

# Queen Takes Night

**MELINDA  
RYDER**

REIGNS AS KC  
DRAG ROYALTY

BY SOPHIA LAIL

**Roller Brawl**  
By Emily Wheeler

**Snuggle Sesh**  
By Shannon Carpenter

**Vodka Vérité**  
By Sarah Sipple



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Photo by Sophia Lail



Resurgence of DJ culture rises in response to algorithmic solitude

Kansas City's DJ scene is still alive and well, five years after the pandemic could have put a screeching halt to the niche subculture. But now the culture isn't quite so niche. A new wave of local DJs have been taking over the bar and club scene in the metro, creating spaces where IRL connections can electrically come to life. The sets change, but the vibes remain the same—allowing people to forget the stress and worry that lingers outside the front doors of the venue by getting their boogie on for a few hours. Scan this QR code to check out some of the new names behind the mixers and sound systems.



Courtesy Photo



Rachel McCarthy James' book *Whack Job* traces the history of axe murder from prehistory to the present

In a sprawling new book—following up 2017's *The Man from the Train: The Solving of a Century-Old Serial Killer Mystery*—Lawrence author Rachel McCarthy James cuts to the roots of human ingenuity, violence, and cuts a clear path through history via an unexpected narrator. *Whack Job: A History of Axe Murder* examines the creation of the instrument, its applications across time and continents, and what it teaches us about who we are as humans today. It's an exceptionally well-researched tome that somehow has approachable beach-read vibes atop a



highly academic text. James' singular voice and conviction to a hyper-specific subject matter make for our favorite local read of 2025. Found out why in our back-and-forth with the scribe.

Courtesy Photo



American Horror Story and Glee alum Cheyenne Jackson takes the Folly for Pride

When Cheyenne Jackson steps onto a stage, the man doesn't just glow, he shines. This June, Kansas City gets a front-row seat to that star power as the Emmy- and Grammy-nominated actor and singer graces the historic Folly Theater for a one-night-only performance to celebrate Pride Month. Known for his powerhouse Broadway vocals and magnetic charm, Jackson is the kind of performer who turns a concert into a full-blown experience. Whether he's belting out Sondheim or crooning a Sinatra classic, he's got the rare ability to make an entire room feel like it's sharing an inside joke. On June 13, KC audiences will see the storyteller up close, unplugged, and unfiltered. Check out our interview with him at the link.



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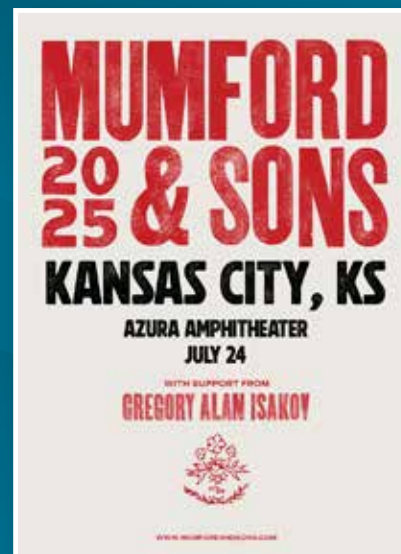
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Nick Spacek

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## Little Village Creative Services

Jordan Selligren

## Contributing Editor

Joe Ellett

## Editorial Designer

Teddy Rosen

## Staff Reporters

Jake Louraine, Shea McGraw

## Contributing Writers

Tiffany Watts, Beth Lipoff, Kristen Thomas, Travis Meier, Jordan Baranowski, Michael Mackie, Kaylynn Mullins, Barb Shelly, Adrian Torres, Zoe Strohm, Emily Wheeler, Nancy Le, Sophia Lail

## Contributing Photographers

Tarik Sykes, Isabella Galvan, Allison Scavo, Jordan Hirsekorn, Haley Mullenix, Stephen Fuller, Kylee Gregg

## VOICE MEDIA GROUP

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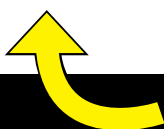
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## Letter from the Editor

PRIDE OR DIE  
By Brock Wilbur

Welcome, dearest readers, to the June 2025 issue of *The Pitch* print magazine, homegrown right here in Kansas City, U.S.A. We're thrilled to have you here and very excited to share our annual Pride-themed collection with you.

To circle back to my earlier mention of the U.S.A., I've been spending a lot of time reading up on the history of fascism and how it seeps in slowly, gradually poisoning hearts and minds and normalizing previously unthinkable horrors until everyday citizens become goddamned soulless monsters without ever realizing the transformation. What, the history of fascism's insidious encroachment isn't a part of your summer beach read pile? Hm. Well, there's plenty of time to hop on the train with me.

I've been focused less on how propaganda functions or how politicians twist their agendas, and instead, highlighting the role that history and literature play in the process. One of the most common go-to moves from successful dictatorships and corrupted warmongers in the past has been the banning of media. As members of the media, we here at *The Pitch* are always hyper-aware of what that means for us. But this is also true for everyone else who would consider themselves part of an educational pipeline. Librarians fighting back against censorship and the banning of books, teachers and schools who find themselves in the crosshairs between performative politicians and astroturfed protesters outraged that diversity and inclusion could have any place in (what is supposed to be) our shared history—They know what this looks like.

Yale professor Jason Stanley got me started on this hyperfixation with his aptly titled book *Erasing History*, which exposes the ways authoritarian regimes manipulate historical narratives to maintain power. He provides compelling examples from around the world, showing how political leaders restrict access to historical truths by banning books, censoring curricula, and criminalizing educators who challenge official narratives. Attacks on education and historical memory support authoritarianism, undermining public understanding of past struggles for justice. By showing how history is weaponized to advance political agendas, Stanley underscores the importance of preserving historical truth as a safeguard

against authoritarian rule.

It is this "attack on memory" that really transfixed me. That, and the idea that the end goal of erasing history is less about pretending real events never happened, but about eliminating the very idea that humanity's story involves multiple perspectives—so that moving forward, the experiences of one group can be fully ignored by others as an almost muscle memory reaction.

In the last five years at this job, I've watched as the importance of documenting and reclaiming KC's history has come to the forefront for so many people, groups, organizations, and movements. We spotlight the introduction of a Wikipedian in Residence at the KC Public Library, who was charged with helping interconnect disparate chunks of our culture with a digital information repository that was accessible by all. We've profiled the folks who are actively working to uncover and reclaim those parts of what built our city that... for whatever reason... are uncomfortable to sit with, or simply wiped clean from any official records, and so we're performing forensic anthropology on a region and its people.

Queer history is one of many lanes here that, unsurprisingly, was not documented well at its origin, was difficult to get folks to speak on during eras where their lives were endangered by doing so, and even as I write this, is facing new forms of erasure from cultural forces and the government alike. Any pushback on capturing and celebrating this fantastically complicated telling of who built our community and how is pushback on the idea of this community being considered human, and therefore worthy of their own perspective on history. To not reclaim and celebrate this is to surrender—now and moving forward—the inclination to ask or consider what matters, what helps, what harms, and what could elevate so many of our friends and neighbors, while honoring those who were never properly honored in their time.

That's one of the reasons Melinda Ryder graces our cover this month. Ryder is an award-winning drag queen who previously appeared on the cover of *The Pitch* in the summer of 1995. Yes, we're repeating a cover story 30 years later, and for very good reason. Ryder has been performing drag in this city for five decades. There are a lot of factors at play, but needless to say: Not many drag queens reign for this long. Not many of them survive for this long. Ryder's story takes her from finding her identity before the AIDS epidemic even hit, losing community, rebuilding community, and carrying a torch to light the way far, far into the future. Hers is not just a tale of individual artistic



triumph, but of defeating overwhelming odds to push this city towards being safer, more joyful, more accepting—and, to be honest, raising just a fuck-ton of money for charities of all stripes along the way.

When you hear about schools deciding to stop teaching the history of Black Americans and avoiding LGBTQ+ stories, you're often being fed a line about how we need to avoid keeping these things in the curriculum... in the name of bringing people together. That to teach the full history of slavery in this country and its struggles to make amends (even now) is somehow creating division by instructing white kids that they should feel shame. That to let students know that queer people exist and have contributions to society and exude love and kindness is somehow a step too far, too antagonistic to their beliefs (or their parents' beliefs) to even acknowledge that they are real human beings. That trans people don't exist or that they don't deserve basic human dignity.

