



The pride of Chicago

**Pride month is upon us: Meet eight LGBTQ Chicagoans seriously upping the city's cool factor. By *Kris Vire*
Photographs by *Andrew Nawrocki* and *Jaclyn Rivas***

FROM ARTISTS TO activists, pamphleteers to politicians, Chicago's LGBTQ community has played a significant role in shaping the city's cultural life for nearly a century, dating back to the pre-Prohibition social clubs of Towertown (now River North) and the nation's first

documented gay rights organization, which was founded by Henry Gerber in 1924. As the city celebrates its 47th annual Chicago Pride Parade on Sunday June 26, meet eight LGBTQ Chicagoans influencing the city's culture today—from veteran activists to up-and-coming artists.

Joseph Varisco

PERFORMING ARTS PRODUCER

A native of suburban Bensenville, Joseph Varisco boasts an eclectic résumé as a producer, presenter and promoter. He's a cocurator of Salonathon, the weekly performance incubator at Beauty Bar, and through his own production company, JRV MAJESTY, he created Queer, Ill & Okay, an annual multidisciplinary performance series about living with HIV or other forms of chronic or mental illness. You may have also seen his POST-Q, a performance series at Links Hall.

Though he's always been involved in the arts in some way, Varisco says, "My education was kind of a separate entity from the work I'm doing now. But [the education] also contributed." The 31-year-old did graduate work in community health and urban development at University of Illinois at Chicago's Jane Addams College of Social Work, and during that time, he interned at Howard Brown Health's Broadway Youth Center. It was there where he took note of the creative energies of the young people involved (many of them just a few years younger than him).

"So much of the work that they were producing is what ends up being kind of translated to pop culture many years down the road," says Varisco. "You can look at something like voguing and see how that went from queer, street-based youth of color and ended up becoming part of larger mainstream pop culture. I thought it was really important to bear witness to how rare it is that anyone from those communities is credited for the work that they do."

This spring, Varisco was announced as the program director for the launch of the Chicago Queer Arts Mentorship Program, a project of High Concept Labs that pairs emerging artists with established professionals for yearlong mentorships. "One of the larger goals is to establish a sense of professional heritage for queer artists," he says.



Psalm One

RAPPER



Chicago native rapper Psalm One, 35, is active in education, partnering with Intonation Music Project for the after-school mentorship program RhymeSchool. "This spring we're working with eighth graders on the South Side who are a bit nervous about graduating. We are getting them to open up about their fears through rap music." She's also become more comfortable talking about her bisexuality than she was at the beginning of her career. "I didn't want to alienate anyone. I was a bit fearful; now, I don't care. LGBTQ kids tell me all the time they thought I was speaking for them. Now they know for certain."



Tracy Baim

EXECUTIVE EDITOR AND PUBLISHER, *WINDY CITY TIMES*

Tracy Baim, 53, has spent three decades observing LGBT life in Chicago as a journalist; her *Windy City Times* has survived as other community publications like *Chicago Free Press* and *Gay Chicago* have died off. The Chicago native is also the force behind the Chicago Gay History Project (chicagogayhistory.com). “I believe that communities need their own voices reflected in alternative media, and that, in many ways, alternative media is more needed than ever before,” she says. “Because we have not been motivated by financial gain but rather community coverage, we have been able to withstand drastic shifts in the economy.”

PHOTOGRAPHS (FROM TOP): JACLYN RIVAS; ANDREW NAWROCKI

Will Davis

ARTISTIC DIRECTOR, AMERICAN
THEATER COMPANY

“I have huge ambitions for the company,” says Will Davis, the incoming artistic director of Chicago’s three-decades-old American Theater Company. “I’m also nervous. This is my first rodeo. I’ve never run a theater before. So I’m going to fall on my face a little bit—should be fun.”

Davis, 33, a native of Santa Cruz, California, first came to Chicago as an undergrad at the Theatre School at DePaul University. After completing his M.F.A. at the University of Texas, he pursued a freelance directing career in New York—last year, *New York Times* critic Ben Brantley praised his “highly ingenious direction” of the play *Men on Boats*, which will be remounted this summer at Playwrights Horizons. He was poised for big things in New York. Then he got an email last fall from Bonnie Metzgar, who served as ATC’s interim artistic director after the untimely death of PJ Paparelli last spring. “It was the most beautiful email I’ve ever received in my life, in which she outlined all the reasons I should apply for this job,” says Davis.

Having applied—and gotten the job—he is now one of the most visible transgender leaders in the arts. “I feel so responsible and so moved to be one of the first trans people to run a theater in this country. It means so much to me. Long-term, I want to be an artist in the field who cultivates space for other people, who uses a platform like ATC to do good for the field.”



“Lucy tries to be the girl next door, but she’s a little far out.”



Lucy Stoole

DRAG DIVA

Spend any time out enjoying Chicago’s more creative LGBT nightlife these days, and you’re bound to catch sight of this distinctively bearded drag queen. Lucy Stoole cohosts Fabitat at Door No. 3 every two weeks, Queen! at Smart Bar every Sunday and the biweekly Deep Dish at Berlin, among other appearances.

“I’d been wearing women’s clothing and playing around with the idea of gender and identity for a really long time, even before I had the words for it,” says Lucy’s alter ego, Ty Huey. He first started doing drag in earnest with a

different persona—“kind of a girly girl, straightforward drag queen, and I hated it. I stopped for a while, and then I went to an Oscar party in drag, but bearded, and I had such a good time. That was the birth of Lucy, like, three years ago.”

