



A sex educator in Michigan refused to be shamed. Then came the backlash.

Heather Alberda found her calling by speaking bluntly about sex in her conservative county. Her career was no match for the nation's culture wars.

Heather Alberda is a sexuality educator with the Ottawa County Department of Public Health. (Bonnie Jo Mount/The Washington Post)

By [Greg Jaffe](#) and [Patrick Marley](#)

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3498



Human read



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HOLLAND, Mich. — Heather Alberda watched as her elected representatives on the Ottawa County Board of Commissioners sought to dismantle what remained of her life's work.

As the sex educator for the county's health department, Alberda, 46, developed programs to lower teen pregnancy and curb the spread of sexually transmitted infections. She spoke about sex and sexuality with a directness that was rare in her conservative county and sometimes got her into trouble.

A late June meeting of the county board was streaming on Alberda's living room TV. The board's vice chair, Sylvia Rhodea, was introducing a resolution that sought to "protect childhood innocence" by blocking the county from spending money on programs that "normalize or encourage the sexualization of children."

Rhodea, one of eight self-described conservative Christians elected last November to the 11-person board, began by describing what she saw as the threat posed by LGBTQ+ groups and the Pride flag. In much of America, the rainbow banner represented the acceptance of gay, lesbian and transgender people.

To Rhodea, it meant something very different. It was, she announced, "time to define the plus" in the LGBTQ+ movement. "Over 50 different flags are flown

under the LGBTQ+ flag,” Rhodea said. Their ranks, she continued, included pedophiles, polygamists and furies, which she described as “those who dress as furry animals and may use litter boxes.”

Alberda stared at her television, where Rhodea had begun talking about the health department’s role in pushing “radical” ideas, rooted in “pedophile-based studies,” on the county’s parents and children.

The fight for the soul of a conservative county

Washington Post reporters Greg Jaffe and Patrick Marley have made five trips to Ottawa County, Mich., since fall 2022. They have documented the ways a tumultuous moment for the nation’s politics and the Republican Party have shaken up this fast-growing, right-leaning county of about 300,000 people.



“It’s pretty much my entire job she’s complaining about,” Alberda said. “It’s so hateful how they do things.”

Alberda had already endured months of scorn from the new commissioners, who had publicly accused her of promoting abortion and sexualizing children. What she’d been doing was her job, which required her to talk about birth control, sexually transmitted infections, abstinence and consent. She met with high school students, migrant farmworkers, teens in juvenile detention and people struggling with addiction.

In her 21 years at the health department, the county’s teen pregnancy rate had decreased by 76 percent and is the fourth-lowest among Michigan’s 83 counties. The abortion rate for Ottawa County during the same period fell by 18 percent, according to state data.

