

G&LR

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Refuge, Asylum**

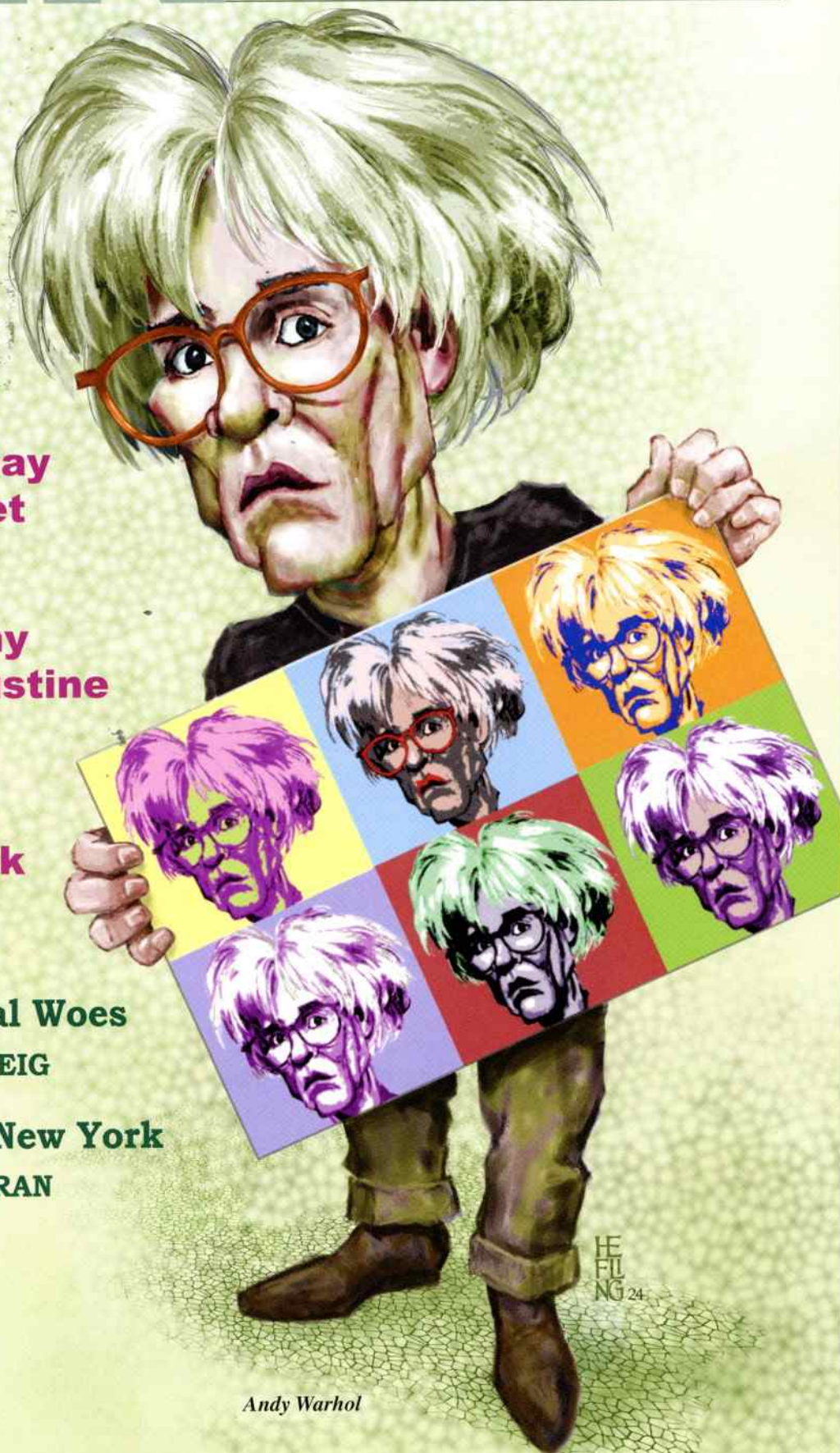
WILLIAM BENEMANN
**There Once Was a Gay
Haven Off Nantucket**

ANNE CHARLES
**A Lesbian Art Colony
Bloomed in St. Augustine**

LUCAS BELURY
**When a Bar in San
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Safety on Trial in San Antonio

LUCAS BELURY

EDITOR'S NOTE: The following is by a grant recipient in a program launched in 2022 by The G&LR, our Writers and Artists Grant, which was awarded to three recipients in 2023. The purpose of this grant is to assist advanced students engaged in LGBT-related research, and awardees are expected to produce an article for this magazine as part of their project. This is the second of three articles from last year's recipients.

