A Mutual Benefit: Letting Employees Define their Families
by Dana Rudolph | drudolph@mombian.com
contribution writer

People and families come in many forms, as any LGBTQ person can attest. Now, Massachusetts Mutual Life Insurance Company (MassMutual) is using that concept to improve upon its already LGBTQ-inclusive employee benefits. The FORTUNE 100 company, which has approximately 7,500 employees around the country (and more than 100,000 life insurance policyholders in Massachusetts), is rolling out new benefits around leave, gender affirmation, family creation, and more that empower all employees and demonstrate a deep understanding of LGBTQ people’s lives.

Dr. Claudia Coplein, MassMutual’s head of health and wellness, who brings to bear her multiple experiences as a physician, attorney, mother, and former U.S. Air Force officer and flight surgeon, explained in an interview, “We heard from our employees that we needed to modernize our benefits. They were pretty paternalistic in the past.” This led the company to “undertake a holistic review” in order to better support its “multi-generational and increasingly diverse workforce.” In particular, she said, their 450-member (BRG), a network for LGBTQ employees and allies, was “very positive and influential” in the process.

Under the new benefits, employees will get up to two weeks paid leave to care for a seriously ill loved one and up to 15 days leave after the death of a loved one. More strikingly, Coplein said, “We’ve left it up to the employee to define who is a loved one. A loved one could be your next-door neighbor who raised you because your parents had to work two jobs each to support the family. Or it could have been a grandmother who raised you. Who are we to decide who an employee’s loved one is?”

Lisa St. Germain, portfolio and organizational effectiveness lead and chairperson of MassMutual’s Pride Business Resource Group (BRG), a network for LGBTQ employees and allies, was “very positive.” This attitude is part of a longer commitment. In 2015, MassMutual announced a new two-word dress code: “Dress appropriately.” Coplein explained, “That was a step towards encouraging employees to use good judgment, placing trust, empowerment, and accountability in their own hands. That’s what we’re seeking to do with all of the benefits that we offer.”

Transgender activist Barbra Siperstein dies at 76

TRENTON, N.J. (AP)—The namesake of a recently enacted law that allows New Jersey transgender residents to change their genders on their birth certificates has died.

We are so excited to reveal the 2019 Boston Pride Theme

Announcing the 2019 Boston Pride Theme

We are so excited to reveal the 2019 Boston Pride Theme, “Looking Back... Loving Forward”. This theme represents the recognition of the 50th anniversary of the Stonewall Riots and is meant to encourage the community to reflect back on the many challenges and incredible victories of the LGBTQ community in that time “The new theme, ‘Looking Back...Loving Forward’ acknowledges the people and Pride groups who have come before us who have helped us strengthen our community,” said Linda DeMarco, Acting President of Boston Pride. “The fight for our rights must continue as well as fighting for our ability to love ourselves and each other freely without fear of hate or persecution.”

NH congressman invited trans vet to speech

CONCORD, N.H. (AP)—A New Hampshire congressman invited a transgender Navy veteran to be his guest at President Donald Trump’s State of the Union address in Washington.

Democratic U.S. Rep. Chris Pappas, the first openly gay member of Congress from New Hampshire, invited Tavion Dignard of Auburn, New Hampshire, to the president’s Tuesday speech.

Dignard is a transgender man who served in the United States Navy from 1998-2002 and was honorably discharged.

Pappas says the president’s transgender military service ban would prevent qualified people such as Dignard from serving in the armed forces.

Dignard, who says he’s grateful for the opportunity to share his story, is currently an undergraduate student at the University of New Hampshire.

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Hong Kong court denies male status to 3 transgender men

By VIOLET LAW
Associated Press

HONG KONG (AP)—Hong Kong’s High Court refused on Friday to allow three transgender men to be recognized as males on their official identity cards because they have not undergone full sex change operations.

The ruling was seen as a blow to the Bedgington LGBT movement in the semi-autonomous Chinese city of 7.4 million people, which is preparing to host the 2022 Gay Games.

The three, identified as Henry Tie, Q and R, are shown on their ID cards as having been born female, but are undergoing hormone therapy. A full sex change would require the removal of female sexual organs, making them sterile.