All of these attacks, all being performed now (as ever) in the name of 'respect' and in pursuit of 'unity' is—as ever—absolute dog shit. Sure, erasing history to make yourself feel better is one way to create 'unity', just as burning down a city you don't like or kicking people out of a country certainly, technically, erases 'division'.

History is one of our greatest investments. It is our greatest defense against forces of evil or, at the most basic level, forces of incredible stupidity. Please join us in celebrating the *continued* life and times and joy of those who feel threatened today, because they won't be humanized until other humans stand up to loudly proclaim, "We're with them. They are us."

*Pitch in and we'll make it through,*

*Brock Wilbur*

P

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# The Once And Future Queen

**NOTHING CAN DRAG MELINDA RYDER DOWN AFTER FIVE DECADES CENTERSTAGE**

By Sophia Lail

**It's hard to erase a person—especially one who shines as permanently as Melinda Ryder.** Thanks to the mass erasure of queer existence in our nation's history, queer stories often find themselves in the underbelly of our country's historical documentation. The Museum of Kansas City took notice and is doing its part to ensure that the significance of the queer community remains prominent in the metro.

As I walked into the museum for the opening of local drag queen Melinda Ryder's exhibit at The Museum of Kansas City, titled *Arrive As A Star. Leave As A Star*, I felt excitement in the air. Walking down the stairs to the exhibit, camera flashes were bouncing off the walls and an explosive chatter filled the room around me. It was then that I saw the stunning, elegant red-headed woman greeting everyone who entered, not only with a hug and a hello but with a photo as well—a professional photographer and all.

It was clear that when this woman entered a room, all eyes were on her. She *commanded* the confines. As cameramen and videographers wove through the crowd, I realized this was more than an exhibition opening. This was the celebration of someone's life's work, while they were still standing in the room. It makes you think, *Who is this, and what's her story?*

The lady of the hour, Melinda Ryder, made her way to a podium and addressed the crowd. "Thank you for coming! I got married here, you know," she says. "This is just so full circle."

The exhibit comprises a collection of costumes, images, and memorabilia that showcases the legendary career of Bruce Winter, who has performed for 50 years in Kansas City as the iconic Melinda Ryder.

This local legend has served the metro with a sickening mug since moving to Kansas City from St. Louis in 1975. After becoming an instant star in the KC drag scene, Winter has gone on to win multiple national drag pageantry titles, begin filming a documentary about his life, and meet his husband Kirk.

As videographers and photographers continued to document the event, it became clear that this team was working with John McCrite—the producer and director of Winter's documentary.

He has been enamored by Winter for a long time. "I went to see Melinda at Hamburger Mary's... She acted like she was a TV star. When she walked in, she walked in with sunglasses on. Her husband, Kirk, had a bag and was following her into her performances. I was like, 'Wow, she's a star on and

off the stage.' She was dressed up when she walked in, and then came in a different outfit, then changed again during the break."

McCrite has worked on a multitude of films, most recently 2024's *Pink Belt*—a documentary that follows the story of Aparna Rajawat, India's sixteen-time national champion in martial arts, and her mission to make India a safer place for women. After finishing the film, McCrite was looking to pivot. Then, he got a call.

"My best friend's daughter called me up and said, 'You're not going to believe who I

umentary into a reality, McCrite has been following Winter's life and has been actively documenting him since 2022. Something McCrite realized is that the identity of Melinda Ryder is now a collaborative project, coming to fruition by the efforts of not only Bruce Winter, but his husband Kirk Nelson as well.

"Kirk was the one that kind of looks like his manager, his makeup artist, his costume designer, and runs the show—He is the Wizard of Oz behind the scenes," McCrite says.

After being Winter's partner for over 40 years, their dynamic changed once Winter

was also happening in the '20s, the '30s, the '40s, and the Jewel Box really hit its stride as a drag club for straight people. It was kind of the predecessor to Hamburger Mary's that happened in the 1950s and '60s," McCrite says. "It moved to another place in the '70s, and Melinda performed there. So, Melinda is the link between the old drag—like from the '50s and '60s—to the current drag; She's a link between both worlds."

Melinda won Miss Gay Missouri 1979, Miss Gay Kansas City America 1982, Miss Gay Missouri America 1984, and 2nd Alternate to Miss Gay America 1985. She has dominated the local drag scene since the late '70s; It's hard to find someone who can say the same.

When Ryder first graced the stage in drag, it was a politically charged time in history. The Stonewall riots had occurred six years prior, and acted as a shift in queer history, as activism became more prevalent and set the stage for decades of social and legal change.

Yet, somehow, despite decades of success for the queer community, performing in drag today is more political than ever. As we begrudgingly enter the second era of this administration, the weight of the change in how society treats drag artists around the nation is being felt on a huge scale. Despite not thinking of herself as political, her career is consistently rooted in pushing for the betterment of all.

"When AIDS hit, I remember she would go and raise funds. The drag queens in Kansas City were raising funds for the Good Samaritan Project. I remember drag queens were... very powerful in the AIDS movement and bringing awareness to safer sex," McCrite says.

Today, you'll find Winter raising funds for a variety of causes. Winter and Nelson host charity drag bingo every Thursday at Hamburger Mary's, and each week they work to raise money for a different organization. According to McCrite, Hamburger Mary's has raised over \$8 million for the causes they've supported.

As his exhibit is up and running, and his work on his documentary is winding down, he still has a lot to look forward to. Currently, Melinda is working on her one-woman show titled *"Melinda Ryder; Still Here,"* as well as preparing for her role as Grand Marshal for Kansas City Pride, taking place the first weekend of June.

Fifty years ago, Bruce Winter introduced the world to a figure that could never be replicated—Melinda Ryder. Today, she's still performing. Her mark on Kansas City? Eternal. **2**



Photo by Sophia Lail

work with.' It was Melinda Ryder. She said, 'I went into the kitchen, and I saw Melinda's picture all over the refrigerator, and then I met Bruce.' I fanboyed out—'Is Melinda Ryder still performing shows?' She has really seen everything in the modern gay movement in their lifetime; She was there when drag was illegal, there when the AIDS epidemic happened, but also able to get married legally to the person they loved."

Our society has missed out on the presence of tons of wonderful queer folk that were victims of HIV and AIDS. To this day, it is still unfortunately rare to meet somebody with this much queer performing experience under their belt and is still here to tell the story and influence on such a scale.

Since pushing to turn talks of a doc-

suffered from cancer multiple times, as well as undergoing rounds of stem cell transplants. So, Nelson stepped up to the plate to allow Winter to continue his passion as a performer.

"For many years, I did all my own stuff. But then, when I beat cancer three times... Kirk said 'I need to start doing your beat.' I do makeup that looks good enough, but he does makeup that looks beautiful. He just said, 'I'm just gonna do it for now on, make sure you look good.' I'm very lucky that I have a husband who is very into it. He makes all my costumes, and he does my hair and my makeup," Winter says.

Kansas City's queer history can be traced back to the genesis of the metro itself.

"Drag was a big thing in the 1800s. It

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# SNUGGLE SESH

PROFESSIONAL CUDDLING IS AN INCREASINGLY POPULAR  
CAREER FOR A TOUCH-STARVED CRISIS

By Shannon Carpenter

## Who are professional cuddlers?

It's hard to ignore the existential crisis that is ongoing in a lot of our lives at the moment. Maybe a boyfriend took off with your best friend, a girlfriend needed to discover herself in Cancun with Julio, or your roommate can't respect the refrigerator rules. Oh, and also the Gestapo is a thing again.

In a world of distance and digital loneliness, the professional cuddler is there to give you what society sometimes can't: a connection to another human being.

