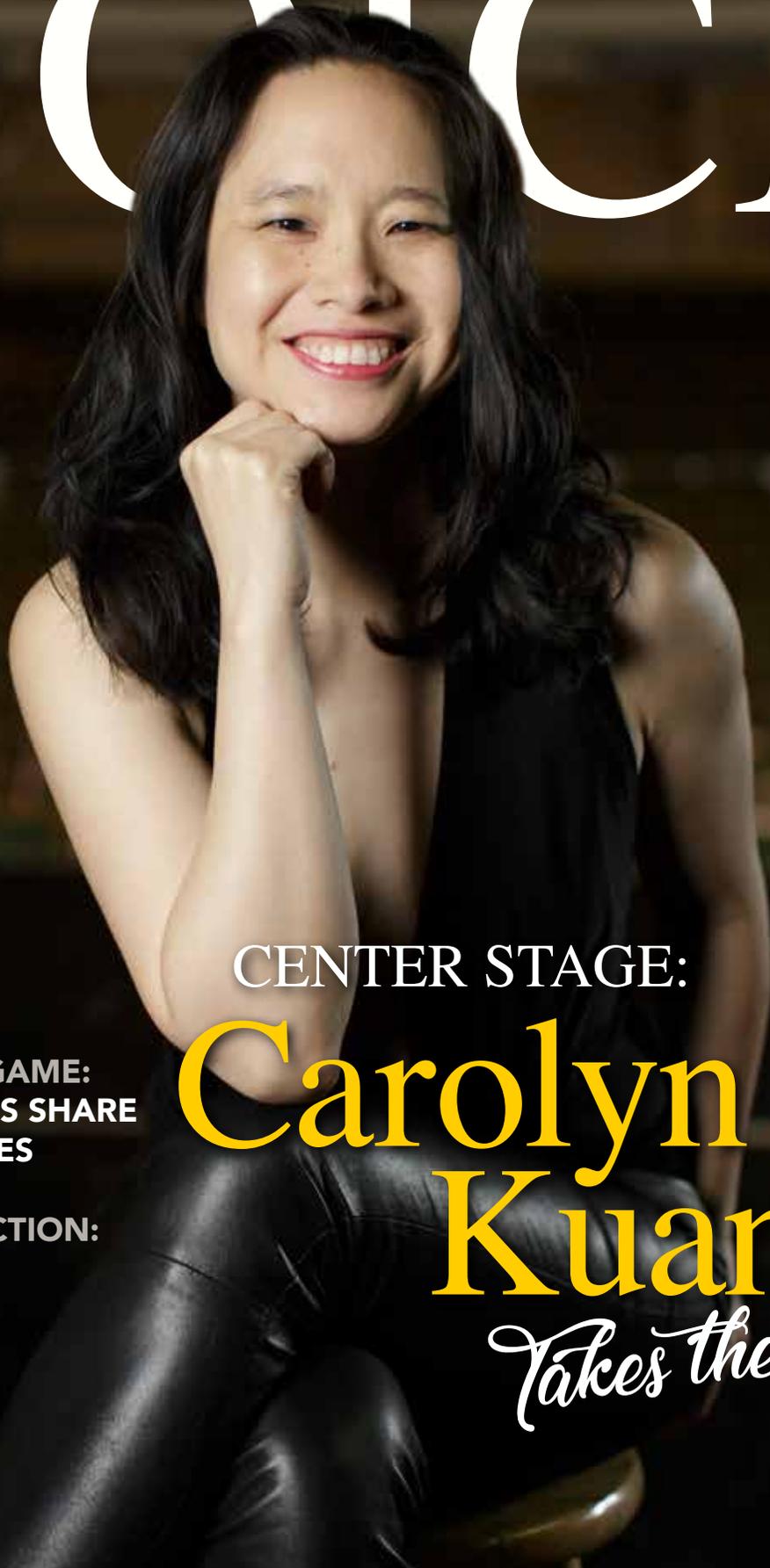


# CONNECTICUT VOICE™



CENTER STAGE:

## Carolyn Kuan

*Takes the lead*

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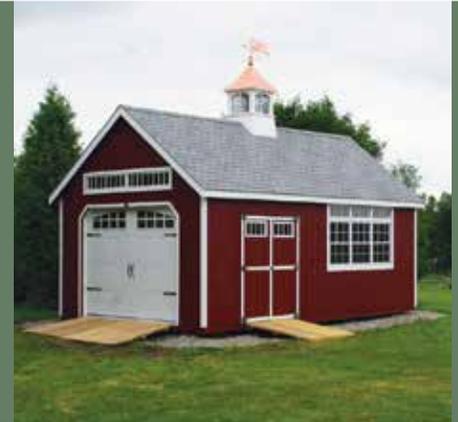
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# CONNECTICUT VOICE™

## EDITOR'S NOTE //



### Welcome to the fall issue of *Connecticut VOICE!*

I have been enjoying hearing readers' feedback on our first couple of issues (please, keep the comments coming!) and am excited to share what we have in store for you in this edition.

In this issue, we get to know two musical powerhouses: Carolyn Kuan and Alasdair Neale, who are music directors of the Hartford Symphony Orchestra and New Haven Symphony Orchestra, respectively. Both are gay, both are dynamic, and both have a tangible passion for what they do.

We also examine the controversy surrounding transgender athletes and discuss the fertility challenges LGBTQ individuals and couples can encounter when trying to start families. On the lighter side, we're indulging in the gorgeous food served up by Hartford-based AMOR, visiting LGBTQ-friendly bed and breakfasts throughout the state, and getting to know some furies.

The entire *Connecticut VOICE* team is extremely proud of the product you hold in your hands – but there is so much more to VOICE beyond these pages. We have recently launched a blog, at [ctvoicemag.com](http://ctvoicemag.com), where you can read some of the latest news and find out about upcoming events throughout the region. I invite you to check it out, along with Chion Wolf's *Connecticut VOICE* podcast and other multimedia content you'll find on the site.

Please connect with us on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, and look for us as we attend a growing number of festivals, conferences, expos and other events across Connecticut. We want to hear from you!

Happy reading,

*Cara*

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*—Roy T. Bennett*



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INTERVIEW

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job. And, Alasdair  
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baton in New  
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Photo by Little Fang

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At Amor, food is elevated to an art form.



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# CONNECTICUT VOICE

## Out Loud!



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## CT VOICE Up Close Television Show Premieres Saturday, September 7

And airs exclusively on WCTX MyTV9 every Saturday night  
in September from 10:35 p.m. to 11:05 p.m.

### Curbside with Kuan

An accomplished conductor who left China at age 14 with intentions to study business, Carolyn Kuan fell into a career in music ... by accident! Since her resume is stunning and slightly intimidating, let's cut through the clutter, get real with her, sitting side-by-side on a curb in Hartford.

### YouTube sensation Will Doughty

Make-up artist, wig designer, and founder of Shop Will Beauty, Will Doughty. A YouTube sensation with nearly 24,000 subscribers, Will has established a flourishing wig business, catering largely to the drag community and shipping his creations all over the world. Will talks about how he got his start and offers his best tips on how to style and care for synthetic hair.

### Middlesex Health's Transgender Medicine Services

Of the 1.4 million people identifying as transgender in the United States, over 12,000 live in Connecticut. Hilary Russo sat down with Middlesex Health's Transgender Medicine Services medical director and one of their patients to share how this program is helping serve the community inside and out.

### LGBTQ Friendly BnBs

There are many options when it comes to Connecticut bed and breakfasts, inns and hotels, but not every one is as LGBTQ friendly as they all should be. Correspondent Dawn Ennis tours two options for queer couples looking to enjoy "The Suite Life."

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ENTERTAINMENT //

# Confessions of a Drag Addict

## And A Word From Asia O'Hara

---

By FRANK RIZZO

Photography by BRANDON VOSS, VOSS EVENTS

---

Drag queen Monét X Change knows how to command the stage — with a lot of glitz and glam.



**I**t started slowly, with my husband Bill becoming a fan first. Eleven years ago, “RuPaul’s Drag Race” was new to Logo, the gay cable channel best known to me at the time for reruns of “The Golden Girls.” Finally, it was offering some original programming that was actually watchable – surprisingly fun, even.

I took a peek at an early show or two and thought it had a great spirit of glam, sass, and an appealing inclusive vibe from these merry bands of gals from beyond the fringe. It had a bit of a low-rent look to it, but hey, it’s drag, I thought. (And what did I know? Apparently not much – yet.)

It took me some time to match the playful names of the contestants with their changing personas for the sometimes silly, sometimes mind-blowing challenges, but the dis was fresh, the challenges a hoot and the looks – well, pretty damn fantastic. Not just glitter-and-be-gay but supremely stylish, provocative, even at times on the edge of couture.

My viewing became more and more regular as the show moved to VH1 – and later became available on Netflix – and the production values, challenges, celebs (OMG! Lady Gaga!) and costumes stepped up with each new season.

Sometime halfway through its 11-year run, it all kicked in. I became a Drag Race obsessive, following each season’s shows, its “Untucked” backstage follow-up programs, its “All Stars” spin-offs, its hashtags, tweets, word coinage, podcasts and recaps. Sure, I had other television passions like my “Game of Thrones” On Demand, but I was also demanding this “Game of Queens” and the playful scheming of these drag dragons just as much.

I recently picked up *New York* magazine and there on its cover was Mrs. Kasha Davis, with the inside feature story declaring “America has a new pastime” and that its name is Drag. (Indeed, there were 37 different drag cover girls in various issues of the magazine, depending on which one you picked up.)

Certainly the current decade has become “The Drag Decade,” with the popularity of the show and its stars hitting new highs, and its stars being featured in *Vogue* layouts, at the Met Gala, and even getting acting gigs in films such as “A Star Is Born.”

It’s also become big business, with RuPaul becoming a shrewd, advocating entrepreneur



Plastique Tiara shows off her beauty and style.

mogul who is the Oprah of this once-outsider/now-insider industry. Forget Comic-Con. DragCon events in Los Angeles and New York attract tens of thousands of gays, straights, and gender fluid folk of all ages each year.

Ditto for “RuPaul’s Drag Race: Werq the World Tour 2019,” which will be at Foxwoods Resort Casino on Oct. 25 at 8 p.m.

But it’s not the sole drag dynamic. In June, veteran drag performer Varla Jean Merman performed her one-woman comedy cabaret “Under a Big Top” for Hartford’s TheaterWorks at the Wadsworth Atheneum and Katya Zamolodchikova came into town in July with her show “Help Me, I’m Dying” at The Bushnell. Bianca Del Rio – whom *New York* magazine ranked as the most successful Drag Race alum and No. 1 in its own ranking of the Top 100 – brings her “It’s Jester Joke” show to The Bushnell on Oct 5. And, of course, there are many homegrown drag events scattered throughout the state. (I’m still eager to see a Nutmegger on “Drag Race” though.)

But the “Werq the World Tour” at Foxwoods is by far Connecticut’s biggest drag event ever, with a show that features Aquaria, Detox, Kameron Michaels, Kim Chi,

Monét X Change, Naomi Smalls, Violet Chachki, Asia O’Hara, Plastique Tiara, Vanessa Mateo, and Season 11 winner Yvie Oddly. The tour started the year in Asia and Australia and played more than 30 cities in Europe this spring. Following the USA and Canada, the tour will finish the year in Latin America.

## CROWN UP

I talked with that fabulous chameleon, Asia O’Hara, who was a finalist for Season 10, on the phone from her home in Dallas just before she was to start the next leg of the tour. At 37, the Texas native is riding high with a new music video and single, “Crown Up,” and was happy to talk about the song, the future of drag, and the time RuPaul slapped her across the kisser. (We skipped over her sad butterfly incident when, in her final lip-sync for the crown, butterflies which were concealed in her costume didn’t exactly flutter fantastically free but rather did a death-drop to the runway floor.)

**Connecticut VOICE:** How has the show affected you, not just professionally, but personally?

**Asia:** I had personal moment on the show when Ru told

CONTINUED ON PAGE 16



Naomi Smalls, known for her long limbs, is a fan favorite.



# TAYLOR MAC TAKES CONNECTICUT

By Frank Rizzo

**T**aylor Mac’s “A 24-Decade History of Popular Music (Abridged)” will be presented at 7:30 p.m. at Wesleyan University’s Center for the Arts on September 21.

This will be a two-hour version of the epic event by Mac, whose preferred pronoun is “judy” and who uses drag persona in judy’s fabulous art. The complete 24-hour theatrical event premiered at Brooklyn’s St. Ann’s Warehouse in 2016. The show reinterprets 240 years of U.S. social history – from 1776 to present day – through music and performance, featuring songs that were popular throughout many different communities in the country.

When asked about judy’s drag creations, Mac says: “My drag is what I look like on the inside.”

Mac’s thoughts on the current drag phenomenon that is happening on TV and on stage?

“What’s happening right now is that there’s this counterculture that’s risen up – call it a trickle up

culture – that’s saying this is an authentic form of expression.

“But I don’t want people to fool themselves into thinking that, ‘Ah, drag is having such a moment right now.’ I would say a particular kind of drag is having a moment right now and it’s having a moment because it has embraced the concept of ‘branding,’ which to me is not the best thing in the world. We’re not cows. There’s a tricky thing with capitalism and drag which is happening right now that is not exciting to me. At the same time, I love all the queens.”

The show is just part of Mac’s Connecticut stay.

There will be a free panel discussion on gender performance and queer histories in sound and dance hosted by Wesleyan’s Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Program with “Drag Queens and Radical Faeries and Judys, Oh My!” on Sept. 19 at 4:30 p.m. at Allbritton Center, Room 311, 222 Church St., Middletown.



Photo by Vess Pitts

“A Conversation with Taylor Mac” will be presented Sept. 20 at 6 p.m. at Memorial Chapel, 221 High St., Middletown. The event is free.

On Nov. 5 at 4:30 p.m., there will be a conversation with collaborator and costume designer Machine Dazzle, who will discuss the multi-year development of “A 24-Decade History of Popular Music,” as well as Mac’s artistic practice, approach to interdisciplinary design, collaborative process, and pursuit of building a creative life. This free event will also be held at Memorial Chapel in Middletown.



Photo by Sarah Walker



Photo by Kevin Yatarola



CONTINUED FROM PAGE 12

me to remember who I was. That really stopped me. And recently in Los Angeles, a young girl came up to me and she told me how much that moment really changed her life. She gave me this handmade, silver-plated bracelet that said, “Remember who you are” on it and that’s something I’ve worn every day since then. It’s great to know that little moments that affect you have the same power for other people, too.

**VOICE:** And professionally speaking?

**Asia:** As the song says, it forced me to “Crown up.” I

Asia O’Hara strikes a pose.

was fortunate to have a successful career prior to being on the show, but drag is what you make of it and the show has given me a greater platform – and a lot more responsibility. I now know that I’m not just doing drag for myself, or for my art, or to just have a good time. Being on the show has made me rise to the occasion and always remember in some sense that I’m involved in a public service.

**VOICE:** What is “Crown Up?”

**Asia:** It’s an anthem for queer people to remember



their purpose. Everyone's individual purpose may be different – we each have a puzzle that we're trying to put together – and along the way, we get distracted by other aspects of our lives. And we can forget what we each contribute to our community and the world and the people around us. It encourages people to rise to the occasion – and put that crown on.

**VOICE:** Who was your favorite celebrity judge?

**Asia:** [Film and TV actress] Tisha Michelle Campbell, [who starred in the Fox comedy series "Martin" from 1992 to 1997 and in the ABC comedy series "My Wife and Kids" from 2001 to 2005.] She was someone I watched on television for so long and I adored her when I was a kid. That was the most starstruck I was among the many guest judges.

**VOICE:** And your favorite regular judge?

**Asia:** I'm partial to Michelle. For me, on every single runway experience I had, she hit the nail on the head, but hers was the voice I had already heard in my head, whether I was great or terrible.

