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YEAR IN REVIEW

2023: A year of perils and progress for LGBTQ Families

by Dana Rudolph | drudolph@mombian.com
contributing writer

This past year saw many setbacks for LGBTQ parents and our children—but also some important wins. Experts at several leading LGBTQ organizations shared their thoughts with me about the ups and downs of 2023.

Sarah Kate Ellis, president and CEO of LGBTQ media advocacy organization GLAAD, said, "In general, LGBTQ parents and their children are under attack," with "a record-setting 500+ bills introduced in the legislative session targeting queer people, the majority of which targeted transgender people and/or youth."

Ellen Kahn, senior director of programs and partnerships at the Human Rights Campaign, agreed, saying, "The attacks on LGBTQ+ youth, especially trans and nonbinary youth, in state legislatures across the country, at school board meetings, and on social media—perpetrated by white nationalist extremists, is infuriating and heartbreaking. Our families are being erased through book bans and curriculum censorship, and we are living in a heightened state of fear as hate-motivated crimes rise."

Ellis similarly called book bans "a major setback for LGBTQ parents and their children this year," as "A very loud but small group of extremists are villainizing our very existence in schools under the guise of 'parental rights.' But LGBTQ people and our allies are parents, too. Thankfully, more and more people are seeing through the ruse." She explained, "We've seen wins ranging from national campaigns to lawsuits to powerful and effective testimonies on the dangers of censorship, which illustrate the harms of book bans on our basic constitutional freedoms."

Kahn concurred, noting "a groundswell of support, people

see **MOMBIAN,** *page 3*

BPD recommit to solving murder of Rita Hester

It's been 25 years since Hester, a Black trans woman, was found stabbed to death in her Boston apartment.

Courtesy Tori Bedford, *GBH* **and Kate Sosin,** *The 19th*

Kathleen Hester never stopped trying to find out who killed her daughter.

She marched through the streets of Boston that winter in 1998. She kept calling detectives long after they stopped calling her. On October 20, 2020, she died at the age of 81 without closure.

Rita Hester's murder inspired Transgender Day of Remembrance, an annual nationwide vigil that honors transgender murder victims. Hester has come to symbolize the crisis of violence facing transgender people. For Hester's family and LGBTQ+ people in Boston and across the

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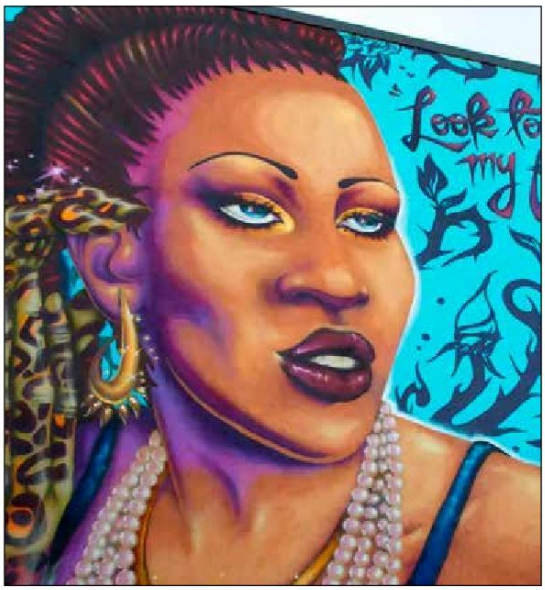

"Rita's Spotlight," a mural of Rita Hester by artist Rixy, commissioned by the City of Boston. Photo by Tori Bedford, WGBH.

MA LGBT Chamber Releases Holiday Shopping Catalog

Effort Aims to Highlight the Need to Support Local LGBT-Owned Small Businesses All Year Long

Submitted by MA LGBT Chamber of Commerce

The Massachusetts LGBT Chamber of Commerce has released its annual holiday shopping catalog, highlighting diverse businesses from across the Commonwealth, each maintaining the fiery independence that LGBTQ+ small businesses are known for. Featuring businesses selling both products and services, the guide provides five highly organized categories to shop from, each highlighting some of the many unique LGBTQ+ businesses that make Massachusetts their home.