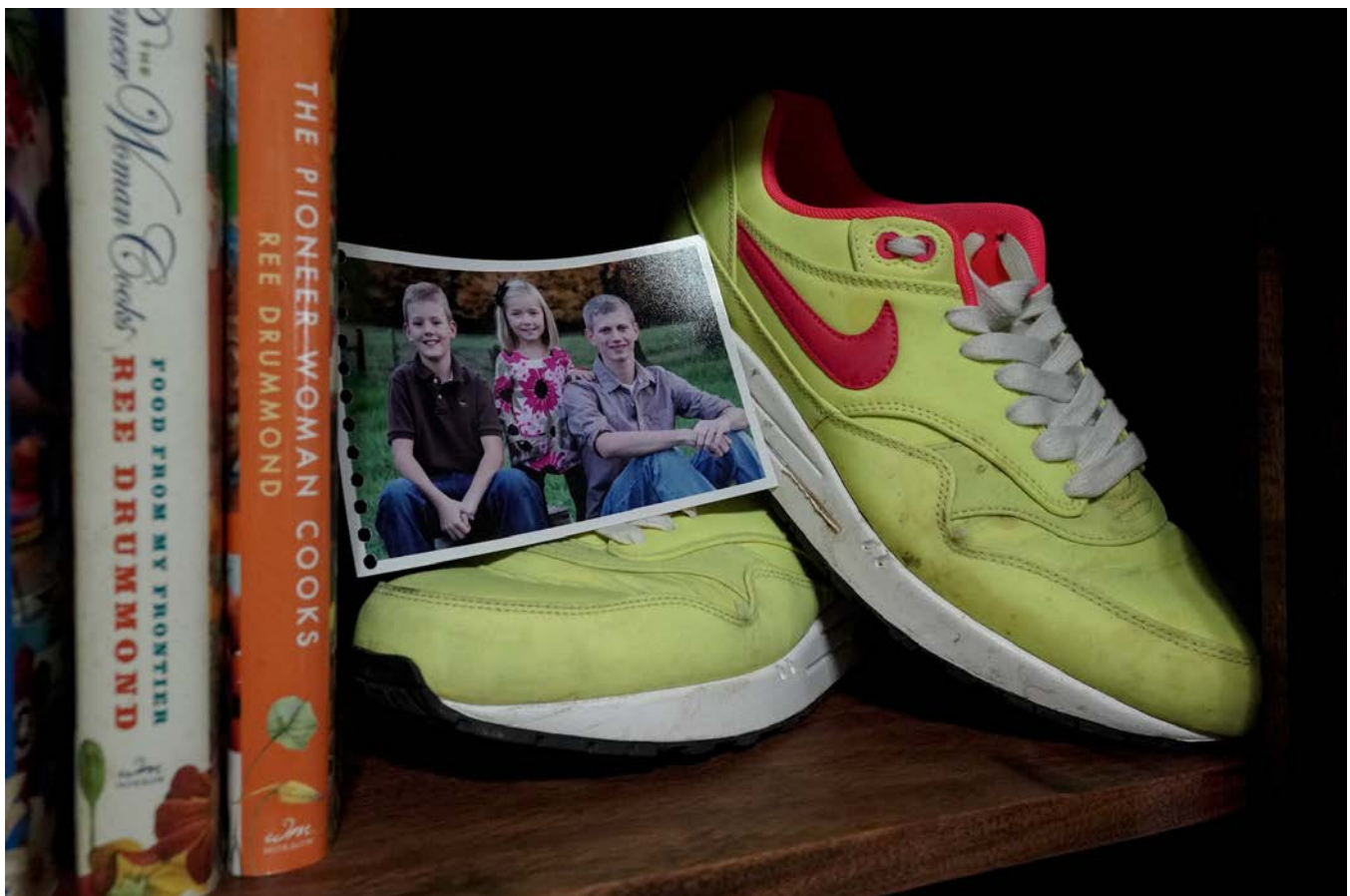
The county’s successes, though, were colliding with the fears of many Christian conservatives that they were losing the culture wars; that their faith and families were under siege. The new board members and their backers saw Pride flags — which had become a common sight in stores along Ottawa’s Lake Michigan

shore — as markers of a society that they believed celebrated sex, promiscuity and perversion.

Nationally, this anger and anxiety had become a driving force in GOP politics. It fueled the rise of figures like Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis (R), who championed laws that constrained what teachers could say in the classroom about sex and sexuality. And it fed QAnon movement conspiracy theories of a burgeoning child trafficking epidemic, secretly supported by the nation's elite.

In Ottawa County, a fast-growing community of 300,000, the GOP's focus on religion, sex and morality was increasingly consuming the essential and often unremarkable work of county government.

