



QYA JUNE ZINE

Dear reader,

Welcome to the June issue of the Queer Youth Assemble monthly zine and happy pride month! With the recent uptick in anti-LGBTQ+ legislation, this is a great time to take a step back to focus on queer joy (something we all need right now). Inside, you will find beautiful pieces of art, writing, and poetry created by Queer Youth Assemble members. We acknowledge the intersecting elements found within the content of this zine, and encourage you to read with both compassion and understanding.

Due to our strong belief in uncensored creativity, we decided to not put content limits on our creators for this publication. However, we understand that some of the content within this zine may be triggering to some readers. In this and future QYA zines, a list of specific triggers can be found at the top of each page, and any potentially triggering themes can be found at the beginning of each zine. There are no potentially triggering themes found in this issue. If you find yourself struggling after reading, we encourage you to reach out for support.

We hope you enjoy this publication, and are inspired to create whatever your heart desires.

With love and care,

Esmée Silverman (she/her)
Queer Youth Assemble Co-Founder

Alice Mead (they/them)
Queer Youth Assemble Writing Team Lead



WHAT IS QYA?

Queer Youth Assemble is a non-profit youth-led organization dedicated to serving queer youth across the United States and its territories. We are committed to nurturing the joy, interests, and talents of queer youth, and giving queer youth the resources and support to create positive change within their communities. We envision a day where all queer youth are happy, supported, and able to reach their fullest potential.



POV: GAYS GET A CAMERA

by Jasper (they/them)

Image Description (bottom left): Eight teenagers are shown sitting and standing around a couch and on the floor. They have various poses and facial expressions. They all seem to be enjoying themselves. All but one face the camera. A keyboard rests on the lap of someone sitting on the floor. One wraps their arms around another from behind, and their hands intertwine.



Image Description (top right): Eight teenagers are shown in a selfie. They have various facial expressions and are all looking towards the camera. The picture is taken at an upward facing angle. They all seem to be enjoying themselves.



PEACE

by Nora (she/her)

She never stopped to look back
At everything she'd done
For everything she'd ever do
She never felt she won

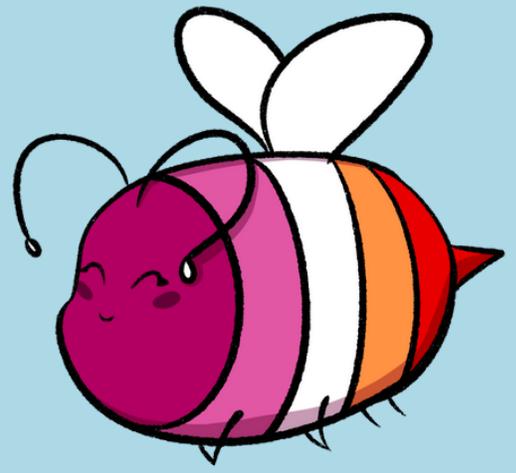
Just always piled on her work
Had never given it a glance
She never set her mind to rest
For if she did she'd lose her chance

She thought this world loved her
Owed it her work at least
But the world was to kill her
It couldn't give her peace

The world was to kill her
So she learned out of spite
To love herself and when in doubt
No matter what was right.



AN ODE TO FIRST LOVE



by anonymous

Growing up, you were always the confident one. You never hid yourself even when times were rough. Maybe the popular girls didn't invite you to the beach and whispered behind your back, but to me, you were the prettiest girl in the world.

I still remember the way you smiled when you talked about your celebrity crushes, and I tried to imagine myself on your list next to Katy Perry and Jennifer Lawrence. I looked for every excuse to place myself by your side, but I still had to blush when I looked in your eyes.

Our love was a short one but I still treasure the memories—your mom knew I was gay before I even told mine. With you I felt safe and my queer joy came alive. I texted you each morning just to feel that burst of excitement. There was nothing more amazing than knowing I could truly be myself, even just for a little while.

We didn't last for very long, as most teenage romances do, but I still hear your laugh when I play some silly video game. I still remember your smile when I see a cute girl, and the memory of your confidence inspires me to go on.

We weren't meant to last forever, and there's nothing wrong with that. But at the time, you were all I needed, and I'm forever grateful for what we had. You left me with your strength in the face of injustice. I remember how you made me feel loved and like I deserve the world; you made me who I am, and that's the power of one's first queer love.