"I started by cuddling NICU babies," says Keeley Shoup, a professional cuddler and CEO of the cuddle service Cuddlist. "Then, one day, I heard about professional cuddling and went to a cuddle party. It was a group event and the first hour was about communication, how to set boundaries, and ask for consent." From there, Shoup decided to truly change the world, and, in 2015, started Cuddlist—an online platform that allows professional cuddlers to connect with clients.

To get started as a professional cuddler for Cuddlist, you must become certified. This is a two-week intensive online and in-person class whose topics include how to cuddle, set boundaries, and have open communication. They also perform background checks on their cuddlers.

Over the years, Cuddlist has taught therapists, massage therapists, and other professionals who wish to expand their services. There are real health benefits for clients who are touch-starved. A good cuddle can help lower your blood pressure, improve heart health, increase oxytocin, and reduce the symptoms of stress and depression.

There is no doubt that the service is needed. There's a cultural focus on a male loneliness epidemic and high suicide rates. Women, people of color, and the LGBTQ+ community face their own specific heightened sources of isolation—not to mention the toll that COVID has taken on consistent physical connection.

It's safe to say that all of us are craving the real, the physical connection, but are having trouble finding it.

"We help a lot of those that are struggling with grief, such as the loss of a spouse," says Shoup, who still has a full roster of clients. "Also, men and women that are ca-

reer-focused and can't devote their full attention to a relationship but still need the benefit of touch."

Other clients include those who have been the victims of sexual assault and want to reintroduce touch in a safe and appropriate setting such as a therapist's office. Or maybe you have just moved to a new place and the loneliness has sunk in. Whatever the reason, the demand is obviously there.

Once a session is booked, there is a process to follow that includes an online meeting between the cuddler and the client. Here, each has a chance to communicate with the other about expectations. Many cuddlers take in-call or out-call appointments, meaning the cuddler's place or the clients. Some even offer virtual cuddling which is a two-hour comforting conversation.

At the first physical meeting, the initial ten minutes are spent going over boundaries and the process.

"The way I put it is that boundary is the fence around the playground," Shoup says. This can be where to put hands, what positions the cuddler feels comfortable with, and expectations. Each session usually lasts an hour. And depending on your preferences, there are a lot of cuddle positions to choose from.

The 'zipped' cuddle is each person sitting next to each other while their legs are intertwined, thus creating a zipper. The 'stargazing' cuddle is both participants on their back, often holding hands, and looking up at the ceiling. This type of cuddle promotes conversation and security. And of course, the ever-popular 'spooning,' especially for those who never get a chance to be a little spoon.

On Shoup's TikTok channel (@yourcuddletherapist), she shows a position called the 'heartbeat'—one partner sits upright, the other sits next to them, turns their body into the client, and places their head up against their client's heartbeat. She even shows where all the arms are supposed to go without crossing boundaries.

One of the largest aspects of cuddling the consent and limitations of the action. Critics may even sometimes falsely classify this as sex work given the intimacy. It's a question that Shoup has gotten plenty of times before.

"There is some confusion," she says.



Art by Teddy Rosen

**"The way I put it is  
that boundary is the fence  
around the playground."**

She explains that a professional cuddler is healing a need and there is no sexual contact. And when a client does cross a boundary?

"This doesn't happen often. We redirect hands or actions when it gets uncomfortable at first. If that fails, we then talk about what about the action is wrong. At that point, the cuddler makes a decision to end the session or not."

The way Shoup looks at this is that "remembering and setting a boundary is giving someone kindness. I celebrate those boundaries, and, 80% of the time, it's because people are uncomfortable with touch."

Shoup recommends that clients ask if their cuddler has certification or if they specialize in certain demographics. For example, some cuddlers specialize in vets, elder care, grief and loss, or disabled populations. Knowing that someone understands your circumstances without needing to voice it

can be a great comfort to many clients.

She also recommends asking why the cuddler does this service. For Shoup, it's about providing comfort to those who need it most. It's a form of therapy that is often unacknowledged, yet extremely necessary.

There are several websites here in Kansas City where you can find a professional cuddler. Cuddle Companions, Cuddle Comfort, and of course, Cuddlist. Prices can range anywhere from \$65 an hour to \$150 with a two-hour minimum. If that's not enough, some offer overnights or to be your travel companion for a weekend.

There may be embarrassment attached to reaching out for the first time, but Shoup emphasizes that there shouldn't be. To be in need of physical touch to help cope with our world is not only normal but should be encouraged. And professional cuddlers like Shoup are more than happy to make it happen. **P**



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# TALK DERBY TO ME

EIGHT-WHEELERS ROLL WITH THE PUNCHES

By Emily Wheeler

**Kansas City is a town known for its sports—football, baseball, soccer... we've got it all.** But a little off the radar is a crew doing their own thing, on eight wheels.

Skater-run, hard-hitting, and no fluff, the Kansas City Roller Warriors have been sliding on all eights for 20 years now.

The league was founded in 2004 by a small group of passionate derby players. "They wanted to create an empowering and competitive space through the sport of roller derby," says Taylor Sifford, the league's marketing officer.

That vibe stuck. Now, it's a full-on league with three home teams—Strawberry Hellions, Midtown Misfits, and 18th & Vines. They also have two travel teams—the All Stars and Plan B—that take on leagues around the country under the Women's Flat Track Derby Association banner.

Even when the skates are off, the Roller Warriors stay busy. Community drives, local orgs, LGBTQ+ events—you name it.

"We foster athleticism, leadership, and community," Sifford says. "We're about inclusivity and teamwork—building strength, on and off the track."

Sometimes that means personal wins, like finding your people. "This league changes lives," Sifford says. "We've seen folks go from never skating to full-on athletes."

Brooke Shuey, aka Spanky, got her start with roller derby in a junior league. She skated through middle and high school

but took a break for a few years in college.

Now a Strawberry Hellion, she made her derby comeback last year. "It's like coming up for air again," says Shuey. "There's a certain mindset people in roller derby have. It's a collective community of inclusivity, friendliness, and queerness, which I really love."

Especially in a place where finding that kind of community can be tough. "It's women-led and gender-expansive," she says. "A lot of queer people don't feel like they fit in with normal cultural things in America, especially in the Midwest. So these kind of niche groups of people are where we all kind of find each other."

Libby Semler, aka Pound Cake, joined two years ago after her sister signed up.

"I couldn't let her do something cooler than me," she says with a laugh. She and her sister CJ, aka Sailor Doom, both play on the Strawberry Hellions.

The sisters had been skating around during COVID lockdowns, but derby was a whole different game.

"I was hooked in theory, but I was not very good at first," says Semler. "I had some fear. I was a little wishy-washy. But I kept going. I joined my team and met my friends."

Now, she's all in. "I think the people make it unique," she says. "There are people from totally different walks of life, so many ages doing this. It feels more supportive than any other sport I've done. Ev-

everyone is just here to have fun."

"It's not about being perfect," Semler says. "It's about showing up and having fun." And that seems to be the sentiment

across the board. Twice a year the league has training for those who are derby-curious. The program includes juniors, referees, non-skating officials, and volunteers. It's a whole ecosystem dedicated to having fun and simply trying your best.

So what's even the point of roller derby? Two teams compete during each jam, which is a two-minute period. The objective is for the jammer to score points by lapping members of the opposing team to score a point. Blockers try to shut them down. It looks like chaos, but it's chess on wheels.

And yes, a bruise or two is inevitable. On a bad day, maybe a broken leg. "A lot of people won't say 'break a leg' before a game, because even though it's not common, it's not uncommon," says Shuey.

The teams hold weekly practices and scrimmages. For the Strawberry Hellions, each practice is led by a different team member. Practices are all about rolling with the punches—fine-tuning techniques, practicing plays, and hanging out with friends. It's about hitting the ground skating but sharing a few laughs along the way.

Home bouts run from fall through summer at Memorial Hall in KCK—two games a night. Tickets start at \$15, a pretty good deal for a wild show. The pinnacle of the season? The Rink of Fire—the league's annual championship.

About 100 active members keep it all rolling—skaters, volunteers, scorekeepers, everyone pitches in.

