heartstopper" stans who don't know what any of this means, here's a quick lesson: Cyclops is known as the leader of the Mutants, and he shoots energy beams from his eyes, only now those energy beams, like Connor, will be officially bisexual. We made up that last part.

"Heated Rivalry" gets new teammates

The second season casting process has begun for "Heated Rivalry," creator Jacob Tierney's spectacularly popular TV adaptation of Rachel Reid's gay hockey romantasy "Game Changers" series of books. Of course, sudden heartthrobs Ilya (Connor Storrie) and Shane (Hudson Williams) are returning. As for new faces, queer actor Justice Smith ("I Saw the TV Glow") and "One Night Only" co-star Charlie Gillespie are signed up to play Harris, a hockey team's social media manager, and a bully of a player named Troy, respectively.

Tierney has disclosed that Season 2 will continue Shane and Ilya's story from the book, "The Long Game," and will also introduce the new couple, as seen in the book "Role Model." Devoted readers will, as before, be expected to deal with the free translation of the book series to the TV series. It's expected to drop in spring 2027, and we're still holding out hope for a cameo from loose cannon hockey weirdo Shoresy from Tierney's earlier projects, "Shoresy" and "Letterkenny." We can dream.

"Clueless" refuses to engage in a midlife crisis

If you've been following the on-again, off-again status of the TV series version of the 1995 teen classic film "Clueless," rejoice, because it's back on. It's headed to Paramount+, which makes it a sort of homecoming, as Paramount Pictures produced the original film back in the '90s.

In it, Alicia Silverstone created the indelible, unflappable Cher Horowitz, the Beverly Hills high school student who brought joy to everyone she met. Silverstone will reprise her role in this limited series, and Cher will now be the parent to a high-school-aged daughter of her own.

Beyond that, little is known besides a tentative shooting date of early 2027. The original film was a touchstone for queer millennial teens now in their 40s, and it's a near certainty that this iteration will include that level of culturally progressive joie de vivre. More details to come as this project moves forward.

"Obsession" star Inde Navarrette takes a terrifying ride

"Obsession," the wild Gen Z horror hit from earlier this year — whose main doomed hetero couple was portrayed by two young queer actors, Inde Navarrette and Michael Johnston — has hit streaming for your end-of-summer horror movie/sleepover party, and if you haven't seen it then brace yourself for Navarrette's singularly unhinged performance.

Meanwhile, she's already shooting her next film, "Invertigo," and if you're afraid of heights, then buckle up. It's about a group of thrill-seeking teens who break into a theme park and ride the new roller coaster. Then it breaks down and they're stuck up there, fighting for their lives, upside down. Directed by Matthias Hoene ("Little Bone Lodge") and written by Kathy Charles ("Castle Freak"), Billy O'Brien ("I Am Not a Serial Killer"), and Don Roff ("Saint Clare"), this one could put a dent in theme-park attendance if it turns out to be another showcase for Navarrette's thrilling ability to unsettle the audience. Look for this one in 2027.

Romeo San Vicente prefers the Tunnel of Love.



Opinion:

When Family Ties Start to Choke, Sometimes You Need to Break the Cord

By D'Anne Witkowski

A recent New York Times opinion piece titled “Cutting Your Parents Off Isn’t the Answer” has resulted in a lot of chatter by people I follow on Bluesky about whether or not queer people who aren’t accepted by their parents or other family members should cut ties with them. The author of the piece discusses her relationship with her father and how both of them worked to repair that relationship. Which, you know, good for them. But it is hardly a universal experience.

Michael Hobbes, co-host of “If Books Could Kill” and “Maintenance Phase,” two of my favorite podcasts, posted a screenshot of the piece’s headline with the comment, “lol come the fuck on.”

The piece, as Hobbes points out, contributes to the “media industrial complex dedicated to telling us that we are too mean to conservatives.”

While politics driving a wedge between family members is nothing new, there’s a particular brand of this division that has gotten considerable attention since the beginning of the Trump MAGA movement. The whole “fuck your feelings” aesthetic widely adopted by Trump supporters doesn’t exactly scream, “Reconcile with us!”

Trumpism has harmed this country in many ways, but one of the most pernicious is the way his racism, misogyny and self-centeredness have given people the permission to gleefully let the worst parts of themselves become their whole personalities.