Appearing in court, Tie unfurled a banner that read, “Forced Sterilization is cruel and inhumane. Recognize our Rights NOW!”

In his ruling, Judge Thomas Au wrote that “the change of gender entry stated in the ID card does not entirely concern the private right of the transgender person but also the wider public interest.”

Like many Asian societies, Hong Kong has become more open about gender issues, although the legal system is sometimes slow to follow.

Friday’s decision follows a ruling last week by Japan’s Supreme Court upholding a law that effectively requires transgender people to be sterilized before they can have their gender changed on official documents. That ruling was widely denounced by human rights and LGBT activists and may spark further legal action.

Japan is one of many countries with a sterilization requirement. In 2017, the European Court of Human Rights said 22 of the countries under its jurisdiction still required sterilization as part of a legal gender change, and it ordered them to end the practice.

Maria Sjodin, deputy executive director of OurRight Action International, which monitors LGBT issues in Japan, said Tie was unsure if all if 22 of those countries have fully implemented the court’s order.

In Hong Kong, the judgment seemed to add to the need for medical reform in a nationwide referendum this month.

Cuban evangélicos push back against gay marriage

By ANDREA RODRIGUEZ
Associated Press

HAVANA (AP)—A Cuban government push to legalize gay marriage has set off an unprecedented reaction from the island’s rapidly growing evangelical churches, whose members are expected to widely reject a state-proposed constitutional reform in a nationwide referendum this month.

The reform is almost certain to pass by a broad margin of Cuba’s 7 million voters — language opening the door to gay marriage is only one element of the reform — but the evangelical vote could shave hundreds of thousands of votes from its victory.

With many pastors promoting “no” votes from the pulpit, the swelling evangelical rejection of the constitution is a novel development for a state that prides itself on projecting an image of ideological unanimity. Cuban government-endorsed candidates and proposals typically receive “yes” votes well above 90 percent in one of last communist nations on earth, now in the 60th year of its socialist revolution.

“I can’t vote for something that goes against my principles. It’s sad but it’s a reality,” said pastor Alida Leon, president of the Evangelical League of Cuba. Hers is one of a dozen evangelical denominations that are actively speaking out against the reform. There are an estimated 100 evangelical denominations active in Cuba, 52 legally registered, and many are taking softer lines.

MassMutual extends parental benefits

By CAYTLYN COPELIN
Associated Press

MassMutual’s new parental benefits are also flexible and structured to include LGBTQ families — something that isn’t always a given. A 2018 survey by the HRC Foundation found that even employers offering paid parental leave may exclude LGBTQ families. Less than half of respondents said their employer’s policies cover new parents of all genders equally. Similarly, less than half said these policies include all paths to parenthood; some exclude older children placed through foster care or adoption.

At MassMutual, however, birth parents now get 18 weeks of fully paid leave. Non-birth parents, including adoptive parents, get eight weeks of fully paid leave that can be used all at once or incrementally for up to a year.

MassMutual is also one of a growing number of employers that cover employees’ fertility treatments without a medical diagnosis of infertility. Coplein asserted, “That’s a huge step. Before I came to MassMutual, I was medical director for a health plan. The definition of infertility was always critical for making those determinations. Here, we’ve just included anyone who wants to have a child, because again, why should we limit that ability for our employees? This ensures that members of the LGBTQ community and single parents by choice receive equitable access to fertility benefits.”

Offered through fertility benefit company Progyny, these benefits are “designed to provide all-inclusive and comprehensive coverage for fertility treatments,” she explained. Instead of a fixed dollar amount, which might not cover all that someone needs, they cover two full “Smart Cycles,” customized to the individual, that include all office visits, tests, and treatments, plus purchase of donor cells, if needed. They are in the process of adding a benefit for surrogacy as well.

The company’s new benefits for transgender employees are similarly thoughtful. While they previously covered gender affirmation services such as hormone therapy and testing, mental health counseling, genital surgery, and mastectomies, they now include cosmetic procedures often not covered by other employers, such as facial feminization surgery, thyroid chondroplasty (tracheal shaving), electrolysis, and more. Those procedures “help to improve social function,” Coplein explained. “Appearance is important, but the social function helps people to maximize their success and feel good about themselves. That’s why we felt it was important for us to cover all of those services.”

