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# CONNECTICUT VOICE™

## PUBLISHER'S NOTE //



### Welcome to **Connecticut VOICE!**

On behalf of everyone associated with *CT VOICE*, we are so pleased to partner with the LGBTQ community and provide a voice for all. Every voice is unique, interesting, meaningful and important, and this publication has a duty and privilege to present those voices. I can promise you one thing: we will always do our best and keep our minds open.

Partnership is the most critical aspect of *CT VOICE*, and this inaugural issue has been a cooperative effort among many people and organizations in the LGBTQ community. Our Board of Advisors offers essential input regarding the overall

look, editorial content, style and direction of *CT VOICE*. They have been passionate about giving their time and energy to help ensure this publication reflects the many facets of the LGBTQ community. Thank you John Pica-Sneedan, Dawn Ennis, Frank Rizzo, Jeffrey Hoess-Brooks and Chion Wolf. They are smart, dedicated and very cool people.

This magazine will be published on a quarterly basis but we hope to foster an ongoing dialogue and invite you to follow us on Instagram, Facebook, Pinterest and LinkedIn. We'd love to hear your thoughts and story ideas.

Each issue will bring you engaging, thought-provoking, and fun stories. And beyond the written word, our *CT VOICE* Podcast with Chion Wolf is a must listen. If you know Chion, or just want a fascinating and in-depth conversation, she will not disappoint.

I would be remiss if I did not thank our advertising partners. The businesses you see on these pages support the LGBTQ community and are enthusiastic about the opportunity to tell their story in *CT VOICE*.

*Jim*

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**“IT IS NEVER TOO LATE  
TO BE WHAT YOU  
MIGHT HAVE BEEN.”**

*—George Eliot*



44  
THE  
INTERVIEW

Ballet star,  
drag performer,  
entrepreneur:  
James Whiteside  
is all that, and  
so much more.





## 57 FOOD

Chef Denise Appel's personal background, as much as her professional pedigree, has made Zinc restaurant in New Haven what it is today.

## 18 SPIRIT

Religion can be isolating and alienating, but there are churches and spiritual leaders throughout the state devoted to leading open and inclusive houses of worship.

## 24 TRAVEL

Beautiful beaches, upscale hotels, hot restaurants and clubs, and an unpretentious vibe: Asbury Park has it all.

## 33 FASHION

Embrace Spring's hottest trends while still feeling authentically like you.

## 38 HEALTH & WELLNESS

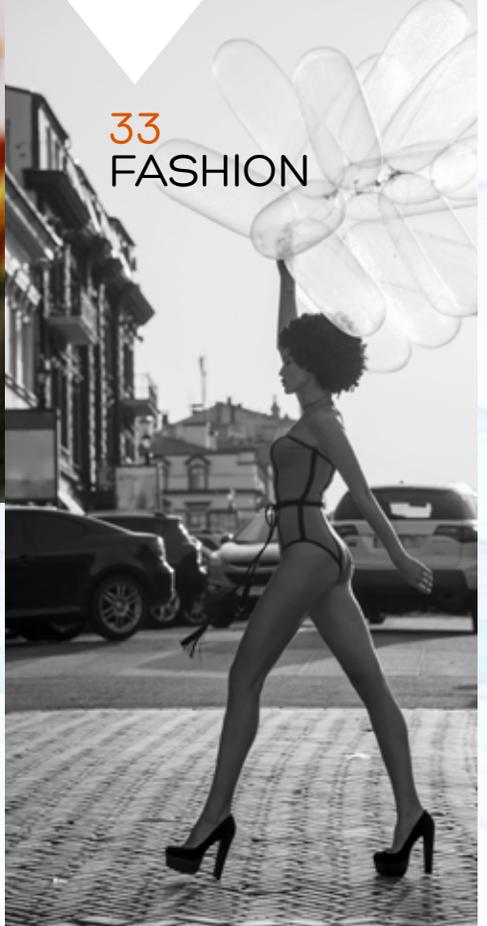
Meet Kathryn Tierney, medical director of the Transgender Medicine Program at Middlesex Health.

## 66 HISTORY

The Stonewall Inn riots were 50 years ago this year. How far have we come from that awful night in 1969?

## 74 PETS

For Amy Kenkel and Laurie Surprenant, their business Leaps & Bones is a labor of love.



## 33 FASHION

## 78 FEATURE

They used to feel marginalized as women, and often still feel erased from the narrative as trans men. Three trans men share their struggles.

## 83 YOUTH

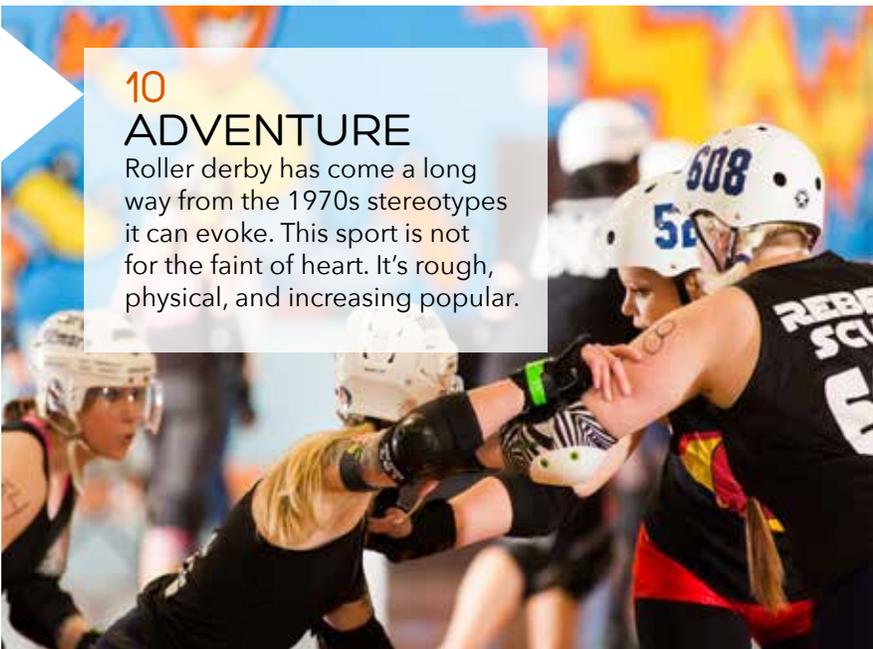
True Colors offers young people a safe, accepting place where they can be themselves.

## 86 TRENDS

A growing number of LGBTQ candidates are seeking - and being elected to - office in Connecticut.

## 93 ARTS & CULTURE

For many LGBTQ students, school theater provides a place where they can be themselves - or, briefly, escape.



## 10 ADVENTURE

Roller derby has come a long way from the 1970s stereotypes it can evoke. This sport is not for the faint of heart. It's rough, physical, and increasing popular.



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ADVENTURE //

# LIFE IN THE FAST LANE





The Beat City Bedrockers' "Black Mamba" (#45) takes a spill as she tries to pass the blockers during a roller derby match.

## People of All Identities Enjoy a Game of Hard Knocks

By JANE LATUS

Photography by ALLEGRA ANDERSON

If you have any preconceived notions about roller derby – well, don't. If you envision women zooming around a banked track in fishnets, tripping, punching and elbowing each other, you're both wrong and old enough to remember the staged-for-TV roller derby of the '70s.

And if you think players are all tattooed, hard-partying lesbians – surprise: they're not even all women. Today, roller derby includes everyone.

Everyone, that is, looking for a full contact, strategic sport. Must be unfazed by bumps and bruises. Must learn to skate well enough to jump over fallen bodies.

What doesn't matter is gender, orientation or size.

It's Sunday night at Ron-A-Roll in Vernon, and Hartford Area Roller Derby (HARD) has invited other leagues to a scrimmage. Fans have brought folding chairs to watch the helmeted, padded skaters give it their all. And that's exactly what they do: jammer Lammy Adder! executes an impressive diagonal leap over opposing blockers, and speeds off with a satisfied grin. Instead of getting slammed down any old way, JESStifiable has perfected a dive that resembles a slide into base.

One thing many people watching wouldn't know is that these skaters are ages 18 to 61, transgender women, bisexual, queer, cis, straight and more, or that often men play, too.

What is obvious is their passion for the game. Liberty Violence pulls on her skates, tears filling her eyes, and says with a slight tremble, "For me, derby is everything."

And yes, derby has historically been a lesbian draw, but it has evolved to be perhaps the most queer-inclusive sport going.

"We definitely have a higher percentage of LGBTQ people than you'll find in the general population," says Marcy Mercury of New London, whose "government name" in derby lingo is



Colleen Lavin. She joined Shoreline Roller Derby after college.

“I really wanted to find a place to make some less-than-straight friends,” she says. “I identify as queer bisexual, and I know there are a lot of people on that spectrum. It was actually really validating for me, because in college you don’t meet a lot of bisexual people.”

“That was part of why I joined, because I’m queer myself,” says BB-SK8 (Hamden resident Lyndsey Gress) of HARD. She stayed because, “I love the athleticism of it, the community of it, and I’ve made some really solid friends.”

### SOME DERBY BASICS

Roller derby is more accessible than its 1930s incarnation, since it’s now played on a flat track in any roller rink or gym. After fizzling in the 1970s, it was revived in the 2000s in today’s form of organizations run by and for athletes.

A game, or bout, has two 30-minute periods, each with multiple two-minute increments called jams. Teams include a jammer and four blockers. Blockers hold back the opposing jammer while helping their own jammer pass. Jammers score a point for every opponent they lap.

Skaters use their hips and shoulders to shove opponents, but must hit within the legal blocking zone – basically, the torso.

Derby is equal opportunity for body types because whether jamming or blocking, small and large skaters can use their size to their advantage.

### SELF-EXPRESSION PREVAILS

Derby retains its camp traditions in the form of creative names and personal expression in dress.

“A lot of thought goes into choosing a derby name,” says Scary Poppins (Lauren DeFoe of New Haven), who was a nanny when she chose her name and plays with Connecticut Roller Derby (CTRD).

By day, Amanda Hutchinson of Ledyard is a journalist. But she is Fly By Night Fury with Shoreline, where she “found a place where I can be way cooler than I actually am.” A former player, she now coaches and refs in the sport.

Team names range from all-business (Connecticut All-Stars) to aggressive (Cutthroats) to mischievous (Beat City Bedrockers).

As for fishnets, you may still find them, depending on the team. HARD’s A-team wears a strict uniform. “They come out as a force,” says Mohammed I’lleatcha (Aisha Mohammed of Manchester), but its B-team gets creative with leggings or booty shorts.

### ALL ARE WELCOME, EVEN NON-SKATERS

Connecticut has three leagues. Shoreline, which practices in Plainfield, is all-gender. HARD in Vernon and CTRD in Waterbury are members of the Women’s Flat Track



Derby Association and follow the association's policy of admitting anyone except players identifying as male.

There is no men's league in Connecticut, but the nearby Mass Maelstrom, member of the Men's Roller Derby Association, welcomes every identity. There is also an opportunity for younger players to take part.

In 2017, Connecticut's two all-gender junior leagues for ages seven through 17, merged into one, now known as the Connecticut Junior Roller Derby. Practices are held in Groton and Waterbury.

JESStifiable (Jessica Firrin of New London) played just about every men's sport "mostly for cover, because I knew I was a girl but I didn't want anyone to know."

She joined derby as soon as she learned it welcomed her. "Not only was it challenging, and aligned with all the sports I've done, but it's the only one that's accepted trans women."

A spectator at one of her early bouts heckled her,

but fortunately JESStifiable was too focused on the game to hear, and HARD issued a strong condemnation of the heckler's behavior.

Her biggest obstacle, JESStifiable says, was "I couldn't skate!" Obviously, she learned. "I also learned how inclusive derby is. It's a whole new community of strong, caring, powerful, badass women."

"A lot of people start out wildly uncoordinated ... like drunken Bambis," says BB-SK8. "You never see adults look so scared as new derby players."

The first trans woman skater in New England, Miss Identified (Andee Scallion of Hartford) joined HARD in 2012. Another

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team's skater protested playing against a "male" player – but HARD stood up for her.

"People have been so kind to me and very accepting. It's really been a positive experience. There were a few bumps along the way, but the last few years especially have been remarkable," says Miss Identified, now with CTRD.

One "bump" was being frequently misgendered, but that inspired the derby name she loves. And she no longer has negative experiences. "Not in roller derby. In the real world, yes."

Derby's diversity appeals to straight players, too: Deja VuDoo (Jocelyn Jenik of Old Lyme), who plays for the Shoreline Roller Derby out of Groton, calls herself "a straight, cis female and staunch LGBTQI ally. One of the joys of roller derby for me has been it has allowed me to develop lasting friendships with a more diverse group of people than I would normally encounter in my day-to-day life."

That diversity includes skaters' professions: engineers, librarians, teachers, accountants, welders, web developers, scientists, nurses, retail workers, students and an autopsy technician.

CTRD President Sinnin Sonic (Heather Barron of Hamden) says derby's popularity is surging and attributes that primarily to it being "all-inclusive. Every type of person can get involved, and it's a different way to show strength and power. It's a place you can go and be yourself. And it's fun to smash into people."

Which raises derby's real appeal: it's fun, and not just to play.

Says Sinnin Sonic, "Good derby is very fun to watch."

