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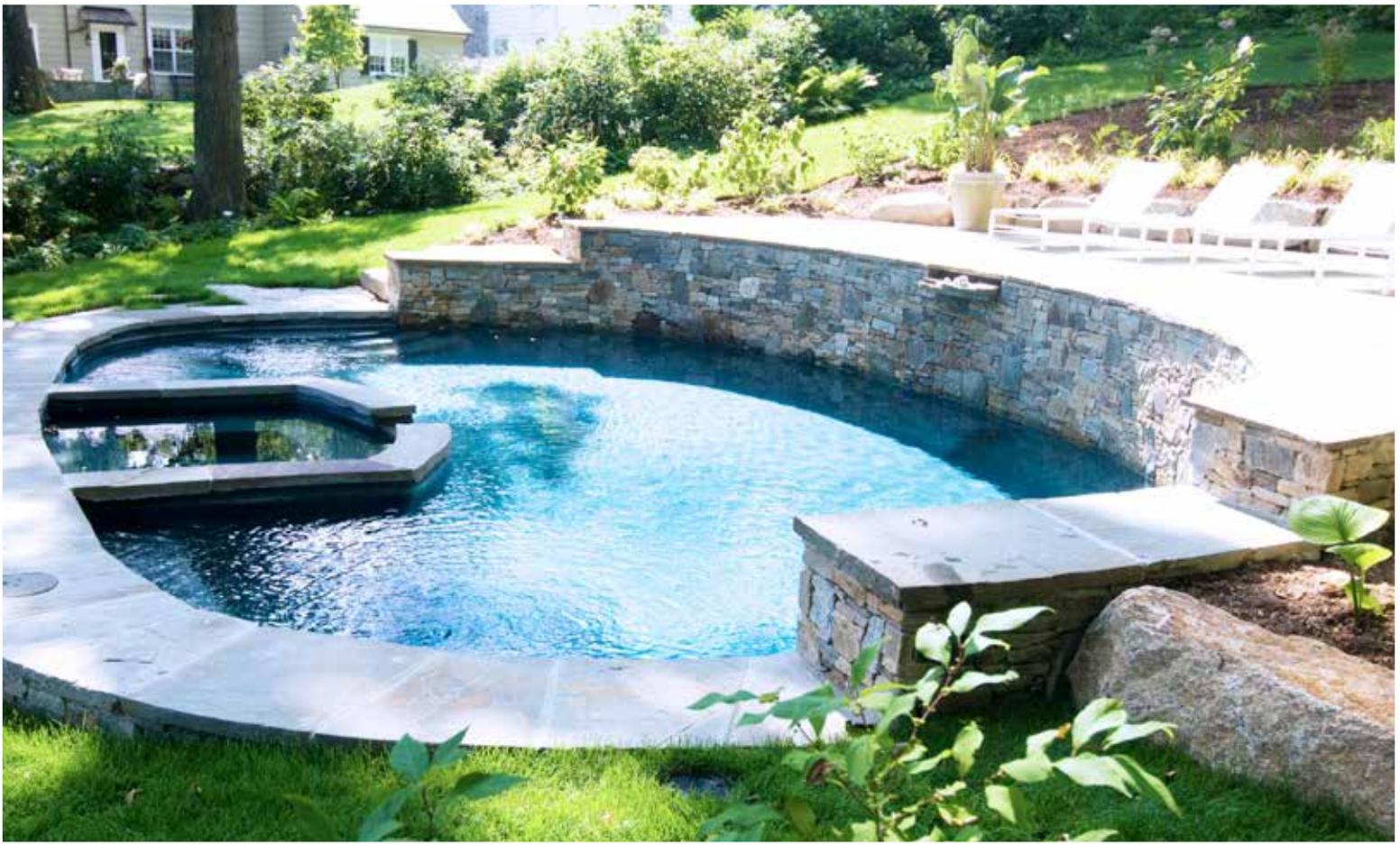
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EDITOR'S NOTE //



Welcome to the Summer issue of *Connecticut VOICE!*

The world certainly has changed for all of us in recent months, and I hope this magazine reaches you in good health and good spirits. As always, this issue features stories that will make you laugh, smile and think.

None of us have been immune to the ripple effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, and you'll see some of them on these pages. Amazing events we planned to preview or reflect on – DragCon, planned for the fall in New York City, and the Schitt's Creek farewell tour slated to stop at

Mohegan Sun this spring – have been canceled or postponed.

As our daily lives were upended by global uncertainty, we turned to you, our readers, because we wanted to hear how you were coping – or, more specifically, how you were cooking. We loved going through the photos showing off what you and your friends, families and partners were making in your kitchens while in quarantine (see some in our "Delicious" feature).

Even in challenging times, there continue to be so many uplifting stories to share. Our cover story showcases the incredible journey of strongman Rob Kearney, a man whose inner and physical strength is inspiring. We also catch up with Kylar Maldonado, the first transgender man to win the title of Mr. Connecticut Bear; preview what looks to be a powerhouse team for the Connecticut Sun's upcoming season; and introduce "Pride Pages," a new feature that will showcase upcoming events by and for the LGBTQ community.

As always, I invite you to join the conversation by finding us on Facebook and Twitter.

Happy reading,

Cara

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-Marilyn Monroe



Photo by iStockphoto/YakobchukOlena



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Photo by Allegra Anderson

Flag artwork by iStockphoto/ mattjeacock



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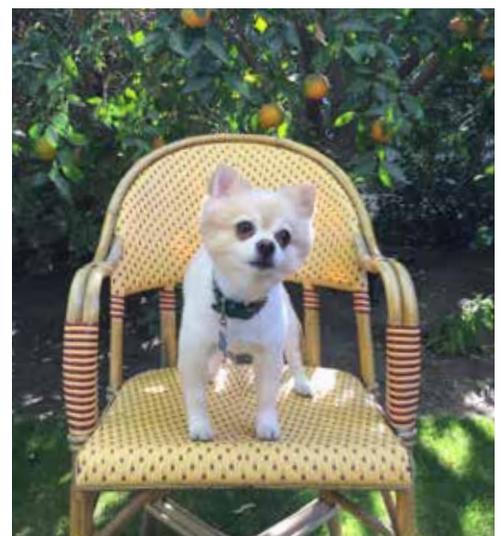
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Schitt's Creek: My (Queer Fantasy) Hometown

How a once-reluctant viewer became a loyal fan

By FRANK RIZZO

As the final episode of the TV series “Schitt’s Creek” neared, I knew I didn’t want to say goodbye to these characters I had come to love – and to the fictional town they called home. But in my heart, I knew it was time to go.

Over six seasons on POP TV, and then available more widely on Netflix, this landmark series slowly built an audience, then a following, and finally, in the end, became a phenom.

Among the earliest of fans who spread the word about the series were those in the LGBTQ community who embraced the extravagance of Moira Rose as a new gay icon, as well as the wide range of characters from the series. “Schitt’s Creek” theme parties started popping up at gay bars across the country, including in Connecticut at the Trevi Lounge in Fairfield. A tour of the cast members was scheduled for the Mohegan Sun Arena before it was postponed earlier this year, due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

This series with a decidedly queer aesthetic just got better, deeper, and surprisingly moving as it went from season to season, following the lack of fortunes of the once-filthy-rich Rose family.

In the first minutes of the premiere episode, federal agents swooped in the family mansion, removing all their assets – the result of an unscrupulous business manager. They were left with only some personal belongings and the deed to a remote small town with the questionable name that the patriarch bought for his son as a joke.

It was there that the Roses retreated, living in two adjoining rooms in a cheap motel at the edge of a town they called upon arrival “disgusting and gruesome.” But first impressions aren’t always the best.

Indeed, I resisted viewing the series for a long time, despite being an admirer of the brilliant Catherine O’Hara and Eugene Levy of “SCTV” fame and the classic comedy



films that Levy co-wrote with Christopher Guest that also featured O’Hara (“Waiting for Guffman,” “A Mighty Wind,” “Best in Show”).

Perhaps I was put off by the cheap-joke title and seemingly shooting-fish-in-a-barrel premise where I surmised it was “Arrested Development” meets “Green Acres.”

But eventually I started watching and boy, was I wrong. Yes, the Roses were horrifyingly self-involved, staggeringly oblivious, and pretentious to the max. Leading the quartet were Levy as entrepreneur and half-billionaire Johnny Rose and his wife and soap star Moira, played by O’Hara. Then

there was the next generation: jet-set daughter Alexis played by Annie Murphy and spoiled, elitist and pansexual son David played by Daniel Levy, who also created the series with his father.

“Schitt’s Creek,” as it turned out, wasn’t what I expected – and neither were the Roses or the town.

When Daniel Levy said Schitt’s Creek was “in the middle of nowhere,” he was right, on multiple counts. It was never explained exactly where the town was - what state, or even what country, though Canada would be a logical guess considering the roots of the show. But “nowhere” took on another meaning. This is a town that could exist in a better world, where the outsider is not only tolerated but welcomed; where sexuality and gender flow as freely as

the wine, where acceptance is a matter of fact, not a special episode.

Without preaching, the series showed – mainly through the journey of David, but also, ever-so-subtly, with everyone – a modern queer sensibility like no other.

From the first season, a coded conversation about sexuality between David and Stevie, the motel desk clerk (played with a sly, wry deadpan by Emily Hampshire) became an instant classic. (See sidebar on following page.) Soon there were T-shirts at Gay Pride events that read: “The wine and not the label.”

But it was also David’s parents’ responses to their son’s sexual fluidity that was endearing. A scene between Roland and Johnny, both stoned at a backyard luau, was also one of



Frizzie Borden as Stevie ; Loosey LaDuca as Alexis ; Kiki Lucia as Moira ; and Ram Shackle as David.

the sweetest moments of the series:

Johnny: My son is pansexual.

Roland: I've heard of that. That's the cookware fetish?

Johnny: No, he loves everyone: men, women, women who become men, men who become women.

Roland: Well, you know, Johnny, when it comes to matters of the heart, we can't tell our kids who to love.

Or the scene where schoolteacher Jocelyn asks David to counsel a gay high school boy whom she feels is not fitting in. The scene between David and Connor (Matthew Tissi) offered a peek into a different Gen Z perspective than what David was expecting. "Why would I talk to you?" asks a snippy, self-possessed Connor. "Look at you. Look at your pants.... Let me tell you what my problem is. I'm a 16-year-old gay kid living in a town that makes me want to throw up. This issue isn't me not fitting in. It's me not wanting to fit in."

The kicker is that Connor ended up counseling David on his recent friends-with-benefits relationship with Stevie: "Have you not seen the 42 films they made about it? It never works."

But it was the slow-budding relationship between David and local man Patrick (the adorable Noah Reid) in the third season that made by this gay heart burst with joy. Patrick's confession that it was the first time he had ever kissed a man before was met by the perfect, revealing response from David, saying though he's kissed many men, as far as anything coming close to being real, it was his first time, too.

But the get-out-the-tissues moment was the episode when Patrick unexpectedly serenades David on acoustic guitar with an intimate version of Tina Turner's "Simply the Best" in front of a store full of locals. Re-watching the scene, I was moved to tears yet again, not just by David's verklempt reaction, but that of O'Hara's Moira, touching her son tenderly on the arm, as if to silently bless the union. But it was also David's gesture of apology to Patrick in a later episode – a fearless lip-synch to Turner's "Simply the Best" – that finally liberated David from his protective shell, signaling that this relationship might just work.

There were countless moment of LGBTQ bliss – and heterosexual, too, with dreamy love interests for Alexis (hunky Mutt and dreamy Ted). And the series finale, where David and Patrick marry, made for perfect and satisfying happy endings.

Hitting rock bottom, the Roses went to Schitt's Creek without a figurative paddle and yet not only survived but, while still remaining their idiosyncratic selves, found their humanity – and a new sense of family.

SCHITT'S CREEK:

The Wine Lesson

BY FRANK RIZZO

Patrick Dunn, executive director of the New Haven Pride Center, told me the exact moment he fell in love with "Schitt's Creek."

"It was when David discusses being pansexual by describing wine," he says. "It's literally one of the best scenes of any TV show that describes being queer and bisexual in a way that's so easy to understand. It's just so nonchalant and comfortable."

Here's the scene in the 10th episode of the first season:

David Rose, the flamboyant son in the formerly filthy rich family that has been reduced to living at a cheap motel in a remote town, has just had sex with Stevie, the female desk clerk. The next morning, they are shopping for wine at the general store.

Stevie: Just to be clear. I'm a red wine drinker. (Pointedly) I only drink red wine. And up until last night I was under the impression that you, too, only drink red wine. But I guess I was wrong.

David: (Catching on) I see where you're going with this. Um... I do drink red wine but I also drink white wine, and I've been known to sample the occasional rosé. And a couple of summers back I tried a merlot that used to be a chardonnay...

Stevie: Uh, okay...

David: ...which got a bit complicated.

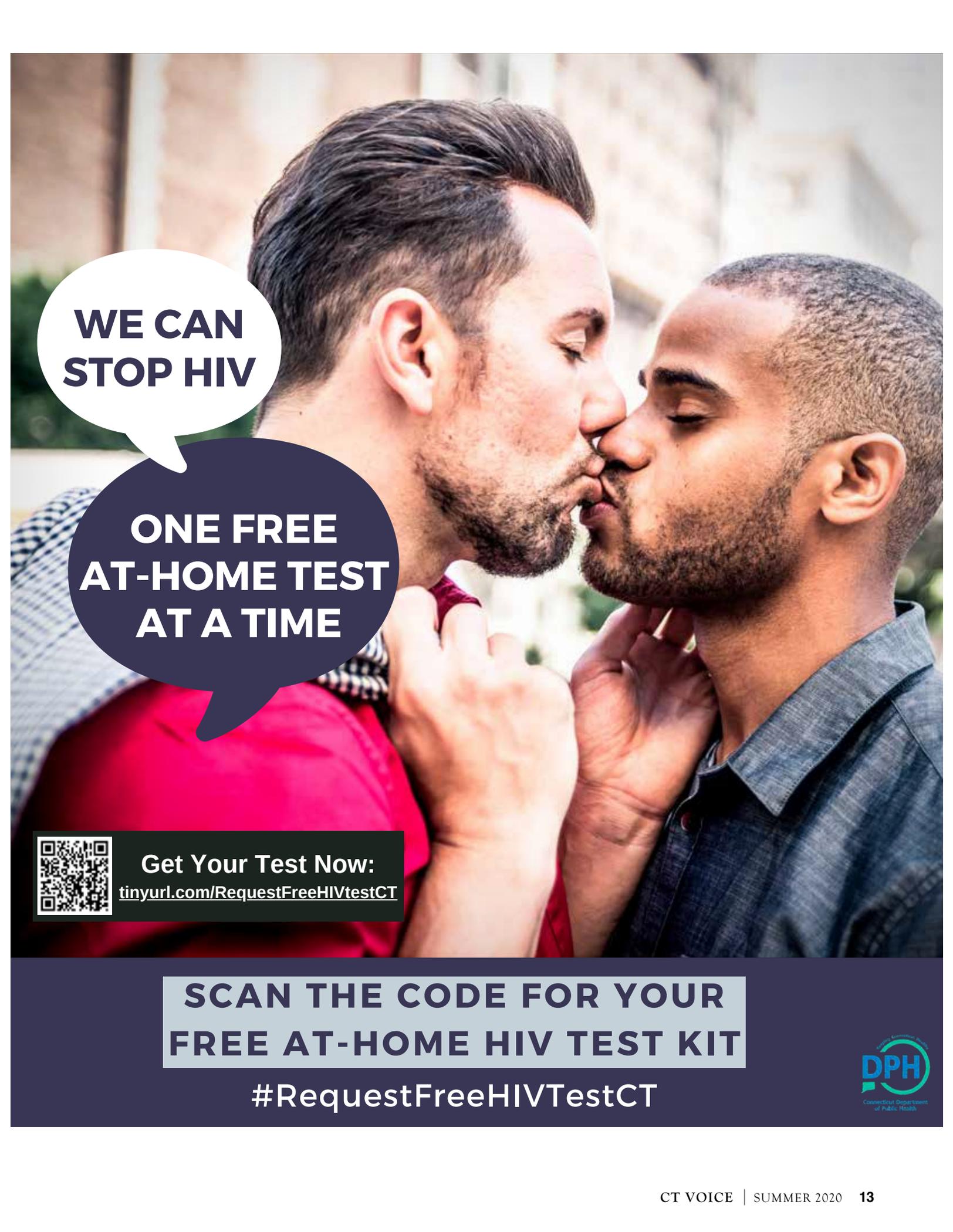
Stevie: So, you like all wine?