Huey, 31, says Lucy “tries to be the girl next door, but she’s a little far out.” As for her look, he says his time as Lucy has coincided with a sea change in the Chicago drag scene when “it became more free. People didn’t feel so constricted to the pageant bobs and all that.”



Rebecca O'Neal

COMEDIAN

It's been four years since Rebecca O'Neal first walked onstage to try stand-up at the weekly open mic at Cole's. "I host it now," she says with some pride.

O'Neal, 29, had been writing about comedy for the national website Splitsider and testing out her own humor chops on her Twitter account, @becca_oneal. "I felt like the Internet was kind of a cheat code between wanting to do it and actually having the courage to do it," says the Chicago native, who grew up in Wrightwood-Ashburn on the Southwest Side. "You could get that immediate feedback on Twitter. That was an easier way to dip my toe into saying things that I thought were funny."

In addition to her time at Cole's, a favorite night among local comics, O'Neal is one of the producers of the monthly show *Congrats on Your Success* at Logan Square's *Uncharted*

Books and hosts two brand-new nights: *Top Ten Tuesdays!*, weekly at *Laugh Factory*, and *Guest List*, biweekly at *River West bike shop Ancien Cycles*. "As soon as you can book a show, you can give someone stage time, and stage time is the best thing you can have as a comedian," she says.

O'Neal sometimes describes herself onstage as "a pansexual hedonist." "That's a joke, but that's how I do identify. I like a good time, and I don't really discriminate wherever my attractions should fall." It's one of many aspects that make up her point of view.

"Everything about me informs my voice onstage. Not being straight is a part of it. I'm coming from an outsider perspective in a lot of ways: being a woman, being black, being queer. Even if I don't talk about the fact that I sleep with women—though I do have a lot of bits about that!—it's always me."



Art Johnston

ACTIVIST/BAR OWNER

As the public face of pioneering Halsted Street gay bar *Sidetrack*, Art Johnston, 72, has watched Boystown's evolution for more than 30 years; as cofounder of *Equality Illinois*, he's been on the front lines of the fight for LGBT rights. At *EQIL's* 25th-anniversary gala earlier this year, he recalled the passage of Chicago's antidiscrimination ordinance in 1988 and how he believed, prematurely, that a battle won was the whole war. "Gay ghettos are not as critical to the development of people's lives as they used to be," he says of Halsted Street's future. "To be a successful gay bar, it used to be enough just to welcome gay people.

But the exciting part is young people no longer feel like the only place they can go is a gay bar. God bless, young gay people are going, 'Goddamn it, I can go anywhere I want to.' Which is, after all, part of what we were working for in the beginning."

Carlos Ramirez-Rosa

35TH WARD ALDERMAN

Lakeview native Carlos Ramirez-Rosa got into politics early: While running for class president as a junior at Whitney M. Young Magnet High School, he was also knocking on doors for his uncle’s successful campaign for judge. A year later, he was a paid staffer on an aldermanic campaign—and he still wasn’t old enough to vote.

That was 10 years ago. Now 27, Ramirez-Rosa became Chicago’s youngest alderman in the February 2015 city elections, defeating incumbent Rey Colón in the 35th Ward by a two-to-one margin. He’s also the first openly gay Latino elected to city council in Chicago. (Raymond Lopez became the second weeks later, after winning the 15th Ward in a runoff.)

“Growing up at the intersection of Latino and gay informs my worldview,” Ramirez-Rosa says in a conversation at the Logan Square office he shares with another millennial political upstart, State Representative Will Guzzardi. “It not only tells me that people who are gay and people who are Latino should have a seat at the table but that all other people should, whether they be white, black, able-bodied or not able-bodied, documented or undocumented. My experiences inform me that I have a responsibility to fight for everyone’s rights. The best way I feel I can do that is by going to people who do not have a full seat at the table and asking them what it is exactly that I can do to advocate for their community’s needs.”



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PRIDE, ENJOY

Celebrate at these five Pride weekend events, including the 47th annual parade

Backlot Bash

This annual festival features comics and rockers with serious sapphic appeal. Lineups weren’t yet announced at press time, but it’s bound to be good.
→ Lot behind Cheetah Gym Andersonville (backlotbashchicago.com). June 24–26; \$TBD.

Proud to Run

This Pride weekend 10K run and 5K run/walk raises funds for LGBTQ causes. This year proceeds go to About Face Theatre, Center on Halsted and TransTech Social Enterprises.
→ Montrose Ave at Simonds Dr (proudtorun.org). June 25 at 8am; \$45, at event \$50.

Chicago Dyke March

The fierce and festive celebration of community activism and queer solidarity takes place in Humboldt Park for a third year.
→ Humboldt Park, 1400 N Sacramento Ave (chicagodykemarch.wordpress.com). June 25 at 1pm; free.

Chicago Pride Parade

Head to this parade with more than 1 million attendees before the party rolls down Halsted and Broadway from Montrose to Diversey.
→ Montrose Ave at Broadway (chicago Pride calendar.org). June 26 noon; free.

Pride North

This street festival just off the Morse Red Line stop in Rogers Park offers low-key entertainment, including the Pride Idol finalists.
→ Glenwood Ave between Morse St and Lunt Ave (facebook.com/glenwoodavenuepridenorth). June 26; free.

PHOTOGRAPH: ANDREW NAWROCKI