## THERE'S HITTING, BUT IT'S STRATEGIC

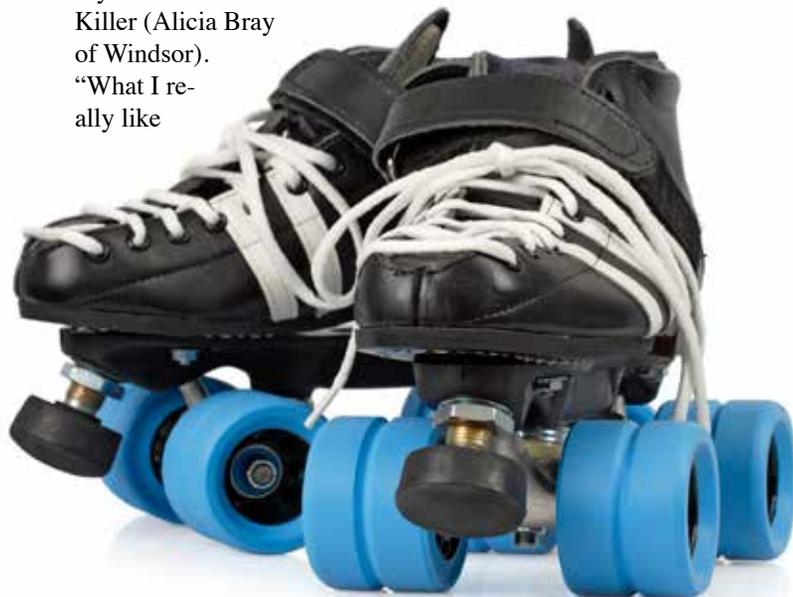
"I like landing good, clean hits! Taking someone out of play, oh yeah, it is so satisfying," says BB-SK8. "I know it looks very chaotic, but on the track there's constant communication. There's so much thinking. I don't know any other sport where there's so much rapid, active thinking."

Players extol the game's physical and mental benefits. "It keeps me in shape, mentally too," says HARD President Liberty Violence (Alana Angle of Bristol).

"Part of becoming physically stronger and becoming proficient at those skills gives you confidence in real life," says HARD's Karma'kaz E.

Killer (Alicia Bray of Windsor).

"What I really like





about derby is it gives women an opportunity to be aggressive, and that's not allowed in general society. This is a place where we can let it all out."

Lammy Adder! (Myra Lam of Northampton, Mass. and the Western Massachusetts Roller Derby Association) likes that "derby teaches women to take up space without apologizing." Society, she says, tells women "go on a diet, cross your legs, say you're sorry." She coaches skaters with, "Don't say sorry. Get in each other's space."

### WANT TO PLAY?

The foremost requirement, says HARD's Liberty Violence, is commitment. Practices are two or three times a week, cross-training is recommended, and everyone pitches in to run the league.

CTRD's Sinnin Sonic agrees. She started out unable to skate. "I went from rookie to All-Star (the A-team) in under a year. I worked my butt off, though, because I wanted that. I thought, 'They're so intimidating, they're so cool. I want to do that.'"

As for that partying reputation, players do become tight friends, and go out after each bout. And as the old derby saying goes, "We don't always win the bout, but we always win the after-party."



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

See additional photos at [www.CTVoiceMag.com](http://www.CTVoiceMag.com) and follow us on [twitter](#), [instagram](#) and [pinterest](#)



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SPIRIT //



Rev. Keri Aubert, left, and her wife, Rev. Jakki Flanagan, right, have strong roots in social justice causes. Photo by **TONY BACEWICZ**

# KEEPING THE *Faith*

## These Churches and Leaders Offer a Spiritual Home for Everyone

By CARA McDONOUGH

**F**aith can be a complicated issue for many, but particularly for LGBTQ individuals who do not feel accepted by their church community.

That feeling of isolation, clergy say, lead some to wrestle with heavy questions about where their lifestyle fits in with their religion. But throughout the state, there are churches and spiritual leaders devoted to being open and affirming – ensuring all people, regardless of their sexual identity, can find a spiritual home. Here are just a few.

### **St. Thomas' Episcopal Church New Haven**

Rev. Keri Aubert is no stranger to fighting the good fight. She spent years working for LGBTQ rights around the country, including serving as a project manager for the Episcopal Church as it developed resources for blessing same-sex unions. Her wife, Rev. Jakki Flanagan, now the emergency department attending chaplain at Yale-New Haven Hospital, has similar roots in social justice.

In her current role as the Priest-in-Charge at St. Thomas' Episcopal Church in New Haven, she doesn't have to tear down barriers daily. The church, visible from Whitney Avenue with its bright red door and rainbow flag flying above, has a solid recent history when it comes to inclusion. In 2005, St.

Thomas', then under the leadership of Rev. Michael Ray, made national news when it announced that it would perform no marriage services at all until the Episcopal Church began allowing same-sex marriages.

Still, she continually looks for ways to improve the role of St. Thomas', and the Episcopal Church as a whole, in being accepting, open-minded and progressive – for the LGBTQ community, but for other marginalized communities, too.

"I believe that an individual's liberation is never fully attained until you fight for the liberation of others," she says from her welcoming office at the church and day school, decorated with comfortable chairs, rows of books and various knickknacks that entertain visitors of all ages.

Some of her regular visitors find their way from Yale Divinity School for a chat, she says, and are evidence that the good fight is far from over. They sometimes break down right there in her office, she says, wondering how they can be both Christian and gay.

"I feel like that's part of my role here," she says. "To be an out, gay clergy member so that they can see what that looks like. I try to be that voice that reminds them that God loves them just the way they are."

Aubert is an especially compassionate mentor



because her own journey took time. She didn't come out until she was 30 and attended seminary at 41 after working as a chemical engineer. Raised Roman Catholic, she felt called to the ministry but knew she had to find a spiritual home that welcomed her as she was. The Episcopalian church felt right, and she landed at St. Thomas' in 2015.

Aubert feels that – now more than ever – churches need to speak up, loudly, on issues of social justice, reacting to churches that seem to ally themselves with incredibly troubling movements, like white Christian nationalism.

"It's time to step up," she says. "It's as important a time as any for us to be part of the public conversation. This is a congregation [St. Thomas'] where we can do that."

She hopes to continue helping the church find its voice on multiple social justice issues within and beyond the church walls. She hopes that the LGBTQ community at large will do the same.

"My dream is that the gay community starts stepping up on issues of race," she says.

She points out the Bible's overall message is one of acceptance, an idea now more crucial than ever, and proof of religion's crucial role in ensuring all feel welcome when it comes to faith.

"There is a place in Christianity for you," she says. "It's all about love."

### **Faith Congregational Church, Hartford**

"Justice is in the DNA of this church," says Rev. Stephen W. Camp, explaining the rich history of Faith

Congregational Church, the oldest predominantly black church in Hartford. Its history makes clear that acceptance of the LGBTQ community is part of its overall mission.

"It's really the mandate of how we understand and interpret the faith. Jesus was a welcoming person. He didn't throw people away, he embraced them. I think that's what this church has understood over the decades, and we have to find a way to even embrace that more fully," he says.

Camp says not only are gay, lesbian and transgender individuals embraced at the UCC-affiliated church, but the congregation makes sure their sexual or gender identity isn't a barrier to serving in church leadership roles, like becoming deacons or charring committees.

Ensuring individuals find spiritual fulfillment while feeling comfortable in a church community is a challenge, and an ongoing process, Camp says.

"I have heard stories of people who have searched for a long part of their lives for a place," he says. "And it can be harder in the black community."

But this acceptance and a continual emphasis on social justice is part of the long-standing goal at Faith Congregational. Established in 1819, in the church's first few decades, it opened the first school for black children in Hartford, was heavily involved in the New England abolitionist movement, and offered crucial support in the New Haven Amistad slave case.

In more recent years, the church has continued to lobby for issues such as public education improvements and then-Gov. Dannel Malloy's 2016 efforts to promote juvenile justice reforms.



Stephen W. Camp of Faith Congregational Church in Hartford welcomes all.  
Photo by **TODD FAIRCHILD**

Camp knows that more progress will occur as the church celebrates its 200th anniversary in 2019 – and beyond.

“Unfortunately, the church is one of the institutions, like government and education, that moves very slowly,” he says, noting that many faith-based institutions still have progress to make. Yet he is hopeful. “I do think the whole church is changing. I think it is slowly trying to understand how to embrace everyone and have that sense of equality ... that sense of knowing that all of us are children of God.”

### **Spring Glen United Church of Christ, Hamden**

In 2017, the Spring Glen United Church of Christ (UCC) celebrated an important anniversary. Twenty years had passed since the church voted to become “open and affirming,” the UCC’s designation for congregations that fully welcome people of all sexual orientations, gender identities and gender expressions.

“It was pretty early on in the open and affirming movement,” says Rev. Jack Davidson, who has been at the helm of



Faith Congregational Church in Hartford. Photo by **TODD FAIRCHILD**



Spring Glen United Church of Christ, Hamden. Photo by **DANIEL EUGENE**



At Spring Glen UCC, weekly sermons repeatedly draw on queer, black and native history to highlight stories of people in the margins. Photo by **DANIEL EUGENE**

the Hamden-based church for two years. For the anniversary of the 1997 decision, he wanted to do more than celebrate their long-standing dedication to embracing all people, including the LGBTQ community; he wanted to expand that notion.

“In 2017, we spent time recommitting to this idea. What has changed in 20 years and how we do we lean into it more?” he says.

The year included special events, discussions and public displays. A transgender chaplain came to speak, the church put together an interfaith presence at the New Haven Pride, and an art installation made up of multicolor chairs was placed on the front lawn, accenting the rainbow on the Spring Glen UCC permanent sign, to name just a few.

The church’s emphasis on



Spring Glen parishioners of all ages, backgrounds, and gender and sexual identities come to worship as they are, knowing they will not only be accepted, but welcomed and affirmed. Photo by **DANIEL EUGENE**

inclusivity didn't stop at the end of the anniversary year.

But what makes Spring Glen UCC's approach truly inspiring is Rev. Davidson's insistence that being actively "affirming" means resisting complacency.

And that means continually evolving.

Weekly sermons repeatedly draw on queer, black and native history to highlight stories of people in the margins. Parishioners of all ages, backgrounds, and gender and sexual identities come to worship as they are.

"I'm a white, cis male and part of being an ally is raising up other voices," he says. As a church leader, this means enthusiastically welcoming the LGBT parishioners who may feel rejected by the denominations they knew growing up. "They are still trying to figure out how to put their two

identities together and reclaim their faith," he says.

One way to help those feeling marginalized? Look to the Bible for guidance, he says.

"If you really believe that all humans are made in God's image, why would you deny someone's divinity?" he asks, noting the flip side of the messages sanctioning exclusivity that some conservative church leaders claim to find in scripture. "There is story after story in the Bible of Jesus trying to confront leaders and show them a more loving way."

A large sign in Davidson's office, presented to him when he joined the congregation, reads: "God is Love."

"If anything," he says. "I want all the children and adults in the world to know that." 



Cara McDonough is a freelance writer who lives in Hamden with her family. You can find more of her work at [www.caramcduna.com](http://www.caramcduna.com).



TRAVEL //



Colorful murals dot the city and provide festive backdrops for beachgoers, bicyclists and tourists - like this spectacular creation at the end of the boardwalk at the casino by an female artist who goes by the name Indie184.



*Come with us!*

# **Asbury Park**

## **A Different Kind of Beach Escape**

*Written and Photographed by FRANK RIZZO*



Recycled doors provide the canvases for artistic expression at one downtown eatery.



Cookman Avenue is filled with cafes offering a wide selection of places to meet and greet.



The famous boardwalk has been part of Asbury Park's beach identity for decades and is filled with stands with a wide variety of street food. Anyone for a Korean fusion taco?



The Wonder Bar is a favorite hangout known for live music, tasty food and the world famous Yappy Hour, where dogs run the show.



Looking for a gay vacation mecca where you're surrounded by only rainbow-loving people?

Honey, that's so 20th Century.

The need for an exclusive gay oasis where LGBTQ vacationers could feel festive, free and safe was understandable, and necessary, in the post-Stonewall/AIDS decades. But

for gay millennials, as well as for their older brothers and sisters, it's now more about traveling to interesting places that welcome a wider spectrum of diversity for the gay – as well as (gasp!) straight – community, too.

For the Connecticut crowd, the go-to choices for exclusive escapes have been Fire Island, N.Y., Provincetown, Mass., or any number of gay cruise lines.

But now, a new wave of cities, resorts and vacation destinations are wooing gays with full-throttle campaigns to come party, chill and have “experiences” – and mix it up with the welcoming locals, too. Toronto, Philadelphia, Washington, Palm Springs, New Orleans, and Montreal are among the places that seek out gay travelers to their diverse cities.

But for something a little closer to home, and a bit beachier, think New Jersey.

Yes, New Jersey.

And then think Asbury Park, that raffish town with a checkered past that is perhaps best known for its epic beach boardwalk and the Stone Pony, the rock nightclub where Bruce Springsteen and the E Street Band got their start.

## THE GAME CHANGER

There's also something “outsider”-cool about A.P., which is less than two hours by train from New York's Penn Station or simply a car ride down the Garden State Parkway.

“It's not pretentious at all,” says Russell Lewis, owner of Watermark, a popular restaurant and craft cocktail bar on the boardwalk. “Asbury doesn't have that look-at-me-I'm-a-model kind of gay crowd. It's a much friendlier, easy-going, flip-flop kind of place.”

Just a short walk from the boardwalk, Cookman Avenue offers a wide selection of shops, bars, galleries and restaurants.

It's taken more than 30 years for the city to recover from the riots of 1970 and its follow-up years associated with crime and drugs. Since the turn of the millennium, the city has seen major changes, some coming incrementally and some – especially in the last few years – coming at a galloping development pace. This always a gay-friendly city, one which hosts the statewide Jersey Pride in early June, has a new wave of restaurants, shops, and offers hotels that will tempt a diverse crowd to turn the beach day into a beach weekend, or longer.

The new big kid on the block is The Asbury Ocean Club, which opens this spring – and it's a game-changer. The 17-story building at 1101 Ocean Avenue was developed by iStar and is a gigantic physical embodiment of significant change for the city. It features residential homes, a beach club, a boutique hotel, and an array of retail amenities that will no doubt further boost that end of town.

It's next door to another iStar newbie, The Asbury Hotel, which opened in 2016 and has a cool, hipster vibe. A former Salvation Army building, the 110-room Asbury shows the respect for re-purposing buildings that gives this funky town its continuing character. It's a great hangout place, too, with a bar in its atrium lobby that's usually packed when there's a live band playing. It also has a rooftop lounge and yoga area, outdoor movie theater, and a spacious pool area, complete with its own food truck and rows of pergolas for shady lounging. Besides rooms that have a higher price tag, it also offers hostel-style “quad” or “octo” rooms for those who can share and like to keep expenses lower.