David: I like the wine and not the label.



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 and on Twitter @ShowRiz.



A photograph of two men kissing. The man on the left has dark hair and a beard, wearing a red shirt. The man on the right has short hair and a beard, wearing a blue button-down shirt. They are outdoors, with a blurred background of buildings.

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SPEAKING VOLUMES

Yale's Beinecke Library is home to a growing number of LGBTQ treasures

By **FRANK RIZZO** / *Photography by* **TONY BACEWICZ**

The archives of gay activist Larry Kramer, furniture of Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas, diaries of photographer George Platt Lynes; the papers of writers such as David Rakoff, Langston Hughes, David Sedaris, David Leavitt – the works of some of the world's leading LGBTQ figures – can be found among the collections gathered, preserved and available for researchers at Yale's Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library.

More? How about papers and collections of writers Hart Crane, James Baldwin, Paula Vogel, W. Somerset Maugham, Thornton Wilder, Edmund White, and Oscar Wilde – and so many more LGBTQ figures?

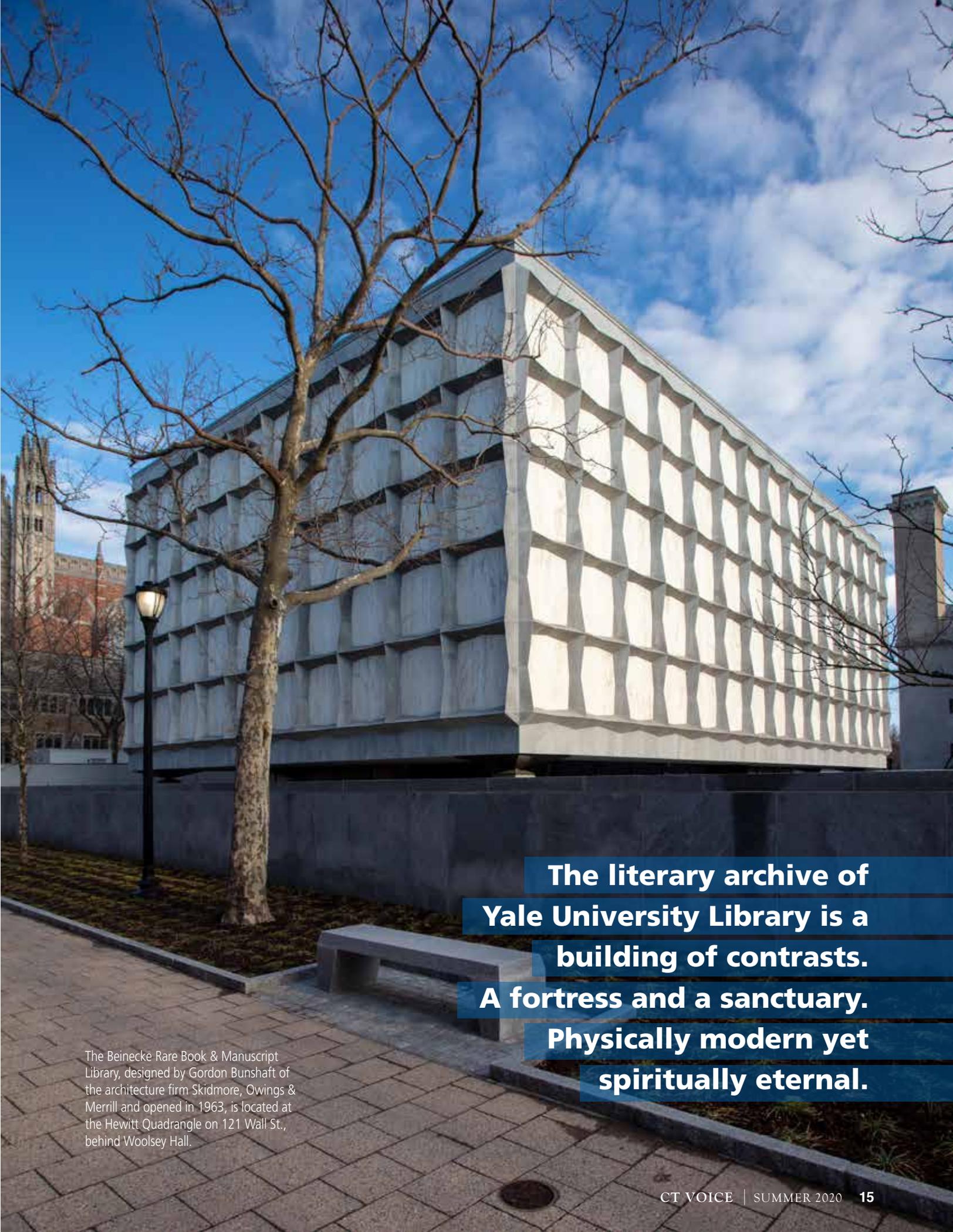
This literary archival bonanza is in a solitary, glistening white jewel box of a building, tucked behind Woolsey Hall in a corner of Hewitt Quadrangle at 121 Wall St. in New Haven. It's a building of contrasts. A fortress and a sanctuary. Physically modern yet spiritually eternal. It's a building that from the plaza looks cool, opaque and intimidating. But enter through its revolving door and be bathed by a warm, golden glow from the wall's translucent, veined marble, windowed throughout in its giant granite hexagonal grid.

Its interior space is spare and spacious, yet its inner sanctum – a six-story, glass-enclosed tower of 180,000 books – is a jaw-dropping showstopper (and Instagram fave). If the tower acts as a cathedral of books, then its exhibition spaces on the surrounding two floors are like literary chapels, offering a more intimate look and private revelations. The building was designed by architect Gordon Bunshaft of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, who also designed the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library and Museum in Austin, Tex.

If the Beinecke is a center of rich humanities scholarship, it is also a place for personal reflection, where one can sit on the mid-century furniture (designed by Florence Knoll and Marcel Breuer) and gaze at the titles on the bindings of the books in the tower. It's a kind of communion between writers and readers through the ages, and the presence of a widening collection of LGBTQ figures among history's greatest minds adds to the richness of it all.

The Beinecke's director, Edwin C. Schroeder, enjoys watching the faces of new visitors as they enter through the building, seeing their eyes light up and soar upwards to the top of the stacks tower. More than 200,000 scholars, students, visitors and tourists came through the doors last year.

"You've walked into a space where books, writing, literature, and the human experience are front and center," he says. "You know this is someplace special."



**The literary archive of
Yale University Library is a
building of contrasts.
A fortress and a sanctuary.
Physically modern yet
spiritually eternal.**

The Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library, designed by Gordon Bunshaft of the architecture firm Skidmore, Owings & Merrill and opened in 1963, is located at the Hewitt Quadrangle on 121 Wall St., behind Woolsey Hall.





The second floor is where most of the exhibitions are presented and where the six-story, glass-enclosed tower of books dominates the interior, walled by the honeycomb of translucent marble.

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One of the 48 extant copies of the Gutenberg Bible is on permanent display on the second floor.

INSTITUTIONAL CHANGES

The most popular item sought at the Beinecke? The Voynich Manuscript – the mystifying, 15th or 16th Century cipher manuscript that has remained an enigma since it was donated in 1969. Its puzzling text (seemingly an encrypted language) and its bizarre illustrations have confounded scholars and fascinated the public for decades. The so-far unsolved manuscript is the subject of documentaries, as well as young adult and graphic novels.

That manuscript, like so much of the Beinecke’s materials, is available online too. But those who want to delve deeper in scholarship, or just feel the talismanic power of seeing original source material, are also welcome, seven days a week, free of charge.

It was not always so. When the museum opened nearly 60 years ago, it was a temple for the privileged, seemingly exclusive and mysterious, a literary Skull & Bones.

“I would describe it as a men’s club. You had to be a senior scholar, a famous collector, a curator or a faculty member,” says Schroeder of those early days before Yale went co-ed and the fundamental nature of the institution evolved to be more inclusive. Even students were not actively encouraged to fully utilize the library. “The director famously pushed students out who seemed to be loitering on the mezzanine.”

For Schroeder, that was the long-ago past. Today’s mantra is access, in terms of student and scholar usage, as well as in welcoming the general public to view its exhibits.

“We went from two classrooms to seven now, where we can do nearly 600 classes a year serving students not just Yale but from Hopkins School and New Haven Promise,” says Schroeder.

Major renovations were made in 2016 after an 18-month closure which dramatically expanded its staff, and its teaching and archival capabilities.

Schroeder says as the massive card catalogue has made way for digitized access, the Beinecke has also become more efficient, able to locate needed materials from its building as well as the library’s shelving facility in Hamden, home to low-use, circulating books or the archival collections at the other colleges of Yale. (Looking for Cole Porter material? That’s at the School of Music — but the Beinecke can retrieve that collection for you.) More than one million volumes and several million manuscripts are available in total.

But unlike the centrally located Yale University Art Gallery and the Yale Center for British Art, the Beinecke’s site and formidable physicality is a challenge. “Unless you know the campus, you can’t get to us very easily, or at least, it’s not as obvious a building as others,” says Schroeder.

Exhibitions – always free – are also limited by the restrictions of the building’s design. Exhibition materials must be placed in the originally designed cases. While architecturally pleasing and suitable for limited interest more a half century ago, the size of the cases now confines what the curators can exhibit. The collections have grown to include a wide range of materials – from ephemera to substantial physical items, such as a pair of petite fireside chairs owned by Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas, with upholstery designed and painted by Pablo Picasso.

“There is so much here, and we want to show the diversity of what we have,” says Schroeder.

Vast materials

Anchoring both sides of the mezzanine are two massive



Also on permanent display is "Double Elephant Folio" of John J. Audubon's "Birds of America" (1827-1838). Below, a page from the Gutenberg Bible.

books that are on permanent display: one of the 48 extant copies of the Gutenberg Bible and the "Double Elephant Portfolio" of John J. Audubon's "Birds of America" (1827-1838). One the main floor is the pen that Abraham Lincoln used to sign the Emancipation Proclamation.

Stored below are ancient papyri, medieval manuscripts, personal papers, photographs, drafts of books, handwritten letters, and assorted personal items from writers, poets and cultural figures, adding up to a who's who in the arts and humanities over the centuries of civilization.

The Beinecke includes works or archives of J.M. Barrie, Rachel Carson, Joseph Conrad, Richard Wright, Charles Dickens, Alexis de Tocqueville, George Eliot, Thomas Hardy, Robert Lewis, costumer Irene Sharaff, actor Marian Seldes, Robert Louis Stevenson, James Joyce, Rebecca West, Rudyard Kipling, D.H. Lawrence, Doris Lessing, Eugene O'Neill Jr., Thomas Mann, set designer Ming Cho Lee, Lillian Hellman, Edith Wharton, Ezra Pound,

and the just-acquired David Sedaris.

To clarify the mythology surrounding the scenario of a fire in the central book tower (not accessible to the public): Yes, the glass-enclosed stacks can be flooded with a mix of Halon 1301 and INERGEN fire suppression gas if fire detectors are triggered. But not until everyone is out and all persons are accounted for.

What to collect?

So how does the Beinecke decide what to collect, given its vast resources and stellar reputation?

"Our idea of collecting is that we build on existing strengths," says Timothy Young, curator of modern books and manuscripts for the last 28 years.

"The collections in Beinecke Library have always contained the voices of LGBTQ writers and artists," he says. "A focus of the past several decades has been to recognize those voices by noting their presence and impact on the creative accomplishments we document. We continue



to acquire books and archives that help our researchers and visitors see the amazingly broad array of work done by individuals and groups working – in gestures from subtle to explicit – on gender, sexuality, and identity.”

Young sees the Beinecke now going well beyond being “a monument to colonialization and patriarchy.” Young takes an expansionist view of American Studies beyond the high-profile names of generations past, to seek out those from backgrounds that are more diverse than the western European works that formed the foundation of the Beinecke.

“We are also interested in those who potentially influenced a figure to tell that broader story and to see how that plays out.”

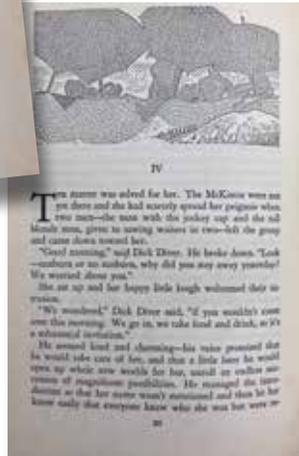
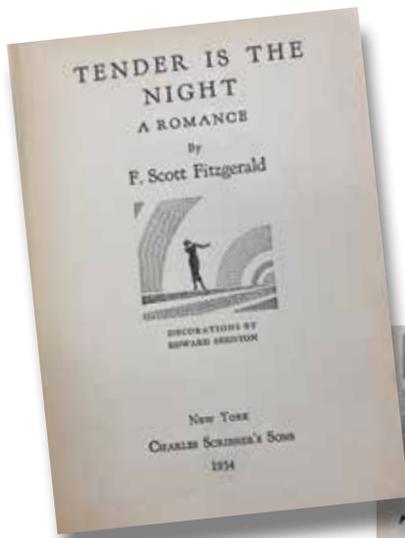
And as more personal stories are gleaned from the increasingly diverse collections, their relevance to a broader audience becomes ever more evident. “We might seem to be in an ivory tower, but these collections might have something to say about your



A detail from one of the shelves of books stored in the tower.



Nancy Kuhl, curator of poetry in the Yale Collection of American Literature, and Exhibition Technician Megan Czekaj, prepare the next exhibit which was presented in May. Photo by **Frank Rizzo**



Among the artifacts in the upcoming exhibit "Road Show: Travel Papers in American Literature" is an original copy of F. Scott Fitzgerald's "Tender is the Night." Photo by **Frank Rizzo**

daily life," says Young.

New technology in a fast-moving age and the ways that people – especially literary figures – communicate are on-going challenges.

"We are collecting more material that is digital in nature," says Young. "And we struggle with how to collect social media and websites."

New exhibit on travel

The next exhibit at the Beinecke was to have been "Road Show: Travel Papers in American Literature," by Nancy Kuhl, curator of poetry in the Yale Collection of American Literature. (The show was put on hold during the pandemic shutdown.)

That exhibit features material from Zora Neale Hurston, Gertrude Stein, Edith Wharton, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Richard Wright, Gwendolyn Bennett, Saul Steinberg, Truman Capote, Annie Dillard, and many more literary and cultural figures.

"It's not an exhibition exclusively about writers being 'on the road' or novels about travel," says Kuhl. "It's more about how a writer's experience in traveling results in a great work of art. A writer's archive is not something outside of time and place. It's specific to a culture and a community so all of these [materials on exhibit], twisted into a certain light, tell us something about that culture. What kinds of travel do writers undertake, far beyond their creative lives, far beyond what we can see on the surface of



A pair of petite fireside chairs owned by Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas, with upholstery designed and painted by Pablo Picasso. Photo by **Frank Rizzo**

a novel? How do their movements in the world impact their lives, their families, their work?"