Additionally, she said, “We’ve created a workplace gender transition support team that includes managers, allies, our Pride BRG, a transition partner, and an HR partner to help an employee who is transitioning, as well as help their manager, their allies, and colleagues go through this entire process of gender affirmation. Having this support system available makes people feel that they are welcome and can be themselves in the workplace. I think this product that has largely been influenced by the Pride BRG is something that really sets us apart as a company. It’s been so well received.”

St. Germain commented, “I’m really proud of our new offerings as they touch so many employees. For those of us who have struggled with traditional employee benefits, they give a message that the company is listening and cares.”

The expansion of gender affirmation benefits, she said, “demonstrates a much deeper level of respect and understanding.”

Additional new benefits for all employees include paid volunteer time, easier-to-access behavioral health counseling services, and a concierge service to help employees or their dependents diagnosed with cancer.

MassMutual has made a public commitment to LGBTQ equality, too. Coplein noted that the company has signed the Business Statement for Transgender Equality and joined the business coalition for the federal Equality Act. It also signed on to amicus briefs in support of LGBTQ equality in cases involving the Defense of Marriage Act, North Carolina’s anti-transgender public accommodations law, and the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs’ ban on providing gender affirmation surgery to transgender veterans, among others. They also supported the Yes on 3 campaign in Massachusetts last year that successfully stopped a repeal of protections for transgender people.

Coplein asserted, “It’s just doing the right thing for our employees and the communities where they live. It’s putting a stake in the sand as a company, saying, ‘This is what we believe in.’ We’ve been very consistent about that over a number of years.”

In addition, there are business advantages. She noted that aligning their benefits with diversity and inclusion objectives is “key for attracting and retaining and engaging talent from a very broad pool of society.”

“For us,” she added, “the business benefit is that we’re holistically supporting the well-being of our employees by providing them with a robust suite of benefits that address their physical, emotional, financial, and social wellness, so we’re helping them and their loved ones, however they may define them, live their best lives. In return, we’re going to have employees who we hope will stay with MassMutual. They come to work every day knowing that they work for a company that supports them and in turn, we think they’ll be productive.”

She concluded, “It’s a win-win situation in our minds.”

Denis Rudolph is the founder and publisher of Mombian (mombian.com), a GLAAD Media Award-winning blog and resource directory for LGBTQ parents.
Two gems for Winter

Well, Wellesley Repertory Theatre, Ruth Nagel Jones Theatre, through February 9. 781-283-2000 or wellesleyperpertory.org
Slow Food, Merrimack Repertory Theatre, Lowell, through February 3. 978-654-4678 or mrt.org

By Jules Becker

The 2018-2019 theater season is a special time in the Hub for Lisa Kron. SpeakEasy Stage Company caught the wit and spirit of the out playwright-lyricist’s inspired collaboration with composer Jeanine Tesori in its exuberant production of the Tony Award-winning musical—one which will happily return for an additional run for most of June. Now Wellesley Repertory Theatre is giving Kron’s thoughtful 2004 play “Well” (2006 on Broadway) a lively bill of health at its intimate Ruth Nagel Jones Theatre.

“Well” opens as a kind of Pirandellian checkup for universal issues. Initially Lisa Kron herself—played originally by the gifted performance artist herself and at Wellesley Rep by Sebastian Ryder—enters with a stack of note cards and declares that she and her four actors will present “a theatrical exploration.”

Intending to examine such difficult questions as why some people become sick and others do not and why some people suffer life-long with illnesses that keep returning and why others do not, she plans to use her Midwest-set mother Ann Kron (actually Michigan)—here played by Wellesley Rep veteran Lisa Foley—as an example.

Ann may be sleeping stage left in a La-Z-Boy recliner in a rightly busy set with numerous books and bric-a-brac—credit David Towlun and props master Kim Towlun—as theatregoers take their seats, but gradually her ‘interjections’ about her own health and apparent allergy issues become more involving for Lisa’s quartet than the play on which they are working.

Wellesley Rep artistic director Marta Rainer keeps the verbal push-pull between daughter and mother fluid and affecting as the exploration and interruptions result in both specific revelations about the Kron’s own wellness and general observations. Ryder has the right intensity as Lisa, and Foley is commandingly feisty as Ann. The savvy playwright may take fourth estate involvement a step further as Lisa, and Foley is commandingly feisty as Ann. The savvy playwright may take fourth estate involvement a step further as Lisa Kron’s voice occupies the audience’s minds and hearts.