**VOICE:** To what do you attribute the phenomenon of drag in the last five to 10 years?

**Asia:** I think society goes through a cycle of needing art and creativity as an escape from the real world and

their daily lives. And then swinging back and needing a sense of being grounded in realism. Now it's time to explore, imagine and feel that we are limitless and powerful. I think that's why drag right now has become such a mainstream phenomenon.

**VOICE:** Was there a moment when you thought, "Wow, drag is now a bigger than I thought"?

**Asia:** It was when they made mention of Trinity the Tuck on "Saturday Night Live." I remember being home and watching that and going, "I cannot believe that they just referenced that in a skit. That people right now are at home, googling 'Trinity the Tuck.' It kind of makes you think that this is something you should already know about. If you don't know what we're talking about, or it's not funny to you, then you're not in the know.

**VOICE:** What is your biggest concern about drag's future?

**Asia:** I definitely hope that the market doesn't get oversaturated or become boring and people just get tired of it.

**VOICE:** Where do you see drag in five, 10, 20 years?

**Asia:** For the longest time, drag has had to borrow from mainstream culture. We impersonated other celebrities and copied – or borrowed – things from artists



The many looks of Asia O'Hara.



Asia O'Hara has her sights set on the future.

that we loved, like Cher and Diana Ross.

But now I think it will set the bar for artistic expression. I would love to see mainstream art and Broadway shows and the world of dance and fashion see stuff from drag queens and then turn that into art of their own.

**VOICE:** And drag queens as they mature...?

**Asia:** I don't think it's just a young person's game. I think it's all about being adaptable and changing. Madonna is a prime example of that [in her 60s] as she stays so relevant and popular because she always adapts and changes with the times. She doesn't try to make her current style work forever – which we know has been the downfall of a lot of artists. It's all about providing current and relevant content. When that begins to change, you'd better change as well.

**VOICE:** Like your Tweety Bird costume challenge. You were considered a pageant queen type of drag star but with the feather design competition, you showed

another side of you.

**Asia:** I had made a completely different costume to wear for the challenge and when I finished it, I realized that I [hadn't] demonstrated anything so far in my looks that was fun, quirky or lighthearted, so I decided to take that opportunity to show a different side of myself that I hadn't explored in my career.

**VOICE:** Might you be on the next edition of "Drag Race All Stars"?

**Asia:** I don't plan on it at this point, but I take almost every opportunity that I can to share my art with the world – so anything is possible.

**VOICE:** Better yet, have your own show.

**Asia:** Ha! Even better.

**VOICE:** After all, when RuPaul accidentally slapped you on the show, you had the great comeback line, saying, "It's about to be 'The Asia O'Hara Drag Race' now."

**Asia:** Absolutely. I hope so! 



Frank Rizzo has written about the arts in Connecticut and nationally for more than 40 years; for the *The New York Times*, *American Theatre Magazine* and dozens of other outlets. He is also a theater critic for *Variety*. Follow Frank's work at [ShowRiz.com](http://ShowRiz.com) and on Twitter @ShowRiz.



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# Making it Better

**CBD is good for business and, proponents say, good for your health**

---

By ALIX BOYLE

Photography by TODD FAIRCHILD

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**Before taking CBD, Denise couldn't complete tasks like grocery shopping or make decisions due to anxiety. She was even treated in the emergency room for an anxiety attack.**

**D**enise W. says that taking cannabidiol, or CBD, one of the many active compounds found in marijuana or hemp plants, has been “life-altering.”

“I tried a tincture and within an hour I felt a difference,” says Denise, who grapples with anxiety. After taking a water-soluble CBD liquid twice a day for a few weeks, and a CBD gummy as needed, Denise felt her anxiety significantly reduce. Before taking CBD, she couldn't complete tasks like grocery shopping or make decisions due to anxiety. She was even treated in the emergency room for an anxiety attack.

“My anxiety level went from a 15 out of 10 down to a three,” says Denise, who lives in the Greater New Haven area and did not want her full name used. “I researched CBD for a year. Why did I wait so long to take it?”

Denise was shopping recently at Your CBD Store in Milford, buying another month's supply. A 1,000-milliliter bottle costs \$110 and lasts for about a month, said Chief Operating Officer and General Manager Clayton Percy. The spa-like shop, decorated with comfy couches and soothing baby-blue paint on the walls, carries all things CBD – everything from tinctures and oils to lip balm, bath bombs, pet items, and so much more.

On a recent weekday morning, shoppers peppered Percy with questions about CBD and tried samples of CBD cream meant to reduce pain. He spoke with some customers for 20 minutes or more, patiently answering every query. Your CBD Store is part of chain of more than 400 stores nationwide that carry CBD products derived from hemp, a marijuana plant that is bred to be low in tetrahydrocannabinol (THC), the chemical in marijuana that causes the high people experience when they use it. If the plant creates 0.3 percent THC or less, it is called hemp; if it makes more than 0.3 percent THC, it is called marijuana. Both plants are in the cannabis genus.

CBD has been touted as a panacea for pretty much everything: pain management, mental health conditions, inflammation, physical ailments including arthritis and migraines, and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. It's sold pretty much everywhere, including gas stations, gyms, and your local Bed, Bath and Beyond.



Kannaway representative Tammy Prevost of Southwick, Mass. (left) explains the benefits of using CBD products to a potential customer. “There’s no regulation of CBD yet. It’s the wild West,” Prevost says.

At Your CBD store, a woman who identified herself as having Parkinson’s disease said she had less pain, less anxiety, and was able to walk more quickly after sampling CBD. She was returning to the store for more.

But, with one notable exception, CBD is not approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA). In 2018, the FDA approved Epidiolex, a drug for Dravet and Lennox-Gastaut syndromes, difficult-to-treat forms of epilepsy. It contains high levels of CBD.

All the products at Your CBD Store are made by a company called Sunflora. The plants are grown in Colorado and certified by the state Department of Agriculture. The company touts its carbon dioxide extraction process that eliminates the need for harmful chemicals and solvents.

The bottles are labeled with QR codes, leading the customer to a website with third-party testing for the product, showing the strength of CBD in the product and listing all the trace chemicals.

Third-party testing is a key to knowing what you are getting in the CBD world, says C. Michael White, professor of pharmacy practice in the UConn School of Pharmacy. White recently published a paper on human studies of CBD’s therapeutic actions and potential in the *Journal of Clinical Pharmacology*.

“It is impossible to reliably tell how much CBD or THC is in a product unless it is verified by an outside laboratory,” White says. “The concentrations of CBD (or THC for that matter) the manufacturer puts on the label are very often a work of fiction, not reality. Many products you buy in smoke shops or over the Internet have little to no CBD in them and some have more CBD than they disclose. If it is verified by an outside laboratory, the product label will refer you to a certificate of analysis that they have on file.”

White urges people who want to try CBD to first discuss with their doctor and pharmacist how CBD might interact with prescription medication they are already taking.

“One important risk is that CBD is broken down in the body by the liver and also impacts how other drugs are broken down by the liver as well. This means there is a risk of serious drug interactions with CBD products,” White says.

CBD can also cause sleepiness and lethargy, so it’s best not to drive after using it until you know how it affects you.

And as far as the legalities are concerned, check to be sure your CBD does not contain more than the allowable 0.3 percent amount of THC.

“Outside of a medical marijuana dispensary-created product, if you use a CBD product that has more than 0.3

percent THC, even if you didn't know it had it, you could be arrested for possession of marijuana in Connecticut or when traveling across state lines," White says. "There are cases of two grandmas who got busted in the spring for possession of marijuana when drug sniffing dogs detected the THC in the CBD product. One was arrested at a Disney amusement park and another at an airport."

Dana Krete, an acupuncturist and naturopathic physician at the Wellness Center at Privé Swiss in Westbrook, has seen her patients have great success using topical CBD for pain relief. "I was treating a patient with acupuncture for knee pain from arthritis. She used the oil and got four solid hours of pain relief," she says.

After researching various CBD products, Krete began carrying them in the clinic and has been recommending the topical cream for patients for a year, and using the oil for eight months. Krete says there are plenty of studies showing the efficacy of CBD for ailments including anxiety and schizophrenia.

Despite its benefits, there is little reason for the drug industry to spend the money to do phase three clinical trials on CBD, necessary to bring CBD to the public, because it is not patentable. Phase three trials involve thousands of

patients and can take years to complete.

Krete believes CBD works for pain, inflammation, anxiety and insomnia, and also helps in regulating digestion. She stresses that patients should use CBD as part of an overall treatment plan.

"It is the most reliable thing I've used for pain," Krete says. "As in anything, you have to make sure you are getting it from a good quality source. It can be hard to figure out."

Kayla Tyska, a shoreline yoga instructor, hosts pop-up CBD events that include education about CBD, a yoga class, and the opportunity to try a CBD salve. Tyska believes CBD has improved the quality of her life so much, specifically improving shoulder tendonitis, that she started selling CBD products to her clients and others.

"I'm a walking CBD dispensary," she says.

Tyska first learned about CBD in high school when a classmate was taking it to help improve Crohn's disease. She began taking 50 milligrams a day six months ago after being reintroduced to it by a health coach and author.

Tyska represents the Kannaway brand and says it's important to get CBD from a reliable source.

"Hemp is a bio accumulator and will absorb all the chemicals in the soil around it," Tyska said. "Kannaway is



Participants in a yoga class at Chamard Vineyards in Clinton learn about various CBD products offered by sales representative Kayla Tyska.

one of 13 companies that has the seal from the U.S Hemp Authority Certification Program. There's no standardized testing in this industry. Ninety percent of labels are wrong."

The Kannaway plants are grown in Switzerland, which has more stringent laws about chemicals used on plants than the U.S., and Tyska believes it is some of the purest available.

In addition to using CBD products for themselves, people are also giving them to their pets.

Ellen Botwin, a consultant and retired special education teacher who lives in Guilford, gave CBD oil to her beloved border collie, Archie, who lived to be 15 years and 5 months. The last two years of his life, he had trouble walking, getting up and seemed to be stiff with hip pain. She tried acupuncture and swim therapy, to no avail.

Botwin already had a medical marijuana license and was taking CBD for back pain as well as PTSD. She gets her product from a dispensary and believes it's a pure,

unadulterated medical-grade product. She calibrated the dose of CBD for Archie based on his weight and her knowledge of how much she takes based on her own weight.

"At that time, vets were not allowed to prescribe CBD for dogs or even give an opinion," Botwin says. "I heard vets in California were prescribing CBD, so I just tried it. Sure enough, he was much spunkier and acted like the dog we knew. It was an amazing change. We gave Archie another year of life."

Chelsea Casper of East Berlin, a hospice worker, vapes CBD oil and feels that it elevates her mood and helps with anxiety and insomnia. She gives CBD-infused dog treats to Penelope, her Shiba Inu, especially before a bath or long car ride. The treat seems to make her a little sleepy, a good thing for this high-energy pooch.

"I think it's a miracle drug, and I'm lucky that I can afford to pay for it," Botwin says. "I wish it were available to everyone." 



Alix Boyle is a freelancer who specializes in writing about health, lifestyle topics, features and cannabis. She lives in Madison with her husband and an incorrigible pug named Helen of Troy.



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# The Suite Life

Many LGBTQ-Friendly B&Bs, Guest Houses,  
Inns and Hotels Call Connecticut Home

By DAWN ENNIS

**“The property is not only LGBTQ-friendly,  
it’s pet-friendly, too.”** – Meri Wick, Innkeeper, Westbook Inn



**W**hen you and your honey want a romantic, relaxing getaway, nothing spoils the mood more than finding out the welcome mat isn't out for same-sex couples and transgender travelers.

Hey, it's 2019, people! And, besides, it's the law in Connecticut.

Same-sex marriage has been legal here since 2008, and that has spawned what's estimated to be a \$40 million stimulus for businesses. Yet some bed and breakfasts still subtly suggest through their ads or their websites that their rooms are strictly for straight couples.

After some digging, we found more than a dozen accepting and affirming innkeepers and hoteliers across Connecticut that cater to the LGBTQ community. Some of the owners are gay and lesbian themselves.

### **Westbrook Inn**

**976 Boston Post Road, Westbrook  
(860) 399-4777  
westbrookinn.com**

In March 2019, Meri Wick and her husband Marcus Little took over as innkeepers of the Westbrook Inn, which was built by a sea captain in America's centennial year, 1876. A sprawling property located along the Patchogue River and just two blocks from the beach, this B&B offers kayaking, biking and other activities by day, nine antique-appointed rooms by night, and a sumptuous breakfast every morning, throughout all four seasons.



As you enter, sunlight pours in from a rainbow-colored stained glass window halfway up the stairway. Wick says she and her family are eager to welcome more guests who are lesbian, gay, bi or trans.

"We have had wonderful guests that have already stayed with us who are of the LGBT community," Wick says. "My nephew is part of that community and actually is doing some work for us to help us understand how we can best serve that community."

Back in the day, actors traveling between Boston and New York would spend a night at the Westbrook Inn, and

one of TV's original Brady Bunch "girls" recently did so, Wick says. The property is not only LGBTQ-friendly, it's pet-friendly, too.

Wick, whose career before this was in sales, marketing and human resources for beer companies, has infused the Westbrook Inn with both a vintage feel and modern comforts and conveniences, such as high-speed WiFi and modern adjustable beds adorned with luxurious, triple-sheeted linens. A classic clawfoot tub is quite popular.

"We are looking to introduce people to the experience who maybe haven't felt comfortable going in the past or have never gone in the past. And I think that the concept that you are in a dusty, grandma's place is what we're looking to dispel," she says. "We have many spaces for people to find privacy, even when they're here with other guests and hopefully they feel like family. That's our motto. We want them to enter as guests and leave as friends."

Room rates range from \$139 to \$245 night.

### **Seth Cheney House**

**139 Hartford Road, Manchester  
(508) 237-5791  
sethcheneyhouse.com**

Real estate broker Vincent Breglia and his husband Gordon Siegel split their time between Provincetown and their Manchester B&B, the Seth Cheney House, formerly the Mansion Inn Bed and Breakfast.

The Cheneys were successful silk manufacturers in the mid to late 1800s and built their 13 mansion homes in a 70-acre park-like area in what is now the Historic District of Manchester.

Listed on the National Registry of Historic Homes, the Seth Cheney House boasts five guest suites, including modern upgraded beds, renovated bathrooms – most en suite, some with porches and fireplaces.

Breglia met his husband in P-town on Valentine's Day 25 years ago, and when they bought the Seth Cheney House, he said, they decided they wanted it to be a place where other couples could have their special day. They're celebrating their 15th wedding anniversary this year.



General manager Gary Nagler prides himself on staffing the Inn at Middletown with employees who don't have to be trained in how to be nice. "If you look at our TripAdvisor scores and the comments people write about us," he says, "it's always the staff, the staff, the staff."



"Historically, we have done a lot of same-sex marriages here," Inn at Middletown general manager Gary Nagler says. "To me, a customer is a customer, and I think that's what makes us special."



“There’s not a lot of gay venues for people in the area to get married like we did, in my backyard. We had a beautiful wedding of like 25 to 40 people, and that’s kind of what I wanted here as well. I have hosted a few of them.”

Breglia, who worked to elect and re-elect President Barack Obama, said despite owning the Seth Cheney House for two years, he was stunned to find absolutely zero support from the local chamber of commerce and other business owners.

“I lived in Manchester when I was 20 and I wanted to come back here and do something Pride-friendly, keeping our community together. And I love old homes, I love doing historic renovations,” Breglia says. “It’s been nice to come back here, for me.”

Rooms range from \$200 to \$275 per night.

**Inn at Middletown**  
**70 Main St., Middletown**  
**(860) 854-6300**  
**innatmiddletown.com**

If historic homes aren’t your style, but you want to avoid the run of the mill, how about bedding down for the night in a boutique hotel? We’re



talking upscale, LGBTQ-friendly, like the Inn at Middletown.

What started in 1810 as a bank president’s mansion evolved into an armory for the Connecticut National Guard and is now a luxury landmark inn that flies the rainbow flag proudly.