The exhibit, for example, will feature evidence of F. Scott Fitzgerald traveling in Europe, meeting American friends and expatriates Gerald and Sara Murphy in the 1920s, "and we see how that traveling experience 15 years later becomes "Tender Is the Night."

Among the travel items featured are about a dozen passports that belonged to cultural figures of the past century.

"What can be more intimate than a piece of identification that's been in your front pocket during the course of your travels?" asks Kuhl.

Other materials offer a darker view of travel. There's also the "Green-Book," a traveling guide for African Americans that was the basis of the Oscar-winning film of the same name.

And there's a business card from a hotel in Ohio that features a picture of its black owner. "It reflects the complexities of traveling as an African-American in this country before the Civil Rights Act – and even after. The significance of a person putting his picture on a business card identifies the hotel as a place that's safe for a whole community of travelers."

Other items in the exhibit include whimsical maps

"One of the things this institution is about," says Kuhl, "is exciting students' minds and engaging them in whatever way, whatever might spark a spiritual connection, whatever might lead a student to do more rigorous research."

by artist Saul Steinberg; traveling material by Langston Hughes; and postcards from Ernest Hemingway.

"One of the things this institution is about," says Kuhl, "is exciting students' minds and engaging them in whatever way, whatever might spark a spiritual connection, whatever might lead a student to do more rigorous research." 

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Sailing enthusiast Hilary Howes loves being out on the open water, and has been working to lose weight, but “to feel good, not for the swimsuit,” she said.

Daring to Bare Their Beach Bodies

For trans individuals, swimsuit season
brings hopes and fears

By DAWN ENNIS

Her first bikini wasn't even hers. A substantial but still comparatively skimpy white, pink and gray patterned two-piece swimsuit, it had actually once belonged to her teenage daughter, who outgrew it as the girl matured. Now, it was a perfect fit.

She wore it to the community pool for the first time in the summer of 2019. This big step followed 12 months of exercise, dieting and mental preparation for the surgery that finally resulted in a body that best matched the ideal image she'd spent decades imagining.

At long last, here she was, in her bikini. Nobody gave her even a second look, which is exactly all she could hope for. Just another middle-aged woman at the pool.

I was that woman.

Ask me if I'll dare to do that again this summer after spending spring binging Netflix, polishing off pints of Ben & Jerry's and emptying entire bags of Cheetos, and the answer will be NO.

But even before anyone ever heard the phrase "social distancing," there were few women on Earth who hadn't agonized over the summer ritual of shopping for, trying on, buying, squeezing back into, peeling off, and having to somehow put back on a bathing suit. We don't come in "one size fits all," and for the majority of us, our busts, hips, tummies and torsos do not fit supermodel proportions, in contrast to what the designers of swimsuits seem to think.

For transgender people, there are even more considerations when it comes to swimwear. For trans men who haven't had top surgery, binding is a must, meaning the compression of breasts. It's not only constraining; it can make even simple movement an exhausting burden and can be dangerous for those with respiratory illnesses. For pre-op trans women, tucking is mandatory, painful, and not foolproof.



Dawn Ennis dreamed this day would come: finding a two-piece that not only fits her, but flatters her.

Embarrassment is the least bad result of a bad tucking job and can potentially lead to crimes of violence.

But even for trans folks who have had gender confirmation surgery, it can be a nightmare finding a suit that fits a body that was once indicative of another gender expression. Cross-sex hormones help to a large degree, giving trans men thicker, coarser body hair, including chest and facial hair. And surgeons are more skilled than ever at contouring the trans male chest. Also, baggy swim trunks do a lot to hide the hips that are telltale signs someone once identified as female.

For post-op trans women like me, there are different issues: while hormone therapy helps redistribute fat to create curves, develop breasts, soften skin and lighten body hair, older transitioners find some features



Trans men have issues all their own: binding before surgery, revealing scars post-op, and finding baggy swim shorts to conceal what might otherwise look like curvy hips. But their newgrown facial and chest hair often help compensate.

are harder if not impossible to eliminate. Bone structure, Adam’s apples, facial hair, broad shoulders, and larger than typically female extremities like hands and feet are the secondary sex characteristics that can betray a transgender woman – not just at the beach or the pool, but anywhere in public. Surgery and laser hair removal or electrolysis can address some of these issues, provided there’s generous health insurance or a hefty bank account to cover those significant expenses.

But getting the biggest breast implants will only make things worse in the changing room, when the bust/waist/hip measurements don’t comport to the usual female dimensions.

Connecticut VOICE asked more than two dozen trans people from Connecticut and across the country to share their experiences with swimwear, and to specifically address whether spending their spring season in isolation, wasting weeks between workouts, would impact their summer plans for hitting the surf or lounging by the pool in a bathing suit.

Here are some of their insights:

Layne Alexander Gianakos, a 26-year-old trans man from Wallingford, works as a healthcare social services manager. “The important thing is you’re comfortable,” he says. “I think once we can go out in public again, we will all be so happy to enjoy being out and the nice weather that it won’t matter, even if we’re usually self-conscious.”

“I have a one-piece,” says Karin Samatha, 50, of Fairfield County, who will celebrate three years of marriage this fall to Michelle Paula Donovan. “As far as losing weight, Michelle and I don’t go to the beach that often. Next year,” she says, “that will be a different story.”

Jaime Fernandez of Greater Hartford, 43, says she was “not sure about buying that one piece ... even though I’ve lost weight. Might not go to the beach...”

“One day I’m going to wear a bikini,” tweeted Melody Maia Monet, a YouTube personality in Orlando, Fla. “I want to know what that feels like, to have that kind of body confidence before I die. I might be 80 when it

“The important thing is you’re comfortable. I think once we can go out in public again, we will all be so happy to enjoy being out and the nice weather that it won’t matter, even if we’re usually self-conscious.”

–Layne Alexander Gianakos



Photo by iStockphoto/nito100



Melody Mitchell said she cannot wait to get back into her bathing suit. The pandemic meant this essential worker, a truck driver, wasn't filling up on fast food the last few months.

happens, but it will happen.” She followed that tweet with one showing off the bikini she’s hoping to wear someday.

Melody Mitchell of Arkansas is 44 and one of the heroes of the coronavirus crisis, who crisscrossed the country delivering goods. Her job typically requires hours behind

the wheel, with temptations of unhealthy food choices and few opportunities to exercise. But this summer, Mitchell said, she has reasons to look forward to hitting the brakes and getting back into her bathing suit. She also shared some adorable photos from last summer.

“As a truck driver, I’m always hoping to get into a cute swimsuit without the ‘spare tire,’” she wrote. “On the plus side, coronavirus has helped me stay away from sooo much fast food. But, of course, the exercise part sucks. Most well-lit truck stops are great for walking, but many are poorly lit and, frankly, not the safest place to walk. So, usually starvation diets are the only real option, unless you work for a company that pays you to unload your truck yourself.”

Summer is over and it’s already autumn in New Zealand, where Lillian Rose Upton lives. The mid-50s trans woman is a Connecticut VOICE fan and wrote to us to share her story of an early milestone moment in her transition: “First time I wore a female bathing suit was in the pool at Bally’s Las Vegas. I was paranoid that I was boob-, butt- and hip-



Joy Denebeim is excited for her surgery, which was delayed by the coronavirus lockdown. But she isn't waiting until it's done to show off her purple polka-dot two piece.

less, plus my broad shoulders cried ‘male, male, male!’ But, after submerging myself from neck down, it didn’t really matter anymore, and I added a further slice of femaleness to Lillian’s ongoing experiences in girlhood! I do remember not wearing breast forms and being worried that the swimsuit cups would fill up with water and pull the suit down. Fortunately, the cups were pretty rigid, and I didn’t have to worry.”

Another fan from Down Under expressed a common complaint: “One-piece swimsuits are always too short in the body for me,” wrote Robyn Johns-Thomas of Sydney, Australia. Trans women often find fashion that’s designed

for cisgender women – meaning, not transgender – to be insufficiently long in the torso. Tall cis women often have the same complaint, but there is hope: Lands End has styles of swimwear that accommodate that body type, and in 2018, BuzzFeed wrote about 21 clothiers that specialize in fashion for women with long torsos. So, solutions abound.

Joy Denebeim, 61, of Phoenix, Ariz., wrote to say, “I’m still losing weight. I’ll be getting surgery almost immediately after it’s possible.” Denebeim’s already paid in full, so whenever she’s recovered and back in her hometown of Overland Park, Kansas, we sense a swimsuit is in her future.

Film and television critic Danielle Solzman, 35, of Chicago, wrote that working out remained a priority, even with social distancing closures. “I’m going to exercise as much as weather conditions allow, but I’m losing out on the Lincoln Park Zoo for the time being,” she says. “But I also don’t go to the beach,” which makes sense since, before the pandemic, “Solzy at the Movies” spent an extraordinary amount of time in darkened theaters.

Solzman isn’t alone. A majority of the trans women who shared their stories wrote about using the lockdown as a “lose weight, get in shape” motivator.

Cyclist and marathoner Karleigh Webb, 49, a sports journalist and Trans Lifeline operator from New Britain, was “still running and lifting daily.”

Rachel Regalado, 56, of southern California wrote: “I’ve been exercising nearly every day since being stuck at home. Yoga, weights, Pilates, resistance band exercises, etc.”

Hilary Howes of Maryland is a décor executive and sailing enthusiast who wrote that her goal was to lose 40 lbs. before summer. “But I’m doing it to feel good, not for the swimsuit,” she says. “I’ll tell you the day I stopped worrying: I was on the beach in a one-piece, because I was concerned about my tummy, and tucking, and everything. Next to me was a woman in a two-piece, and she was fat. She was having a wonderful time with her husband and kids, but I was lying there plotzting on a beautiful day at the beach. I released my body image demons that day, and now I dance like no one is watching.”

That message matched the sentiment of Kelley Sullivan, a voice-over artist in Tacoma, Wash., who sent this simple thought: “With self-love, everyone has a beach body.”



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.



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Breaking Barriers

The first transgender Mr. Connecticut Bear wants to bring people together

By JANE LATUS

Masculine and rugged. Big and tall. Muscular or stocky. Above all, hirsute! The clichéd descriptions of a bear are physical and allow for only a little variability, mostly of weight.

But Kylar Maldonado, Mr. Connecticut Bear 2020, is no cliché.

The Portland resident, now 22, became at 21 the first transgender man to be named Mr. Connecticut Bear. He entered the competition at the urging of his boyfriend Eddie Brewer, a full-time nursing student. After winning, he got a congratulatory hug from his mother, Kimberly Burr, also of Portland. The competition is organized by the Northeast Ursamen, a non-political, gay fraternal organization that promotes bringing people together in a variety of safe and fun social events.

Maldonado is a shift leader at a D'Angelo sandwich shop. When he and Brewer aren't working, they do partner acrobatics and travel for fun.

I asked him to tell us more about what it means, especially as a trans man, to be Mr. Connecticut Bear.

Q: You are a barrier breaker. Where do you stand as a record-holder for trans bears?

A: I'm the first trans man to win Mr. Connecticut Bear. Worldwide, I'm the second openly trans man and the youngest, at age 21, to win the title internationally! There are actually other people who have won similar titles, but I'm not sure if they're out. Some of them prefer to be stealth. But, do know, others do exist!

Q: When did you transition and was your family supportive?

A: I was 17. I wrote a letter to my family coming out as a trans guy. It wasn't easy. My mom didn't want me to start hormones until I was 18. She knew I had friends who were



Kylar Maldonado is the first transgender Mr. Connecticut Bear.

trans, but when it's your kid and you don't know what to do, you panic. What made her come around was when I told her that I didn't want her to be like the people she was afraid of me for. That scared her, when I put it to her like that. My mom's amazing!

I worked with GLSEN [a nonprofit that works to end discrimination and harassment based on sexual orientation and gender identity] since I was 15, so my mom knew I've got this. She knew this was something I'm very knowledgeable about.

Q: How did you discover the bear community, and how did you get involved?

A: It was a mix of online, like hook-up apps, and through friends at Pride events. The community is still very small in



Maldonado was selected by the Northeast Ursamen, the nonprofit that runs the Mr. Connecticut Bear contest and other contests.

Connecticut, but I started hanging out with others, getting to know them. Thankfully, I was soon connected to people who were part of the Northeast Ursamen, which is not only the organization that runs the CT Bear contest, but is a nonprofit that hosts community events such as Spookybear, Out of Hibernation, and Bears Dine Out.

Q: What made you decide to compete?

A: Uh, (laughing) my boyfriend.

Q: I'll rephrase that. Who made you decide to compete?

A: My boyfriend! I'd been wanting to do it for a few years, since I saw another title holder wearing his vest at Pride in the Park. I was like, "Why do I want to do that? Why does it look like something I want to do?" At that time, I wasn't exactly a bear, so I wasn't sure why I was thinking this. I was in that weird area of my life where I started questioning my sexuality and gender after being out as a lesbian for two to three years. But as time went on, I knew I really wanted to compete and make a difference on a bigger platform. Last year was the first year I finally was old enough. I wasn't sure I was ready, but my boyfriend was like, "No – you've been wanting to do this, and you need to do it this year. It's something that means a lot to you."

Q: What defines a bear?

A: When I was a lot younger, it was definitely more based on physical characteristics. But everything with gender is continually progressing and changing. So being a bear, or a cub, or an otter, or whoever in the community, has become more of a state of mind than what you look like. Some who look like they would belong in the bear category don't even identify as part of it. I know others who weigh 15 to 20 more pounds than I do, but they still have the title of cub. So it just depends on what you feel you identify with.

Q: So a bear doesn't have to look like a lumberjack?

A: Stereotypically, it's more common than not to look like that, yeah. But there are all kinds – there are femme ones, and more masculine ones. I have tons of friends who identify as bears and happen to wear makeup better than I would have ever in my life, and even do drag! (Laughs.)

Q: What does the competition entail?

A: It entails a meet-and-greet, a dance party, and an interview conducted by five judges – all previous or current title holders – and people of the community. There was an onstage portion where I modeled lots of looks, like a pageant – and then a pop question. I had a formal look, a



Mr. CT Bear shows off a more formal style.

hot look and a bear look. The question was, if I had a sitcom, what would it be? I said it would be based on my family – my mom always tells me, “You could write a book about it and nobody would believe it, because of how crazy we are.”

Q: What is the responsibility of Mr. Connecticut Bear?

A: The role of Mr. Bear is to connect with the community by outreach. They want somebody who will be a good representative.

You’re obligated to attend certain events held by the Northeast Ursamen, but you also fundraise for charities. I try to be visible in all LGBTQ communities like drag, leather/kink, and more, especially by volunteering at their events.

Also, my mom and I travel a couple times of year and speak about my transition, and how transitioning affects the family, too. We’ve spoken at trans conferences like True Colors, colleges, and wherever we get booked.

Q: How do you explain to others what the bear community is about?

A: It’s a state of brotherhood and family, alongside with having a good time.

The bear community in Connecticut has become rather – I don’t want to offend anybody – but generally an older crowd. That is something that I was worried about when coming out to this community. I didn’t want to feel left out or underappreciated due to my age. Also, the trans bear community is even smaller so I was worried I wouldn’t be able to connect more personally along those lines. I want to create a bridge between the older crowd and the newer bears – cisgender or trans, vanilla or sexually explorative, white or people of color, and more. It’s about enjoying each other’s company, and being there for other people’s communities, not just for our own.

