Crashing Through the Front Door is a culmination of photography, essays, and oral histories examining queer life in Indianapolis, Indiana through the lens of a once-a-month dance party. This is the story of how a chosen family finds triumph in the face of tragedy; grapples with gender, sexuality and identity in the midst of a cultural movement.

CRASHINGTHROUGHTHEFRONTDOOR

Taylor Rose & Casey No

PRINT tEXT

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with Indianapolis tattoo artist Brandon

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FOREWORD

Photographer Casey No and writer Taylor Rose met over a decade before the ideation of this project in southern Indiana. Though the town was small, and seeped in rural midwestern tradition, the two found a group of LGBTQ friends who were a safe haven. In fact, Casey was the first person Taylor came out to at the age of 16. Both developed their individual artistic crafts over the years, talking about doing a collaboration for several of them. When Low Pone, an Indy-based queer dance party, came to life the subject matter was clear — the two would chronicle the lives of their queer community as it intersected over one night every month.

Casey and Taylor are capturing a rare and novel movement in queer Indianapolis. One where much of the LGBTQ community is hungry for inclusion of all races, genders, non-genders, and expressions. On a sociological level, they are examining the need for public celebration of holistic queer existence by showing the vibrancy that comes from a space where queer people can unapologetically show their identities. Low Pone is doing something that's outside the norm in this city: It's creating a space for those who have felt displaced. *Crashing Through the Front Door* is capturing this historical queer moment of creation and community.

This is a story about how that one night becomes a sanctuary, paying homage to the idea of home, to a chosen family, to rising above the fragments that society bends us to fit neatly into their stackable boxes. This story is about finding triumph in the face of tragedy and refusing to be defined by it.

Low Pone crowd

CONCEPTION

Indianapolis is historically an unwelcoming place — at least for those who fall under the LGBTQ banner. In recent history the city praised itself for standing against anti-LGBTQ legislation. Addressing the actual inequalities in the state was masked by well-timed PR campaigns and used as an opportunity for businesses to tape a sign to their windows, saying that they "welcome all," while in the cracks of the sidewalk ran a disdain for those who do not fit the privileged promise of patronage.

In 2015, RFRA (the Religious Freedom Restoration Act), enacted with the help of the malicious ideology of then-governor Mike Pence, brought a fiscally conscious legislature to its knees when a law reared its head to staunchly proclaim that any business owner could refuse service to whomever they chose. The result was a slew of socially conservative businesses boldly stating that they would not cater to LGBTQ weddings. The strife caught national attention at the time, and again when Mike Pence later hovered over his over his assigned X on the stage that's reserved for the Vice President of the United States, slightly to the left of Donald Trump, raising his hand to be sworn into office.

(It should be noted that this is not a political story, but it's only the naive who say that the existence of queer people in the midwest is not political by default. The mere act of walking down the street, using a bathroom of choice, using correct names on job applications, or simply existing within our own community, is a political act of defiance within a system that would see us destroyed.)

Aside from a political context, it is well documented that the cards have rarely been stacked in favor of the safety and health of queer people in the Midwest. Indiana has the third highest teen suicide rate in the nation and the highest in LGBTQ youth suicide rates. It's one of only five states that does not have legal protection against hate crimes. As a state, Indiana also does not have teeth against discriminatory housing practices, nor protection against harassment and bullying of students based on

sexual orientation and gender identity, nor protection for queers in the workplace, nor does it provide healthcare to transgender state employees. The result is a an often harsh, rural state, and nested in it a fairly liberal bubble of the capital. Indianapolis is a crucible of art, activism, segregation, and misogyny — and all are alive and well within the queer community.

Within a 4 year timespan as many LGBTQ establishments closed their doors, effectively displacing many of our city's queer residents from events that they considered safe spaces. This void was the impetus for Carrie Keel to create a once-a-month dance party called Low Pone.

The event was inspired through travels Carrie made with her wife, Jaime Reynolds, where they saw shows that welcomed performers outside of the gender binary, shows that were more than the traditional rhinestone drag queens singing Celine Dion. They would come home and discuss why there was nothing like that in Indy.

Eventually talking wasn't enough. Carrie sat down with Zac Crain and Trent Bush — whose drag names are Mary Fagdalane and Auntie Christ — in a little chocolate cafe in the heart of downtown.

"We instantly vibed and we were just talking about ideas and kind of bouncing ideas back and forth and we got the date for the first show and everything kind of started coming together," says Zac. "When it [Low Pone] happened it was just like really cool and I think we were all kind of shocked because there were over 100 people there... It was just really amazing. Since then, Low Pone has taken on a whole new meaning for me... It has obviously changed my life, and I've seen that it's changed other people too. So now when I think about it, it's something that I feel like I needed and a lot of other people needed it too.

"I needed it because Low Pone showed me a sense of community that I didn't really see or know before," says Zac. "I had my drag sisters and I had a small drag family back then. Everything was just kind of like me and Auntie did our own thing. We never really had the community experience back then I guess. But when we started doing Low Pone we saw the community explode basically. It was really cool to get to meet everybody and as long as we've been doing Low Pone it's cool to still meet new people every single time. Seeing that really gave me a comfort that I didn't have before."

Zac was not alone. Over the last eight months, dozens of people were interviewed about the impact that a small pop-up, queer, trans, and people-of-color inclusive space had on their lives. By no means is a dance party the solution or even a delineation of the queer community in Indy, but it does bookmark a moment in time and offers a periscope view into queer life. Low Pone is shallow upon a glance. It's simply a drag/performance art show, but what it represents is a consistent discourse around representation and freedom.

Safe spaces like Low Pone are incomparably vital for people who hunger to see events and figures that look like them. Without the opportunity to see a reflection of yourself, it is impossible to imagine or pave a way to it. Without representation, how can we expect the safe spaces of a city like Indianapolis to differ from the whitewashed boardrooms and binary powers of privilege? When there is little representation in the mouths of those who speak for our community we, who are left, are swallowed whole.

HISTORY OF INDIANAPOLIS LGBTQ SPACES BY: JORDAN RYAN

Indianapolis has a documented history of LGBTQ spaces going back to Indiana Avenue vaudeville drag performances in the 1930s. Since then, LGBTQ spaces continue to populate the built environment predominantly in the downtown area — gay businesses, health services, arts and cultural organizations, civil rights–related events, and leisure spaces, such as bars, clubs, and bathhouses. These Third Spaces — commonly visited spaces outside of home and work, like bars and clubs — are places that facilitate connections within a community. Undoubtedly, there's no single LGBTQ experience, but some general observations can be made regarding the changing landscape of gay spaces in Indianapolis. In recent years, numerous bars, dance clubs, and drag performance venues have closed down: These closures have been attributed to the popularity of online dating apps and the growing acceptance of the gay community in younger, city nightlife scenes.

The first in the string of closures in recent years was The Ten Bar, aka The Ruins, at 1218 North Pennsylvania Street. The bar originally opened as a gay bar in the 1980s but chiefly served

Above: Talbott Street
Right: 501 The Eagle

the lesbian community by the 2000s. It closed in 2014 and was converted back into its original use, small storefronts. Soon after, The Varsity Lounge, 1517 North Pennsylvania Street, closed in 2015; this was a shock as it most likely was the oldest gay bar in the city, dating back to the 1940s. Over three years later, the building is still vacant and for sale. In 2016, the largest drag performance venue, Talbott Street, at 2145 Talbott Street, closed. Although there were multiple smaller drag performance venues functioning at this time, this was a significant blow to the community. Just a few months later, The 501 Eagle (a leather bar) closed. The ca. 1895 building, located at 501 North College Avenue, served leather, bear, and kink communities for decades.

This isn't the first time gay bars have closed. There was the lesbian and feminist music venue, Labyris Pub, now known as Lockerbie Pub. There was Tomorrow's Bar on Meridian Street, a piano bar with numerous drag queen hosts, closed many years ago. Club Indy, a bathhouse, was demolished in 1982 for a parking lot. Many of the gay spaces of the 1980s and 1990s have closed and the buildings were demolished. Other buildings remain, with both federal and local historic preservation protections, although the LGBTQ history isn't acknowledged. Perhaps spaces are temporary as the community's needs and the city changes over time. Perhaps we've entered a new era of queer expression and third spaces. Perhaps Low Pone is only the beginning.

Perhaps spaces are temporary as the community's needs and the city changes over time. Perhaps we've entered a new era of queer expression and third spaces. Perhaps Low Pone is only the beginning.

LAKEN: STEPPING OUT

Ava stood in the dressing room at Zonie's Closet, a small cash-only drag bar on the near East Side of the city with a small-town dive bar feel. This specific bar plays a pivotal role in the drag culture of Indy. Many kings and queens in Indianapolis stepped a shaky first foot on stage at Zonie's. For Ava though, the experience was unnerving.

Ava (Laken out of drag) was there on her 21st birthday and was getting ready for her first drag performance at a gay bar, ever. She looked around at the queens adjusting their wigs, costumes, and make-up, several giving side-eye glances. Allanah Steele walked up to her and said that Zonie's had an "image," one that Ava's look didn't maintain. She told her that she would not be performing tonight even though her name was on the show bill. Ava left and a handful of the audience with her.

Ava's signature look, by her own description, is a combination of sex and gender fuckery. Ava is a woman of color and only performs with a beard — a physical aesthetic that is not uncommon, but is revered as avant garde by the gender binary of society (and the sectors of drag that follow suite).

"My reason for having a beard — originally it was just for shock value — but as I started to really figure out who my character was, I realized it's more of a political statement," says Laken. "A lot of the drag community... like how Allanah was, and how a lot of queens at Zonie's are say that you can't have a beard. That you have to shave your body. That you have to be completely hairless and very feminine. That you have to be a lady and all that type of bullshit. I realized that there are women out there who have full on beards, biological (I hate that term) women. I want to represent those types of women. I want to represent the woman who is not like the everyday woman. That's

Laken in his room

why when you see my performances I show my body a lot. I keep my beard. I keep all my body hair. Even though it's sexy and sort of feminine, I keep those masculine touches."

A few weeks after Ava was told that she couldn't perform, Mary Fagdalane and Auntie Christ reached out, saying they had heard what happened. 'We believe in you and think you are a great performer.'

"My reason for having a beard — originally it was just for shock value — but as I started to really figure out who my character was, I realized it's more of a political statement."

"[After being turned down at Zonie's] I would probably say I was feeling self-doubting," says Laken. "After that I really didn't think there was anywhere else to perform. Well I was thinking, if Zonie's is going to be like that, then what are all the other bars going to be like?

