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News in 2022

THE INTERVIEW

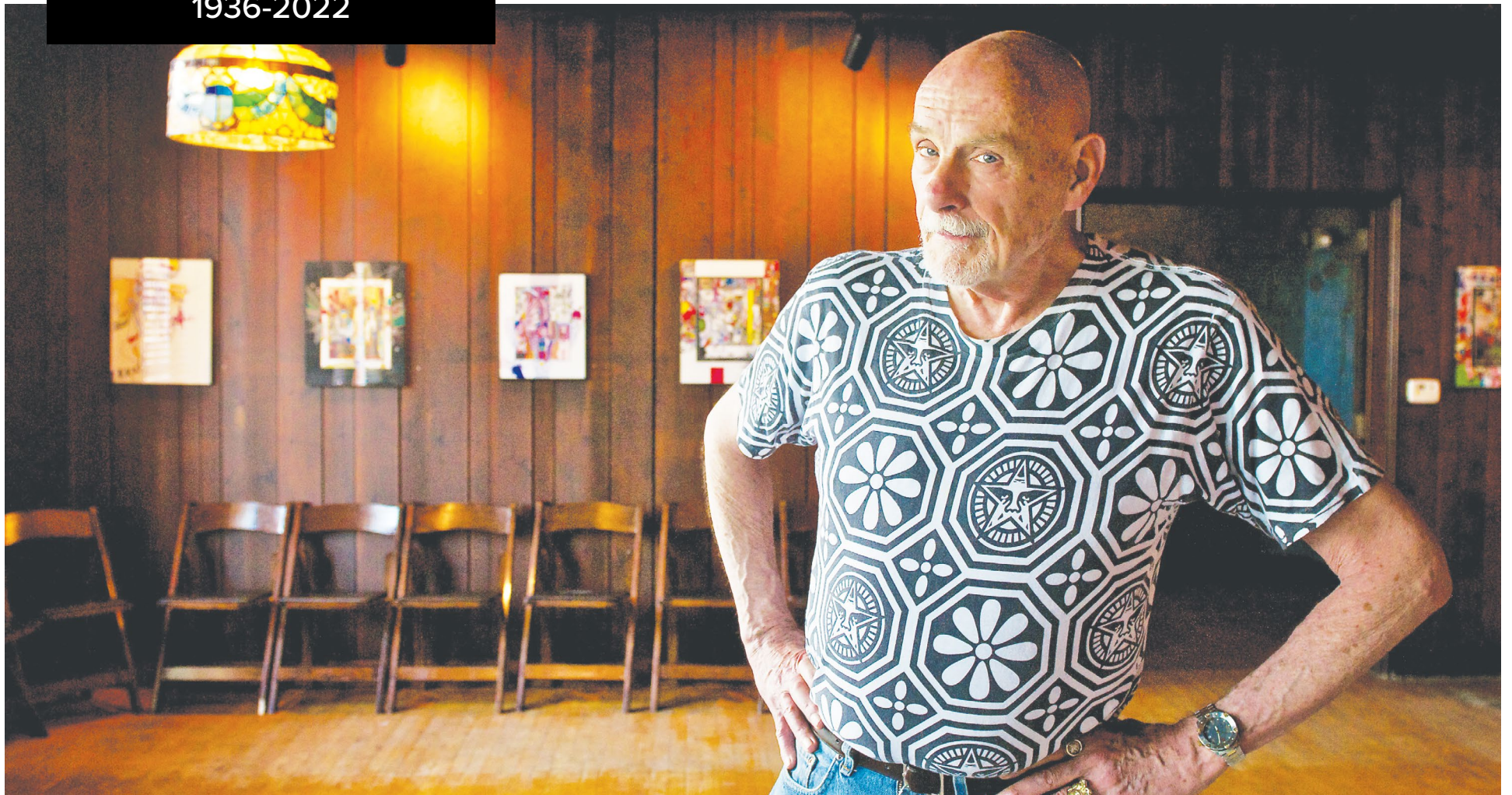
Ben Aldridge Talks
Gay Holiday Romance
'Spoiler Alert'

One Last

Parting Glance

Remembering Beloved Michigan Writer, Artist and Mentor Charles Alexander

1936-2022



Charles Alexander. Photo: Andrew Potter

Parting with Charles

Michigan LGBTQ+ Icon Leaves Behind Major Impact on Local Community

BY JASON A. MICHAEL

Longtime Pride Source and Between The Lines columnist Charles Robert Alexander, also a beloved artist and community activist, died Dec. 10 following a brief battle with pneumonia. He was 86.

Called Bobby as a child, Alexander was born and raised in Detroit's Midtown section as an only child. Alexander attended the then very prestigious Cass Technical High School downtown as a commercial arts major and graduated in 1956. At Cass, Charles befriended other closeted gays and they formed a sort of secret fraternity. After Cass Tech, he earned a bachelor's degree in English from Wayne University (later renamed Wayne State University).