Q: Tell us about your platform.

A: My platform is acceptance and inclusivity, for all identities. As someone who is Latino, trans, queer and very young – all that – I want to make sure that no one is left out. I never attended bear events when I was younger, because they were all 21-plus, or they were always at a bar, so it was always a barrier I’d run into. I was interested in the bear community ever since I was 17.

I just want to have more of an intersectionality between other communities,



Maldonado says he's grateful for how accepting Connecticut's LGBTQ community is. People from all points across the spectrum come together here, he says, which isn't always the case elsewhere.

like the drag queen and leather communities.

The bear scene in Connecticut is mostly a white, older crowd. That's why I hold my events in more racially diverse places, like New Haven or Hartford. If we want to have more people to attend our events – of different races and ages, different everything – we need to go to them.

I'm organizing an S&M Dinner – spaghetti and meatballs – with Mr. Connecticut Leather 2020 Mark Richards – who also happens to be my sash grandpa (laughs) and Imperial Sovereign Court of All Connecticut 2013 Empress Morgana De Luxe. I'm hoping to draw more people than what has been commonly seen in our community previously.

Q: Tell me about your chosen charity, Boston-based The Network/La Red.

A: About two years ago, I was finally able to get out of an abusive relationship with my ex-boyfriend. When I was looking for a charity to donate to, this one got my interest because they are a survivor-led, nonprofit organization for LGBTQ people trying to get out of abusive relationships, including BDSM, polyamorous, and more. It is an organization that I wish I could have known about when I truly needed it.

Q: How does being trans intersect with being a bear?

A: As a trans person, you constantly face people within the bear community who don't understand it. A lot of people

think you can't be a bear because you were "born a girl," and you can't be a bear because "bears have penises." Some people are very ... harsh. But there are also people who've done nothing but build me up and protect me. They have always given me appreciated affirmation.

Q: Was being trans an issue in your competition?

A: I don't think so. And if there were, it wasn't on my mind. I was focusing a lot on myself and to be honest, my other competitor. As they were a friend of mine, we did check-in meals to make sure our mental health was okay and that we were ready to face anything that could have been brought to our attention. But the people around me really kept me busy and on track for the title. The people who helped me compete – who did mock interviews and stuff – they'd either won the title before, or they've been nothing but supportive of me. The judges were all super nice and they all knew of me due to my activism presence.

Q: What is the rest of the LGBTQ community's perception of bears?

A: People commonly see the bear community as an older crowd of people who just like to hang out among themselves. Which brings me back to why I want to intersect with all communities. Especially in Connecticut, we all get along. Connecticut is awesome because the lesbians hang out with the gays, the drag queens hang out with the bears and leather people. Everybody hangs out

together. I guess I am always shocked when people say that it is quite the opposite for them in other states.

Q: Is there a move toward body positivity in the bear community?

A: There are always people who will think I'm too skinny or too fat, but that's like the world in general. But the current Mr. North American Bear is two or three times my size, and everybody adores him just the same. The community has been quite accepting of all body types, for the most part. It's something I'm really surprised about, because when I was younger, I thought being heavier was an issue. But nobody cares about physical appearance as much as I thought they did. We care more about well-being,

making sure everyone is happy and healthy, and what they want to be in their life.

Q: Just like some people incorrectly think that four-legged bears really sleep all winter, are there any myths about bears you'd like to dispel?

A: It's commonly thought that we're dirty, rough, aggressive and mean people. But I've been called a teddy bear a lot. People always tell me, "You look so intimidating, but you're really so nice!"

People think we're very masculine, keep-to-themselves people. But we're not. The people I keep around me are very genuine and honest people, but very kind and sweethearts. 



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.

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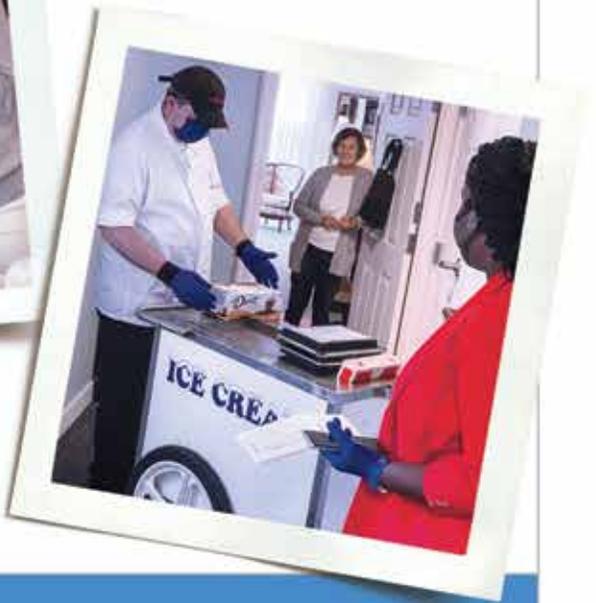
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Ephraim Adamz Means Business

Shining a spotlight on the queer community is this entrepreneur's true passion

By QUINN ROBERTS

As the LGBTQ community continues to gain prominence and influence, both in and beyond Connecticut, many are curious to know: how can we promote LGBTQ-owned small businesses at a time when they are threatened? And just who are these small-business owners keeping the LGBTQ community together?

Ephraim Adamz is here to ensure that Connecticut's queer events remain by and for the LGBTQ community. From DJing and nightlife promotion to video production and music, the Hartford-based entrepreneur is something of a Renaissance man. And he's especially passionate about shining the spotlight on queer Connecticut talent.

We spoke with Adamz about Pride, representation, and the joys of being an LGBTQ business owner.

CT VOICE: You had a very busy Pride season last year. You organized Six Flags New England's Pride Fest and hosted DJ sets at various Pride festivals in Connecticut and beyond. Why do you feel it's so important to recognize Pride each summer? What is your favorite part of every Pride season?

EPHRAIM ADAMZ: Every year is someone's first Pride. I come back for the newcomers. Six years ago, I was in the closet, searching for liberation. An adult in my 20s who was still coming out, I had no knowledge of what Stonewall meant. I did not learn my history in school and I really needed guidance. But attending queer bars, community events, and getting involved in outreach brought out some of my best traits. I've developed empathy, compassion, and confidence, while still feeling free enough to admit my flaws. Sexual health, speaking with your doctor, not being afraid, knowing when to stand up for yourself, and meeting people who are different is something I encourage in every

newcomer at Pride. In short, Pride means it's never too late to love yourself.

There has been an ongoing prejudice at Pride that different music brings a "certain crowd." My favorite part of Pride is challenging this prejudice. I'm the coordinator that's not afraid to include rock, jazz, R and B, hip-hop, pop, Latin, house, Bollywood, Asian, throwbacks, and new-school music, all in the same set. Music speaks to culture and age, but it also transcends both. The type of food trucks speaks to folks, too. I tell board members that, "Yes, we're vegans who enjoy brunch with mimosas, but gays from the hood drink tequila and henny! Did you know that bisexuals are people too? Are we going to have a Womxn night?" I always have someone thank me for acknowledging that queer people come from all walks of life. I am just here to continue breaking barriers.

Q: At World Pride in Manhattan, you had the honor of working with the cast of FX's hit television show "Pose." How was the experience? Are you a fan of the show?

A: "Pose" is making history with its spotlight on queer and trans people of color. I met Dominique Jackson briefly; she is so gorgeous and nice.

It's very difficult to juggle my own intersectionality at times. Am I black enough? Am I too assimilated? Am I gay enough? Am I butch enough? What makes me a man, my looks or my manners? Am I ugly or am I cute? Do I matter? I still ask myself so many questions. Content with more real-life issues and identities is greatly needed. I didn't grow up with a "Pose" poster on my wall, so I'm jealous, but I'm glad television is catching up.

Q: The coronavirus crisis is certainly going to put a wrench in our summer plans for Pride 2020,



Entrepreneur and Renaissance man Ephraim Adamz.
Photo by **Allegra Anderson**



Adamz encourages LGBTQ people to be authentic and unafraid, whether it's in speaking with their doctors about their sexual health, standing up for themselves in social situations, or getting to know people who are different from themselves.

but the great thing is that the LGBTQ community knows how to thrive under pressure. How are you reacting to the shifting plans? What do you say to anyone worried about Pride being in jeopardy?

A: Pride 2020 matters because it marks the 5th year of marriage equality in the United States. Celebrate your partners, reflect on your relationships and dating. Yes, Covid-19 has put a damper on festivals, but we have to remember that Pride is more than just gatherings.

I encourage everyone to become more involved, despite social distancing. Donate. Host a food pantry for queer homeless youth that have been denied by their family. Have a wig drive for struggling trans women of color, who face discrimination in the workplace. Send a card to queers in senior living facilities who never had the opportunities we have. Teach a young queer person about the history of Stonewall and what it means. Know your HIV status, in case your immune system might put your health in compromise. It hurts to discuss our reality, because statistics are used to bully us and stereotype us; I assure you that we can help each other at the root of the community, especially in times of uncertainty.

Q: As LGBTQ culture and media continues to gain prominence and popularity, how do you feel this affects business owners and content creators within the community? How important is it that LGBTQ culture remains by, about, and for the community?

A: People like to stereotype and say, “Oh you’re gay, you must be a hairdresser.” The truth is, we’ve always been very influential in business, art, and fashion. The traditions started by black and queer communities are why your favorite pop stars are so fiercely fabulous. But entertainment is not where it ends. We’ve been your business assistant, clothing designer, stage director, choir coordinator, wedding planner, dance choreographer, computer technician, and more. We are just kept behind the scenes due to homophobia. If not homophobia, then colorism. If not colorism, then race, gender, age – the list goes on. We’ve always been here, we’re still here, but we are just not always allowed to be the face of it.

Q: In addition to DJing, hosting and events production, you also operate an audio/video



DJ, host, producer, entrepreneur:
Adamz does it all.



Adamz urges people to be the best versions of themselves. "You are never too old to come out," he says.

production business and produce music. How do you manage to balance these different ventures while maintaining a coherent personal brand?

A: The short answer is internet and social media. Film has always been an interest of mine since middle school, so I taught myself video. By high school and college, the wave of YouTube, Myspace, and Facebook swept us all in. I got a head start and yet I still feel late. Now anyone can create a video with a cellphone!

Professionalism, high quality, and healthy numbers is what businesspeople want. I'm going through a very crucial stage in which I have to figure out compromise. Some clients see Pride as dollar signs, and that can be problematic in certain situations. Knowing my purpose, our history, and who and what I stand for really helps. When I feel stressed, I can put it in a song. Oh, and drag queens! Everything I learned or admire about juggling business, DJing, and music I learned from drag queens. They'll out-work you and sashay away with the prize.

Q: You make a point to promote and collaborate with local Connecticut talent as frequently as possible. What is it about Connecticut's LGBTQ scene that fuels your drive?

A: I was born in Hartford. I moved to the south at age 2 and returned when I was 19. No matter where I travel, I will always show Connecticut love. One reason it's important for me to shout us out is because we are surrounded by New York, Boston, Providence, and New Jersey. Our community has our differences, like everywhere else, but we are still a force to look out for.

Q: What is one thing people might not guess about you from a first impression?

A: I've known my orientation since puberty, but people are surprised to learn that I didn't come out until age 27. I skipped school so I wouldn't be bullied, I ran away from home for fear of telling my family, I dated women as a form of denial. I felt empty as a youth in the '90s, with no queer role model, few gay men of color in the media, and the legacy of the AIDS pandemic.

You are never too old to come out. Be the best you and inspire someone. I am by no means perfect, but I refuse to be invisible.

Find Ephraim Adamz on Facebook and Instagram, and hear his music on iTunes, SoundCloud and YouTube. 



Quinn Roberts is a writer and Connecticut native. He contributes to digital content and marketing for *Connecticut VOICE Magazine*.

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HELP AND HOPE

For trans patients, high-quality primary care is a crucial part of the journey

By JANE LATUS

When most cisgender people – unfortunately, even some doctors – think of medical care for transgender people, their thoughts are likely confined only to this group’s unique needs, like hormone replacement therapy, gender confirming surgery and vocal therapy.

But transgender people need primary medical care just like everyone, and face the hurdle of finding a doctor who is well-versed in transgender health care, and who will treat them with respect and as a whole person. The difficulty of finding such a doctor keeps nearly a quarter of transgender Americans from even trying.

Fortunately for Connecticut’s trans residents, there is Middlesex Health, where primary care doctors in 12 locations are trained experts in caring for trans, non-binary and gender-queer patients as part of the Middlesex Health Transgender Medicine Program.

Other Middlesex staff members are also trained to provide comprehensive and respectful care to LGBTQ patients, allowing patients to have a positive experience with the health system. As a result, the Human Rights Campaign Foundation has for the past three years designated Middlesex Health an “LGBTQ Healthcare Equality Leader.” The Transgender Medicine Program, ever-growing thanks to word of mouth since its 2016 inception, now provides care to more than 1,000 patients.

Laurel Slongwhite, MD is one of Middlesex Health’s family doctors, practicing in Madison. “This program is the entire reason why I took this job,” says Dr. Slongwhite, a lesbian who acquired a passionate interest in LGBTQ health as a medical student, after finding the curriculum entirely absent of training for LGBTQ patient care.

At first, she says, her patients were mostly referrals from other doctors such as endocrinologists, but word of mouth has made primary care at Middlesex so in-demand that now, she is frequently the first doctor that trans patients seek.

“People are very grateful we are here. Patients will go out of their way to see a provider that they know will be knowledgeable and welcoming,” she says.

The importance of having a primary care physician, as opposed to seeing random doctors during health emergencies, is “We know about our patients, their personal lives as well as their health, and are able to put into context a whole person,” says Dr. Slongwhite.

She remembers if someone complained of heartburn several months back and can judge whether it is related to their current

problems. She knows if someone has lost a pet. She knows when screening tests are due. She knows her patients’ family histories.

Importantly, Dr. Slongwhite also knows when a health issue is not related to being trans. “There are many trans people who feel there’s been too much focus on their identity when it isn’t relevant,” she says.

For these and many more reasons, she says, a primary care doctor is “especially valuable for trans people.”

TRANS PATIENTS COMMONLY AVOID CARE

Without doctors like those at Middlesex Health, trans patients nationwide report negative medical care experiences ranging from the aggravating to the serious.

“It’s fairly well documented that trans and gender non-conforming people have less access to health care, and one reason is deliberate avoidance,” says Dr. Slongwhite.

A 2015 survey by the National Center for Transgender Equality found that in the previous year, “23% of respondents did not see a doctor when they needed to because of fear of being mistreated as a transgender person.”

That fear was well-founded, as the survey also reported:

33% of those who had seen a health care provider in the prior year “reported having at least one negative experience related to being transgender, such as verbal harassment, refusal of treatment, or having to teach the health care provider about transgender people to receive appropriate care.”

15% reported that a health care provider “asked them unnecessary or invasive questions about their transgender status that were not related to the reason for their visit”

13% said that a provider attempted to convince them to undergo conversion therapy

Dr. Slongwhite has herself heard of patients’ negative experiences that have ranged from “on the most benign end, having providers who aren’t knowledgeable – and that itself is off-putting when you’re going to someone who is supposed to have an area of expertise – to having experienced harassment in doctors’ offices, or being denied services either through insurance or by providers.”

A trans male friend of hers with uterine cancer was denied insurance coverage for doctor-recommended surgery, because the insurance company considered it a trans-related procedure when it was actually standard of care for the diagnosis. Fortunately, his family had the means to pay for his surgery. This, she adds, is why



Laurel Slongwhite, MD, says the Transgender Medicine Program was a driving factor in her decision to work for Middlesex Health. A lesbian who is passionate about health issues facing the LGBTQ community, she urges transgender patients to seek high-quality primary care as an important component of their medical needs.

it's necessary to see a trans patient as a "whole person" and not just trans. "This is far from isolated. There are cases of people who've died from terrible cancers because of refusal by insurance and care providers."