"Before the whole incident, I was very excited," he remembers. "It was one of the few bars left that was still doing drag shows. Talbott Street had closed. The Ten had closed. All those big drag bars in Indy, they were gone. Those two were clubs that I had planned on going to for my 21st birthday way, way, before this... After the incident I was pretty crushed and hurt. I wouldn't say abandoned, but I felt very lost. I didn't know what to do then."

The shock of not knowing where to go was new to Laken. He grew up calling Indiana Youth Group (IYG) home. The space is a nonprofit that provides tutoring, after-school programing, events, counseling, social workers, and more to young LGBTQ people in Indianapolis.

"My mom took me there and as soon as I walked in I was greeted with smiling faces," says Laken. "It was sort of my home away from home... My life was very boring [before going there]. I didn't have a lot of friends. I would go to school, come home, go to sleep, start the day over again and do the exact same thing.

"Growing up in IYG was a very eye-opening experience in a lot of ways," he says. "Going into there I had never been around that many people who identified as part of the LGBTQ community. So meeting all different sorts of people, seeing that the LGBTQ community wasn't just what I saw through my sister's friends or what I saw on television... It was awesome. Also toward the end of it, it was eye-opening in the way that my bubble of being at IYG — and thinking that all of the space was completely welcoming — was also shattered. As I was exiting out of IYG, I was having not-so-positive experiences with former staff members... A lot of racist experiences, not so blatant in your face like people yelling the N word, more like microaggressions and people not really knowing their place... at least that's how my experience was going there; it might have changed now."

Laken did, however, grow up with a strong backbone in the form of his family. They fostered his creativity through music, leading him to be part of the visual staff for a high school marching band. In a way, he was groomed for the job since birth. His mother is a singer and piano player, his sister is a singer, his grandmother's stage name is Florence T. Kine (a famous jazz singer), and his uncle was the drummer for Marvin Gaye for a few years. When Laken began doing drag, the music and performance drew him back to the creative chromosome of his family over and over. However, most of his family doesn't know about Ava, save for a few.

"My mother and my sister, they are completely fine with it," says Laken. "In the beginning they were sort of like eh, I don't know. Not because they didn't understand drag; it was more for my safety. Their experience with a lot of drug queens, it was a lot of drugs and alcohol and they didn't want that for me. They

thought that if I got into the drag scene that I would be influenced by that... At the time I was pissed off about it, but now that I am older I thank them for being that overprotective."

Laken's experience is indicative of all that is copacetic and acrimonious in the queer community of Indianapolis. He was reared in a safe space, yet still experienced the heteronormative prejudices that many see plaguing the LGBTQ community.

"It's been very sort of back and forth," says Laken. "I have had my really good experiences and my very bad experiences. I am in the queer community, I do have a lot of friends who also identify as queer in this community. I would say that its very opening and welcome but there are those small parts who are like 'Oh no, we all have to be this certain way' and want to put everybody in a mold.

"One thing I am struggling with right now, to be completely honest, comes to self-image," he admits. "With being out of drag and in drag."

The strive for comfort is part of the draw and motivation for Ava to perform at events like Minor Sweat, an all-ages queer performance night that was created by Carrie Keel.

"I thought it was a really cool idea," says Laken. "I like that it's an all-ages event because it's rare to get the opportunity to do that, except for outside of Indianapolis. Even then it's very few bars that do that and it's only up to 18. To have a space that is for all ages is awesome... When I was younger I never really got that experience. I want to be a child's very first drag queen experience or to be an inspiration to someone a lot younger who can't go into bars."

Laken

HOME GROWN BY: MENLO PARQ

Menlo is a trans writer and regular attendee at Low Pone.

born strong and defiant
like crops that grow
through the depths of rocky clay soil
you live with the taste of dirt in your mouth,
even when it's bright red with blood
from the school yard bully,
your best friend,
your lover who couldn't handle being other,
who got discouraged by their momma
when she refused to accept you,
Because small towns
talk about small matters,
like the size of the watermelons
at the local grocery
compared to the ones grown at home
and the size of someone else's imprint
instead of the heart you hold,
but you keep standing
looking toward the sun,
growing determined like
the flowers through the last frost
and the last snow fall
that was really the first spring rain in April-
you grow,
no longer able to hide
in the cat tails and weeds of your peers
mucked down in the mud,
the weather is always changing
but you are sturdy
mixed with city dreams
grounded roots rutted into the soil,
into the state,
and you heed the course
aware of ever changing winds
yellow as the corn,
fertile as the soy beans,
queer and brave,
a Hoosier forever

15Logx

CARRIE AND JAIME: CREATING MOVEMENT

Carrie Keel is a person who loves hard, forgives lightly, and is humble nearly to a fault. Her marrow is that of a caretaker and a doer; her creation of Low Pone is a prime example of these traits. At each Low Pone she is behind the scenes and figuratively pulling the curtain open to make space for those who don't fit into others' boxes. For her, growing up with safe spaces was pivotal to who she is now.

"The first bar I went to what is now Greggs, what was OPs... I was 16," says Carrie. "I went with these two gay guys, we were friends with through the restaurant industry. They took me because I had a fake ID... I was so out of place as a teenage lesbian in this very male-dominated bar."

Carrie grew up in Fountain Square — where she now lives with her wife Jaime Reynolds and their daughter Francesca. Twenty-two years ago, Carrie's mother would drop her off at a coffee shop called Indigo — which was housed where Pioneer is now and where Low Pone is currently held. Inside held a stage, deli case, pool tables, and a slew of couches: "[V]agrant gay kids just slept there." It was generally understood or assumed that if you slept there you were likely a homeless teenager. The crowd was a mix of LGBTQ and rock-and-roll kids "who were sort of in the same boat — both maybe not really accepted at home."

"My mother would drive me there then I would walk home" says Carrie. "I only lived a mile and a quarter away, it was a 30-minute walk. I remember thinking 'Okay, if I walk really fast I can give myself 10 more minutes to stay.' It was really busy all the time there... I think everyone could agree that it's a place you could meet a partner. It's a place where you could share similar experiences. There's a place where you could talk shit and Kiki and be whatever.

"There's power to be able to walk into a place and know that everyone there is just like you — even as a kid, even when you don't know there is power in that," she explains. "There is a lot of freedom involved there that's irreplaceable when you're a teenager. A lot of people live so deeply in fear when they are young and gay, it seems like to have an outlet like that or just to have a place, even if you don't want to perform or do that, to have a place where you know you can literally walk in the door and not ever worry about what someone is going to say to you. That's why I found that to be important... It's cool to know that what I am doing now is in the same place."

For her wife Jaime, the introduction to safe spaces came a little later in life. When Jaime moved to Indianapolis from the small town of Aurora, Indiana, she found community in places like The Ten and English Ivy's. "Going to The Ten, it's a huge space, you walk in and you have to be metal detected, first of all," recalls Jaime. "Then they check your bag then they wand you. Then you get in line for about 45 minutes to get a drink. Then it feels like a high school dance; everybody is line dancing, there's somebody taking pseudo professional pictures that they print out that makes it feel like prom photos. It's extra, it's a free-for-all, it's super diverse, men and women, people of all different ethnicities. Rowdy as fuck. Then the opposite of that is going to English Ivy's, an old white man gay bar. It's all wood inside. The bartenders all pour you strong ass drinks, everybody is fussy, lots of old men, somebody plays a Broadway tune, people are doing the splits out in the middle... but I liked it because I never experienced that in my younger life."

Before meeting Carrie, Jaime was open about identifying as bi but had only been in relationships with men. "I was busy with other stuff," she says. "I was into music. I was in very masculine spaces. Then moving into being with women, also felt like very masculine spaces but women; like macho ass women being macho with each other. It wasn't until many years later, meeting women who empowered each other, where the queerness aspect of it was secondary to the feminist aspect of it. [It] was much more powerful to me and to the women that I knew."

Jaime grew up in the country, spending her childhood wandering through the woods and her teenage years sifting through who she was by weighing her identity against those around her.

"I got really into meditation because I thought it would make me more worldly," laughs Jaime. "I drank a lot of tea because my parents didn't, and I just wanted to be different. I just wanted to live in the city. Nobody I knew was like me. I certainly didn't know any queer women. I knew one gay woman and she was very very butch, and very popular actually. I didn't identify with that. I was like maybe I'm just weird, maybe I should go to New York? I want to drink tea, maybe meditate, just do things that were different than country people were doing. It sounds silly, but in my head it made sense.

"I grew up with so many people, and so many people in my family have such different values than I do, but I think that they are kind people so I can see that they aren't coming from a place of evil or bad," she says. "They just see things a bit differently and haven't been exposed to things and don't understand. So on a positive spin, I think it's made me a much more empathetic person.

"On the negative spin, it makes me not want to go back there," says Jaime. "Because when I go back there and I am in Walmart like who is trying to kill my wife? Are these people going to fucking kill us? That's real talk. Because I go down there and [wonder] can we go in this place? Is it safe? I am boisterous

Jaime, Carrie, and their dog Moose

enough and femme enough that I feel like I can get away with it, but being with my wife who is not like me what are they going to say to her? That's the downside of that... I don't often feel afraid [in Indy]; it's about my wife. I know that she is powerful, but I think that she feels uncomfortable in country spaces and I feel uncomfortable for her... but who knows what people do. It's scary. People have guns. People are racist and homophobic."

There is a sense of trepidation that comes with rural America. Perhaps it's because so many of these places were built on the backs of fear — that things will change, that outside of a repetitious time capsule the world might spin onward. The result and seeming stagnation forces these towns to cling to the dust kicked up by the heels of the rest of the world. It should be noted that Indiana still has a very active Ku Klux Klan and has for many years. Fear is something that queer people from the rural midwest know all too well.

"But [us being down in rural Indiana] has changed people's lives," says Jaime. "Knowing people down there, getting to know me and my family, people who are friends with my brother who were really homophobic then they hung out with us and they are like 'Oh, they are cool man. Don't talk about gay people like that, they are cool.'"

To see oneself reflected in the world allots a place within it. Representation carves a pathway to equity.

"The thing about that though was that when I was younger I didn't have any lesbians to look to that I could connect with or model," says Jaime. "It didn't make sense to me. All the lesbians I knew weren't like me... I thought, how could I possibly be gay... It was hard for me to be like 'I'm a fucking dyke' because it just didn't feel like me."

Jaime remembers going to a slumber party in seventh grade at her neighbor's house, and one of the few lesbians she knew growing up being harassed there.

"And all the girls ganged up on her and said, 'You know Jennifer, you are really going to have to start growing your hair out and dressing differently if you are going to be okay in high school,'" says Jaime. "Now this bitch took two girls to prom, not one but two. So fuck everybody."