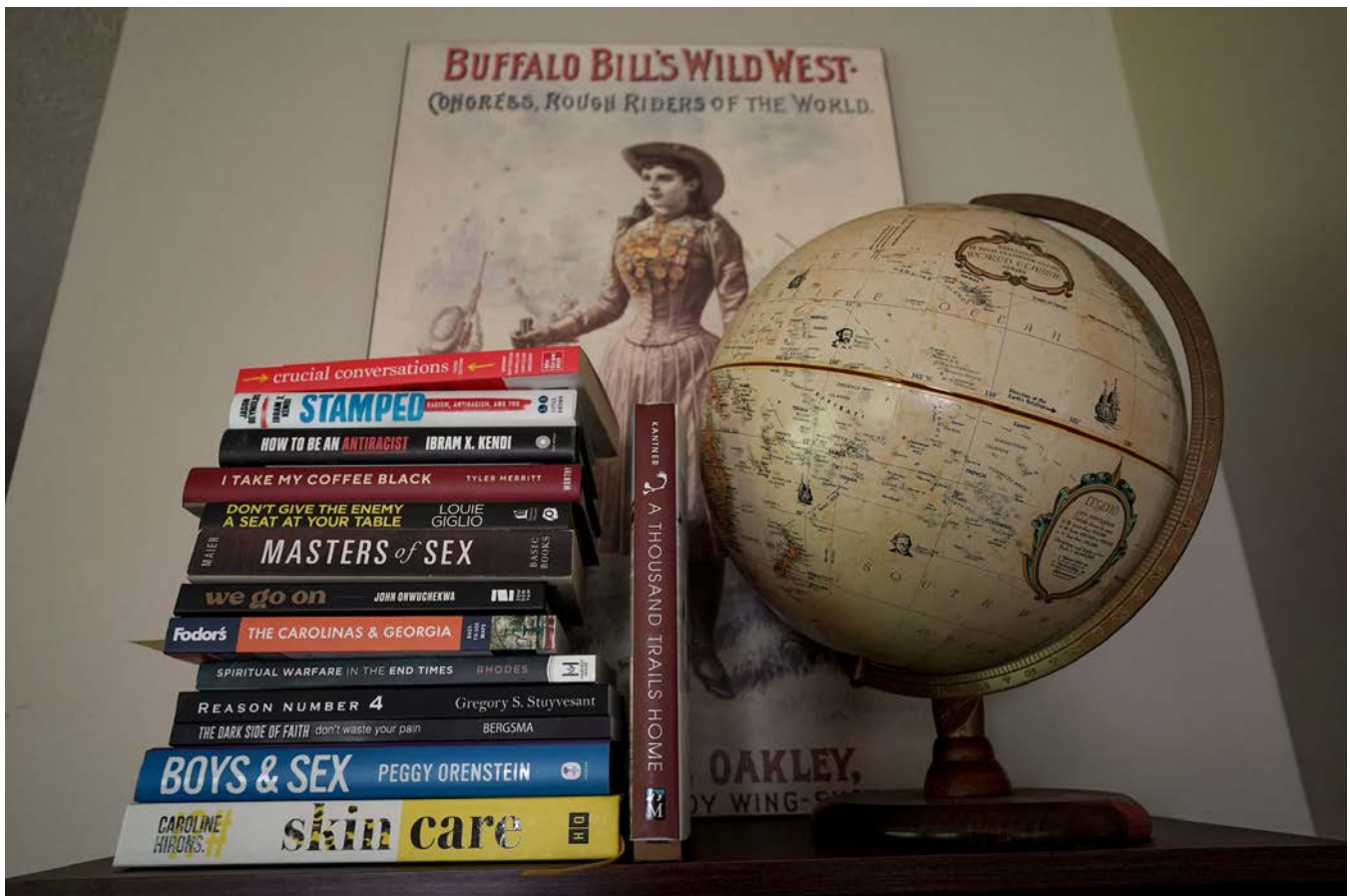
Few felt the sting of this shift as acutely as Alberda. Her bosses had tried to protect her by scaling back her sex education work, but the change just felt like punishment. Her job, which she had described as her "passion," was quickly becoming a source of mental anguish.



A photo of Alberda's children, from left, Elliot, Olivia and Tyler, sits on a pair of Tyler's tennis shoes at the family's home in Holland, Mich. (Bonnie Jo Mount/The Washington Post)



Alberda's work has come under fire by conservative members of the Ottawa County Board of Commissioners. (Bonnie Jo Mount/The Washington Post)



Books in Alberda's home. (Bonnie Jo Mount/The Washington Post)

“I have to go into the community, and people think I am a pedophile,” Alberda said. “They don’t think I stole a car or embezzled money. They think I’m a sexual predator.”

In the county board meeting room, Rhodea had finished introducing her “childhood innocence” resolution. Doug Zylstra, the board’s lone Democrat, was pushing her and the measure’s other backers to provide examples of taxpayer-funded activities that sexualized children. County employees, he said, deserved to know specifically what was being prohibited.

Alberda’s husband, Ryan, was watching the proceedings from the kitchen, where a buck’s head was mounted by the cupboard. He’d just returned from coaching the high school’s trap shooting team.

“They aren’t going to answer!” he called out in frustration.

To Alberda, the resolution's language seemed purposely vague; its goal, she believed, was to stop the health department from providing services to LGBTQ+ residents and give the county an excuse to fire her.

“They are setting people like me up for failure,” she said.

Her thoughts turned to a few of the new commissioners who had run for office vowing to fix a county government that they believed too often acted in ways that were hostile to their Christian faith. Lately, they had begun to express unease with the board's direction.

“Do you think [they're] going to vote for this crap?” Alberda asked her husband and a friend from the health department who was watching the proceedings with her.

They shrugged. The county clerk began calling the roll. Soon Alberda would get her answer.

On the table next to the television sat a picture of Alberda's three children, taken at a park about a mile from their house. She had given birth to Tyler, her eldest son, a few months after finishing high school when she was 17.

“No one knew I was pregnant until after I had graduated,” she said. “My parents didn't want me to tell anybody.” Because she had sex out of wedlock, the elders at the church where her family worshiped told Alberda that she had to take part in a profession of faith ceremony before her son could be baptized. And so, one Sunday in 1994, about two weeks after Tyler was born, she stood in front of the congregation. The pews were packed. A relative videotaped it.