When restaurant service is slow, are the kitchen and the chef to blame? In Wendy MacLeod’s fairly predictable but genuinely funny comedy “Slow Food,” the culprit seems to be a gay waiter named Stephen. Zagan would give Dmitri’s, the Palm Springs-set Greek restaurant in question, a very low rating, but the laughs prove rapid-fire and the comic routines well-timed under artistic director Sean Daniels’ expert guidance in the no-intermission 90-minute play’s winning area premiere at Merrimack Repertory Theatre.

The ‘victims’ of Stephen’s food-delaying performance are Irene and Peter, a couple celebrating their wedding anniversary. The slow service adds the proverbial insult to injury as they do not have a hotel hot tub and the promised rental car. Time after time Stephen dodges their menu requests and presents arguably feeble reasons for the lack of what they want—even persuading Peter to down a microbrew rather than the Sam Adams he orders.

Irene eventually hits on the idea of having Peter flirt with Stephen to encourage better service. Not surprisingly the husband peppers his conversation with double entendres. When Stephen admits to being between men, the husband says that “sounds like an interesting place to be.” What could have seemed like de-meaning dialogue here actually works—largely thanks to the sharp timing of Joel Van Liew as Peter and especially Brian Beacock as Stephen. Beacock is a hoot as he dances along with absurd explanations. Daina Michelle Griffith finds the right understatement as the contrastingly more patient Irene.

Apollo Mark Weaver’s restaurant set provides the right cozy feel, and Brian J. Lilienthal’s lighting has the right romantic ambiance. Call Stephen a nightmare. Call “Slow Food” a de-lightfully fast dessert.

For more information on shows or this website please call the box office at 781-283-2000 or visit wellesleisperpertory.org

Sebastian Ryder and Lisa Foley rehearse for “Well.” (Courtesy Helen Makadak/Wellesley Repertory Theatre)
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**The Nuclear Winter of our discontent**

*Liberal infighting only helps a divisive despot*

by Richard J. Rosendall | rrosendall@starpower.net
contributing writer

A theater critic once left a play at intermission and submitted a review as if he'd seen the whole thing, only to be caught out because the theatre burned down during the second act. Despite such a cautionary tale, I feel confident in offering this thumbnail review of Trump's 2019 State of the Union in advance: he lied a lot, insulted everyone's intelligence, and made it all about himself.

Trump's mischief requires many helpers. Let's consider a few. Mitch McConnell is like a man who sees his toddler reaching for a loaded handgun on the coffee table and does not stop him lest he throw a tantrum. Roger Stone, who threatened radio host Randy Credico's therapy dog and said, "Prepare to die," claims that the FBI treated him "worse than bin Laden." Wouldn't that have made him the late Roger Stone? Sarah Huckabee Sanders says that Trump was chosen by God. I can't say we don't have it coming, but I doubt Sanders meant that in the same spirit as Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time*.

We are being conned and endangered, yet often our response is liberal infighting caused not only by competing ambitions (which are all in the game), but by unresolved issues and lack of courage in our convictions.

One problem is the blind arrogance of privilege that impedes cooperation. It oozes, for example, from a planned monument marking the 2020 centennial of the 19th Amendment. Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, who erased contributions by black women in their six-volume History of Woman Suffrage, are to be honored with a Central Park sculpture in which they are reviewing a scroll of suffragists. Their century-old belief that race and gender were separate issues, and their paternalistic entitlement, are recapitulated in the sculpture's design.

Even now, many people scorn intersectional activism, whether out of ideological considerations, aesthetic distaste, or eagerness to house their concerns in separate silos from others. How is that working? Progress on a range of issues is being rolled back by a president whose power is based on dividing us.

Trump has no moral authority when he denounces the racist and homophobic assault against Empire star Jussie Smollett, or criticizes Virginia...
Virginity is vastly overrated—and I say that as someone who held onto at least portions of his far longer than most (although I made up for lost time). I also think that virginity might cause at least partial mental instability. Two popular shows on network television currently feature high-profile virgins. One is dumb as a stump, and the other is banzai crazy. I don’t mean to disparage either of these people, but I believe perhaps their celibacy has played at least some part in their tenuous grasp on reality. So the next time someone proposes something beyond your level of expertise, give it a try. It may actually help... even if initially it hurts.