KNOWLEDGEABLE PRIMARY CARE IS KEY

Finding a doctor who understands their health needs is an enormous relief for trans people, including in ways cisgender folks might not realize. At Middlesex Health, trans patients can be comfortable knowing they will get expert care, minus hassles, and be welcomed by the staff from the top on down.

This saves patients from either avoiding care or suffering through mightily uncomfortable situations. Imagine, for instance, a trans man having to wait in an ob-gyn's office for a pap smear. Or a trans woman having to explain to an uninformed doctor why she needs a prostate exam. And that upper respiratory infection? A doctor at Middlesex Health will know that it has absolutely nothing to do with your being trans. These experiences can be so triggering that many people would try to avoid them.

And wouldn't everyone love to have a doctor who really knows them, and on whom they can rely?

"There's a value for all people in having a primary care physician, in having a medical home, and someone who'll help you keep healthy, or help you get healthy if you are sick. A primary care physician can also help you navigate a health care system," says Dr. Slongwhite.

Most primary care is the same for trans and cis patients. There is, though, some specific knowledge required for quality care of trans patients, including keeping up on standards of care. "Research is a work in progress. Part of my job is being knowledgeable for patients," says Dr. Slongwhite.

She even helps with matters that most primary care doctors wouldn't. "It can be part of my job to help you navigate for a name change and help you with insurance coverage. That's part of my job, so you aren't tilting at windmills by yourself."

Some of Dr. Slongwhite's patients are referrals, but she is seeing an increasing number of new patients for whom she is their first stop. "Initially, in some cases, they just want to talk to me about their transition and where they want to go." She says they are looking for someone who can help them navigate their journey.

IMPROVING MED SCHOOL CURRICULUM

When Dr. Slongwhite was a student at the University of Maryland School of Medicine, she and some classmates took it upon themselves to write an LGBTQ curriculum, which they then taught faculty how to teach. "We trained the trainers. We'd never seen any depiction of any non-cisgender patient. At the very least, the concept of LGBTQ people should be introduced into the curriculum," she says.

One day, she and classmates were practicing taking hospital patients' histories. One student entered the room of a patient who, unknown to him, was a trans woman. He asked when the patient's last menstrual period was, and when she said she'd never had one, he asked why. The patient answered that she'd been born a man. The student fled the room in embarrassment.

"He was so ashamed," Dr. Slongwhite says of her classmate. "That was something that should have never happened to either of them."

DID YOU KNOW?

Middlesex Health provides the best possible care to all of its patients, including its LGBTQ+ patients, and cares for more than 1,000 transgender patients across its health system.

Middlesex launched a comprehensive Transgender Medicine Program in 2016. Its network of medical providers works with transgender persons to meet specific needs, and services are coordinated throughout the health system.

In August 2019, Middlesex Health earned its third "LGBTQ Healthcare Equality Leader" designation from the Human Rights Campaign Foundation.

LEARN MORE

National Center for Transgender Equality:
transequality.org/issues/health-hiv

2015 Transgender Survey:
transequality.org/sites/default/files/docs/usts/USTS-Full-Report-Dec17.pdf

2018 survey of med students:
ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/29717635

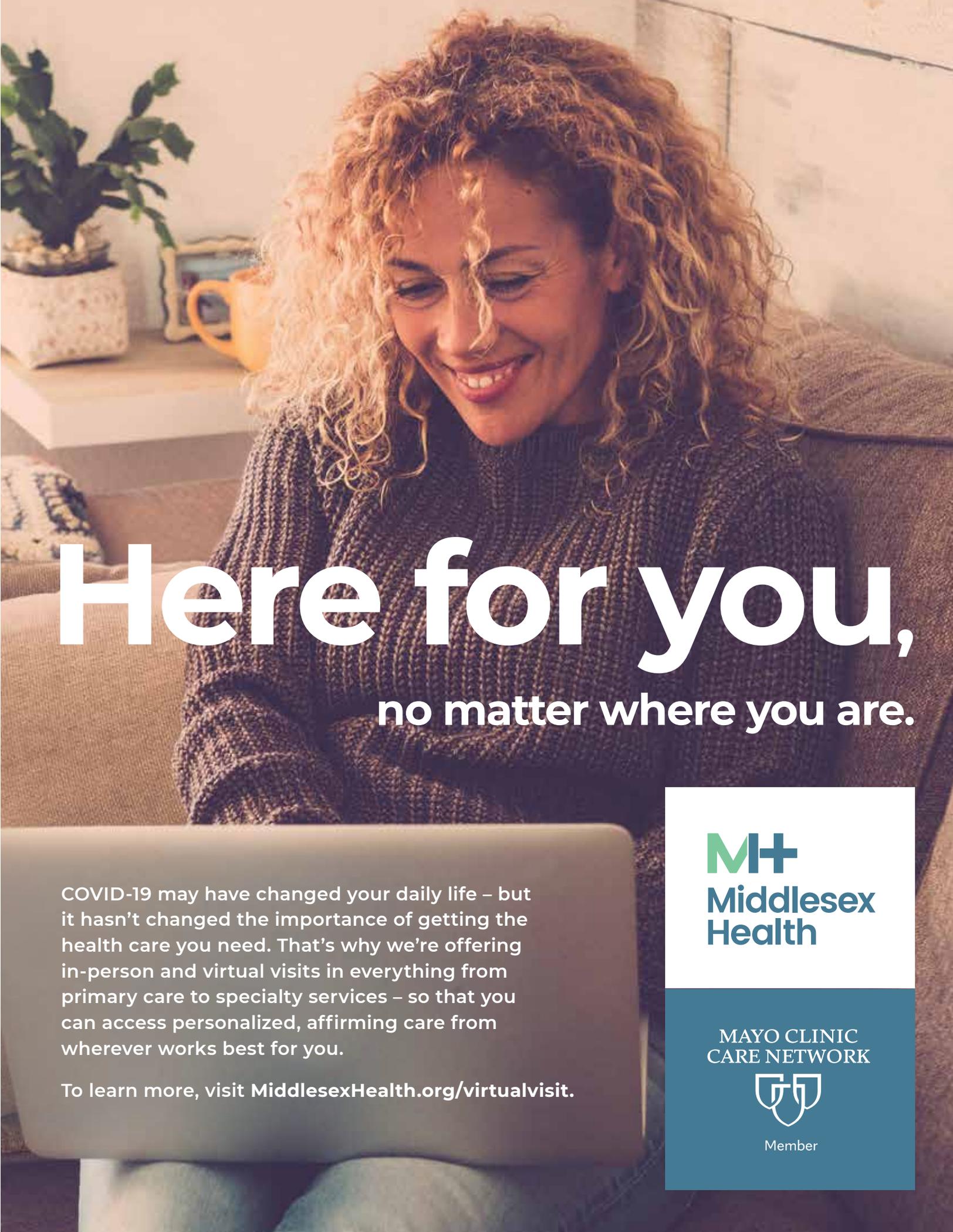
She notes, "I experienced that distress about when and how to come out to a care provider" – including explaining, after a doctor's follow-up question about sexual activity, why she didn't need birth control.

In 2014, the American Association of Medical Colleges published competency guidelines for use in curricula. Although most medical schools now have some LGBTQ training, it remains limited and students – many of them LGBTQ themselves – continue to clamor for more. A 2018 survey of New England medical school students found that 77% felt not competent at treating gender minorities, and more than 50% said their curriculum was inadequate.

For any doctor who seeks it out, guidelines on caring for transgender patients are available from many medical organizations, including the American Medical Association, American Psychological Association, and American Academy of Pediatrics.

Dr. Slongwhite foresees "a sea change" as incoming medical students are increasingly aware of LGBTQ people and their care needs.

"Ultimately, it's the care we want for our ourselves, that we want for our loved ones," she says. 



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SECRETS OF “The World’s Strongest Gay”

Rob Kearney exudes fortitude,
inside and out

By DAWN ENNIS

When he’s not pulling firetrucks, lifting stones or carrying an 1,102-pound weight called a “yoke” around, professional strongman Rob Kearney typically is in a gym in South Windsor or at work in western Massachusetts as a certified athletic trainer. Yes, in addition to proving his incredible physical strength in contests around the world, Kearney admits, “I have a ‘real’ job,” too.

“I actually work as a physician extender,” he says, “with non-surgical orthopedic doctors who specialize in non-surgical care of orthopedic injuries of athletes and any active adult.”

In spite of his impressively beefy, broad shoulders, Kearney, 28, describes his physique as “slightly chubby.” In fact, at 5’10” and 285 pounds, he is not all that big compared to other strongman competitors. Former World’s Strongest Man champions Brian Shaw of Colorado and Hafþór Júlíus Björnsson of Iceland are 6’8” and 6’9” respectively; both weigh 440 pounds.

Kearney is much more of a “Clark Kent,” whose true nature as a super man is cleverly disguised. To discover his secret identity, don’t bother looking for a cape: Kearney is the one sporting a rainbow mohawk hairstyle, to tell anyone who asks, “Gay doesn’t look one certain way.”

“There is a very, very big LGBTQ+ population here,” Kearney says. “So, I usually get a lot of compliments on my hair. When I’m bringing patients into the room, that’s usually the first thing they point out, which is great.”

The mohawk actually predates the rainbow. And children

get a real kick out of it, too, he says.

“I think the best thing about the hair is hearing all the little kids in the grocery store, you know, pulling on their mom’s coat, saying, ‘Mommy, Mommy! Look at the guy with the rainbow mohawk!’ You know, that’s always really cool when you see three-, four- or five-year-olds can be excited about it. That makes this a lot of fun.”

Embracing His True Self

Kearney first adopted his now-trademark rainbow mohawk look in June 2019. “Rainbow colors because the World’s Strongest Man was being hosted in June, which is Pride Month. So with it being in the USA as well, I felt that it was pretty important for me to take that extra step and be a little bit more representative for the LGBTQ+ community.”

Kearney has been representing ever since 2014, when he came out as gay with a social media post that made headlines. That bold step out of the closet followed a decade of refusing to acknowledge his truth.

“It took that long because there was a lot of self-denial,” he says. “I had tried to live the ‘heterosexual lifestyle’ for a long time.”

Last December, he was invited to share his coming out story with middle school students in Deerfield, Mass., and mentioned he had once lived with a woman. “It was essentially me and a good friend just living together,” Kearney says. “And, I don’t know what it was, but one day I woke up and I finally realized why I wasn’t so happy.”

Kearney figured out his unhappiness stemmed from a common experience among closeted members of the



Sometimes people are afraid to approach Rob because he's so brawny, but his husband Joey says the truth is, "He's generally just a teddy bear type of person."

LGBTQ+ community: exhaustion from trying to convince others, and themselves, that they're someone they're not.

"You're just exhausted every day of putting on this facade, pretending to be somebody you aren't, all the time. And then finally, being your true self, this weight gets lifted off your shoulders. And, you know, I'm literally a professional weight lifter, and I've carried thousands of pounds on my back, but nothing has ever, no weight has ever been lifted off my shoulders, like when I came out back in 2014."

It was in 2014, he says, he fell in love. "I was in a relationship with a guy who had been out since high school," he recalls about dating Joey Aleixo.

"I really didn't feel that it was fair for him to be dating somebody who's still closeted in our early 20s," Kearney says. "So, in the most millennial way possible, I came out via a Facebook post on 'Man Crush Monday.' I came out to my family and friends prior to that, my close family, friends. But then on October 20 of 2014 is when I came out to the world."

His Facebook post read: "My [man-crush Monday post] goes to ... my boyfriend! The past few months have been crazy, but throughout all of this, you've given me a reason to smile. So I guess this is me coming out and saying ... I'm gay!"

"Finally being able to be myself without fear, and finally, honestly experiencing love and real happiness for the first time," says Kearney, "that was my biggest motivator to come out."

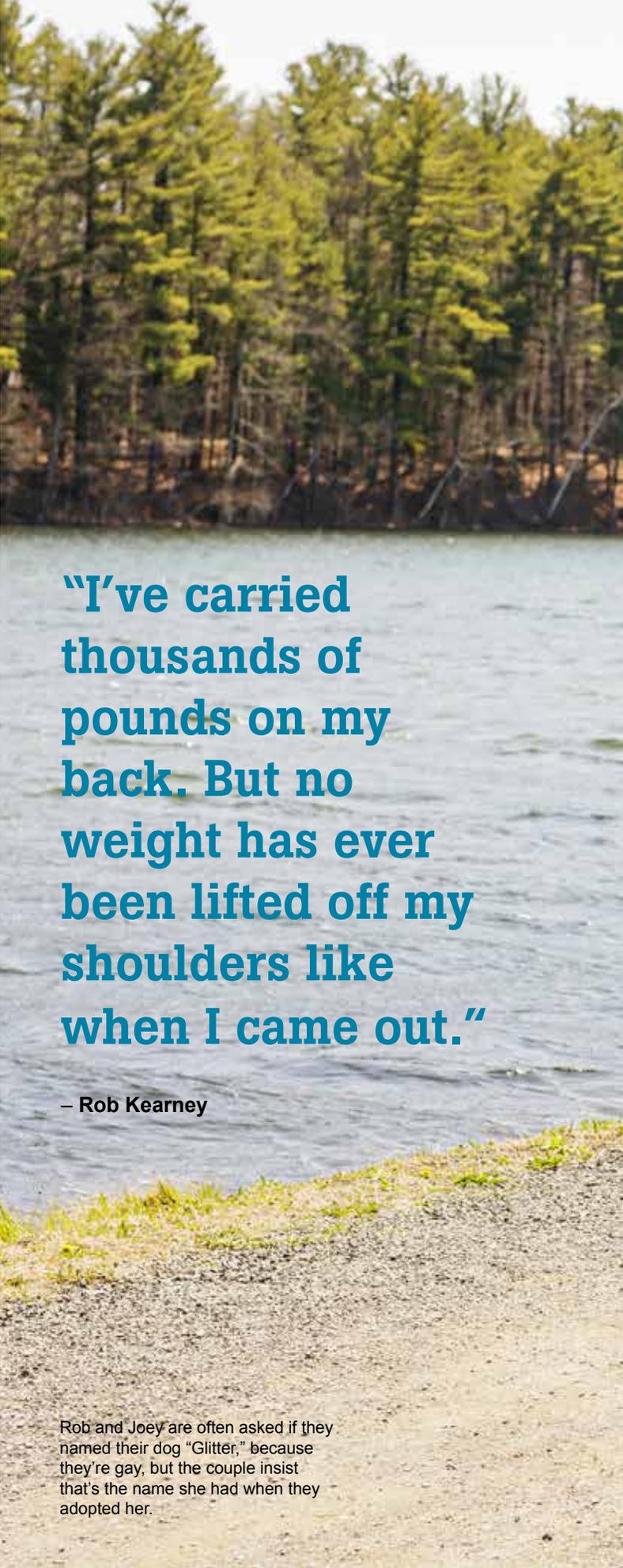
A Trailblazer Among Strongmen

In the macho world of strongmen, this was the sports equivalent of Ellen declaring "Yep, I'm gay." Kearney was the first out gay man to be actively competing in pro-level, international strongman competitions. And while his historic coming out story brought him a bigger spotlight, he says that's not the reason for his fame.

"Strangely enough," recalls Kearney, "my strongman career took off, just catapulted forward. And it wasn't simply just because, quote, unquote, 'people were looking at me because I'm gay,' and that's how I got popular. It was that I genuinely got so much stronger after I came out. And that was just because I didn't have to pretend anymore."