“Historically, we have done a lot of same-sex marriages here,” general manager Gary Nagler says on a tour of the inn’s spacious suites, pool, workout room and intimate banquet halls. “To me, a customer is a customer, and I think that’s what makes us special.”

He says he prides himself on staffing his hotel with employees who don’t have to be trained in how to be nice. “If you look at our TripAdvisor scores and the comments people write about us,” he says, “it’s always the staff, the staff, the staff.”

Nagler has been G.M. of the Inn at Middletown for 11 years, and came up through the ranks in the hospitality industry as an executive chef starting in New Orleans. He cooked up an extensive renovation two years ago, according to catering sales manager Rachael Puccino.

Deluxe mattresses in the 100 guest rooms and suites feature 300-count linens and plush pillows. You’ll find spa-style double shower heads in the bathrooms and multiple charging outlets throughout every room, along with in-room refrigerators and coffee makers; the executive suites sport shoe buffers.

The inn is located just two blocks from Wesleyan University and is centrally located to everything Middletown has to offer.

“We have tons of great shops and restaurants and everything up and down Main Street,” Puccino says. “But

we also have a restaurant on site as well so this is a busy place.”

Rate varies by season. Call 860-854-6300 for info.

If you’d like to shop around, check out the website [purpleroots.com](http://purpleroots.com), which is a popular resource. Four of the B&Bs on our list, marked with an

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[bushnellhouse.com](http://bushnellhouse.com)

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 (860) 887-7589  
[captaingrants.com](http://captaingrants.com)

**Daniel Rust House B&B**  
 2011 Main St., Coventry  
 (860) 742-0032  
[thedanielrusthouse.com](http://thedanielrusthouse.com)

**Griswold Cottage**  
 296 Boston St., Guilford  
 (347) 564-2938  
[griswoldcottage.com](http://griswoldcottage.com)

**House of 1833\***  
 72 North Stonington Road, Mystic  
 (860) 536-6325 or (800) FOR-1833  
[houseof1833.com](http://houseof1833.com)

**Inn at Harbor Hill Marina**  
 60 Grand St., Niantic  
 (860) 739-0331  
[innharborhill.com](http://innharborhill.com)

**Maron Hotel and Suites\***  
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**Mermaid Inn of Mystic\***  
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**Riverwind Inn**  
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[riverwindinn.com](http://riverwindinn.com)

**Scranton Seahorse Inn\***  
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[scrantonseahorseinn.com](http://scrantonseahorseinn.com)

**Stanton House Inn**  
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[stantonhouseinn.com](http://stantonhouseinn.com)

**Taylor’s Corner Bed & Breakfast**  
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[taylorscornerbnb.com](http://taylorscornerbnb.com)

**The Wallingford Victorian Inn**  
 245 N. Main St., Wallingford  
 (203) 265-1200  
[thewallingfordvictorian.com](http://thewallingfordvictorian.com)

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asterisk (\*), offer discounts if you mention the site when you book. Unfortunately, some of the Purple Roof listings are outdated, with wrong or disconnected numbers for inns that have gone out of business.

An alternative is Global Gay Lodging with more than 30 choices, many of which made our list. There's also Link Pink and Gay Cities, but their listings were bare-boned.

Or, you can always consult an LGBTQ-friendly travel agent. We found Laurie Scott of Wide Horizons Travel through the Connecticut Gay and Lesbian Chamber of Commerce. You can reach Wide Horizons at (860) 510-6740. 



Dawn Ennis is an award-winning journalist who hosts the talk show "RiseUP with Dawn Ennis" and co-hosts the "Before the War" podcast. Ennis was America's first transgender journalist in a TV network newsroom when she came out six years ago. Follow her @lifeafterdawn on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram. Ennis and her family reside in West Hartford, Connecticut.

## 2019 / 2020 SEASON

**The Cherry Orchard**  
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Lee Hall and Marc Norman*

**Men on Boats**  
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**The Wolves**  
*By Sarah DeLappe*

**The Curious Incident  
of the Dog in the Night-Time**  
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FASHION //





# THE BEST COSTUME FOR THE DAY

By MAR JENNINGS

*“... I think this is the best costume for today ... Mother wanted me to come out in a kimono, so we had quite a fight.”*

**M**any of you surely recognize that as a quote from American socialite, fashion model, and cabaret performer Edie Beale, or Little Edie as she’s known, greeting filmmakers while wearing one of her characteristically unconventional but comfortable outfits. Her fashion wisdom and bravery first came to light in the classic 1975 cult film “Grey Gardens” – a documentary by Albert and David Maysles about two aging, eccentric relatives of Jackie Kennedy Onassis (Edie Bouvier Beale and her mother, Edith) in their dilapidated East Hampton, Long Island estate. It was renewed in popularity by an award-winning 2009 HBO dramatization starring Drew Barrymore and Jessica Lange, and that quote was brought to life once again.

The word “costume” has many meanings today. Truth be told, even the conventional clothing we wear is very much a costume, and getting it right sometimes can be both stressful and uncomfortable. Taking the lead from Little Edie, I think that what works best is when you feel empowered in what you’re wearing.

The seasons change and so do the costumes. We layer ourselves up in the winter and strip

ourselves down in the summer months. Along the way, we make purchases that either replace items in our closet or complement them. Costumes, for the sake of this article, are nothing more than the look and feel of the day. Add practicality and sensibility to your choices and you’ll begin your day in the right costume.

For some – including me, I admit – several costumes are required to fill a day. Construction clothing for the makeover show, riding clothing for my English riding lesson, or business attire for those real estate meetings. Each event defines the appropriate costume, and none are interchangeable.

This article title may have made you think about Halloween (or maybe Comic-Con.) Not everyone likes costumes on Halloween but we want to be part of the fun, even if we decide to participate at the last minute. Since it’s the season, let’s dive in.

For me, the most important word for a dress-up costume is comfort. Can I sit in it? Move in it? Drive in it? Navigate a crowd in it? See in it? (Use the restroom in it?!)

I say banish the shame of comfort: embrace mobility and ease! I even brought a more comfortable option to last year’s party and changed after making our entrance and started to overheat. So even if you prefer the “rotting zombie” or “superhero” genres, why not consider the comfort option as a backup?



These types of costumes have another huge benefit: you might be able to shop for them in your own closet, so bring on those last-minute invites. Who has time to run out to the store and rummage around the picked-over remains of party supply stores?

Be resourceful. There are a lot of costumes that can be pulled together using items you probably already own. I am proud to have my brother's U.S. Marine dress uniform. I'm also proud to say that I still fit into it! Use what you have and a little ingenuity.

Here are a few of my successful, fun and comfortable in-a-pinch costume ideas to get your creative juices flowing. (Note: I fully acknowledge the cheesy nature of some of these!)

**Cloudy with a Chance of Rain:**

This costume consists of a blue or white shirt, cotton balls and a plant mister or squirt gun. Affix the cotton balls to the shirt and when someone asks you what you are, spritz them and say: "Cloudy with a chance of rain!"

**Ceiling Fan:** Here you need a shirt you won't mind writing on and a magic marker. Write the words, "Go Ceiling!" or "Hurray for Ceilings!" When someone inquires as to the meaning, tell him or her you are a ceiling fan.

**Moving Target:** This is another simple costume that transforms a T-shirt into a costume with the stroke of a pen. Draw a target symbol on the front of an old shirt and call yourself a "moving target." Alternatively, use the logo from a Target® store bag.

**Sexy Ghost:** Halloween is the time to bring out your wild side. Take that old bedsheet ghost costume to the next level by wearing your bathing suit or other sexy attire over the sheet.

**Static Cling:** This costume requires you to wear ordinary street clothes. Then tape or pin socks and dryer sheets to the outside of your clothing. Voila! You are static cling personified.

**Baby in Pajamas:** Want something that is comfortable, easy and fun? Dress up in your coziest jammies. Do your hair in pigtails. Tie a make-shift bib around your neck using a kitchen towel. Wear your slippers. Pull a lollipop out of the Halloween candy bowl and ham it up!

**Chef:** You don't need a toque to look like a chef. An apron with a few handy kitchen tools is all you need to look the part. Grab a cookie sheet and spatula or pot and ladle as easy chef accessories.

**Librarian:** Have a pair of glasses and a stack of books? Poof, you're a librarian. Ham it up a bit more with a super tidy hairdo and pencil skirt. Put a pencil behind your ear. Remember to shush those who dare raise their voices in your "library," and scowl at people who talk above a whisper.

**Risky Business:** Old movies can be great inspiration for last-minute costumes. A pair of sunglasses, tailored shirt, and white socks can be a great costume – and really risqué, so don't forget the tighty-whities.

**Toga:** Keep the college frat party spirit alive with this classic costume. Tie a sheet over one shoulder and you are

living the Greek life. If you are feeling really adventurous, create a laurel wreath from the branches and leaves that you have in your yard.

These are super simple costumes that you bring to life with your ingenuity and personality. Do not let your ideas be limited to this list. Let these options be a launching point for your own brainstorming. Really have fun with being resourceful, as you look around your house for great, last-minute Halloween costumes. Share what you came up with, and inspire us all right back.

Whether your costume is for fun, for every day, or for expression, everything you choose ends up being a reflection on how you want to be seen. Even RuPaul Charles is famously quoted as reminding us, "We're all born naked and the rest is drag." So I ask you: What's your best costume of the day? 



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# ALLIES FOR THE JOURNEY

*The Transgender Medicine Program at Middlesex Health helps patients navigate the path to happiness*

By CAROL LATTE / Photography by TONY BACEWICZ

**F**or people who are transgender, or even for those questioning their gender, the road to get to where they want – and need – to be is often a long one, with many difficulties along the way. Whether it’s before, during, or after a transition, people of any age may experience not only anxiety and fear of what lies ahead and how others may react, but rejection, discrimination, harassment, and even physical violence.

“The majority of patients that I have seen, particularly those who have lived as the gender they identify with, have faced some sort of aggression – or flat out been assaulted – because of their gender identity,” says Jeffrey Shelton, MD, chair of psychiatry at Middlesex Health. “Stress causes anxiety and depression. And I can recognize that an actual severe clinical depression can develop out of the microaggression, or even overt aggression, that transgender people often experience.”

With so much tumult affecting many transgender patients, he says, addressing not only the physical but the psychological and psychiatric challenges they face is key to their success and future happiness.

Fortunately, help is at hand.

For the past four years, the multidisciplinary team involved with Middlesex Health’s Transgender Medicine Program has been helping patients find their way through the process of dealing with their gender issues, offering wrap-around support that helps them feel safe, heard, and respected. The program is headed by medical director Katy Tierney, MSN, APRN, FNP-BC, an endocrinology specialist who treats hormonal and glandular issues and is widely known for her work. Middlesex cares for more than 900 transgender or gender non-conforming patients, and its program continues to grow.

The program’s staff includes not only Dr. Shelton but a wide variety of practitioners, including other mental health providers, primary care providers, physical therapists, speech therapists, urologists, OB/GYNs, plastic surgeons, occupa-

tional therapists and clinical social workers—just to name a few. Clinical psychologist Angel Roubin, Psy.D., LPC, serves as the program’s navigator and runs a monthly transgender community support group.

When the Transgender Medicine Program began, says Dr. Roubin, “we identified providers in various departments that we felt should be involved. We really wanted to pull together a team to offer comprehensive care. A lot of my patients have started out here with one service, but then slowly decided that they wanted everyone [all of their medical providers] to be in the same healthcare system. It certainly makes collaboration easier.”

As her title implies, Dr. Roubin helps patients to navigate the health care system, make complex care decisions, and cope with emotional issues that might arise before, during, or after transition.

She works closely with Dr. Shelton, who has treated transgender or gender non-conforming patients throughout much of his career and considers himself not only a physician but an advocate for his patients. When patients seek him out, or are referred to him, Dr. Shelton says, “much of that initial visit is just to try to convey an understanding and empathy, and to let them really know that this is a safe place. This is the place where they can get help. This is a place where they can heal, and we have an army of people who support us, who can also help patients along this journey. It’s interesting – very rarely in psychiatry do I say, ‘Go see endocrinology, occupational therapy, and speech therapy as part of the treatment plan.’ But that is absolutely part of the treatment plan.”

While endocrinology offers hormone replacement therapy, other medical specialties can also improve a person’s mental and physical wellbeing. For example, occupational therapist Lisa Gramlich, PT, IMT-C encourages patients to continue exploring their gender identity, affirms their feelings and experiences, and helps them transition into their preferred gender roles. She also teaches them how to deal with bullying and prevent job loss, among other things. Speech and language pathologist Rebecca Burrell, MS, CCC-SLP assists

patients in managing and adapting to changes in their voice as they undergo hormone therapy.

“They’re both just incredibly passionate” about the work they do, Dr. Shelton says of Gramlich and Burrell. “There was this amazing story that Rebecca told about how she’d been working with a patient and in the last session, the patient was reading a story about saying goodbye to her old voice. And literally, as she is telling us this, all of us are crying. It was just so touching.”

## DEALING WITH EMOTIONS

Emotions can run high during a transition journey, both in positive ways and negative ones. Dr. Shelton says for patients, the stress and despair of feeling they are living in the wrong body, being bullied or rejected, and fearing retribution or violence can be overwhelming. “Studies have shown that transgender people are probably the highest risk group demographic for suicide of any demographic in the U.S.,” he notes.

A 2014 study found that 41% of transgender people attempted suicide at least once. Those figures were backed up by a 2018 American Academy of Pediatrics survey, which revealed that nearly 51% of transgender male teen respondents and 30% of transgender female teen respondents had tried to commit suicide at some point. Almost 42% of nonbinary teens, along with 28% of questioning adolescents, also said they had tried to kill themselves.

“The national average is around 7%, so that’s a dramatic increase, and higher than people who live with major depression. That’s a big deal,” says Dr. Shelton.

Patients wishing to undergo gender-affirming surgery are required by their insurance companies to undergo mental health evaluations first, but the benefits of seeing a mental health provider extend far beyond getting approval for those procedures. Drs. Roubin and Shelton say that psychiatric and psychiatric support can be extremely affirming for patients, who often feel that they are “wrong” or “less-than” for having gender dysphoria, due to the way they are judged and treated by society.

At Middlesex Health, patients are reassured that being transgender or gender non-conforming is not a mental illness, and that, if anything, it’s society that has the problem with their identity. In essence, many people need to learn to be more understanding, accepting and supportive.

Still, it can be difficult, even heart-wrenching, to work through all of the obstacles these patients have to face. Some are rejected by family members – even by their parents. Others may find that friends and



Left, Dr. Jeffrey T. Shelton and Dr. Angel Roubin

acquaintances distance themselves or report being treated rudely by strangers. Dr. Shelton says many patients realize they are transgender when they are middle-aged or older, and face having to reinvent their entire lives. Some are married with children and must face possible lack of acceptance or collapsed relationships involving the people they love the most. Most don't know other transgender people, so they feel extremely isolated. Talking things out with a psychiatrist or psychologist can be a lifeline, helping patients make peace with themselves and their decisions.

Middlesex Health's monthly gender discussion group – for transgender people only – is another key resource. Says Dr. Roubin, "I've been hearing from [members] that, 'This is the one time of the month in which we feel safe.' Or, 'It's the only time of month I can come out looking like this.' It's kind of heartbreaking. It is." But the group is a valuable source of both professional and peer support. A separate support group for parents, friends and allies is also held monthly.

Dr. Shelton notes that while he is an advocate for transgender and nonbinary patients, he also has empathy for parents or other loved ones who are struggling with their new reality.

"I want to be compassionate to both sides," he says. "It absolutely is a transition for the family as well. We've had people come to our [family/ally] support group who say, 'I love my child, but I'm having a really hard time calling her him.' And we'll say, 'I'm so glad you're here. Let's talk about that; what are your concerns and what are your fears?' Because there is so much stigma surrounding being trans, or non-conforming, they may have a hard time reaching out to their friends or other people in their lives to talk about it. They may be isolated in their own way. That's why support groups are great because it's like, 'Here's a whole other group of parents who will say, 'Yup, I've been there.'"

