Over the past year, The Daily News has published a handful of special sections and editions highlighting relevant and timely issues, including both a Black History Month and Women’s History Month special section last spring semester and a 9/11 anniversary edition last September. These opportunities revealed to us how many voices were unintentionally left out of our storytelling.

While the U.S. celebrates LGBTQ History Month in October, the editorial board felt both an obligation and necessity to tell timely and relevant stories as they unfold while simultaneously appreciating the stories of our past. As student journalists, we understand our responsibility to educate both ourselves and our audience on minority rights and issues is not a responsibility limited to one month of the year.

Likewise, as stories are not limited in how they can be told, love is not limited in how it can manifest. As an editorial board of 21 student journalists, a belief common among us all is love is love, yet our most impactful experiences with love have all been unique. While one of us learned love is love at the age of 4 the day our uncle walked into the kitchen holding hands with another man, another learned the same lesson when they started using their preferred pronouns and were fully accepted for who they are.

While the history of Valentine’s Day remains uncertain, February has long been celebrated around the world as the month of love. Since as early as 1375, love has manifested in ways impactful enough to make people appreciate and celebrate its presence in their lives. However, as time has passed, its image has diversified and expanded into something unimaginable nearly 650 years ago.

As student journalists, we take our responsibility to both learn and educate others on important topics seriously. Tales are as timeless as love, and we will continue to write untold stories as they write themselves and appreciate the histories that made different voices possible.
Joey Glover didn’t know where he wanted to spend his college years until he found Ball State. For him, the university felt like home as soon as he stepped on campus, and Spectrum, Ball State’s LGBTQ support organization, was an opportunity for him to grow as a person, he said.

Glover applied to 29 different colleges his senior year of high school. He said narrowing it down was difficult, but Ball State had the best community. As a sophomore psychology major, Glover is Spectrum’s interim president and has found a place to thrive.

“When I was on my tour, I felt like I was at home and I could just flourish as a social human being,” Glover said.

Glover said he always knew he was different as a kid, fitting into gender norms until he reached middle school regarding “physical things and characteristics.”

“Once I started getting into middle school and high school,” Glover said, “I started presenting myself in a different way.”

In 2018, his sophomore year of high school, Glover made an important realization — he was bisexual. Glover thought he liked “both men and women, and that was just it.”

“I was wrong,” he said.

Glover came out as gay to his friends and peers his senior year of high school. In the spring 2021 semester, Glover came out as nonbinary, using they/them pronouns. Now, he identifies as a transgender man who is gender fluid, whose pronouns are he/they.

“I’m not one to really care for labels, but I’ve been through a lot of them,” he said. “I feel I’ve finally found myself.”

National Coming Out Day is Oct. 11, and Spectrum holds an event for it every year. This event gave Glover, who found out about Spectrum when he was in high school, the courage to come out to his family. While his parents supported his coming out, Glover said, it was harder for them to accept when he came out as nonbinary.

“They’ve all been very accepting, family and friends-wise,” Glover said. “It was just more of a grammar issue for my mom and dad.”

Spectrum is an organization that has provided a safe place for Ball State students. Brooklyn Arizmendi, 2020 Ball State women’s and gender studies alumna and 2017-19 Spectrum president, said she was afraid of her sexual orientation while growing up in southern Indiana. Being a person of color in a predominantly white and religious area, she said, it was easier for her to ignore her sexuality. When she first got involved in Spectrum, she said she was shy.

“I was always there, even if I didn’t speak in every single meeting and just was present,” she said. “It was really cool because the executive board would reach out to me and invite me to things and ask to hang out with me.”

Arizmendi said Spectrum influenced her current career as a youth development specialist, where she provides people
in juvenile detention, foster care and residential facility systems knowledge about sexual health. She said she eventually aims to be a therapist specializing in LGBTQ youth.

“Being involved with Spectrum and getting into so early kind of forced me to stop being so scared of people and speaking,” Arizmendi said. “It was really an integral part of growing up to be who I am today.”