To embrace his newfound fame, Kearney adopted social media handles: @strongestgay on Twitter and @worlds_strongest_gay on Instagram. Aleixo chose @gayeststrongman and @worlds_gayest_strongman.

"I was fortunate enough to meet Joey and get into this amazing relationship," says Kearney, who reveals the



"I've carried thousands of pounds on my back. But no weight has ever been lifted off my shoulders like when I came out."

— Rob Kearney

Rob and Joey are often asked if they named their dog "Glitter," because they're gay, but the couple insist that's the name she had when they adopted her.



couple met on Grindr in September 2014. Which prompts the question: did he swipe right?

“Luckily, he messaged me first,” Kearney says with a laugh.

Finding ‘The One’

So, why did Aleixo reach out? It wasn’t based on looks, he says: “I wanted to meet someone, at least get to know someone. That was my main initiation for a conversation.”

“I was on Grindr trying to kind of come to terms with my sexuality,” says Kearney. “And then Joey kind of came out of nowhere and messaged me. And so we started dating a few weeks after that.”

And, as in many love stories, the timing was not ideal, Kearney recalls.

“It’s funny, because we look back and we both realized we were not in any place in our lives to start a really serious relationship,” he says. “I was just finishing my first year of grad school, Joey had just finished undergrad, so neither of us thought that it would turn into a lifetime partnership.”

Kearney and Aleixo got engaged on Aleixo’s birthday, Dec. 17, 2016. Then, for a short time in May 2018, the couple split. But they reconciled, and started making wedding plans.

“We had kind of always planned on the traditional big wedding, and we had looked at venues and done all the numbers and realized that, 1: we couldn’t afford it. And 2: we were way too selfish to put on a wedding for everybody else.”

As it turns out, the couple found a way to combine competition and tying the knot in their own distinctive way, in one of the most beautiful places on earth. In March 2019, Kearney and Aleixo were headed Down Under for a very big contest, organized by the world’s most famous body builder, actor and former California governor Arnold Schwarzenegger.

The Arnold Pro Strongman Australia competition is one of several qualifying events leading up to the Arnold Strongman Classic, the world championship event held each year in Columbus, Ohio.

“The Arnold Strongman Classic is one of the most coveted strongman competitions in the world. It’s arguably the most selective,” Kearney says. He was one of 13 men competing in six feats of strength over the course of two



Left: Rob Kearney shows why he is the “World’s Strongest Gay” by pulling a fire truck. Right: Rob and his newlywed husband enjoy a cruise around Melbourne, Australia as a guest of Arnold Schwarzenegger.

days in Melbourne, Australia.

According to official reports, Kearney was on fire right from the start, winning the first two feats. He completed the 1,102-pound yoke in 13.22 seconds. A yoke is a staple of strongmen competitions, in which contestants pick up a large metal frame with a crossbar, stacked with weights on all four corners and, with the crossbar resting on their

backs, carry the yoke over a long distance as quickly as they can. Kearney lifted five times his weight and walked it across the competition floor in about 13 seconds, more than four seconds faster than anyone else. He also won the log press, lifting 200 kilograms – more than 440 pounds.

On the second day in Melbourne, Kearney lifted four huge Atlas stones in almost 76 seconds and finished fourth, but he was still able to take the overall victory by a margin of 1.5 points. Winning qualified him to compete in this year’s Arnold Strongman Classic against “Thor” Björnsson, the defending champion and an actor who played “The Mountain” on Game of Thrones.

And as a bonus, Kearney got to meet Arnold Schwarzenegger himself.

“Arnold was presenting me the trophy on stage and asked what we had planned for the rest of the weekend. So I told him, in front of a few thousand people, that I’d be getting married the next day,” Kearney says. Schwarzenegger pulled Aleixo up on stage to cheers and whistles.

A month earlier, Aleixo had suggested they elope to a place neither of them had ever been before: Melbourne. In the space of a few weeks, they found a justice of the peace who suggested scenic Half Moon Bay Beach. On March 17, they exchanged vows on a cliff overlooking the bay.

“Fortunately, it turned out to be absolutely amazing and breathtakingly gorgeous,” he says, wistfully. “It was perfect, to say the least. It was the most amazing day of our lives.”

Aleixo took his husband’s name, and their heartwarming wedding photos went viral. As it turned out, the day after was almost as magical.

“After the wedding on Sunday, my phone was ringing and it was a FaceTime call from Arnold, who then asked what we had planned for the night. And I told them we just had made dinner reservations. And his response was, ‘Cancel them. I’m taking care of you guys.’” Schwarzenegger

“It was the most amazing day of our lives.”



Kearney and Aleixo wed at scenic Half Moon Bay Beach in Melbourne, Australia, the day after Kearney won an international strongman competition.



Caption here.

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chartered a yacht and took the newlyweds on a three-hour tour of the city of Melbourne, Kearney says. “And then he kind of spoiled us even more and took us out to dinner afterwards.”

Using ‘Negativity as Motivation’

Thanks to Kearney’s victory in Melbourne, the couple traveled to Columbus, Ohio in March for the world championship. And while people cheered the Kearneys Down Under, a handful of haters jeered them in their native land.

“My husband and I were walking across the street and a couple of guys driving by screamed out, ‘Faggots,’” Kearney says. “I think any LGBTQ person deals with that stuff.”

“Typically, I ignore the comments,” he says. “I use all the negativity as motivation for training. For me, there’s no better way to say ‘F-you’ to that person than for me to win. So, I just try to channel that negative energy that those people are giving me and use it positively in my training to work harder, become better, get stronger and place higher in the competitions that I do.”

And the “coolest” thing to the Kearneys, he says, is that the straight men he competes against are their biggest allies.

“If somebody makes a comment on one of our posts, we don’t even have to defend ourselves. It’s usually our friends that are also in strongman that come to defend us and have our backs and show that allyship that’s so amazing in this sport.”

An Unexpected Path

Despite its central role in his life now, Kearney says strongman wasn’t even on his radar growing up. He was born in 1991 in Brooklyn. As a child, his family moved to North Stonington. He spent his high school years at the Norwich Free Academy, where he briefly was a football player and then a cheerleader.

In January, Kearney told podcaster Joe Rogan that joining the cheerleading squad was where he first really put his strength and his skill to use: “I was throwing girls up in the air by myself and catching them overhead. The timing, coordination, it’s crazy. It takes a lot of balls.”

Although he considered pursuing cheer at a collegiate

level, he gave it up because he felt he was “a little too chunky” to successfully do a backflip. So next he “dabbled in lifting weights,” but a chance encounter provided a new direction.

“My senior year in high school, I was working out when a substitute teacher who was also a CrossFit coach noticed me and started training me at his gym before school,” Kearney says. Every weekday for more than four months, he reported to the CrossFit gym at 5 a.m., and worked out. “And I found out pretty quickly that I sucked at CrossFit, but I was really good at lifting weights.

“So I walked into the gym one morning and the gym

owner said, ‘Hey, there’s a local strongman contest this weekend. We signed you up for it.’” Kearney knew right away he was in over his head.

It was 2009 and, at that time, Kearney saw strongman as “big guys lifting these crazy things, pulling trucks, picking up cars, lifting logs over their head,” he recalls.

“I was 17 years old. I had never trained for strongman. I’d never done any of the implements; I’d never done the lifts.” But he didn’t say no. “I went to the contest, got my ass kicked – I took dead last of 27 athletes – and fell in love with the sport.”

Kearney joined the powerlifting team at Springfield College, where

he also earned his bachelor’s and master’s in athletic training. For a time, he served as the head athletic trainer at the Williston Northampton School, while also honing his technique, and competing on the amateur circuit.

In September, Kearney will have been competing in strongman for 11 years. “I started competing under 200 pounds and I took dead last in every contest I did for eight contests straight,” he says. “I didn’t win a show until my 17th contest. And I made my way through the entire amateur rankings, through multiple weight classes before I ended up competing at World’s Strongest Man starting in 2017.”

The results were not as rosy at March’s world championship in Columbus: he finished sixth out of ten, with “Thor” three-peating as World’s Strongest Man. But the Kearneys also marked their first wedding anniversary.

Then life took a different turn for them, and for all of us, when the Covid-19 pandemic hit.

“We really tried to practice that social distancing, just



Rob Kearney has sported a mohawk for years, but decided that for Pride in 2019 he would dye it in rainbow colors, to “be a little bit more representative for the LGBTQ+ community.”

because it's proven to work so, so well, which was tough because we're both pretty social people," Kearney says. "So for us to not see our friends and kind of hang out with people we love was a little bit tough, but we knew how important it was. So, we spent a lot of time together."

What's he like cooped up at home? Joey Kearney spoke to Connecticut VOICE by phone from their kitchen, where he was cooking one of the six to eight meals a day his husband eats. Rob Kearney's daily intake is between 5,000 to 8,000 calories. Joey confided that Rob is not what some people seem to think.

"People approach him who want to take a picture, and I'm like, 'Oh, do you want a picture?'" says Joey. "Like, I initiate it, because I can tell they're hesitant to even approach him, even though he doesn't seem like a scary guy to me. He's generally just a teddy bear type of a person."

Together, they care for an English bulldog named "Glitter," whom Kearney insists already had that name when they adopted her, and despite the fame, they struggle like everyone does.

"[Being a strongman] doesn't pay nearly what it should pay," Kearney says. "The prize purses at competitions are much lower than other professional sports, even in the

strength world. And endorsement wise, we get taken care of. But we're not getting these massive deals that other professional athletes are getting." Fortunately, Kearney also has his work as a physical extender to fall back on, and his confidence in himself.

He said he's heard from naysayers ever since he started in 2009. And in 2017, he came up with his own motivational quote: "I trained to become the person they said you would never be."

"My entire life was always just trying to do what people said I couldn't do and achieve things that people thought were unattainable for me," says Kearney. "It was that I didn't have the size, I didn't have the stature, I would never be that strong. And, you know, in most senses, a lot of people were right."

"Looking at me, I think the best compliment I ever got in strongman was somebody once told me that I was 'the least genetically gifted athlete to ever make it to World's Strongest Man.' And I took that as the biggest compliment in the world, because that just means, nothing was ever given to me," he says. "I had to work my ass off to get to this level in the sport. And that's something that I still continue to do in my career right now." 

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FEATURE //



What A Dr

Tens of thousands of drag lovers turned out last September for the three-day DragCon at the Jacob K. Javits Center in New York City.



drag!

DragCon may be postponed but the spirit of fab, fun and fantasy is alive and well

Written and photographed by **FRANK RIZZO**

Approaching the Jacob K. Javits Center on a bright fall morning on Manhattan’s West Side, a pair of drag queens sashayed along 11th Avenue, swinging their hips as if keeping time to a dance beat only they could hear. Crossing the street came another, even larger, group – one that had a decidedly downtown, arty-smarty feel. As they all neared 34th Street, gaggle after gaggle of stylized-to-the-max guys and gals, many bewigged, bejeweled and bedazzled, joined in the impromptu parade and headed into the cavernous building that in the past has hosted political conventions, auto shows and art expos.

It was drag’s turn to claim its place in the great hall, and – “Yaass, queen” – with flourish.

Not far from Chelsea’s Meatpacking District and the Village’s Stonewall Inn, where drag queens of decades past would strut their stuff and fight for their rights, the Javits Center was a celebration of LGBTQ+ empowerment that would have been unimaginable even a dozen years ago.

Tens of thousands of queens – and those who love them – came to DragCon, lured by that Pied Piper of glam, sass and marketing: RuPaul.

The extravaganza embraced the artist-entrepreneur’s catchphrase in defining a drag star – “charisma, uniqueness, nerve and talent” (and whose initials reflect drag’s sense of naughty outrageousness).

It was also – “halleloo” – big business.

The coronavirus pandemic has derailed plans for DragCon events in 2020. The Los Angeles DragCon, originally slated for May, was cancelled, and at press time it was unclear when the next New York City DragCon, typically planned for the fall, will be.

The first DragCon debuted in Los Angeles in 2015, just as the drag phenomenon was being propelled into the mainstream culture by the Emmy-winning reality series “RuPaul’s Drag Race,” now in its 12th season.

Since then, RuPaul’s World of Wonder empire has expanded to include the television spin-offs “Drag Race All Stars,” entering its fifth season, and “Drag Race UK,” which began its first season in January, officially making the brand international. Then there are “Drag Race”-sponsored tours featuring the series’ stars, multiple annual DragCon events, and an open-ended live revue show at Las Vegas’ Flamingo Hotel.

But not everything RuPaul touches turns into gold lamé, however. The star’s effort in dramedy with the Netflix series “AJ and the Queen” was short-lived and her daytime talk show took shade and was cancelled after a few months.

But for this third go-round in NYC, business was booming like never before. (Ticket prices were \$70 for a weekend ticket, \$40 for a single day pass, and \$300 for a VIP pass.)

After going through metal detectors, attendees – many dressed to impress – walk down a pink carpet and into the epic hall where a Disneyland of drag



Sometimes the fans went glam, but other times the dragsters went playful, such as this stylish royal who showed off her dressing...and buns.



Others went for a more ethereal look, like this creative who presented a dreamy fashionable identity.

awaits. The cultural mash-up proved to be real head-turners with cell cameras at the ready: A stocky hirsute man was outfitted as a twisted version of Ursula from “The Little Mermaid.” Another created an outfit that was Elsa from “Frozen” meets Wonder Woman. Another pair did a variation of “Game of Thrones” drag.

“If it’s your first time there, it’s a bit of a culture shock,” says Angel Rivers, a Connecticut drag performer who grew up in Manchester. “You never know what to expect and that’s how you should always be when you go to a drag event because drag queens are so unpredictable. They can be simple and sweet or they can be really out there.”

Angel says the great thing about DragCon is that it brings an even wider audience of all ages – including straight couples and families – who might not want to go to a gay club. “The mood is very supportive and there’s a real positive vibe. That’s RuPaul’s message: Everyone is different. Everyone is welcome.”

Even youngsters. Kids 10 and under were admitted free when accompanied by an adult and in the “Kids’ Zone,” children could play dress-up as the Statue of Liberty; enjoy “dragtivity” books, and sit in and listen to “Drag Queen Story Hour” sessions. (Miz Jade, Cholula Lemon and Angel Elektra held forth on this Saturday afternoon.)

Along aisles named “Glamazon Blvd,” “Sickening Street,” “Death Drop Alley,” or “Werq The World Way,” 220 booths featured a wide and playful range of wares, including biodegradable glitter, kaftans, enough wigs to make Moira Rose jealous, platform and stiletto heels and sneakers with a Liza-level of sequins, “drag therapy” sessions, over-the-top jewelry, lots of padding, jock straps, undies, hot pepper sauce, and

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Scores of vendors displayed — and in some cases strutted — their stuff, such as this model luring in fans to his booth at Skull & Bones, a New York-based underwear and leisurewear brand.

campy pop art. There were plenty of free samples — and makeovers, too, which were shows unto themselves.

“People want to see their favorite queens obviously, but they’re also here to shop,” says Robert Matysiewski of Skull and Bones, a New York-based underwear and leisurewear brand that used bubble-butt models as bait, including one lithe lad in a sky blue assless number. “They garner a ton of attention and bring a lot of folks to the booth. We find with DragCon there’s a whole array of people — gay straight, bi, women, and families that are drawn to DragCon — and that just expands our demographic.”

Drag Stars Draw

The main draw, of course, were more than 150 of the world’s top drag queens, many of whom appeared, natch, on “RuPaul’s Drag Race” — and they were treated like pop stars. Long lines wound around the aisles for fans eager to meet, greet, get autographs and have their picture taken with their fave stars. for a not-small fee (prices reflect who are the hottest stars at the moment).