Your uncle who used to merely grumble about immigrants now talks like a eugenicist at the Thanksgiving table. Your sister-in-law who has always been a little light on facts when it came to medical science is now a walking megaphone for the anti-vax movement. Your neighbor who has never interacted with a trans woman or attended a single girl’s sporting event is now railing against “men in women’s sports” at school board meetings.

All of these folks are actively promoting ideas that feed policies that make this country a more

cruel, a more sick and a less equal place for everyone. Including themselves.

And papers like the New York Times have been trying for years to get liberals to approach this kind of hateful nonsense from a place of understanding and love. But as many people have pointed out, it’s rarely the other way around, especially for queer people who have been rejected by loved ones.

Instead we get served the same “love the sin, hate the sinner” style bullshit, which, of course, puts the onus to change on the queer person (i.e. “the sinner”). It is not complimentary to tell someone, “I love you. But I hate who you are.”

As Hobbes put it, sarcasm clear, “Rank and file Republicans are turning against LGBT acceptance and GOP politicians are leaning into bigotry in both rhetoric and policy. But it is you, the progressive queer or ally, who needs to open your mind and consider other people’s feelings.”

I spent a good deal of my life considering other people’s feelings. I was closeted until 18 and then still partially in the closet for years after that. That was a really painful way to live. And anyone who expects you to live like that for their sake? Well, they’ve made their feelings very clear, haven’t they?

It’s not like I don’t consider other people’s feelings any more. I do, but I’ve learned that other peoples’ feelings aren’t always more important than mine.

For a lot of LGBTQ+ people, the choice is not between embracing or rejecting their families. The choice is actually between two different kinds of pain. The pain of being part of a family that does not make you feel loved and whole, or the pain of cutting ties with that family in order to feel loved and whole.

It’s not just a political disagreement we’re talking about. For too long, we’ve been expecting LGBTQ+ people to appease those who do not recognize, respect or accept our full humanity.

The thing is, going along to get along isn’t a fair request when it means having to compromise your own authentic self to appease people who believe that your authentic self is something too terrible to accept.

You either let them clip your wings or you fly.

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LGBTQ Pittsburgh Community Directory

HEALTH, TESTING

AIDS Free Pittsburgh

625 Liberty Avenue
Pittsburgh, PA 15222
(412) 773-1120

Allies for Health + Wellbeing

211 N Whitfield Street Suite 500
Pittsburgh, PA 15206
(412) 345-7456
alliespgh.org

Central Outreach Wellness Center

centraloutreach.com

Aliquippa PA

2360 Hospital Drive, Upper Suite 1
Aliquippa, PA 15001
(412) 322-4151

Northside, Pittsburgh

127 Anderson Street, Suite 101
Timber Court Building
Pittsburgh, PA 15212
(412) 322-4151

Washington, PA

817 Jefferson Avenue
Washington, PA 15218
(412) 322-4151

Metro Community Health Center

1789 S Braddock Ave #410
Pittsburgh, PA 15218
(412) 247-2310
metrocommunityhealthcenter.org

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LGBTQ+ BARS & CLUBS

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Pittsburgh, PA 15232
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5801pgh.com

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335 High Street, rear
Morgantown, WV 26505
(304) 292-2010
babylonmorgantown.com

Blue Moon

5115 Butler Street
Pittsburgh, PA 15201
(412) 781-1119
bluemoononbutler.com

Brewers & Underground

3315 Liberty Avenue
Pittsburgh, PA 15201
(412) 904-2821

Club Pittsburgh

1139 Penn Avenue
Pittsburgh, PA 15222
(412) 471-6790
clubpittsburgh.com

Harold’s Haunt

142 Grant Avenue
Millvale, PA 15209
(412) 283-6023
queerwitches.com

Lucky’s / Real Luck Cafe

1519 Penn Avenue
Pittsburgh, PA 15222
(412) 471-7832

Lucy’s Place (Johnstown, PA)

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Johnstown, PA 15901
(814) 539-4448
facebook.com/lucillesjohnstown

Mary’s

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Pittsburgh, PA 15225
maryspgh.com