It should be noted that Jaime has a heart of gold, one of a true caretaker. She is motherly in the most powerful of sense, in the way that fiercely protects those around her. She is witchy, perpetuating the power of female. For her, observing the tenacious women in her life would later be the foundation of her feminist values.

"I grew up with a lot of women, without a lot of men in our lives," says Jaime. "I had an Aunt K and everyone always made jokes about her and how she was a lesbian. She came out for a little bit, maybe when I was 20 or something. I never thought anything about it, just that K's cool, she's kinda butch, kinda softball. And then my mom told me that when she was a child her dad and two of his friends took her out to go fishing, and they all raped her. So it flipped the script on how I thought about her. There are very few women I know in my life, especially where I grew up, who weren't sexually assaulted; and also very few men I know. I don't think that has anything to do with your sexuality, FYI, but I think it probably made her feel much safer around women. I think every woman who is of my mother's generation feels much safer around women. I think they have a lot of romances with each other that they keep secret because it's much more real and safe and they can talk about their feelings more openly and be free with each other. Growing up that's what I saw in women and older women's relationships. It wasn't a sexual thing, but it was very intimate. They had very intimate relationships with each other and not with men. There were a few husbands and boyfriends floating around, but they never interacted with each other the way that the older women did. So as a young woman who always felt very queer, that was meaningful to me. I've always valued my relationships with women way more than with men. They just feel more meaningful, and in my own experiences with men, they are more meaningful."

The relationship between Jaime and Carrie began with a glance across the room. They were working together at Santorini, a Greek restaurant in Fountain Square.

"I walked in the door to train on my very first day, and the first thing I saw was Carrie cutting lemons, and I looked at her," remembers Jaime. "I had never seen anyone like that before. She was so confident. She looked at me, and we locked eyes, in such a powerful way I almost fell over. My knees almost locked up. I knew, I fucking knew, at that moment — that was the person for me. And I never stopped looking at her. It was so beautiful.

"I had been with Francesca's father, with these really masculine musician people, and they were so insecure and weird and so about themselves, for so long. It was so refreshing to me to see someone who was so powerful in themselves and just look at me in this assured way that I knew she liked me and that I liked her. It just happened in that moment. And we have been in love ever since."

Several years later, the two decided to move to San Francisco. "We had a really tough time in California as a couple because it was just us," says Carrie. At the time Jaime was 29, Carrie was 26, and Francesca was 6. "We were pretty lonely even though we were together. We were lonely for our friends and what we thought was our life. We thought we would go there and it would be this magical situation. Although we had a good time, sometimes... We really went through it sometimes when we came home. And we were like, this is stupid, we love each other. We are going to go buy some rings. We are just going to call it what it is. You couldn't be married at the time."

When they moved back to Indiana they went to Silver in the City, bought two plain silver bands, and hugged outside of the store. Carrie still wears that ring to this day. "[We said,] 'Well we are married, this is the way it's going to be," says Carrie. For their official marriage in 2012, they went to New York to see a friend and signed the papers at the courthouse. "We propose to each other every day in some way. No one was on a knee, none of that kind of stuff."

Like all marriages, the two have seen each other change and grow over the years in many ways. For Carrie, a piece of that journey is centered around gender.

"When I was a kid I was such a little boy," she says. "I didn't realize it. I didn't even know that it was that big of a difference. But everyone around me made sure that I knew that I was a tomboy."

Carrie vividly remembers being six years old and playing with friends, who were all boys, and all of the kids were dirty and wet from playing outside. The adults told them to take their shirts off so as not to spread the mess. She recalls going over to a friend's house not wearing a shirt, like all of the other kids, and their mother getting upset. "She chided me really, in a way that I did not anticipate because my mom told me it was fine," says Carrie. "I never stopped getting shit about being a tomboy. There weren't out trans people, not that I knew about [at the time]... I've never ever walked in a woman's shoes, or anything else comfortably. Because ever since I was little someone was always saying 'Why are you trying to be a boy, why are you trying to do this?'

"I've never ever walked in a woman's shoes, or anything else comfortably."

Carrie remembers having a disdain for butch women for much of her early years. "I think that's a response to being criticized my whole life about what is my gender, without knowing I was trying to choose one or not choose one. I feel like that happened my entire life, forever, and still now.

"When you are a kid you don't get it," says Carrie. "I feel like as a kid I rebelled against the idea that I had boyish qualities because it was such a problem. Well it wasn't a problem for me until other people made it a problem, then I became

embarrassed. Then I became an adult who viewed other women who were really butch as embarrassing. I think that's really how that worked. Which is bullshit. I cling to my butchness the very best way that I can. And also think that butch women are some of the most invisible women on the planet; black, white, brown, whatever — if you are extremely butch then nobody cares about you... [Butch invisibility] feels like going to the bathroom and being misgendered. Or going out with your wife and someone is like 'Hey bro.' And I'm like, 'Fuck you.' Why do you even have to comment? If you are not sure, don't say anything. Use your best judgment like any fucking adult would do. I don't know. It's sort of an everyday, hour-to-hour, battle. Where do you want to start it? Where do you want to stop it? How much do you want to ignore?

"I also think that gender is total bullshit," Carrie continues. "I obviously think it's not a binary... I feel different every day but I almost never feel like a woman. Does that make me feel like a man? No, but I never feel like a woman. So it's a matter of how masculine am I feeling versus how neutral am I feeling. It really is a daily dynamic situation. It's weird because I don't feel like I bounce between the feminine and masculine side. I have never felt feminine in my life, and when I try to it's ridiculous. And I feel more uncomfortable than I have ever felt... We are in a time where it doesn't matter as much... I think that struggle is normalized, and at my age. It rears its head all the time, but you're just like 'Fuck off, I'm in the wrong crowd and I know it.' Which is absurd, you're not in the wrong crowd, you're just with stupid people. At my age, I don't really want to be in a crowd full of straight people. I don't really have any interest in that. I don't have anything against anyone, but I know where I am most comfortable."

There is a balance in the daily existence of those who do not fall into the polarity of gender normatively. Spaces like bathrooms are volatile. Names on job applications are a conversation instead of an answer. Glances from strangers can bare a threatening load. It is something that if one hasn't experienced it personally, it's nearly impossible to understand. These points of tension are a shedding with the skin of the next generation.

"They are progressive and really don't care," says Carrie, when reflecting on her daughter. "I think as a whole the next generation is killing it. When you think about Minor Sweat or anything else, I had to tell my daughter — and my daughter is straight — that you can't invite all your friends. If they aren't gay, it's not for them and you all need to realize that. She was like 'I hear you.' And that's not a disrespectful thing to say — to carve out your own space is not an issue."

Minor Sweat is a call and response to many of the issues that are present throughout the Midwest: representation, inclusive safe spaces, and support for youth.

"Minor Sweat was always on the back burner, because I had experiences like that [as a kid]," says Carrie. "I always grew up with a place where I could be gay, always. There was the Indigo... then it was the Abby. That's where I met one of my oldest, best friends and a myriad of other people that come to Low Pone now. I always knew that was critical — that was critical for me, so I knew it was critical as a whole. Everyone I knew who went to the Abby or Indigo thought that was quintessential to their gay youth — having a place to be. Having a place where whoever you are is totally fine."

For Jaime, the importance of Minor Sweat is personal. "It's beyond me being a mother," says Jaime. "It's about me being a kid and feeling like a weirdo with no where else to go. I don't feel like I'm connected to anybody. Minor Sweat is important to me because these kids don't have to feel so alone. Whatever you look like, or you feel like, or whatever you want to see, you can come to a place that is made for people like you. You can just be yourself. The past two we have had these kids have been so free to be themselves, it's beautiful.

"I want it to grow into programing," says Jaime. "I want to have a space where they can go. I would like to have a storefront.

I would like people to feel comfortable to go there when they don't have anywhere else to go. I would also like it to be youth driven, so it looks like whatever they want. Whatever I want isn't important. Whatever the kids need or are lacking in their lives, I would like them to tell us and we will make it happen. I have learned over the last two years of doing Low Pone that we can fucking make anything happen. We really can... I use to think these things were impossible. We used to talk and have these ideas years before Low Pone happened. Carrie and I would talk forever about what we wanted queer life to look like in our city... We spend our time, that we would be doing nothing, trying to develop our community... We did bring something to the city that didn't exist here before for the queer community. We actually acknowledged that there is actually a queer community and not just a gay bar. And nobody has ever done that before. And we are trying to be as inclusive as possible and respectful as possible to everyone."

"Being queer is about being radical, because you have to be."

"Everything is happening in a way that it's never happened before," says Carrie. "I mean think about the 60s, 70s, 50s. That whole movement was about men. It really was. It wasn't about lesbian visibility, it wasn't about trans-visibility, it wasn't about anything like that. Don't get me wrong: I get that you are being arrested for sodomy and things like that, but it's a misogynistic movement.

"We are doing better than ever probably, but black trans women are being killed by the numbers significantly more than white trans women," comments Carrie. "Decisions are made on that backs of men. How society accepts us is written in on the backs of men and maybe a few absolutely washed out lesbians like Ellen. She doesn't do anything for anybody. She is visible, but I mean she cries over dogs but she doesn't cry over trans black women being killed. You know what I mean? No one is really pushing envelopes as far as lesbianism goes, no one is pushing envelopes at all. To me points of radical 'Fuck you' happen everywhere. What I want to do is protect that and make sure there is a place. If you want to say 'Fuck you,' then come right over here... I love that we have a culture but there are no lesbian bars, there is no trans night. There's no real appreciation for the people who are not white and gay... I am 35, I have been in this community for 20 years, and this is the first time I have dug my heels in and said this isn't what gay has to look like. This isn't what our community has to look like. There are options. Do better.

"There are queens who are not here for us," says Carrie. "There are gay men who are not here for us, because we don't participate in the pageantry, the glitzy and glamour of traditional Indiana drag or Indiana gayness, which is male-dominated and cis-dominated culture.

"The face of us, the face of our community, is a white gay man," she continues. "You know what, that is bullshit. There is every kind of person at our event. There are straight people, there's lesbians, there's trans people, there's trans men, there's trans women, there's people of color. There is everything. Why do we have to look white and male to be swallowed? When you dilute it down to an acceptable swallowable pill for a straight person, that's not what being queer is about. Being queer is about being radical, because you have to be. To ignore that we are still fighting for our rights is insane."

ZAC: EMBRACING HER

It should be noted that pronouns switch throughout this chapter when referring to Mary's story as a drag queen or Zac as a person. Zac is non-binary and uses they/them pronouns.