If there’s one thing that works out less often than being a virgin, it’s being in a throuple. And I’m not talking about casual encounters, in which case I say the more, the merrier. But if you think being in a relationship with one person is hard, try two. Frankie Grande tried his share of combinations before going public around Halloween as being the proverbial third wheel to a very hot couple. Apparently it wasn’t all smooth sailing. “You have double the highs, double the excitement, but also double the lows, double the drama.” Those heady days have passed. “I am single. I’ve been single for about a month now.” Probably spending most of his time in a sitz bath!

Since this column is being filed on Super Bowl Sunday, one would think this proud Bostonian living in LA would be watching. And I am—but primarily to see the cheerleaders. Although I have a personal connection with someone cheering for the Pats, it’s the Los Angeles Rams that are making history. This will be the first Super Bowl to feature male cheerleaders! Last year, Quinton Peron and Napoleon Jinnies auditioned or tried out or whatever one does to become a cheerleader. They not only joined the LA Rams squad, they’re at the Super Bowl! Congrats.

The big gay story last week was the attack on “Empire” star Jussie Smollett. I was kinda shocked at the reaction. First, some of my dearest childhood friends questioned if the attack really took place, or if Jussie was simply looking for publicity: “Something doesn’t ring true,” one said on Facebook. Yeah, because if I were looking for publicity, I’d tie a noose around my neck and douse myself in bleach! Then someone pointed out to me the social media posts by organizations that used this attack as an opportunity to promote themselves. Shameful.

As of the writing of this column, here’s what we know. On the evening of Monday, January 28th, Jussie had flown from New York to Chicago—where “Empire” shoots and where Smollett has an apartment. Around 2AM, he was hungry and went to a 24-hour Subway (and, if I might inject a bit of levity into this difficult story, let me note that nothing good happens at a Subway at 2AM). When he left the Subway (presumably with his sub), two white men wearing ski masks approached him and yelled out, “Aren’t you that P&**%’ Empire n&**%?” They then attacked Jussie, put a rope around his neck, and poured bleach on him, saying “This is MAGA country” as they ran away. After reporting the crime to the police, Jussie got himself to Northwestern Memorial Hospital where he was treated for a fractured rib. A couple of days later, Chicago Police released a photo of “persons of interest” that shows two men on a neighboring street around the time of the attack.

I will admit, all of this raises several questions—who is walking around Chicago at 2AM with a noose and bleach? There is speculation that Smollett was targeted, as he had earlier received a letter which was sent to the “Empire” set and threatened, “You will die black fag,” with a return address that simply said “MAGA”. Also, a woman who lives in Smollett’s building says that when she took her dog out to pee at 12:30AM, she saw a suspicious man lingering. On the flip side, Smollett says that at the time of the attack, he was talking to his manager on his cell phone. So, the police asked to examine the phone—Jussie declined. Police say he was not obligated to share the handset or phone records. And, frankly, as a gay man, I don’t think I’d want the fuzz looking into the bowels of my mobile, either.

BTW, Smollett had a concert scheduled for February 2nd at the legendary Troubadour in West Hollywood. Despite some concerns, the concert took place, although the scheduled meet-and-greet was cancelled. “I’m not fully healed yet, but I’m going to and I’m going to stand strong with you all,” Jussie told the capacity crowd. “I had to be here tonight. I couldn’t let those motherfuckers win! So I will also stand for love, I will never stand for anything other than that. Regardless of what anyone else says, I will only stand for love and I hope you will all stand with me.”

One of the people speaking out on Smollett’s behalf has been “Empire” creator Lee Daniels. “It’s taken me a minute to come to social media about this because, Jussie, you are my son. You didn’t deserve nor anybody deserves to have a noose put around your neck, to have bleach thrown on you, to be called ‘die faggot nigga’ or whatever they said to you. You are better than that. We are better than that. America is better than that. It starts at home. It starts at home, yo. We have to love each other regardless
Showtime sets 'The L Word' sequel with Jennifer Beals

PASADENA, Calif. (AP)—Showtime will air a sequel to its groundbreaking drama series “The L Word,” which explored lesbian and bisexual life in Los Angeles.