P*Town Bar & Baum Shelter

4740 Baum Blvd
Pittsburgh, PA 15213
(412) 621-0111
ptownbarpgh.com



Crossword! The Chore of Choreography

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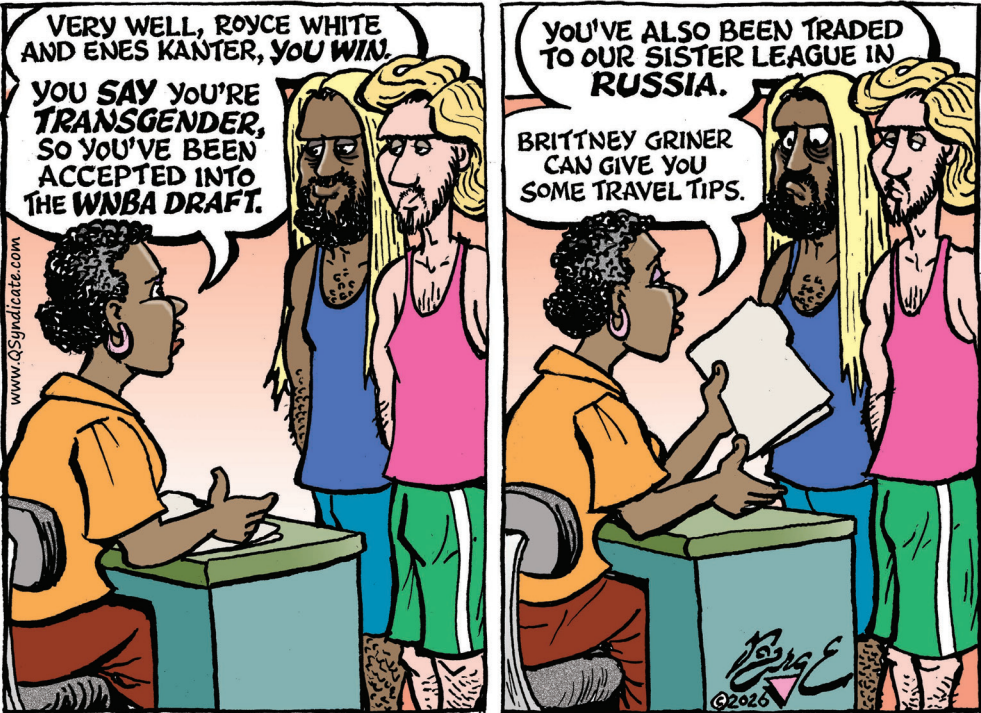
ACROSS

- 1 Robin Williams' home, in "Aladdin"
5 Use it to stroke your head
10 Go lickety-split
14 "Baby Doll" director Kazan
15 Pound part
16 Tournament for all
17 College cram session
19 Cheeky
20 With 23-Across, Jerome Robbins' musical set in a Jewish community
21 "___ Darling, Are You Working?"
22 Son of Aga Khan
23 See 20-Across
25 Worn-out stallions
28 Stick in the wrong place
31 Egypt neighbor (abbr.)
32 Have a yen for
33 Like some gasoline
37 Robbins' musical set in the palace of Siam
40 Summer for Rimbaud
41 "Dawson's Creek" characters
42 Letters in many Black church names
43 Sappho's B
44 Lacking, with "of"
46 Robbins' musical set in Neverland
49 Kahlo's cash
51 "Yeah, right!"
52 Robbins' musical set on Manhattan's streets
56 Language of Bangkok
57 Met highlights
58 Greenish blue
60 What homophobe Vance is president of?
61 They fly in formation
62 Meaty sandwich, maybe
63 Roddy McDowall's "Planet of the ___"
64 One of the Fords
65 Marine birds

DOWN

- 1 Fig part over a private part
2 Weight loss product
3 Not burning the mouth much
4 Bamboo munchers
5 Kiddy frightener
6 German industrial area
7 "Golden rule" word
8 Flower shop emanations
9 The other woman
10 "Feel Like Makini Love" singer Flack
11 Ohno of speedskating
12 It comes between the knees
13 Short ___ the stick
18 Not in the pink
21 "___ stand, head in hand"
24 Hammerlock, e.g.
25 Capone colleague
26 Like Arthur of the Aids Quilt?
27 Environmental awareness group
29 "Cunt" author Muscio
30 Terence of "Priscilla"
32 Most prudent
34 Fast food fixture
35 Kett of the comics
36 James of "East of Eden"
38 Play it under the table
39 Bridal bio word
43 Eggy sweet bun
45 Morsel of AZT, e.g.
47 Fez attachment
48 Shakespearean verb ending
50 Successfully donated sperm
52 Party big shot
53 Peters out
54 "___ On Down the Road"
55 Fish story
56 Dam agcy.
59 "I have a headache" et al.

W-Hoops



August solution: Songs of Madonna

D	I	M	A	G		H	O	L	A		P	E	S	O
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