As difficult as it may be to accept, at first, that a daughter has become a son, or a brother has become a sister – and as hard as it may be to remember to use new names and different pronouns, they say, it's crucial that the family accepts and supports that person in their journey.

"I have had family members come in who were hostile and unwilling to change," says Dr. Shelton. "And I was like, 'You have a choice: a dead son or a live daughter. That's your choice.' I've seen patients just in huge crisis after rejection from a family member, time and time again, and I've had some parents say, 'Okay, look, you're right. I'm good.' That's really what this boils down to. Your support is that important. Your child has never needed you more – except maybe when they were a week old – than they do right now. They need you in a really intense way, and they're going to lean on you, because who knows who else they might have in their life? You've always been there for them, so to have that yanked out [from underneath them] is really hard."

At the same time, he says, "it's okay for you to need a

transition too. But please don't try and do that by yourself. Go to the support groups. I have a friend whose son came out as transgender and this woman loves her son more than anything but went to a lot of support groups to get there, and now she argues with TSA agents at the airport."

## THE UPSIDE

While it's sometimes easy to focus on the struggles, a tremendous amount of good often comes from the whole process.

Dr. Roubin says once a patient starts hormone therapy or undergoes gender-affirming surgery, they typically feel a sense of relief that they're finally becoming "themselves." Trans males who have top surgery may feel that a weight has been lifted, both physically and emotionally, for example. "But I think that even beyond that, just in terms of their emotional experience, people do feel better. And that's our goal, to try to serve people along that path. So it's not all doom and gloom."

Adds Dr. Shelton, "What an amazing privilege it is to watch the journey and see someone grow in self-acceptance and love, and develop a community of supports – and to see the same thing for family members who are just, like, 'I love my kid, and I will do anything for my child. This isn't easy but I love my daughter, and before, it was always my son.' To see that journey, to me, it's just so exciting."

Dr. Roubin points out that not every trans person experiences gender dysphoria – "particularly younger trans people or people who identify as being binary; they're down with who they are. They might say to me, 'I just want to get on hormones to feel a little more in sync with that, but overall, I feel fine,'" she says.

"I've even heard people use the phrase 'trans euphoria,' once they come to a place where they feel comfortable. They're not dysphoric at all. They're quite happy. One of the hardest parts is getting them to come see you initially."

She says trans or questioning people should know that employees throughout Middlesex Health have received extensive training in gender sensitivity, so patients don't encounter the kinds of uncomfortable questions and situations they may have experienced in other healthcare settings.

And Dr. Roubin is there to guide them through the process. "I always try to make the point of acknowledging that not everyone's journey is the same, and I don't have an agenda for you. However, if and when you're ready, this is how we can help."

"Everyone's transition is individual," agrees Dr. Shelton. "Sometimes, people don't do hormones. Sometimes they change their name; sometimes, they don't. I think that's beautiful. That's great. I'm like, 'Where are you? I want to meet you there as a human being and as a person.'"

For more information, visit [middlesexhealth.org/transgender](http://middlesexhealth.org/transgender) and [middlesexhealth.org/lgbtq](http://middlesexhealth.org/lgbtq). 



# Support + Respect

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# Conducting Herself With Pride

**HSO Musical Director Carolyn Kuan has stepped into the spotlight, personally and professionally**

By CARA ROSNER



When Carolyn Kuan conducts an orchestra, it's more than just a job to her. She doesn't stand on her podium and merely move her arms, ensuring the musicians stay on tempo and play the piece properly. She uses her entire body, coaxing sounds from her musicians through movements – sometimes grand, sometimes barely detectable – that show she truly feels the music. Even her facial expressions convey the jubilation, gravitas, sadness, or tension the music conjures.

She's heavily invested in the entire symphony orchestra experience. She doesn't just want the music to sound good; she wants the audience involved, not merely as spectators and listeners but as part of the action. Conducting, which Kuan currently does as music director of the Hartford Symphony Orchestra (HSO), is one of her life's true passions.

But as a young girl growing up in her native Taiwan, she never really imagined she'd one day become a conductor, let alone that she'd be leading one of this region's largest symphony orchestras. She also never thought she'd be in a loving, committed relationship with a woman.

"I didn't know I was queer at all. Being Asian, you don't even realize the possibility. It's not in

the culture, it's not on TV," she says. "Most Asian countries are very traditional, so the idea that someone would be queer was not even in the realm of possibility."

Kuan, who is 42, had her first girlfriend in college but didn't fully come out as queer until much more recently. Her brother and father, for instance, didn't know she is in a long-term relationship with a woman until about two years ago.

She grew up in Taipei, Taiwan, where her family still lives. In Asia, she says, the LGBTQ community, for the most part, is not highly visible or discussed. It didn't occur to her she would potentially fall in love with women until she attended Smith College, a school recommended to her by a high school mentor. Kuan credits Smith with helping her realize she's queer.

When her father came to visit her at college, she recalls, he assumed her then-girlfriend was merely a roommate.

"I didn't tell my family for the longest time because I wasn't sure how he [my father] would react," she says. A couple of years ago, when Taiwanese leaders began discussing legalizing same-sex marriage (a move the nation ultimately made in May of this year, becoming the first Asian country to do so), she felt compelled to divulge the truth – particularly after seeing her brother post a message on Facebook denouncing same-sex unions.

"That's when I decided, 'I need to come out,'" she says. "So, I sent [my brother] a message on Facebook and said, 'Here's my page, here's my girlfriend.' And that's how I decided to come out."



Her brother was supportive, but urged her not to tell their father.

That was two years ago. Soon after, Kuan began “dropping hints” to her father but “it was a long journey to telling him that people fall in love with whoever they fall in love with.” After six months, she came out to him, but she says he still didn’t fully acknowledge it. Then earlier this year, on a visit to Taiwan, she made it very clear to him.

“I think he’s ok with it,” she says. “I would have no problem bringing Elizabeth home [to Taiwan] with me. She’s the love of my life, and I’m proud of it. I’m a much better person since I met her.”

Kuan and her partner, who she wishes to identify only as Elizabeth, have been together for four years and live in Connecticut.

“I would say I’m fluid in terms of who I like. I believe people fall in love with whoever they like. I think sexuality is a spectrum,” says Kuan.

## FALLING IN LOVE WITH MUSIC

Kuan moved to the United States, alone, when she was a young teen – a decision that would shape the rest of her life.

“My middle school in Taiwan and my high school in America were sister schools, so [the high school] actively came to recruit students in Taiwan,” she says. The States made a quick impression on her during her first trip here in eighth grade, when she participated in a summer study program in Hartford.

“The very first day in class, the teacher said, ‘Feel free to ask questions’ – which, for most of you is perfectly normal,” she says. “It was an amazing moment for a young girl who was very rebellious naturally. Because in Taiwan, you don’t ask questions. You’re not encouraged to be creative.”

After returning home to Taiwan at the end of that summer, she applied to a U.S. high school, unbeknownst to her parents. She was accepted to Northfield Mount Hermon School, a boarding school in Massachusetts, and moved to America at age 14.

“It was there that I fell in love with music,” says Kuan.

Growing up, and even into adulthood, she figured she’d be an investment banker, or have some similar career. Her brother is a banker. But she double-majored in economics and music in college, and life took her on a different path.

“What drew me to conducting, more than anything, was it was the thing I understood the least,” she says. “Math came easy to me, computer science made sense to me. Conducting is a thing where, the more you learn, the more you have questions. I love the passion of it.”

After graduating cum laude from Smith, she earned a Master of Music degree at the University of Illinois and a Performance Diploma from the Peabody Conservatory. During college she also received a scholarship to attend a conductors’ institute at the University of Hartford’s Hart School.

In the back of her mind, and what she kept telling her father, was the notion that she could always fall back on a banking career if she ultimately realized conducting and music weren’t for her. That didn’t happen.

Before coming to the HSO, she was the associate conductor of the Seattle Symphony Orchestra, artist-in-residence at the New York City Ballet, and assistant conductor for the Baltimore Opera Company. She was appointed music director of the HSO in 2011.

When Kuan came out as queer, she gave as much thought about how to tell her symphony family as she did her biological one.

“Symphony orchestra tends to be conservative, and I wasn’t sure how my symphony family would react,” she says, noting the HSO has been supportive. “Before I took her [Elizabeth] out to our first HSO gala, I reached out to some of our board members and told them ahead of time that I met this amazing girl and I think she’s the one I’m going to grow old with.”

## TAKING THE BATON

As music director, Kuan is part of a team





Carolyn Kuan takes a quiet moment to herself backstage at the recent Talcott Mountain Music Festival, where the Hartford Symphony Orchestra performed.

that oversees the HSO's programs each year ("I have the ultimate say, for the most part.") She also, in many ways, is the public face of the orchestra, attending local events and speaking to groups.

Under her leadership, the HSO has changed the way it approaches things.

"We think about our programs from the audience perspective," Kuan says. An example is "Intermix," an occasional program that invites audience members to move around the room and get up close and personal to musicians as they're

playing. In some cases, two ensembles in the same room will play two different pieces of music, and audience members can experience what that sounds like from various vantage points.

"It completely changes how one experiences concerts," she says proudly. "We encourage people to walk around so you can literally create your own experience. If you stand next to the harp, it's going to sound very different than if you stand next to the cymbal."

Intermix has taken place at a brewery, museums, coopera-



Kuan, shown here leading the HSO at the Talcott Mountain Music Festival, says she was drawn to conducting because, “it was the thing I understood the least.”

tive work spaces, and other non-traditional venues.

“I love collaborating with partners, and they don’t always have to be traditional partners,” she says. Once, the orchestra played while an artist made a painting during the concert, inspired by the music. “We’re always thinking about out-of-the-box ideas, how to encourage people to think differently. Art is a way for us to speak, but also for us to think differently. Our music is a way for us to take a journey somewhere else.”

The orchestra, which can range from smaller groups to larger ones of about 100 musicians depending on what’s being performed, has largely been responsive to her unique ideas. The HSO is the second largest orchestra in New England, by budget, behind only the Boston Symphony Orchestra.

“For the most part, I’ve developed trust with our board, our musicians, our staff,” she says. “I’ve been grateful for people’s trust in me to take us on this new and different journey. Since I’ve become the music director, we’ve changed our relationship with the audience. I believe that arts organizations are there to serve their community, so that changes how you program, how you engage with the community, how you engage with your audience.”

## WHERE MUSIC AND LIFE INTERSECT

Kuan also helps spearhead the HSO’s community outreach program, bringing musical experiences to the elderly, Hartford Public School students and others. But her reach extends beyond this region.

In June, she was the conductor for the New York City Opera’s world-premiere production of “Stonewall,” an opera that ran June 21-28 at the Lincoln Center for Performing Arts to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the police raid and riots at The Stonewall Inn in lower Manhattan. The opera, set in 1969, was the first to feature a transgender character specially written for a transgender singer, according to *Playbill* magazine.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 51





Top right photo: The HSO performs at the Talcott Mountain Music Festival. Photos above: Off stage, Kuan lets her hair down.

**“I want to be in environments, jobs, positions that give me the opportunity to make a difference. I want to find places where I can do things and champion ideas.”**





Kuan says: "Even though I just came out about two years ago, more than ever, I feel very strongly about telling people not only that I'm queer but that I am an immigrant and I'm proud of it. I believe diversity is important."

# New Horizons

## Alasdair Neale takes the baton at New Haven Symphony Orchestra

By FRANK RIZZO

“To be honest, it’s not something I’ve given a great deal of thought to over the years,” says Alasdair Neale, the new music director and conductor of the New Haven Symphony Orchestra (NHSO), the fourth oldest in the country.

We are chatting about what being a gay man in the field of classical music is like – and how his own life was conducted.

“I’ve been fortunate having a series of – professionally speaking – long-term relationships [with orchestras] and the subject hasn’t come up a whole lot,” says Neale, 56. “Actually, this is the first interview I’m doing with any gay-based publication.”

Neale, who became the leader of the NHSO in May, says the world of the arts has generally been a more accepting environment for gay people. “Mostly, being gay is met with a shrug,” he says, “so it’s just not an issue. But at the same time, we shouldn’t forget how important it is to come out.”

He also points out that the area of the country where Neale has spent most of his professional life, the San Francisco Bay area, has generally been a beacon for the gay community

“I haven’t run across any instance [of homophobia] so I’ve been lucky, but one shouldn’t forget, though, that there are many areas of this country – let alone the world – where this is not the case,” he says. “Just look at the statistics for suicide among gay and lesbian teens and trans and gays of color. I realize I’ve had a very privileged existence. We are by no means done with this.”

Neale spent his early years growing up near London and when he was 10, his family moved to Edinburgh, Scotland.

“As with many of LGBTQ people of my generation, I thought I might have been ‘the only one.’ That invisibility of gay people is something unthinkable now, but it was very much the case back then, in the ‘70s, and any instances of gay people in public life were usually accompanied by either scorn or pity. I definitely felt a sense of isolation because there really wasn’t anybody to talk to about it.”

Music, he says, was his passion “and became the focus of my life. That’s where I poured my energies. I don’t remember anybody being out of the closet in high school and pretty much even when I was at the university.”

Neale, who spent six years at the Yale School of Music, graduating in 1985 with a master’s in conducting, says he didn’t come out until he was in New Haven – “and not even



as a student, but rather as a member of the faculty with the Yale Symphony. It was kind of gradual, with more and more people knowing, and so by the time I got to San Francisco, I was pretty comfortable with the whole idea.”

He met his future husband, Dr. Lowell Tong, a psychiatrist, at a San Francisco Symphony reception. “I saw him across the room and he saw me. He was with a friend and we chatted for a while, and of course I thought he was cute.”

He recalls, “Lowell did something uncharacteristically forward for him. A friend prodded him to ask me out for a date but Lowell said, ‘He could be married with three children, for all I know. I don’t know if he’s gay or straight.’ So he wrote me a nice letter and asked me if I would like to have dinner or drinks with him sometime. I got back to him and said, ‘Yes, please – both.’ This was January of 1995. We married in 2008. But the fact that Lowell and I are now legally married is a wonderful thing but it’s not like, ‘OK, we’ve done that and there’s nothing more to see here, folks.’”

When asked about identifying classical composers who were or might have been gay, Neale says it’s more relevant “to see [gay artists] that are alive and well and successful right now – and who are out and proud. I think that’s more important than knowing that one of the great artists 600 years ago was gay. Well, yes, that’s great too, but I think it’s much more important for people in current times to be visible. That’s the thing I missed growing up. It was the invisibility. We shouldn’t underestimate that. Who knows? There could be some kid growing up somewhere that is facing pressure from home who sees our gay, successful LGBTQ people and thinks, ‘Well, maybe I can be like that, too. Maybe what I’m being told is b.s. and there’s nothing wrong with me, that I can be my own self and be happy and successful.’”

That sounds like young Neale talking to his future self.

“I would have liked that growing up,” he says. “It would have made me feel a little bit better, more confident a little sooner. But it could have been a lot worse – and in some places it still is for a lot of people where life is very hard if you’re young and gay.”

Does he feel like a role model?

“There is the potential of being a role model because you never know who is in the audience – and the effect that that has.” 



Hear more from Carolyn, in her own words, on the *Connecticut Voice* Podcast with Chion Wolf (episode 3), available at [ctvoicemag.com](http://ctvoicemag.com)

Whether it's here, at the Talcott Mountain Music Festival, or anywhere else the HSO takes her, it's clear Kuan loves her job.

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 46

"It's one of the most amazing artistic experiences I've had," says Kuan. "As a conductor, what drives me is feeling that I can make a difference. The entire cast, it felt like we were making a difference. The stories in 'Stonewall,' even though they happened 50 years ago, it feels like it could happen today. Especially in the world we live in right now – the attacks on minorities, the attacks on the LGBTQIA – I feel like we're losing what little rights people have fought so hard for. [With the opera,] it felt like we were at least doing our part to share our story, and to encourage conversations. That was the point. People were laughing and crying throughout the show. As artists, that's our job, to speak our truth and give voice to people who may not be able to be heard."