"It takes a village," Sifford says. "We're fully skater-run. Nobody's on the sidelines." **P**



Photos by Joe McClendon



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# Calloway's Career Catapult

KC G.I.F.T. INVESTS IN ENTREPRENEURS FROM CONCEPT TO CONQUEST

By Emily Wheeler

**KC G.I.F.T. (Generating Income For Tomorrow) is equipping Black entrepreneurs with the tools, funding, and mentorship needed to build sustainable businesses.**

Through a dual approach—direct financial support and hands-on technical assistance—KC G.I.F.T. offers grants to Black-owned businesses in historically redlined neighborhoods. In addition, it operates a Business Center open to all entrepreneurs. In just five years, the organization awarded \$1,839,000 in grants to Black-owned businesses, supported 77 entrepreneurs on Kansas City's East Side, and helped create 135 new jobs with an average hourly wage of \$16.06.

But KC G.I.F.T. isn't just a grantmaker—it's a hub for sustainable business development. In addition to financial capital, its Business Center offers free mentorship, training, and back-office support to help business owners grow with confidence and strategy.

"We're not just giving money, we're giving strategy," G.I.F.T. Co-Founder Brandon Calloway says. "The grant money allows them to implement a plan, and the technical assistance helps them deal with the challenges of success."

For local entrepreneur Ritchie Cherry, the resources available through KC G.I.F.T. laid the foundation for his wellness business, BOXOUT Stress. Cherry received a \$15,000 grant in November 2022 and credits G.I.F.T. with accelerating his growth as an entrepreneur.

"I see them as an extra hand to help lead the business in the right direction," Cherry says. "It definitely brought a lot of exposure to my brand. I'm able to reach out to other networks and organizations all because of G.I.F.T."

Beyond the financial support, Cherry takes full advantage of G.I.F.T.'s Business Center services. "I got a business coach that I can meet with to help me scale up my business and find other ways to bring



Photo Courtesy of KC G.I.F.T.

in revenue," he says. "I've been able to use the photography services that they offer, so I don't have to go out and purchase that expensive equipment—that and the web designing, to get my site started."

"That's what I'm looking at them as—an extra hand to help... lead the business in the direction that it is," Cherry adds.

The idea for KC G.I.F.T. was born in the Black Owned Business Kansas City Facebook group in April 2020. It all came together when Calloway saw a post from Houston-based Kansas City native Chris Stewart, who proposed that, if the 15,000 group members donated just \$10 a month, they could collectively fund Black businesses without waiting on outside institutions.

At the time, Calloway was the Director of Volunteer and Donor Engagement at United Way. He saw parallels between Stewart's proposal and United Way's donation model. After reading the post, Calloway reached out. "I sat there for an hour thinking of all the ways this idea wouldn't work," he says. "Then I came up with a solution for each one of those things."

He couldn't let it go. "If you have a solution for a community and you don't do anything about it, how is that different from actively tearing the community down?" Calloway asks.

Stewart suggested Calloway bring on Cornell Gorman, and within five days of Stewart's post, the paperwork to launch KC G.I.F.T. had been filed.

To better understand business owners' needs, the founders conducted surveys across Kansas City. They identified three grant levels—\$10,000, \$25,000, and \$50,000—designed to meet businesses where they are.

These early outreach attempts and surveys were met with excitement from business owners, but also a bit of skepticism. "There's a really rich history of people saying they want to do something for a Black community, and then that never

happens," says Calloway.

Despite early uncertainty, KC G.I.F.T. quickly proved its commitment. Just three months after the organization was founded, it awarded its first \$10,000 grant to Ruby Jean's Juicery. The nonprofit began distributing monthly grants after that. "People saw we meant what we said," says Calloway.

Calloway emphasizes a critical distinction: G.I.F.T. offers grants, not loans.

"Grants instead of loans allow us to be intentional about propelling businesses forward so we can close the wealth gap," he says. "We're not using the same financial products that helped create that gap in the first place."

To apply, businesses must meet four basic requirements: be at least 51% Black-owned, located east of Troost Avenue, have generated revenue for at least three months, and submit a detailed growth plan.

The organization's focus on the East side of Kansas City is intentional. It's an area with a 75% Black population with 36% poverty. Kansas City's population on the West side of Troost is 91% white, with 5% poverty.

"It's a huge gap, a real big gap," Calloway says. "135 new jobs in four years is great, but if we're gonna do our part in closing that gap, we gotta take a bigger bite out of that pie."

KC G.I.F.T. aims to deepen its impact by expanding its donor base to 15,000 monthly contributors—a goal that would allow the organization to dramatically increase its grantmaking and programming.

Eventually, G.I.F.T. hopes to gain enough donor support to expand its area of focus to KCK.

"There are a lot of other areas in the city that have the same challenges," Calloway says. "We are hyper-focusing on the East side right now so we can have an impact here. We don't want to spread too soon and lessen that impact." ■

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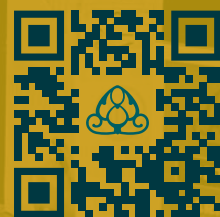
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# Cult Classics & Craft Cocktails

THE ART OF A GOOD TIME

By Sarah Sipple

**Action!** For a few short months, the intersection of cult classics and craft cocktails happens to rest in a former Crossroads bank. Fern Bar's seasonal menu draws inspiration from television and films, including a clever partnership with Screenland Armour Theatre.

To follow a winter of music references that guided the Fern FM menu, enter: Video Killed the Radio Star. Movies including *Singing in the Rain*, *Cool Runnings*, and *Rebel Without a Cause* demonstrate the film side, while *iCarly*, *Severance*, and *White Lotus* are represented as some of the television-themed drinks.

My picks? The shock-your-senses lime and vinegar Still No Pickles cocktail that nods—nay, shouts—of a *Spongebob* episode from season one; and the irresistibly juicy, beer-based cocktail that may leave you *Dazed and Confused*. Someone could probably design a personality assessment around people's choices here. I'm sure a similar BuzzFeed quiz already exists.

For each featured cocktail that a patron orders, they earn a punch on a themed punch card. When completed, the staff at Fern Bar will trade it out for a gift card worth two free tickets to Screenland Armour.

When Fern Bar's owner Bryan Arri first reached out to Adam Roberts at Screenland, the theatre owner was instantly interested. "My response was 'abso-freakin-lutely!' We're always looking for new ways to join forces with other local businesses and this one is a favorite of mine. It's run by great people with a unique bar program. Anytime we can cross streams, it's good for both of our audiences," says Roberts. I'll leave you to hunt for his myriad film references there.

## LET'S HEAR IT FOR THE CREATIVES

Something struck me, besides the playful cocktails and reward system. (But seriously, it's like the reverse of earning a personal pan pizza as a kid from reading books through BookIt... now you drink a lot and earn yourself a movie day!)

The art of it all.



Photo by Jon Hargett

Art shines through aspects of this project—and the two featured businesses—where others wouldn't have thought to add it. Or, wouldn't have chosen to invest.

Glassware and garnishes are over the top. A glossy handheld menu—complete with a QR code that directs patrons to a custom Letterboxd page. The colorful punch cards and custom hole punch that is traded in for a Screenland gift card, which itself dons a one-of-a-kind logo. High-quality video and photo content for

the bitters used in *Toke About It* (*Dazed and Confused*) give a surprisingly accurate taste of Mountain Dew. The one-of-a-kind concoction was reverse-engineered by the Fern Bar bartenders.

"Each bartender was given full creative control over their film/show selection prior to pitching their cocktail idea. They were dedicated to watching many shows and films to gain inspiration, and flavors were based on pieces from the film," says Arri. "In life, all work can be art. We hap-

pen to make art with liquid and sell it (although hopefully with less pretension than how that sounded), and so we always try to surround ourselves with beauty."

ice-molders, painters, designers, growers, printers, writers, photographers, etc., can simultaneously build community while carving out a specific identity. Roberts also relies on design and creativity, and not just through the films he shows. "There's something to matching your aesthetic outside of your walls the same way as you do internally, that appeals to me," he says. "A lot of our materials have been created by employees or long-time friends—They get what we're doing here. And I love working with people to find an interesting way to create something, whether that's a menu, poster, or event—It's a lot more fun together."