THE SIMS & LGBTQ+ SELF-EXPRESSION

by Ellen Richards (she/they)

This past week, The Sims 4 partnered with GLAAD and The It Gets Better Project to launch one of its most ambitious updates in recent years: the ability for players to customize their characters' pronouns. Although this new update is only available for users who play the game in English, Electronic Arts (EA), the parent company of The Sims franchise, has expressed interest in expanding this feature to include other languages over time. This news has a personal significance to me and to so many others.

I credit The Sims with helping me realize that I am queer and non-binary. I first started playing it when I was given a copy of The Sims 4 for my thirteenth birthday. Today, I still play the game regularly even as my eighteenth birthday is right around the corner. Being able to play a video game that allows you to explore queer relationships, gender identity, and gender expression has benefitted my life in ways I may never fully comprehend. I believe that games like The Sims are powerful tools for identity exploration and building empathy, especially for kids. Without The Sims, I know I may not have taken substantial time out of my day to really "play with life." I had grown up with a love of playing with doll houses, both in the shape of wooden structures, magnetic sets, and even online games, but I wasn't able to find a similar style game geared towards older kids and adults - until I found The Sims. Another benefit I found in it was that the game has a consistent history of expansion to incorporate more LGBTQ+ inclusive content, as reflected in its latest update.

As early as the first release of The Sims in 2000, two sims of the same gender could enter a romantic relationship and move in together. Since then, each new version of the game has expanded on an attraction system. In The Sims 2, characters could have gender preferences; and as of The Sims 4, all characters are considered attracted to all genders, unless the player imagines a different orientation for them. The first major game update to expand on sex, gender, and physical characteristics in the game was in June of 2016, two years after the initial release of The Sims 4. Previously binary styles of bodies, voice, walking patterns, and even clothing options were made available to all characters.

Despite its merits, I must acknowledge the fact that many necessary LGBTQ+-centered updates have been slow to be implemented or have yet to occur. For example, the only options for a character's labeled sex is 'Male or Female,' which further perpetuates the erasure of non-binary and intersex identities. In addition to these shortcomings, The Sims franchise, like many others, is vulnerable to rainbow capitalism, which is defined as exploiting LGBTQ+ content for profit. As a global brand, it has also faced bans and restrictions from countries where LGBTQ+ content is restricted if not outlawed entirely. Russia banned the release of the expansion pack "Sims 4: My Wedding Stories" for featuring a queer couple getting married in its promotional content.

Over the years, I have spent nine hundred eleven hours on The Sims and counting. Although the game is far from perfect, I appreciate the fond memories and learning it has brought into my life. I still recommend it to friends and I feel fortunate The Sims is still being updated and expanded upon to this day. I am grateful for the community it has built and for it helping me find a community of my own. Most of all, I remain hopeful that good change will continue to come both online and off.

Sources:

<https://www.ea.com/games/the-sims/the-sims-4/news/customizable-pronouns-dev-diary>

https://sims.fandom.com/wiki/Same-sex_relationship

<https://www.ea.com/games/the-sims/the-sims-4/news/new-cas-update>

<https://www.cbr.com/sims-4-wedding-stories-russia-banned-proganda-law/>



WHAT I AM

by Savannah Keating (they/them)

Image Description (page 8): A figure with a moon for a head is wearing a long skirt and a blazer with unlaced dress shoes. Behind their shoulder on the left is a sun and from behind the sun and their head is a swirling rainbow, a stream of purple from the rainbow flows downward through their hand. The background is a dark blue with stars.



MY MOMENTS OF HAPPINESS

by Scarlet (she/her)

I wanted to share some of the things in my life that bring me happiness and a little about how they do so.

Music

While not every piece of music is a happy one, listening to music in general is something that gives me joy. Music is a huge part of my life, something I listen to everyday, and each song is a story to me. The wide access we have to music today allows people to experience different emotions and perspectives through the lyrics and melody of songs they listen to. Even with the same song, one might reflect on and interpret its meaning differently over time as their own perspective on the world evolves, and that's part of what I love so much about it.

Spending time with friends

Just being in the presence of close friends, those who are supportive and accepting, those who I can let down all of my walls and cautious demeanor around and just be myself with, is something that never fails to delight me. With a busy life and constant challenges, a moment to relax and spend time with those closest to me is something precious.