For some time, Alexander worked

jobs ranging from surgical technician at Harper Hospital to public relations for the Detroit Symphony Orchestra. He came out officially in 1959, a rare move for that time and became an early activist. Ultimately, he would work 28 years with the Detroit Public Schools, first as an instructor and later as an administrator.

Recalling the late '50s and early '60s, Alexander said in a 2011 profile in BTL that "back then people really knew nothing about homosexuality. There was a requisite anonymity. You had a nickname. You didn't give any information about where you worked. It was a very guarded existence."

Through the years, Alexander developed a drinking problem. But by the time of his death, he was a recovering alcoholic with more than 40 years of sobriety under his belt.

It was while in rehab that he reconnected with art. A group therapist asked him to cut photos out of a magazine to describe his feelings. Alexander created a collage, a method he would employ for some time before embracing his signature mixed media presentation.

Even before BTL first published in 1993, Alexander wrote for a predecessor publication called "10 Percent." Alexander was a BTL columnist from 1994 until 2021, writing more than 700 columns. He also wrote for other sections of the paper from time to time and for several years created original art to grace the paper's cover for World

AIDS Day issues.

Alexander befriended BTL co-publisher Jan Stevenson while she was still executive director of the then-fledgling Affirmations LGBTQ+ community center. Stevenson and her partner Susan Horowitz would take over the publishing reins of BTL in

I have lived a very fortunate life. I have, because of my artistic talent and being a first-responder gay, so to speak, for more than 65 years.

— Charles Alexander

1994. Charles' column was called Parting Glances, initially a take on the end of the millennium and his remembrances of days gone by.

"What gave his column the depth it needed to become the longest-running

See **Charles Alexander**, page 8

Friends, family and admirers attended a memorial service for Charles Alexander Dec. 17 at the Ferndale First United Methodist Church.

One of those in attendance was Thomas Zerasa, who had known Alexander for years.

"It's got to be 45 years at least," Zerasa said following the service. "Once you met Charles Alexander, you had a friend for life. He always allowed himself to be open to everybody. It wasn't just a one-sided relationship. He will be missed."

Julie Sabbath knew Alexander even longer, having met him in the 1950s. "He was always very thoughtful," she said. "He had a new kind of way of thinking, of looking at things."

Michelle Brown first met Alexander a couple of decades back when the two both lived in the Cass Corridor. It was there that she would often run into him in local restaurants and businesses, where he was well known. "I moved away from our beloved Cass Corridor before Charles. I would still sometimes drive him home, savoring his stories of days gone by."

In recent days, others have been remembering Alexander as well, paying tribute to his legacy and recalling fond memories they shared with him on Facebook and through correspondence with BTL.

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Charles Alexander was a regular fixture at Union Street Saloon back in my bartending days there in the 1990s. He was always thoughtful and kind-hearted and took an interest in my son and his drawings. I will never forget him. RIP dear one.

— Deborah McCauley

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Detroit's gay culture has lost an icon. He was more than an artist, writer, educator... he was an activist for our community in times that most chose to be quiet. We can only imagine the evolution he experienced over the past 86 years of his life. I was fortunate to have time to really get to know Charles when I managed Pete's Place in Ferndale in 2010. Although our paths had crossed over the years, his regular appearance at Pete's, commanding my attention and sharing stories, blossomed into a treasured friendship. Charles exemplified the identity of the gay community here, when we had to be loud, irreverent and step out of the closet. He never held back, exuded an incredibly unique style, and paved the way for so many that have come after him. Never afraid to be flamboyant, he lived a life that was not dictated by the judgment of others.

— Steven Reaume

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“He was a true warrior and kind spirit. He gifted me one of his works for my 35th birthday entitled ‘Third Secret to the Left.’ I’ve hung it everywhere I’ve lived ever since and will treasure it always.”

— Melissa Frederiksen

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*Charles Alexander, more than anyone else, was responsible for my past work as a columnist and op-ed writer. When I arrived at Wayne State in 1998, I encountered him at the Potato Place down the street from what was then the Philosophy Department Building. Recognizing him from his weekly column in *Between The Lines*, I introduced myself. ‘You should write for the paper!’ he said. I demurred, but Charles was persistent, and after several encounters he finally convinced me to try it out. Over the years he frequently offered me sage advice and encouragement. I will miss his bright presence.*

— John Corvino

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“As a 19-year-old budding writer, I would chauffeur Charles into the BTL office a few times a week. On our drives, Charles would give me writing advice, regale me with tales of his old Detroit haunts and tell haunted tales of his old Detroit loves. He’d also retitle most of my columns with eloquent precision — after they were published, of course. ‘You know, Thomas,’ he’d say on the drive home, ‘I enjoyed your column, but I would have called it ‘Little Eyes and Big Ohs.’” His retitlings always smacked with razor-sharp wit, nuance and rhythm that my 19 years of life experience couldn’t have begun to conjure. Though I should have been intimidated (and I was at first), I was mostly in awe. I am lucky to have been able to sit at his feet and soak in some of his wisdom.”