“I do not want to make light of the fact of sin in your past life ...” the pastor began.

At the time, the pastor's words and the ceremony, which wasn't required of others seeking to baptize their children, didn't stand out. But years later, after she'd graduated from college, found a job at the health department, and became certified as a sexuality educator, Alberda re-watched the tape. By this point, she'd met and married her husband; they were raising three children.

The pastor's words, she said, sent a message that there was a hierarchy of sin, and that sexual sins, like hers, were "the most heinous." That sense of shame permeated the county, where Alberda and her husband had spent their lives. It led parents and pastors to cede conversations about sex to popular culture and the increasingly ubiquitous porn industry, both of which "sexualized everything," Alberda said. The unwillingness to talk about sex contributed to teen pregnancy and untreated sexually transmitted disease, she believed.

Alberda understood the unease because she had felt it, too. She had started with the health department after college teaching prenatal classes to teen moms. When that program ended, her bosses asked her to give talks on birth control and bloodborne diseases.

"I never even said the word 'vagina' in my house probably, let alone in public in front of a bunch of strangers," she said. But she found that most of the groups she spoke with were eager to talk and desperate for reassurance that their desires and problems were normal. What started as a job became a calling. Alberda trained through the University of Michigan's Sexual Health Certificate Program, where she sometimes lectured.



Alberda and her daughter, Olivia, soothe Frederick. (Bonnie Jo Mount/The Washington Post)



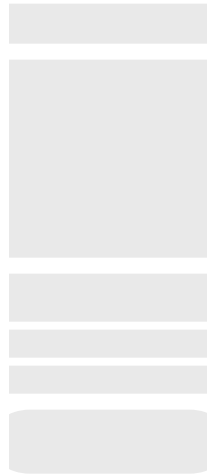
With Frederick underfoot, Alberda prepares pizza for her husband's and son's lunches. (Bonnie Jo Mount/The Washington Post)

Public school teachers invited her to speak with their students. She developed sex-ed programs for women in drug rehabilitation and inmates in the county jail. She spoke to uterine and cervical cancer survivors who were seeking alternatives to vaginal sex.

Often, Alberda had groups write anonymous questions for her on scraps of paper, which she kept in a drawer in her desk. They asked her about pain during intercourse, penis size and consent. "If a guy presses me into sex and I say no five or six times and he starts touching me is that molestation?" read one question from a high school student. Alberda talked with the students about sexual consent and the importance of reporting abuse.

Gradually, she expanded the health department's reach. She knew that young women in juvenile detention were at high risk for becoming pregnant in their teens. So she arranged for them to visit the health department and, with their

parents' permission, get birth control implants. She brought regular testing for sexually transmitted diseases to migrant farmworker camps, homeless shelters and Grand Valley State University.



In 2014, she started a program to distribute free packages of condoms and lube to liquor stores, bars, bowling alleys and tattoo parlors throughout the county. Sometimes her work provoked resistance. She put a container of condoms in the courthouse office where people who had recently been released from prison met with their probation officers. Alberda reasoned that the former inmates were more likely to engage in risky sexual behavior. The courthouse's chief judge thought the condoms would encourage people to have more sex and demanded their removal.

Alberda's condom program, which she called Wear One, became a model, expanding to more than 50 Michigan counties. Even as teen pregnancy and abortion rates have fallen, the county hasn't been able to reduce infection rates from sexually transmitted disease, which have risen statewide. Alberda often reminded her bosses that changing sexual behavior took time, persistence and a willingness to set aside the shame that inhibited frank conversations about sex.

She didn't realize that other forces were reshaping the way people in the county talked about sexual health and sin. The biggest driver was Ottawa Impact, a political group that formed in 2021 and pledged to field county board candidates who would govern according to conservative Christian principles. The group's

leaders drew inspiration from Matthew Trehella, a Wisconsin-based pastor who preaches a version of Christianity that focuses on using politics and the law to purify the community of evildoers and sin. Trehella and the leaders of Ottawa Impact didn't respond to requests for comment.

In 2013, Trehella self-published a book called "The Doctrine of the Lesser Magistrates," which argues that low-level elected officials — "lesser magistrates" — have a sacred duty to oppose higher authorities who attempt to enforce immoral or anti-Christian laws.

Trehella drew inspiration for the book, which he said has sold more than 80,000 copies, from 1500s-era treatises written by Protestant leaders resisting the tyranny of the Catholic Church. His roots, though, were in the 1990s antiabortion movement. In 1993, he signed a letter describing the murder of doctors who provided abortions as "justifiable," and he often boasted of the 15 months he spent in jail for blocking the doors to abortion clinics.

