

## THE LAURA FLANDERS SHOW

### DRAG STORY HOUR UNDER ATTACK: WHAT CAN MEDIA DO?

**LAURA FLANDERS:** June is Pride Month, commemorating the brutal police raid on New York's Stonewall Inn back in June, 1969, and the uprising of LGBTQ people that followed. Drag queens and trans people bore the brunt of the violence that night, and led much of the fight back afterwards. Still, they faced discrimination even from inside their own community. In 1973, for example, the organizers of the New York Pride March banned drag queens from participating. The drag activists responded by marching ahead of the organizers. 53 years on most states celebrate Pride with parades and flags and celebrations and a whole lot of merchandise. But assaults on LGBTQ liberation continues with drag artists and trans people still in the crosshairs. By the ACLU's count reactionary lawmakers have pushed and in many cases, passed some 500 bills that take aim at drag performers and queer self-expression. And across the country, right-wing extremists, some of them even masked and armed, have been showing up at family-friendly activities like Drag Story Hours, events that are supposed to promote literacy and diversity and safety. One of our guests today has been a direct target of attack. From North Carolina, we are joined by Naomi Dix, drag artist extraordinaire, activist, and proud member of Durham's BIPOC-operated, House of Coxx. Dix was the headliner and organizer behind a drag show in rural Moore County in December, 2022, an event that was harassed for months and ultimately took place in the dark after unidentified saboteurs caused a blackout that left 45,000 households and businesses without power. Also, joining us is reporter, Sam Zachar, who is the author of a two-part podcast series for Epicenter-NYC on Drag Story Hour in New York City and the attacks it's been facing. And with me again for this conversation, my co-host, Mitra Kalita of Epicenter-NYC, and co-founder of URL Media. What are mainstream media getting wrong and what are BIPOC media like those of the URL network bringing to this important story? Mitra, welcome to the program. So glad to have you back.

**MITRA KALITA:** Glad to be here, Laura. Good to see you again.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** Let's start with the story from North Carolina. And Naomi, what is the queer community and the drag community facing there in North Carolina this Pride Month nationally?

**NAOMI DIX:** This is the first Pride that a lot of people especially within my generation, have felt scared and have felt nervous of the unknown. We don't know what to expect. We're putting ourselves in harm's way when we go out there and we do these shows, especially in public events just so that we can be able to educate and bring and facilitate safe space to community, especially in the South right now. You know, it's just it's one of those things where you go through this process. For so many years, I've been doing drag for almost 10 years now. And it wasn't until, I

would say probably towards the end of 2021 throughout 2022 that I felt a sense of urgency from my own community but specifically, a sense of urgency when it came from the community within North Carolina because we deal with a lot of groups like Proud Boys, white supremacists. We never thought in a million years especially drag artists of my generation, never thought in a million years that we would have to be facing the same things and issues that our parents were telling us about that they were having to face in the 50s, in the 60s, in the 70s, in the 80s. But one thing that I have found specifically here in the South is that the community and the queer community is not just the LGBTQIA+ community but there's also an S in there for straight, cis allies who are there to support us and show up and be visible, and really push for these people who are so just horrific towards us as a queer community especially queer community, of people of color as well. But just really push those ideals that they have about us away and be there and be visible especially when using the umbrellas that they have that are beautiful rainbow umbrellas that we have. Hundreds upon hundreds of volunteers that come out to these events and they hold these umbrellas to shield the children, the youth, and also just the community from the hatred that we're getting from white supremacist groups.

**MITRA KALITA:** Naomi, Sam and I are nodding because you just painted this picture of beauty and protection, and that is, in some ways, the story of Jackson Heights and why when we were contending with a lot of the safety and security issues that you just mentioned, the Proud Boys included, being in one of the most diverse neighborhoods on the planet, from a coverage perspective, Epicenter said, "Look, we're seeing a lot of, on the one hand, on the other hand, and this is a case where this is our neighborhood these are the people who don't belong here, right?" These protestors are the ones who don't belong here. And so I want to turn to Sam in the way I turned to Sam a few months ago when I said, "How should we tell this story and not make it about these two sides, but really center our communities?"