For a more intimate feel, there's the cozy but classy Tides Hotel on Seventh Avenue with executive chef Julio Cruz reigning at its sophisticated-but-casual restaurant. For a taste of old-time A.P., there's the Berkeley Oceanfront Hotel, located in a

100-year-plus building with a kind of fading dowager funk.

For the partying crowd, it's the four-story Empress Hotel at the other end of the boardwalk with its rooms overlooking the pool – and its sassy scene, which includes tea dances. (Think P-Town's Boatslip meets “The Ritz.”) The adjoining Paradise nightclub, with its dance party atmosphere and drag shows also keep things hopping for the late-night crowd.

## DOWN ON THE BOARDWALK

Oh yes, there's a beach, too, and you'll find most of the LGBTQ crowd congregated near the Fifth Avenue entrance to the boardwalk, next to Paramount, where you can catch a live concert, depending on the night. (Rock & Roll Hall of Famer Dion was playing on our weekend.)

The long boardwalk seems almost wide enough to land a cargo plane, with a water park, miniature golf course, and the classic Silverball Museum Arcade that's like stepping into your pinball past. There are plenty of food shacks that offer goodies from crepes to lemonade (at the appropriately named Pucker) to Korean fusion tacos. There also are higher-end eateries such as Cubacán, a Cuban fusion restaurant, and Watermark with rooftop dining, too. You can also get a psychic reading at Madame Marie's, run by her granddaughters since the late founder's death. Tell them Bruce sent you.

The Stone Pony is literally a stone's throw from the boardwalk, where it also has an outdoor stage. And a block away there's the nightclub/grill Wonder Bar, with its iconic outdoor mural of Tillie, a replica of the creepy-grinning face that was originally located on the side of the long-gone Palace Amusements.

Then take a 10-minute walk for your second wave of shopping, restaurants and farmers' markets, to nearby Cookman Avenue. There are



The Asbury Park boardwalk was renovated and strengthened several years prior to Hurricane Sandy and survived the storm while other boardwalks in nearby towns were destroyed. The promenade features eateries, boutiques, a water park, miniature golf and live music.



A vintage vibe gives many of the shops in the downtown district a visual pop.



Specialty shops for cigars, vintage clothing, psychics and rare and paranormal books give Cookman Avenue its eclectic flair.



A kind of people's artistic park in the downtown district invites folks to donate art to the collection — or purchase pieces.



To some city planners, it's an empty lot. For Asbury Park, it's another opportunity for a spectacular mural on Cookman Avenue. This one by an artist Mike La Vallee, who goes by the name Porkchop.

art galleries, retro-clothing shops, gyms, crafts stores (one of which also teaches glassblowing), breweries, coffee, tea and poke hangouts, an art house cinema, a cigar shop, bookstores, salons, and a mid-century furniture shop. And who can resist a salon that's called Hot Mess?

For a more neighborhood-karaoke type of watering hole, there's the old-time Georgies at 819 Fifth Avenue, which is often described as "the gay Cheers," but hardly the Norm.

The cool kids hang at Asbury Lanes bowling alley that's been renovated and "hipified" four years ago – also by iStar – and also features live performances ranging from musical acts to

burlesque. It adjoins a vintage diner that is open until 4 a.m. on weekends, 24 hours a day on summer weekends.

### FLASHBACK TO PRESENT

Located in conservative Monmouth County, A.P. has long been a progressive, bohemian, artistic and gay enclave.

"It's always been downright welcoming to the LGBTQ community, and it continues to be," says Amy Quinn, Asbury Park Deputy Mayor, and an out gay woman.

Side note: Asbury Park was one of the very first, and few, places giving out marriage licenses and marrying same-sex couples in 2004.

Quinn says Asbury Park has been kept alive by the energy and diversity of its communities: "There's the artist community, the music community, the African-American community, the church community and, of course, the gay community. These are the people who stayed when everyone else was fleeing. My favorite description of Asbury was by a woman in town who said, 'Asbury Park is the Isle of Misfit Toys.' Maybe you didn't fit in elsewhere but you can find a home in Asbury Park."

And some literally did just that. "The gays were instrumental in making the city's resurrection happen," says Kim Powers. The New



**... ASBURY PARK HAS BEEN KEPT ALIVE BY THE ENERGY AND DIVERSITY OF ITS COMMUNITIES: “THERE’S THE ARTIST COMMUNITY, THE MUSIC COMMUNITY, THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN COMMUNITY, THE CHURCH COMMUNITY AND, OF COURSE, THE GAY COMMUNITY.”**

York-based senior writer at ABC’s “20/20” discovered Asbury Park in the ’90s and bought a home there in 2004 with his husband, Tony Award-winning Broadway costume designer Jess Goldstein. “We used to go to P-Town every summer – 13 years in a row – but it was such a long trip to get there. Then we discovered Asbury Park.”

They consider themselves early settlers there. “The true gay ‘pioneers’ bought in the ‘90s,” he laughs. “At that time, there were two antique shops and a few places to eat but nothing to write home about.”

Gradually, that changed as more and more people found deals in some of the one-of-a-kind Victorian and American Craftsman homes.

“But it didn’t emerge as an exclusive gay Shangri-La,” says Powers. “We prettied things up for everyone else to then come in.”

That included artists, musicians, hipsters, millennials, young couples, and families, too – some of whom were gay, but many were not. The gay sensibility was still there to a degree but now just part of a larger and more dynamic whole.

“Instead, it emerged as this 21st Century place,” says Powers, “which is very mixed, very accepting, with an artistic-hipster-gay kind of vibe, a kind of a who-needs-labels kind of place.”

Says Watermark’s Lewis: “Welcome to assimilation. It’s what we’ve all been fighting for.” 



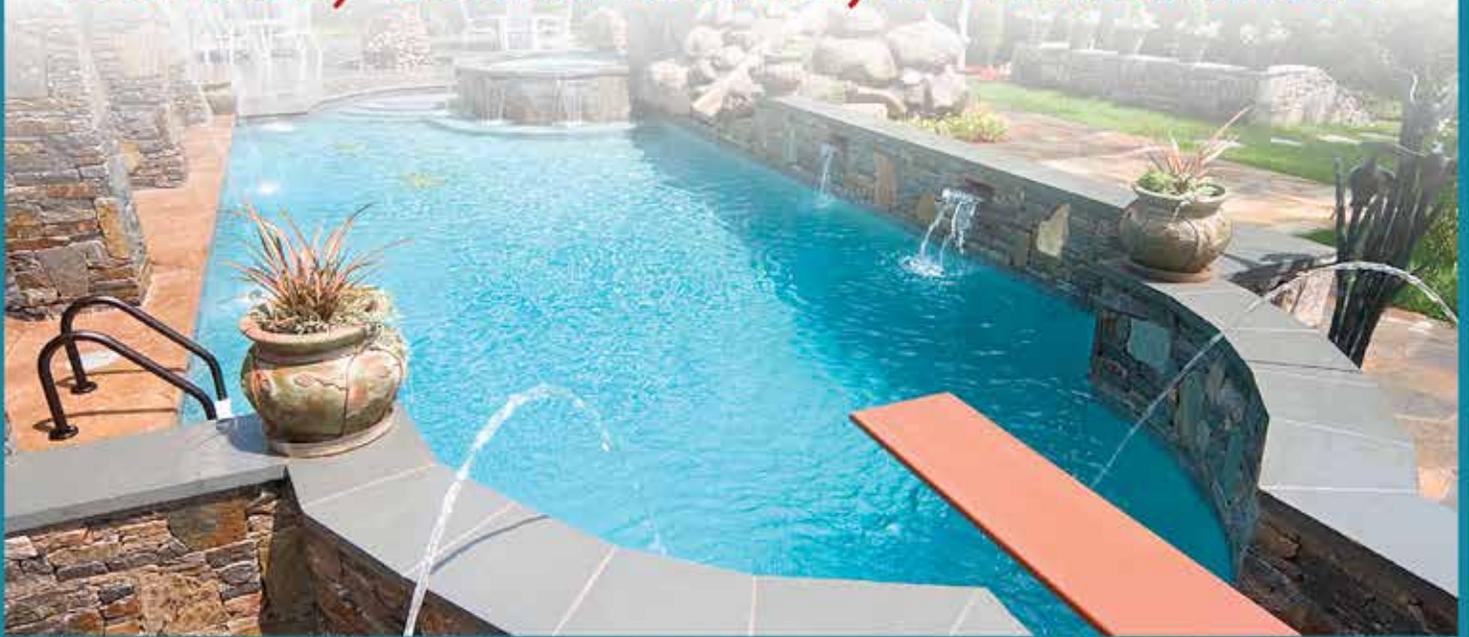
Oh yes, there’s a beach too, and it’s a long welcoming stretch that draws bathers, sun worshipers and volleyball enthusiasts. The gay section is near the Palace Theatre/Convention Hall.



Frank Rizzo has written about the arts in Connecticut and nationally for more than 40 years; for 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.

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FASHION //

by MAR JENNINGS

# FASHION SHOULD NOT BE *a drag*

**FIND YOUR INNER  
FASHIONISTA!**



Even if you're not looking to project a larger-than-life persona, take a cue from these drag queens from season 10 of "RuPaul's Drag Race" and let the clothes you wear help you express your inner personality.

**D**id I get your attention? First and foremost, I'd like to welcome you to my column, a fun approach to fashion that embraces personality and individuality. That said, no one personifies personality and individuality more than a professional drag queen. Truth be told, when I learned I was going to meet the queens of "RuPaul's Drag Race" Season 10 when they were performing in New Haven, I had no idea how marvelous and on point they would be for my premier article in *CT VOICE*.

Drag queens take their inner personalities and create bigger-than-life characters, always building from who they are. Great personal style and dress, when done correctly,

also should follow these same fundamental rules.

As a fashion connoisseur with years in the television industry, I have walked many red carpets – from the Daytime Emmy Awards to New York City Fashion Week – and along the way, I've met and interviewed some of the biggest fashion icons, designers and celebrities. Jane Seymour, Michael Kors, Ralph Lauren, Badgley Mischka, and Joan Rivers, to name a few. They all had the same thing in common: they all owned their looks and embraced their talents and who they are.

That said, let's delineate the difference between fashion and style. Fashion is just clothing that is currently popular. But style is how we wear it to express ourselves. A properly dressed person can evoke confidence and power. For example, have you ever had to wear something, for someone, that

*“Lines, edges and curves should be embraced, as all shapes are fashion worthy.”*

you absolutely hated? Perhaps for a wedding or celebration? How did that make you feel? Did you feel confident? Compare that to when you dress for yourself when you want to feel wonderful. Finding your comfort zone and what works for you begins with loving yourself and allowing yourself to become the best you can be.

One does not need to spend excess money or only buy designer labels to be a fashion icon or look great. Some of the best-dressed people are resourceful and creative.

How you dress and what you wear personifies feeling great about yourself, and that means being comfortable and confident. Analyze your body and learn what looks best. Lines, edges and curves should be embraced, as all shapes are fashion worthy. Spend a little time on what you feel best in. It will infiltrate your whole mood and being. A skinny jean might be “in,” but if it doesn’t make you feel comfortable, you’ll never look stylish. Loving our bodies and knowing what makes us different and more interesting than others



Mar Jennings is a TV host, author, lifestyle expert and realtor.



Mar's go-to? Brooks Brothers, for its classic men's fashions.

is the best way to take care of ourselves.

Knowing what works is just as important as knowing what to wear. For many of us, the key way to discover our style is knowing the brands that work for both our bodies and personalities.

I admire the Brooks Brothers brand and have always found the classic, gentlemen's fashions of yesterday to be my signature style. A sports coat, pocket square and dark jeans is a casual uniform for my daily business. I know what works for me and I stay in my fashion comfort zone. I learned many years ago that a purple velvet jacket, leather pants, and sneakers do not fit my personality, regardless of how great they may look on someone else.

If you love wearing bowties, make them your signature. If combat boots

are your footwear choice, build your wardrobe around them.

The key is to own your personality and style. Individuality and knowing what works for you, not others, is truly what style is all about. Learning who you are "in fashion" will far outlast any hot, of-the-moment trend that you won't feel comfortable in, or later hate yourself for wearing. (We've all been there, done that!)

So why should we care about how we look and what we wear? No matter how wrong it may be, people do judge a book by its cover. Your "cover" should reflect your core self-worth. We should love how we live, and truly living can't be possible without some understanding of what makes us look great.

What does your clothing say about you? Creative, handy, conservative, rocker, fashion-forward? Does it represent your true personality? Even our age



*If you can't love yourself,  
how the hell you gonna love someone else?* —RuPaul

can be defined by the clothing we select and what we use to accessorize. Work, casual, and play wear can range in style, but the one thing that should never vacillate is what makes us feel comfortable. One thing is for sure: we are all unique billboards that people read when we walk into a room.

Learning how to work core pieces into an everyday wardrobe is something that comes from knowing what clothing to have in your closet. For men, owning a great suit is a staple and for women, it could be a simple black dress or pantsuit. But this is where your personality can upgrade any boring outfit. A fun tie, belt or jewelry can personify you. The key is to allow yourself to reflect on what you love and adore in clothing.

I have this one friend who is totally into one-of-a-kind necklaces and every day, no matter what the occasion, you will find her wearing one of these conversation pieces. Over the decades, she has curated quite a collection. I asked her about her devotion to her necklace collection and she said, "It's my armor! I can do anything wearing them, and they make me happy. From painting a room to a black-tie event, I have them for all occasions." I loved her response.

Let's take a moment and talk about trends and why we should avoid them. One great example is overalls! Yes, you read that correctly. Fashion editors and celebrities are



Whatever you choose to wear, wear it confidently.

bringing back this '90s staple. Coast to coast, celebrities as varied as Emmy Rossum, John Mellencamp and Selena Gomez have all recently gotten press for rocking overalls. So, does this mean we should all run out and get them for ourselves? Only you know the right answer. If you feel great wearing them, and have an appropriate place to wear them, then own it and rock them.