"This catalog is not just a showcase of delightful gifts and cherished services, it's a testament to the importance of economic justice," said Grace Moreno, Executive Director of the Massachusetts LGBT Chamber of Commerce. "By supporting LGBTQ+ businesses, consumers are not only finding one-of-a-kind treasures but also promoting a more inclusive and equitable economic landscape. These businesses, often founded in the

see **HOLIDAY SHOPPING,** *page 4*

Arline Isaacson to receive honor

At Celebration of the 250th Anniversary of the Boston Tea Party

Longtime Beacon Hill resident and Co-Chair of the Massachusetts GLBTQ Political Caucus (formerly known as the Mass Gay and Lesbian Political Caucus), Arline Isaacson to receive honor at Celebration of the 250th Anniversary of the Boston Tea Party.

Other honorees will be Rahsaan Hall (President and CEO of the Urban League of Eastern MA) and Sean Simonini (Founder of MA Assoc of Student Representatives).

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— Meghan McCain. OK, so she only retweeted it. But I'm filled with the spirit of giving.

more in Billy Masters on page 6!

Photo by David Shankbone, via Wikimedia Commons.

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pushing back against the so-called Moms For Liberty, showing up to protect Drag Queen Story Hour attendees, and running for school board to take our schools back from extremists."

On a positive legislative note, too, Polly Crozier, director of family advocacy at GLBTQ Legal Advocates & Defenders (GLAD), noted that confirmatory adoption bills passed this year in Rhode Island and Maine, bringing to eight the number of states that offer this statutory, streamlined process for a nongestational parent to secure their parentage. This is important because outdated laws and discrimination mean that even married nongestational parents shouldn't rely on a birth certificate alone.

Other LGBTQ-affirming parentage legislation moved forward in Massachusetts and Michigan, with efforts in New York, Oregon and Pennsylvania as well. "It has been encouraging to see more states take steps to update their parentage laws to more fully protect all families, including those with LGBTQ parents," said Shannon Minter, legal director of the National Center for Lesbian Rights (NCLR). On the downside, Stevenson said, "the Nevada Legislature passed comprehensive parentage protections, but these protections were vetoed by the governor."

Another win, however, was the American Society for Reproductive Medicine's (ASRM's) updated definition of infertility, which explicitly includes those who need donor gametes for any reason, regardless of sexual orientation or relationship status. While the definition itself carries no legal weight, ASRM definitions are often cited in legislation and policies that do. Crozier said, "I'm hopeful it will make a tremendous difference in both advocacy with insurance commissioners and in legislation."

Stacey Stevenson, CEO of Family Equality, agreed. "This is huge," she said, explaining that the new definition "is especially important for BIPOC LGBTQ+ folks who often encounter a disproportionate number of challenges when creating a family." She added, "We're also seeing a number of states pass explicitly inclusive fertility healthcare bills, including Washington, D.C., which included fertility care in its Medicaid coverage."

Jordan Budd, executive director of COLAGE, the national organization for people with LGBTQ parents, saw a setback, however, in the passage of the federal Respect for Marriage Act (RFMA). While the RFMA ensures some ongoing rights for married same-sex couples if the U.S. Supreme Court reverses the right to marriage equality, it also allows for religious exemptions. Budd worries that the overturning of marriage equality would thus "create two classes of queer families," those in supportive states and those in states where they "could still be denied adoption or assisted reproductive services because of religious objections."

In another area, Minter noted that "2023 was a banner year for state laws protecting LGBTQ youth from conversion therapy, with three new states—Utah, Minnesota, and Michigan—passing such laws," and NCLR's Born Perfect project helping to make that happen.

On the judicial side, the Michigan Supreme Court ruled in July that nongenetic LGBTQ parents who were unconstitutionally denied the right to marry before marriage equality may seek custody of children they were raising with former partners. "That was a really great case of the Court acting to protect children and also saying to the legislature, 'This is an area of policy that we need to update,'" Crozier said.

She applauded, too, the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court's July ruling that affirmed the validity of a Voluntary Acknowledgement of Parentage (VAP) to establish and secure the relationship between a nonmarital, nongenetic father and his child. A VAP is a simple, free form that under federal law is the equivalent of a court decree of parentage. They have traditionally been available to nonmarital, genetic fathers in different-sex couples but are now available in 11 states to nongenetic parents and LGBTQ couples of all genders.

Not all court rulings were favorable, however. Minter is concerned about the February Oklahoma trial court decision involving a married lesbian couple, which "resulted in the court wrongly holding that the birth mother and the child's sperm donor were the legal parents, rather than the two spouses. NCLR is representing the non-birth mother spouse on appeal."

Crozier similarly noted a Pennsylvania case that refused to apply the marital presumption of parentage (the legal principle that a child born during a marriage is the child of both spouses) equally to children of same- and different-sex couples. "I think that's wrong based on statutory interpretation and constitutional principles, and leads to tragic results," she said.