**SAM ZACHAR:** Yeah, for sure. Thank you so much for having me, first of all. And I would say, when I first approached the Brooklyn Public Library, I believe it was in March, to attend a Drag Story Hour event run by Rev. Yolanda, I was just so excited. I walked in, and the energy was incredible. Parents and children started coming in, and Rev. Yolanda was wearing a striped, kind of like tube dress.

**REV. YOLANDA:** First, we're going to start off with a little activity. Can anybody guess how I'm dressed today? What I'm dressed like? Anybody have any idea? Looks like this. Yeah?

**KID:** Caterpillar.

**REV. YOLANDA:** Caterpillar. Yay! That's absolutely right. And do you know what happens to a caterpillar?

**KID:** They turn into a butterfly.

**REV. YOLANDA:** Yes, that's right. Just like this. Now.

**KID:** Wow. Oh my goodness.

**KID:** A butterfly.

**REV. YOLANDA:** It's a butterfly. Yes, it is.

**SAM ZACHAR:** That was just an incredible moment of transformation, of teaching children and those present to accept themselves as they are and grow into themselves. And I think that Drag Story Hour as a whole, gives us a great look at a microcosm of drag, trans, and queer worlds because it represents how they're being attacked in terms of losing rights to exist, to exist safely, and the right and the Proud Boys specifically, digging their heels into inflammatory, destructive, and untruthful accusations against these communities.

**MITRA KALITA:** I did want to pick up on Naomi's reference to safety and security. How did you center that issue in your reporting? And I hope it's okay to ask you about your own identity, right? I'm asking you to go out there and take us inside Drag Story Hour, but of course, you also did end up contending with protestors, and how did you reconcile that?

**SAM ZACHAR:** Yes. So in my first venture out into Jackson Heights to attend a Drag Story Hour event, I was confronted with this scene of protestors and counter-protestors. And Naomi, as you said, the counter-protestors held these beautiful rainbow umbrellas. They were playing disco music, and everyone was making noise and having a great time and kind of escorting the children and families in and out of the library. On the other side of the street however, there was just so much anger, and it made me feel fearful, honestly, as a queer New Yorker who has grown up here and has kind of seen how the city has evolved, and especially now with the Proud Boys entering the Jackson Heights area. I also saw them present in Manhattan when I went to an event downtown. I felt scared. I was talking to someone at Epicenter-NYC, and they said to me, "You know, if you feel unsafe at any point, it is okay to remove yourself from the situation." I really appreciated that. And I think that, yeah, it was just scary to know that these people have so much anger in their hearts and wish you ill and harm.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** Naomi, what happened there in Moore County? SandhillsPRIDE last December did get national attention. It sure did, perhaps not enough of it, but it got some. What did the story get right? What did the sort of mainstream reporting get right? And where do you think it could have been better?

**NAOMI DIX:** Well, I mean, first, I want to say that what happened in Moore County was one of the largest, well, was the largest domestic terrorist attack when it comes to the power outage that has happened in US history. So this is not just a small story, this is not something that just happened in North Carolina, and you know, here we are more than six months later and it just kind of has fallen off the face of the earth. This is something that happened to people, human beings, human beings that weren't even at the show.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** And we should say, we don't know if the sabotage was connected to the harassment of your show but it coincided precisely, and some of the most vocal opponents to the performance and the event made up Facebook post that night saying they knew why the lights were out.

**NAOMI DIX:** A lot of the questions were more so about how did I feel, and more so about what was it like inside of the theater. One thing that really did not sit right with me is that no one's concern was the fact that this was a domestic terrorist attack that happened to innocent people. No one really wanted to be honest and really use the words and phrases that actually explained what this was.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** Why did you bring the Drag Divas Show to Moore County in the first place? What was your goal?

**NAOMI DIX:** My job is more than just to be pretty with hair and makeup. My job is also an educator. I have a platform and a responsibility to be able to educate and facilitate safe space for the community. And so when going to Moore County back in 2021, specifically Southern Pines, we started drag brunches. And then I started working with their Pride committee that is there, and making sure that we brought education through film and through an education through the ballroom scene to the queer community to help them understand where drag really comes from and the roots of drag. And so when it came to the Divas Show that we were having at their theater, that was the fourth show that we were doing in that area. And before, we never really got any sort of pushback. We maybe had a couple of, you know, comments here and there on social media, but it wasn't until we were having this major event inside of this theater that was a sold out event with more than 300 people there that we started receiving a lot of social media pushback. And I started receiving death threats, and the theater started receiving death threats and people who were involved in participating in the show as well.