More recently, some anti-maskers and election deniers have embraced Trehella's views. Retired Lt. Gen. Michael Flynn, former president Donald Trump's national security adviser and an influential proponent of disproven election fraud theories, has praised Trehella's book as a "masterful blueprint showing Americans how to successfully resist tyranny." State and local officials in Florida, Tennessee, South Dakota, Montana, Illinois and Michigan have touted his ideas, said Anna Rosensweig, a University of Rochester professor who has tracked Trehella's influence.



In November, eight self-described conservative Christians joined Ottawa County's Board of Commissioners. (Bonnie Jo Mount/The Washington Post)



The Holland Farmers Market in Ottawa County. (Bonnie Jo Mount/The Washington Post)



St. John's Episcopal Church in Grand Haven helped organize the city's first Pride festival. (Bonnie Jo Mount/The Washington Post)

Most of the voters who supported Ottawa Impact's candidates were not familiar with Trehwella. They were angry at their old commissioners for complying with federal and state pandemic masking and vaccine policies, which they viewed as an unconstitutional and tyrannical overreach. Some feared that new anti-discrimination laws would force the county to support policies that promote homosexuality or abortion.

Many of the group's most ardent supporters were convinced that the nation was in the midst of a moral crisis so deep that it had precipitated a massive surge in child sex trafficking that had reached west Michigan. At county board meetings, they insisted that the media was conspiring with the state and federal government to hide the heinous problem. One of the area's biggest churches was building a shelter for trafficking victims. (The county's prosecuting attorney, Lee Fisher, said in an interview that he hasn't seen an increase in sex trafficking cases in the area.)

Trewhella's theories provided Ottawa Impact's leaders with a template for resisting the forces that they believed were corrupting their community.

The group's leaders and local Republicans invited the Wisconsin pastor to Ottawa in 2022 and again earlier this year. In his appearances, Trewhella told them that good legislation, grounded in the word of God, could lead men to Jesus. And he preached that resistance to "wicked tyrants" and "anti-Christian" laws, such as those protecting abortion or "homo sex," could "abate the just judgment of God" on their community.

Alberda had never heard of Ottawa Impact when the group released a report in May 2022 accusing her and the health department of using county resources to promote abortion and sexualize children.

She was accustomed to the occasional angry parent stopping her in a parking lot and haranguing her for promoting sin. But this was different. The report ran 59 pages and included photos of Alberda and emails she had sent to local school officials offering to help them develop their sex education curriculums.

Her supervisors' initial reaction was to take down a link she had posted on the health department's sexual health page to a Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit group that offered birth control advice. The site had recently added an "abortion finder" tool to help women navigate rapidly changing state laws. Alberda said she hadn't noticed the addition. Everyone assumed the controversy would quickly pass.

Two weeks later, Libs of TikTok, a social media account that has attracted more than 2.3 million followers and become an agenda setter in right-wing politics, shared screenshots of a pamphlet Alberda had created for parents seeking to better understand their children's sexual development.

The 30-page guide advised parents on how to talk with children about sexuality, menstruation and body image. It noted that 47 percent of Ottawa County 12th-graders said in a survey they had been involved in "sexting." And it urged

parents to talk with their teens about the ways sexually explicit photos could be misused online.

Libs of TikTok zeroed in on one page of the guide, which advised parents that it was normal for children under age 5 to play with themselves and experience “genital pleasure.” The right-wing account twisted Alberda’s words and warned that she was advising parents to teach toddlers “about masturbation.”

The information in the guide came from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Planned Parenthood and the American Academy of Pediatrics. None of that mattered. Soon, dozens of people on social media were calling for her to be fired and accusing her of being a pedophile and a groomer.

In the run-up to the 2022 Republican primary, the Right to Life of Michigan PAC pulled its endorsements of the GOP incumbents on the county commission — some of whom had donated to the organization for decades — and backed Ottawa Impact’s slate of more hard-line challengers.

In the November general election, Ottawa Impact-endorsed candidates won eight of the board’s 11 seats. Shortly after they took office in January, the head of the county health department appeared before them. Alberda, who had never been actively engaged in county or national politics, took off work so that she could attend the meeting in person.

On the dais, Jacob Bonnema, one of the new Ottawa Impact commissioners, was asking the county’s public health officer if she knew the name of the employee who had posted the links to “vulgar,” “activist,” “pro-abortion” sites on the department’s webpage. The health department officer dodged the question.

“The person who did that needs to be found out,” a second commissioner insisted.