Despite the setbacks, there are reasons for hope. Budd said, "The clear repudiation of anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric in (some) courts and at the ballot is a cause for optimism. Clearly the fear mongering about our families is not working as intended."

Ellis likewise observed that "an overwhelming majority of non-LGBTQ Americans" support LGBTQ equality and "every major medical association supports healthcare for trans youth."

And Crozier said she feels "super hopeful," especially after November's legislative hearing on the Massachusetts Parentage Act. The lead sponsor, State Representative Hannah Kane, a Republican with an LGBTQ daughter, "feels so passionately about making sure that all people can build their families," Crozier said. "We've got a lot more allies out there than we realize; we just have to do the work of connecting with each other."

Dana Rudolph is the founder and publisher of Mombian (mombian.com), a two-time GLAAD Media Award-winning blog and resource directory, plus a searchable database of 1,400+ LGBTQ family books.

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Hester

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world, her murder also represents the disregard police and media show for Black transgender murder victims, the unsolved case casting a long shadow on Boston detectives.

All of that, however, could be changing. Earlier this year, the Boston Police Department assigned a new detective, Matthew Fogarty, to the case. On November 28, the 25th anniversary of Hester's death, the department renewed its request for information from the public about her murder.

"Rita's murder shook the LGBTQ+ community," the Boston Police Department said in a media statement. "The Boston Police Unsolved Homicide Unit is actively reviewing the facts and circumstances surrounding this murder."

The police statement includes Hester's deadname, the name she was assigned at birth before transitioning. LGBTQ+ media organizations and advocates have largely condemned the practice of deadnaming transgender people as dehumanizing.

In an additional comment to GBH and The 19th, police spokesperson John Boyle strongly encouraged anyone with information to reach out to Boston Police.

"We never lose interest and we never forget cases," Boyle said. "That's why we don't call them cold cases."

Activist and transgender health advocate Chastity Bowick organized Boston's Transgender Day of Remembrance event this year. She said solving Hester's murder is critical to preventing future violence against her community.

"If they're solving her case from 1998, then that means that when something happens to us in 2023, 2024 — well, then maybe they will take it seriously," Bowick said at this year's vigil.

Less than half of all murders with transgender victims are solved, a significantly lower rate than the national average, according to researcher Brendan Lantz, an assistant professor in the college of Criminology and Criminal Justice at Florida State University.

"We see on average that the clearance rates are lower among trans homicide victims relative to other homicides," Lantz said. "It's still markedly different from our national estimates."

The average clearance rate for murders with transgender victims from 2010 through 2020 was about 48 percent, according to Lantz's research. The national average murder clearance for that same time period was roughly 62 percent, according to uniform crime reports from the FBI.

The disparity is even greater in cases where police have deadnamed or misgendered victims, according to Lantz's research.

"In the instances where the preferred name isn't used, you're less likely to see clearance," he said. "That's a police efficacy issue … if you're not using the right information, you're probably not investigating these as well as you could be."

LGBTQ+ people are four times more likely to experience violence than their cisgender peers, according to the Williams Institute at the UCLA School of Law.

It's hard to say if things have gotten better since Hester's death in 1998, because these murders were then — and still continue to be — underreported. But the past few years have shown trans people being killed in record numbers, including more than 300 in violent incidents this year worldwide.

For Black trans women, like Hester and Bowick, the risks are even higher.

Hester's sister Diana Hester said her family waited years for justice and asked for updates, only to be met with silence from police. Diana attributes that to the fact that her sister was Black, transgender and poor.

"They haven't really done anything," Diana said. "With 25 years coming up, there's been absolutely nothing, and if there wasn't a damn remembrance, it still would have been the same thing."

Boyle declined to respond to questions about the initial handling of the case or whether officers and detectives have communicated regularly with family members.

Hester was just 34 when she was stabbed 20 times in her first-floor apartment. A neighbor reported hearing an altercation and calling police. More than an hour passed between paramedics' arrival to the scene and Hester's transport to Beth Israel Hospital, where she died of cardiac arrest.

Friends and family suspect Hester knew her killer or killers, because the apartment showed no signs of a break-in.

The murder shocked local transgender advocates. It came just weeks after the brutal killing of White gay college student Matthew Shepard, whose death outside of Laramie, Wyoming, drew national attention. Hester, however, was misgendered in death, even by Boston's LGBTQ+ newspapers.