FROM THE STONEWALL RIOTS of 1969 to the recent raid of a Seattle-based gay bar called the Cuff Complex, police harassment of LGBT+ people in bars and nightclubs forms an important part of our history. Unlike New York City or Seattle, a city like San Antonio, Texas—mid-sized, Southern, and largely Latinx—tends to be overlooked in the history books. And yet, San Antonio was at the center of an important legal battle between the U.S. military and a gay discothèque called San Antonio Country in 1973 and '74. Indeed this court case provides a lens through which we can examine how gay people in this era survived in the face of persecution by outside forces.*

In the post-Stonewall Gay Liberation era of the 1970s, a major change took place in the lives of LGBT+ San Antonians with the opening of San Antonio Country, commonly known as the SA Country, in April 1973. The club was founded by the developer Arthur “Hap” Veltman along with the bar’s manager and a close friend of Veltman, Gene Elder. Veltman was a well-known entrepreneur who developed the first restaurant facing San Antonio’s iconic Riverwalk. Up to that time, according to Elder in a 1993 oral history: “the gay bars in San Antonio were very small holes in the wall.” Another thing that distinguished the SA Country was the openness with which the bar publicized its sexual orientation. Perhaps for this reason, the bar was raided almost immediately by both the Military Police (MPs) and the local vice squad, and it was placed on the military’s off-limits list.

For context, San Antonio is known as a “military city” due to the large population of active duty military and veterans who live in the city. Historian Melissa Gohlke remarked that being placed on the off-limits list was sometimes akin to free adver-

tising and enabled LGBT+ servicemembers to know where the local gay bars were located, because they were often posted in barracks for the servicemembers to see. Conversely, placement on this list also meant harassment and increased risk for service members who frequented these bars.

The Stonewall Riots had provided one model of resistance, but the response this time was different. Veltman and Elder, with the help of their lawyers, challenged this injustice in military court. This court case is legendary in San Antonio queer history and resulted in several published articles and oral histories, a documentary, and even a play. In these retellings of the landmark court case, there’s a standard narrative that the queer community of San Antonio triumphed over the homophobic military. This David and Goliath scenario has often drawn comparisons to the Stonewall riots and painted Veltman and Elder as champions of LGBT+ rights.

However, these narratives conceal important facts about LGBT+ life in San Antonio in the early 1970s. While I’m not here to challenge the belief that Veltman and Elder were instrumental in shaping San Antonio queer life or to diminish the importance of the legal battle and its outcome, I would like to offer a more nuanced account of the court case and a more holistic approach to this contentious time (1973–’74) in the history of LGBT+ life in Texas. I hope to elucidate some of the complexity of queer urban politics in South Texas and, in doing so, to broaden our understanding of a larger swath of that life: that of Southern, Black and brown, and noncoastal urban queer experiences in the era between Stonewall (1969) and the AIDS epidemic of the 1980s.

COMPLICATING THE NARRATIVE

THE COURT CASE was a small part of a long history of harassment by MPs after establishments were placed on the U.S. military’s off-limits list. After the SA Country was placed on this list and police harassment began, Veltman and Elder challenged this injustice in a military tribunal. In doing so, they fought for LGBT+ rights and were ultimately successful in curtailing both the military’s efforts to put the SA Country on the off-limits list and the military raids and harassment of the SA Country. As Gene Elder says in his unpublished autobiography: “Our lawyers all got together and began the magic ritual of paper shuffling that lawyers do and the next thing we knew the whole business was dropped and never spoken of again. The military eventually dropped their efforts to put us ‘off limits.’” Yet this narrative by Elder, along with articles in gay publications, documentaries, and oral histories, don’t capture the complexity of the tensions between the rival parties.

During this contentious court case, Veltman, Elder, and their

In 1973, a major change took place in the lives of LGBT+ San Antonians with the opening of SA Country. ... The bar was raided almost immediately.