Alberda glared at Bonnema. He wasn’t the person who sent her parent guide to Libs of TikTok. But he had circulated the account’s tweet, and he had identified

her on social media as one of the people responsible for the department's "vile approach to over sexualizing our children."

Bonnema knew her name and what she did for the county. His questions, Alberda believed, were designed to single her out for more public scorn.

"What are you going to do?" she recalled thinking. "Hang me in the public square?"

Alberda wasn't the only one feeling pressure from the county board. In April, Bonnema and the new board members toured the Children's Advocacy Center, a nonprofit group that works with law enforcement to prosecute sex offenders and counsel their victims.

They listened as Darcy Fluharty, the center's executive director, explained its mission. Each year, law enforcement officials referred about 250 to 300 children who said they had been sexually abused to the center so that they could be questioned by specially trained professionals in a less intimidating setting.

Fluharty talked about the therapists who worked with the victims and their families. She showed the commissioners interview rooms, which included comfy chairs, toys and two-way mirrors that allowed detectives and prosecutors to follow along and suggest questions. And she explained how the center worked with the schools on prevention programs that aimed to help students and teachers recognize grooming and report abuse.

Then she offered to answer the commissioners' questions.

Bonnema recalled suggesting that they discuss "the elephant in the room." At first, Fluharty wasn't sure what he meant. Then Bonnema began talking about the 3-by-5-inch LGBTQ+ Pride sticker on the center's front door. Several of the commissioners had spotted it along with other Pride flags in staff members' offices. The commissioners saw the Pride sticker as an "activist symbol,"

something that had no place in a facility that aimed to serve the entire community. “Their agenda was very clear,” Fluharty recalled. “Take that Pride sticker off the front door.”



The director of the Children's Advocacy Center, which works with law enforcement to prosecute sex offenders and counsel victims, is worried that the nonprofit's funding is at risk after some county commissioners took issue with the Pride sticker on the entrance. (Bonnie Jo Mount/The Washington Post)

Fluharty told the commissioners that parents and their children turned to the center at one of the darkest moments in their lives. “If in some small way we can make it a little less horrible, it’s worth it,” she believed. The sticker sent a message to marginalized, sexually abused children that they were safe and would be accepted, Fluharty explained.

The discussion continued for 45 minutes, according to Fluharty and several of the commissioners at the meeting. One of the commissioners said that she knew someone who had turned to the center for help but decided not to return after seeing the Pride sticker. The person was worried that the center’s counselors might encourage children to identify as gay or transgender. Another commissioner, Fluharty said, asked her if she would put a swastika on the door to let neo-Nazis know that they should also feel welcome. To Fluharty, the notion that a Pride sticker and a swastika were in any way similar was ridiculous and offensive.

The county provided about \$120,000 a year to the center and had promised it an additional \$274,000 in federal covid relief funds to bolster its \$1.7 million annual budget. After the commissioners left, Fluharty warned her board of directors that the Pride symbol could put their county funding at risk. The board hasn’t decided whether to keep or remove the sticker.

Bonnema was concerned about what would happen if the center’s relationship with the county unraveled. Both the Ottawa County sheriff and prosecutor told him that it would cost the county more than \$800,000 a year to replace the center with something that might not serve abused children as well.

Bonnema, an insurance agent who was new to politics, didn’t approve of the Pride symbol. But he was growing increasingly uncomfortable with the way some Ottawa Impact commissioners viewed any compromise as betrayal — a view he had shared in interviews and at public board meetings. He exchanged text messages with Fluharty in an unsuccessful effort to find common ground.

One alternative sticker he suggested featured the words “YOU ARE LOVED” in rainbow colors.

In the spring Bonnema, 45, broke with Ottawa Impact. “I am not extreme,” he said in an interview. “I just want government to work better for people.”



Ottawa County Commissioner Jacob Bonnema spends time with his wife, daughter and dog in their garden in Zeeland. Bonnema has distanced himself from a majority on the Board of Commissioners that he considers too extreme. (Bonnie Jo Mount/The Washington Post)



Bonnema, seen with his wife, Kelly, has been censured by the Ottawa Republican Party and fellow county commissioners. (Bonnie Jo Mount/The Washington Post)

The board’s criticism of Fluharty and the Children’s Advocacy Center didn’t stop. In June, the center sponsored one of the county’s Pride festivals, which included a drag queen reading books to children. Fluharty and other attendees insisted there was nothing perverse about the festival or the performance. But several commissioners expressed outrage at pictures of children handing the drag queens tips.

Some donors pulled their financial support for the center, Fluharty said. Her board of directors instructed her that any future sponsorships needed their approval. “When we have people in positions as high as our county commissioners that are making allegations that we are in some way associated with the grooming and oversexualizing of children, it is devastating,” Fluharty said.