The disparity in reactions to the Shepard case and Hester's murder infuriated transgender advocates. Shepard's suspected killers were arrested within days of his murder, which eventually inspired a national anti-hate crime law. That stood in stark contrast to the aftermath of Hester's murder.

Police didn't go in person to tell Kathleen her daughter had been murdered. Kathleen was alone when she got the phone call. Diana rushed over to comfort her sobbing mother. She also accompanied Kathleen to Rita's apartment to get her belongings a few days later.

Hester's family and her best friend, Brenda Wynne, were left to clean and sanitize her apartment, because police do not clean crime scenes and the family could

see **HESTER,** *page 7*

Holiday Shopping

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face of adversity, are at the forefront of fostering diversity, creating opportunities, and driving change. Each purchase you make from our LGBTQ+ business members helps propel economic justice and makes a meaningful difference in communities across Massachusetts."

In the catalog's "Tangible Treasures" section, consumers will find triumphs of the written word like All She Wrote Books, the beloved intersectional inclusive feminist and queer bookstore based in Somerville. Other businesses featured include Canal District Wines, a bottle shop and tasting room in Worcester, and Tuck Life, the outdoor lifestyle brand from Nantucket. In the Professional Services section, you'll find everything from Only In My Dreams Events, an event planning company that coordinates weddings, galas, and private events, to Hoop & Bee, the Easthampton-based quilting studio that hosts sewing classes and longarm services in an inclusive environment. With options guaranteed to delight kids, adults, and everyone in between, the queer shopping guide features fun and thoughtful businesses that provide goods and services that create lasting memories– exactly what the holidays do best.

A complete list of all businesses included (in alphabetical order):

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billy masters

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Every once in a while, I like to enlighten you on notable moments of history that perhaps have slipped through the crevices of American curriculum. I recently came across a story which took place on December 16, 1773. I believe **Joy Behar** was celebrating her 5th birthday. On that fateful day 250 years ago, the **Boston Tea Party** took place — and this was long before we gays co-opted the term "tea party". I was taught that the colonists raided a British ship and tossed bales of tea into the Boston Harbor to protest taxation. Here's what nobody ever mentioned — the name of that ship was The Beaver! Yes, The Beaver was pillaged and plundered, and whatever else you can do that begins with a "P". So, for heaven's sake, if you can remember The Maine, please don't forget The Beaver!

I love when I hear good news about a friend, and my pal **Darlene Love** just got some very good news. In fact, it's very overdue good news. Her perennial holiday classic, "Christmas (Baby Please Come Home)", just went platinum! And she had the platinum album presented to her by none other than **Bruce Springsteen**! It happened at Love's holiday show at New York's Town Hall on November 30th. The "overdue" part is because the song was released in 1963. This year, the single has had a bit of resuscitation since **Cher** included it on her Christmas collection — and turned it into a duet with Love. Fun fact — Cher actually sang backup on the original recording 60 years ago! Even more fun — during several of Cher's tours, Darlene sang backup for her! She's featured prominently on Cher's "Live from the Mirage" concert video from 1990.

Not to be outdone, Cher got some good news of her own. Her single, "DJ Play a Christmas Song", just went to #1 on the Adult Contemporary chart. While that might sound impressive, it bears noting she has not had a #1 on that chart since 1989's "If I Could Turn Back Time" ("Believe" topped the Pop chart in 1999).

One person puts them both to shame. **Brenda Lee** has been singing "Rockin' Around the Christmas Tree" for 65 years. And last week, the song went five—times platinum and finally hit #1 on the Hot 100! She recorded the song when she was 13 — which, for those of you doing the math, still makes her younger than Darlene Love, but a year older than Cher. While this is the third #1 of Lee's career, it is the first time the song hit the top of the charts. The secret sauce (so to speak) was that this year she released a music video for the song — which featured **Tanya Tucker and Trisha Yearwood**. You rock, Brenda!

Proving he is more than an ally, **Pope Francis** has taken decisive action against **Cardinal Raymond L. Burke**. The Cardinal from Wisconsin has been quite critical of Franny — specifically his efforts to attract more LGBT members to the church. Ray even said, "The sheep depend on the courage of pastors who must protect them from the poison of confusion, error and division." That might explain why Burke was just shorn of his apartment in Vatican City...to say nothing of his salary. You can lead a sheep to water...