Mary Fagdalane leans over the wooden railing on the second floor of Pioneer, the bar where Low Pone is held, waves and pulls up her nightgown to flash friends below with her silicon fake tits. She was planning a routine as a sexy grandma because she tore a ligament in her knee a week before during another show. She was able to borrow a wheelchair to use during her number because it was so painful to dance. This year marks one of the first times that she has watched her drag career not only become lucrative but also allow her to regularly travel.

"Auntie [Christ] and I have always been weird performers," says Mary. "Trent (Auntie) would always be doing the splits, just for our friends in our living room… I started watching 'RuPaul's Drag Race' when I was in high school and I thought this is crazy, I never even thought about [doing drag] then. I actually thought drag queens were a little scary. I grew up in a really small town and I had never been exposed to that and I thought, 'This is interesting, I don't know how I feel about it.' I started watching the show with my sister at night. She would come in my room and we would sneak and watch it because I would be afraid my parents would know that I was gay or something if I was watching that because I was not out then.

"I mean my mom was obviously super supportive [when I

Above: Zac Crain after their shift
Right: Mary Fagdalane performing wearing Trent Bush's wig after his passing

came out], which was cool, I had nothing to be afraid of, it's just that small town–mentality, afraid-to-come-out type thing," says Mary. Mary tried to show Trent "RuPaul," who was resistant at first but eventually came to love it.

"Then we started doing makeup together and we looked awful," laughs Mary. "We looked like clowns. It was the worst. We started doing that and we moved to Indy together. I was 21 and he was probably 19."

Before living in Indy, the first time Mary stepped into the world was when Zac lived in Long Beach, California. They met a friend who introduced them to Tammie Brown and Detox Icunt, both queens from "Drag Race."

"Then we all started hanging out, and me and my friend group would go to his house and we didn't really know anyone there and we just moved there, so he would show us around and show us all the cool places," remembers Zac. "Then one night he painted my face, and he put me in drag for the first time, and I looked like Cher, well maybe Cher on crack. It was crazy, insane. That was the first time I ever got put in drag."

Zac and Trent eventually moved back to Indianapolis, where they lived on the East Side. They would put on their makeup and walk down to Mass Ave, just for an excuse to experiment with drag.

"We didn't have wigs, we didn't have hardly any outfits, but we would walk around in our jeans or short shorts and get ice cream in drag just for fun, so we could we practice our makeup," they recall. "He couldn't go out, and I didn't want to go out without him. I didn't know anyone in Indy. I had just moved here, but we would just do that and we would literally walk around Marsh [Supermarket]. We were just trying to buy boxed wine, but it was really fun. That's kind of how we started doing drag, just getting drunk, and walking around downtown. People paid attention to us, and we were young."

Zac introduced themselves to Anna Bortion, a queen in Indianapolis, who quickly took Mary under her wing, giving her things like her first booking at the 501 and her first hip pads. Once Trent turned 21, the two started to perform at the open stage night at Zonie's Closet, which they continued for a year and half.

"The backstage was insanely small, performing there taught me a lot about drag and makeup even, just watching them back there taught me a lot," says Mary. "But before Low Pone it was just sporadic bookings and we got whatever we could. Basically a lot of people would only book us for Friday the 13th or Halloween shows because of the spooky drag stereotype. I guess it was just not what they wanted on a daily basis or on a weekend. Now it's become a lot more mainstream, not even just Indy but everywhere. It's cool, it feels good to be accepted finally, even if I have been the whole time but you can feel it with Low Pone, the crowd is awesome."

Low Pone quickly became a refuge for Zac even in the first few months. Two years ago was the last time Zac saw their father. It was across a courtroom where Zac was testifying against him in a custody battle over their little sister.

"I didn't even know this at the time but my dad told me, literally when he was on the stand, that he wasn't even my little sister's [biological] dad," says Zac. "It was a huge mess. A crazy mess. And this was basically when Low Pone was starting. So Low Pone helped me get through a lot of that shit too. It was just a lot."

Zac's father was physically and emotionally abusive to them, their mother, and sisters. Zac recalls not being allowed to ever have friends over, effectively isolating and catching them between a harsh life at home and a staunchly religious upbringing.

"I was forced to go to a Southern Baptist church and not many people know that," says Zac. "I never spoke in tongues because I was not involved or believed in any of that. To me it was always forced on me, which made me see it in a negative light to begin with. I mean I have read the Bible. I just don't agree with a

lot of the shit that I was exposed to as a kid. Not that I have anything against religion, I never would, but it's just not for me. My personal experience was just not a good one. I had to go to this church where I was related to probably 75 percent of the people there, and it was kind of scary. They would speak in tongues and do all this weird shit. It was crazy, I had to go to church camp every summer, nothing bad ever happened it was just a culty thing. It freaked me out, and I've never really felt comfortable with it. I've always been a bit of an eccentric and an outgoing person and it's been, well, I never really tried to hide that but then, I felt like I had to. Growing up and being told being gay was terrible, and you are going to hell. I just never wanted to come out back then. I never even thought I would... I grew up with that situation and violent shit with my dad."

Trent was Zac's first queer community, and the two clung to one another amidst a less-than-affirming environment.

"There is this website called Topics, it was like a forum basically," says Zac. "It was so bad that anytime me and Trent would go to Walmart or something, people would send us screenshots from the website. A forum posted: 'Watch out there are two faggots walking around Walmart right now.' Crazy shit like that. I feel like basically that I had always been conditioned into thinking I was doing something wrong and to feel sorry about everything. That's always kind of stopped me from doing what I wanted to do. So when I started doing Low Pone I was like 'Fuck all of that.' That has helped me grow so much as a person. I've really matured in who I am, in the past two years, even in my daily life that's affected me. Now, I see everything in a whole new light. I could be hung up on all the stuff I've gone through in the past and pity party myself or I can just take that and make it so I want to do this that much more, and to show little aspects of that in my performances; it's helped [me] to connect with people as well... That is what drag is all about for me, just that, connection at the end of the day."

Drag speaks in overwhelming stereotypes, ripping them to pieces to show the world how malleable our constructs of gender are — that the foundation and restraints of the mass nuclear family are often built on oppression and assumption.

"Honestly, when I've gotten into the crowd [at Low Pone], there have been times where I look someone in the eye and they are crying and they will just grab me and hug me and I will stop my performance and hug them," says Zac. They have received messages from people in the audience, saying that they helped them lean into their identity as trans, to feel at home in their skin by watching someone perform and play with the constructs of gender.

"It started as me doing drag for myself and it's sort of just evolved into this thing where I do what I do for everyone, not only myself. I do it for people who can't speak up, people who can't live their lives on a daily basis because of certain restrictions or where they live — they feel like they can't be themselves."

"I wish I would have had someone like that as I was growing up. I didn't really have anyone to look up to in that aspect, and that fact that people say that to me kind of just shakes me to my core," says Zac. "It started as me doing drag for myself and it's sort of just evolved into this thing where I do what I do for everyone, not only myself. I do it for people who can't speak up, people who can't live their lives on a daily basis because of certain restrictions or where they live — they feel like they can't be themselves."

Mary Fagdalane in the greenroom at Pioneer

Zac uses drag as their own version of therapy. For example, during one Low Pone performance they poured black candle wax over their body to simulate a sex doll. "That song meant a lot to me, because I've been really terrible with relationships, or unlucky, kind of. I am attracted to these people who end up using me in the end. I always have these blinders up and just recently I've been able to see those things, or the kind of cycle I have been going through with that. I always end up getting cheated on or I always end up being the side person and not knowing that at first... I was really angry about that... and I got to let all that anger out. [It lets me say] 'I am your doll, this is nothing, what you are doing to me is nothing.' Basically trying to say 'Look, I am stronger than that.' That's why I did that song. Things like that help me get through what's happening in my head and in my life. I think it helps me get that feeling out, and once I put that feeling out for everyone I can put that behind me and it won't affect me in a negative way anymore. I can get stronger if I make myself vulnerable to everyone who can hurt me. If everyone sees and knows how I feel with this it definitely helps. There have been so many performances that have meant so much to me emotionally. Obviously I go out there and do a fun one every now and then, but I always make sure that I do something for myself."

Mary's performances are a tincture — a boiling up of emotion, self-care, and fear. "One of my biggest is letting people down," they say. "I always put my all into what I do. If I disappoint myself, which is always easy because we are all our own worst critics, but if I disappoint myself with a certain performance, or a certain makeup style that I was trying to do, I feel like that affects my night. I'll just think about that and run it through my head constantly, because I am a really anxious person. I'll think, I'm terrible tonight, or think no one likes me. But, I think letting people down is my biggest fear. I think it's kind of an irrational fear because I think that I'm getting out there and by being myself, it's making a least a few people proud."

DJ Littletown performing

Above: Harper, December 2018
Left: Laken at Low Pone

Above: Indianapolis photographer David Morris
Right: Isabel Skidmore and Christine Pallon of the band Spandrels

Above: Omar in a doorway outside Low Pone
Left: Indianapolis drag queen Mary Fagdalane, with Indianapolis tattoo artist Brandon

Above: boyfriends Andrew and Logan outside Low Pone
Right: Zoe Orzak

Above: Malikah
Left: Vanity Rex after performing at Minor Sweat, an all-ages queer party

Above: Kendra Stone
Right: Stevie Dicks, pizza slut

Above: Ursula Major after stapling money to her flesh during her performance
Left: Conor

Above: unknown first-timer at Low Pone
Right: Lucky Stiff (everything's bigger in Texas)

Above: Nia Petrol
Left: Tyne and Coop

Above: Abhora stage-diving
Right: Kasyn Pointe (ghost bitch)

Above: Erin K Drew
Left: Michael Perkinson (DJ Pressing Light)

Above: unknown lovers outside Low Pone
Right: Queer rapper Big Dipper in the greenroom

Above: Ian at Low Pone
Left: Grantus

Above: Stevie Dicks, de-wigged backstage
Right: Thomas and Pri Mary at Minor Sweat

TATE: BREAKING TRADITION

When Mary Fagdalane and Auntie Christ started performing at Low Pone, the Haus of Blaspheme, their drag family, came into the spotlight and grew. For artists like Sleazy Nicks (Tate Smith) and Lady Dumpster (Myke Dobbins), the Haus was a dawning in their artistic careers and in their personal growth.

For Tate, it started by working at the Hard Rock Cafe with Zac when he was 18. "In the beginning it was when Mary and Auntie lived together on the Southside, and I used to drive down there all the time. They would help me get ready and put costumes together, and then they started Low Pone... I feel like they had definitely just helped me to not give a shit, that's probably the most important lesson they taught me. I just cared so much to the point of it being a little crippling, and then I see these people just doing what they want, being who they want and when someone doesn't like it they are like, 'Fuck off,' you know?"