Seeing how much I've improved at something

After putting in hard work, it always thrills me when I look back on my progress and see how far I've come from where I started.

Challenging assignments for classes especially can be a struggle to get started on, for example very strict requirements for an essay, but with the practice I put in, writing this type of essay is now much easier! Reflecting on progress with goals and skills is rewarding for me, as not only does it bring me joy but it also gives me a burst of motivation to continue improving.

Completing a writing piece

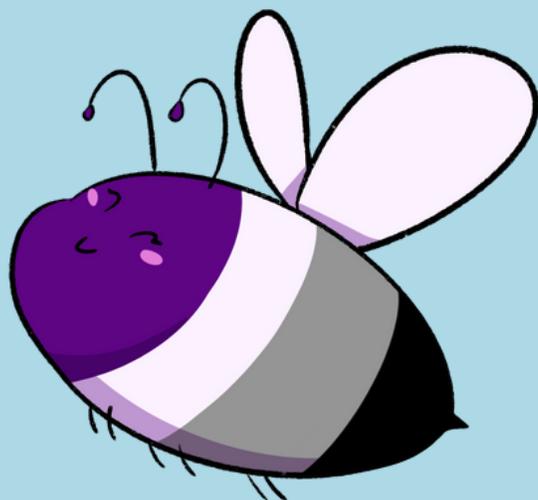
The surge of satisfaction that comes with typing the final period at the end of something you have written is an exhilarating one.

Succeeding in expressing my ideas and thoughts is very fulfilling, and receiving positive commentary on those pieces published online makes me feel very happy.

Seeing representation in the media

Seeing realistic and well-written representation of people like me in the media never fails to give me a boost of serotonin.

Try taking a moment to consider what things bring you joy!



MY JOY

by Eclipse (they/she)

My friend runs over to me. She tells me about her partner and how happy she is to have the confidence to come out. I laugh and tell her how proud I am. She hugs me close and my heart lights up. She is part of my joy.



My boyfriend walks over to me at lunch. He doesn't question as I lay my head on his shoulder. He smiles at me as I put my forehead against his exchanging soft kisses and whispered 'I love you's. He doesn't question anything as we sit at lunch together enjoying each other's company. He is part of my joy.

My partner is standing at a booth at pride. The minute we see each other I am in his arms and we're laughing. They pick me up and the two of us are happy to see each other. He spends the rest of pride laughing with me and exchanging affection. They are part of my joy.

I see myself in the mirror. I can smile and say the person smiling back at me is confident and kind. Things I have always wanted to be. I sit a bit longer. This person is the reason all these things can happen. I am part of my own joy.

TEO'S ART

by atlas/mateo (he/him)

Image Description (below): Two spiky rats face each other one sitting depicted in the colors of the rainbow flag, the other on the right standing depicted in the trans flag.

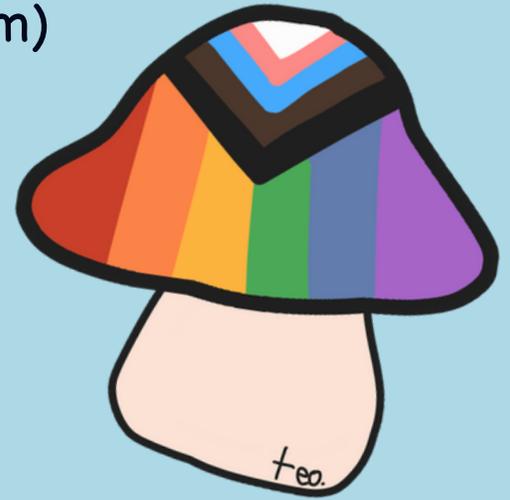


Image Description (above): A mushroom with the Progress Pride flag design on the top.

Image Description (below): A rainbow colored hand with black nail polish making the peace sign.