What happens to people who don't have a career? They start a podcast. "Amy & T.J." comes from **Amy Robach and T.J. Holmes**, former co-workers on "Good Morning America" who were fired when their secret affair went public. "We're the folks who lost the jobs they love because we love each other," they say. I confess I still don't understand why ABC fired them, since they really didn't do anything wrong. Unless you were married to them.

This leads to one of my favorite stories of the year. According to reports, the former spouses of Robach and Holmes are dating...each other! Allegedly, **Andrew Shue** (formerly of "Melrose Place") and **Marilee Fiebig** have been dating for six months. Of course, nobody will confirm the report. Maybe they're trying to keep it a secret!

Time for another installment of "Billy's Holiday Gift Giving Suggestions". And this week's selection ties in with the last two weeks beautifully. Author **Eddie Shapiro** has been on our list twice before with his Broadway books, "Nothing Like a Dame: Conversations with the Great Women of Musical Theater" and "A Wonderful Guy: Conversations with the Great Men of Musical Theater". Third time's a charm with his latest opus: "Here's to the Ladies: Conversations with More of the Great Women of Musical Theater". Yes, we get more Broadway babes — but these all—new interviews include the previously unpublished chapter about **Barbara Cook** alongside people like **Kelli O'Hara, Heather Headley, Judy Kuhn, Adrienne Warren, Marin Mazzie,** and even **Stephanie J. Block**, whose holiday album was last week's suggestion. Come to think of it, Eddie chatted with **Chita Rivera** in his first book, and she was our first suggestion of the season with her new ornament for Broadway Cares/Equity Fights AIDS. "Here's to the Ladies" is dishy, juicy, and fun. It'll make the perfect gift for your theater—loving friends. The icing on the cake? Your humble scribe got an acknowledgement in the preface. Thanks, baby!

Our "Ask Billy" question is about some other ladies. Harry in Seattle writes, *"Because of you, I watched "Ladies of the '80s: A Divas Christmas". I'm curious about the guys. Who is that British guy who played Alex? WOOF! And the opening credits listed **Scott Evans**, but I never saw him. Did he get left on the cutting room floor?"*

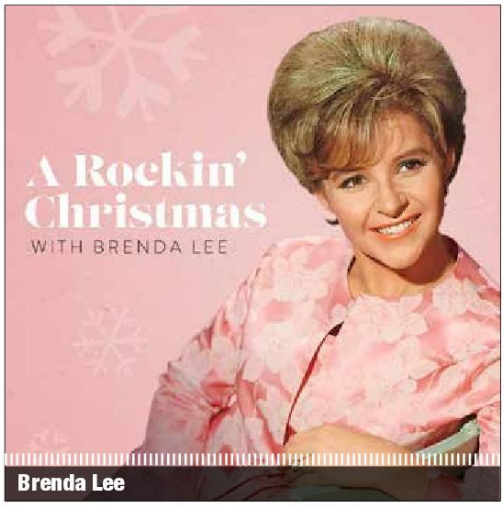
Lifetime's attempt at a holiday flick starring five nighttime soap divas had its moments. But it is definitely not the film they intended to make. Pretty much nothing about the ages or relationships or story makes much sense. **Nicollette Sheridan's** character talks about going to Limelight in NYC with her "bestie" **Donna Mills** back in the day. However, Mills is 22 years older than Nic — so it's unlikely that a 21—year—old was clubbing regularly with her 43—year—old co—star. And on the soap, **Morgan Fairchild** played the mother (well, maybe stepmother) to Sheridan, Mills, Linda Gray, and **Loni Anderson**. Except Fairchild is younger than all her "children" — with the exception of Sheridan. Turns out **Joan Collins** was originally cast as "mother", Morgan was going to play the Nicollette role, and **Jaclyn Smith** was going to play the **Linda Gray** part. Then the writers and actors' strikes loomed, and Lifetime gave them 13 days to shoot the movie or scrap it. The scheduling didn't work for Joan and Jaclyn, who dropped out, Morgan decided she'd rather play "mother", and Nicollette and Gray joined the cast. One additional detail bears mentioning. When the characters are texting each other, the graphics show the actresses' real names, not their characters' names! Simply put, this movie is a mess...but a fun mess.