Jennifer Beals, Katherine Moennig and Leisha Hailey, stars of the original 2004-09 series, will reprise their roles, Showtime said Thursday.

The sequel will introduce other characters across the sexual and gender spectrum, the channel said. It also will explore new and old neighborhoods throughout L.A., Showtime entertainment president Gary Levine said Thursday.

Production is set to begin this summer on eight episodes that the cable channel aims to air later this year, Levine said.

Original series creator Ilene Chaiken will be the executive producer, along with Marja-Lewis Ryan.

Jussie Smollett strikes emotional chord: Attackers won’t win

By ANDREW DALTON
AP Entertainment Writer

WEST HOLLYWOOD, Calif. (AP)—Jussie Smollett was blunt, emotional and defiantly determined Saturday night at a Southern California concert some urged him not to play, telling the crowd before singing a note that he had to go on with the show because he couldn’t let his attackers win.

"The most important thing I can say is ‘thank you so much, and I’m OK,” said the "Empire" actor and R&B singer from the stage at the Troubadour in West Hollywood in his first public appearance since he reported to police in Chicago on Tuesday that two masked men had assaulted him and put a rope around his neck while using homophobic and racial slurs.

"I’m not fully healed yet," said Smollett, who is black and openly gay, "but I’m going to be, and I’m gonna stand strong with y’all.

The concert had been planned long before the incident, and his family members and others had urged him to postpone it.

But Smollett said he couldn’t do that.

"I had to be here tonight, y’all. I couldn’t let those (expletives) win," he said to screams and cheers from the packed room of about 400 people. "I will always stand for love. I will only stand for love."

His small band then launched into an upbeat song and he broke into dance, wearing a simple white buttoned shirt, white sneakers and black jeans, shuffling across the front of the stage and at times standing defiantly with a fist in the air.

Smollett kept the tone mostly celebratory through his hour-long set before addressing the attack head-on toward the end of his hour-long set, when he told the crowd he wanted to clarify a few things.

He said he was bruised but his ribs were not cracked. He went straight to the doctor but was not hospitalized, and physicians in both Chicago and Los Angeles cleared him to play but told him to be careful.

"And above all, I fought the (expletive) back," he said to cheers.

Then he paused and said, emphatically but with a laugh, "I’m the gay Tupac."

Fan Monique Davis said after the show that she was shocked he spoke so bluntly and directly

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Siperstein

Continued from page 1

was reported by the gay rights advocacy group Garden State Equality.

Siperstein helped champion the new state law that took effect Friday. It allows the registrar to amend birth certificates based on how people identify themselves, as male, female or under-

ignated. Previous law allowed birth certificate changes only if a doctor certified that a person’s gender was surgically changed.

Siperstein also was the first openly transgender member of the Democratic National Committee. She was appointed to the committee in 2009 and two years later was appointed to its executive committee in 2011, where she served until October 2017.
Continued from page 7

about the incident, but she’s glad he did.

“It was amazing, it was emotional, it was in-
spiring,” Davis said. “He showed everyone in the
room he was strong.”

Smollett told police the men attacked him as
he walked home in Chicago early Tuesday, throw-
ing a chemical substance at him in addition to
shouting slurs and putting the rope around his
neck.

No arrests have been made, and police have
not found surveillance video of the attack, though
they found footage of Smollett walking home
with the rope around his neck.

Smollett had made his first public comments
about the incident on Friday in a written state-
ment that said he had been “consistent on every
level” with the police during their investigation,
countering comments on social media saying he
had changed his story and been uncooperative
with investigators.

Chicago police also said Smollett has been co-
operative and they have found no reason to think
he’s not being genuine.

Smollett stars alongside Terrence and Taraji P.
Henson in “Empire,” the Fox TV show about
the power struggles of a family in the music busi-
ness that is now in its fifth season. The series has
allowed Smollett to play, sing and occasionally
write music in addition to acting.

Last year he released a solo album, “Sum of My
Music, which made up much of Saturday night’s
set, along with songs from “Empire.”