The wait was more than an hour to meet and greet Season 11’s “Miss Congeniality” winner, Nina West. Lines also stretched for last season’s winner Yvie Oddly. But perhaps the longest was for Vanessa “Vanjie” Mateo, the hysterically funny underdog who was the first queen eliminated in season 10, only to be brought back the following season to become a top-five finalist and a sui generis superstar.

Also tending to their followings were Honey Davenport, Scarlet Envy, Aquaria, Ariel Versace, Brooke Lynn Hytes, Shuga Cain, Ongina, Acid Betty, Gia Gunn, Naomi Smalls and Trinity the Tuck.

“My favorite was Aquaria,” says Angel. “I’ve been following her from the very start of her career. She’s very resilient. Many people have told her ‘no’ so many times because they thought she wasn’t doing drag the right way, which is something I’ve experienced myself from my community.”

Of course, RuPaul herself presided over the event like a queen on high — literally from a platform elevated 15 feet above the crowd. During the weekend, she did live interviews with Diane von Furstenberg and Whoopi Goldberg, and on Saturday and Sunday took a spot high above the main stage to played DJ sets. Then-presidential candidate Elizabeth Warren also made



DragCon attracted a wide range of attendees, especially young people who reveled in the fabulousness of the event, including these two, who manned one of the shoe booths.

a special appearance via video, which was introduced by Trixie Mattel.

There were panel discussions on comedy queens, featuring drag’s best gagsters: Nina West, Pandora Boxx, Meatball, Sam Harrison and Hedda Lettuce. Another panel called “Judgey Judies” featured Drag Race’s most astute and witty judges, Michelle Visage, Carson Kressley, and Ross Matthews.

Other panels offered more than just laughs. The “Queens of New York” panel featured Dusty Ray Bottoms, Brini Maxwell, Marti Gould Cummings, Merrie Cherry, and Flotilla DeBarge, who talked about having careers independent of being on “Drag Race.”

“One of the things I wished DragCon did more of was elevate the voices of local drag acts,” says Patrick Dunn, executive director of the New Haven Pride Center, who also performs in drag as Kiki Lucia. “If there was a way to have local queens perform, that would be a cool component to add to DragCon.”

Another panel including Dianne Brill, Simon Doonan and Frank DeCaro talked about the art and history of drag. Another, hosted by the political action group Swing Left, was called “Trump and Mitch, Sashay Away: How We Win in 2020.”

When DragCon inevitably makes its post-pandemic return, fans will be ready.

“Whenever it is, it’s definitely going to be bigger for sure,” says Angel. “The younger generation appreciates the art of drag – which is really so great. They’re responding to what the power of drag is, that you can be whoever you want to be.”



DragCon also offered the opportunity for anyone to get into the spirit of drag, here with one booth offering “Drag Therapy” for those who needed a lift in heels, wig and something pretty.

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THE SHOW MUST GO ON

No global pandemic will stand in the way
of Connecticut Pride

By QUINN ROBERTS

With the Covid-19 pandemic throwing so much into turmoil, it wasn't totally clear how we should spend our weeks in quarantine. Our concerns ran the gamut from the political to the personal, the universal to the intimate. So much of our calendar was up in the air and, for the first time in what feels like forever, we focused on the present, the day-to-day. Should I order medical masks and toilet paper in bulk? Should I try a new pasta recipe? Should I disinfect my grandmother's doorknobs? Should I apologize to my ex? Should I finally read *Middlemarch*? When normal life is suspended, it raises the question of what we truly need.

Therein lies the quandary of our summer calendar. It's easy to be dismissive, to downplay the importance of recognizing and celebrating Pride

season. It's just a block party, you might think at first, with a touch of pizzazz. But of course, Pride season is more than just a fun afternoon at the park. It's a time for the LGBTQ community to study our history, support our local talent and businesses, reaffirm our shared values. It's a time to come together – but how do we come together in the age of social distancing?

At first, for many of Connecticut's Pride season hosts, the solution depended on good luck and fortune: postpone the event and hope for the best. But as the ban on large gatherings extended later into the year, it became clear that we'd have to come together in a more virtual sense.

"Over 20 local towns and cities in CT may need to postpone events due to the devastating impact of COVID-19 on our local LGBTQ+ communities," stated the CT Virtual Pride Facebook page (facebook.com/CTVirtualPride). "June is our special month to stand up

and be proud of who we are as people. To continue the tradition of Stonewall over 50 years ago, we will come together safely with a virtual event to be broadcast on Facebook, YouTube and Discord."

Thus emerged our very first Connecticut Virtual Pride. Virtual Pride is hosted by CT Pride, a collaboration of Pride organizations statewide. Not only does Virtual Pride host a celebratory virtual parade and festival, but there will also be summer-long programming presented by LGBTQ+ nonprofits across the state. The goal is to celebrate, but also to organize solutions for our community members who are facing hunger, loss of income, housing insecurity, challenges accessing healthcare, and mental health stresses. Those tuning in are encouraged to contribute directly to those nonprofits we rely on for our needs, such as the New Haven PRIDE Center, Triangle Community Center, Hartford Gay & Lesbian Health



Collective, True Colors, and Kamora's Cultural Corner.

"Our intent is to provide a safe way to express our pride and maintain social distancing through the latest technology," Hartford Pride committee member Dr. Richard Stillson recently told *The Rainbow Times*. Indeed, it is impressive how efficiently CT Pride has arranged Connecticut Virtual Pride. The future of technology aside, though, we're still focused on the past and present: recognizing our queer history, and giving back and caring for the less fortunate members of our LGBTQ+ community.

Still, the sense of community and solidarity may be lost or diminished this summer. One of the greatest parts of Pride season is the opportunity to be with those who share your identity. The experience of sharing physical space has a power that

can't be transferred perfectly onto our computers. Reflecting on this in his forthcoming video project "Pride Before COVID," Hartford DJ Ephraim Adamz says, "Everybody says stay home, but what if you don't have a home to go to? This is a chance to dig deeper into the lives of those who are marginalized."

Maybe the most important thing to remember is the progress that is yet to be made. So, we must continue recognizing Pride, even in the midst of Covid-19.

We at *Connecticut VOICE* are crossing our fingers for summer 2020, and we can't wait to see you at Connecticut Virtual Pride. Make sure to follow social distancing guidelines and keep checking out COVID-19 resources. And remember that, no matter what, like Lady Gaga once said: "Being gay is like glitter; it never goes away."

Connecticut Virtual Pride 2020 includes a diverse array of events:

- **Advice from the Lights** features the artwork of trans artists in response to the poetry of transgender writer Stephanie Burt.
- **The MiniCon Series** livestreamed content on topics affecting queer youth, includes workshops, networking, and entertainment.
- **LGBT Digital Pride and Migration 2020**, a party celebrating LGBT-identifying migrants and refugees, will be held on World Refugee Day.
- In **Pride Before COVID**, DJ Ephraim Adamz discusses what Pride means to Connecticut and New England's LGBTQ community. The three-hour, interactive Facebook presentation includes drag performances, interviews with LGBT activists and celebrities, and footage from prior festivals.
- **Sylvia Rivera: She Was More Than Stonewall** includes a two-part documentary about the transgender icon, followed by a Q&A with the founder of the Connecticut TransAdvocacy Coalition.
- **Be You!** a virtual queer prom for Connecticut's out and proud high school students, features performances by the Imperial Sovereign Court of Connecticut drag artists.
- The 24-hour event **Global Pride** includes speeches, performances, and film content from Pride organizations around the world.

For up-to-date information on other events as well as scheduled dates and times, visit ctvoice.com.

Connecticut
Virtual Pride
2020



CT Sun head coach and general manager Curt Miller keeps an eye on the action.

Eyes on the Prize

After coming so close to a championship last year, the Connecticut Sun is hungry in 2020

By **JOHN TORSIELLO** / *Photography courtesy of CT Sun*

In early spring, Connecticut Sun head coach and general manager Curt Miller was still wishing he had a few minutes back from the fifth and deciding game of the 2019 WNBA Championship Series against the Washington Mystics.

With the series tied at two games all and the championship on the line in game five, the Sun was up by three points with just under seven minutes to play. Then the bubble burst; the Mystics went on a 13-2 run that powered them to an 89-78 victory and the title. What also stung the Sun's coach and players was the fact that they had led in the game by as many as nine points in the third quarter. They were, oh, so close – they could almost feel the trophy in their hands.

“If we could have a portion of game five back, where a couple of calls went against us and changed the whole momentum,” says Miller wistfully. “But that is what makes our game so special,” adds the fifth-year coach. “It’s a chess match, and things happen and calls are made

or not made that completely change the game. It’s difficult to describe the feeling of losing in game five of the championship series. But it leaves a pit in your stomach.”

It was the third time the Sun had advanced to the championship series in its 18 years of existence and the first time since 2005.

Despite the difficult-to-process loss, Miller calls last year “a great ride.”

“When I was hired four years ago, a lot of people wondered if Connecticut would ever truly compete for a title again,” he says. Indeed, the Sun had endured three straight losing seasons. Miller’s first team went 14-21. Then came back-to-back 21-13 campaigns, and then a 23-11 regular season record and a playoff sweep (3-0) of the Los Angeles Sparks last year. “In many ways, it was incredibly gratifying to watch our building process over four years and to get to the championship series.”

So, for Miller, it’s a hoop half-empty, half-full approach to 2019.



Connecticut native Bria Holmes has a clear goal for the new season: she wants her team to win a championship.



Forward Alyssa Thomas comes down the court.

Amber Cox, vice president of the team, calls 2019 “such a special season for our entire organization and our incredible fan base. A run like that is not only memorable for our long-time fans but, with all the exposure and excitement, we welcomed many new fans into the Sun family. We’re looking forward to carrying that momentum into the 2020 season,” she says.

Cox says last year’s team had tremendous chemistry. “The core had been together for four years, so both on the court and off, the group had a special connection. They wanted to win for each other. It was always team first.”

For Connecticut native Bria Holmes, a guard who averaged 6.3 points a game in 2019, last year was definitely a fun ride.

“That experience will be unforgettable,” she says. “The key to getting to the finals was that every single person was locked in and ready to play when their number was called.” She says the team “practiced hard day in and day out” and “went to battle every game, giving it our all.”

When they hired him, Sun management allowed Miller time to build a winner “from a core group of players” and end what had been an almost-constant turnover of the roster in previous years. It was a similar approach to the ones Miller had used in building winning programs at the collegiate level (at Bowling Green University and Indiana University as a head coach).

“It all came together last year,” says Miller, “and management made the decision to go all-in on the season, push the chips in, and give us the players to make a run at a championship. We knew we would lose some of our free agents after the season and that our 2020 roster was going to look different.”

The Sun will indeed have a new look in 2020 after losing several players to free agency. But Connecticut landed probably the prize of free agency, DeWanna Bonner; added several other pieces; and will welcome back players who played roles in the drive to the championship series. Bonner is a two-time WNBA champion and three-time All-Star.

“We knew we would lose some players, especially given the new collective bargaining agreement,” says Cox. “Change can be difficult because bonds are formed. I’ll certainly miss seeing the players who moved on. But it’s a business and, ultimately, change is inevitable in sports. We’re excited about the players who are still with us – who

understand our culture – and we are thrilled about the players we’ve been able to add during free agency.”

Cox believes “we absolutely can get right back to where we were a year ago and hopefully hang a championship banner for these fans.”

In addition to Bonner, Cox referred to the addition of Briann January, an 11-year WNBA Champion and All-Star who averaged close to 7 points and four assists a game in 2019; as well as a player familiar to UConn fans, Kaleena Mosqueda-Lewis. Mosqueda-Lewis is one of the elite three-point shooters in the WNBA and a proven winner at the collegiate and pro levels. The veteran leadership will gel nicely with a core of Jonquel Jones, Alyssa Thomas and Jasmine Thomas.

Jones is a star in her own right and averaged 14.6 points and 9.7 rebounds a game in 2019. Alyssa Thomas scored 11.6 points and hauled in 7.8 rebounds a game, while Jasmine Thomas scored 11.1 points and had 5.1 assists per game. All three figure to play prominent roles in the 2020 season.

Bonner, who plays both the forward and guard positions, averaged 17.2 points and 7.6 rebounds last season and is “beyond excited” about joining the Sun.

“It’s a great organization with amazing staff and players,” she says. “My number one reason to sign with the Sun was to try and help the organization get its first championship. Secondly, Amber, Curt, and I really had the same goals and expectations when we met. We talked and they made me feel extremely comfortable with things, both on and off the court. I think my babies and I will have a great time in Connecticut.”

She called the fan support for the Sun “amazing,” adding, “Connecticut fans always come out, support and show love, so I’m looking forward to connecting with all of them.”

As for the team’s prospects for 2020, Bonner opines, “Of course the cliché answer is to say we have a group of players that can win a championship, which we do. However, it won’t be easy, and we know that, so we are all just super-motivated to put in the work to bring one to Connecticut.”

Mosqueda-Lewis, who played for Seattle and averaged 5.3 points a game in 2019, is excited about re-connecting with fans from her UConn days. “Those were some of my best memories and I am looking forward to making more,” she says. “Hopefully, with me and the other new additions, we can bring something else to the table to make us even

**Connecticut fans
always come out,
support and show
love, so I’m looking
forward to connecting
with all of them.**

—DeWanna Bonner



Bria Holmes (left), Alyssa Thomas and the rest of the Connecticut Sun are ready to make headlines again this year.



better. I think this could be an amazing season.”

Holmes, who played at New Haven’s James Hillhouse High School, comes right to the point when asked her goals for the new season: “My expectations are to win a championship for Connecticut and for me to be a better player and teammate than I was last year. It’s always been a dream of mine to play in the WNBA, but to play for my home state is indescribable. It’s so much fun playing in front of my daughter, family and friends. I enjoy the support from my home state’s fans. I have so many family, friends, and supporters that come to every home game to support me and my teammates. The love I get is unreal.”

Holmes is involved heavily in the team’s community outreach efforts, something she takes seriously: “It’s enjoyable knowing we can give back to others and put a smile on others’ faces. It’s more than just basketball. Being in the community and supporting others goes a long way when you’re a professional athlete.”

On his 2020 expectations Miller says, “Obviously, landing Bonner, one of the premier players in the league, was key. We were able to bring back Jonquel Jones as well as Bria Holmes, two other important moves. We were going to lose pieces, but we brought in some great pieces and fan favorites.”

Miller believes his team will “obviously” be one of the championship favorites in 2020. “I feel real good about our starting five and how we look on paper. When we get to training camp, we will see how things work out. We have competition for spots on the roster.”

It will take time for the 2020 Sun to gel and collectively figure out the team’s chemistry, he says. “There will be speed bumps along the way. Our system has worked well for four years but you can’t just snap your fingers and make it happen. We ask that the fans stay patient as we go through trial and error at the start.”

And for those loyal Sun fans who have faithfully followed their team for 18 years and showed up in droves last season at Mo-



Coach Miller makes sure his players are on the ball.

hegan Sun Arena, Cox has nothing but praise.

“It’s really special. Most of our fans have been with us since the team arrived in 2003,” she says. “There have been highs and lows, but they have never wavered in their support. And again, it’s been great to continue adding new fans, especially young girls and boys who can look up to these WNBA players as role models. Beyond basketball, this team and this league mean so much more. We are a symbol of diversity and equal opportunity.”

The Sun’s regular season was to begin May 16 against the New York Liberty and conclude Sept. 20 against the Mystics. But the season’s start and conclusion will depend on the way the WNBA will handle the Covid-19 crisis. With only a 34-game regular season, the league could well push the start of its season back and not lose any regular season or playoff games.