Dressing to impress begins with impressing yourself, knowing what works for you and identifying your own personal style. It's all about mixing and matching until you find what's best for you.

So, when you see those glossy magazines, ask yourself this: What would these models be wearing if they were not dressed for the photo shoot? Hair, makeup and clothing can make a person, but personality, individuality and self-worth are far more interesting and fun.

One of the best quotes

I can leave you with is,

of course, from the iconic drag queen RuPaul: "If you can't love yourself, how the hell you gonna love someone else?"

Take the power and control how people see you by loving yourself, knowing what works for you and avoiding trends. Discover your inner fashionista, and fashion will never be a drag.

Stay *MAR*velous! 

# BECOMING THEMSELVES

*At Middlesex Health, Transgender Patients Find Empathy and Assistance*

By JAMES BATTAGLIO

**T**hose considering hosting a gender reveal party may wish to hold off a few years before announcing the gender of their child.

Such parties, which are becoming a popular trend among expectant parents while their child is still in utero, are premature, according to Kathryn Tierney, MSN APRN, FNP-BC, medical director of Middlesex Health's Transgender Medicine Program.

"Gender reveal parties are not actually correct," says Tierney. "You may see a cake that's pink in the middle or people releasing certain color balloons that represent the gender of their expectant baby. The problem is that the word 'gender' doesn't actually mean what kind of genitals a baby has. You don't know what gender that baby is because our gender is defined by our culture – and the baby or child needs to experience our culture before their gender identity is known."

Tierney says her patients consistently tell her that at a very early age, they knew their gender differed from their birth sex.

"When I ask our transgender patients how they knew they were a certain gender, they tell me that when they were young kids, they knew something was different about them, that something wasn't right. Mothers would tell girls to wear a dress and the child felt that was crazy. Or a father wanted his son to play baseball and



the child would feel that it didn't fit with his internal sense of identity," she explains.

Tierney, a Cheshire resident and mother of two, came to Middlesex Health from the Hospital of Central Connecticut in 2014. Since 2006, the nurse practitioner has specialized in transgender hormone therapy and endocrinology. "Transgender care encompasses all types of care, but in endocrinology, we take care of the hormonal part of it," she says.

Middlesex Health treats some 700 patients a year, starting or continuing hormones for patients who are transitioning from one gender to the other "or finding their way in the middle."

New transgender patients who are being treated with hormone therapy are evaluated at least every three months for the first year, and every six

to 12 months after that. These patients are seen sooner if acute issues occur.

Tierney explains that for transgender patients, there is a "disconnect" between the body they're born with and their real identity.

"This is where the rub is," she says. "For almost all of us, our gender identity matches the kind of body we were born into. For transgender people, most of them are born into a body that doesn't match."

For the most part, gender identity is solidified between ages 2 and 4, says Tierney. That's when most kids start dividing into groups when playing. A lot of her patients will tell her they were born male and were expected to do male things, but they would prefer to be with their mother or with female friends, or do things that society would consider female.

"It gets harder to understand it because we're pushing into a world where girls can play baseball and boys can do art, but in our culture, we have very set things that are male and female, and boys and girls are expected to do a certain number of things that make them fit into their gender. When the way we see our self internally doesn't match with the way the world sees us, it makes it very uncomfortable for these patients," she says.

"The expectations of these children, starting early, were that they were to act a certain way. When they didn't, that's when they realized they were different."

Years ago, young males with effemi-



*For Tierney, treating the transgender patient is more than just a profession. It's a privilege, a cause and a vital service she performs daily.*

Kathryn Tierney says not all transitioning patients undergo surgery because the transition from one gender to another has less to do with one's physical body and more to do with one's identity.

nate traits or preferences were termed “sissies,” while young females with some masculine traits or preferences were known as tomboys. Both terms have pretty much worked their way out of today’s social lexicon, Tierney says.

She says “the word ‘transition’ encompasses a lot of things for people who are transitioning from one gender to another.”

Not all female patients who are transitioning to male – or male patients transitioning to female – undergo surgery, says Tierney, because the transition from one gender to another has less to do with one’s physical body and more to do with one’s identity. Still, she notes, “our physical presentation is important in our culture.”

Trans men generally receive testosterone injections, which results in beard growth and a deeper voice. These patients present as male but still have a female chest.

“That makes it much more difficult for them to be themselves in public,” says Tierney. “So they have chest surgery to flatten their chests to the degree that a male has. What they choose to do with their genitals is completely a personal decision; there’s no such thing as a ‘complete’ transition. Everybody has to transition in the way they’re comfortable in their body. Sometimes that means hormones and surgery, and sometimes that means surgery only. It depends on the person.”

For the trans male patients who choose surgery, there are a number of options.

“Chest surgery is the most common and most dysphoria-reducing surgery that trans men undergo,” Tierney says. Chest surgery, or “top surgery,” as it is widely referred to, is a double mastectomy in which breast tissue is removed and the chest is contoured to give it a male appearance. This surgery may include nipple grafts, or nipple/areola resizing and repositioning. Afterwards, patients no longer have to wear binders to flatten their chests. This makes them a lot more comfortable, both physically and psychologically.

Some of these patients opt for genital surgery as well. In metoidioplasty, existing genital tissue is used to form

a neophallus, or new penis. (It can be performed on those with significant clitoral growth from the use of testosterone.) These patients can urinate but are not always able to engage in intercourse. Phalloplasty is a gender reassignment surgical procedure that involves grafting skin from an arm to create a penis with erotic and/or tactile sensation, as well as rigidity for sexual intercourse (usually with a penile implant) and the ability to stand to urinate. In both procedures, there are risks, says Tierney.

“Surgery is a personal choice for a variety of reasons, ranging from non-insurance, time away from work, or other co-morbidities that prevent them from safely having surgery,” says Tierney. “Some choose not to have any kind of surgery but to just remain on hormones. A lot of Connecticut residents have had surgery. The Connecticut TransAdvocacy Coalition worked hard to make sure that Connecticut residents have the option of having surgery through their insurance, and because of the coalition’s efforts, coverage of trans-related services is mandated in this state.”

For the trans female patient who chooses to undergo surgery, there are several procedures available. They include a tracheal shave to reduce the size of the Adam’s apple, voice therapy, breast augmentation, vaginoplasty, and testicle removal, Tierney says.

Of Middlesex Health’s 700 transgender patients, about 30% have had surgical procedures.

When Tierney came to Middlesex in 2014, the health system began its commitment to introduce a comprehensive transgender program, which included the training of staff, volunteers, and “all the way up to our CEO,” she says.

Gender-neutral, single-stall lavatories for patients and the public were created so no one has to choose which bathroom to use. All employees (more than 3,100) and the 381-member active medical staff have undergone transgender training for which Middlesex has been nationally recognized. The institution has also been identified as a leader in healthcare equality several years in a row by the Human Rights

Campaign’s Healthcare Equality Index.

Tierney, who grew up in a non-traditional family, recognized from a young age the cruelty often aimed at someone dubbed “queer.” Today, she heads a 30-member committee that meets monthly to review policies and ensure they’re in line with protecting transgender, gay and lesbian patients and employees.

“Ideally, the entire health system is involved in the transgender program,” she says. The committee includes Middlesex Health’s chief of psychiatry, who co-chairs the committee with Tierney; social workers; physical and speech therapists; nurses; Emergency Department professionals; and the chair of the Department of Medicine.

“It’s my job to assure that providers are trained and educated in trans care, so that if a transgender patient shows up in the Emergency Department, I’m not the only one that knows how to take care of them correctly. ER personnel, radiology, specialists, surgeons, registrars ... anybody coming in contact with a transgender patient should know how to address and treat a trans patient,” she explains. “It’s important to use the right name and right gender pronouns and make sure our charts and systems are presenting the patient as they are, and not as they were. Also, we make sure that, clinically, we’re being safe in which labs we’re looking at and which medications we’re using. You always want to make sure you’re not giving patients undue side effects.”

For Tierney, treating the transgender patient is more than just a profession. It’s a privilege, a cause and a vital service she performs daily. She’s quick to recognize that transgender patients, in general, face a lot of discrimination in many ways, in employment, sexual assault, housing, and medical care, which is one of the reasons Middlesex works so diligently to ensure it doesn’t happen within their facility.

“If you’ve ever had an outfit that didn’t quite fit right, multiply that by 100 and live that every day,” she says. “The most rewarding part of my work is seeing people get their confidence and really being comfortable in their skin.”



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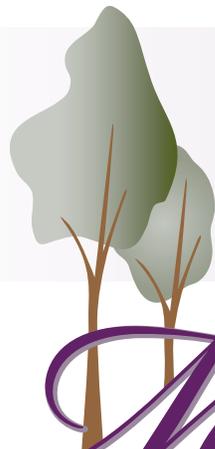
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THE INTERVIEW //



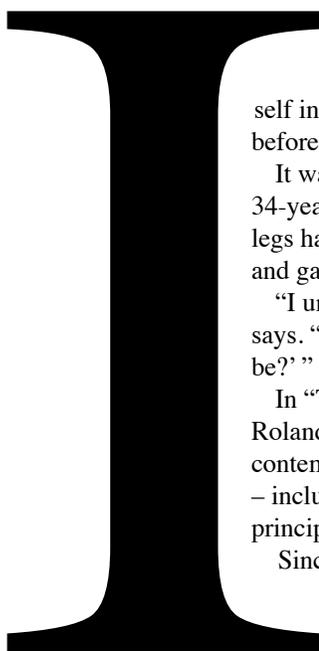
James Whiteside is the American Ballet Theatre principal dancer.

# James Whiteside

*This Connecticut native and dancer has all the right moves*

By FRANK RIZZO

Photography by AMBER JONES



In the dance-theater piece “The Tenant,” which had its premiere last fall at The Joyce Theater in New York, James Whiteside played a stressed urban dweller who transforms himself into the persona of the woman who lived and died in the apartment before him.

It was just one of many mesmerizing identity shifts that the handsome 34-year-old dancer with the striking jaw, glistening body, and chiseled legs has made since he was a free-spirited boy growing up independent and gay in Fairfield.

“I understand the idea of having many people living inside you,” he says. “Something I’ve thought about for ages is, ‘Who am I choosing to be?’”

In “The Tenant,” based on the 1976 Roman Polanski film and 1964 Roland Topor psycho-sexual novel, Whiteside was the epitome of contemporary angst, performing wildly expressive modern dance moves – including full-frontal nudity – that was far removed from his roles as principal dancer at American Ballet Theatre (ABT).

Since 2012, Whiteside has dazzled audiences and critics at ABT with his graceful lines, stunning technique and breathtaking partnering that defines what it is to be a leading man in classical ballet – while at the same time redefining it as an out-and-proud star.

But the formal world of performing at ABT is just one of the many Whiteside lives in, and his roles in each artistic genre vary wildly. They include being a drag performer, electro-pop composer, model, choreographer, podcaster, and sneaker and ballet shoe designer (his shoes are size 9). Last fall, in the midst of rehearsals and performances for “The Tenant,” he also completed a course at the Harvard Business School while choreographing a new piece at an ABT lab. He also has an outline for a book he wants to write and if an acting gig comes along, he wouldn’t necessarily say no.

His fan base is huge – he has 176,000 Instagram followers. There are those who see him as his sassy rap musical persona of JbDubs, whose videos have gone viral with such high-energy dance songs such as “I Hate My Job” (which received 3.5 million views), “Wallflower” and “The Fanny Bounce.” Then there are fans of Uhu Betch, the sassy dragster he portrays and one of the members of a group of downtown club-hopping divas. And then there those who follow his dance star, too.

## GROWING UP GAY

Whiteside grew up a Connecticut kid with a strong sense of freedom, rebellion, and fun.

“I was like most little boys, honestly: energetic, wild and probably very irritating,” he says. “I was also sort of weird. And my sense of humor has always been a little off.”

In his boyhood bedroom were posters of NSYNC and Janet Jackson, with music playing by Britney Spears. There was a big tape deck where he would make mix tapes off the radio,



**I didn't discover or accept that I was gay until I was 16 years old –**



**but I had inklings.”**



WHITESIDE, CIRCA 1996 OR 1997, WITH HIS FIRST DANCE STUDIO, THE D'VALDA & SIRICO DANCE AND MUSIC CENTRE IN FAIRFIELD.



IN THIS CHILDHOOD PHOTO, WHITESIDE MAKES AN EASTER CAKE WITH HIS MOTHER AND BROTHER.

a PlayStation (he's still a big gamer), whiffs of incense and shelves filled with global tchotchkes. "My bedroom had a sort of world flair to it," he says.

His parents divorced when he was two, and since he was a boy, his mother tried to harness her wild child's energy into some productive outlet. He tried sports. "Loathed all of them."

Then he saw an ad in the phone book that had a picture of a man suspending a woman over his head with one hand. He thought it looked cool and decided to check it out. The ad was for the D'Valda & Sirico Dance and Music Center in Fairfield, and it was there Whiteside finally found his passion as he was coming to terms with being gay.

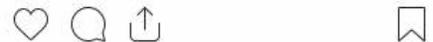
"I didn't discover or accept that I was gay until I was 16 years old – but I had inklings.

Most of my friends knew it before I did. It was like, 'OK, who are you kidding?' Denial is pretty easy to maintain so I waited until I was 16 before I finally gave in," he recalls.



**jamesbwhiteside** • Follow  
D'Valda & Sirico Dance and Music Centre

**jamesbwhiteside** Ah, 90s jazz. This photo was taken outside my first dance studio for a local magazine. I'll never forget the first time my mother brought me to the dance studio. I had tried soccer, baseball, Boy Scouts, and more. I loathed them all. My first dance school offered free trial classes at the beginning of the school year. The studios were at a racquetball club and were essentially gymnasium fitness rooms. I arrived for my first trial class, a ball of sparkling energy and unearned confidence.



