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Notes from editor (not for publication):

HEADLINE ELEMENTS:

####BEGIN HED####

The power of loving one's self

####END HED####

####BEGIN SUBHED####

'My hope is that we will connect with compassion for
each other's stories/lives, as we move forward together in creating
a society based on liberty and justice for all,' says Rev. Yolanda, a
trans genderqueer musician, actor, and performer who now lives
in Windham

####END SUBHED####

TEXT BODY:

####BEGIN TEXT####

REV. YOLANDA and The Circle of Love offered a benefit
concert for the AIDS Project of Southern Vermont in early
November at the First Congregational Church in Dummerston.

11 A moving, upbeat show of originals and covers, a wide
12 range of sound and intentions, it was the first local appearance of
13 the Windham-based trans femme genderqueer
14 singer/songwriter/performance artist/interfaith minister.

15 Word is she'll be back there in February, again with her
16 band: Freddy Freeman, Jay Freeman, and Tyler Wansley.

17 Before then, audiences can see Rev. Yolanda in the Rock
18 River Players' (RRP) No Kings Cabaret this weekend when she'll
19 perform "I Pledge Allegiance to My Self," 10 minutes of music
20 and spoken word, about the "power of loving oneself
21 completely."

22 The new performance piece "shares personal stories of
23 my life starting in fourth grade in Alabama where I came out of
24 the closet; learned about slavery and about the genocide of
25 Native Americans; was bullied by the principal and students at
26 school; and decided to pledge allegiance to My Self."

27 That commitment "has carried me through a life of joy
28 and grief that includes becoming HIV positive in 1980s New York
29 City, finding the love of my life in Rev. Glen Morton Ganaway,
30 and enduring the extreme grief of his passing in 2024," she said.

31 "I'm sharing these stories now as we deal with a threat to
32 our country and world that I have never seen in my lifetime," Rev.
33 Yolanda continued. "My hope is that we will connect with
34 compassion for each other's stories/lives, as we move forward
35 together in creating a society based on liberty and justice for all."

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37 REV. YOLANDA, formerly of Burlington and New York City,
38 has been making music/theater/TV/film/performance art for well
39 over 40 years. With nine CDs of originals to her name, she's won
40 a host of awards and honors from OutMusician of the Year to
41 induction into both the New York Blues Hall and StoneWall
42 Society LGBTQAI+ Halls of Fame.

43 From Muscle Shoals, Alabama, "the hit recording capital
44 of the world" where luminaries like Bob Dylan, Aretha Franklin,
45 the Rolling Stones created iconic albums, Rev. Yolanda recalls

46 that her father, who worked in radio and television, associated
47 with such recording artists. “So I grew up learning to sing and
48 play instruments.”

49 After college in Alabama, Rev. Yolanda spent time in
50 New York City in the 1980s. Growing up “a pretty wild kid,” she
51 “tried to get my thing going there. And that was quite a ride.”

52 She soon met a New York-based group, the Radical
53 Faeries, which was starting a commune in Vermont, and she
54 eventually migrated to Burlington, where, in 1994, she came out
55 as transgender.

56 There she soon grew a following, becoming deeply
57 involved in queer communities and in the Burlington music
58 scene with her band, Yolanda and the Plastic Family. She started a
59 drag ball, too, “which is still going on — a 30-year fundraiser for
60 Vermont Cares.”

61 “At that time in Vermont — the ‘90s, you know — the
62 LGBTQIA community was becoming visible, very out,” she said.

63 She and drag queen Cherie Tarrt started a public access
64 cable TV show that was “wildly popular and affected a whole
65 bunch of folks — a generation of young folks who grew up
66 watching us.”

67 It was in that stage of her life that Rev. Yolanda, already
68 holding an M.A. in theater, specializing in the oral interpretation
69 of literature, earned a MFA in performance art at Vermont College
70 of Norwich University in 1995.

71 In 2001, after roughly eight years in Burlington, Rev.
72 Yolanda returned to New York City, where she developed her
73 original musical blend of rock, pop, country and jazz with her
74 band.

75 The band, she recalls, “became so popular that I was
76 getting invites from CBGB,” the infamous music club.

77 The band would go back and forth between Burlington
78 and New York City and to play those gigs, “but then I decided I’m
79 just going to move back to New York and see what I could do as
80 Yolanda, because when I lived there before, I wasn’t Yolanda.”

81 She met Glen Ganaway the year she returned, and he
82 would soon become her husband.

83 “He was a real grounding influence on me,” she said.
84 “And literally he was the son of a preacher man. Glen was a
85 guru, a teacher. He was an incredible spiritual being.”

86 She described his influence as “wonderful.”

87 “I really loved church when I was growing up and I
88 always felt a connection to spirit,” Yolanda said. “When I was
89 young, my goal was to be a music minister. That’s what I wanted
90 to do when I was 16.