* This article is based on archival research at the University of Texas San Antonio’s Special Collections and the Happy Foundation GLBT Archives, and on informal conversations with both LGBT historians and San Antonian elders.

Lucas Belury (*hel/him/el*), a doctoral candidate in geography at the University of Arizona, has published articles on urban informality, environmental justice, and race equity.



Author's photo of a 1973 photograph as annotated by Gene Elder. Happy Archives.

lawyers adopted the strategy of centering their case on the violation of their economic rights as upstanding businessmen rather than the rights of LGBT+ people. In this way, they oscillated between defending people's right to be gay and distancing themselves from the gayness of their clientele. Finally, the SA Country went to multiple military tribunals, and while the harassment of the club abated over time, it never went away completely. The military tribunal transcripts reveal that Veltman, Elder, and their lawyers argued that the placement of the SA Country on the off-limits list, and the harassment and mistreatment by the MPs, represented an infringement of their economic rights without reference to the sexual orientation of their clientele. To make this claim, they emphasized that they had made a "sizable investment" in the club, while placement on the off-limits list harmed their ability to stay in business.

In addition, Veltman and Elder tried to demonstrate that they had ties to reputable business and publishing organizations. For example, in a letter to his lawyers to be passed to the military tribunal, Veltman wrote: "[The] San Antonio Country does not hold itself out as a homosexual bar, or as a gay bar. It has been offered membership in the San Antonio Chamber of Commerce, and the Texas Restaurant Association, which membership it has under consideration. It is anticipated that it will be listed in *Texas Monthly* as a San Antonio discothèque, which is open to all persons of legal age." Part of their strategy was to present themselves as successful entrepreneurs whose establishment played an important economic role in San Antonio.

An important element of Veltman's letter to his lawyers was the final line, "open to all persons of legal age," which subtly

hinted that the SA Country was a space for everyone, including LGBT+ people. In fact, later that year (in October 1973), Elder gave an interview to *The Trinitonian* proclaiming that the SA Country isn't just a gay bar, but instead "a place anyone can feel comfortable in." In doing so, they engaged in a tactic of respectability politics that allowed them to continue operating a known gay bar while appeasing the U.S. military.

During another military tribunal, on July 6, 1973, Veltman stated the following: "To correct any situation that the military may deem harmful to military personnel, I will evict anyone from the premises who any competent military authority designates as a homosexual or undesirable in any way. All I ask is that the military in turn indemnify me for any liability I may incur in doing so. I do not think any businessman could be asked more." This statement demonstrates three core elements in the strategy that Veltman and Elder used to challenge police harassment: 1) distancing themselves from the LGBT+ community and from their own sexuality as gay men; 2) acknowledging the "harm" of homosexuality on young, impressionable, and largely male service members; and 3) reconstituting themselves as "businessmen" to claim their place as economic actors. While Veltman's statement sounds homophobic to our ears, a more generous reading might acknowledge that they were playing into a politics of respectability that would enable them to continue operating their popular gay disco.

It should be noted that neither Veltman nor Elder is alive to speak for himself. (Veltman died in 1987, Elder in 2019.) However, I had the opportunity to speak to Elder in 2014. Even then, a few years before his death, he was an outspoken advocate for social justice who had fought for equal rights for decades and created the Happy GLBT Archive dedicated to the preservation of queer history. Their statements in the mid-1970s must be understood in the context of the complexity of survival in an era of homophobic persecution.

CONTINUED THREATS AND HARASSMENT

While Elder and Veltman superficially acquiesced to the demands of the military ban on "known homosexuals" from their bar, this never transpired, and the SA Country remained a widely popular gay bar for many years after this court case. Yet despite its continued operation as an LGBT+ space, it was not simply ignored by the U.S. military or the city's vice squad. As a former employee of Veltman stated in an interview in Noi Mahoney's 2019 documentary *Hap Veltman's San Antonio Country*: "He would fight that [being on the military's banned list] all throughout the time he was alive. It was a constant ... they would put us on the banned list and then he would go over there and fight to get the military people to be able to come into his bar, and then they would put us on the banned list again and he would go back and fight it. It was a constant battle."