He often sits at the piano on the show but
stood front and center at the microphone at the
Troubadour, the legendary Los Angeles club that
helped launch the careers of James Taylor, the
Eagles and Elton John.

He was joined in jubilant dance by his family
members during his encore.

Earlier, they had taken the stage and voiced
their support before he came on.

“To be honest, as his big brother, I wanted him
to sit this one out,” Joel Smollett Jr. said. “But we
realized this night is an important part of Jussie’s
healing. He’s been a fighter since he was a baby.
He fought his attackers that night, and he contin-
ues to fight.”

Hashtag stirs debate over role of
Christian schools in US

By DAVID CRAZY

AP National Writer

NEW YORK (AP)—For their supporters, the
thousands of Christian schools across America
are literally a blessing—a place where children
can learn in accordance with biblical teachings,
uantunted by the secular norms of public schools.

To critics, many of these Christian schools ven-
ture too often into indoctrination, with teachings
that can misrepresent science and history and
potentially breed intolerance toward people with
different outlooks.

“These schools are front and center in the po-
liticization of knowledge and that’s problematic,”
said Julie Ingersoll, a professor of religious studies
at the University of North Florida.

The polarized views have been highlighted
in recent days after the appearance of an (hash)
ExposeChristianSchools hashtag on Twitter. It
was introduced by Chris Stroop, an Indianapolis-
based writer and activist, on Jan. 18, shortly after
news broke that Karen Pence, wife of Vice Presi-
dent Mike Pence, would be teaching at a Chris-
tian school in northern Virginia that lists “homo-
sexual or lesbian sexual activity” as among the
disqualifying criteria for prospective employees.

Stroop, 38, calls himself an “ex-evangelical.”
He says he attended Christian schools in Indi-
ana and Colorado almost continuously from first
grade through high school and recalls pervasive

“Not everything about it was bad—I had
teachers I liked who encouraged me academi-
cally,” said Stroop, who went on to earn a Ph.D.
at Stanford. “But I don’t think education as in-
doctrination is right.”

The news about Karen Pence’s teaching job
was quickly followed by debate over the behavior
of boys from Covington Catholic High School
in Kentucky during a visit to Washington, D.C.
While opinions varied widely as to whether the
boys had behaved badly, that incident further fu-
eled debate over faith-based schools.

Within days, there were thousands of responses

see NATIONAL, page 11
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Continued from page 4

in block-level meetings across the country, 11 denominations sent a letter to the National Assembly that was signed by 179,000 people and objected to gay marriage and made 15 other demands, including greater freedom of property ownership.

Leon said she delivered the letter to the Communist Party’s Central Committee, which acknowledged receipt but never delivered a formal response, although Leon and other evangelicals did meet with government officials.

Evangelical pastors also began speaking out from the pulpit and distributing Bibles in the street along with hundreds of thousands of pamphlets advocating for God’s “original plan” for unions between men and women. The Methodist Church organized “pro-family” services that drew more than 3,000 people.

In December, the National Assembly withdrew the gay marriage section in favor of softer language that allowed a future family code to establish marriage outside heterosexual relationships.

That left many Cuban Evangelicals unsatisfied. “I’m a daughter of God. God established that man is for woman and woman is for man,” said Caridad Borges, a 31-year-old Methodist homemaker and mother of one son. “I’m going to vote against the constitution because it establishes something that I don’t agree with.”

Meanwhile, the Cuban government has launched a vigorous “yes” on state-run media and government officials’ social media accounts.

Joel Ortego Dopico, a Presbyterian pastor and secretary of the Cuban Council of Churches, said he would vote in favor of the constitutional reform but was telling members of his church to vote their conscience.

While the new constitution will be improved, he said the evangelical reaction to it was an important change in Cuban society. “It will have a political impact in the future,” Dopico said.

Correspondent Michael Weissenstein contributed to this report.

‘Superstore’ actor relishes true-to-life gay Filipino role

PASADENA, Calif. (AP)—For Nico Santos, the role he plays on NBC’s sitcom “Superstore” is personal.

“I never thought in a million years I’d be involved in a project that celebrated the fullness of my identity of being queer and Asian,” Santos told a TV critics’ meeting Tuesday.