91 “But then life took over and all these other things
92 happened. But Glen and I both had always wanted to be in
93 ministry. So we decided to go to One Spirit Interfaith Seminary in
94 New York.”

95 Ordained in 2011, the duo started a church in the New
96 York City club scene.

97 “We called it ‘Church with a Two Drink Minimum.’ That
98 was the way to do it because so many, especially LGBTQAI folks,
99 have been damaged by religion. So this is not a religious thing
100 that I’m doing. It’s an inward spiritual thing. It’s really about
101 finding authenticity in you and in your own personal connection
102 to what you may call spirit or God — or whatever.”

103 When Covid hit in 2020, Ganaway and Rev. Yolanda
104 joined Awakening Together, which had already established an
105 online presence.

106 “It was built as an online church. We knew those folks,
107 we knew the founder, and we had a really great relationship. So
108 we just merged our ministries,” she said.

109 “But again, it’s not a religion. It’s not Christian, Jewish,
110 Muslim. What we talk about are truth principles. It’s what we call
111 non-dual or interfaith: all are welcome. It’s not just an LGBTQAI
112 following. No, no. We wanted to focus at the beginning on
113 LGBTQAI because folks have been so damaged, but it’s much,
114 much broader than that. People join in from all over. It’s very
115 inclusive.”

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YOLANDA AND GANAWAY had shared a love of Vermont,
too, and so they decided to buy property in Windham in 2020.

“And then my husband unfortunately passed away in
2024,” she said.

The couple had previously planned to move that summer
up to the lot they’d bought, “and so I went ahead and did that,”
Yolanda said.

“He died in March, and I moved up here in July. I’ve
always loved the Brattleboro area. I’m close enough that I
consider this the Brattleboro area, and I’ve always loved it around
here, so that’s why I’m here,” she said. “I want to spend the rest of
my life in Vermont. I think of Vermont as really my home.”

On the board of the AIDS Project of Southern Vermont,
Rev. Yolanda seeks deeper community engagement and thus
reached out to Rock River Players about performing in their
annual winter cabaret. She embraces the RRP standard that the
lively arts are essential in all times, especially in the tough ones.

“I really feel that standing strong with each other and
connecting with each other is so incredibly important. And we
will get through this. I’ve lived for — whatever — 69 years. And I
grew up around redneck bullies in Alabama, so I’ve been dealing
with this all my life.

“I know it’s really horrible right now. This is probably the
worst I’ve ever seen it be.

“However, I have a positive feeling as we’re moving
through this, that most of America does not want to live this way.
And most people do not care who you love or who you’re
married to.”

“BEING HUMAN is a divine experience. That’s how I see
it,” Rev. Yolanda reflected. “And the ego can certainly cloud our
experience, as we’re seeing right now in the world.”

For her, that’s “a perspective of ego way out of control.
So what is important to me is to make sure I’m grounded, and

151 centered, and know that the truth of my being really is joy. And
152 then that expression comes out in my music.”

153 In talking with Rev. Yolanda, one couldn’t help notice the
154 complicated and intriguing paintings behind her.

155 She has been a painter of fine art, too, “since I was about
156 5 years old,” she explained. “That was my first expression.” She
157 grew up “wanting to be a famous artist.”

158 Rev. Yolanda endorses the essential value of finding a
159 vehicle for personal expression. With a brother who was a star
160 athlete, she sought her own route, and her parents encouraged
161 her: “When I wanted to start taking art classes, my parents were
162 so on board, and I really appreciate that.”

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164 REV. YOLANDA IS also a guest star role in *Beauty*, a new
165 feature television series from prolific creator Ryan Murphy that
166 will premiere this month on Hulu.

167 It’ll be a sci-fi drama — “my favorite genre,” Yolanda
168 said.

169 “I don’t show up until episode six, which is a little bit
170 into it,” she said. “But my role actually is pivotal to the plot,
171 which is really cool. I’m playing a trans woman, and it was so
172 beautifully written, and I’m really, really, really proud to have this
173 opportunity.”

174 She noted that she has worked in TV and film, “but not in
175 this big of a feature role, especially not in prime time: it’s really
176 upbeat and really fabulous. So I’m pretty excited.”

177 Rev. Yolanda will also release a new album, *single by*
178 *single*, which is scheduled for release Jan. 26.

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180 For more info and to get her music, visit yolanda.net. For
181 information and/or tickets for this weekend’s Rock River Players
182 cabaret, in which Rev. Yolanda will close act one, visit
183 rockriverplayers.org.

####END TEXT####

BIO/COATTAIL:

####BEGIN BIO/COATTAIL####

184 ANNIE LANDENBERGER is an arts writer and columnist
185 for *The Commons*. She also is one half of the musical duo Bard
186 Owl, with partner T. Breeze Verdant.

####END BIO/COATTAIL####

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