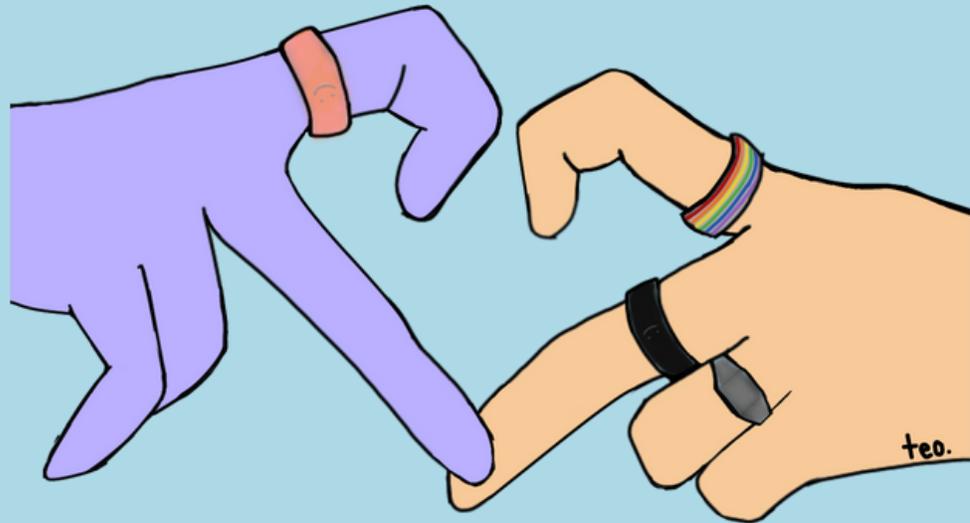


Image Description (above): Two hands form a heart. The hand on the left is purple and wears a rose gold ring with a smiley face on it on their pointer finger. The hand on the right is a light skin tone with a rainbow pride flag ring on their pointer finger, a black ring on their middle finger, and a silver ring on their ring finger.

HAPPY

by Nico Toepfer (they/them)

My dad is an interesting man. So interesting in fact that sometimes I feel like we're from different worlds; and in a way, we are. My dad is my step dad, born and raised in Alabama and a traveler of the South. Between growing up in Alabama, moving to Texas, then taking a construction job that would bring him all over the South and Midwest, he's a true hick through and through. Compared to me, who grew up comfortably in Liberal Massachusetts, you can clearly see the difference between us ideologically; but the main difference between us is that I'm Gay and my dad is Happy.

I have this t-shirt that I bought from a LGBTQ+ online influencer. It's one of my favorite shirts to wear because when I put it on I get to sport the phrase in colorful lettering "Could Be Gayer," first coined by Thomas Sanders, a famous viner. It's just so clever! What could be funnier than stating that this innately queer individual could be gayer than they already are? That shirt summed me up in three words and it defined me in ways I could never describe on my own. So if this shirt meant so much to me and the way I identified, why did my father always refer to the shirt as "could be happier?" Every time I wore it he would comment that "I could be happier" or "I'm glad that you're happy" or "you're so happy!" And at first, it was funny. "Haha, my dad is using the other definition of 'gay' in reference to my shirt. Point made, joke achieved, hilarious." However, my dad didn't let up. Over a span of four years (since I purchased the shirt) he has referred to it as my "happy" shirt and it was beginning to really piss me off. What did this straight man have against my shirt? Why was he censoring his words? Was he belittling my identity? Making a joke out of something that was meaningful to me? Was he unable to pronounce /gā/? It hurt my feelings, and I didn't understand it.

I am Gay and my Dad is Happy. This went on for a while, and I only got more upset every time my dad referred to my shirt with what I interpreted as a censored reference to my identity. Call me sensitive, but I just wanted my father to recognize my identity, and to view it with the same pride that I viewed it with. The problem was, my dad wasn't necessarily unsupportive, he married my mom after all who had been married previously to my other mom; if anything he was just the type that had a hard time understanding. My dad was the type of guy that would say "don't put a label on yourself, sexuality is fluid!" While also saying he only ever liked women and knew that wouldn't change. Ah, yes, so everyone's sexuality is fluid except your own? Right right..