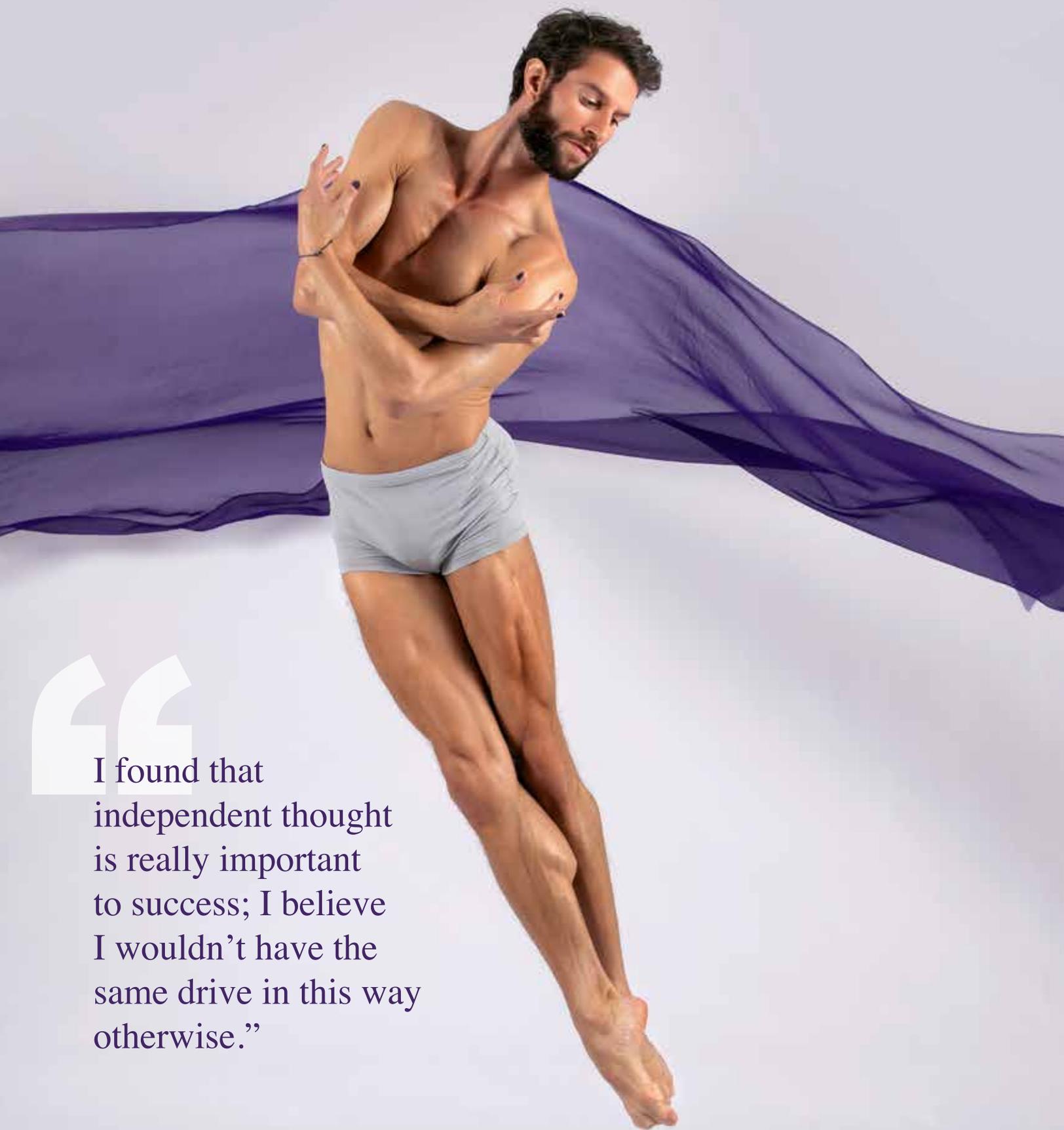
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“

I found that independent thought is really important to success; I believe I wouldn't have the same drive in this way otherwise.”

As an out teenager in the early 2000s, he was the object of “mean kids” at school. “But I was very resilient and had wonderful friends, and dancing made me confident and happy. I think being an outsider from a young age conditions you to be more bold in your choices and you feel less obligated to conform,” he says. “I believe that gives queer people an edge. And I found that independent thought is really important to success; I believe I wouldn’t have the same drive in this way otherwise.”

## DANCE MOVES

Whiteside’s extraordinary dance talents became evident early on and he received a scholarship for ABT’s summer program when he was in his early teens. “But I wasn’t obsessed with [ballet],” he said. At least, not yet. He received a letter at the end of his second summer, ending his scholarship.

The setback only made his resolve stronger, determined to be better at the classical form. At 15, he got a scholarship to the Virginia School of the Arts.

“There, I learned I had to focus,”

he says. “When I was a teenager in Connecticut, I was slightly wayward. I didn’t try at all in school. I smoked a lot of pot and fooled around with people a lot. The only thing I cared about was dancing.”

At 17, he was offered a scholarship to a summer course at Boston Ballet. By the end of the term, he was asked to join the company, graduating to soloist and, finally, principal dancer. But his colorful flair wasn’t always welcome and was sometimes mistaken for not taking the work seriously. Nothing





could have been further from the truth for the serious, focused and ultra-disciplined artist.

But outside of ballet, life was a blast. He roomed with pals in the South End and they partied heartily on their off time. One night, they formed a drag quartet, calling themselves The Dairy Queens, naming themselves after dairy products. He was inspired by his beloved childhood Yoo-hoo drink and his now-partner of 10 years, Dan Donigan, became Milk (and would later be a contestant on “RuPaul’s Drag Race.”)

Rocks, bottles and homophobic taunts sometimes greeted the group. “People there were incredibly aggressive. They were not impressed with us,” he remembers.

Whiteside also started making music on his computer. “I was always fascinated with all kinds of music but my tastes are definitely pop because I sure do like dancing.”

In 2012, he joined ABT as soloist. The next year, he was a principal dancer.

“I was without a doubt the gayest person in this butch atmosphere, but this time I felt incredibly unapologetic. I wasn’t interested in pretending. I just was who I am. When I joined, I was a soloist and I was getting a lot of principal parts, so not only was my personality somewhat shocking but I imagine it was hard for people who were waiting for these principal roles to have someone else come in and sort of usurp things,” he says. “But I certainly didn’t have the time to focus on that because I was so busy learning new repertoire and it was not a harrowing situation. I felt supported [at ABT] because I worked very hard and when you see someone working really hard, it’s hard to disrespect them. But it took about four years before I felt people got used to my existence there. If you persevere, people just have to give in at some point. It’s like a game of chicken and I believe I won.”



## HARD WORK

Though Whiteside's Instagram and Twitter pics and video clips are often playful, they are also plie-ful, showing both the agony and ecstasy of being a dancer.

"It's important to get real every once in a while, and to show that this is really fucking hard and that it takes a lot of work and extreme discipline. That's worth noting and appreciating," he says.

Besides the hours of rehearsing and performing, Whiteside also works out with a personal trainer. "Before that, I just went to the gym on my own, doing weight and strength exercises," says the six-foot, 160-pound dancer with the distinctive claw-scrape tattoo on his left torso. "Essentially it's so I can partner the women in a productive and easy way. I get my cardio in my daily dance rehearsal. As far as diet, I eat whatever I want because I'm blessed in the gene department."

Whiteside's hunger to do new and challenging projects comes from a continuing personal exploratory search. "It's not just for superficial reasons but for soul reasons that I do a project like 'The Tenant.' I needed this."

That ability to stretch as an artist – and as a person – is what he urges audiences to do, too.

"I understand preferring to just go to or do things that you like, but I want art to be less about personal preference and more about a willingness to witness something that they never experienced before," he says.

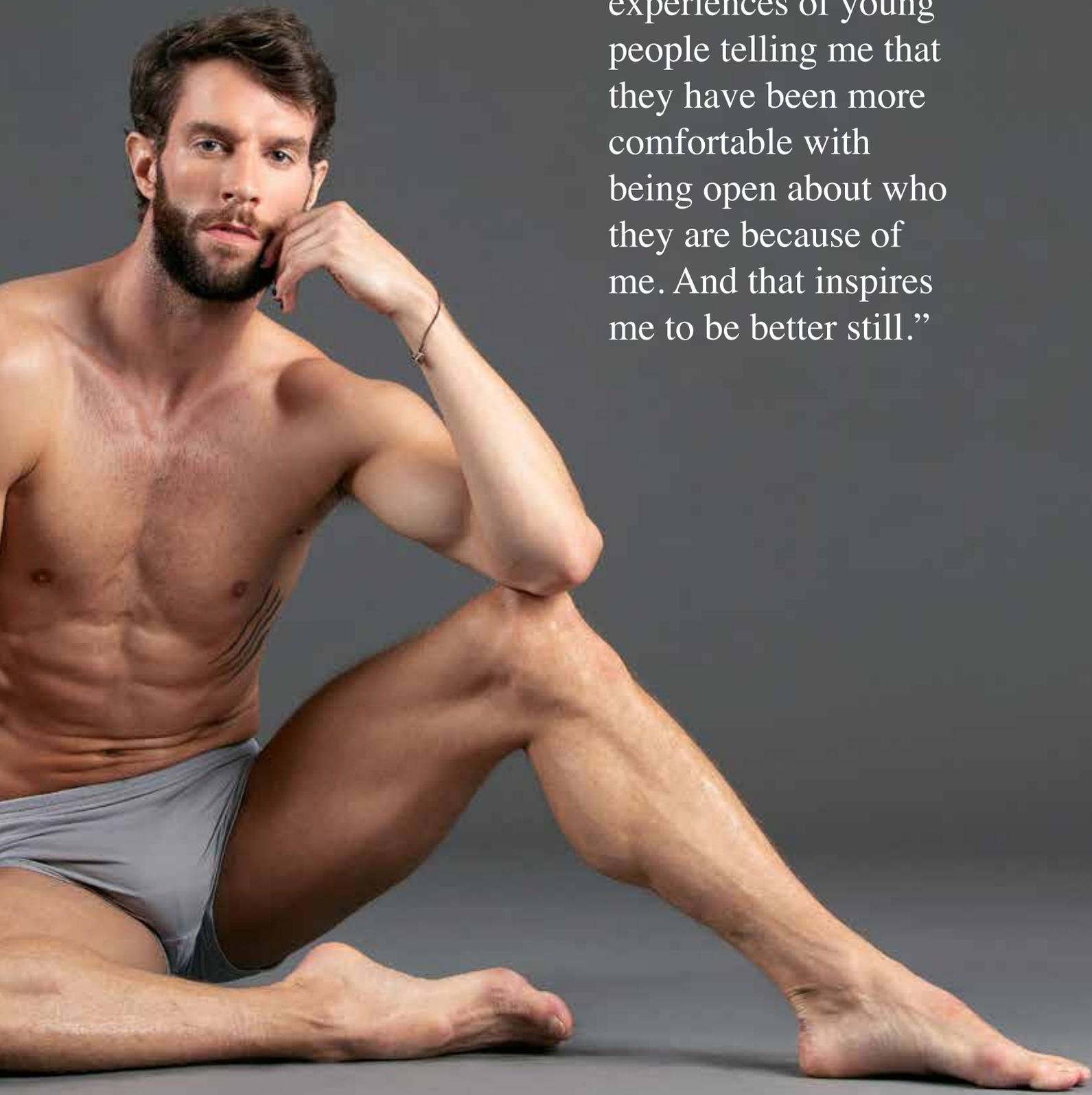
With all his projects, it's become more difficult to keep up with all of his alter egos.

"Oh my god, I wish I had more time to do more music and drag, but I'm doing so much dance right now it's difficult to maintain all the personas in the way that I did before. There's a lot of world travels coming up in 2019 and performances all over the place," he says. "I don't do vacations but I did Fire Island last summer and I try to do P-Town for a week every year."

Does he feel he is a gay role model and helping to give young people a voice?

"It's hard to say," he says. "I'm just a gay dude. But I'm very happy if I can provide some support. I've had some heartwarming experiences of young people telling me that they have been more comfortable with being open about who they are because of me. And that inspires me to be better still." 





“

I've had some heartwarming experiences of young people telling me that they have been more comfortable with being open about who they are because of me. And that inspires me to be better still.”

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## THE NEW HAVEN RESTAURANT'S CHEF BRINGS AN ARTIST'S TOUCH TO THE MENU

By **TODD LYON**

Photography by **WINTER CAPLANSON**

**C**hef Denise Appel is an artist. The fact that she is an artful chef is obvious; her exhilarating, ever-changing, always-original menu is the heartbeat of ZINC, the downtown New Haven eatery that turns 20 this year. Nowhere else in our state, or perhaps our country, or perhaps the whole wide world, would diners be presented with choices ranging from a Salmon Gravlax Bowl with kefir coconut milk sauce, candied mangoes and kimchi, to Crab Fondue with fried artichokes, or Ricotta Gnocchi with celeriac-fennel sauce and crème fraîche pickled beets. The menu pings and bounces between continents, madly grabbing flavors and making crazy bedfellows of dishes like Lettuce Wraps with mint-chile-garlic sauce, Vegetarian Vindaloo, and Weisswurst and Knockwurst Grilled Sausages.

It is an artistic adventure indeed – culinary collage comes to mind – but what diners might not realize is that Appel's cuisine is part of her life as an artist. She is a chef, a painter,

a sculptor, a leather worker, a woodworker, and a metal-smith.

Those of us lucky enough to have seen her paintings (albeit on a bitty phone screen) have gotten a shot of her primal energy: Vibrant abstract expressionist works, with flying paint and integrated objects, occupy huge canvases, some as tall as nine feet.

"Painting and food: that's how I get my thoughts across," explains Appel. "I make constant adjustments to my paintings, and sometimes I'll paint right over a canvas and start over. I do the same with food. I'm always experimenting, always changing."

Art has been entwined with Appel's cookery ever since she started working at the Museum Café at Hartford's Wadsworth Atheneum. That was back in 1987, but it wasn't quite her first restaurant job. In high school, she was a fry cook at Burger King. "The polyester outfits drove me out," she laughs. Much earlier, it was her grandmother, Katherine Crites, who instilled a love of cooking in Appel, the young-



*Chef Denise Appel*



*Diver sea scallop with green olive and mustard seed,  
celeriac puree, carrot redux, charred cauliflower  
and white radicchio*

est of seven kids.