In fact, Roberts encourages everyone to get a little more expressive. "If you aren't an artist but have an idea or vision, start by asking your employees, friends, or family if they know someone. I think it's good to acknowledge that you as the business owner are a creative, but you might not be artistically inclined."

## STILL ROLLING

Fern Bar's Video Killed the Radio Star menu will be available through June, but if the screen-inspired lineup speaks to you, there's a year-round solution. In the back of Screenland Armour is a bar that screams Blockbuster and '90s nostalgia. Rewind Video Dive is a 21+ bar that feels like a speakeasy, but instead of a moody, gilded style, patrons are met with neon lights, movie posters, and Nintendo.

Roberts believes there's room for both styles of bars, saying, "While the list of cocktails at Rewind Video and Dive isn't as deep as Fern's, our love of realized spaces and good hangs is."

Fern Bar is at 2041 Broadway Blvd, Kansas City, MO 64108. Screenland Armour is at 408 Armour Rd, North Kansas City, MO 64116. **P**



promotion. A new mural in the entryway... Fern Bar is not shy about investing in the details.

"We thrive when we live alongside and inside of art. It is one of the reasons we're so proud to call our corner of the Crossroads Arts District home," Arri says.

That isn't to say that the sugarcane and agave bar is all flash and no substance. They've got a few nominations and awards under their proverbial authentic, handmade leather belt. And the artful eye for detail and creativity can even be found in the glass itself.

Jalisco Gunpowder, a cocktail based on *The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly*, features an edible gunpowder element. And

pen to make art with liquid and sell it (although hopefully with less pretension than how that sounded), and so we always try to surround ourselves with beauty."

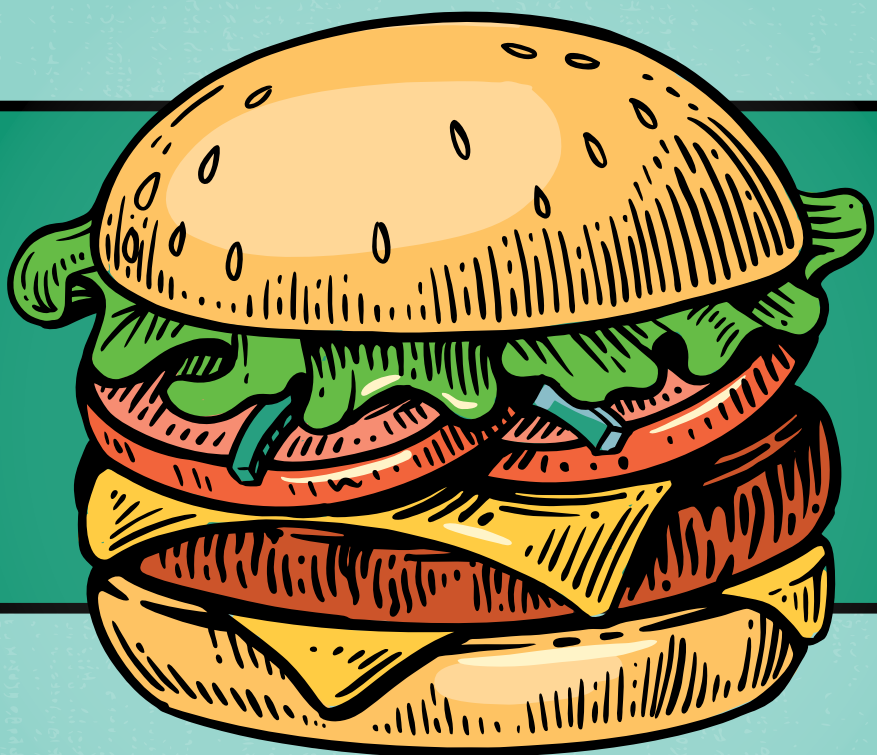
## IT REALLY IS THAT DEEP

While some places approach aesthetics through the lens of being the next "Insta-worthy" hot spot, creative expression and strong visuals can be much deeper. The human element is the core of this partnership—using art to communicate feelings and memories so that others can have a shared experience. Arri credits Jack Hatzfeld—the in-house Creative Director—with much of the visual experience at Fern Bar. Investing in local artists,

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## EAT THIS NOW

### HAPPY HOUR AT CAFE TRIO

By Tiffany Watts

Cafe Trio  
558 Main St  
Kansas City, MO 64111



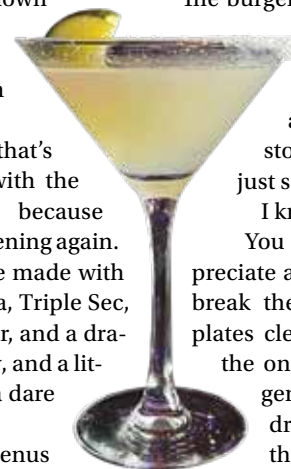
Photo by Tiffany Watts

A great happy hour, in my book, boils down to three things: tasty food, stiff drinks, and a tab that won't rattle you. Throw in a group of your favorite people catching up, and suddenly you're looking at a picture-perfect evening.

Perched above Main Street on the Plaza, with a view of the city buzzing past, Cafe Trio has happy hour down to a science: bold flavors, easy atmosphere, and drinks that keep pace with the conversation.

Speaking of drinks, that's where we started. I went with the Margaritinis (\$11), plural, because once you have one, it's happening again. These tasty little delights are made with Cazadores Reposado Tequila, Triple Sec, fresh lime juice, agave nectar, and a dramatic half salt rim. Tart, silky, and a little wild. They go down like a dare and taste like a reward.

Drinks in hand and menus



thoroughly scanned, I made my next move: The steak burger was calling.

I ordered a four ounce choice patty grilled just right, layered on a soft brioche bun, sharpened by crisp red onion, dill pickle, and finished with your pick of gooey cheese. Honestly, it was love at first bite. The burger was rich but not greasy, filling but not heavy, with fries that earn their spot on the plate: piping hot, deliciously crisp, and seasoned like they've got stories to tell. All of that food, for just seven bucks.

I know. Only \$7.

You really do have to pause and appreciate all the good moments that don't break the bank. Plus, by the time the plates clear and the last sips disappear, the only thing left to do is laugh, linger, and admit it: good food, strong drinks, and a cheap tab really is the trifecta. **Q**

## DRINK THIS NOW

### ODDLY CORRECT COFFEE

By Sarah Sipple

Oddly Correct Coffee Bar  
4141 Troost Ave  
Kansas City, MO 64110

There's nothing odd about wanting to spend a morning on a patio, soaking up the sun, sipping on an iced latte.

Oddly Correct is a Kansas City coffee roasting company with a tasting room at 42nd and Troost. On each of my visits, the shop boasts a line reaching or surpassing the front door. And partly because of that, this is not the spot to pop in for a quick drink to go. Service is accurate and friendly enough, but speed is not the priority.

For this visit, I paired a herbed cheddar scone (\$4.50) with an iced bourbon vanilla latte (\$5.25). And for the sake of switching it up, I tried macadamia nut milk. This combo offered the sweet and savory mashup that I love in the mornings, but didn't stop there.

While the latte didn't taste of bourbon, the sweetness was matched by a nutty and rich depth. Bourbon and macadamia took the front seat, which I was happy about since vanilla is such a common flavor in lattes. A hint of earthiness helped prime the senses for the fragrant herbed scone. Baked goods like this rotate

at Oddly Correct, but biscuits (including a vegan option) and the bourbon vanilla latte are long-term menu staples.

Between the large size of the scone and the way my cold drink helped offset the warmth of the sun-drenched patio seat, I could have spent hours relaxing at Oddly Correct. But why this spot, rather than the other few coffee shops with patios?

First, there's no wrong answer to enjoying your cafe of choice. Oddly Correct, however, has made public commitments to paying staff a livable wage, providing paid time off and healthcare access, in addition to implementing environmentally sustainable practices. That's correct. **Q**

Photo by Sarah Sipple



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**The Pitch**  
FOOD & DRINK

## Mise en Place

BRI BURROWS OF BIG RIP BREWING  
TALKS BEER, BIZ, AND BIG EVENTS

By Sarah Sipple

After a couple years of home-brewing and working as a bartender at The Big Rip Brewing Company in North KC, Bri Burrows worked her way up to head brewer before buying in as co-owner in 2020. Now, in addition to her creativity with brewing science, she helps ensure that Big Rip is a hotspot for the queer community.