Looking ahead, Kuan says her main goals are to feel fulfilled, both professionally and personally.

"I want to grow old with my partner; I want us to have a life together," she says of Elizabeth, who is a communication and relationship coach specializing in working with LGBTQ individuals. "I want to be in environments, jobs, positions that give me the opportunity to make a difference. I want to find places where I can do things and champion ideas."

And she's as comfortable in her own skin as she is on stage.

"I'm very proud of telling people that I'm queer now," she says. "Even though I just came out about two years ago, more than ever, I feel very strongly about telling people not only that I'm queer but that I am an immigrant and I'm proud of it. I believe diversity is important. We are an important part of society." 



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DELICIOUS //

# Made with *Love*

**At AMOR, food is more than a business –  
it's a passion**

*Written by* **MAKAYLA SILVA** / *Photography by* **TODD FAIRCHILD**

**G**abriella da Silva-Taylor and her wife Mal launched their Hartford-based catering company – serving gourmet, plant-based food rooted in all things vegetable – in the name of love. AMOR is the passion-driven project of two women who are partners in both business and in life.

Realizing the need for locally sourced plant-based foods, the couple dreamed of catering to the growing demand for meat- and dairy-free foods with inventive dishes inspired by their travels, families and love of food.

“I think there’s a misconception about vegan and plant-based food that is quickly changing – that vegan food is hippie food. It’s salad,” Gabriella says. “But it doesn’t have to be that way. Treat vegetables like you would meat; it’s how you flavor it and cook it and prepare it.”

As the plant-based diet continues to gain traction

worldwide, evidence suggests it’s more than a fad. Millennials and Generation Z are largely behind this shift in thinking and in eating. While the vegan way of life may not yet be the norm, it becomes more popular every year as veganism gets a much-needed image reboot.

With meat- and dairy-free options now much more readily available – and, frankly, downright tasty – becoming vegan doesn’t have to mean munching on alfalfa sprouts while your friends sink their teeth into bacon cheeseburgers.

“Most restaurants these days are at least providing a vegan option. For me growing up, that wasn’t even an option,” says Gabriella, head chef at AMOR. Raised in Los Angeles, she has been a vegetarian since before birth, dating back to her vegetarian mother’s pregnancy.

As the eldest of five, she taught herself to cook and developed an unwavering passion for food, drawing culinary inspiration from her vegetarian mother and



Gabriella da Silva-Taylor (left) and her wife Mal (right) are partners in life and business, so it's fitting they'd name their eatery AMOR.



AMOR's confections, like this cupcake held by Gabriella da Silva-Taylor, are too pretty to eat - almost.

two grandmothers – one of Mexican descent, the other a native New Englander.

When she later discovered she had an allergy to eggs, making plenty of foods off-limits, including birthday cake, Gabriella trained herself to create modified versions of the meals and treats that would otherwise be forbidden. Years later, her self-taught skills, combined with a passion for good food, would come together in the name of AMOR.

But let's go back to the beginning. Or the middle.

Ten years ago, living in Vermont, Gabriella Taylor was planning a return to the West Coast. But at her going-away party in North Hampton, just two weeks before heading back to Los Angeles, she met a woman from Hartford by the name of Mal da Silva, who would become her wife just three months later.

"I literally never left. And it was the best decision I've ever made in my life," Gabriella says. "It was a leap of faith."

Born and raised in Santa Catarina, Brazil, Mal had moved to Hartford to live with her brother and had been working as a DJ. She says when she first saw Gabriella, the stars aligned.

"When you know, you know," she says.

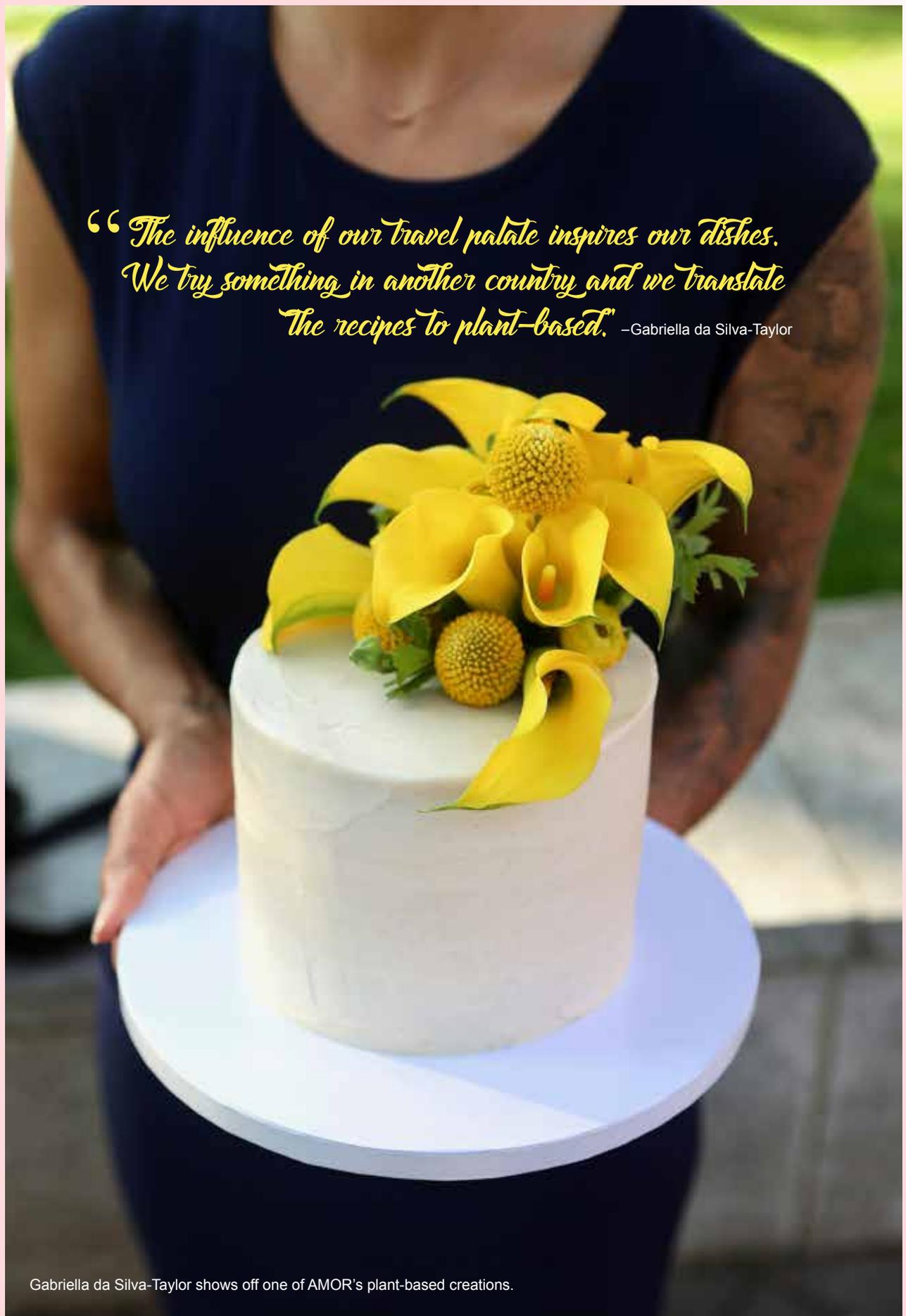
They married at Hartford City Hall just 90 days after meeting. The couple took a combination of their maiden names – da Silva Taylor – as their common legal surname and planted their roots in Connecticut.

Gabriella began catering and working as a personal chef, servicing clients in West Hartford and local venues like Real Art Ways and West Hartford Yoga, and working as a raw chef at Alchemy next to Trinity College, Red Lentil in New Haven, and Six Main in Chester.

"Right after that, we decided to open our food truck. We thought, 'Why don't we try to do something just for us?'" Mal says.

The pair got started with their food truck venture, originally dubbed The G-Stream, but quickly rebranded

*“The influence of our travel palate inspires our dishes. We try something in another country and we translate the recipes to plant-based.”* –Gabriella da Silva-Taylor



Gabriella da Silva-Taylor shows off one of AMOR's plant-based creations.

as AMOR (“love” in both Spanish and Portuguese).

The brightly colored turquoise and red truck traveled to large-scale farmers’ markets – in Wethersfield on Thursdays and Coventry on Sundays – with a rotating menu featuring street-food classics made with local and organic ingredients.

And let’s be honest, who doesn’t love street food classics, from burgers to grilled cheese to tamales? But what’s a vegan to do?

Serving up authentic veganized dishes like an Un-Beet-Able Burger (made with beet burger, tomato, avocado crema cashew cheese, and greens, and served with a side of baked home fries), the food truck served as a canvas for creative cooking.

Mashing up indulgent favorites like pumpkin-spiced whoopie pies or cinnamon sugar donuts, Gabriella has mastered the art of serving wholesome yet familiar veganized foods reminiscent of those we enjoyed growing up.

Vegan food inspired by Italy, Portugal, and Brazil seems almost like an impossibility, given that these regions tend to offer a heavy, meaty cuisine. Yet Gabriella and Mal don’t just pull it off. They do it so well that you don’t even notice the missing meats, eggs or dairy.

“The influence of our travel palate inspires our dishes. We try something in another country and we translate the recipes to plant-based. Like a Hummingbird Cake we discovered in Australia or a Brazilian potato salad. We are forever translating recipes,” Gabriella says.

Favorite dishes include a vegan potato salad; roasted polenta with vegetables; and the Bangin’

Beet Salad, with beets, carrots, apples and raisins on a bed of arugula, maple pepitas and lemon-maple dressing.

And no one misses out on dessert – despite the absence of eggs or butter – after sampling a luscious triple-chocolate baked doughnut with chocolate glaze and a scattering of chocolate shavings.

“We wanted to provide delicious, healthy, plant-based food and you can really only do that from scratch,” Gabriella says.

AMOR specializes in raw cashew-based cheesecakes that are to-die-for, Mal says. “Usually I have two for my birthday; I can’t make up my mind,” she jokes.

Creating celebration cakes for birthdays, anniversaries, or events is Gabriella’s first love.

“For me, I don’t like to be pigeonholed,” she says. “It’s about the creative process and what the client wants. Maybe they had something they grew up with

that is a favorite cake but they’ve never had it vegan. So I’m able to help facilitate what they’re missing because we all have our comfort foods. And making cakes is my first love.”

But after four years, the couple made the decision to close their food truck at the end of 2017 to focus on catering and private chef services.

“With the food truck, you compromise yourself and your life with a demanding schedule. Whether it’s every Saturday or every Thursday, you are tied to a schedule,” Mal says. “When it came to the summer season, there were so many catering events and weddings, we couldn’t manage the food truck as well. So we needed to make a change that was



Mal da Silva-Taylor (left) and Gabriella (right) stand in front of Hartford City Hall.



AMOR makes doughnuts to order for private events, in flavors like hibiscus, lemon lavender and triple chocolate.

in the best interest of our business and our life.”

Transitioning out of the food truck and into a more flexible career in catering and special events allows for plenty of travel – three to four international trips each year, in fact.

“Traveling is everything. It’s the cuisine, the culture, the people. When you’re in that open mind of the unknown, new things, it’s amazing. I don’t think there’s anything greater than travel. It opens your mind, your heart, your perspective,” Mal says.

Operating out of the shared commercial kitchen space at Hands On Hartford on Bartholomew Avenue, AMOR continues to craft creative vegan dishes that rival anything grandma makes, for clients from all over New England and New York.

The AMOR menu is a moving target, but dishes like Tofu Banh Mi, Turmeric & Spinach Ravioli filled with Roasted Sweet Potato and Kale, and Enchiladas with Papián Verde, Avocado Mango Salsa, Arroz a la Mexicana, and Frijoles

Negros are typical of their veg-friendly efforts.

The duo is looking for a more flexible kitchen space that could lend itself to the production of half-baked plant-based meals to go.

“When we sold the truck, there were so many of our regulars who were like, ‘We want your food and where do we get it?’ After having a little bit of a break and thinking about how we can make it work so that more people can access plant-based meals, we’re looking for opportunities for a flexible kitchen space to craft build meals from scratch to go, catering to people with dietary restrictions,” Gabriella says.

And yes, you can still get the doughnuts. Lemon lavender, vanilla beach, hibiscus, blueberry and even the triple chocolate are made to order in large batches for your private event.

“The secret ingredient is love. Everything is made with love at AMOR,” Mal says. 



Makayla Silva has been a storyteller since she opened her first Limited Too diary in 1997. She is a freelance writer and lives along the shoreline in Southwestern Connecticut with her two children. When she’s not writing, she can be found collecting seaglass, rearranging furniture and nurturing her caffeine addiction.





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NCAA track and field champion CeCé Telfer, center, marched with Andraya Yearwood of Cromwell and other LGBTQ athletes in L.A. Pride Parade in West Hollywood, Calif. on June 9, 2019. Photo by Haley Videckis

# A QUESTION OF FAIRNESS

## Trans women athletes often bear the brunt of hatred and vitriol

Written by DAWN ENNIS

**T**hree teenage girls from Connecticut are the unlikely combatants embroiled in a ferocious debate that has divided athletes, fans, feminists, clerics, pundits, and parents around the world: the issue of transgender inclusion in sports.

At the core of this controversy looms one overarching question: What is fair? That word means different things to different people, depending on which side of the debate you're on.

On one side, there is a female student athlete who argues she should not have to compete against transgender girls.

On the other side are two girls who are trans, and the private, nonprofit organization that serves as the lone governing body for all of the interscholastic athletic activities throughout the state: the Connecticut Interscholastic Athletic Conference (CIAC). CIAC rules state that trans student athletes can compete according to their gender identity. A similar policy is in effect for high schoolers across New England, in New York, and in several other states.

The CIAC policy follows Connecticut's anti-discrimination law. But in an ironic twist, the opponents of trans inclusion say the anti-discrimination policy is discriminating against girls who are cisgender, meaning that they identify with the gender they were assigned at birth.

To best understand the genesis of this standoff, let's go



Terry Miller of Bloomfield, left, and Andraya Yearwood of Cromwell, are entering their senior year of high school. Photo courtesy of Terry Miller and Andraya Yearwood

back to May 2017, when these three young women competed in the Middletown Varsity Invitational. The results of that meet sparked the firestorm that has made headlines around the world.

### "WE HAVE NO CHANCE AT WINNING"

Selina Soule of Glastonbury, 16, placed sixth in the Middletown event, behind two trans girls and three other female athletes. Soule is cisgender.

"It's just really frustrating and heartbreaking, because we all train extremely hard to shave just fractions of a second off of our time. And these athletes can do half the amount of work that we do, and it doesn't matter," Soule told the *Wall Street Journal*. "We have no chance of winning."

Terry Miller, 17, of Bloomfield finished first, followed by Andraya Yearwood of Cromwell, now 18.

Both are transgender sprinters. That result inspired a crusade by Soule and her mother, Bianca Stanescu, to stop the CIAC from allowing trans girls to compete with cis girls.

"It is unfair because it's only calling for girls to have the right of participation, but not the right to succeed," Stanescu said in a telephone interview with *Connecticut VOICE*. "And that should not be the case. Girls should have the chance to succeed, not just boys."

Stanescu, like many opponents of transgender inclusion, frequently refer to Yearwood, Miller and other female trans



Terry Miller, left, and Andraya Yearwood, have finished first and second in many of their races, but they haven't won them all. Photo courtesy of "Changing The Game"

athletes as "boys" and "biological males."

Stanescu launched an online campaign in June 2018. Her petition failed to get any traction until earlier this year, when her daughter started appearing on Fox News. Soule posted a video to YouTube about her experience that she says she made "so this won't happen to other girl athletes in the United States." Lesbian tennis pioneer Martina Navratilova waded into the debate and shared a link to Soule's video with her 283,000 followers.