Mahoney's documentary captures a particularly violent night of harassment in December 1973 when MPs beat and arrested several gay patrons and threatened Elder. The documentary discusses the court case as a byproduct of this harassment. However, this chronology does not accurately reflect the timeline of events, as the court cases date to the summer of 1973. In

an oral history conducted in 1993, Elder discussed the raid of December 1973 and read from the military tribunal that took place six months earlier. In another example of this re-ordering of history, in an interview published on October 26, 1973, Elder states: "The military ... tried to have it [the SA Country] put off-limits to military personnel. After a hearing by military officials, however, the issue was dropped." Yet on October 30, 1973, the U.S. military placed SA Country back on its off-limits list and sent a letter to Gene Elder stating that "you have failed to comply with our agreement ... by allowing overt acts between male individuals in your establishment." An interviewee in Mahoney's documentary states that he began going to the SA Country in 1977, and he recalled the U.S. military coming through and checking IDs in search of military personnel. Clearly harassment by the military and the San Antonio Police Department did not end in 1973.

In fact, the story of the SA Country ends with another homophobic legal challenge. In 1980, the Valero Company filed a lawsuit to close the SA Country. In an article titled "Male Hookers Infest Downtown," a local anti-LGBT+ advocate stated: "Valero Energy Corp. has filed suit against the ... San Antonio Country. ... Valero alleges the defendants permitted the use of sidewalks, streets, parking lots and other property to be used for homosexual solicitation." This legal battle ended in the closing of the SA Country and the leveling of the building to create a parking lot. This closure led Veltman to open Bonham Exchange (with the forced payout money from Valero), a night-club still in operation as of this writing.

RACIAL ERASURE

Among the predominantly white, gay, and male voices of the LGBT+ archive in the 1970s, the opening of the SA Country changed San Antonio's gay scene dramatically. For these men, San Antonio was a closeted and conservative city, even compared to other Texas cities such as Houston and Austin, which were considered to have more open gay scenes. One interviewee in Mahoney's documentary described San Antonio as "pretty provincial" when compared to Houston. Yet the SA Country had a profound impact on the city's gay scene.

The value of having queer elders discuss their unique experiences is priceless. We as a community have tragically lost too many queer voices from homophobic violence, the HIV/AIDS epidemic, and poverty. However, upon watching Noi Mahoney's documentary, I grew uncomfortable with its predominantly Anglo and gay male perspective. San Antonio has been a majority Hispanic city since at least the 1970s. However, few Latinx individuals were interviewed, with one notable exception: Ray Chavez, a well-known gay icon in San Antonio.

Interviewees described San Antonio as conservative due to the influence of religious "Hispanics." One interviewee described San Antonio in the following way: "Everything was very hush-hush and low key, and I think, again, that's because you have a Hispanic community, a Catholic community, and a heavily military presence. And all three are conservative, closeted communities. And it did set San Antonio back in things like civil rights marches and parades ... especially when AIDS came along." This narrative that San Antonio's queer community was particularly closeted and conservative because of "Hispanics" is a recurring theme in the documentary. The conservative influence of the U.S.

military is also emphasized. As another interviewee stated: "The demographics of this place have always been very strange, you know, with the military and the Hispanics."

The belief expressed in these quotations that the U.S.-based Latinx community is more conservative on LGBT+ rights than other populations does not square with my own experience. As a mixed-race (half-Mexican-American and half Anglo) queer man, I have come out to both white and brown family members with equal parts animosity and acceptance. While not explicitly racist, the viewpoint that Hispanics are more socially conservative, religious, and anti-gay than their Anglo counterparts promotes a narrative that the Latinx community is backward and closed-minded. There's also a belief that Latinos are more misogynistic than white men—another painful and racially charged stereotype about a very heterogeneous community. Of course, heterosexist patriarchy is alive and well in both Anglo and Latinx communities.

Accounts of the SA Country vary in its purported racial and gender diversity. For many interviewees, the SA Country welcomed Black and Latinx San Antonians. Unfortunately, these narratives rely on the oral histories from almost exclusively white and largely male elders. Photographic evidence does document Black and Brown performers and staff at the SA Country, yet the extent to which this was reflected in the clientele requires additional verification from queer elders of color who were active in the LGBT+ scene at that time. The dearth of perspectives from queer people of color in the archive in San Antonio speaks to a broader erasure in the way that our histories are told and shared. The racialized language many use to describe San Antonio's gay scene not only regurgitates harmful stereotypes about the supposed conservatism of San Antonio's Hispanic community, but also extends the erasure of Latinx queer spaces and renders invisible queer Latinx communities.