Events like Nerd Night, Queer Dyke Night, Queer Craft Night, and more provide a welcoming space for drinkers and non-drinkers alike. In fact, whether you stop by Big Rip on a whim or attend an organized event, your hang can be supplemented by Hawg Jaw BBQ next door.

Burrows has a sweet spot for lagers, but the menu has a wide variety of beers, meads, wine, seltzers, liquor, and n/a options. In this Q&A, she teases a summer brew that's equal parts fresh and feisty.

**The Pitch: What are some of the biggest differences between operating in 2025 versus 2016?**

Bri Burrows: One of the big things that we notice is that it used to be a lot easier to predict people's behavior. We would be like, 'Oh, it's gonna rain. No one's gonna come in,' or, 'Oh, it's a really nice day, it's gonna be busy.' But now, no one knows. Also, we're a lot more intentional with cleanliness. We still fill glass growlers of beer, but we don't just take the customer's glass and fill it back up for them.

**When you visit other breweries, do you have a repeat order that you like to compare/contrast, or do you order a flight to try a variety?** I typically just order a lager. It says a lot about the brewery. If the lager is really clean and easy drinking, then you know that probably the rest of their beers are going to be good as well, because it's one of the more difficult beers to make.

**So that's a green flag. What about red flags?** One red flag for me is if I go to the bathroom and it's dirty, then I start thinking about what else in the brewery might be dirty. Are they cleaning their lines? A bathroom is a really easy thing to take care of. A green flag is if the bartenders are really nice.

In my column a few months back, I included your Old Gregg-themed mead because I appreciated the obscure reference. Would you define your



Mise En Place is a series of questions, answers, recommendations, and culinary wisdom from the food and drink masters that push KC flavor further. The following answers have been edited for length and clarity.



**THE BIG RIP BREWING COMPANY**

216 E 9th Ave, North Kansas City, MO 64116

Photos by Candace Bruce and Lava Dreams

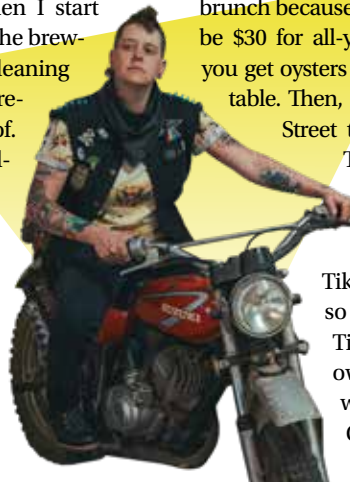
**overall strategy as trying for broad appeal or nicheing down?** When it comes to naming and branding our beers and meads, it's definitely more of a niche thing. I love it when I can name something after some obscure one-off quote from a movie, and people get it—That makes me feel awesome.

**What are some of your more popular brews in the summer?** Our kolsch is essentially an ale, but super similar to a lager—super light and easy. I'm going to take a couple kegs of The Killer and put watermelon jalapeno in it. People love that one. It flew off the shelves.

**You frequently host a variety of Queer-focused events. What can readers look forward to this summer?** June 20 is our one-year anniversary party for Queer Dyke Night/Pride celebration. We usually get between 500 to 600 people from 9 p.m. to 1 a.m., with DJs, extra bars set up, food trucks, and this year we'll have some go-go dancers. It's a really fun party for the more sapphic side of the LGBTQ community.

**What is your perfect day of eating or drinking in Kansas City?** I would choose it to be a Sunday when Jarocho is having brunch because it's cheap (as in price)—maybe \$30 for all-you-can-eat small plates, and you get oysters and a whole fried fish for the table. Then, going to Alma Mader or Vine Street to check out their new stuff. They both have good patios to sit on.

For drinks in the evening, I'd say Blue Palm Tiki in KCK. They do flights now, so you can get three different Tiki cocktails, and Roxy, the owner, is amazing. Dinner would be at Lula Southern Cookhouse. **[P]**





# MISSOURI'S GREAT OUTDOORS: MDC MAKES NATURE EASY FOR EVERYONE

Whether you're a seasoned hunter, a first-time birdwatcher, or just someone looking for a little peace and quiet under an oak tree, the Missouri Department of Conservation (MDC) is here for you ...

... and that's something every Kansas Citian should know.

"Our job is to protect and manage Missouri's fish, forests, and wildlife," says Erin Woodiel, MDC's Media Specialist for Kansas City and Northwest Missouri. "But, just as importantly, we help people enjoy and learn about those natural resources."

And enjoy it, they do.

MDC makes getting outdoors easy and inviting with free events, family programs, and classes on everything from fly fishing to native plant gardening. Want to try your hand at archery or learn the difference between a redbud and a red oak? There's a program for that.

For those new to hunting or angling, MDC offers beginner-friendly, expert-supported opportunities like managed hunts and even fishing clinics. "We want to make it accessible," Woodiel says. "There's no pressure, just support."

*Beyond the fields and forests, MDC's urban outreach is thriving. Nature centers like Burr Oak Woods in Blue Springs and the Anita B. Gorman Discovery Center in the heart of Kansas City bring the outdoors close to home with birding challenges, urban hikes, art classes, and even adult summer camps.*

All of this ties into MDC's embrace of the "One Health" concept—a philosophy that links a healthy environment to healthy wildlife and healthy people. Clean air, clean water, and thriving ecosystems benefit all Kansas Citians, physically and emotionally.

"The healthier our environments are, the more humans can go out and enjoy the outdoors. It's so good for people's mental health," she adds. "Just getting out in nature and getting away from screens is vital. It's a chance to get away from the stress of your day, but there's also so many opportunities to be with other people."

At the end of the day, MDC wants Missourians to see nature not as a far-off destination, but as a neighbor. "We own about 3 percent of the land in Missouri—and it's all public," Woodiel explains. "You don't have to go far to find beauty, peace, or your next adventure."

*From conservation experts to community partners, MDC's mission is a collective one. "We couldn't do this without the support of the public," says Woodiel. "All Missourians deserve easy access to the great outdoors."*

For events, tips, and more ways to explore, visit [mdc.mo.gov/kansascityevents](https://mdc.mo.gov/kansascityevents).

Sponsored by Missouri Department of Conservation/Written by Michael Mackie



Photos by Kelly Bowers

# YARD ACT

**BANDS BUILD A BRIDGE TOWARD REHABILITATION AT LANSING CORRECTIONAL**

By Nick Spacek

It's a gorgeous Thursday evening in May. I'm sitting next to a stage as Lawrence musicians Melvin Litton and Mando Dan Herreck warm up the crowd spread out on the lawn in front of them. There's a light breeze as the sun begins heading down, giving the stage that golden hour lighting. You couldn't ask for a better setting for a couple hours of roots music, which will also include sets from singer-songwriter Megan Luttrell and country troubadour Outlaw Jake Mandrell.

The smell of wet, trampled grass and the faint odors of food wafting on the breeze, coupled with live music lends an aura of a county fair or music festival. But the crowd here is

clad in white t-shirts or gray crewneck sweat-shirts, blue jeans, with red hats. Those crew-necks have big names and numbers across the back. If you lift your gaze to the opposite side of the grassy expanse, you'll see a group of men working out, while a few run laps on the track that surrounds the yard.

This is Lansing Correctional Facility. There are security measures like armed guards and barbed wire atop the fence surrounding the yard; That summer festival vibe is brought crashing back to Earth. Well, almost. Against all odds, there is still the typical group of dudes standing in a far off corner, playing hacky sack. That constant remains.

Since 2024, Lansing Correctional has played host to what might be the most 'exclusive' concert series in the area. Every Thursday, musicians gather on stage to perform for the incarcerated residents. It's an idea that came to Warden Jesse Howes when he was the deputy warden at the El Dorado Correctional Facility.