— Thandiwe Thomas De Shazor

“

It was over brunch with Charles and Jeff Montgomery that I was encouraged to get off the sidelines and get active in LGBTQ politics. Charles challenged me to write, not just for BTL but supporting my artistic endeavors. A spirited discussion on why women wore high heels — him siding on sensibility and practicality with me on the side of sensual expression — inspired a poem. His inspiration on those of us in the arts no matter the form reached beyond the LGBTQ community.

— Michelle Brown

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*“Charles was the kind of person who could keep you on your toes while also making you feel completely at ease in his presence. As a young journalist starting at BTL right out of college, being asked to copy edit his *Parting Glances* column was like being asked to critique a famous artist— I felt like I didn’t have the right to change his words.”*

— Jessica Carreras

◀ Charles Alexander Tribute

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feature in the paper was his ability to tie historical events to the current times,” said Stevenson. “He’d pull on his own experiences or historical references he’d gleaned from his prodigious reading and show how LGBTQ+ issues have shaped our world forever. That context made his column a must-read for thousands of readers.”

Stevenson said Alexander’s column became a critical part of the paper.

“Often when I would be out in the community, people would tell me Charles’ column was a highlight of their week,” she said. “In fact, I often said, and felt, that my one claim to fame was that I know Charles Alexander, the renowned columnist and artist.”

In 2017, a collection of Alexander’s art was produced in book form. “The Art of Charles Alexander” was edited by John Douglas Peters and released by his Treasure Press. All proceeds from the book went to the Scarab Club.

In his official artist’s statement, Alexander explained that “there is little conscious planning as I create my art. I work intuitively and rather quickly.” At one point, Alexander was so prolific he was creating a piece a day. Alexander went on to call his work “whimsical, satiric, metaphysical, convoluted and highly detailed. As much as possible I try not to censor my work but to let it flow from my psyche.”

Treena Flannery Ericson, gallery director for the Scarab Club, said in the book’s preface that Alexander’s work “is imbued with a fluent energy expressed in a graceful flow of dots, dashes, swoops of color and fragments of letters that seem to be from a forgotten language.”

In addition to raising funds for the Scarab Club, Alexander donated his art to various LGBTQ+ and AIDS-related charities. All told, he raised nearly \$100,000 over the years and was particularly giving to Affirmations, for whom he served as curator of the Pittman-Puckett Art Gallery for eight years.

“Charles has been a lifetime supporter of Affirmations, including being awarded the Jan Stevenson Award in 2008 for his amazing work and contributions to the LGBTQ+ community and beyond,” said Affirmations Executive Director Dave Garcia. “His art, writings and beautiful sense of humor has graced us all and he will be deeply missed.”

Alexander was a member of Metropolitan Community Church – Detroit (MCCD) for over four decades. He enjoyed the fellowship the church provided and was often called upon to

read the scripture.

“The words that come to mind when thinking about Sir Charles Alexander are artist, storyteller, writer and overcomer,” said Rev. Dr. Roland Stringfellow, pastor of MCCD. “If you knew him, the first three descriptors were apparent. The fourth word was reserved for those who truly knew his story.”

Stringfellow said that Alexander conquered many demons in his life, ranging from internalized homophobia and alcoholism to a sense of spiritual emptiness.

“He was happy to brag on his church,” Stringfellow explained. “His spirituality was so very important to him because it was [through that] lens that he saw everything.”

Through the years, Alexander served on the boards of the Detroit Area Gay and Lesbian Council, Affirmations, MCCD and the advisory board of the Triangle Foundation, which was later renamed Equality Michigan. He was awarded the Spirit of Detroit Award from the Detroit City Council in 1994, as well as the Lifetime Achievement Award from the Pride Award Banquet in 1997.

In addition to Affirmations and the Scarab Club, Alexander exhibited his art across Metro Detroit as well as in Chicago and San Francisco. He was also an artist instructor at the Detroit Institute of Arts on multiple occasions.

“What helped him in conquering alcoholism is that he turned to art as a panacea at first, and then as his life’s mission,” said longtime friend and renowned pointillist Jon Strand. “He was both authentic and original, always curious, and because of it, he lived a privileged and interesting life — and he lived it on his own terms.”

Historian and scholar Tim Retzliff knew Alexander for many years. “Charles leaves a unique and enduring legacy to Metro Detroit’s LGBTQ+ community,” he said. “As someone who came out in the gay bar scene of the 1950s and who endured the trauma of arrest by undercover police at age 23, he served as witness to an earlier era of enforced secrecy.”

“He went on to blend brilliant art with out-and-proud activism,” Retzliff continued. “We are all heirs to the tremendous, generous gay life that Charles lived.”

Alexander is survived by his family, including Jan Stevenson and Susan Horowitz, John Floros, Jason A. Michael, Rick Robinson and Jon Strand. Donations may be made in Alexander’s name to MCCD or the Scarab Club. The latter is planning a retrospective of Alexander’s art in the spring.