On June 27, two weeks after the Pride festival, Rhodea introduced her resolution to “protect childhood innocence” by prohibiting the county from supporting any

groups that “encourage the sexualization of children.”

The leaders of several nonprofit groups spoke in opposition. Among them was Barbara Lee VanHorsen, the executive director of the Momentum Center, which runs programs for people with developmental disabilities and mental illness. Some commissioners had condemned her group’s work on behalf of LGBTQ+ residents, and VanHorsen worried that her group’s county funding — about \$290,000 a year — could be in jeopardy.

“I implore you to stop the moral grandstanding and start engaging with the leaders in this community who can help you understand the real-life struggles of people in this county,” she told the board.

Kate Leighton-Colburn, the director of Out on the Lakeshore, a community center for LGBTQ+ residents, also pleaded with her elected leaders: “If there’s even one of you tonight planning to vote yes who even a little bit questions the righteousness of that decision, please reach out to me.”

Ottawa Impact’s supporters blasted the county’s Pride festivals and the recent drag queen story event. “Don’t get mad when we refer to you and everyone else who doesn’t denounce this garbage as groomers,” said George Maierhauser, a 63-year-old accountant and an officer in the county Republican Party.

They demanded that the commissioners do something to protect Ottawa’s children from shadowy actors and sex traffickers. “If you’re saying this is not happening in our community, you’re wrong,” Christi Meppelink, a member of the county GOP’s executive committee, told the commissioners. “Our children are at risk.”

Bonnema listened and, before the commissioners voted, voiced some concerns about the resolution: Who would decide which content was sexualizing children? What standards would they use? “Good policy is not vague,” he said. “It’s specific, so that you know what you’re addressing.”

Two holdovers from the previous board — a Democrat and a Republican — complained that the resolution’s broad language could be used to “trap” or retaliate against county workers such as Alberda.

The Ottawa Impact board members defended the resolution as a necessary first step toward protecting the county from a culture that was increasingly corrupting children. “We’re seeing a slow normalization of adult-child sexual relationships,” warned Roger Belknap, one of the commissioners.

The resolution passed 9-2. All of the new commissioners, including Bonnema, supported it. He believed that the measure addressed a real and growing problem — one he saw referenced regularly on sites such as Libs of TikTok. He also knew that voting against a resolution to preserve childhood innocence was a political death sentence. “Try to explain that to your neighbor,” he said.

By early July, Alberda’s supervisors at the health department had largely shut down her work as a sexuality educator and assigned her new, bureaucratic tasks that mostly kept her confined to her office cubicle.

Public school health teachers were still teaching sex-ed classes, but Alberda was no longer allowed to talk to their students about birth control or sexually transmitted disease. Alberda’s Wear One condom program was still running, but she was told not to add any new locations. Her parent guide, which had drawn the scorn of Libs of TikTok, had been taken down months earlier. Initially, her supervisors said they would review it and put it back online. It still hasn’t returned.

“It feels like I don’t even exist anymore,” she said. “Twenty years of what I worked so hard to build literally was in one instant destroyed.”

Her supervisors told her that they were trying to protect her from being fired. “Heather is talented, passionate, smart, bilingual,” said Marcia Mansaray, the

deputy health officer for the county. “She’s important to the health of this community.”

Alberda’s bosses were also fighting in the courts to keep their jobs and protect the department. In January, the new commissioners had voted to remove the head of the health department and install a safety manager from a local HVAC company who hadn’t worked in public health but had been an outspoken critic of mask requirements and other covid policies.

A state judge had so far blocked their efforts, ruling that the commissioners had to prove that the current county health officer, Adeline Hambley, was “incompetent” or had neglected her duties before they could dismiss her. On Tuesday, the county administrator gave Hambley three days to cut the department’s 2024 budget in half, to \$9 million from \$18.1 million. In a statement, Hambley called the request “ridiculous” and an “act of unlawful retaliation.”

The commission’s chairman, Joe Moss, countered in a blog post that it was time to “rein in” the health department’s “out-of-control expenditures” and excessive “influence.”

Amid all the lawsuits and turmoil, Alberda has been allowed to keep one sex education-related assignment: a class she teaches at Harbor House, a facility for women recovering from addiction. She said she knew why it was still okay: The organization served a population that the vast majority of the county’s residents didn’t think about.

The women at the facility reminded Alberda of the son she’d had at 17. Tyler had struggled with addiction and depression for most of his adult life. On June 13, 2020, he died in a motorcycle crash. He was 25.