**MITRA KALITA:** I think that storytelling aspect of what you're describing is really important. And then so is, there was a community there that actually wanted us there. And on the flip side of that, you know, Sam and I are sitting here in liberal New York City and seeing those same forces. And so, you know, I think that's just an important point. Sam, I wanted to turn to you on

the parents themselves. What are they saying about the journey that their children are taking? Why, in terms of the safety issue, how are they fighting the Proud Boys as well?

**SAM ZACHAR:** Yes. So I spoke to a variety of different parents from different parts of the city who do different things, who are different people, and go for different reasons. And one family I spoke to, they're a part of the queer community and they wanted to feel safe in a family-friendly environment where their child could learn about reading, learn about acceptance. And another family, I spoke to the mother. They're in a heterosexual relationship. They're both white and their children are white, and they wanted to expose their children to different people and different communities and learn acceptance. In terms of the protests happening outside, I asked the parents, "How did your children feel walking through the loud music across the way from Proud Boys, across the way from these people who aim to hurt?" And they told me that they spoke with their children, like, "Are you comfortable doing this? Are you comfortable approaching this scene? And we don't have to go. If you're uncomfortable, we'll turn back right now." But they were like, "No, this is just kind of silly. Why are these people coming out here today of all days to yell and scream at me for enjoying myself and having a good time reading a book?" And so I think that was something very insightful that a child had to say. And I think they have great perspectives on this as they are the main audience for Drag Story Hours. They're the children who are being read to.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** Coming back to you, Naomi, the drag protests, the protests by the Proud Boys in North Carolina, Proud Boys and others are truly terrifying. I mean, these are people with often masks and guns. As reporters, as a reporter, I'm often struggling with how much to emphasize the threat and how much to emphasize the joy and the community and the courage. Like how do we balance those two things? And where in all of this is the call to our supposed public servants in our, in positions of power, police, security, sheriffs to protect everybody in this community. I mean, we're reminded with Pride that this, not so long ago, it was the police conducting these raids. It was the police going with guns against this community. We've supposedly made progress, but at the same time, this is a terrifying scene that the queer community should not be left to defend for itself.

**NAOMI DIX:** I mean, I do want to say that I think it's really important for us to be honest right now, even with the youth that are coming to these events or the youth that are interested in coming to, you know, these queer-focused events or being there or just being visible. We have to be really be honest about what's happening right now. Because they, as youth, no matter how old they are, really deserve to know what's happening. Whether they see themselves as queer or whatever journey they're on, they deserve to know what's happening. Because to be honest, they are the future. They are the future to this fight. As I continuously and always say, this fight will never be over but the fight will continuously get stronger, and it will get stronger with the visibility and the future generations that are able to see that there are still people in groups and

communities out there that have an issue with us as queer people or as marginalized communities. And when these youth are able to see that, and then on the flip side are able to see the visibility within the queer community and the trans community that we are not going to back down. And this is not the time to be silenced because the whole idea of this from the opposite side is to silence us. It has always been to silence us. And so when it comes to, you know, those who are in power, I will say that we, and Durham specifically, have a really good relationship when it comes to the police here. And I'm saying that because as the director of Pride, we do have to deal with the police. We have dealt with the police for many, many years. But we also understand that people have a lot of trauma when seeing police officers specifically when they're in uniform. But we have done a really, really good job with one, solidifying that we have this communication with the police force here, and making sure that when it comes to queer events or when it comes to rallies, that if they have to be involved, that they are in plain clothes and not uniform. When we think about it in a broader aspect, I think that one thing that we have to do as the community is holding these police officers accountable. That is the most important thing that we can do is holding them accountable.

**MITRA KALITA:** Naomi, on that issue, are you seeing these intimidation tactics working? Does it mean that there's less people coming out or have you noticed any differences?