Each time Tate washed the makeup off of Sleazy, he became more comfortable with his ebb and flow between the masculine and feminine constructs that he fought against at a young age.

He grew up in Loogootee, a small town that's about 20 minutes north of Jasper, Indiana, off Highway 231. According to Tate, if you blink you will miss it. "It was miserable in high school. I didn't come out until I was 16, and right before I did I joined the dance team there. I was the only boy who ever did it." When he joined, people petitioned to bar him from the dance team because he was "breaking traditional values."

He ended up becoming the captain. "Honestly, I owe a lot to my dance instructors then, they were a huge part of the reason I do drag," says Tate. "If I hadn't had the confidence to do that then, I don't think I would have been where I am with my drag now, so that's something that's really cool. I tried to censor myself when I was young because it was a matter of literally not getting the shit beat out of me. Don't cross your legs this way, don't talk like this, keep your straight voice on, kind of stuff. I noticed that in real life, I say real life, it's all real, but as a boy there is stuff that I naturally do, that I don't even think about anymore, that is just kind of masking who I am... I feel like I am feminine enough to be emotional in front of people but then in boy life it's just very separated."

"Gender, to us, is something we bend around in our minds but to them it's black and white. I think that my femme side is very angry. I have a lot to say..."

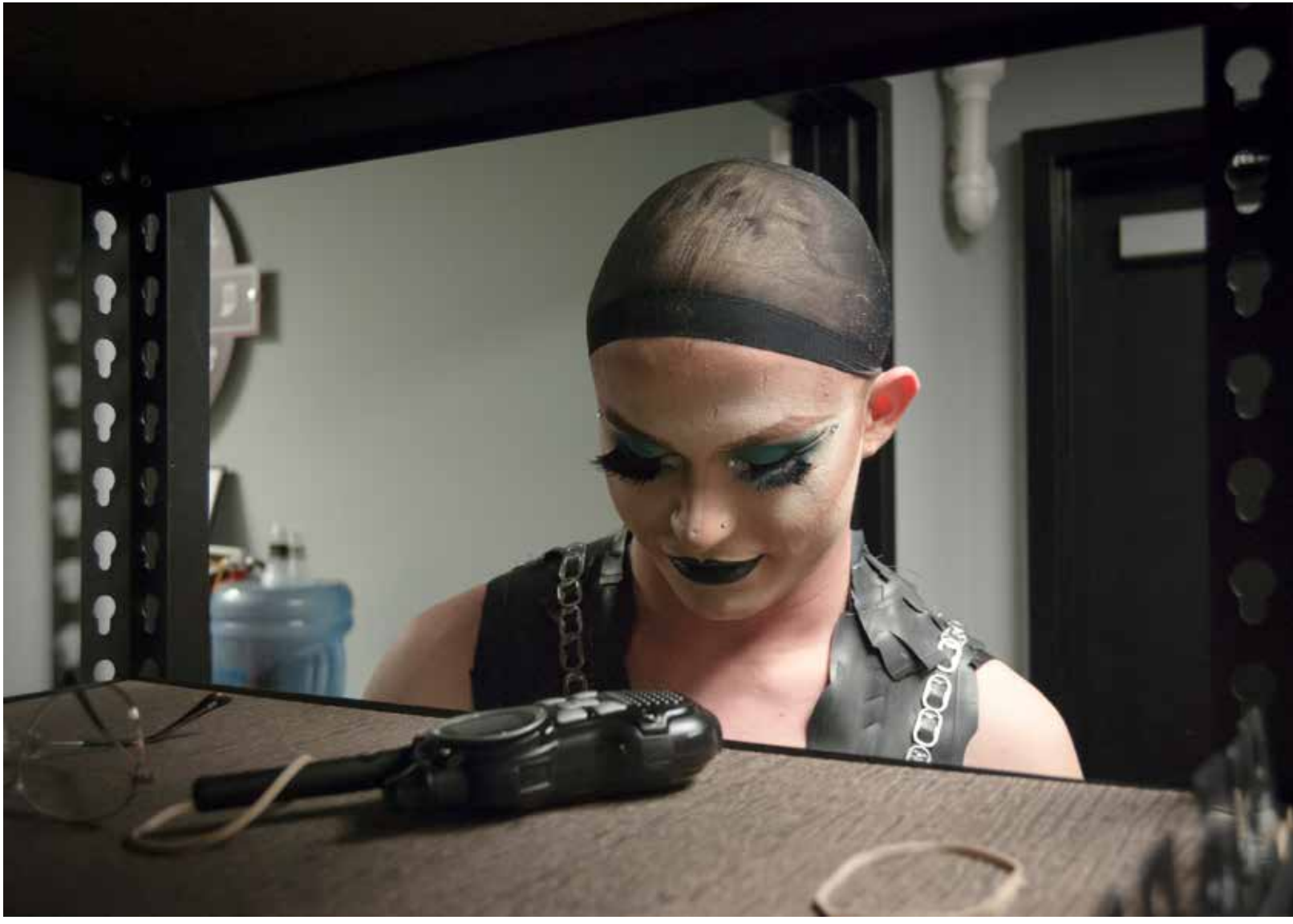
For Tate, the separation of wig, makeup, and who he is out of drag provides the sanctuary of escape. It's a way to process emotions and parts of himself that he will only reveal on stage, rarely in front of friends.

"Realizing that I don't have to be anxious all the time about what everyone else is doing lets me focus on what I want to do," says Tate. "You know, what are my goals, how can I make my drag better, how can I make my professional self better, self development and reflecting on that is the best way for me to get rid of my anxiety. I think, 'I am doing this, I am growing.'"

One of the ways that Tate has developed in drag is marrying his childhood perception of how men and women interact — and his own ideals of the masculine and feminine.

"I think with my feminine side, as far as drag goes, my favorite thing about it is that it helps me identify with women more," he says. "I always kind of saw the way that men had treated my family members that are female. From my grandma, to my mom, to my sister [men treated them] badly, kind of your typical misogynist; you're going to do this, this and this, these are

Tate



Tate, getting ready to perform as Sleazy Nicks

Sleazy Nicks performing at Hi-Fi

your rules and roles. They are the kind of people that it doesn't really effect. When they think about gender, they don't think about it obviously in the way we do but, gender to us is something we bend around in our minds but to them it's black and white. I think that my femme side is very angry. I have a lot to say... Even my name, there is a little irony there. I am actually a super hopeless romantic, but I like the slutty personification of it. Because that's what people don't want to see, that's why people are on women all the time — about how they dress, and what they do, who they can be.

"For the male side I sort of reciprocate those same things," says Tate. "I don't know, when I started school as a nursing major I took gender studies and human sexuality classes which were really cool. It was eye-opening, in those shitty situations, where women in my family had to deal with toxic masculinity in their significant others. I am always the one who tries to compensate for that, which some say is because I am gay, but I think it goes a lot deeper than that. With the masculine side, I try to be strong for people. Sometimes that's good because I know there are times when people need to kind of rest on me for a little bit, but that's why I like my femme side too, because sometimes I will run myself into the ground and not realize that I need to take care of myself too. I don't know, sometimes it's hard to balance both."

Tate's care for others is not something that only he feels; it guided Myke through the first steps out of a drug addiction. It was a point for Myke that came on the heels of a moment which rattled the bones of everyone connected with Low Pone. That day was a stark reminder what the queer community continuously encounters because of a predisposition to forced triumph, to wrestling with mental health, to fighting against the concepts and identity that lay their heads easily into the lap of the world.

TRENT BUSH: WALKING ON

On May 23, 2018, Trent Utah Bush, Auntie Christ, passed away.

Carrie Keel was sitting in her Fountain Square neighborhood when a text rolled in: "Have you heard from Trent?"

Zac was contacting as many people as they could, trying to track down where Trent could be. Eventually Zac called Trent's mother, who asked his landlord to go check on him. Later on in the night, Zac discovered that Trent overdosed.

"When I found out that Trent had passed, I was with Zac on speaker phone with his step dad," says Tate. "That's never happened to me before. I have had plenty of family members die and everything, older people, and it was just super shock. Even in that moment Zac lost it immediately. I just hugged him, and he was crying for a little bit and he was just like 'Okay, I have to call some people.' Then I started crying and he was hugging me. We just had to balance off each other, you know, even in the longer scale. The first two weeks after Trent had passed Zac was a super rock for everybody. He kept it together and I was a mess. I just really wasn't able to do that then — if you ask anyone, if you ask Myke too — Zac was a rock all day."

Trent's obituary read "Trent was an accomplished make-up artist. He was a kind and gentle soul who was witty, resilient and had a loving heart. He loved hanging out with family and friends, and enjoyed expressing himself through his art."

Walking up to Trent's wake was nerve-wracking. Would they actually represent who Auntie was? Would they care or try and hide this part of him, all of her, under the rug? Family milled about, chosen and given, who all drew so much love from Trent and Auntie.

Inside was a perfectly preserved pristine table of Auntie's makeup brushes. Trent's mother asked Zac earlier that day to clean the brushes and arrange them how she would have liked. The childhood photos and the makeup layered a chilling effect. One that, even though at her wake, felt like watching her undress seeing Auntie unfold into Trent.

"[The grief] comes in waves," Zac notes, several months after Trent's funeral. "I've honestly had a really bad week. I was up 'til 5 in the morning last night, and I just couldn't sleep. I've had a lot of dreams about her, and they are all mostly really good memories, but it hits me at a hard point right now for some reason."

The dream was recurring. Every night Zac would see Trent standing in an empty room, statue silent and unresponsive. "I just give up in the dream and I want it to end," says Zac. "It's kind of scary. I am really into astrology and interpreting dreams and I haven't even looked into it. I think it's my feelings of guilt from trying to get through to her when everything was going on, but it didn't work. That is what I have equated it to. I know I shouldn't feel that way because I did everything I possibly could have, I think it's just something I will probably have to deal with forever. I do know that it's not the truth, it's just a feeling that I have that's just guilt, and something that I hope I can turn around and use to make me a better person for sure, because it sucks... I just haven't been able to get her out of my head. I'll hear a song and it will make me miss her. I was going through my camera and looked at pictures that we had taken together and thought 'Oh my god, that was one of the last pictures we had taken together,' things like that.

"It's not just all me being sad all the time," continues Zac. "I am really happy about it sometimes too, and I know that Auntie was going through a lot of shit. I didn't even know the extent of what she was going through... I didn't even know she was using heroin until about a month before she passed away.

"I had heard rumors so I messaged her and said, 'If this is true, tell me right now,'" says Zac. "She told me it was, she said she had used it a few times. I instantly called her mom, I called her sister, told her family."

The two were living together up until Trent stopped paying rent. It became apparent that Trent was using, but no one was sure to what extent or what it was.