"I came here and I talked to my team," reflects Howes. "With our Deputy Warden Nicolaus Ball and Marcy Konkader and all her great volunteers just took it and ran—All of a sudden, boom, here we are. They're human beings, I'm a human being. We can all agree on the positivity of music, even if our situations in the world are opposites elsewhere. It's important that we can remain tethered together in whatever small ways we can."

Residents told me the Thursday night concerts are completely free of issues, as nobody wants to be to blame for losing the music should something go awry. As one of them who was helping with the show put it: "You'd have 1900 guys and they'd all be upset with you. You don't want that kind of attention."

This particular concert had at least 280 residents in attendance, which was an estimate on the lighter side of the average. One man made sure to point out to me the sheer number of folks lining up outside the cafeteria, so that they could still catch the sounds of the artists while they waited for dinner.

Kelly Bowers organizes and books the Thursday evening performers.

"They originally gave me three months: June, July, August," Bowers recalls. "But it went so well, we continued from June to December."

The first show featured Outlaw Jake Mandrell, who was an instant hit. Mandrell remarks that the Lansing residents make him feel "like

a rock star," and their response when he steps onstage only emphasizes that statement.

One resident quipped: "How'd Outlaw Jake get in here? This is a gated community."

Since its inception, word of mouth has turned the Lansing Correctional Facility into a popular venue among performers who want to give back. As Howes heard from the band Superball after their gig: "Sometimes we play in a bar to like three drunk people. Here, you've got 200-plus folks who are here to listen to you and grateful for it."

"It only took me like a week and a half to book the place," says Bowers of this year's shows, which are scheduled through October. "I was just

amazed because it was like, 'Man, it's a Thursday night, it's not a paid gig, you gotta bring your own shit,' but everybody's like, 'Hell yeah, I'll do it,' because Johnny Cash played there in the '70s."

That said, "Folsom Prison Blues" is off the table, as the residents do not find it amusing.

As a correctional facility, the stated intent of the program is to focus on rehabilitation of residents so they can re-enter society as better, functional members. This eye toward the future does little to cover for the stigma surrounding incarcerated persons, and that creates complications.

"A lot of people think that prison residents don't deserve good things and don't deserve to be treated like human beings," acknowledges Bowers, explaining that any images shared from these shows require a lot of editing to make sure that no individuals can be identifiable.

"They are here, doing time, for harm they've done on the outside. This is a system built to pay their debt back to society, but that doesn't undercut their humanity. Cruelty adds nothing." **P**



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# BREAKING INTO LESBIAN CULTURE

**Understanding the full spectrum of human sexuality is complicated and nuanced.** The judgmental type might call it 'trendy' to play with labels for gender, orientation, or relationship structures. But consider that the people taking on a new label are seeking solace and camaraderie, and they want to embrace a newfound understanding of themselves.

While there is more space to be queer overall in our culture, heteronormativity remains the default setting. 10 states have policies that affirm LGBTQ+ identities, and only six states require LGBTQ+ inclusive sexual health education, according to GLSEN. When no education or representation is accessed by young people at age-appropriate times, some gay kids are left wondering why they feel so different about dating, sex, and relationships than their peers.

That's how you end up being married to a man for nearly 25 years and wondering why women give you this panicked feeling and butterflies in your tummy, like love and relationship coach Heidi Oh. "I consider myself a late-in-life lesbian." Oh experienced a slow progression into acceptance

of her identity, first coming out to herself. "You have to undo some conditioning about living that heterosexual, cis, female life. So it took some time."

After a friend came to her expressing both her excitement at wanting to live authentically and date women, as well as her frustration over not knowing lesbian culture, Oh started a monthly meet-up group.

"Every subculture has its own rules—unspoken rules—and that's what she didn't know, and she had a really hard time inserting herself. That constant feeling of like... not sitting at the 'cool kids' table.' She felt like 'What do I have to do to be accepted? What do I have to do to be liked by you? I'm saying that I'm attracted to women, I want to date women, I want to be with women, but yet, you're rejecting me and I don't know how to get in there,'" says Oh.

Her support group is open to anyone who identifies as a late-in-life lesbian, yet she expressed she had some preconceived notions about who would attend. To Oh's surprise, it wasn't just Gen Xers or women post-divorce. It was also early to mid-20-year-olds who were just coming out. They

Photo by Nicole Bissey. Illustrations by Shelby Phelps

even felt like they were late to the party if they didn't recognize their true orientation sooner. She believes we have witnessed a generational divergence.

"You know how heterosexuality has that default? If you're born a woman, am a woman... No one told me I had to marry a man, but there wasn't another path lit up at all. But as the younger generations are coming up, they know there is another path," she says. Gen Z has barely known a world without marriage equality since SCOTUS' Obergefell v. Hodges ruling was in 2015.

Growing into same-sex attraction, no matter your age, is absolutely valid. The split attraction model also supports that we can be romantically attracted to one group

enforce pussy repulsion in our society in many ways. Oh says, "They are okay with their men thinking their pussy is gross. They are okay with their men making fish jokes."

How can you tell if someone you've met has pussy repulsion? "You kind of know by the way she talks, she's usually not confident talking about her body, or mine," says Kay of her experiences.

Another challenge is that newbies who have been immersed in heterosexual culture could also be making a fundamental mistake—treating a same-sex relationship like a hetero one. "There are a lot of women who come into lesbian culture and treat the lesbian relationship like the one they just got out of. If you have your blinders on like,

**"Break down those barriers that we all have inside of us that are preventing us from having connection and attunement with others."**

while being sexually attracted to another. Between context, conditioning, education, and wiring of our brains, we have a wide variety of desires and experiences.

"Our sexuality is on a spectrum. There is no 'I decided to be gay' or 'I chose to be gay', but there is a decision to stay in the closet. And to be clear, that's okay. [Coming out] is not the ultimate goal of every gay person. It's not even safe, especially now. And for some people, the closet was not a privilege for them," says Oh.

What can feel frustrating for late-in-life lesbians or bi/pansexuals is the gatekeeping by lesbians. Oh and Kay—a 44-year-old bisexual woman from Overland Park—both state they completely understand not wanting to be someone's experiment, to be approached by a couple, or to end up with someone who has pussy repulsion or internalized homophobia.

Oh says rejection of a newbie by a "gold star lesbian" can happen for all those reasons and more, yet it's interesting because, "most lesbians—at some point—had sex with a man, got close with a man, had a relationship with a man. I feel like it's really unfortunate because so many lesbians have been with men and then ostracize someone else for being where they were at one point."

When Kay directly asked why so many lesbians do not want to be with anyone other than a gold star lesbian, she says, "I got told it's a trust issue. It's the fear that if you've been with a man once, you'll be with them again."

Being afraid of or repulsed by women's genitals isn't usually based on notions of preference, it's usually a lack of education or internalized homophobia. Women can

"This is how relationships are," and take this into a lesbian relationship, you're gonna flounder," Oh says.

How can someone procure the knowledge to be in lesbian culture? Oh first recommends, if there's been trauma, take the time to heal and grow your self-awareness before jumping in. "Maybe you need to be debriefed from heteronormativity. Maybe you need to hang out in a lesbian space and be an observer," she says.

"Break down those barriers that we all have inside of us that are preventing us from having connection and attunement with others, empathy and compassion, it's all those things," says Oh. This is what is necessary for us to be available and ready for whoever comes into our life next.

Go to lesbian bars, Pride, or events with the Mid-America LGBT Chamber of Commerce. Find inclusive spaces where the entire LGBTQ+ community gathers. Challenge yourself to gain a deep understanding of what you want, free from the influence of your past. Have conversations with other people who are in the same situation, either online or in person.

Don't worry about talking someone into giving you a chance just because you've lived a different life than they have. Be yourself in your most unabashed form, and the right people will want to be in your life. 🍷

You can find Kristen @coach\_kristen\_ on Instagram or [openthedoorscoaching.com](http://openthedoorscoaching.com). Check out her podcast *Keep Them Coming*.