Unfortunately for Stanescu, her petition remains far short of reaching its goal. "People are afraid to sign it," Stanescu says. As of press time, it had garnered only 204 signatures.

### A COACH'S PERSPECTIVE

*Connecticut VOICE* asked a track coach to review Stanescu's claims. Zach Emerson, head coach of Franklin Pierce University in New Hampshire, coached the very first NCAA transgender champion in track and field, CeCé Telfer, to victory in the 400-meter this past May. As a father of girls, Emerson says he feels for Stanescu, who is upset that her daughter placed sixth in the Middletown meet instead of fourth; she says it's because Miller and Yearwood finished 1st and 2nd.

"I would never say that what she feels is wrong," says Coach Emerson. "But I think if you asked any college coach about that argument, they would laugh at that." All that

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really matters, he explains, is whether runners improve their time.

“We don’t look at finishes, we don’t look at who’s a state champ, we look at what their time was,” he says.

What do scientists say?

Yale University bioethicist Katrina Karkazis told VICE News in May she’s seen no “evidence that going through a male-typical puberty will necessarily give trans women or transfeminine individuals an advantage” over cisgender women.

But in July, New Zealand researchers published a paper that concluded that trans women and cisgender men are “unfairly advantaged” over cisgender women and trans men, based on testosterone levels and other factors.

Who’s right? Both sides in the debate over transgender inclusion can only agree on one thing: more research is needed.

### HELP FROM A “HATE GROUP”

On June 18, the Alliance Defending Freedom (ADF), a Christian legal advocacy nonprofit organization, joined the fray.

Labeled an extremist hate group by the Southern Poverty

Law Center, the ADF filed a complaint on behalf of Soule and two unnamed Connecticut student athletes, with the federal Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights. Their attorneys called the CIAC policy “illegal discrimination,” and claim it violates Title IX of the Education Amendments Act of 1972.

The ADF misgendered Miller and Yearwood throughout its announcement on Fox News, and in the complaint, as “two biological males.”

“Between them, they have taken 15 women’s state championship titles (titles held in 2016 by 10 different Connecticut girls) and have taken more than 40 opportunities to participate in higher level competitions from female track athletes in the 2017, 2018, and 2019 seasons alone.”

In August, the U.S. Department of Education approved the investigation.

“I’m grateful that the Office of Civil Rights has agreed to investigate our complaint,” Bianca Stanescu told *Connecticut Voice*, “because girls deserve to compete on an equal and fair playing field and shouldn’t become spectators in their own sport.”

In their response, Miller and Yearwood noted that



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discrimination is something they know all about. “I have faced discrimination in every aspect of my life and I no longer want to remain silent,” said Miller. “I am a girl. ... There is a long history of excluding black girls from sports and policing our bodies. I am a runner and I will keep running and keep fighting for my existence, my community and my rights.”

Yearwood said in a statement, “I have known two things for most of my life: I am a girl and I love to run. There is no shortage of discrimination that I face as a young black woman who is transgender. I have to wake up every day in a world where people who look like me face so many scary and unfair things. I am lucky to live in a state that protects my rights and to have a family that supports me. This is what keeps me going. ... I will never stop being me! I will never stop running!”

Soule has the ADF; and Yearwood and Miller have the New Haven Pride Center and 15 other state organizations, including the ACLU, all of which signed a statement of solidarity in support of the trans student athletes.

Stanescu says she, too, supports the rights of transgender students to identify as they see fit.

“Someone’s freedom of expression or someone questioning their gender, in a normal, everyday school environment, it’s perfectly acceptable,” she says. “Nobody should have an issue with that. However, athletics should be treated differently.”

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“I don’t understand how you can say, ‘I can be who I want to be, however I can’t [run] track with the females.’ That means you don’t accept me for who I really am.”

---

But Miller says: “I don’t understand how you can say, ‘I can be who I want to be, however I can’t [run] track with the females.’ That means you don’t accept me for who I really am.”

Miller transferred to Bloomfield High School from Bulkeley High in Hartford, and since then she has seen her times improve – and the hatred she faces increase.

“When we first went viral, it was new for me,” says Miller. “I was sad. I read through the comments [online] and wow, it shows how cruel people can be.”

Eventually, she says, she got over it. “I took it and I stored it, so every time I ran, I just left it all on the track, and it built my character. Now I can say I’ve been through that, so I can go do anything.”

Miller says she’s always known she is a girl. “Since I could talk,” she says. Although she didn’t begin her transition until sophomore year, she came out to her mother



when she was in eighth grade.

Running is her favorite thing to do, other than shopping, Miller says. She is so fast in her sport, *Hartford Courant* sportswriter Shawn McFarland tweeted in April, “What didn’t Terry Miller win?”

In an article, McFarland calls her “one of the most accomplished indoor track athletes in the state,” and the All-Courant girls’ indoor track and field athlete of the year. McFarland also noted that Miller at one point “held the No. 2 time in the country for the 55-meter dash.”

While critics say statistics prove that trans athletes are dominating or “destroying” girls’ sports, the fact is, she wasn’t faster than the cisgender girl ranked No. 1. And



Mack Beggs of Texas is a trans man who was forced to wrestle girls in high school because of a state law. His story is documented in the film, "Changing The Game." Photo courtesy of "Changing The Game"

Miller's best time in that event, 6.91, currently ranks her fourth in the country, behind three cis female athletes.

"I can be beaten," Miller says. "A few times, I have been beaten. I feel like we all have things that we need to work on, and I try to focus on the things I need to work on."

### **"WE FEED OFF EACH OTHER"**

Fortunately for Miller, she is not alone in her battle to be recognized, respected, and accepted. In many of the state competitions she has run, Yearwood from Cromwell High has finished a close second, challenging Miller to run faster.

"We feed off each other," Miller says, adding that they've

become fast friends instead of just fast competitors. "We have a lot in common."

Miller and Yearwood both took part in a roundtable discussion at GLSEN's headquarters in Manhattan in April. GLSEN stands for the Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network, which bills itself as "the leading national education organization working to create safe schools for ALL students." The roundtable followed the Tribeca Film Festival world premiere of Michael Barnett's documentary film, "Changing the Game," about three teen trans athletes: Yearwood, skier Sarah Rose Huckman of New Hampshire, and wrestler Mack Beggs of Texas.



From left to right, Mack Beggs, Andraya Yearwood, Sarah Rose Huckman and Terry Miller met reporters in New York City to discuss the challenges they face and to promote the documentary film in which they appear. Photo by Dawn Ennis

“I feel like there’s a different advantage that each person has,” said Yearwood.

“And we lose sometimes, too,” Miller interjected.

“Yeah, exactly!” exclaimed Yearwood. “We don’t come first in every race but some people make it seem like we do.”

“A lot of the people that we compete with come over to me and say, ‘You’re so brave,’ and it’s just shocking, because I would expect our generation to go crazy,” said Miller. “But it’s not them.” The older generations, she said, are their most vocal and prolific antagonists.

“Well,” added Yearwood, with a wry smile. “They’ll be gone soon.”

## WOMEN OF COLOR

At the roundtable, Huckman, Miller and Yearwood each spoke about being women of color, and the additional perils Miller and Yearwood face given the national epidemic of violence against black trans women.

“It does worry me,” says Ngozi Nnaji of Middletown, Andraya Yearwood’s mother. She spoke with *Connecticut VOICE* about the obstacles her daughter faces as a trans woman of color.

“What I try to tell her is that it’s about awareness, the reality of her life, and how society might respond to her. [I also explain] how it gets compounded because she’s transgender, and she’s an athlete who’s out, and she’s black,” says Nnaji.

“The one thing that she can do and she has been doing, to help people understand,” she says, “is just to be herself.”

Earlier this year, Yearwood invited *Connecticut VOICE* to meet her father, Rahsaan, his wife, Shannon, and her six siblings at her dad’s Cromwell home.

Yearwood says as far back as first grade, she recalls wearing princess dresses and bringing a princess backpack to school. In fifth grade, she accessorized with pink and purple boots. Reactions made her realize, “What I had been doing wasn’t the norm.”

## “Being able to advocate, and to support and help other people. I do take pride in my being transgender.”

But Yearwood could not be swayed from becoming who she is. “I didn’t let being different hinder me from getting what I wanted.”

With the full support of family and friends, Yearwood started her transition in middle school. In 2017, she started running track on the high school girls’ team and joined the cheerleading squad. She turned 18 in August and told the *Courant* she’s been undergoing hormone treatment for some time.

Without getting into details about her private medical history, Yearwood told *Connecticut VOICE* she’s looking forward to the next step in her transition.

“I’m more happy with myself because of who I am, who I have become,” she says. “I am excited for the future, knowing that future changes will happen.”

Her father adds that he took Stanescu out for coffee to talk about her petition.

“I tried explaining to her as someone who was an athlete in college,” Rahsaan says, that “colleges look at the body of work. There’s never any one race or one game. But in her mind, you know, she thinks, ‘You’re

taking opportunity away from my daughter because you’re here.’”

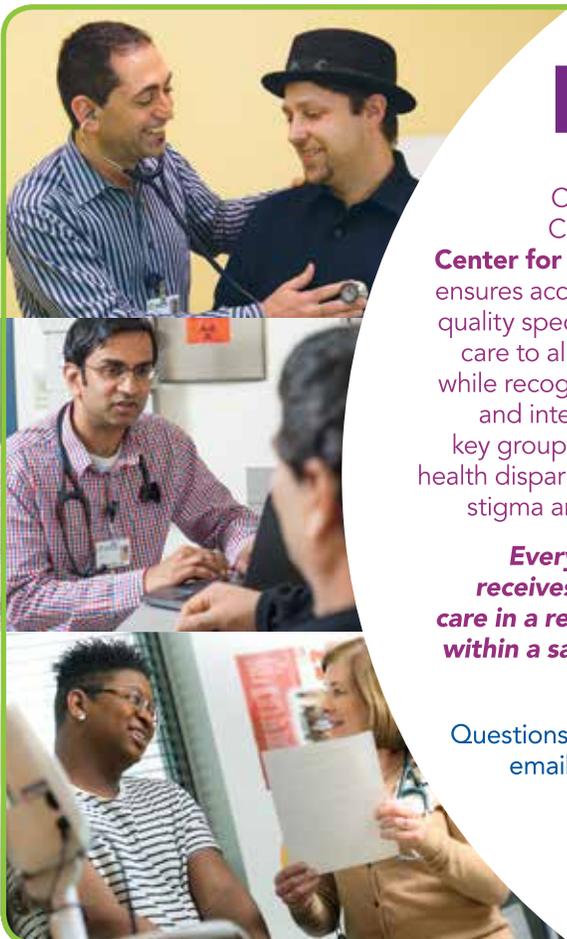
“Runners who can’t afford to attend regionals and nationals are also being excluded,” says Rahsaan, “and yet they find ways to make sure college coaches know who they are.”

### TRANSGENDER PRIDE

In June, Yearwood took a break from homework, track and traveling the nation promoting the documentary, to march in her first-ever Pride parade in West Hollywood, Calif. She also spoke at an international LGBTQ athlete conference at UCLA called Outsports Pride.

While other trans athletes say they’d prefer to be labeled as just athletes instead of “trans athletes,” Yearwood says she sees a huge upside to her living authentically as an out trans girl.

“Being transgender has afforded me so many opportunities,” Yearwood says. “Being able to advocate, and to support and help other people. I do take pride in my being transgender.” 



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Picnicker in furs: "I made my own paws, ears and tails," says the Rocky Hill gay, trans man whose fursona is Ace Husky.

# ANIMAL INSTINCT

## Furries share passions for animals, philanthropy, and acceptance

By JANE LATUS / Photography by TODD FAIRCHILD and STAN GODLEWSKI

If you go down to the woods today, you're sure of a big surprise. Especially if the woods are in Manchester's Wickham Park, because today is the day the teddy bears – and otters, foxes, mice, cats, dragons, rabbits and leopards – have their picnic.

It's a gorgeous June Saturday for the 6th Furry Picnic, and nearly 150 furries of all ages are there, some in fursuits and others wearing tails, paws, ears, masks, or a badge with an artist's depiction of their furry self.

Family-reunioners in nearby pavilions are in for a treat. "What is this?!" they say as they wander over to see fuzzy, colorful, critters barbecuing and throwing Frisbees. Some end up joining in, says picnic organizer Kasi Frost of Bristol (aka *Vulpes Automata*, an arctic fox).

And why wouldn't they? Being a furry is fun. It is also, furries say, life-changing.

"Who doesn't wish to be sly like a fox, roar like a lion, and howl like a wolf?" says Kar, a purple-eyed gray wolf (Jon McMurray, formerly of New Britain and now Maryland) who credits being a furry with easing his social anxiety and a new way of life. "I've definitely made lifelong friends," he says, including "people I tell stuff to I never would have told anyone in a million years."

Before, says Kar, "I hardly went

outside. I went to work, home, bed, repeat. Now I'm going out a whole lot and am excited about going out. It changed my life. It's definitely about having friends, but it's also about having a support network. It's also how I met my partner."

The picnic is annual, as are two other Connecticut events. In August, furries meet at Camp Tiny Paws in Danbury for crafts and summer camp fun. Every October, approximately 1,400 furries convene in Cromwell for Furpocalypse.

But furries are a social bunch. You'll frequently find them eating at Town Line Diner in Rocky Hill, bowling at Spare Time in Bristol, or going for spur-of-the-moment walks. Passersby do double-takes, and kids run up asking for hugs.

### Furries are ...

Furries are fans of anthropomorphic animals, portrayed in community-created media including drawings, video games, costumes, animé, music, fiction and usually a fursona that expresses an extension of themselves.

Kar "gravitated to wolves because I have a very strong sense of friends and packs. That's what I always

"Even if you're not wearing a costume, you get to behave like you are," says Tony Bassette, Jr., with wife Miss Cellaneous Mouse (aka Tara Bassette) of Colchester.





Fursuits not required: Badges bearing your name, a tail, a mask – any way of expressing your fursona will do. At the Furry Picnic, L to R: Devi, Sombra, Zima, Iffy (kneeling), Steel Rhodes and Polar.

wanted growing up, so that’s naturally what I settled on.”

Flash Bluewolf of Meriden (who prefers not to use his real name) describes his fursona as “a carefree wolf who’s fun and easygoing. My fursona is my goal. In literal life I’m not this, but this is how I want people to see me.”

Furries are similar to cosplayers, Comic-Con goers, Trekkies and sports fans, but are – no offense to the others – more creative; they produce their own content. Furries are more participatory. And the community grew by decentralized organizing, rather than in response to a big-name show or movie.

Furries are also predominantly LGBTQ, not surprising for a group that values originality. Plus, if you already accept others’ identities, extending that to their interests – say, dressing like a dragon – isn’t a reach. Says Vex Zorro, a blue, black and purple fox (Jeremy Gagnon of Massachusetts), “I can be myself. I can relax without having to worry about being discriminated against, a fear I had when I first realized I was gay.”

Ask furries to describe their community, and they hit on these major themes: love of animals, art, charity and friendship.

Voxel (who chooses not to use his real name), a red and black fox from Massachusetts who attends many furry events in his native Connecticut, explains: “Beyond having people to share the general interest of anthropomorphic animals with, I like that it’s full of gender and sexual minorities. That alone makes me feel more welcome in this community. Inter-

acting with other furries has made me a less socially anxious person,” which has spilled over into the rest of his life, he adds. “It’s made me a more confident person.”

He says, “The other thing I like about the fandom is it’s so artistic, so creative in many ways. You get to know lots of talented people, like artists and dancers. Also, there’s the whole charity aspect.

“It’s more enriching than I’d expected,” he continues. He goes out a lot now, to barbecues, walks and bowling. Tomorrow, he says, he’s picking up an Ikea bed frame and will try to assemble it himself. “If not, I’ll need to enlist a local furry!”