"We were still friends and we were trying to make it work out but when I told her parents about her use she got super pissed at me and blocked me on Facebook, etc.," says Zac. "She wouldn't talk to me, the last thing she said to me, she was cussing at me. She came into Hard Rock because she had broke my phone on accident; she stepped on it and spilled a drink on it when it was in my bag... She stormed out and that was the last time I actually saw her. That's not exactly a good memory, but I do know that addiction changes who you are and it makes you do shit that you normally wouldn't do to people who you love.

"Even though that happened, no matter what, that doesn't take away from the ten years we had together as best friends," says Zac firmly. "That bitch was my family for sure. We grew up together... I've just always been there for her. When I lost her, I felt like I lost a part of me. Up until that point I had always had her but now I have a picture of her sitting on my mantle. It just sucks every now and then.

"There have been a few other queens we've lost in Indy to drugs and suicide," says Zac. "I think one of my friends was killed in a hit-and-run a week after Auntie had passed. We had performed with her at Zonie's. Her name was Lady Anastasia. She was really cool and eccentric. She was riding her bike somewhere in Indy and someone ran her over, and she died and they just drove off. It was terrible. A lot of terrible shit has happened in the community in the past few years and it seems like everyone is coming together a lot more than they had in the past.

"So I have my own family, but my chosen family means so much to me because without them I just feel like I wouldn't be here," says Zac. "It's crazy to say that, but it's true. They changed

Trent Bush as Auntie Christ, a former co-host of Low Pone before his death

my life and they've made me really strong and it makes me want to do that for other people. It lights that fire under my ass and makes me want to be able to help other people in the way that I've been helped by my family. That's what kind of drives me, my past experiences, and seeing what I have gone through, and seeing how I've overcome those things and gotten to where I am at now. I want to make sure that people know that even if you feel like shit, even if things are going bad, you can definitely change that. You can change the way you think you're never going to feel, you can change that. It's cool, for sure, and drag has definitely helped me with that."

The loss of Auntie brought everyone to a halt. Mary would often call Stevie Dicks (the current co-host of Low Pone), who lives in Louisville. Stevie would comfort her, reminding her that it was not her fault. Tate wrestled with not only losing a friend but also feeling like he failed professionally, as his career is in public health with a focus on addiction.

"I wanted to work in needle exchange and harm reduction, maybe methadone clinics, that's what I really wanted to do, but there's not a market for that around here so that's hard," says Tate. "I feel like I took that even more personally with Trent because I feel like not only was I being a crappy friend by not talking to him, I also have this specialty that I care about so much and this community of addicts that I care about so much because no one else does. To know that I know how to help him and I didn't do all the things I could've done is the worst part about it, I think. That's what I want to do with my life, and to have that happen to one of my best friends is the hard part about it.

"Addiction has become the most personal for me now because of everything that has happened," he says. "I know there are all these communities of trans people, gay people, who are being shoved off to the side, but I think addicts are literally just thrown off the table most of the time. Like, 'You had Narcan once, you can't have it again.' What is that? You are literally trying to play God with people, and that's just wrong. That is what makes me so passionate about it. I am going to get up here for people like me and not stand down and take shit. [I want to] change something."

Tate was able to change something. A week after Auntie passed, Myke came to Tate saying how he was ready to get clean. He asked Tate to help him stay distracted, focusing on new makeup designs or booking shows. For Myke — who was initially Mary's dresser — being in drag as Lady Dumpster radically altered his life. After doing drag, not only was Lady born: Myke dug his hands into what it meant to be brave by coming out as bisexual and taking the first steps toward addressing his addiction.

"I was too worried about not getting sick, or getting to the next day," says Myke. "There was no time to worry about loving myself. As soon as I dropped that it opened me up to having so much more time and mental capacity to love and care for myself.

"Tate is the first person I called and told that I was sober since Auntie had died," says Myke. "I didn't know who else to tell. I didn't have the heart to tell Zac...Auntie's passing is where I knew Tate was one of my best friends and Sleazy was my sister... It's more than a drag bond, it's more than a friendship. It's like a real sibling."

The connection to the Haus of Blasphemy brought Tate a level of clarity while wrestling with Auntie's death.

"You know, the way [addiction affects] our community is terrible, I hate it so much, it's so much worse," says Tate. "That's why we have drag houses and little families, we just adopt, and we all call each other family because we had to choose our family. Some of us don't even have family, or are abandoned people. I think that's the best thing being in the queer community has taught me — just to be there for those people who are already on society's shit list."

"This whole experience, especially the first Low Pone at Pioneer, now I am getting it," Myke continues. "It is fucking

Trent Bush's last performance as Auntie Christ before his death

amazing. When people say it's a movement — it is a fucking movement. This moves people. I have seen people live their best life here. I have seen people cry here. I have seen people jump up and down in joy, screaming because they are getting everything they need at that moment. You don't see that at other shows. You don't see that anywhere else here. This place grabs your emotions and holds them... [Low Pone] is a movement in so many different ways. It's a movement in drag because it's giving alternative queens, or different queens, spooky queens, or not-pageanty queens a home, where you can do whatever you want and we don't really care. It's created this queer space in a not-queer place... You can feel it in the air, what Low Pone is; it's like a static almost."

The generation before us gave the rights that LGBTQ people have. Trans women of color throwing bricks at cops laid the foundation for open existence. Yet the battles have new faces and names like addiction and disengagement. The phone call saying that they were found in their apartment, or that the Narcan didn't work, isn't foreign to many. There are tallies of those lost. The quantity in the queer community is unprecedented. Queer ancestors fought through the AIDS crisis, and now there are battles, new and old, that show no signs of slowing.

Though there is a healing energy in creation, tragedy reaches in to draw out questions.

How do we as a family carry on when a sister dies?

How do you keep their name sacred on your tongue?

How do you prop up an artist so she can go on when a piece of her genesis slips through her fingers?

How can we celebrate when our community is picked off one by one by addiction, murder, harassment, and rape?

Why are so many in the LGBTQ community so used to that fucking phone call?

These questions cause those of us in points of privilege to turn to those younger, to hear their stories, and to see the other members of the community who are forging conceptions of home and healing into concrete.

CEE AND SARAH: FINDING FAMILY

Cee and Sarah Wilson have not missed a single Low Pone. "[At Low Pone] I feel free," says Cee. "Spaces like that, and even shows like this, are truly where I can be myself and I don't have to worry about whatever is going on."

"The first thing that comes to my mind is home," says Sarah when asked how she feels at the event. The two started following Auntie Christ and Mary Fagdalane when they were performing in Louisville years before the inception of Low Pone.

"Nothing in Indy really suited us until we found Auntie and Mary," says Cee.

"Not that the Indy queens are boring, it just didn't seem relatable," says Sarah. "It doesn't seem like our scene."

It should be noted that both Cee and Sarah have isochronal bouts with anxiety that have a mask of timidness. In fact, on Sarah's 21st birthday they drove to the White Rabbit Cabaret to see a drag show. They never go out of the car as anxiety pinned Sarah to the seat. They buckled back up and left only to get in an accident because they were so distracted and nervous. However, Sarah has found ways to cope, namely through art and her work as an advocate for those who are displaced in Indianapolis, a feeling that is known all too well to both her and Cee.

Cee grew up in Rushville, an hour drive east from the state's capital, surrounded by cornfields. They had never been to Indianapolis, save for once a year to Christmas shop. Sarah, by contrast, called Irvington home. "[Irvington Prep] sounds like a really fancy high school, but it was a charter school that got all of the kids who got kicked out of public schools." After high school she stayed close to home by attending the University of Indianapolis. "I was doing decent, I was going to class, but I wasn't eating because of anxiety, because of wanting to look like all of the other girls at U Indy. Everyone was blonde and pretty and

Cee and Sarah

rich. I didn't feel like all of them." Sarah and Cee met through a mutual friend. "We found each other when we were both pretty low in our lives," says Sarah. "We were trying to find ourselves out."

Being reared in the rural Midwest can feel ritualistic, where at every turn the world around you is littered with gendered iconography. High schools are a modern Salem, where those whose ilk strays from heteronormative assumptions are kept in the shadows.

"Where I grew up I didn't really know a lot," says Cee. "I wasn't exposed to a lot of things. I was very shut off. I was able to learn a little bit more [at IYG]. I struggled a lot with who am I? What am I? And just one day — I don't remember how — I was just like 'I'm not going to worry about that anymore. I am just going to be myself. I am going to wear what I want. I am in the middle and that's okay.' It took a lot to get to that point."

"I am just going to be myself. I am going to wear what I want. I am in the middle and that's okay."

Cee, who is non-binary, goes by their birth name professionally. "I am what they perceive me to be," they add. "My family calls me by my middle name which is Cheyanne. That's what they perceive me to be. They know that I am with Sarah now, but that is all they need to know. My family, it's always been very weird and cut off. Everything is under the rug. We don't talk about things. The only time I am who I am is in spaces like this [Cee gestures to the patio outside Hard Rock Cafe before X, a local drag show, starts], or when I am with Sarah."

Cee goes on to give the example of how their uncle recently passed away from AIDS, that he was too afraid to openly admit that he had HIV and would not seek treatment.

"My family is Sarah and my cat. For the most part Sarah's family and the people we surround ourselves with. That's, to me, what real family is."

The two, though vastly different, chose to integrate their stories at a young age, carving milestones with one another: coming out, finding pronouns, buying a home.

"Cee helped me figure out that there are ways to express myself," says Sarah. She explains how Cee pushed her art to a level of vulnerability. "If I can put what is in my brain on an actual canvas then maybe I can work through this. That is what saved me. I don't think it was only my art that saved me. I think it was having someone who truly saw me for my sexuality, for my mental health, for my weird family, for everything."

The two lived with Sarah's family briefly, then found their own place (prior to signing the mortgage for the home they share now) that they jokingly referred to as the "crap-shack." One of the redeeming qualities was that it had running water, but the stove couldn't be used, the shower was too short to stand under, there was no heat in the winter, and it flooded when it rained.

"When I was in high school and even college, my mom literally handed me a disability application and said 'This is probably what you are going to have to do,'" says Sarah. "Now I am..." Cee interjects, "You're rocking it."

Sarah recently received a diamond service award in her field as a case manager for displaced people in Indianapolis. She was also invited to sit on a national LGBTQ homeless awareness board.

"I felt like I was never going to be anyone unless I had this piece of paper stating I was someone," says Sarah. "I can now say that I am truly someone without that piece of paper. I am a case manager now. I have four years of experience in the mental health field... I am helping people get housing every day. I truly change lives. But it's not that I am changing lives. These people are changing lives. They are changing their own life. My work makes a difference. It's inspiring."