Spectrum seeks to provide social support on campus to create an accepting and comfortable atmosphere, according to its Benny Link page. The organization has been registered since 1974, but under several different names.

On the Ball State intent to organize form, the organization is called the Ball State Gay Alliance. That changed to the Lesbian Gay Student Association, and in 1994, to the Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Student Association. The organization is now known as Spectrum.

After graduating from Ball State with her bachelor’s degree in English in 1982, Stephanie Turner returned for her master’s degree in English in 1983, and it was then she got involved with Spectrum. She said Spectrum would go to different classes and educate people on the LGBTQ community.

In 1984, Spectrum began focusing specifically on HIV/AIDS education.

“Some smart pants would raise [their] hand and say, ‘What about AIDS?’ We always had a wrapped condom ready to hand to them as a way to congratulate them for asking a very important question,” Turner said. “It was really hilarious because people didn’t even want to touch the wrapper of the condom — it was toxic or something because it was handed to them by a gay person. I’m not kidding. It was really that bad.”

While Turner and Spectrum dealt with many hostile people, she said they had fun with it because they were a “self-supporting community.” After Turner graduated from Ball State, she got involved with Justice, Inc., an Indianapolis-based gay rights activist group, and became president of the board.

When the conversation about same-sex marriage became increasingly popular in the 1990s, Turner said she didn’t want anything to do with it.

“There was this conversation about, ‘Well, should same-sex couples be allowed to marry?’ and I was like, ‘I have no desire to marry’ — it was just such a heterosexual thing,” she said. “I wasn’t even interested in thinking about it. But, the conversation started to change, and people were saying, ‘Well, look, there are actual benefits, legally, to … being able to marry someone.’”

Turner got married in 2014 in her partner’s home state of Massachusetts, the first state to legalize same-sex marriage. The following year, the United States Supreme Court legalized same-sex marriage in all 50 states — a day Turner said she will always remember.

“I just remember being on vacation with my wife, and we knew this Supreme Court decision was coming down,” Turner said. “I was taking the suitcases out to the car, we were getting ready to leave and I could hear somebody’s TV on in one of the rooms adjacent to ours, and it’s like, ‘And the Supreme Court has decided to uphold same-sex [marriage].’ We were like, ‘Wow! We had bought wedding rings on that trip and everything.’”

Turner said she believes Spectrum is a fitting name for the organization.

“There’s just a spectrum — I think that’s a really appropriate name [they] have,” Turner said. “It’s the way people work. That’s just kind of the complexity of life.”

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I’m not one to really care for labels, but I’ve been through a lot of them. I feel like I’ve finally found myself.”

- JOEY GLOVER, Spectrum’s interim president

March 24, 1993
Brian McNaught, an author and sex educator, gave a speech to Ball State students.

Sept. 28, 1994
Lesbian Gay Student Association changed to Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Student Association.

Oct. 6, 2014
Same-sex marriage is legalized in Indiana.

Feb. 1, 2022
Spectrum rallied against the House Bill 1041.

1990
Daily News Archives stated fraternity Delta Lambda Phi is the only gay fraternity in the U.S., according to national news organizations. It is no longer the only gay fraternity.

January 1998
Within one week, Ball State’s Student Government Association (SGA) passed two bills to include sexual orientation in Ball State’s Code Discrimination Grievance Policy and Procedures and the Equal Opportunity and Affirmative Action Policy.

Feb. 23, 2011
Former President Barack Obama stated his administration would no longer defend the Defense of Marriage Act.

June 26, 2015
The U.S. Supreme Court declared same-sex marriage legal in all 50 states.

Jan. 27, 2022
Indiana House Bill 1041, which would ban transgender girls from playing girls’ sports in schools, passed the Indiana House of Representatives.

Sources: PBS “Milestones in America,” Ball State Digital Media Repository, Daily News archives

ALEX HINDENLANG, DN DESIGN
Ball State professors reflect on their experiences in the LGBTQ community.

