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PHOTOGRAPHY BY DARREN ANDREW WEIMERT



E R I N G

T Y P E S

Alonya Chest (David Borges),  
at left, and Ashlyn Manhattan  
(Kollen Walters).

The State Queens bring LGBTQ awareness to  
the community through performances and events  
such as Drag Queen Story Hour

## IT'S A THURSDAY NIGHT

at Arena Bar & Grill in State College, and 18 performers from across Pennsylvania with various talents have gathered for a competition. With strobe lights flashing and a medley of pop hits throbbing out of the speakers, Hexxa, a statuesque performer, takes center stage as the final act of the evening. Wearing a red-and-white bikini set, thigh-high patent red stiletto boots and a red bolero with fringe sleeves, she literally and figuratively sets the stage on fire. She sashays, shakes her long blonde mane, performs splits and dips, and well ... does a couple things that would probably make your grandmother blush.



Venus Doom (Kara Gillespie)

Hexxa, whose legal name is Chris Castro, closed out the State Queens competition drag show in late January in which contestants lip-synced, danced, and showcased various aspects of their personalities. Believe it or not, Hexxa says she's an introvert at heart – and that performing drag has helped her get in touch with all her different sides.

“Drag helped me come out of my shell,” she says. “Sometimes I’m feminine, sometimes I’m masculine.”

Hexxa, 23, has been one of the breakout stars of the State Queens – a local drag queen troupe that started in 2017 and now performs regularly in venues throughout central Pennsylvania. State Queens has extended its reach

Mandy Mango  
(Sigfried Aragona)





beyond the local nightlife scene by promoting lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) awareness through events such as Drag Queen Story Hour (DQSH) at Schlow Centre Region Library. Drag Queen Story Hour, according to the organization's website ([dragqueenstoryhour.org](http://dragqueenstoryhour.org)), "is just what it sounds like – drag queens reading stories to children in libraries, schools, and bookstores."

"We've held two very successful Drag Queen Story Hours at Schlow and plan to hold one each semester going forward," says Tamra Fatemi-Badi, who has helped with the organization and promotion of the event.

In addition, according to State Queens Director David Borges (whose drag name is Alonya Chest), the group now serves as a springboard for drag queens who would like to

eventually take their acts to larger cities. Hexxa, a recent Penn State graduate who is based in Reading, is one of those success stories. She now performs regularly in cities such as New York City, Boston, and Chicago, but routinely makes appearances at State Queens shows.

"It's great to see when you have performers who grew up in the drag scene here and they move somewhere else and they're a big fish there," says Borges.

Since his arrival in State College in 2017, Borges says, he has seen the State College drag scene gradually grow its presence. A graduate of Shippensburg University, he was working in human resources at Penn State when he started performing with the State Queens. After the former director stepped down in 2018, Borges took over the reins and promptly started calling local businesses to book shows. One of those places was Café 210 West, and the group now performs a few shows a semester there.

"Every single time we do these [Café 210] shows, they're always packed, there's always a line, and they're always talked about," says Borges.

Borges then proceeded to book a once-a-semester show at Primanti Brothers in addition to regular performances at Arena Bar

& Grill. Also added to the group's agenda were a recurring "drag brunch" at Doggie's Pub and "drag bingo" events at Webster's Bookstore Café. The group now performs up to six shows per month, which includes gigs at other colleges such as Juniata College, Penn State Altoona, and Lock Haven University.

Bringing the Drag Queen Story Hour to State College, Borges says, was not exactly a small feat. According to a June 2019 article in *The New York Times*, the event originated in 2015 in San Francisco, when a drag queen arrived at a library and read to the children she met there. The idea quickly caught on and story hours are now regularly

held in large, liberal-leaning cities such as New York City and Los Angeles, as well as in red-state towns such as Juneau, Alaska, and Lincoln, Nebraska. Fatemi-Badi says she was taking a World Campus course that dealt with human sexuality when she decided that it was time that State College joined in on this phenomenon.

"We were required to do a final project and Drag Queen Story Hours were happening all around the country, but I realized we didn't have one here," she says. "I booked a room at Schlow Centre Region Library as a private citizen and contacted Alonya and the State Queens to see if they would like to be the queens for our story hour."

While Borges says the State Queens were totally on board for the story hour, they did receive some negative feedback, such as hostile Facebook posts, during the planning phase for the event. To be on the safe side, they requested that the State College Police Department monitor the event. Fortunately, there were no incidents at the event and there was an "overwhelming amount of support during the Drag Queen Story Hour."

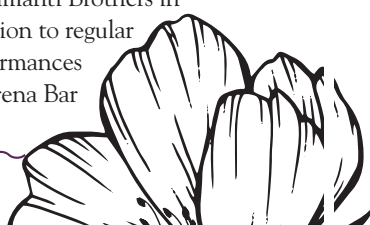
The first Drag Queen Story Hour at Schlow was extremely touching, Borges says, as it inspired dialogue among parents who wanted to know how they could support the LGBTQ



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community as well as help their children come to terms with their identities. He added that he almost cried when he saw “little boys in dresses and little girls in hiking boots” – which they were usually not allowed to wear outside of their homes.