“My grandmother would come and stay with us and cook for the family, to help my mother out,” she recalls. “She would make German food, French food, spaetzle, beef-on-the-bone broth. She had been a private cook for a priest for 24 years.”

Fast forward to when the 17-year-old Denise Appel took a job at the Buckboard in Glastonbury, her hometown. Fate struck when she met manager Donna Curran, who would become a major influence in Appel’s life. Young as Appel was, their professional bond became the stuff of legend, and Curran remains co-owner of ZINC to this day.

After the Buckboard, Appel worked at a gourmet shop and catering firm – back when the word “gourmet” meant something. Very much like New York’s tony Silver Palate, it was where Appel learned about upscale ingredients like smoked salmon, pâtés, expensive cheeses and the like. “We were doing events for 800 people and charging \$400 per person,” as befitted the excessive ‘80s.

When Curran became GM of the Museum Café, she brought Appel along. “I started out as a waitress and hated it,” recalls the chef. The day a kitchen worker called in sick, Appel jumped on the chance to get behind the lines. “That was the only time in my life that anyone told me I couldn’t



*Saigon beef and lettuce wraps - spicy coconut milk braised beef, chile garlic and peanuts*





*Smoked duck nachos with chipotle aioli*

do something because I was a girl.” She did it anyway, and from that day – still a senior in high school – she soaked up techniques and learned the wisdom of ingredients from a steady stream of mentors. Appel remembers them all, their names and how they enriched her life, from the young New Orleans native who’d worked at the famed Commander’s Palace and taught her classical French cuisine, to front-of-house wizards who elevated dishes with impeccable service and perfect wine pairings.

One colleague who changed the course of Appel’s life was Paul Rossman, formerly of Cavey’s. “He was an amazing chef,” she recalls, “and he also had a master’s degree in painting.” She loved his artwork so much that she was inspired to return to painting herself – a passion since the age of eight that had faded in the heat of her restaurant career and her studies at Manchester Community College (she has an associate’s degree in hotel food service management). What’s more, he was the first to expose her to high-end seasonal cooking.

“That was back in the mid-’90s before we even had phrases like ‘farm-to-table,’” she says. “I was 23 years old; I started cooking with the seasons and working directly with farmers.” Thanks to a travel and dining stipend provided by the Atheneum, Rossman and Appel also went on culinary adventures that landed them at some of the most exciting and influential restaurants in New York.

“At the Museum Café, the menus were designed to complement the exhibits,” explains Appel. “The world came to us.” Thus, for a Fabergé egg exhibit, the team produced a Russian menu; for surrealism, they carved letters out of giant blocks of cheddar; a Warhol exhibit inspired a pop art sensibility. Special events had Appel working side by side with chefs from Africa and Malaysia; it is also where she first discovered her love of Indian and Vietnamese cuisine. “Vietnamese is my favorite,” she says. “There is the cleanliness of the vinegars, the citrus, and also that French influence.”

When Curran and Appel opened ZINC in 1999, downtown New Haven was in the midst of a renaissance that included a new crop of chef-run eateries. Many have come and gone – the city’s dining landscape is in constant, lively flux – but Zinc has remained an oasis of low-key sophistication. With soothing lighting, muted tones, modernist design, a small-but-friendly bar and a private dining room that seems always to be the site of lively gatherings, it has the feel of a boutique restaurant in a terribly expensive big-city hotel.

And yet ... snacks. Yes, you can order the \$35 Grilled Rib Eye with porcini/red wine demi-glace, truffle butter, mashed Yukon potatoes and shaved Brussels sprouts.



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“We’re a neighborhood restaurant,” says Appel. “You don’t need a special occasion to eat here. We have customers who come in five days a week.” And then, of course, there is Kitchen ZINC, the pizza restaurant directly adjacent to ZINC that faces the Temple Plaza courtyard. Opened by Curran and Appel in 2008, it more than holds its own in a pizza-mad town. But that’s another story for another day.

The combination of fine dining options and Asian street food is what makes ZINC’s personality so distinctive. A fantastic way to experience this culinary territory is via one of ZINC’s special tasting menus. Available with a week’s advance notice, Mondays through Fridays, this five-course meal features “smallish” plates paired with

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wines, and is custom-designed by the chef with people's dining preferences in mind. "We always respect people's food restrictions and choices," says the chef. "I customize the menu for you – sometimes I'll invent dishes based on what you like." The cost for this one-of-a-kind dining adventure is \$100 per person with wines, \$65 without.

Wine, beer and cocktail choices change with the menu, guided by the expertise of third-level sommelier Michael Egan and special events expert Elizabeth Ciarlelli. Appel says they are part of a rock-solid team that keeps the restaurant humming, including pastry chef Alba Estenez, who has been at ZINC for 10 years, and chef de cuisine Alex Bliford, who first worked there at age 18 and came back at 28.

For the past several years, Appel, often along with her life partner Liz Jacovino, her business partner Curran, and Curran's husband, Patrick McCaughey, has traveled the world, seeking and finding inspiration. "Sometimes the trips are as much about art as they are about food," she confesses. That makes sense: Not only is Appel an artist, but McCaughey is the former director of both the Wadsworth

Atheneum Museum of Art and the Yale Center for British Art. But there is plenty of eating, too, in places like Rome, Paris, London, and Berlin.

On their own, "Liz and I have eaten our way through some major places," says Appel, and mentions Amsterdam, Prague, the Tuscan Valley, Florence, and stopovers along the Danube River – just a few of their overseas trips. The two have cycled through Yellowstone, have visited Alaska, and have a special place in their hearts (and their stomachs) for Key West. "There are so many places I'd still like to see in the U.S.," says Appel, but her culinary travel bucket list includes Japan and the home of her favorite flavors, Vietnam.

Soon Appel will turn 50 (it's a big year for ZINC). When asked what she'll be doing in 10 years, her answer is strong and certain: painting. And continuing to love and care for her beloved rescue dogs. As for her final meal – which we hope won't be for another 50 years – forget the kimchi and nuoc cham sauce. She'll be having Lucky Charms in milk, a forbidden childhood treat. 



Todd Lyon is a veteran food writer, columnist, journalist and author of several books about fun stuff like champagne, interior design, color, and kissing. As co-owner of Fashionista Vintage & Variety, she has dressed New Haven's eccentrics for nearly 15 years. She is named for her paternal grandmother, Todd Lyon.

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# Pride, Police and Stonewall:

## 50 YEARS AFTER THE RIOTS, SOME OF US HAVEN'T STOPPED FIGHTING

By DAWN ENNIS

**M**illions of people, from Connecticut to all over the world, will flock to New York City in June to march, dance, sing, and simply celebrate Pride, amid the traditional stream of rainbow banners and flags.

This summer's annual observance is sure to be different, however, as gays, lesbians and other members of the LGBTQ community take to the streets to mark the 50th year since another generation did so. Then, it was in violent protest of their inability to freely express their sexual orientation and gender identity.

"Stonewall was a pivotal event in human history," said Jason Victor Serinus, a music critic and former New Haven activist of that era. "An oppressed minority said, 'Enough! Stop! We're not going to take this anymore.'"

It was a late Friday night, or early Saturday, June 28, 1969, when an uprising broke out against baton-swinging police officers who raided The Stonewall Inn in New York City's Greenwich Village. The

crime? Alcohol was being served there without a license. And men were dancing with other men.

This wasn't the first time police had launched a raid, but unlike other times, this one wasn't anticipated – the mafia-owned dive bar was typically tipped off in advance of police action – and on this night, the raid unexpectedly erupted into violence.

Some gay men refused to show their driver's licenses to cops, for fear their families would find out their secret. Male officers reportedly groped the handful of lesbians at Stonewall, in the guise of searching them, and arrested all who could not or would not provide legal identification. Women were required to prove they were wearing at least three pieces of "feminine clothing." However, women's clothes worn by drag queens and transgender women, who were then called "transvestites," were grounds for arrest, as was lacking proper ID.

As the eight detectives, two of them women, waited for vehicles to haul away some of the 13 suspects they had rounded up, a crowd standing in the hot summer



# *From New Haven to Now*



The Stonewall Inn on Christopher Street in New York



New York City, USA - July 14, 2016: People walk in Christopher Park, location of the Gay Liberation Monument, a bronze sculpture created by George Segal in 1992. The park, located in the Greenwich Village neighborhood of New York City, is also part of Stonewall National Monument, which was established in June 2016.

air outside Stonewall began to grow, both in number and in frustration. According to blogger Keith Allison, one anonymous Stonewall customer was quoted as saying, “This shit has got to stop!”

Instead, the shit hit the fan.

A policeman hit a butch lesbian named Stormé DeLarverie over the head for saying that her handcuffs were too tight. Seeing this, and hearing her shouts for help, a woman in the crowd named Sylvia Rivera threw a bottle at police; a Stonewall patron named Marsha P. Johnson and other drag queens as well as the crowd of men joined in. They threw everything at police that they could get their hands on, even coins. Outnumbered cops retreated inside the bar, as hundreds protested outside, banged on its doors and tried to burn down The Stonewall.

The clash between the N.Y.P.D. and beer can-tossing, bottle-throwing,

cobblestone-hurling protesters sparked several nights of riots across the Christopher Street neighborhood surrounding that now-famous tavern. News of the riots inspired even bigger protests, lasting six long days and nights.

The slow march toward equality over the five decades since Stonewall will be commemorated on Sunday, June 30, at what is now a national historic landmark.

History took its time traveling more than 80 miles from The Stonewall to New Haven’s then-burgeoning gay community. In June 1969, Jason Serinus cruised the streets around Yale University and worked in the Sterling Memorial Library on campus. Those days remain fresh in the mind of Serinus, now 73.

“It was like no other time,” the journalist and professional whistler told CT Voice. “I remember going past The



Jason Serinus, 73, lived in New Haven during the Stonewall era.



Organizers of the New York City Pride March, slated for this June, expect it to draw its biggest crowd ever - about 3 million LGBTQ people and allies from around the world.

## **IN SOME WAYS, THAT RAGE HAS NOT FADED MUCH IN THE 50 YEARS SINCE STONEWALL. IT FUELS HOW SOME MEMBERS OF TODAY'S LGBTQ COMMUNITY FEEL ABOUT POLICE.**

Pub, the gay bar in New Haven, which was affectionately known as, ‘The Pube,’” he says. A 2001 story in the Yale News called the long-gone watering hole “a meeting place for gay Yalies for nearly 60 years” and a necessary aid in the gay dating world of the past,” when being openly gay could spell disaster.

That’s also where Serinus first came out, to end what he called “the darkest memory, my own fear and self-loathing,” by walking inside for the first time.

Serinus says he remembers vividly the newsstand outside The Pub, where one day he spotted the front page of the now-defunct Village Voice, telling the story of the riots at The Stonewall Inn.

“The forces of faggotry” led to a “kind of liberation,” Lucian Truscott IV wrote in the July 2, 1969 issue. “Limp

wrists were forgotten. Beer cans and bottles were heaved at the windows, and a rain of coins descended on the cops.”

From inside The Stonewall, Howard Smith huddled with police as he wrote for that same issue of the Village Voice: “By now, the mind’s eye has forgotten the character of the mob; the sound filtering in doesn’t suggest dancing faggots any more. It sounds like a powerful rage bent on vendetta.” Some protesters reacted so angrily at those loaded words that the rioters targeted the newspaper itself.

In some ways, that rage has not faded much in the 50 years since Stonewall. It fuels how some members of today’s LGBTQ community feel about police, especially in regard to their participation in Pride events.

“The police have been monsters,” says transgender activist Miss Major, who was at the Stonewall Inn the night of

# “BY NOW, THE MIND’S EYE HAS FORGOTTEN THE CHARACTER OF THE MOB; THE SOUND FILTERING IN DOESN’T SUGGEST DANCING FAGGOTS ANY MORE. IT SOUNDS LIKE A POWERFUL RAGE BENT ON VENDETTA.”

the 1969 raid. In a public service announcement posted to Twitter in January by Gay Shame’s Five-O Out of Pride 50 campaign, Major declared police officers should be banned from marching at all Pride celebrations.

“They’re all worthless, unimaginable, horrible people and destructive to mankind in general, especially to my trans and gender-nonconforming community,” she wrote. As to those who welcome officers who identify as LGBTQ, who wave rainbow flags as they march, *Out* magazine reported Major is clear on her position: “Fuck a flag,” she said. “That shit doesn’t mean a damn thing if you’re not going to treat people right or fair or honestly.” She’s not alone; the meme “No Cops at Pride” has gained traction in recent years, as the website [www.them.us](http://www.them.us) reported.

The group No Justice No Pride issued demands in 2017 to organizers of the Capital Pride march in Washington, D.C., to avoid a repeat of a parade-stopping protest the year prior. Among the demands, they insisted that the event “stop celebrating the police,” even out of uniform.

“At the end of the day, NJNP doesn’t want a formal cop presence in the parade,” Jacinta told NBC News. “We look at our history and our present reality and see there is very little accountability for the extrajudicial murder of civilians, especially brown and black folks.”



Jason Victor Serinus and Ron Punit Auerbacher at the NYC Weinstein Hall demo in NYC. Photo is the property of the NY Public Library, and was taken by Diana Davies.

The LGBTQ community in particular has a horrendous record in its dealings with law enforcement, according to the Williams Institute at UCLA. Nearly half, 48%, of all victims of anti-LGBTQ violence reported that their interactions with police had resulted in misconduct, unjustified arrest, use of excessive force, and entrapment. The numbers are higher among all groups that are LGBTQ and minorities, the researchers found, with two-thirds of transgender Latinas reporting verbal harassment, and one in four suffering sexual assault by officers of the law.

So, seeing an officer in uniform at Pride or anywhere can be triggering for many. But for others, seeing a cop with a rainbow flag is a sign of how far gays have come.