Maya Wilkins
Reporter

It’s the first day of classes at Ball State. Leo Caldwell, assistant lecturer of media design, is ready to welcome a new group of students to his classes, prepared to teach them all he knows about journalism and design. Students file into the classroom, filling the empty desks around the room and preparing themselves for what they are about to learn in Caldwell’s class.

However, during Caldwell’s introduction, he adds in a detail students may not know about him — Caldwell is transgender.

“There’s a little awkwardness, usually blank stares, and some people look confused,” he said. “I’ve always felt either confusion or that sort of vibe … [My class] doesn’t leave space for them to ask me questions, but some of them have before or after classes, and they’re genuine, really good questions.”

Caldwell was born and raised in Muncie, in a Pentecostal, “super religious” family. When he realized he was queer, he said coming out to his family was traumatic because they were “very Pentecostal.” In the church, he was told he was an abomination and “being queer was the worst thing you could be.”

“In the last 10 years, I’ve realized. ‘Wow, that was really freaking traumatic,’” he said. “I didn’t know how deeply it hurt me because I spent so much time trying not to believe what I had been told as a child.”

In his teens, Caldwell decided to “reject religion altogether” and later came out as a lesbian at 21 years old. He then spent his 20s reprogramming and telling himself he wasn’t a bad person because of who he is. In 2009, when Caldwell was 26, he met a transgender person for the first time at the Mark III Taproom and began experimenting with his identity.

“It was actually in the [Ball State] journalism department where I started experimenting with being ‘Leo’ in class,” Caldwell said. “The faculty there [were] really supportive — Jenn Pallionis was one of the faculty that really embraced my identity and who I was.”

While Caldwell said he is now completely comfortable with his masculinity, it took a long time for him to get there because he had to learn how to be comfortable in his body and what kind of masculinity he identified with most.

Caldwell said when he first came out as a lesbian to his mom, the two didn’t talk for about six months to a year. So, when he came out as transgender to his family, he did it more nonchalantly, even though he knew they would still be upset — but he didn’t care as much because he was embracing who he was.

Since then, Caldwell has continued to be nonchalant when he comes out to people, casually dropping it into conversation but still making them aware of his identity.

“As a passing trans person, I am constantly coming out because I want people to know — they don’t have to — but I want people to know that they’ve interacted with a trans person,” he said. “I have the ability, privilege and safety around me to do that, but I don’t expect all trans people to because it’s a personal choice, and I think some trans people can’t because of where they’re at in life.”

Caldwell said he thinks the LGBTQ community has changed a lot since he came out, with more representation in and around the community as a whole.

“For me, it was mostly a fight, even though that was only 20 years ago,” he said. “We had to fight to exist — we had to fight even within our generation. There wasn’t a lot of kindness there.”

Caldwell thinks Generation Z is more accepting of queer people than previous generations, even with backlash from anti-LGBTQ legislation, and he thinks it’s making younger generations realize the possibilities for them and their identities.

David Little, assistant teaching professor of theatre directing, also believes the LGBTQ community has changed and thinks younger generations need to remember the hardships those before them faced.

Little grew up in a “fairly conservative home” with a father who was a minister and said his Little’s journey to discovering his sexuality was long and complicated. In 2002, Little said he ended up in the hospital because of his depression, and that was when he began talking with a psychiatrist about how he thought he was gay.

“For some weird reason, the psychiatrist, instead of saying, ‘When you leave here, maybe you should go find a gay community or something,’ [told me] to go date a girl,” Little said. “So I left there and I dated a girl for a while, and that did not go well. She was so great and so patient and kind and lovely with me, but I was like, ‘Yeah, I don’t even want to hold your hand.’”

About two years later, Little was in a play in Pittsburgh and realized he had a crush on the other man in the play, so he gave himself “permission to surrender” to what he was feeling for one week. He said the second he did, he realized he was gay.