Tyler, Alberda's eldest son, died in a motorcycle accident in 2020 at age 25. (Bonnie Jo Mount/The Washington Post)



Alberda prays before a meal with her family. (Bonnie Jo Mount/The Washington Post)



Flowers from colleagues. (Bonnie Jo Mount/The Washington Post)

Today, Alberda keeps his ashes on a bookshelf at home along with his sneakers, his baseball cap and the last family photo that he took with his siblings. She had planned to bury his ashes in a cemetery that borders a soybean field and a new subdivision a few miles from their home but couldn't bear to part with them. "Eight to 10 years of his life was taken from me by his addiction," she said. "So I am going to hold onto him a little longer."

Alberda pulled into the driveway at Harbor House, a large Victorian-era home with a neatly trimmed lawn and flowers wilting in the afternoon heat. Three women who were standing outside eating ice cream cones and smoking cigarettes waved at her. At Alberda's first meeting with the group a week earlier, they had talked about birth control. Several women mentioned that their period had stopped while they were using drugs, and Alberda reminded them that they could still get pregnant even when they weren't menstruating.

The second session focused on preventing the spread of sexually transmitted infections. The women sat on couches as Alberda unpacked her props, a plastic

vagina, a speculum and packages of condoms. She showed them photographs of untreated infections from gonorrhea, chlamydia and herpes, which she described as a “forever gift.”

“Dang,” one person said.

“So, leave the lights on,” another added.

Alberda encouraged the women to ask future partners about their sexual history and reminded them that the health department offered free testing for sexually transmitted infections and cervical cancer. After about an hour of discussion, she began packing up her teaching tools.

“We think we know everything,” one woman told her. “But even when I was out on the streets using drugs and involved in prostitution, I didn’t always use a condom.”

Another woman confided that the last time she had sex she hadn’t thought about her risk of contracting a disease: “I was high on cocaine and decided to mess around with somebody and I didn’t check for any of this. I’m sitting here guilt-ridden and feeling so disgusted with myself.”

Alberda paused and met the woman’s eyes. “I don’t want you to feel any guilt or shame,” she told her. “We’re here to be better than we were yesterday. We’ve all been in similar situations. I had my first son — who was actually killed three years ago — when I was 17. What’s important is now you know and now you can share that information with others.”

And with that, she walked out to her car and drove back to her cubicle at the health department.



Alberda walks her puppy, Walter. (Bonnie Jo Mount/The Washington Post)

On a Sunday morning in early July, Alberda and her husband headed to church. Several years ago, the large, slightly rundown sanctuary was regularly packed with hundreds of worshipers. “Now you have a choice of any seat you want,” Alberda said, eyeing the three dozen people who remained.

The church’s losses were driven, in part, by the rise of bigger, newer evangelical churches that featured pop-style praise bands, colored lights and an array of fellowship and support groups. The divisive 2020 presidential election and arguments over whether to ask members to mask during the pandemic also contributed to the attrition. Amid all the rancor, the church’s pastor asked to take a short sabbatical and never returned.

Alberda had considered leaving both the church and Ottawa County. The attacks from the Ottawa Impact commissioners weren’t going away. Late last year, she

applied for a job with the state of Wyoming doing suicide prevention work. “I am done with all this,” she thought. Then she was offered the position, and she and her husband decided they weren’t ready to leave behind their grown children and their home. So they stayed.

At the front of the church, the lay leader was telling the story of the scathing criticism that Jesus received when he invited prostitutes and tax collectors to share a meal with him. “His was a superabundant grace, a scandalizing grace,” the lay leader preached.

This was the spirit that had drawn Alberda to Christianity and sustained her faith. She had long believed that Tyler’s birth had been God’s way of calling her to work as a sexuality educator. Many years later, when Tyler was struggling with addiction, Alberda and her husband prayed that the Lord would give him strength to overcome his addictions and return home.

“God does answer prayers,” she said. “But his answer to our prayer was no.”

She wanted to believe that her son’s death and the public scorn she had endured were still part of God’s plan — his way of making her stronger, “pruning” her back and giving her a “different lens to see ... a different worldview.”

“I don’t know what that looks like,” she said. “I don’t know if I’m supposed to be at the county or if I’m even supposed to be a sexuality educator anymore.”

The service had ended and people were drifting toward the doors. Alberda couldn’t stop thinking about the people in the county who had never met her but still seemed to hate her. The intrusive thoughts would lead her a few days later to take a leave from work and check herself into a faith-based, outpatient psychiatric facility. She had never felt more anxious and lost. She didn’t know what she was supposed to do.

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