“This isn’t 1969, those cops [from The Stonewall riots] aren’t on the force any longer,” says Officer David Hartman of the New Haven Police Department. “Several years ago, I myself marched in the New Haven Pride Parade and several of us attended the Pride event downtown.”

Hartman said his top brass want their officers to participate, whether they are LGBTQ or not.

“The NHPD would allow any officer to attend and participate in a Pride march or related LGBTQ event,” wrote Hartman, in an email to CT Voice. “Such would be no different than an officer marching in the St. Patrick’s Day Parade or

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anything similar.”

There are rules that govern uniforms, but what about complaints that uniformed police are unwelcome at Pride events? “Honestly, we don’t care – or should I say – we can’t possibly juggle the opinions of everyone,” Hartman responded.

“Having attended Pride events in many communities – Connecticut and elsewhere – I’ve witnessed many more cheers when LGBTQ or supportive officers march by than gestures of disapproval,” said Hartman. “The climate of policing has changed drastically for the better, though further change is welcome and continues to be needed.”

Change was swift in New York City, where a militant band of gays organized the very first NYC Pride march in 1970. They had come together just weeks after the riots

to form the Gay Liberation Front. That, in turn, inspired a Methodist minister on the Yale campus to suggest Serinus spearhead New Haven’s own chapter.

From there, Serinus expanded his horizons, moving to New York’s historic 17th Street Gay Men’s Collective. He says a popular phrase from that time, from the Bob Dylan song *It’s Alright, Ma (I’m Only Bleeding)*, still applies today: “He not busy being born is busy dying.”

“This is a time for everyone to be busy born anew, in the most wholesome of senses, to realize our potential. We need to remember the people who fought, and did so bravely, and said, ‘Enough!’ They did not bottle up their anger, but instead they channeled it into constructive action,” says Serinus, concluding: “That’s what I’d like to see happen” as New Haven and the world remembers Stonewall. 



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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CHRISTOPHER MORLEY



Laurie Surprenant, left, and Amy Kenkel, right, are co-founders and owners of Leaps & Bones, as well as life partners.

# Barking Up the Right Tree

## Two entrepreneurs have found their passion, both personal and professional

By RENEE DININO / Photography by TODD FAIRCHILD

**I**t was an awkward first date in 2003 at Mohegan Sun that left Amy Kenkel wondering if there would be a second. Laurie Surprenant, the more talkative of the two, was uncharacteristically quiet. Kenkel, the “quiet” one, was uncharacteristically talkative and carried the conversation. However, it was Surprenant who called Kenkel right after that first date and from there, it was clear these two would stay together.

Both grew up in supportive, loving families, and both had a passion for animals. Surprenant’s first pet was a dog named Scooby Doo and Kenkel’s was an orange tabby cat named Tiger. By the time they would share their lives together, Kenkel had two rescue cats, Buddy and Tizzy. The couple later rescued Jack (a Beagle-Terrier mix), Jill (a Jack Russell), and Hemi and Zelda (both Parson Russell Terriers).

In 2008, the two were on their way to see Melissa Etheridge in concert, about an hour’s drive from their home. During this drive, the women – both at their wits’ end with their respective jobs, neither very happy – started to think, “What are we doing with our lives?” They discussed their lives, passions and goals, and the one thing they decided without hesitation was that they both loved hanging out with their dogs.

Within an hour, while Surprenant drove, Kenkel wrote fast and furiously on random napkins found in the vehicle. They came up with the name, bakery concept, logo and business plan. Leaps & Bones LLC, a pet supply business, was born.

Once they later visited The Promenade Shops at Evergreen Walk in South Windsor, and were surprised to find a pet-friendly place with no pet store, they quickly leased space in the upscale plaza.

Kenkel left her general management position in the hospitality industry to craft what would become their signature recipes for the bakery. Surprenant continued to work in the corporate world until 2014, then joined the business

full-time. In the meantime, they made their love legal and were united in a civil service ceremony. They were later “upgraded” (as the two women describe it), when marriage became legal for same-sex couples in Connecticut on October 1, 2010.

Both share the responsibilities as business owners, with Kenkel in charge of operations, purchasing and serving as head baker, and Surprenant in charge of marketing and IT.

Kenkel worked out the flavors of her recipes for four months in their home, researching different flavors, pet food safety concerns and testing them on all their dogs and the neighborhood dogs.

This duo’s shared love for dogs was the inspiration and foundation for their entrepreneurial venture.





Hand-decorated bakery treats are a big hit with customers, both canine and human, at Leaps & Bones. You could say that these colorful cookies have "gone to the dogs."



Theirs became the popular house on the street. They tried making cat treats, but decided they would sell some cat food and toys and leave the bakery for the dogs.

They now boast more than 300 specialty baked goods, some specific to the seasons like gingerbread biscuits and their Talkin' Turkey treats. In addition to being loved by pets, everything is made with natural and human-grade ingredients so curious pet owners can share.

They also offer an array of specialty celebration cakes, including the Bacon Lovers' Cake with fresh bacon and the dog fan-favorite Ice Cream Cake, made with house-made peanut ice cream. All cakes are made fresh to order and can be personalized. They also donate a free cake to any K9 officer's or K9 first responder's birthday or retirement.

The ladies do everything with passion and love for people and pets, and it shows in their store, which carries all kinds of pet products, toys, food, treats, and pet-related gifts for humans. Kenkel also honors Surprenant's Italian heritage with some specialty treats they can barely keep on their shelves: Parmesan Bread Twists and the K9-Knolli. If you see them, grab them; your dog will thank you.

Ten years into the business, Leaps & Bones has eight employees who share their passion for pets. Many of them volunteer at local animal rescue facilities.

The shop has a loyal clientele, whom the owners and staff view as extended family. Customers are often greeted at

the store by Surprenant's and Kenkel's pets or employees' pets and, of course, well-behaved dogs are always welcome to visit.

Surprenant and Kenkel have never hidden their love for each other, and continually express their true devotion to serving their customers products they would give to their own pets. They feel very lucky, and understand this is not the case in all situations, but they have never faced any adversity as LGBTQ business owners.

"Understand, you will never make everyone happy; target your audience and hold true to who you want to be and how you portray yourself to others," Kenkel says.

Leaps & Bones supports many community causes, mostly focused on animal rescue. The store hosts multiple events, from pictures with Santa Paws to a Halloween Pet Parade and vendor fair, as well as in-store days featuring different rescues to create awareness.

"We are proud to not only be a thriving business, doing what we love, but also a strong, women-owned business, not to mention being without intention, solid role models as a married lesbian couple and leaders in the community," Kenkel says.

Surprenant and Kenkel don't view themselves as different from any other couple. They laugh, cry, argue, annoy each other, work together – and sometimes need to take a break. This loving couple lives their lives with respect for one another and with love and understanding for all. But mostly, for those with paws. 



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

# ERASED NO MORE

## THREE TRANS MEN SHARE THEIR STRUGGLES

By DAWN ENNIS

**R**esearchers say that the transgender population of the United States amounts to more than 1.4 million Americans, with more than 12,000 here in Connecticut. So, what image pops into your mind upon seeing the word “transgender?”

What most people don’t immediately conjure is an image of a balding, bearded dude. Or any dude.

Even in the bathroom bill debate, much of the media focus was on transphobic messaging like, “no men in women’s bathrooms,” although though those discriminatory laws would have actually meant husky trans guys would be peeing in the stall next to you, your daughter or wife.

It’s this erasure from the national conversation that presents a problem for many transgender men. Three shared their varied experiences with *CT Voice*.

“I am always mistaken for a cis guy,” says Tony Ferraiolo, an author, inspirational speaker, life coach and trainer from New Haven who feels sad when his own community doesn’t see him for who he is.

“I’m one of ‘them,’” realized Elijah Nealy, 60, a West Hartford social worker and college professor, soon after he transitioned to live as a man. His awareness was the result of seeing a young woman walking alone, late at night, become visibly nervous as the out trans man followed behind her. “I’m [perceived as] a threat to women now.”

“Cis men, gay and straight, are gatekeepers in our culture and in the media we consume,” says Tiq Milan, 36. “Often, and unconsciously, they place more value in the stories of people that they may have a connection with: being born or perceived as male. Also, femininity, trans or not, attracts the

male gaze, whereas trans masculinity disrupts it. I don’t like the notion that it’s a trans men versus trans women issue, but we definitely need to have deeper conversations about gender and representation in media.”

### ELIJAH NEALY

“I never even heard the words gay or lesbian until I was 16 or 17, and people certainly weren’t talking about gender identity then,” recalls Nealy. “I’d never heard the word trans,” he confesses. “I didn’t even know that such a thing existed.”

Nealy came out as a lesbian when he was finishing his bachelor’s degree in social work at a fundamentalist bible college.

“All I knew was that I was attracted to women and I was in what clearly appeared to be a female body. So by process of deduction, I must be a lesbian,” he says.

In 1992, Nealy started working at the LGBT Center in Manhattan and rose up the ranks to become the deputy executive director.

“It was not until I arrived there that I consciously remember even knowing that gender identity was separate from sexual orientation and that trans people existed,” he says. “All the trans people I met initially at the center were trans women, and trans men were still pretty invisible.”

He says throughout the 1990s, he slowly explored the idea of “genderqueer” and being butch, in his words, “as an alternate gender construct.” It would be another decade before Nealy found the answer to the question: “Who am I, really?”

“In 2005, it became really clear that being seen in the

world as a man was what felt most authentic,” he says.

After Nealy started to live as a man, he felt euphoria mixed with trepidation.

“On the one hand, when I’m in a men’s space, when I’m moving through the world, when we’re out and I’m seen as a guy, this is exactly what I want for my life,” says Nealy. “I’m moving through it; I’m not navigating the dysphoria I navigated before. Nobody’s tripping over what to call me. I’m just a regular guy in the world and, in many ways, that’s what I wanted when I transitioned.”

“On the other hand, my queerness is invisible,” he says, his gravelly voice barely betraying the frustration he feels. “Totally, totally invisible, to the point that my history as a woman and understandings of that experience, and how it shaped me, is totally invisible.”

He often uses humor to help explain the challenges of trans life. A urologist replacing his catheter during a doctor’s appointment clearly didn’t realize he was trans when he asked Nealy, “So, what was the original problem with the phallus?”

“Well, I’m a trans man,” Nealy told him. “And so the original problem with the phallus is that it just wasn’t there.”

Nealy is married to author and former Sarah Lawrence College educator Alexandra Soiseth, a cis woman, and is a dad to their three children. He is an assistant professor of social work at the University of Saint Joseph in West Hartford and an ordained minister. His book, “Transgender Children and Youth: Cultivating Pride and Joy with Families in Transition,” was published in 2017.

### **TONY FERRAILO**

“I typically don’t come out as a trans guy until halfway through the training,” Ferraiolo says of his work helping to educate businesses, schools and groups on issues affecting transgender Americans – in particular, trans and gender nonconforming youth. “So I hear things like, ‘No fuckin’ way!’ and ‘Did he just say he was trans?’ ” After Ferraiolo reveals this about himself, he’ll ask the audience, “So what’s changed for you?”



Dr. Elijah Nealy is an author, social worker and university professor, as well as a husband and father. Photo by **TODD FAIRCHILD**

Ferraiolo came out as a lesbian at 15, came out as trans in 2004, and now identifies as straight. “If I listened to everyone who insisted they knew me better than I knew myself,” he says, “I’d be a married Italian woman with three kids, cooking pasta every Sunday.”

“If I am in a situation where it can be physically unsafe to be a trans person, I am grateful” to be mistaken for cisgender, he says. “But then I think that this is the way it should be for everyone in the trans or any marginalized community; no one should ever have to fear for their lives for being their authentic selves.”

Ferraiolo recounts one experience in which he approached a trans woman, standing off to the side of a crowded dance floor.

“She looked like she was a little scared, and looked very alone,” he says, so he invited her to his table. “She looked

at me, and just shook her head, ‘no.’ Then I said, ‘It’s cool, I’m a trans guy.’” Ferraiolo recalls that the woman was stunned, and confessed she thought he was a straight cis guy trying to pick her up.

“It made me feel invisible, and I know I scared her at first. I don’t know, I just felt bad,” he says. Ferraiolo’s “invisibility” can be an emotionally challenging experience. “Sometimes I wonder, where do I fit in? It can be very lonely sometimes.”

In addition to his dozen years as a trainer and life coach, Ferraiolo is a cofounder of the Jim Collins Foundation, which funds surgeries for indigent trans people; author of the book series, “Artistic Expressions of Transgender Youth”; and the subject of the award-winning documentary “A Self-made Man.”



Tony Ferraiolo is an author, healthcare and corporate trainer, public speaker and certified life coach.



### TIQ MILAN

“I haven’t been read as transgender in years,” says Milan, from Brooklyn, N.Y. He is a busy dad to a daughter who turned one in January, and is raising her with his wife, Kim Katrin Milan, who identifies as cis and queer. The family is currently living in Toronto.

But who he is, Milan insists, should not be misconstrued to be an act. “The one thing I take issue with is the language we use. I’m not ‘passing as cisgender,’ I’m assumed to be cis.”

“Passing” is a controversial state in both the trans masculine and trans feminine universes, given that some do, some don’t, and those who do “pass” as cisgender are often misconstrued as having “fooled” cis people. Milan, who is black, is sensitive to this topic, as it not only relates to his gender identity but also to his race.

“The term ‘passing’ has a historical context where light-skinned black people would pass as white for safety, to have access to education, housing, and jobs,” he says. “I’m not trying to pass as cisgender for whatever privilege it may give me.”

Yet it still happens, says Milan, a former spokesperson for GLAAD. He is now a strategic media consultant, the owner of his own production company, Milan Media, and co-hosts the podcast “Masc Undone” with Aydian Dowling. 

Tiq Milan of Brooklyn, N.Y., is a writer, podcaster, human rights advocate, husband and father.

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YOUTH //



Mel Cordner, True Colors' youth activities coordinator.