Furries share many stories of helping each other, from mentoring to crises. “You have a community that cares whether you succeed,” says Frost.

## Learning the Lingo

There are some useful terms for normies (non-furries) to know:

**Furry fandom:** the furry community

**Fursona:** a self-created animal character with whom one identifies, often designed around real or idealized aspects of themselves, and used as an avatar

**Mates:** romantic partners or spouses

**Gray muzzles:** senior furries

**Badge:** a drawing, worn on a lanyard, depicting one’s fursona

**Fursuit:** a costume representing one’s fursona, worn by



"More than anything, we're a community," says Izar, who organizes the monthly FurBowls in Bristol. Many furies he knows have experienced trauma, and find friendship and support in the fandom.

## A DAY OF G.I.F.T.S.

Middlesex Health is holding a special event for the transgender community in November, called **A Day of G.I.F.T.S.** — Gathering Information for the Transgender Community to Support Health & Wellbeing. On Nov 2, medical experts from Middlesex Health, businesses that offer products for members of the LGBTQ+ community, and special guest speakers will be at Middlesex to provide education about, and access to, resources that are available in the community.



**Date: November 2, 2019**

Time: 10 a.m. to 2 p.m.

Location: Bardenheier Center at Middlesex Hospital, 28 Crescent Street, Middletown

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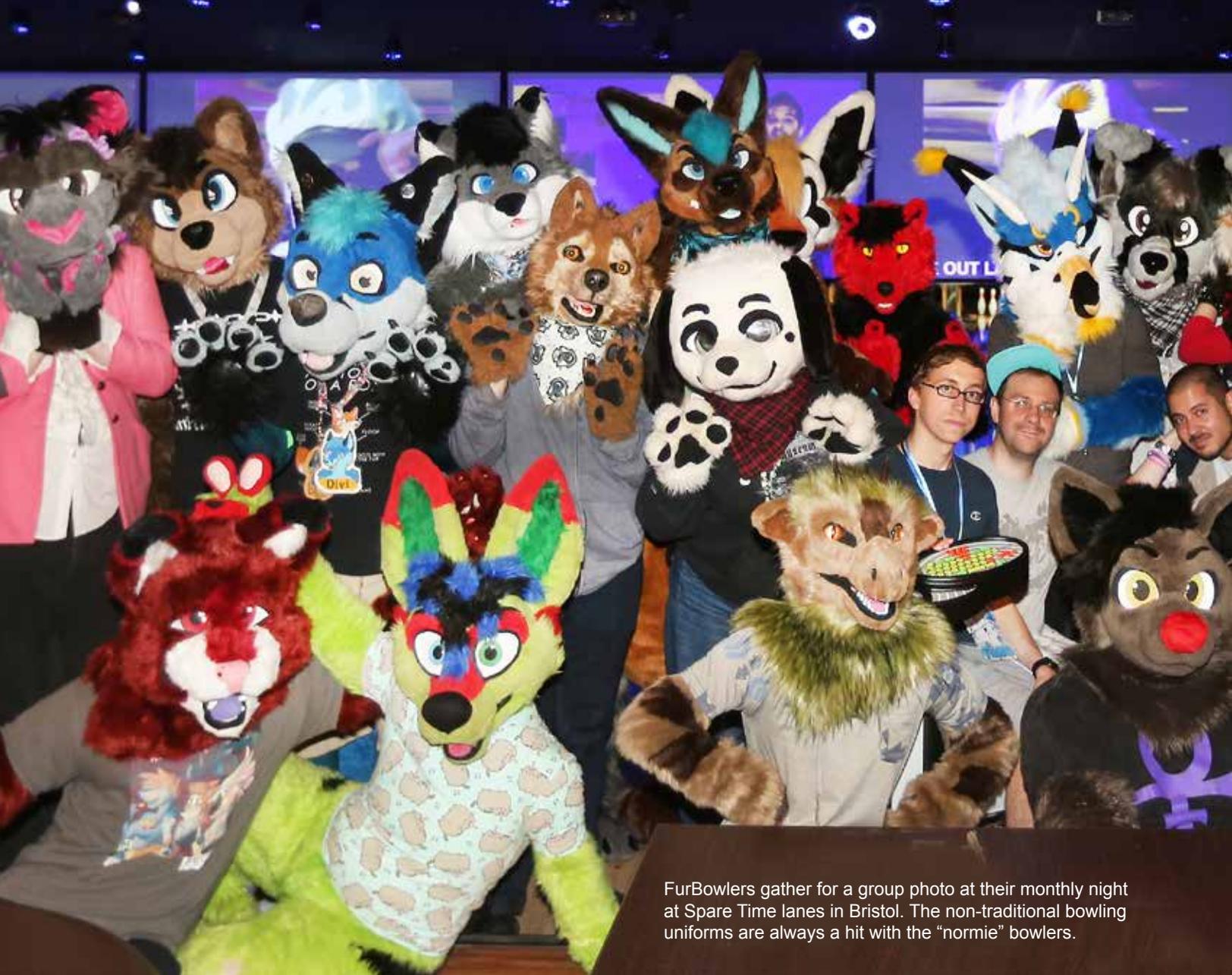
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FurBowlers gather for a group photo at their monthly night at Spare Time lanes in Bristol. The non-traditional bowling uniforms are always a hit with the “normie” bowlers.



Woonna (left) and Atlas (right) nuzzle up to each other at a furry gathering.



only about 20 percent of furies because they are expensive and, face it, hot.

Also expect furies to use terms of measurement like “pawful.”

### Furry Business

Many furies say their first convention is unforgettable.

“I loved it, right away, from the very moment we drove into the parking lot,” says Kar. “Until that point, it was a closeted part of my life. Seeing lots of people dressed up, being themselves and not having a care in the world about it ...”

Vex Zorro says, “I saw my first fursuit, and it was the best thing ever. I love animals, and to see an animal like that, it gave me much more joy than I’d ever felt before.”

Conventions showcase furry-made art, and careers are made here. “There’s a massive fan base of people who want to see the art. Works go for thousands of dollars just within our little fandom,” says Tiffany Fox of Bristol, aka domestic cat Taisia. Fox, married to Frost, is herself an artist.

There’s also fun with a fuzzy twist: imagine adults, in fursuits, playing musical chairs, dancing onstage, and parading by the hundreds through hotel halls.

Furpocalypse raises money for the U.S. War Dogs Association, a military service dog welfare group, and True Colors, which advocates for sexual and gender minority youth. Camp Tiny Paws and the Furry Picnic focus on the Humane Society. “Those two organizations over the past three years have raised over \$3,000 for the Connecticut Humane Society out of the goodness of their hearts,” says Priscilla Clark, society development manager. “I feel like we’ve become part of the furry community.”

A furry’s calendar can get crowded. Vex Zorro attended nearly 100 New England events in 2018. With an impressive commitment to frequency and variety, furies meet for go-carts, movies, walks, mini golf, picnics, conventions, backyard barbecues, car meets, board games, bowling, dinners, ham radio operating, roller skating and camping.

There’s a misconception that “we sit at home online,” says Fox. “No, we go out and do things!”

### Feeling the Impact

Many furies say they used to be lonely, anxious or shy.

“It caused a monumental change in my life – my personality, my comfort in socializing. It gave me self-esteem,” says Flash. “I’m a college educated, world-traveled, intelligent young man but people looked at me like I was just a kid.

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Jane Latus is a writer and personal trainer living in Canton. She and her husband Ken have an escalating number of cats and two grown sons, one transgender and one gay.

See additional photos at [www.CTVoiceMag.com](http://www.CTVoiceMag.com) and follow us on [Twitter](#), [Instagram](#) and [Pinterest](#)



# “It’s not always about the costume. It’s who you are in your heart.”

Being a furry helped me stand up. I feel like an adult.” He was miserable at work and had the courage to find a new job he loves. “When I went in for that interview, I nailed it! It felt so new because it wasn’t how I used to be.” As a bonus, Flash met his boyfriend through the community.

The support is empowering, says Frost. “It’s not taboo to be you, to be everything that you are. We are fans of ourselves.”

The International Anthropomorphic Research Project is a team of scientists who compile furry data. They report increased well-being among those who were previously bullied, despite that “our studies also show that other fan groups dislike furies.”

They found: 80 percent of furies are LGBTQ, 84 percent are male, 88 percent of adults are under 30 (they didn’t track minors), and 40 percent feel furies aren’t socially accepted.

Furies say Connecticut’s community is likewise mostly young gay men, but more diverse than elsewhere, especially with a growing number of trans furies, thanks to local efforts at inclusivity.

Picnickers ranged from nine-year-old Super BunBun of Middletown (a chocolate bunny with a turquoise tummy) to gray muzzles and straight couple Tony and Tara Bassette (Miss Cellaneous Mouse) of Colchester.

But forget real life – what are the popular fursonas? The data say: hybrid, wolf, fox, dog, big cat, dragon, mythical, cat, rodent, rabbit, raccoon, reptile, otter, avian, bear, horse, aquatic, hyena, skunk, marsupial, dinosaur, deer, feline, squirrel, ferret, canine and insect.

## Famous Furry

Normies were introduced to a furry last year when Dominique McLean won the eSports Player of the Year award. He may not have made headlines if he hadn’t worn his SonicFox fursuit and announced, “I’m gay, I’m black, a furry, pretty much everything a Republican hates.”

Kar, laughing, says furies are at the bottom of the fan-group hierarchy, “Which I’ve always found funny. People who go to Star Trek conventions think we’re weird.”

Says Vulpes, “These are just really passionate people who love art and fun, and give tons of money to charitable organizations.”

Want to get your furry on? The fandom is an (anthropomorphic) mouse click away, and there’s no need for a tail. Says Frost, “It’s not always about the costume. It’s who you are in your heart.”

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# A PASSION *for* PAWS

By **RENEE DININO** / Photography by **TODD FAIRCHILD**

**S**herry DeGenova and Susan Levy met at a Tea Dance on a Saturday night in July 2007, at a bar in Ogunquit, Maine called Mainestreet. Neither was looking for a relationship; it just happened.

As Levy puts it, “I was on the dance floor and caught her looking at me. After several glances, I waved her over and she said, ‘You have the best smile I’ve ever seen,’ and then we danced.”

There was one more test to pass: DeGenova had her partner in crime with her, Pizon, a golden retriever mix, who went everywhere with her. After the Tea Dance, Levy met Pizon, who approved – in fact, DeGenova recalls, “I’ve never seen him take to someone so fast.”

After three consecutive days together, a relationship was born, and pets were soon to follow! Levy had two cats, Peanut and Boo. DeGenova came with Pizon as well as two cats, Chablis and Finny. Levy was in the military and stationed in Maine, then Washington, D.C., and DeGenova had her dream job as animal control officer with the City of Hartford Police Department.

After a two-year, long-distance relationship – including a gift of Batali, a rescue

shepherd/lab mix, from DeGenova to Levy, they were finally able to unite households in 2009. Levy was able to transfer her station to Connecticut, where she achieved the title of chief petty officer.

Once the household was fully combined, there were tears of sorrow at the passing of fur babies over the Rainbow Bridge and tears of joy for the new additions – all rescues. They had dogs Pizon and Batali, along with Lola, a white pit bull who came from the streets of Hartford. They also had cats Finny, Boo, Malado and Lily.

The couple has a dedicated room for fostering cats

and kittens in need, which has led to the adoption Ziggy and Gilligan.

“Sherry has the biggest heart,” says Levy. “Her passion for animals is beyond reproach and she makes me laugh until I pee.”

Their relationship was public to select friends and family but remained largely private because of Levy’s military career. Passion is what drives both women in their personal and professional lives.

Levy is now a retired chief petty officer, having served with the U.S. Coast Guard for 27 years. Her career serving our country led her from drill



Sherry DeGenova and Susan Levy on their wedding day.



Sherry DeGenova, Hartford's animal control officer, is a longtime advocate for animals.

sergeant to recruiter, from sea marshal to head chef for the secretary for Homeland Security in Washington, D.C.

Levy is the owner and founder of David James Catering – named after her brother David, who died at the age of 32 from complications of AIDS, and her father James, who passed of heart disease at the age of 66. Her business caters to a wide range of clientele, running everything from small parties to large corporate affairs, weddings and more. David James Catering has also donated services to many animal-related causes, including the “Bark Twain Bash...It’s the Cat’s Meow” at the Mark Twain House to benefit Kenway’s Cause animal rescue.

She was inspired to take on her catering full time because of the discrimination she felt from her beloved service with the Coast Guard. She actually wanted to continue her service to our country but, due to the current administration and pressure, she decided it was best to retire.

“In my opinion, it was because I was a strong woman who stood my ground,” she says. “Sherry and I had to keep our relationship a secret because of ‘Don’t ask, don’t tell.’ This lasted three years. My shipmates thought I was dating someone named Steve who could never make it to any functions.”

DeGenova’s career as an animal control officer came about from years of unintended animal advocacy and work. Raised with her two siblings in Stratford, she often found herself rescuing neighborhood animals, from stray dogs to injured birds.

“My dream was to be an animal control officer for an inner city and have my own rescue,” she says. “This has always been my childhood dream.”

She began her journey in 1997 as the animal control officer in Stamford, then took the opportunity in Hartford in 1999. She soon discovered this was not merely a job, but her life’s passion.

In June 2011, Sherry DeGenova received a call regarding a dog found along some railroad tracks. When she arrived at the scene, she noticed a black plastic garbage bag saturated from the puddle that surrounded





Elizabeth Park in Hartford is one of DeGenova and Levy's favorite places to take their dogs.



Levy, a retired U.S. Coast Guard officer, is the owner and founder of David James Catering.



The couple's pets are an integral part of their family.

it. While she was approaching the garbage bag, it suddenly moved, and when she opened the bag, she was instantly brought to her knees – a nearly lifeless, abused, neglected, emaciated and innocent soul was found clinging to life. A gentle soul thrown out like garbage and left for dead.

Their eyes made a connection and she knew he was pleading for her help. She immediately scooped Kenway up and drove to the vet as fast as humanly possible. The pup was placed on intravenous fluids, body warmers and all of the necessary medical assistance to facilitate his recovery. Sadly, he didn't make it.

Unfortunately, this type of abuse is seen way too often and, in many instances, these poor innocent souls don't stand a chance at survival.

In the dog's honor, she named him Kenway, which means "brave warrior." She knew Kenway had fought very hard to live; the condition he was found in showed he fought every day. He was an adult dog that resembled the size of a puppy. His breed was almost unrecognizable but he was a pit bull mix.

Thus, Kenway's Cause was born, and is led by DeGenova. The organization supports adoptive families as well as rescue organizations should a dog that is adopted from the Hartford shelter have pre-existing medical conditions or even behavior issues. The goal is to provide relief to help with treatment or rehabilitation. Donations to Kenway's Cause, a 501c3 nonprofit, also help provide medical care for dogs that need immediate treatment while in the shelter or would otherwise be euthanized.

DeGenova is supported by her peers behind the badge at Hartford PD, many of whom adopted from the shelter. Over the years, she has been able to show the great relationship among the city shelter,



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Kenway's Cause, and the community. She says the police department also supports her relationship with Levy.

"I still have the same passion I had 20 years ago – in fact, I feel my voice is stronger today," DeGenova says. "Typically, the average burnout time for an animal control officer is five years."

Her commitment to her work is as strong as her commitment to Levy. "I love the way we laugh and how she accepts that sometimes I bring my work home, in the form of new pets," DeGenova says. "She's always there to support me and my animal rescue."

After President Barack Obama abolished the policy of "Don't ask, don't tell," the couple was free to enjoy a healthy and public relationship. And a beautiful wedding was soon in the works! They were married on July 25, 2015 in Provincetown, Mass. – beachside, with all of their pets as part of the bridal party, along with family and friends, shipmates, and fellow animal advocates. In honor of their beloved Pizon, who passed before the wedding date, each guest was given a bottle of homemade "Pizon Red Wine."

The women say pets, and the unconditional love they give, are the best things in life.