I am Gay and my Dad is Happy. After going to college for my first year, being away from family, being able to really be myself and dive into my identity, I became more confident with who I was. I mean, I was already so profoundly loud about who I was, however college just allowed me to be louder. I wasn't afraid to be who I was! I was out of state and far far away from any family members or people I knew from high school, so this was my shot to be someone I always wanted to be. As cliché as it sounds, I started fresh, went by my preferred name, and really thrived at college. What I didn't expect was the Mack Truck that would hit me when I had to go home for the summer. In a way, it was a total culture shock when I returned home. Despite my family knowing that I was queer, I hadn't disclosed any details about my pronouns and name, so although I knew what to expect when I went home, it was still quite the adjustment to going from authenticity to back in the closet. As much as my family was supportive of my sexuality, they weren't quite there when it came to gender, so I didn't bother with trying when I knew I would just be met with

disappointment. Regardless, I was still as loud as I could be at home, even if I did have one foot in the closet and one foot out. Nothing had changed except my acute acknowledgement that I may never be able to come out as who I truly am under my parents roof. As supportive as my parents were, their lack of understanding of the gender spectrum made me realize that I would have to just wear two hats, one when I was around my parents, and another when I wasn't around them. However, my confidence from being my authentic self stuck with me as I was knocked a few pegs lower and I went from rolling my eyes at my dad and being silently annoyed with his jokes, to suddenly taking a stand. After experiencing almost three to four years of his "Could Be Happier" jokes I finally had the courage to ask him what he meant.

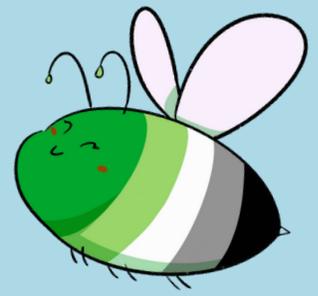
I am Gay and my dad is Happy. I remember wearing the shirt for the day, just out of habit, waiting to leave to go out to eat with my family. I was standing in the kitchen and looking down at my phone when my dad rounded the corner, passing me as I stood totally unbothered, peaceful even as I scrolled through Instagram. He could've said something there, and I almost wonder why he didn't, but perhaps he was too focused on getting his shoes on and getting out the door. That had to be it because it wouldn't be until we were getting ice cream where he would make a comment. It wouldn't be until we were standing in line with anticipation at the ice cream shop that he would find the time to notice what shirt I was wearing. It wouldn't be until he had nothing else to occupy his brain when he would make his oh so familiar attack. "I'm glad you're happy" I remember him saying with a grin that stretched from ear to ear as I turned to look at him with a blank expression, one that had yet to completely process what he had said until I had glanced down at my own shirt as if to confirm he'd made his ever proverbial joke. In that moment all of the occasions where he had said this ran through my brain, with the lingering confidence of my first year of college authenticity bubbling alongside my boiling annoyance. I huffed and looked up at my dad with a sense of finality as I opened my mouth to question his motives.

"Dad, did you know that every time you say that I feel as if you are censoring my identity?" I tell him with a twang of challenge to my voice. "I don't understand why you say happy, when the shirt says and means something else. Every time you say it I feel as if you diminish the statement I am making about who I am." Yes! I said it! Finally! After years of just ignoring it, after years of just rolling my eyes, the words left my mouth! At that moment I imagined a boundary being set, as my dad and I stood opposite to one another, with a thick line being drawn between us in the dirt. The words that left my mouth fell heavy to the ground like bricks as a wall was drawn and built, masoned by the very truth I spilled and mortared by my confidence. I remember looking up with a defiance like never before burning bright in my eyes as I waited for a response. And as the fire of indignation roared in my ears my dad replied with explanation. "I'm sorry. I don't mean anything by it," he started, before explaining he'd only ever heard the word used in a way to describe others negatively.

That was it? Wow. I almost expected it to be some sort of homophobic intolerance. I almost wanted to be called a slur just to make up for all the anger I harbored against this joke, just to feel as though my years of ignoring his antics meant something. At that moment I suppose I understood, to an extent, what my dad was saying. The word gay had negative connotations in my dad's weirdly wired hick brain, so when it came to my shirt it probably translated in his mind as something he wasn't allowed to call me, in fear of it coming off as an insult. I remember a ringing sensation in my chest as the bell in my head rang loud with understanding. I never once considered my dad to be afraid to use a word, nevermind the word Gay, but in the moment I understood for a second, a pure second, where my dad was coming from. It didn't make much sense to me, however as I stood contemplating in the seconds I had after his response, it made sense in a backwards kind of way.