On Oct. 1, 2006, Little was in graduate school at The New School in New York City when his father had to have an unexpected medical procedure, prompting him to return to
Pittsburgh. At that point, he was only out to about five or six of his friends.

“When I was home, I sort of had this moment where I realized I don’t want either of my parents to die without them knowing this information,” Little said. “Once I told my parents, more and more of my friends at school knew because I was a bit of a mess emotionally for a couple months. I needed a little bit more support, so I told more people at school, and they were all incredibly supportive.”

Little went to Pittsburgh Creative and Performing Arts School and graduated from high school in 1995. When he graduated, he said there were 50 people in his graduating class. Of those people, about 10 were men, and he thinks four of them were gay, but none of them were out yet.

He said — from what he has seen — more students these days are more comfortable being open about their sexuality now. Little also works at Blue Lake Fine Arts Camp in Michigan as a musical theater instructor and said he’s noticed students feel more comfortable being open about their sexuality. This led to him having a conversation with a group of them because he noticed how easy it was for them to talk about sexuality.

“I said to them at one point, ‘I am so happy that you feel this comfortable to be out of the closet, at least while you’re here at camp,’” he said. “I said, ‘However, I think it’s also important for you to remember that you stand on the shoulders of people a generation or two older than you — like myself — who had it much harder. And I stand on the shoulders of people a generation or two older than me who had it much harder than me.'”

Little said, after he said that to the students, they told him they felt safer and like they were able to talk about themselves freely at camp but they couldn’t do that anywhere else, which showed him things still haven’t fully changed.

Little also said he thinks anti-LGBTQ legislation, like the “Don’t Say Gay” bill in Florida — which would restrict discussions of sexual identity and gender orientation in schools — is dangerous for students because it prevents students who may be confused about their sexuality from talking about it.

“My gut reaction is to get super, super angry, and I just want to be more understanding of where the people on the other side are coming from,” he said. “I want to be able to listen to other people and to understand and to help educate, because in the case of some of these bills, I feel like legislators and parents who don’t know me are saying there’s something evil about me and people like me, and that’s just not true.”

Like Caldwell and Little, Sara Collas, assistant teaching professor of psychology, believes Gen Z is more accepting of the LGBTQ community.

“There’s really an emphasis on sexual and gender fluidity, and identities are viewed as constructed, which I believe as well,” Collas said. “Gender animates the LGBTQ community, and now I think there’s more recognition of gender fluidity due to the trans movement.”

Collas said she realized she was a lesbian when she was in third grade because she developed a crush on her teacher.

“I felt conflicted when I went home because I was supposed to love my mother the most, but I was having this mad crush on my teacher,” Collas said.

When Collas was 21 years old, she came out to her friends and family and said it went fine because she always normalized her lesbian identity. She said she was never afraid of people judging her for her identity, and she was proud of who she was when she came out.

Although the LGBTQ community and its representation has changed since Collas came out nearly 40 years ago, she doesn’t regret the way she came out.

“I think it’s great,” she said. “We’ve gone mainstream, we’re everywhere and proud, and I think it’s fantastic.”

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Elissa Maudlin
Associate Lifestyles Editor

It started with a promo of RuPaul’s Drag Race. In a pink, flowing Roman princess gown draped out from the arms, Roxxy Andrews fawns herself with a large golden fan in front of four pillars with pegasuses flying around her. Her blonde hair fans out from her golden brown face, and black eyeliner and lashes hide the color of her irises.

Alesha Heitmann was 14 years old and thought Andrews was beautiful, she said. She saw someone who looked like her—“pleasantly plump” and multiracial—living a life she didn’t know was an option, that wasn’t just dressing up and pretending.

For the next almost five years, Heitmann performed at-home drag shows until Veterans Day in 2017 when, at 19 years old, she performed her first live drag show at Be Here Now in Muncie.

“The more I kept doing it, the more I was like, ‘I should do this all the time,’” Heitmann, a transgender woman who works in Muncie, said. “This isn’t just a costume for me. This is who I am.”