# Yes, We Cannabis

WE ARE JAINE LEVELS A LEAFY PLAYING FIELD THROUGH NETWORKING AND EMPOWERMENT

**As fresh as cannabis across various legal states is, statistics show that it still leans toward a male-dominated industry.** According to a 2021 report from MJBizDaily, only 22.1% of women in the cannabis industry held executive positions in 2021, which was a decline from 36.8% in 2019. The 2020 national average among all industries in the country was 29.8%.

We Are JAINE is a nonprofit aimed at empowering women, working to ensure that the Missouri cannabis industry remains as level a playing field as possible.

JAINE—which stands for Join, Achieve, Ignite, Network, and Empower—began as an early concept by a few Missouri women license holders and advocates during the medicinal years in the state and has grown through the legalization of recreational cannabis, now with over 170 members, both men and women.

The organization has four different annual membership plans that individuals, small businesses, and larger corporations in the space can get in on, each listed at \$100 per person (with a discounted \$1,800 for a twenty-person corporate package) that grant the member a variety of amenities.

Through different events, web seminars, and just being an overall hub for women looking for guidance, support, or varying perspectives regarding the market, We Are JAINE wants to be the central avenue for any woman looking to grow in the cannabis field.

Current JAINE Co-President Kassie Ferrero is no stranger to how cannabis markets operate. She got her feet wet in Maryland’s medicinal market before diving into Missouri’s recreational, now working as Principal Procurement Specialist for Calyx Peak—the parent company to Local Cannabis Co., Smackers, and Pinchy’s. Throughout her five-plus years of working within the field, she understands the different hoops and hurdles that women encounter, which led to her getting involved with JAINE in 2023.

“A lack of female presence” in the legal weed scene is what drives Ferrero’s work

with JAINE. “That space for women was really lacking. I mean, it was there, but it was small. And I do truly believe that we need to have a stronger space like that,” she says.

As Co-President, Ferrero services the West side of the state, whereas Co-President Lila Waier services the East side. Ferrero touches on the importance of holding events in cities across the state, specifically Southern Missouri.

“There’s a goal that we’ve accomplished—just getting more spread throughout the state and hosting more events, especially in the southern area,” she says. “It’s such an underserved area.”

Current JAINE Secretary and Marketing Committee Chair Nicole Castellano’s introduction to the organization was organic. After working in the Colorado cannabis industry, she moved back to St. Louis and later founded her marketing company Planty of Greenery, servicing local plant shops, dispensaries, CBD companies, and farmers. Her first client was a local garden center, The Garden Shop, owned by Lila Waier.

In 2023, Waier mentioned We Are JAINE to Castellano, gifting her a membership, and she has been all hands on deck since. She says that the number of connections she has received through networking with the group is inimitable.

“I’ve definitely made a lot of personal and professional connections, which has been great,” Castellano says. “I feel so connected to all these different women all over and it’s been really cool to learn their stories.”

She has taken what she learned from her experience in the Colorado cannabis space and brought that knowledge with her to the Show-Me State, which is about a decade behind in terms of market experience. Yet, despite its freshness, Castellano mentions that it is still a remarkably, incredibly booming service.

“Clearly, it’s still a younger market, but that doesn’t seem to be stopping the sales or the amount of product that keeps coming out,” she says.

Art by Keegan Hudspeth

Castellano spearheads much of the organization’s social media presence, website updates, event planning, and more. As far as their events go, We Are JAINE holds larger, informative gatherings as well as smaller, intimate smoke seshes when members are looking to blow off some steam.

Just at the end of May, the organization hosted its third JAINE in Bloom event at The Higher Event Space in Independence, where individuals came together to get more deeply intertwined with cannabis culture and knowledge, while also being able to take part in sound meditation, networking, and other fun activities.

This upcoming September, We Are JAINE is looking to tap into the younger demographic, hosting a cannabis career expo in Columbia, aimed at targeting University of Missouri students. While some Missouri universities have taken up cannabis courses to help educate young adults on the innovative and flourishing space, Mizzou does not yet offer any classes—another checkmark on what makes Columbia a solid fit for the conference.

“I hear from people who are coming out of college or in college that are intrigued and want to learn more,” Ferrero says.

JAINE’s reach goes much further than just knowledge spread in the Missouri market; There are members from many different states, along with international members. JAINE member and author of *Cannabis*



Photo Courtesy of We Are JAINE

Queens Melanie Wentzel is based in Brisbane, Australia. She met former Co-President Sarah Glasser in St. Louis and immediately wanted to join the group.

Ferrero values the fact that she and the other board members can provide a center for women looking to get more involved in the behind-the-scenes of cannabis. “You shouldn’t have to be a man. You shouldn’t have to have money. That shouldn’t be a contingency on success—I would love to see more places value hard work and good character.”

With their consistent meetings and broader congregations, We Are JAINE hopes to continue to be an all-encompassing intersection for knowledgeable cannabis-centered minds searching for ways to make Missouri, and overall cannabis industries better than the day before. ■



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Photo by Beth Lipoff



## TREASURE TROVE

**REPURPOSED RE-INVENTION AT MAGPIE  
CREATIVE REUSE COLLECTIVE**

By Beth Lipoff

**If you want to get crafty but don't have a big supply budget or a lot of experience, the Magpie Creative Reuse Collective might be the place for you.** The nonprofit specializes in pairing education with redistributing all kinds of materials.

"We teach classes that take the material we have available and in the class, people learn one way of upcycling or downcycling. We also teach repair, and we want to do more of that in the future," Magpie Director of Education Keli Campbell says.

Everything from pipe cleaner flowers and old t-shirt headbands to visible mending has been on its recent class list. For some classes, they'll hire local artists to teach, and some Campbell and others teach themselves. Anything's fair game for a project, even old microscope slides.

"We named it Magpie because, mythologically, magpies like to collect, so we're really about the collections bit. I think all of us who are volunteers like the idea of treasure collections. The whole idea about the magpie is that we're collecting special items, and not everything is trash—Some of it is treasure," Campbell says.

They've partnered with local libraries, the Girl Scouts, and other nonprofits to offer lessons. Classes for both kids and adults are on the schedule, and they meet in a variety of locations around the metro.

On Saturdays and Sundays, Magpie opens shop at 1522 Holmes St. from 12 p.m. to 4 p.m. to sell gently used craft supplies. For \$25, you can fill a large bag.

"We do some of the work to help keep things useful and available for people who

need those things," Campbell says.

And if you've got odds and ends from your own projects you want to get off your hands, they collect donations on Sundays from 12 p.m. to 3 p.m. and Wednesdays from 3 p.m. to 6 p.m. Between August 2024 and April 2025, they processed 10,390 pounds of donations, and they always need volunteers to help sort them.

"Because we're trying to serve artists and makers, we're willing to process stuff that's a little strange or bizarre or offcut. We know that creatives like a real diverse set of material to work with," Campbell says.

Recently, they had classes where they took old vinyl banners from various businesses and organizations and transformed them into crossbody bags.

Jennifer Tufts has volunteered with Magpie and also taken several classes. In one session, she learned how to make a witch's bell decoration for her door that involved making a paper collage and soldering pieces of glass together.

"Those were definitely skills I hadn't used before. It's amazing that, in a couple hours one night, I made this whole new work that I didn't even know how you made it before that night," Tufts says. "I definitely think that's something Magpie is great at doing is creating these sessions where an artisan gives you the information you need to kind of enter into their practice and then you can continue to learn from there."

Ultimately, Campbell says they'd like to get a permanent space for the store and for the various classes like the ones Tufts attended. That would allow them to get tools like a fabric granulator that can turn fabric scraps into filling for a stuffed animal.

"We want to make sure that artists and makers—if they're wanting to make products out of reused material—they have a regular supply of those materials. They have tools they need to transform those materials. They have the knowledge they need to transform materials. As we build, we're going to be building those resources as well," Campbell says.

She hopes to partner with more nonprofits in the metro area as the collective grows.

For more information about Magpie Creative Reuse Collective and its classes, visit [magpiecreativereuse.org](http://magpiecreativereuse.org).

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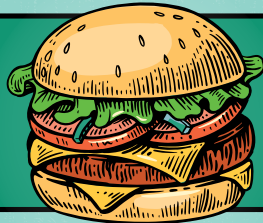
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