Getting back to Harry's question, let's talk about the guys. He didn't mention it, but I thought it was clever to have **Christopher Atkins** play Gray's love interest...again! As for **Scott Evans**, he was in there. I know you were expecting **Chris Evans'** hunky (and gay) brother. Wrong one! This Scott Evans is actually an entertainment reporter on "Access Hollywood". As to Alex, he was played by **Travis Burns** — who is Australian, thank you very much — although he has some Brit in him. Alas, not in the romantic sense. He is reportedly straight, with a wife and a kid. Still, I found him reminiscent of a young Maxwell Caulfield in "Grease 2" — and I can't think of a better compliment. And the scene when he was writing the soap in his underwear? Let's just say I was mighty distracted. If the writer of this flick looked like that, you'd be calling me little Billy Zimmerman! Still, I'm in debt to Stan for including the scene — which you can see on BillyMasters.com.

When we're bringing you ladies of the '80s and tea of the '70s (the 1770s), we've definitely come to the end of yet another column. We may be closing in on the end of the year, but we still have a couple more weeks of fresh dish for you at www.BillyMasters.com — the site which rarely focuses on Beaver! If you need some tea, send a note to Billy@BillyMasters.com and I promise to get back to you before Timothée Chalamet gets a job with AAA! So, until next time, remember, one man's filth is another man's bible.

Photo via Darlene Love, Facebook

Darlene Love



Brenda Lee

Ladies of the '80s: A Divas Christmas

Hester

Continued from page 4

not afford to pay for cleaners. They did their best to spare Kathleen.

"That was such a nightmare," Wynne said. "Somebody had gone there earlier and had flipped the mattress on the blood and had hidden as much blood as possible. But we didn't hide it all, and the mother found a bloody sandal, and I remember her breaking down."

During that cleaning, the Hesters found what they thought was an important piece of evidence.

"I don't remember what it was, because it's been so long ago," Diana said. "And [police] said they took everything they needed to take out the house. We just don't feel like they felt they really needed to do a thorough investigation."

Hester's was not the first transgender murder to occur in Massachusetts in the late 1990s. Two months before her killing, Monique Thomas, another Black trans woman, was killed in Boston's Dorchester neighborhood. Three years earlier, two other trans women — Chanelle Pickett and Debra Forte — were both killed in the state.

According to Nancy Nangeroni, a transgender activist who scrupulously documented Hester's life and death, Hester had once expressed fear in Boston's LGBTQ+ newspaper, the Newsweekly, about what would happen if Pickett's killer didn't face justice.

"I'm afraid of what will happen if he gets off lightly," Hester told the paper. "It'll just give people a message that it's OK to do this. This is a message we cannot afford to send."

For 20 Novembers, Kathleen, Diana and her family fielded calls from reporters and advocates about Rita, recalling her life and reliving her murder.

"I just felt at one point, it was just like every year, they will contact us around November 28," Diana said. "Nobody really helped, and it was just us being there supporting everybody else that has been victims of this type of violence. We had to stop going [to Trans Day of Remembrance vigils]."

The lack of resolution began to wear on Rita's mother, Kathleen, as she aged.

"I felt for my mother over the years ... just to see the look on her face," Diana said. "It's devastating."

Diana herself is tired. A few years ago, she stopped asking the police for updates.

Wynne rarely grants interviews anymore — she doesn't like talking about her feelings and wonders if they do any good. She's also been dealing with a lot of health issues.

"You know, it would have been nice to have Rita around the last 10 years of my life that everything's falling apart," she said. "It pisses me off that someone just takes that away from me."

But the next generation of Hester's family is ready to step in and push for justice. Diana's son, Taufiq Chowdhury, remembers his Aunt Rita fondly.

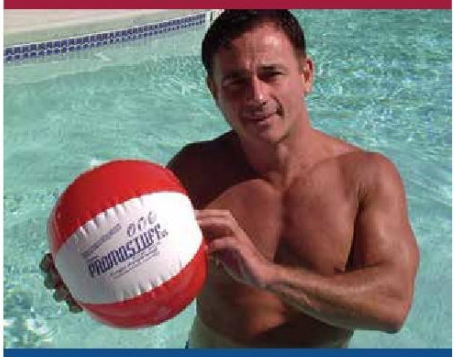
"Her energy was vibrant," Chowdhury said. "You felt it when she entered a room."

Chowdhury, who is gay, looked up to Hester as a child, and wonders what his life might have been like had he gotten to grow up knowing her past the age of 8.

Angela Smith, Rita's niece, wonders the same thing. She is motivated to find out who killed her. She has been in touch with detectives and said she is willing to work on the case that has exhausted her family and that broke her grandmother's heart.

"Things are so different nowadays where people are more accepting," Smith said. "Hopefully, this new [detective] will probably invest in what actually matters. ... I feel so much more can be done. I feel more people know things."

HOT IDEAS



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