Brandon Million, assistant director of the Ball State Office of Inclusive Excellence, has been told trying on a dress for the first time as a transgender woman is a magical experience.

“Sometimes, it’s the first step to being able to show your true, authentic self,” he said.

In 2018, the idea of clothing and the gender-nonconforming community was on the minds of the sorority Gamma Rho Lambda, where talk about gender-affirming clothing for students was active among its members and within committee meeting rooms. Failure to find resources and get the idea off the ground caused it to lay dormant.

However, for four years, the idea never truly left the mind of one member: Mikayla Yohe, vice president of Gamma Rho Lambda 2018 and a future practicum student for the Multicultural Center.

Earlier this year, The Lavender Door — a resource for Ball State students to get gender-affirming clothing on campus — opened.

Huy Huynh, assistant director for the
Multicultural Center, said students fill out an appointment form on the Multicultural Center’s webpage with their name, information and times they can meet. Then, staff brings them to The Lavender Door, where the location is kept secret to be as discreet as possible. He also said clothes are washed and cleaned and organized weekly, and only one student attends at a time.

“Our main goal has always been to serve students in any capacity we can,” Huynh said. “Serving an underserved population is what really was a green light for [The Lavender Door] to happen.”

To A.C. Fowlkes, LGBTQ Sensitivity and Transgender Inclusion expert, clothing is part of social transition and a way for people to show up authentically as themselves.

Heitmann, unless she was expressing herself through drag, turned to food and was 375 pounds, she said, which she attributes to lack of expression.

“I would perform once a month, and I would put all that pent-up feminine energy into one night or one weekend a month,” Heitmann said. “And then, I’d live the rest of my life hating myself.”

Ande K., a Muncie resident who identifies as gender queer nonbinary, thought during puberty he’d become a boy. However, he learned through starting to transition that he wasn’t like trans men but also didn’t feel he was like a lesbian, he said.

He used his own money to buy gender-affirming clothing and said his mother was bipolar and, during manic episodes, would get rid of the things she didn’t want him to have, including his gender-affirming clothes.

“She wanted me to have long hair and wear tight girls’ jeans and daisy duke-type shorts,” he said. “And that wasn’t who I was. I was a skater. I was a goth. I lived in jeans and sweatpants and shirts from the skatepark.”

Ande K. thinks forcing a person to wear clothes they aren’t comfortable in is “a form of child abuse,” with the exception of school uniforms.

Cam Winter, 2013 Ball State graduate who identifies as non-binary, knew they were different around 13-14 years old but didn’t have a word for it until their early college years. Their mother allowed them to shop in the male section of stores, which Winter said was “super affirming.”

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Maya Wilkins
Reporter

For Ball State Women’s Golf head coach Katherine Mowat, the baby shower Ball State Athletics held for her daughter, Myla, was a very special day. It was one of the only baby showers the department has thrown, but even more than that, it was one of the ways Mowat was able to be more authentic with her coworkers.

For Mowat, having her first child is what she calls her “coming out card.” She said the athletic department throwing a baby shower displayed her coworkers’ support of her relationship with her now-wife, Mandy Harrison.

“I think a lot of my colleagues knew we were in a relationship, but it wasn’t actually declared or spoken until we said, ‘We want to share something with you: we’re having a baby,’” Mowat said.

Even though Mowat had come out to her family, they still didn’t know about her relationship with her now-wife until the baby shower. Mowat’s family was supportive and happy for her, but it was still a big step for her to take.

“Looking back, things made a lot of sense, but I wasn’t exposed to anyone in the LGBTQ community growing up, and it was still kind of taboo and there wasn’t much conversation around it,” she said. “It was a challenging realization, for sure, because I was very conflicted about what it meant for me, my family, the people around me and my life.”