The SA Country provided a place that was not just a bar but a focal point for the disparate members of this community to find a (relatively) safe space to be together and to be themselves, notwithstanding these important limitations. The qualifier "relatively" is needed because, even after the 1973 ruling, harassment by both the vice squad and the U.S. military continued, albeit somewhat abated. As late as 1987, there were raids on a lesbian bar called the Jezebel that were perpetrated by the U.S. military. The historic and recent raids of queer spaces in San Antonio, and the diverse tactics LGBT+ activists have employed to challenge these injustices, are an important window into understanding the day-to-day negotiations of queer survival in the past and present.



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Correspondence

San Antonio in the '70s: Being There

To the Editor:

Thanks for the article about San Antonio in the 1970s [July-August 2024 issue]. Lucas Belury recounted the story of bar owner Hap Veltman's legal actions to stop the Military Police from entering his bar in search of military personnel, demanding to see people's ID's.

This was during the Vietnam War era, and soldiers were everywhere. There were something like ten or twelve military bases around the city. Hap's bar was the popular, trendy San Antonio Country, which we called The Country. His 1973 success in opposing the MP's helped not just his own bar but of all the bars in the city. There were even more gay and lesbian bars than there were bases! San Antonio had a thriving gay nightlife. It even dubbed itself "the Drag Capital of the World."

Veltman's influence went well beyond his ownership of a gay bar. He and his father, a real estate developer, were key to the modernization of San Antonio. Hap owned a couple of downtown restaurants. He flipped the front entrances from street level to downstairs river level (which had been the back door to the garbage cans), thus improving and commercializing the River Walk—which today gives the city its character. A bronze plaque proclaims: "'Hap' turned an underutilized river into the vibrant district that it is today."

In 1980, The Country was forced to close in a homophobic legal challenge brought by the energy company next-door, whose new building needed a parking lot. What seemed like a defeat proved a major upgrade. The money from the sale of The Country bought the historic building on Bonham Street, named for one of the heroes of the Alamo, which became the Bonham Exchange—with its naughty pun on "bottom"—next-door to, but facing in the opposite direction of, the Alamo. The Bonham was much larger and more visible, with theater and ballroom space for community meetings and events, a de facto community center.

Belury quotes from the 2019 documentary *Hap Veltman's San Antonio Country* by filmmaker Noi Mahoney (available on YouTube). The comment about San Antonio being "hush-hush and low key ... because you have a Hispanic community, a Catholic community, and a heavily military presence," was said by my partner

Kip Dollar. That is certainly how it felt back then.

The account of The Country doesn't mention Michael Stevens. Stevens had been a very popular antiwar political science professor at U.T. San Antonio in the '70s. When he split with his wife and came out gay, he was denied tenure. In a progressive-style retaliation, he organized the San Antonio Gay Alliance (SAGA) and started a community newspaper called *The Calendar*.

I moved back to my hometown from San Francisco in 1981 to be a gay therapist. I quickly became Michael's protégé and Secretary of SAGA. Hap Veltman was on the board of SAGA. He was very publicly gay and expected respect and influence for who he was. And he was very helpful and generous with the community. During the Gay Alliance period in the '80s, an out-front community formed with such staples as a business association, a chorus, the AIDS Foundation, Gay Pride Day picnics and marches, and the annual "Gay Fiesta."

SAGA tried hard to be racially and sexually inclusive. I want to note that the Latina women's and lesbians' community developed in parallel under the leadership of Graciela Sanchez of the Esperanza Peace and Justice Center. We were all trying to address the very issues that Kip cited: we strove to achieve visibility and thereby overcome those conservative forces. That Lucas Belury reports that he grew up feeling accepted as mixed-race,

Hispanic, and queer suggests that we were successful.