TATJANA: SPEAKING TRUTH

Tatjana Rebelle walks up to the microphone at White Rabbit Cabaret, a windowless show space tucked off the heart of Fountain Square. “How’s it going? Welcome to Vocab.” When she comes back later in the night under the spotlight, to read her own poetry, she grips her notebook, fingers curled over the top, and her hips begin to sway as she turns each page further into a moment of vulnerability.

Tatjana has many attributes that follow her name: founder, writer, activist, mother, curator, warrior, to name a few. Her story is one that is in constant flux and radically informs her art, but is not without turmoil.

In early 2018, Tatjana was attacked by a group of radical white nationalists who found a video of her speaking at the March for Our Lives rally, posted it on Facebook, and added their own commentary — the most harsh of which dubbed her as an anti-white racist.

“[The organizers of the rally] asked me to speak, so I wrote something specifically for high schoolers, which was pretty much ‘Fuck the Man,’” says Tatjana. “I was very adamant about only speaking to the youth at the statehouse at the time. One of the comments that I said was... the system is set up for heterosexual, white, cis, Christian men. Somehow through my social media, this guy who is completely a white supremacist got ahold of the clip that I posted on my social media. So someone who I was friends with quote, unquote, sent it to him. So on April Fools’ Day one of my friends sent me a text that said ‘You finally made it’ with this YouTube clip. I click on it and it’s a picture of me

with the phrase 'anti-white racist'... He went on for 15 minutes explaining why all marginalized people are in the position that they are, like blacks are inherently more inclined to violence. I didn't watch the whole thing, I had a friend's white boyfriend watch it then give me Cliff Notes. But there were over 1,000 comments, and I made myself read most of them. It's anti-semitic, anti-gay, anti-black; it's everything that we know that they say behind our backs directly at me. He linked my blog to it. So I started getting attacked on my blog... And in my blog I am being very honest about being first generation, biracial growing up, being queer growing up in Indiana. They started attacking my blog... They used the fact that I mentioned that my father wasn't around saying, 'Well, this is the exact reason why blacks are in the position that they are, because her black father left her and her white mother raised her. How dare she do this.' It's a lot."

Tatjana's response was, naturally, to create. She designed a chapbook and held an art show where she read and responded to specific comments. What emerged was a condensed version, a precursor to a book. Long before the show, Tatjana leaned back and explained how she would spend time bearing down for a month of preparation leading up to it, a time she referred to as "come back to center." Her family and friends were all on high alert, ready to check in, to offer support and fierce protection if called.

"I am making a point that I am going to ask for help when I need it," she says. "Right now I am good because I am preparing myself for what's going to happen when I finally go back to it. I kind of ignored it for a long time. It was really hard for me to navigate the world. When you see a thousand comments on a video of you referring to you as an anti-white racist, and everyone attacking every faction of your being — I couldn't even navigate, I couldn't even work. I went into the coffee shop where I worked and was like 'Who saw the video?' I didn't know who saw it."

Her concern swelled when she looked out the window of her home, a mostly white neighborhood at the time, to see a cop sitting in front of her street address for hours.

"It was one of those moments where it could have been a coincidence, but I don't believe in coincidences," she says shaking her head. "It altered the way I interacted in the world completely, so I had to take a step back. I am forcing myself to go back in it because I am a person who is like 'You can't do that without me saying something.' I have never been a person who can idly sit by when I see bull shit happen. I have always had to speak up. ... I know I am looking at it more on a grander scheme now, as opposed to a personal attack. I'm using it as a case study."

The show that emerged was more than a case study. It was a reshaping of violent actions into a platform of power. "It's been hard," she says discussing the process of reading each comment in preparation. "I'm the daughter of an immigrant, first generation, I am perceived as black but I am biracial... being bisexual, so I am queer. Every faction of myself is almost always under attack at all times."

The author spoke with Tatjana to hear about how she fights back, what she is building, and what comes next.

Q: How do you care for yourself in those moments where you are being bombarded?

A: I have learned how to clock off. I have learned how to listen to ancestors. Bayard Rustin has been a huge inspiration for me. He was Dr. King's top advisor. He taught Dr. King about nonviolence. He was a Quaker; I work for a Quaker organization. But he was silenced because he was gay. Everything I do is in honor of him. I had the privilege to go to Philly this year. I was sitting and having drinks with these 70-year-old activists and organizers. They have lived their lives, they had the benefit of not having social media around. I actually think that's the difference. They were able to do it because they weren't bombarded with it every second of every day.

Tatjana and her son, Xavier, in their home

Q: It's like people coming up and knocking on your window every day.

A: Yeah, constantly. I mean they had to deal with more shit. For me, yes, I got attacked but it's on the Internet. I didn't have a cross in my front yard. I did have a cop in my front yard, but he never came up to my house. I know intimidation is real.

Q: How do you navigate this in your home space, being a mother?

A: I've been going to therapy. And I learned how honesty is really crucial. Xavier [my youngest son] being eight, he only gets a little bit. With my other two being teenagers and young adults, they got all of it. I was very honest about what I was going through. And there was something really beautiful about being honest about it, and teaching them the reality of what's going on. My home space is my sanctuary. It's the clock off again. There's a moment where there's no computers, there's no news, there's no nothing. We share space together and we are a family. No matter what I do my family is the most important thing to me. My family has kept me out of jail. My family keeps me from doing a lot of shit that I want to do deep down. I am an anarchist and I want to chain myself to shit, I want to be on the front lines, but my family keeps me grounded. I honor that as much as I can.

Q: Where do you see the greatest need right now? With you personally going through all of these things, but then looking around you, what do you see Indy needs the most right now?

A: For me it's POC liberation always. One of the hardest things for me especially in queer spaces is seeing how white it is and trying to figure out how to get people of color out without isolating. That's the hardest part of being [called] "anti-white racist," I am the farthest from anti-white racist. My mother is white, super German. I identify as German more than I do American. But

to be queer and a person of color, a lot of things are just white spaces. It's not even on purpose. I have thrown events and they have ended up being mostly white events. So it's trying to figure out how to get queer people of color to feel comfortable to come out, figuring out how to establish POC spaces without isolating. For me that's been the hardest part, but also why I am so vocal about being present and being there. It's why I will always walk in a Pride parade. It's why I will always be present. It's why I am always super out, because representation matters. Even if I am the only person of color in a space, I will be that person for the little kid that's walking by, for the other POC person who is not there, who is like "I don't know what the fuck is going on." Hey I acknowledge you, I see you. For me, that's been the hardest part is figuring out how to get people of color to be out and proud everywhere, not just in POC places.

Q: When it comes to the queer world in Indy, it's created for white, cis, people. There is a sense of displacement.

A: That's one of the reasons I have been so vocal and passionate about Vocab. I have been very adamant about saying it's a POC and queer space. And being very vocal about it being a trans, non-binary space, without it being exclusive. I think a lot of the problem is that the exclusive — while I know it's completely necessary — people don't change if they don't see other people. It's why Vocab is so important to me. It's giving people the space to be honest about who they are and being comfortable in that space to do that. So when said cis white whatever shows up, they know what they are stepping into. It's giving people the power to speak their voice. It's giving people the opportunity to listen. That's one of my main goals in my entire life — fostering spaces to make that happen, outside of exclusion. I worry because "inclusion" and there are a lot of words that have become really fucking kitschy right now that people, I don't think, actually give a shit about, but are really fucking important. So my goal,

everything I do, is to make sure that everyone knows that this is this space. You are welcome to come. Fucking listen, and learn something... People aren't going to learn unless they actually witness it. You have to witness someone in their truth to be able to acknowledge it.

Q: How do you present that truth in day-to-day?

A: It's hard but I have always been this person. I don't remember a time in my life where I wasn't... A friend referred to it as "oppositional defiance." I guess [this] is the technical term for it. I don't understand a world where you deny someone else their existence. I believe in a world where if that's what someone tells you they are, then you honor it. You believe them. You just get on with your fucking life. If you tell me you are this person, cool you are this person. No argument. No nothing, we acknowledge it and go on with it. For me, it's the basis of humanity. I don't understand how it's so hard for so many other people, which is why I fight so hard for it. I believe to my core it's what's right.

"I don't understand a world where you deny someone else their existence. I believe in a world where if that's what someone tells you they are, then you honor it. You believe them."

Q: What is your utopia?

A: My utopia is everyone being able to live with dignity. Which to me, doesn't seem that far fetched. I realize everyday of my life that it's a concept a lot of people don't understand. I have my own beliefs. I don't enforce my beliefs on people, except for dignity. I am an atheist and practice magic, but I work for a Quaker organization that strictly works for religious rights. If I can do it then I don't understand why other people can't do it. I think people need to get out of their fucking heads and let people live their fucking life, whatever that looks like. There is no right or wrong. It's just you and me. Let's just live in that world. That's my utopia — a world that's outside of everyone else's judgements and rules. A world where everyone gets to live by their own standards without hurting someone else.

Q: What is your version of Midwest queer life?

A: I feel like I am in an interesting space, because I just came out like four years ago, like fully out. I realize in the grand scheme of modern terms I am kind of old to do that, even though I don't feel like 40 is old. I feel like a lot of queer spaces are really into an image of what queerness is supposed to look like. And I know for a fact that queerness is very vast, but I am also really excited that there are a lot of other people who see how vast queerness is, and gender is, and sexuality is. There's language now that wasn't around when I was younger. That if it was around when I was younger I would be a completely different... well, I wouldn't be completely different, but I wouldn't have had to wait until I was 40 or 35 to do it.

Q: What kind of language?

A: Non-binary language. I think if I were a teenager now, I would [be] 100 percent non-binary. Without question. I always just thought I was a tomboy. I never understood. I am in a space now where my identity is wrapped around motherhood: I take it very seriously and it's something I am proud of. Now, I am comfortable in my identity. But I know that if I was growing up in this space, if I was 12, now, it would be totally different. But there was no language for it before. It was like you are a tomboy or you're a gay boy. That was it. There was nothing. So I am excited

about the future. My own role, I am figuring that out every day.

Having teenagers has made it so much better for me. My daughter is the only cis, straight girl in her pack. She has grown up outside of me and what I believe in, her entire crew are pansexual, bisexual, trans, non-binary. She is the only cis one. So to be able to see kids take on their truth and have language for it, to me is beautiful. It inspires me. While I am comfortable with where I am outside of language, being able to see these kids do it younger and younger because of what we have been doing. I take pride in knowing that what I have been doing up to this point helps the next generation get the language. They are living in a world, but they are living in that world because we did the work, I did the work, other people did the work. So I am really excited about that. If they are coming into this space way farther than we could have ever been at that age, then the next generation is going to be even better off for it. While I might not have been able to be the 14 year old with the language of non-binary and pan and all that kind of stuff, seeing that they have it means the fucking world to me. That shows me that all of this up to this point has been worth it.