Mowat said she came out to her family a few years later “one-by-one,” starting with her mom, then her brothers and, finally, her dad. By telling her mom first, she felt it eased a burden for her to tell them. The two weren’t trying to hide their relationship, but at the time, they were still not allowed to get married, so there was no real timeline for their relationship. It wasn’t until one of her athletes asked if they were together — four years into their relationship — that she told her team.

“I thanked her because, since that day … there’s really been no going back,” Mowat said. “They’ve just always known and understood it’s just who I am. We’re a family, and I’m the same coach as I was before they knew.”

For Mowat, it’s been important to be an open and active member of the LGBTQ community, especially for her athletes, because she didn’t have any role models who were gay growing up. Over the years, Mowat said she has had meaningful conversations about her sexuality with athletes who have told her seeing her family has helped them discover more about themselves.

One of those athletes is graduate student golfer and co-captain Liz Kim.

“Coach Mowat is definitely a pioneer in just how comfortable she is,” Kim said. “She’s not someone that just stands out in a crowd and proclaims who she is, but by just being her normal self and living out her truth with her family, she shows who she is.”

Kim had no plans of playing Division I golf — she found Mowat and the Ball State Women’s Golf program through a tournament where she was playing with someone who already committed to Ball State. After they played, Mowat invited Kim on a tour of Ball State the next day.

Kim said after she talked to Mowat, her dad read Mowat’s bio on the Ball State website, and he saw she was married to a woman and had children, which was something that stood out to Kim.

“At that point, I didn’t know anything about myself,” Kim said. “I was still just an 18-year-old kid. I didn’t really explore that part of my identity.”

Kim wasn’t sure how her family or friends would react, but in the back of her mind, she said she knew, no matter what, she had Mowat by her side.

Since coming to Ball State in 2017, Kim has fully come out to her friends and family, and she said she
thought her coming out process was “pretty natural.”

“My team, they’re like my biggest allies,” Kim proclaims who she is, but by just coming out and people starting families through professional sports,” Harrison said.

Harrison said she didn’t fully feel like herself until she dated Mowat because up until that point she had dated men. She said she has friends who are gay, so it was easier to come out to them. However, Harrison said her mom did not receive the information as well as her dad because she has siblings who are about 10 years younger than her.

“A lot of it was just trying to navigate all that, like, are the younger kids going to make sense of it? And how’s that going to work … Just all the fears a parent has,” Harrison said.

Harrison and Mowat have two kids together — Myla, 10, and Katy, 7. Harrison said she and Mowat have been “pretty fortunate” with how their colleagues at Ball State have responded.

“[Myla’s] left-handed and [Mowat’s] left-handed,” Harrison said. “I carried both our children. So people will be like, ‘Oh, she’s left-handed like [Mowat],’ because then they think about it and they’re like, ‘Wait a minute.’ It’s just one of those things I think that kind of reinforces the fact that people just see us as a family.”

Harrison also thinks her relationship with Mowat has helped some athletes in the department and said she thinks she has become closer with some because they feel safe and comfortable talking to her. Sometimes, though, she does think there’s athletes who don’t engage with either of them because they’re “afraid of outing themselves.”

“I hope that’s not the case,” Harrison said. “I don’t care what your sexuality is — I’m going to be here for you.”

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Our Stories Our PRIDE

Queer stories should be told by queer storytellers.

John Lynch
Opinion Editor

John Lynch is a senior journalism major and writes “Fine Print” for The Daily News. His views do not necessarily reflect those of the newspaper.
The first time I was ever outed was because of the movie “Love, Simon.” It was 2018, and I saw the movie in the waning months of my senior year of high school with my group of friends, including my girlfriend at the time. It was one of the first times I had ever seen gay love depicted in a largely positive light onscreen, and it brought me to tears in the theater. This didn’t go unnoticed by my friends, who later asked me if I was myself gay via one of the hardest phone calls I’ve ever been a part of.

When I got the call, my stomach dropped. A part of me knew this conversation was inevitable, but that didn’t lessen the anxiety it brought; the feeling of finally plunging from the cliff was unavoidable in that moment.