**NAOMI DIX:** Thank you for asking me that because, it depends. So when it comes to places like Moore County that are more of a rural area, I have seen a sense of wanting to step back. But that is because, and I feel that is because these are areas that have kind of lived in a bubble for a very long time, and haven't really had to deal with so much hatred that has been focused in on them. When it comes to my specific area, which is we call it the triangle, which is Durham, Chapel Hill, Carrboro, and Raleigh. we actually see more support on our end coming out than I would in Moore County to be completely honest. But one thing that I do want to say about Moore County is though I do see a sort of step back from wanting to be visible, it's not really necessarily coming from the people that are on the ground, the community itself, it's really actually coming from the people who are sitting on the Pride board, who are wanting to take a step back because their idea is to create and to protect the community, which in fact, is actually doing more harm to the community by not being visible than it is actually building the community up and making the community stronger.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** One of the things the media really got wrong in their coverage of what happened there that night that Naomi performed was that the protest outside from the opponents was way smaller than the protest in support. I urge you to go and check that in the reporting. Sam, turning to you, again, about the reporting. What kind of a job are media doing in New York connecting the Proud Boys on the ground with the, sort of city council moves and the larger political context?

**SAM ZACHAR:** Yeah. So I had the opportunity to speak with the city council member representing Jackson Heights and Elmhurst, and I think, he's doing a big bulk of the advocating for funding within the government for these events to occur in public libraries specifically in Queens. And speaking to him, he had some great things to say. Again, I urge you to listen to the podcast. I think he had some really insightful things regarding how he is working and why he is working to support these groups and support the counter-protestors and the trans and queer communities within New York City to continue these events.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** And this is the city council member, if I remember correctly, we covered the story of how his house was then attacked by Proud Boys and their pals.

**SAM ZACHAR:** Yes.

**MITRA KALITA:** I think the tactic of let's just keep funding these programs across New York City, and Sam has alluded, it's Manhattan, it's Brooklyn, it's Queens, you know, we need to keep having these avenues but they need to be supported in the face of the anti-trans legislation.

**NAOMI DIX:** I agree with that. I mean, the continuous funding is what's really important. I work for nonprofit, and I work in the nonprofit world, and one of the things that we're always talking about through all of these, you know, conventions and meetings that we're going to is making sure to really, really continuously keep funding these organizations. That's so important because in order for them to be able to continuously educate the community and provide access to things for the community, they have to be funded.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** Naomi said we need to be honest about what's happening. And I guess I still feel like we need to say, I'd love to hear what do each of you think is actually happening here.

**NAOMI DIX:** It's such a complicated answer and question because I think that there's so many things that are going on right now, but I will say that I think that what's going on right now has always been there. I don't think it's anything new. I don't think that it's anything that is brand new to our community, but I think that it's becoming more visible now because of the current political climate as we have seen since Trump was in office. You know, one thing that I will say is that, you know, the power of words, the power of visibility, whether it is on the left or the right. We saw the visibility when it came to Trump, we saw the visibility when it came to those who were following him and who believed in him. And I think that it gave this kind of gateway to those people who have always felt a certain way. They felt that they, all of a sudden, had a community that understood them, right? And so when they were able to find that community, I think that it gave them an okay, a mental okay for them to start to be verbally, audibly abusive towards, you know, minority communities specifically the trans Black community has always been at the

forefront of everyone's hatred. But we are now seeing that, again, spill over into the queer community and the gay community.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** Sam.

**SAM ZACHAR:** Yeah, so I totally agree, and I think that's something that's important that's happening in Epicenter's reporting in other organizations like that, is that we're focusing on the literacy, the acceptance, the positives that this has while not ignoring the other side, but just because that side is getting so much attention in terms of the media, like, you know, there's dozens of protests happening, there's dozens of these events, yes, that is true. And at the same time, there are hundreds of Drag Story Hours events, hundreds of drags events that are happening that deserve this coverage, that deserve the attention of the positive stuff that it's bringing to children, to family, to everyone's lives in the community.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** I'm excited to say we're going to be doing an episode directly from Moore County coming up here on "The Laura Flanders Show," looking at just who did commit that attack on the power station in Moore County, and who was the real threat there? Was it the drag performers or the people who pulled the plug on power for 45,000 households and businesses? Naomi, Sam, Mitra, thank you so much for joining us. It's really been a pleasure. I wish you happy Pride now and in the fall in North Carolina. We'll continue reporting, and we will have another episode of "Meet the BIPOC Press" in four weeks.

**MITRA KALITA:** Thank you, Laura.

**SAM ZACHAR:** Thank you so much for having me today.

**NAOMI DIX:** Thank you so much for having me. Thank you. It means a lot.

- Thank you.

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