I began to note that perhaps this was an insecurity my father needed to work on, that it was okay to call someone Gay so long as it was used appropriately and with the right intentions. However I also began to note my fathers lack of understanding when it came to how important it was to acknowledge someone's identity, especially an identity that was socially marginalized in a lot of aspects. I sighed and accepted the explanation, regardless of how disappointing it seemed to be. It was simply that my dad was just Happy and I was just Gay.

PEOPLE I'M GRATEFUL FOR THIS PRIDE MONTH



by Alex (they/ae/any)

my best friend
the first of us to come out
my platonic wife
proud bisexual plant mom
clue marathons forever <3

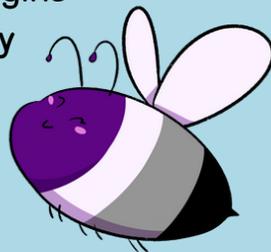
M, A, & L
with whom i form LAMA



M, my partner in crime
who came out as bi
about five seconds before A.
we will never understand the allos.

A, bisexual and demigirl icon
who taught me it was okay
to question my gender
who has never ever apologized
for being herself.

and L, our baby gay
who just discovered she likes girls
coming to terms with it is scary
but you will always be valid.



my fellow aspects
E, B, N, and Iz
funny how none of us have genders anymore.

E, who might as well be my twin
both of us are gender non-conforming,
arocae, mixed-race,
but they're the best version of me.

B, who sat in the corner with me
and side-eyed the dating drama
who taught me joys of neopronouns
who sits through my chaos
every day under the stairs.



N, my stalwart supporter
i'm so proud of you
for coming out to your family.
you are so strong and talented my beloved.

Iz, one of my oldest friends
the ultimate girlboss
who reminded me that staying unlabeled
is always a valid option.

B, for the unapologetic representation
that they bring to qprs
and the community
he's built around herself.
crow makes me believe
i don't have to be alone forever.

my middle school english teacher
who never told us she was queer
but was still there for us always.
i hope one day i get to meet your wife.

my history teacher from last year
who told us to experiment
that we didn't need an answer right away
and led by example.
thank you for always making us feel safe.

to everyone, i love you all.

AROMANTIC JOY

by Mika Z



Image Description: A girl with black braids sits to the right of a white dog in the woods, petting it on the head. The dog has a black spot covering its right eye and ear. A heart with the aromantic flag floats above the girl's shoulder, between her and the dog. A narrow stream flows to the left of them.

Cover art by Jesse/Finch (he/they)

Nine people, layered over one another against a light blue background, practice activities which bring them joy. From bottom-to-top, left-to-right: a person with red hair, a blue flannel shirt, and top surgery scars (without nipples) sits leaning against a person with shaggy blonde hair, and a green flannel shirt. A person with teal-streaked hair wearing a purple flannel sits with her earbuds in, listening to music. A person with a blue button-down and short wavy blonde hair sits playing a purple bass guitar. Above this row of people, a brown-haired person dressed in LARP (live action role play) gear stands holding a blue and red checkered flag. A person with long ginger hair in a black dress decorated with orange flowers writes in a pale blue notebook. A person with dark shaved hair, a black skirt with white flowers, and orange flower earrings skateboards. A person with curly dark teal hair and a navy blue flannel sits with a duck in his lap. A person with long brown hair and a green tank top stands with a trans flag, speaking into a microphone.

THANK YOU!

Stay tuned for next month's edition
& QYA zine announcements!

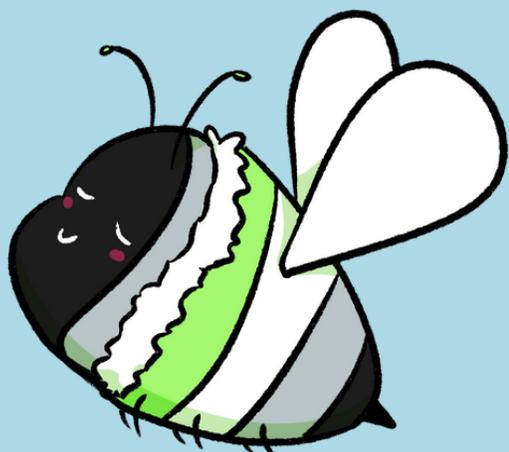
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Page decorations by Alice Mead (they/them)
and Little Miss Bee (Abby) (she/they)