And the current dog count at the time of this article? There's Donovan, a recent Rottweiler-mix rescue from Hartford who was abused and injured from a car accident with a bum leg (but don't tell him that!), and Lola is still the queen of the house. The canine contingent recently expanded with the addition of Luigi, a 5- to 6-month-old foxhound mix who was found tied to a pole on the streets of Hartford during the July heat wave. DeGenova discovered that Luigi was not only suffering from the heat but from a shattered femur, cigarette burns, and compression fractures on both of his front legs. She says he's now a permanent part of their family. The family cat count includes Malado, Lily, Ziggy, and Gilligan.

DeGenova and Levy continue to be a fierce couple, making a difference not only in the lives of their pets, friends and family, but also in the community.

"It's important to be the voice for those that cannot speak," DeGenova says. 



Renee DiNino is the director of community affairs for iHeartMedia in Connecticut, the midday host on The River 105.9 and host of an hour-long syndicated talk show on all Connecticut iHeartRadio stations. She also appears weekly on WFSB Channel 3's "Better Connecticut." An avid animal lover and advocate, she and her husband Sal have a German Shepherd, Luke, they rescued in Hartford. Instagram @iheartcommunities.





# Walking With Pride

## Lavender graduations offer students celebration, validation

By JANE LATUS / Photography by TONY BACEWICZ

**I**t's a celebration – and an act of defiance. It's for sharing your achievements with the family you were given – or the family you chose.

It's a Lavender Graduation, and at a growing number of colleges, LGBTQ graduates gather each year to celebrate making it against the odds, and enriching the campus they are leaving behind.

Balloons floated in ballrooms, music filled courtyards, and caterers restocked buffets at lavender ceremonies across the state last spring, among them the University of Connecticut, Yale University and Trinity College, along with Central, Southern, Western and Eastern Connecticut state universities.

Each school does it its own way. Some bring in big-name speakers – others, a revered faculty member. Some speed along so the party starts ASAP; others are two-hour affairs with many moving student speeches.

In common are enormous smiles, high spirits and, of course, the highly-coveted rainbow tassels.

"This is the only graduation ceremony I'm doing. I feel this is so much more meaningful to me," says Taylore Grunert at UConn's event. To fully appreciate his decision, know that he graduated with double majors and a minor.

At Central's ceremony, master's degree recipient Elijah Lombardi shares, "This means the world to me."

### RECOGNITION AND RESISTANCE

You'd be forgiven for assuming that the first Lavender Graduation, in 1995 at the University of Michigan, was organized by students, perhaps rejected by their families and wanting to celebrate with their friends. But no, the founder is a lesbian whose children blocked her from their ceremonies.

Says Ronni Sanlo, a playwright, author and consultant: "I created Lavender Graduation for two reasons:



CCSU student Armando Osario embraces CCSU LGBT Center Coordinator Nicol McCarter after receiving recognition as a Volunteer of the Year.

first, I wasn't invited to my children's graduation because of my sexual orientation. Second, LGBTQ students were telling me that their lives were miserable on campus and they couldn't wait to get out. I wanted their last taste of their college experience to be positive."

For those wondering, "Why lavender?" – it's a combination of the pink and black triangles that Nazis forced gay men and lesbians to wear. LGBTQ rights activists claimed it as a symbol of community pride.

By Sanlo's count, more than 500 universities and colleges nationwide now hold the event. No surprise, given the atmosphere of camaraderie at the ceremonies, combined with the current backlash against gains in LGBTQ rights. At the Central graduation, Vice President of Student Affairs Dr. Michael D. Jasek recounted the progress since Stonewall but told graduates, "Today we are under attack again. We've walked a long way. We need to celebrate that. But we can't become complacent. We have a long walk to walk."

As UConn Rainbow Center Director Kelsey O'Neil put it, "This is first and foremost to celebrate." But, they added, "It is also an act of resistance in this political climate."

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tion, at 11 years. “Although 11 years ago doesn’t seem that long ago, it was a very different climate. I wasn’t there, but I heard it was very hard being out on campus,” says Nichol McCarter, program coordinator at the LGBT Center and a 2018 lavender grad.

McCarter says a small number of people have “expressed upset over this ceremony and seeing it as unfair that LG-BTQ+ people are having a ‘separate’ graduation ceremony. However, this is a misconception. This ceremony is not instead of commencement. It’s supplemental.

“LGBTQ people often face rejection, extreme bullying and hardship at a school and at home,” says McCarter. “Many never finish college, are thrown out of their homes, run away, or commit suicide. This ceremony celebrates LGBTQ people and allies that persevered and reached their goals despite those hardships, and commends them for fighting the fight, and finding the strength to continue believing and investing in themselves despite it all.”

McCarter points out this is one of several recognition ceremonies held on campus.

“Colleges and universities have a long history of holding specialized ceremonies that recognize the contributions and

achievements of historically underrepresented communities in higher education,” says SAGE Center Coordinator Jenna Retort of Southern, which recently held its third Lavender Graduation. “Students really enjoy the opportunity to engage their families in a more intimate ceremony and highlight their engagement with their community.”

Organizing Trinity’s first Lavender Graduation was one of the first things Carrie Robinson did when becoming director of LGBTQ+ Life there in 2018. “It’s a moment [when] students can really own their identity, and the campus can come together to recognize them and the work they’ve done on campus,” she says.

### ADVICE FROM ELDERS: FIGHT AND LOVE

On a rainy Friday evening at UConn, Connecticut Supreme Court Justice Andrew J. McDonald told graduates that after coming out at their age, “my dad told me no law firm would hire me. I had no role models I knew of who were openly gay.” As others ultimately helped him, he says, “It is your responsibility to also turn around, grab somebody’s hand and pull them up with you.”

On a sun-drenched Saturday morning at Central, activist



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Lavender Graduation keynote speaker Kate Bornstein applauds the ceremony from her seat in the audience.

and writer Kate Bornstein told graduates, “Use your gender and what you know about gender to ease someone else’s suffering and give them some happiness.”

At Southern, Colleen Bielitz, associate vice president for strategic initiatives and outreach, urged graduates, “Create or extend your families based solely on love, and continue to fight for justice and equity in all forms.”

Afterward, Bielitz shared that as a lesbian and mother, “the story of how Lavender Graduation came to be hits home for me. As a group, we are still so largely marginalized. This kind of ceremony allows students to fully connect with their LGBTQ identities.” When she sees proud parents take part, she says, “It makes my heart so full.”

## AN EMOTIONAL CELEBRATION

Participating graduates expressed the gamut of emotions you’d expect from those who faced everything from rejection to bullying to invisibility. All, though, said the ceremony holds deep personal significance. Here are a few of their reflections:

Sam Cahill, Central: “College for me has been really hard and I’m very happy I’m done. At my first school, I got harassed and bullied to the point of having to move dorms,” says the dance major. “Even at Central, the dance program is not very accepting. It’s either straight men or gay men, and there’s no place for gender queer or lesbians. Being a lesbian, it just put me on the outside of everything. The only place I could feel at home was the LGBT center. I could breathe.” At the Lavender ceremony, she says, “They care.”

Rory Dougall, Southern: “It [the ceremony] was about a sense of pride in being able to graduate despite being LGBTQ. Being LGBTQ creates stress from not being ‘normal,’ and that impacts academics. Lavender Graduation was an important stepping stone and something I will cherish.”

Hannah Meyers, UConn: “When I got here, I didn’t have a complete sense of my identity. The Rainbow



Annissa Carter shows off the rainbow tassel she received at UCONN’s ceremony.



Photo caption

Proud parents Kevin and Pam Cahill embrace their lavender graduate daughter Sam Cahill in the reception area following graduation.



Lavender graduate Anna Fossi is presented the award for academic excellence and achievement by William Mann, director of the LGBT Center at CCSU.





Keynote speaker Kate Bornstein congratulates lavender grad Armando Osario.



Kim Skehan of Newington gives her graduating daughter Colleen Skehan a kiss on the head just before the Lavender Graduation ceremony at CCSU.



Lavender graduate Colleen Skehan accepts congratulations from William Mann, director of the LGBT Center at CCSU after receiving her diploma.

Center really helped me figure myself out. It feels good to be validated after this place has meant so much to me.” She plans to be a human rights lawyer.

Catherine Menousek, UConn: “My parents aren’t very accepting. My mother has said my grandparents will literally die before they know I’m queer. So, I wanted to do this a lot for me.”

Annissa Carter, UConn: “I was in a room surrounded by people I’ve gotten to know through the Rainbow Center. It’s a much more intimate graduation, too.” Her professional goal is “to help queer people make families.”

Kacie Brennan, Central: “I consider myself five years old,” the length of time she has accepted her identity as a lesbian. She credits Central’s “LGBT-inclusive history courses” for awakening her pride and creating her support network.

Frankie Ashun, UConn: “A lot of the time when queer folks come together, it’s really a type of celebration.”

Rae Enzie, UConn: They also attended the main ceremony, solely so their family could see them graduate, but their diploma will bear a name they don’t recognize. “This [the Lavender Graduation] is for me to graduate with my second family, the people who support me. It’s nice to have this, and be just for me and my true self, and with my chosen name. Also, I wanted the rainbow tassel!” 

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# on the scene

## Fairfield County is home to a growing number of LGBTQ-friendly venues, events

By QUINN ROBERTS

**I**f you could have decorated your childhood bedroom the way you'd wanted, what would it have looked like?

Enter Troupe429, and you'll immediately come down with a case of gay teenage fever. Look, by the door, there's the Mario Kart and Pokémon video games playing on the flat screen TV. Further down, the bookshelf of classic feminist texts, the bulletin board offering resources from local nonprofits.

Across from the bar, the DJ plays an old-school Britney Spears hit, and soon enough your friends hit the dance floor. You smile, shake your hips, and remind yourself where you are: in Norwalk, Connecticut, a place you never realized was just this queer.

Flirtations with nostalgia are embedded in every detail of the Troupe429 experience. 429 spells G-A-Y on the telephone keypad, say Casey Fitzpatrick and Nicholas Ruiz, the owners of Troupe429. During the Stonewall era, this was used as a code to know if someone was '429.' This piece of trivia, subtle as it may be, reflects Fitzpatrick and Ruiz's broader efforts to express their reverence to and passion for the queer community. They want to make it clear:

Troupe429 is by and for the community.

Each night offers a fresh, exciting experience – no two visits to Troupe429 will be quite the same. For unleashing your inner diva, come check out the monthly open mic night, hosted by Connecticut-based drag queens Robin Fierce and Sienna Rose. For the sapphic moments, there's SIREN, the largest party for queer women in Connecticut. Tuesday night bingo and Wednesday karaoke offer a more relaxed vibe; higher-stakes evenings have seen appearances by "RuPaul's Drag Race" alumni Aja and Ivy Winters.

Event planning allows Fitzpatrick and Ruiz to flex their creative muscles, as well as provide a positive, fun space for community. "It's been magical to watch friendships form between people who may have never met outside Troupe429," says Ruiz. "We are a neighborhood bar for all people and all allies."

Increasingly, the business scene throughout Fairfield County is affirming its support for the LGBTQ community. Norwalk's Rene Soto Gallery and Westport's Mystic Market are owned and managed by queer Connecticut residents. Established presences too, such as Garden Cinemas in Norwalk and the Westport Country Playhouse, have introduced and promoted LGBTQ-friendly programming.

These places are making their marks at a curious time in Connecticut's history, as New York City's increasingly exorbitant prices are sending an influx of Manhattanites to its outer suburbs in search of more affordable housing. As Fairfield County becomes a hub for queer life, one could reasonably wonder: how



will Fairfield County accommodate both its current and future LGBTQ residents? Might this shift in urban terrain be forming a “gayborhood”?

Before many of these businesses opened, the search for queer community often led to the Triangle Community Center (TCC), a Norwalk-based nonprofit that fosters growth and connection within the LGBTQ community.

“It’s great to serve the LGBT community in a formal capacity,” says Sean-Michael Hazuda, the newly appointed executive director of the TCC. “If you look at many, many towns across the globe, these resources are provided by churches and religion. Now, in addition to religious groups, the TCC can offer LGBTQ specific resources to Connecticut.”

Since 1990, the TCC has been Fairfield County’s foremost provider of resources and programming for the LGBTQ community. For the first few decades, efforts were decentralized and entirely volunteer-run; in 2013, the TCC hired a full-time staff, and soon thereafter introduced a counseling and case management program for at-risk members of the LGBTQ community. Currently, the TCC’s most in-demand services are youth programming, job placements, and LGBTQ-affirming counseling.

To deliver its services, the TCC has often relied on partnerships with area nonprofits. Perhaps its strongest

ties have been with the Mid Fairfield AIDS Project and the Circle Care Center, two organizations that focus on providing clinical services to HIV-positive and LGBTQ individuals. This mutual support, from cross-referrals to annual grants to shared office space, has allowed all three organizations to expand services and create new programming.

“There’s a much higher unemployment rate among members of the LGBTQ community,” says Hazuda. “That’s something we need to be aware of. Here in Fairfield County, one in four LGBTQ people go without food on a regular basis. That’s just shocking, [especially in] one of the nation’s wealthiest areas.”

The TCC is working to continue its expansion to Bridgeport, Danbury and beyond. The nonprofit has bought a new building to accommodate the high demand for counselors. Under Hazuda’s leadership, the TCC hopes to place a greater emphasis on LGBTQ elders, a community particularly vulnerable to inequality and isolation.

“When you have an LGBTQ community center that provides critical, high-demand services, it draws people to Norwalk,” says Hazuda. “Our expanded space will allow us to do so much more...we’re going to more than double in size.”

Each June at Norwalk’s historic Mathews Park, the TCC hosts its annual “Pride in the Park” festival. This



**Troupe429 has its sights set on the future: an increasingly LGBTQ-friendly business presence in Fairfield County, and a more inclusive culture for queer Connecticut residents.**

year’s event attracted a record number, more than 6,000 people.

There, at “Pride in the Park,” is where the LGBTQ nonprofits’ interests dovetail with those of the local business community. The event offers the TCC an opportunity to demonstrate its impact on Fairfield County, as well as to change the public perception of the LGBTQ community in general.

Anthony Crisci, former director of the TCC, suggests that Norwalk’s progressive culture and community-oriented values are what attracts local businesses to that city in particular: “If you look closely, you’ll see that Stamford has developed much faster and much earlier than Norwalk, but there’s no gay bar in Stamford. Stamford has much stronger of a commuter culture than Norwalk.”

For many years, Fairfield County’s only two gay bars were Danbury’s Triangles Café and Westport’s Cedar Brook Café.

“One of my earliest childhood memories was driving past Triangles ... and looking out at the rainbow flag hanging from their sign,” recalls Troup 429’s Fitzpatrick. “This symbol showed me there were places for people like me, even if I wasn’t yet old enough to visit them.”

Cedar Brook Café, formerly the oldest gay bar in the United States, closed in 2010 after 71 years in operation; four years later, Triangles shut its doors after 31 years. “I was fortunate to enjoy many nights at Triangles before it closed,” says Fitzpatrick. “We are proud to continue where these bars left off and make our own special mark on queer history.”

For Fitzpatrick and Ruiz, staying true to progressive Norwalk values is part of a larger priority to promote socially conscious initiatives. They say they want their business to be space for activism. Perhaps their most assertive effort has been in response to President Donald Trump’s administration’s proposal to define gender as a biological, immutable trait. Troupe429 held a rally in support of Connecticut’s transgender and gender-nonconforming community; in attendance were many activists, speakers and local lawmakers, including Norwalk Mayor Harry Rilling.

As Fairfield County businesses and nonprofits serving the LGBTQ community continue to expand their reach, it poses some questions to us as a community. What exactly do we want our “gayborhoods” to be? What values do we hope to advance? How will we keep working to protect the needs and rights of the LGBTQ community, year after year? We’re still searching for these solutions, of course – but given the recent strides in Fairfield County, we’ll now have a more centralized space to address them. ♡

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