He also appreciates the comedy’s focus on what his character, Mateo, has faced after learning that he’s an immigrant in the country illegally. “I certainly know a lot of members of my community who are undocumented, and that’s so relevant right now. I’ve gotten so many messages from everybody. People stop me wherever I go who are ... just really appreciative of the fact that we’ve tackled the issue, because they themselves are undocumented or a family member or a loved one is undocumented.”

Santos, who played Oliver in “Crazy Rich Asians,” said he’s grateful the comedy is portraying the character with “dignity and respect.”

Colton Dunn, who plays Garrett in the series set in a big-box store, said Mateo is important to the show. Dunn and his castmates, including America Ferrera, took part in a panel promoting the show’s midseason return in March.

“A lot of times, the narrative of undocumented workers and undocumented people is that they are criminals,” Dunn said. “That’s a narrative that’s put out there. And the other side is, ‘No, they are not.’ It’s great to have an actual example of a character who is really just living through this time out here. All he’s trying to do is be a floor supervisor at a superstore.”

Noted Indian transgender activist shakes up Hindu festival

By EMILY SCHMALL

and BISWAJEET BANERJEE

Associated Press

PRAYAGRAJ, India (AP)—Indian transgender activist and Bollywood TV star Laxmi Narayan Tripathi has shaken up the male-dominated monastic orders that run the Hindu Kumbh Mela festival underway in northern India that’s expected to draw as many as 150 million pilgrims.

The Kumbh takes place every three years at one of four sites Hindus consider sacred. It’s a series of ritual bathings led by 13 all-male Hindu monastic orders.

Though Hinduism’s ancient Vedas scriptures describe transgender people as integral, for centuries they have been marginalized, forced to leave their family homes as children and often sold into sex trafficking.

Tripathi is capitalizing on the ruling Hindu nationalist party’s emphasis on India’s Hindu roots to claim a place for transgender people among the nation’s religious elite.
of what sexual orientation we are because it shows we are united on a unified front and no racist f- can come in and do the things that they did to you. Hold your head up, Jussie. I’m with you. I’ll be there in a minute. It’s just another fucking day in America.”

Lee Daniels also has some good news to share. “Y’all remember maybe 10, 12 years ago I said my dream was to make a gay superhero film? Dreams do come true. And I found my superhero.” Wouldn’t it be a heartwarming moment if I then told you that the gay superhero would be played by Jussie Smollett? If this were a movie on the Hallmark Channel, that’s exactly what would happen—of course, all of the characters would be played by white folk. Apparently Lee saw a video of 19-year-old Dremond Cooper and offered him the lead. Stay tuned.

I don’t regularly watch “Flipping Out.” In fact, I try to avoid it. So, I didn’t realize Jeff and Gage were not married—but who cares? If straights can have kids out of wedlock and be sued by their surrogates, why not gays? I found out the couple wasn’t married because Jeff announced that Gage had moved out last week. He says that for most of the past year, Gage had been in a separate bedroom and the two have primarily been friends with benefits—the benefit, if you ask me, is that you get your own room! I don’t have a dog in this fight (no offense), but I’d like to make one general observation: one doesn’t marry a Gage. One has meaningless sex with a Gage. Hot, meaningless, nasty sex. Like, I once slept with someone named Brick. I can’t swear that was his real name—I never checked his papers. The Gages and Bricks of the world are the guys you fool around with in the bathroom while your boyfriend is waiting at the table in the restaurant. You want a drama-free life? Marry someone with a name out of the Bible. Except Lazarus—every time you think he’s waiting at the table in the restaurant. You want a drama-free life? Marry someone with a name out of the Bible. I’ll be by to reveal...but in the privacy of a bathroom.

When we’re dishing on famous houseguests’ health, it’s time to end yet another column. And still, my 50th birthday looms. February 13th is right around the corner, but there won’t be much time for celebrating—at least not on one coast. The next day, I’ll be off to NYC to assist Jennifer Lewis in her American Songbook concert at Lincoln Center on February 15th. But whether I’m hither or yon, you can get all of the best dish on www.BillyMasters.com—the site that’s more than a bit. As always, send your queries to Billy@BillyMasters.com and I promise to get back to you before I reclaim my virginity. So, until next time, remember, one man’s filth is another man’s bible.
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