Q: What comes next?

A: I got a fellowship to start a youth program. I don't have a title for it. I am going to go into spaces and teach them everything I know. From navigating computer systems of the government, to figuring out what is coming up in legislation, to art, to activism, and organizing rallies. I am literally going to go into spaces and teach kids what I know. I am passing off my toolbox. And in three years I am hoping that there will just be this whole little pack of these woke ass activated, toolbox having. That's been the hardest thing for me, there isn't a history of resistance in Indy. At all. And all of us who are doing it now are literally winging it. So I want to be like I have wung it, I have learned this, take it. Do what the fuck you want with it. If you want to do art shows, if you want to do marches, if you want to run for office — here are all my tools. Take it. I'm done and gonna go be a writer, live in my log cabin, love you all. Good day [laughs].

My goal in five years is a community center. Nonprofit community center. Also, tiny house, traveling, homeschooling. One of the hardest things for me is that I want to travel, but I don't feel right leaving Indy. I don't feel right going to another city and being like "I want to change your city." I feel like I have to do it here. I've lived here for a really long fucking time. This city needs a lot of work. Even on a global scale if I am like, "I made it in Indy," they will have no idea what I am talking about. But to have a community center that is self-sustaining, that gives me enough money to be able to have my tiny house, travel with my kid, homeschool — that's the goal. That's why I am working my fucking ass off right now. That's why I have four jobs. It's why I am doing everything that I am doing. I want to eventually get to the point where I can literally hand it off. Everything I am doing is to hand it off and not have to be present. Vocab, I want to just book. I don't have to host. I want to do tours, I want to do the whole thing, but I don't actually have to be in Indy to do it. My community center or school — I haven't figured that out yet. I'm going to let that manifest — there will be a brick and mortar. There will be a space to teach kids about art and activism... and I can just go and do what I have to do remotely from whatever part of the world I am at. It might take 10 years but I am working on five....

It's time. I just feel like it's time for society to alter. I just don't understand. The people who go live by these societal rules, I don't understand those people. Specifically because society is fucked up to me. I don't understand how it's okay. How easy it is to negate someone else's existence. That's why I am so passionate about Palestine, queer rights, POC rights. There's this mentality of negating other people's existence. I just make my money, work my job, I buy my house. I don't understand those rules because so many other people are left out.

I look forward to a day when more people are coming out. The more of us who are like, "Fuck it. I'm not going to do it," the more people will be like, "I don't want to do it either." Plus I don't understand why people don't want to live for their passion. I understand that people have to have jobs, and not everyone has a passion for something. But I have met so many people that have negated their passion for other things. And for me, if you are passionate about something then do it. Just do it.

Vocab is going on its 12th year soon. March? May? Early spring? Late winter? I have been really bad at that. But I have also had this moment of — and I am learning to try and not be shitty about it — a lot of people in this city have gotten their first feature at Vocab, and that's one of the tug of wars that I have. I don't do what I do for recognition, but I have been working my ass off for a really long time to foster this space. I know what I have done for the art scene. I don't need the recognition. It would be kind of nice, like a little bit. It's also been hard, now that Cory Ewing is helping me host I have watched Cory get credit because people assume that I am just a host. That's been really interesting. Every night when I go to sleep I know that I am doing the best that I can and that I have actually done shit to make this city better, and I am okay with that.

Q: How did Vocab begin? What was that initial conversation?

A: Being a person who has been through a lot of traumas, in my early 20s I reached a point where writing in my journal or writing poems for myself wasn't enough. I had to say it out loud. So I started showing up to really shitty singer-songwriter open mics in Broad Ripple. And they hated me. No but they fucking hated me. It was a bunch of white guys playing covers on their guitar. Here is me with my real ass, trauma talking about, poetry. And I was like I have to do it. And I started getting a following... It grew into this thing that, aside from my children, is literally the greatest thing I have ever done. PRINTtEXT has hit me to another level, but Vocab is the greatest thing I have ever done by far.

Q: How have you seen Indy change because of it?

A: Being around for 11 years, I have seen the ebbs and flow of the poetry scene. I have seen other people show up and say "I'm doing something new." Where it's like, "No, we have been here." Cafe Kumba has been doing this shit for 30 years.

Poetry has been a part of this city for a really long time. For a lot of the musicians, a lot of the poets here, Vocab has been integral for them being where they are at... I know I have helped propel people to that next phase. It's one of the things I love — finding a new artist. My favorite part is the open mic. One hundred percent. Because you never know what is going to happen. In the old days, I had to go through a lot of fucking shit. The benefit for it now, it being what it is. Shitty-ass people don't show up to Vocab anymore. They get intimated at least. I don't know why. But the open mics are always phenomenal. To be able to give that person a space, to just try it out one time. Just try it out for one time, get on the open mic and see how you like it, then let me feature you. Then I get to see artists prosper, grow. That's my favorite shit. Whether they acknowledge that's where it came from or that Vocab was a stepping stone, I know that I was a part of that... I have been able to hear moments where people connect. That's the shit I live for. It's happened to me over and over and over. Anytime I am going through something, something will happen at Vocab that will affirm where I am at or make me realize what I don't want to realize. I am grateful to be able to establish a space that people have to acknowledge something about themselves — if that's a talent, a trauma, if it's a community — you can't go without some kind of connection.

That's part of the reason I am so passionate about Vocab, establishing that space. Because they hated me so much at those open mics, that I was like "I am going to establish a space where every single person who walks in and wants to perform will feel

comfortable." We won't heckle you. Well, I mean we might talk about you a little bit if you suck but that hasn't happened in years.

Q: What was one of the most formative experiences that you went through early on in life that made you who you are?

A: My first trauma happened when I was 6. I was sexually molested when I was 6. It was from that point on plus. When I say I have gone through a lot, I was molested when I was 6, my mom was in an abusive relationship, also an emotionally abusive relationship towards me in my middle school years. There was some physical abuse, emotional abuse. I have been raped. I have been physically assaulted. I have been through a lot of shit. My notebook is the thing that saved my life. Speaking on those open mics is the thing that freed me. Every single one of those things led me to a place of being, no matter what someone says to me, I have literally gone through it either personally or through my circle. But also learning the power of speaking it and freeing yourself has completely altered my life. It was when I decided to finally sign up for that shitty-ass open mic, with all those shitty-ass singer-songwriters, and being like I can't hold this in anymore, being able free myself that way — that is how I know about the power of the vocal. I am grateful for my notebook, because it got me to the point of the vocal. The first time I signed up for that open mic and completely was honest with people, it altered the entire way I lived my life. So if there was a pivotal moment, it was the shitty open mic at the UpRoom.

That's why I want to foster that space for people. Even if you don't become an artist, I know how freeing it is to say it and let it go. All the stuff I do with youth and other people, no matter what you say to me, I have been through it.
I have gone through it.

I am here.

CHARLES GREYSON MEYER: RECEIVING HOME

"Your name is a gift, you can return it if it doesn't fit." —Andrea Gibson, Lord of the Butterflies

There is no singular transgender experience aside from bravery. Charles is a polyamorous, pansexual, trans man, who asked to share an insight into his narrative.

"When I finally realized I wasn't like everyone else, I was lucky because my mother is also a member of the community but my father was a bit less," says Charles. "I have had a hard time coming to terms with my identity, but I was okay with not being straight. But being trans was the hardest part. It's only been the past few years that I have been open and out. Even then, there is still family that I can't tell. I have dealt with bigots, with misunderstanding, with people who don't want to understand. Being a part of the community and having people who know and who can actually, physically relate, instead of just

being understanding — it's been a breakthrough. It gives me a reason to live... I think like a lot of people in our community I have had a really hard fucked up life. I've dealt [with] abuse, abandonment, sexual abuse, everything — from people who are in power who you are supposed to be able to go to."

Charles has attempted suicide several times. He finds moments of strength in connection — places like queer dance parties, goth events, and the BDSM community.

"It's funny how much the queer community and the leather community overlap," says Charles. "If I show up here in full leather, no one is going to bat an eye. I am a switch. I am a sadomasochist. Being abused throughout my childhood, it leaves an impacting mark. It never goes away, but with BDSM it's a way to let it out in a controlled and safe environment. I struggled with self-harm. I don't have to do that now. I have very good friends. My fiancé is also in the community. We play. We have some of his friends who we play with, they're wonderful people."

"I am one of the darker ones," says Charles. "I am not fully goth; I don't do it every day, but I relate to the goth community. I have never been feminine. I have always been the tomboy. I don't have to put on a front. I don't have to put on a mask. Personally, being able to be out every day — even when I struggle with people misgendering or deadnaming— I can cut those out.

"Sometimes I wake up and I hate that I am trans," he says. "Even in our own community there are bigots. There are gays and lesbians who don't want to accept transgenders. There are people who are actively working to remove the T from LGBT. And they don't acknowledge that without trans women of color we wouldn't even have Pride. It's sad that even in your own community we still have to fight to be closeted. Low Pone isn't like that, they don't care. We have non-binaries. I have seen a couple of trans men and trans women. You try and kick them out and they are going to kick your ass with eight-inch heels.

"I have something to strive for [now]; I have something to live for," says Charles. "I can't die because Low Pone is next month. I can't allow myself to fall into the pit when I finally have a community to refer to when times get hard. They aren't someone who just says, 'Oh, I am straight but I'm an ally.' They say, 'I understand because I am right there with you.' I have someone I can turn to. I have someone I can confide in; even when they don't necessarily understand everything, they know that they are part of it."

"I have something to strive for [now]; I have something to live for. I can't die because Low Pone is next month. I can't allow myself to fall into the pit when I finally have a community to refer to when times get hard."

self-portrait while Taylor interviews Mary Fagdalane

About the authors:

Casey and Taylor consider themselves documentarians and creative culture makers. Casey is a local musician in the band Spandrels and an award-winning photographer living in Indianapolis. He is interested in closing the negative space between artist, audience, and community. Taylor is a non-binary journalist in Indianapolis who has worked as the Arts Editor for NUVO *and as the Communications Director for the ACLU of Indiana. Their work has won numerous Society of Professional Journalism awards for social justice and community based content. This relationship between an artist and journalist is collaborative. Both artists have experienced discrimination based on class, gender, and sexuality. They both found power in their perspective mediums by boldly claiming their own identities. This project is not only personal, it is how these artists hope to encourage similar endeavors in the arts community of Indianapolis.*

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From Casey No:

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From Taylor Rose:

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