“After our first story hour was such a success, I decided to apply for a Penn State Student Engagement Grant so that I could continue to pay for the craft supplies that we use during the events and to pay a small donation to Schlow for the use of the room,” Fatemi-Badi says. “I was fortunate that I did receive the grant and will be able to continue to hold the story hours for

many semesters to come.”

Catherine Alloway, director of Schlow Library, says that “Schlow Centre Region Library’s meeting rooms are used annually by over 70 different groups that offer a wide range of meetings and programs that enrich and enlighten our community. Women Anglers, Girls’ Bible Study, political and medical support groups, and Drag Queen Story Hour are just a few of the diverse gatherings held in our spaces. The Drag Queen Story Hours presented in 2019 were presented by an outside group, and the events filled the meeting rooms with delighted children and families, while

also generating some critical comments from individuals. The Library Board and staff value the U.S. Constitution and the right to free speech and assembly, and govern its meeting rooms accordingly.”

Self-acceptance and self-expression are primary motivators for many drag performers, according to several drag queens interviewed. A couple of them cited the late David Bowie, who was known for his gender-bending ways, as a personal influence. Borges says that his drag alter-ego, Alonya, is “who I’m normally not but I want to be. Alonya Chest is hilarious, obnoxious at times ... that’s what I wanted to be for myself.”

Another State Queens performer, Charlotte Royale (a.k.a. Lloyd Shope), 23, of Lock Haven, who has been with the group for about six months, says that doing drag has freed her from the constraints of living up to society’s expectations of what it means to be a man.

“I’ve spent most of my life, like, ‘I’m a man, I have to do manly things,’” she says.

Her outlook changed, she says, when she discovered *RuPaul’s Drag Race*, a reality competition series that documents legendary drag queen RuPaul’s search for “America’s next drag superstar.”

Charlotte, who performed at the state competition at the

Arena wearing a long blonde wig, fitted red top, cutoff shorts, and black thigh-high stiletto boots, says that her normal “uniform” while working her day job at a coffee shop is a flannel shirt and glasses. She adds that she enjoys the anonymity that a dual identity sometimes allows her.

“That separation is like, everything,” she says. “Having people here not recognize me, idolize me as Charlotte rather than Lloyd, that’s why I do this. It’s just the illusion of being a real woman.”

And indeed, it is the illusion of being a woman that many drag queens aspire to – not necessarily to change the gender they were assigned at birth.

“The main misconception (about drag queens) is that every single drag queen wants to be a woman,” says Ariana, a.k.a. Ethan Tyson, who traveled from Carlisle to perform in the state competition in January. “It’s fun to play dress-up. It’s fun to dance and make money. I never went through any gender crisis.”

Borges also disputes the common belief that drag queens are struggling with their identity, adding that men dressing as women goes back much farther in history than many people realize.

“We are not confused,” he says. “Makeup is for everyone. [Women’s] clothes are for everyone.”

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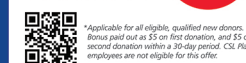
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makeup, and wigs for centuries, he adds. For example, there were no women in Greek theater as all the female roles were played by men. Also, high-heeled shoes were originally worn by men – one of the most famous examples being Louis XIV of France, who wore heels up to 4 inches to boost his 5-foot-4-inch frame.

“The biggest thing is not associating a look with a stereotype,” Borges says.

Another common misconception, several of the performers say, is that drag mainly consists of men adopting hyper-feminine characteristics and doing gymnastic stunts such as splits and “death drops” – the move of lowering oneself to the

ground, one leg extended. On the other hand, drag encompasses many different fashion styles and personas. At the state competition at the Arena, there were 16 different acts that included a Marilyn Monroe impersonator, an African-American queen who did a spoken-word lip-synch with a black female empowerment message, and a drag king – a female performer who dresses in masculine drag.

John Oates, 43, of Carlisle, who goes by the stage name Andronica and is engaged to Ariana, is an example of someone who doesn’t fit the typical mold of a drag queen. He sports facial hair, speaks in a deep voice, and wears a combination of masculine

and feminine attire. While he says he has “changed personas several times,” he now leans toward an “androgynous, non-binary, gender-bending” identity.

“By doing this persona, I feel like I’m a voice for the voiceless,” says Oates. “You’ve got to live your life for yourself, and not for anybody else.”

Since arriving in State College in 2017, Borges says, he’s seen the community make significant strides toward diversity and inclusion. Rainbow flags (symbols of LGBTQ pride) are now flown downtown and on campus. In addition, the State Queens participated in The Penn State Altoona’s Pride parade in October 2019 and will also play a role in State College’s first-ever LGBTQ Pride parade on June 13.

While *RuPaul’s Drag Race* has undoubtedly been “one of biggest catalysts for interest in drag,” says Borges, he hopes it doesn’t discourage people from embracing the State Queens’ grassroots style of drag.

“If that’s how you heard about drag, I’m glad,” he says. “Let me know what our local scene is like.”

A major difference between the State Queens and drag scenes in larger cities, Borges says, is that no particular skills or experience are required to join their community.

“Just [Facebook] message State Queens and say you want to be in a show. It’s family. I want it to feel that way.”

Stephanie Koons is a freelance writer in State College.



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