Toby Johnson, Austin, TX

To the Editor:

As a native San Antonian who came of age in the late 1970s, I enjoyed Lucas Belury's article on the San Antonio Country nightclub. Although formally opened in 1973, the bar was named after an earlier gay bar located several miles outside of the city, literally in "the country." The remote setting of this predecessor bar allowed it to operate with less scrutiny by civilian and military police.

Legend has it that in this former bar, same-sex couples danced together openly, but a lookout kept watch at the door. If police arrived to raid the bar, the lookout would blow a whistle and each dancer would quickly find an opposite-sex partner to dance with until the police left. When Hap Veltman opened "The Country" in the middle of San Antonio, he took the name of that former hidden establishment and proudly asserted the right of LGBT+ people to gather openly in the middle of our city.

I met my now-husband when he was stationed at U.S. Army Fort Sam Houston in San Antonio in the 1980s. He quips that the U.S. Army's "off limits" list in those days was more useful in finding gay bars than *Bob Damron's Address Book*! One wonders who in the U.S. Army was charged with doing the required "research"

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to find all the local gay bars for this listing.

Although there is more progress to be made, we've come a long way since the difficult days described in the article. Still a "military city" and now the seventh largest city in the U.S., San Antonio welcomes active-duty personnel at its LGBT+ establishments. Thankfully, raids by the military police are a relic of the past.

Jim Germann, San Antonio, TX

Allen Barnett Is Worth Knowing About

To the Editor:

Walter Holland's recollection of Allen Barnett [in the July–August 2024 issue] is greatly appreciated. I think *The Body and Its Dangers* is one of the great works of AIDS literature, and have been frustrated that Barnett seems to have been forgotten by gay letters. Holland's personal recollections provide biographical information not available elsewhere. Twenty years ago, I repeatedly hit a blank wall when conducting research for an encyclopedia article on Barnett, only to receive a letter from the late Michael Denny offering some of his memories of Barnett—but only after the article had appeared, so this material arrived too late for me to use.

Raymond-Jean Frontain, Conway, AR

Charles Silverstein's Achievement

To the Editor:

Thank you for the obituary for my dear friend Charles Silverstein, PhD [March–April 2024 issue]. For the record, he was a psychologist, not a psychiatrist as stated in the obituary.

Furthermore, Charles was still in training and had not yet received his doctorate when he made his case for removing homosexuality from the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM)*. The fact that a fledgling psychologist helped bring about changes in the *DSM* is, to my way of thinking, an even more impressive accomplishment than it would have been had he been a psychiatrist.

Jack Drescher, MD, NYC

An Opening Night in Hartford

To The Editor:

Regarding an article titled "The Making of *Longtime Companion*" that appeared in the May–June 2024 issue: when *Longtime Companion* was released in May 1989 and premiered in New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Chicago, it also premiered in Hartford, Connecticut. Mark Lamos, director of the Hartford Stage Company and an

actor in the film, had contacted me about having "an event" in Hartford. I was the founding member of the AIDS Ministry Program of Connecticut and the Connecticut AIDS Residence Coalition.

That night, we held a fundraiser. The message was: enjoy the film at the local Hartford cineplex and then come back to the Hartford Stage Company for an after-party reception. Mark Lamos and Stephen Caffrey spoke about making the movie and about our efforts. We raised thousands of dollars to help provide housing for people living with HIV/AIDS, many of whom had lost their housing because of discrimination. Over the years, wherever I've been working, I have proudly hung the signed poster in my church office.

The Rev. Thaddeus Bennett, Conway, MA

Corrections

In the May–June 2024 issue, a piece titled "The Making of *Longtime Companion*" refers to a play by Terrence McNally as *Our Sons*. The correct title is *Mothers and Sons*.

Also in the May–June issue, a review of *Conversations with Terrence McNally* changed the preposition in his play *Frankie and Johnny in the Claire de Lune*.

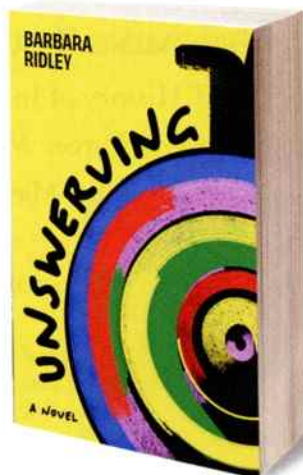
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