“No, but you’re not far off,” I replied.

“Love, Simon” is actually a pretty good microcosm of what my coming out experience was like as a bisexual person. Much like the movie’s protagonist, I didn’t get to come out on my own terms. As such, telling my own story has been something I’ve struggled with. When I left home for college, I let myself embrace my real identity and was open and honest. I explored my sexuality and my identity to find John, hidden behind the fears that shoved me out of the closet while never letting me explore the room.

That’s when my story really began, when I allowed myself to be whole and complete in my real identity. I began to see myself as the protagonist of my own story again. I became a journalist so I could tell other people’s stories better than I was ever able to tell my own.

In journalism, the standard we strive for is neutrality — when we remove ourselves from the narrative, that’s considered a good thing. Keeping our work free of bias is essential to our relationship with our readers, and I wouldn’t change that at all. However, the queer community’s sometimes fraught relationship with the journalistic and entertainment media has made me question who should be telling our stories.

Before I was out of the closet, many of my perceptions of the queer community were shaped through media created by non-queer people. There’s a host of reasons for this — the limited acceptance of LGBTQ people in media historically being one of them — but it led me to a broader realization: We need more queer storytellers.

One of the most important reasons to give more queer storytellers their due is the relatively short length of queer media’s history. Western society has largely been taught to repress and shun queer people until the late 20th century, to the point that openly telling our stories was off the table until the last 30 years or so. While history is littered with references to periods of queer acceptance, the predominant attitude toward this community has been intolerance.

As such, media that is authentic to the queer experience is few and far between. Excluded from the mainstream, our understanding of queer media is still in its infancy — shouldn’t it be queer storytellers forging the modern understanding of this genre?

When queer representation is done wrong, it breaks my heart, but it also strengthens my desire to do it right.

Ever wonder why gay characters seem to meet untimely demises more than their straight counterparts? That’s the “Bury Your Gays” trope — also known as Dead Lesbian Syndrome — rearing its ugly head and making sure audiences don’t get too comfortable with queer characters.

Ever wonder why so many queer stories end in tragedy? It’s a result of decades of post-AIDS crisis homophobia that said the only good gay was a dead or lonely one. “Call Me By Your Name” and “Brokeback Mountain” probably wouldn’t have ended in heartbreak if the main characters were straight.

To live in a closet is to hide, to make yourself a stranger in your own eyes, providing the rest of the world with a comfortable mask. The queer experience in America is a complicated one to reckon with — one day, you could see yourself truly represented in media for the first time, the next,

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Ever wonder why your favorite Disney villain has such a … unique flair? It’s the age-old trope of making queer people out as the enemy. For example, the evil, scheming Ursula in Disney’s “The Little Mermaid” is based on ‘80s Baltimore drag queen Divine.

“There were strong messages that you got that were not written on any whiteboard.” Dunlap said. “You knew to avoid it. It was a self-reinforcing edict: Don’t write about queers.”

The topic of AIDS was shunned due to its prominence in the gay community, making it toxic. The press didn’t take it seriously initially, and neither did the people the press was covering. When Ronald Reagan’s press secretary Larry Speakes was asked about the growing disease in October 1982, he called it a “gay plague,” causing the press room to erupt in laughter, according to a 2015 Vanity Fair article.

By no means is that to say that straight and cisgender people are incapable of telling LGBTQ stories. By most measures, the modern media is far more tolerant than it ever has been.

As a community, however, we have been failed many times by our portrayals in media. It’s why we need more queer storytellers — people who have lived the same experience, who have walked their lives in our shoes.

“I’m going to do better for my community through my work. I’ll do it for the people who didn’t get a chance to have their stories told because of who they were or who they loved. I’ll do it for the version of me who cried during “Love, Simon” and didn’t know why. I’ll tell the stories my community needs to tell, because if we’re going to tell them, we’re going to tell them the right way.”

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