A number of WNBA players depart for foreign countries to play off-season basketball, which is a factor in any deci-

sion. But the league’s new collective bargaining agreement, which increased player salaries, has made it easier for players to stay at home, attend to other careers or family, and not feel the financial pressure to go overseas to play for additional money to supplement what many considered inadequate WNBA salaries and other compensation.

“It wasn’t just the salaries that were improved,” says Miller, “but taking care of the women in our league with everything from childcare to assisting them with careers outside of basketball. It put our league in a great place, considering we have a high percentage of players who have had to play overseas once our season ends. Now, some players will be happy with the money they make from playing in the WNBA, and may take the six months off to rest their bodies, raise and enjoy their families, and pursue other interests they can get into once the ball stops bouncing.”

Sun fans are hoping the ball indeed keeps bouncing at the Mohegan Sun Arena this summer and into the fall. 



John Torsiello is an independent writer and editor living in Torrington, Connecticut and part-time in Mount Pleasant, South Carolina. John has written extensively about a wide variety of topics for a number of national, regional and local publications and has won more than two dozen awards for his writing.



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Paul Florez raises the glam factor at a charity auction.

The Pom Pack

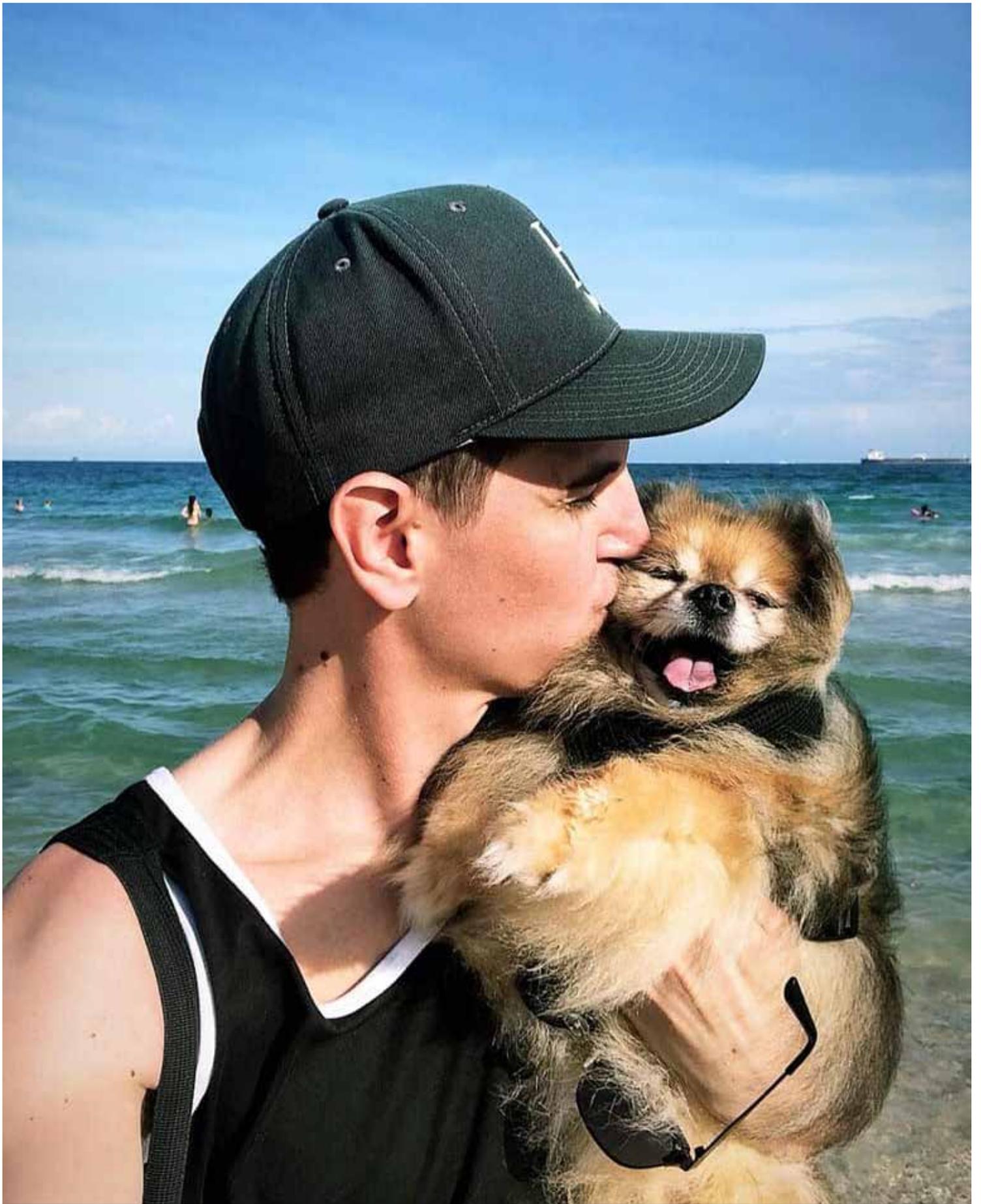
For Paul Florez, puppy love brings confidence, compassion, and unconditional adoration

By **RENEE DININO** / *Photography courtesy of Paul Florez*

I met Paul Florez at a charity event a year ago and we instantly connected over people watching, Hollywood and glamour, and pets.

Florez was the auctioneer at the event and he not only looked fabulous but raised a lot of money through his personality and glitzy gavel. “SOLD to the highest bidder!”

Florez has been the head auctioneer at HUNT Auctioneers for five years. His first auction as a professional auctioneer was for an animal rescue in New York City’s meat-packing district, of all places, where he broke a record for fundraising. His opening statement, he recalls, was “I’m the proud dad of two Pomeranians who are currently mad at me for not being home.” There was



Florez is the proud dad of two Pomeranians.



For Paul Florez and husband Jeff Florez-Taylor, there is plenty of puppy love to share with their fur babies.

an instant connection and an auctioneer was born.

His energy and passion for life is contagious. He lives in the New York City area with his husband – Jeff Florez-Taylor, who is a director for Live Nation – and, until recently, their two fur babies, Victorious and Apollo.

In addition to his life as an auctioneer for high-end celebrity events, he's a published author and writer/contributor for many publications, including The Huffington Post, The Advocate, Slice Magazine, HelloGiggles, Queerty, Gay.com, Marvel Pulse Newsletter, Burrow Press, Liar's League, Dead Rabbits, and Wizard magazine.

This year he was to be a writer-in-residence at The Rockvale Writers' Colony in Tennessee as well as The Betsy Hotel in Miami Beach. Covid-19 changed those plans just a bit, forcing him to move them to later dates, but he's hoping to keep them both before the end of this year.

His book "Flaco," about his relationship with his father, is being shopped around to publishing houses. He and his father share more than their love for people; they've also shared the experience of anorexia. Now under control, his father's experience stemmed from coming to this country and starvation was a way of life. He'd rather let others eat than himself. Florez says he watched his father and learned some of his behaviors, using them as coping tools when he was being bullied as a child. The book explores their complicated relationship as father and son. While the men have endured many challenges both, as individuals and together, Florez says his father has always supported his life as a gay man. In fact, it was never an issue or discussion once he came out to his father – they celebrated at The Cheesecake Factory.

Back to the pets. Paul grew up around many animals; his

sister Cindy, who suffers from petit mal seizures, had a menagerie of pets. A family doctor suggested animals as a means of therapy that proved to not only help his sister, but the whole family. At one time, there were five dogs in the home who formed bonds not only with Cindy, but with Paul, who admits it helped him through years of bullying.

He feels his love for animals has given him the perspective and courage he needs to be in front of hundreds, if not thousands, of people. It's what makes him connect

on a personal level.

He met his husband Jeff when they were 12 years old. They were internet pen pals for seven years before they met in Florida in 2003. On a date early on in their relationship, they were walking through a mall in Miami, saw a Build-A-Bear store, built two stuffed puppies, and recorded their voices in little boxes inserted in the stuffed pups, declaring their love for one another. They still have the pups to this day.

Florez's first pets on his own were actually with his husband. They adopted Victorious (yes, spelled that way) as a puppy. They loved him endlessly to the age of 15. Florez categorizes the loss of their first pet-child as the most catastrophic experience of their lives.

"The loss of Victorious has shown us how grateful we were to share our lives with such a lovable soul," Florez says. Caring for another being taught them a sense of family, "a pack" as they called themselves. They learned how to love each other unconditionally, without judgment and with complete innocence.

Apollo is a blind Pomeranian they adopted as a puppy a year after they adopted Victorious to add to their pack. Even though they were raised as brothers, Apollo actually is Victorious' nephew. He loves belly rubs, people, attention, the couch, the bed, the chair – and being blind doesn't slow this daredevil down!

Paul finds himself in Connecticut for various reasons, mostly work for charitable events. In fact, one could say he devotes his life to charities, to people, and pets.

Balancing his eclectic and exciting lifestyle is easy for this rising star: he puts his husband and Apollo first. (Although he wouldn't say in which order.) 



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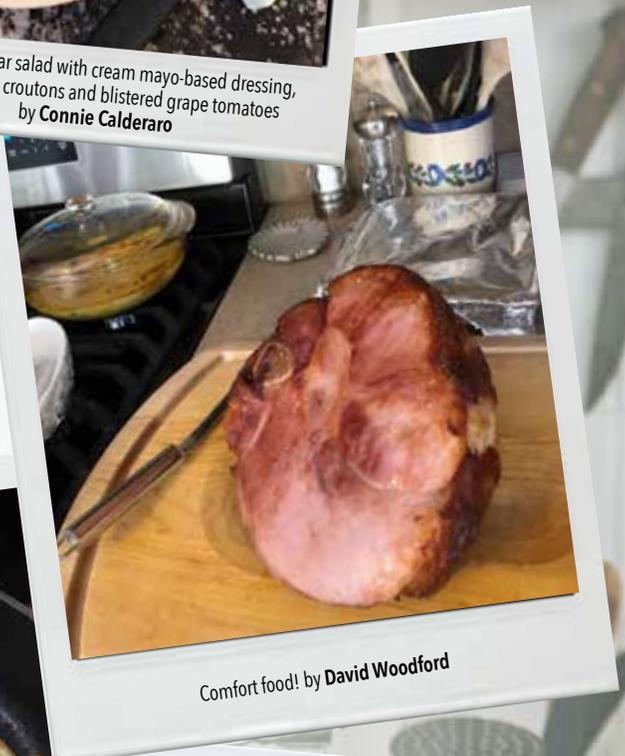
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DELICIOUS //

2020 has been the year of the quarantine. For the rest of our lives, when we look back on this year, we'll undoubtedly remember the weeks on end when we were stuck at home. While the COVID-19 pandemic has caused much despair, grief and uncertainty, one silver lining has emerged – for many of us, it offered the time and motivation to get creative in our kitchens.

We asked our friends and fans on social media to show us what you were cooking during quarantine, and you delivered! Breakfast, lunch and dinner – you've been serving it all up, and we loved seeing your photos. Here's a sampling of what you've been cooking.





Quarantine Cooking



Bowties with vegan sausage by **Gail Leoniak**



Sunday meal prep: roasted lemon-cumin cauliflower, spaghetti squash, and vegetable soup! All vegan! By **Ellen Aqua Hart**



Beer bread made with Killian's by **Sharon Waagner**

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Making Our Mark

Activism and advocacy on the local level bring the greatest impact

By GANNON LONG / *Photography by BLEEDING HEART SHOTS*

Do you feel discouraged about the state of the world? Even the most rose-colored glasses are fogging up these days. Less than halfway into 2020, people living in the United States endured a presidential impeachment, a global pandemic, and an economic collapse. Climate change. White supremacy. Poverty. Consider the most existential threats our species faces today. Imagine what our world would look like if every one of us treated them as urgently as we are responding to a pandemic. What would we be doing right now?

While we can spend hours consuming and discussing national news, decisions made close to home are what impact our communities most deeply. Finding your niche as an involved citizen is a positive way to channel stress and despair about larger-scale politics. Acting locally, one person makes a more noticeable impact than on the national scale. Your mayor, state senator, and town council represent much smaller areas, with a much lower ratio of constituents, than federal congresspeople or senators. No public servant is an expert on every single policy issue they address. They rely on others to guide them; that's where we come in.

Every one of us offers a unique vantage point, knowledge base, and skill set; we all benefit when we share our diverse assets in the public square. What do you experience on a regular basis that you think decision-makers should know more about? What role do neighborhood groups,

commissions, city council, lobbyists, nonprofits, large employers, citizens, and others play in your town's decision making?

Sharing summaries and updates with other people helps connect us socially, which chips away at our feelings of isolation. Who can catch you up on the issue: neighbors, children's classmates' parents, coworkers? What have they already tried? Which city staff can connect you with project plans? Do elected officials support, oppose, or know enough to move forward? What skills can you contribute to lighten the load for others?

Imagine what our world would look like if every one of us treated them as urgently as we are responding to a pandemic.

Look online for minutes and agendas of public meetings, providing a record of participants and a timeline of actions. If you want to see change in your neighborhood, join a local civic association or revitalization group. If you want to learn more about a particular issue affecting your community, such as speeding cars or drug addiction, attend monthly city council committee meetings. If you want to follow how decisions are made, request documents and emails through the Freedom of Information Act.

Another approach is to join an issue commission. Though these groups' decisions are not binding, they have a formal relationship with municipalities that gives them oversight power. When ordinary citizens can't get meetings with high-level city staff, commissions can invite them to share information publicly, and on a regular basis. Sometimes, one person in a room with a cellphone camera is enough to change the discussion. This past year, the city of Hartford revised outdated sexual harassment policies after months of meetings where commission members illuminated an



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inadequate process and recommended reforms.

More often than not, change happens because individual people choose to tell stories of their lived experience. I first joined a picket line at 8 years old, when my Hartford teacher and parents brought us to protest budget cuts that would have left our schools without arts. As a 19-year-old college student, I joined thousands on the streets of Chicago, protesting the imminent Iraq War that devastated our generation. A community organizer for “Love Makes a Family” at 27, I celebrated marriage equality at our state capitol. In 2018, I ran for office, leading a primary challenge against a long-time state representative.

The issues I organize around today include transportation safety and access, police accountability, public education, and government transparency. Contrary to what nervous politicians may suggest, activists are not angry people who seek fights. We are empathetic observers and communicators, whose moral codes and relative privilege compel us to advocate for change.

Uniting with other folks around a common goal improves one’s self esteem and relationships with other people, and amplifies our collective impact. As we join together, we must also consider, who’s not represented in a decision-making process? Why aren’t they, how they might get there, and what would they say? Each campaign we experience forms who we are – developing our skills, educating our communities, deepening our connections.

The Covid-19 lockdown has affected every aspect of our lives, including how our governments operate, and how we engage civically. How do we show up, especially when we can’t show up? Our city councilors and state legislators are figuring out how to do more outreach on the ground and less orating in their august workspaces. They are organizing online meetings and town halls. How are Covid-19 accommodations making civic engagement more accessible, and how can we maintain these relationships and practices after the pandemic subsides?

Each of us, regardless of age, is experiencing several once-in-a-lifetime events all together. This moment in history provides a natural reflection point for us as human beings. If you would like the world to be better than it is today, you have a part to play in how we get there. 

Gannon Long is a lifelong activist and Hartford native with professional experience in communications, community organizing, and specialty food. An avid pedestrian who ran for public office in 2018, she is an organizer at the Center for Latino Progress. If your online media consumption indulgences include unabashed feistiness, follow Gannon’s Twitter feed @CTGlo.

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- Nursing Education, EdD • Nurse Educator, NSN
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- Social Work & Women & Gender Studies, MSW/MA

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