# Color Me Courageous

True Colors offers youth a safe space to be who they are

By CARA MCDONOUGH / Photography by NICK CAITO

**A**s the evening begins, the presenters lay out the ground rules. This is a “safe space,” they explain, where respecting each other’s opinions, questions and bodies is important, and expected.

They add, however, that the small room – where about 12 people have gathered on a chilly Friday night in November, and is undeniably cozy with worn couches, colorful pillows and a few soft blankets – also serves as a “brave space.” Being safe doesn’t necessarily mean you won’t be a little uncomfortable.

Courage is a hallmark of the Friday Night Activities at True Colors, a Hartford-based nonprofit that advocates for sexual and gender minority youth. The events are held in

the organization’s office and led by the organization’s Youth Leadership Team, made up of three high school students who plan and facilitate the events. The gatherings provide an accessible gathering space for individuals who want to connect and, perhaps more importantly, learn from one another, covering topics and cultural issues relevant to today’s queer youth and their allies.

Plus, it’s a lot of fun.

As participants check in at the door, writing their names and preferred pronouns on color-coded nametags that indicate whether or not they are comfortable being on social media, they greet one another warmly and then make a beeline for the plentiful snacks set up in the hallway. There is a lot of laughter.

The activities are open to the public and follow a rotat-



ing set of themes, including Pagan Discussion Night, Drag Night and Movie Night. This particular Friday's theme is Intergenerational Night, and while most of the attendees (which include staff, interns and the Youth Leadership Team) are young adults, the idea is to get individuals of different backgrounds and ages together in the same room to discuss current issues in a friendly environment. Tonight's participants will be taking part in a gender and pronoun workshop.

"I think this is so important because Hartford is one of the most diverse cities I've seen. So there should be a space where we can come talk to each other," says Luis, a Hartford High School student who attended the event. [Last names have been withheld at the request of True Colors.]

"This is where you learn," agrees Lorena from her spot on the couch. Lorena is a student at Central Connecticut State University who is doing an internship at True Colors. She says that beyond acting as a necessary home away from home for the youth it serves, the organization's dedication to educating the public on relevant topics is crucial, especially in today's volatile political environment. Events go above and beyond LGBTQ topics, she notes; a recent Friday Night Activity focused on cultural appropriation.

She's right. The crux of True Colors' mission is informing the public in innovative ways while acting as a home base for LGBTQ youth, who feel not only accepted but also empowered there.

The organization, founded under the name Children from the Shadows in 1992 by its current executive director, Robin McHaelen, works with social service agencies, schools, clinicians, social workers, college and high school students, and many others, conducting trainings, seminars, workshops and discussion groups on sexuality, gender, diversity and inclusion.

In addition, the organization runs the state's only LGBT mentoring program and holds the country's biggest LGBT youth conference with more than 3,000 attendees. This year's, scheduled for March 22 and 23 at the University of Connecticut in Storrs, will include workshops, a drag show, and a dance.

And many True Colors programs, like the Youth Leadership Team and Queer Academy (the organization's 6-week youth leadership summer program for queer and ally youth aged 13-19), give young people tools to educate and advocate on their own, working to change their schools and communities for the better.

The organization's office is a testament to the enthusiastic individuals who lead and gather there, with draped rainbow flags, colored lights, posters advertising upcoming events, and inspiring quotations dotting the walls. It is a bright, inviting and powerful space.

"This is a place to connect with the community and see what their needs are," says Jaymie, who currently serves on the Youth Leadership Team and presented at Intergenerational Night. "I really love being able to provide that support in a relaxed environment."

"For me, True Colors is a place that we can come together and lead," says Bren, another member of the team, who presented as well, along with the third member of the team, R.J.

Kristina, a UConn School of Social Work student, interns at True Colors.

The Intergenerational Night showed how well the emphasis on youth leadership serves True Colors' overall mission.

The team had created an informative PowerPoint presentation, accented by worksheets with scenarios and questions for discussion. They explain an elegant “ouch/oops” rule at the outset: if someone says something that offends you, use “ouch” to express the feeling; “oops” is the preferred, simple reply from the offending individual, rather than profuse apologies.

While the rule was never invoked, that Friday's agenda served an important and complex educational purpose. The program focused on non-binary pronouns, which are chosen by individuals who identify as something other than “he” or “she.” Topics included usage of non-binary pronouns (such as “they” and “them”) as well as the newer, or “neo pronouns” (such as “xe” and “ze”); ways to incorporate more inclusive greetings into your vocabulary (greeting a group as “Hey, all!” instead of “Hey, ladies!”); and how to react sensitively to those dealing with evolving gender identity issues (for example, no longer using someone's “dead name” – the name given at birth – to refer to them if they have chosen a new one).

These were dense and cutting-edge topics, deftly handled by an impressively young panel of experts.

But while the topics were heavy, the atmosphere was not overly serious. These were, after all, teenagers, so the evening featured the hallmarks of a night out with young adults. There were plentiful snack breaks and digressions – including a side conversation about how much everyone loves cats – and some casual dancing, too.

“I'm always dancing,” says Bren, breaking out a few moves in between slides.

On the flip side, discussion included more serious issues

at school, including the use of single-sex bathrooms and trouble with teachers. Participants listened respectfully and provided sound suggestions.

“True Colors' core mission is to create a world in which youth of all orientations and genders are welcome, valued and affirmed. It's about capacity building, really – making sure that LGBTQ+ and ally youth, and those responsible for their health and well-being, have the tools they need to make that vision a reality,” says McHaelen.

“Our youth programming is so important. Friday Night Activities, for example, not only give youth a place to belong and to feel welcome, but provide the youth who organize the evenings the tools they need to advocate for themselves and others going forward,” McHaelen says.

“Our youth leaders are learning how to successfully run groups, how to use and integrate feedback loops into their planning, and just as importantly, learning about themselves and who they are – all through an intersectional, social justice lens. Growth and capacity building. That is what this is all about.”

The crowd at the Intergenerational Night certainly echoed that sentiment, returning again and again to the idea of embracing new concepts and validating others' identities. It was clear that no one in the room expected anyone else to be an expert, or never make mistakes. It was all about learning, acceptance, and inclusion.

For the young people who count True Colors as a sanctuary, that sense of inclusion is key. And they are working tirelessly to ensure everyone else out there in the world has a chance to flourish in their own safe, brave spaces.

“I know I have a place to go after a hard day. I have a spot here,” R.J. says of True Colors. “For me, it's a sense of belonging.”



The library at True Colors showcases a caricature rendering, by artist Ricky Mestre, of youth in a previous intern cohort.

# Taking a Seat at the Table

## A RECORD NUMBER OF LGBTQ CANDIDATES THROW THEIR HAT IN THE POLITICAL RING

By CAROL LATTER

Contemplating career choices before heading off to college, the idea of getting involved in politics in any capacity never crossed Raghib Allie-Brennan's mind – let alone running for public office.

"I wanted to go into medicine when I was leaving high school," he recalls, but while he was good at reading and writing, "I wasn't very good in math. I knew I would have to struggle" to become a doctor.

Today, Allie-Brennan, 27, is the youngest member of Connecticut's House of Representatives, serving the 2nd District – Bethel, Redding, Newtown, and part of the City of Danbury. He is also one of just two LGBTQ members of the House, and one of four LGBTQ politicians serving at the state level.

A Democrat, he was elected last November, after an unsuccessful run two years earlier. On the surface, he says, the odds might have seemed stacked against him. "I have a different name – my dad named me after a football player but people might assume I was Middle Eastern. I'm of color, I'm gay, I'm young. The only thing I'm not is a woman," he jokes. "There were a lot of things against me, but I got there. I'd like to be a role model, to let young people know that as long as you put in the work, you can achieve your goals."

And put in the work he did, knocking on more than 9,000 doors from early last spring to November. "I was obviously running as a gay man. It was hard at times," he admits. "Some people like to use that [sexual identity] to suggest that's all you care about, but it's not. I'm more than just a gay man. I'm very invested in energy and environmental issues, animal welfare, paid family medical leave, helping Connecticut's young

people, and so much more."

A couple of things contributed to his success, he believes. "I focused on the human side. I spoke to the opponent's record and explained how he was out of touch. It took time and perseverance, but we were successful." Now, he's working to make a tangible difference in the Nutmeg state.

Among other things, Rep. Allie-Brennan wants to help build an LGBTQ network across Connecticut to "fill the service gaps that some of the organizations are not getting to" – particularly in more remote areas like the northwest and northeast portions of the state. In those areas, many LGBTQ people, and especially young people, feel isolated and unsupported. Many lack a place where they can spend time with people who relate to them. Some are homeless. Some commit suicide.

"We want to pass legislation that will positively affect the LGBTQ community in this state. We want them to know that we're here, we're listening to them, and we've got their backs. We want them to know that they have a voice in the State House. Hopefully we can ease the problems they face."

### A RAINBOW WAVE

Allie-Brennan is part of a record number of "out" LGBTQ political candidates who ran for public office across the U.S., at all levels, and are currently serving their country, states, cities or towns. Among that contingent are 10 members of Congress, the governors of Oregon and Colorado, seven statewide officials (including Connecticut Comptroller Kevin Lembo),



Raghib Allie-Brennan, 29, was elected to the Connecticut House of Representatives last fall. Photo by **TODD FAIRCHILD**



Rep. Allie-Brennan wants to pass legislation that will positively affect the LGBTQ community in Connecticut. Photo by **TODD FAIRCHILD**

and 148 state legislators. The tally also includes 38 mayors, 348 local officials serving on municipal councils or school boards, and 106 serving in a judicial capacity.

Of approximately 750 who ran in 2018, more than 650 were elected. Of that number, three are trans men and 10 are trans women. One identifies as intersex, and two each identify as gender non-conforming, genderqueer/non-binary, and Two Spirit (Native American/Alaska Native).

According to the Washington, D.C.-based Victory organization – a bipartisan nonprofit that provides funding, training and support to LGBTQ political candidates – just a handful of states do not have any elected LGBTQ officials.

In Connecticut, a significant number of LGBTQ hopefuls ran this past November, including six Republican candidates for seats in the state's General Assembly. Connecticut's two openly gay lawmakers, Sen. Beth Bye of West Hartford and Rep. Jeff Currey of East Hartford, both Democrats, were successfully re-elected. (After four terms as state senator and two terms as state representative, Bye resigned in January to lead the state Office of Early Childhood.)

Allie-Brennan was the only first-term state representative to win office in November.

While no GOP candidates were successful in that race, at least one has seen a change in the political climate from years gone by. Republican John Scott of Mystic, who served one term in the Connecticut General Assembly from January 2015 to January 2017, representing Groton and Le-dyard, says being part of the LGBTQ community wasn't a barrier for him to running for, or holding, public office.

What he's found "amazing and beautiful" is that Connecticut's Republican party "couldn't care less about people being gay. They don't want anything to do with making any [anti-LGBTQ] changes. They are very warm and welcoming. I think it's a great thing."

He'll never forget the day when, soon after he got married on December 25, 2015, Themis Klarides, Republican Minority Leader in the Connecticut House of Representatives, announced his marriage on the House floor and led a standing ovation to congratulate him. "I didn't expect that. It was very cool," he says. "Being gay, as the world is changing, is so normal now that I don't think many people care anymore." Instead, the state's party members and Connecticut voters want "a good member of the community who can help make things better."

Scott, 49, has been involved in politics at the local level for the better part of 20 years, including time as a member of the Groton Town Council and Representative Town Meeting. He ran for state office in 2014, unseating Edward Moukawsher, who had held the District 40 seat for 12 years.

Scott, with a history as a small business owner, worked hard to improve the state's economy and business climate, he says, but last fall, "this region went solidly against

Trump. We have a military base in my district and a very transient population. Sailors and their spouses bring their parents to live with them, and Navy support families didn't know me from the dog catcher." Democrat Christine Conley, running on a platform of securing state funding for Electric Boat, safeguarding healthcare benefits, and providing tax relief to senior citizens, narrowly won the seat in 2016 and again in 2018.

Scott doesn't rule out running again in the future, saying it's important for LGBTQ candidates to be involved in politics to ensure that recent legislative gains – including the state's legalization of same-sex marriage in 2008 – "don't get taken away from us."

## A HELPING HAND

Annie Parker, president and CEO of the Washington, D.C.-based Victory Fund and Victory Institute, couldn't agree more. Parker – who previously served for six years as a Houston city council member, six years as controller, and six years as mayor – was the first openly LGBTQ mayor of a major American city.

"We can be represented really well by our allies," she says. "They care about the issues, and that's great, but no



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Annise Parker heads the Victory Fund and the Victory Institute, which together help fund and train LGBTQ political candidates across the nation.



Caitlin Clarkson Pereira, a Fairfield County resident, ran for a seat in the Connecticut legislature last fall, and encountered many obstacles during the campaign.

one can really speak to the truth of the daily [LGBTQ] experience like those who have lived it. LGBTQ politicians can serve as role models and mentors, and have the opportunity to change how the broader LGBTQ community is perceived across America.” Victory is the only national organization that works solely with LGBTQ candidates, from town contenders to gubernatorial candidates.

Parker says while great strides have been made in garnering equal rights with respect to gay marriage and other issues at the state level, there is still much more progress to be made, and the danger of backsliding is ever-present. “In half of states, you can still discriminate against LGBTQ people without repercussions,” she says.

Trans issues are another hot spot in today’s social and political climate.

“America is a lot further along on gay and lesbian issues than on trans issues,” Parker says. “Most Americans now have worked with someone who is gay or lesbian, but not

too many can say they know someone who is trans. That’s one of the reasons it’s important to have trans candidates and politicians. It will humanize and normalize that human experience for everyone.”

Anti-trans bills, she says, continue to be “a plague across the country. For many legislatures, the most insidious legislation relates to conversion therapy.” Meanwhile, on the national scene, the legal fight over whether trans people can openly serve in the military continues to be waged.

Parker, who has been an activist since the 1970s, says her organization conducts an extensive vetting process of LGBTQ candidates before deciding whether to endorse them. The Victory Fund (which offers funding to the candidates it endorses) and the Victory Institute (which provides training) have helped many gay and lesbian candidates run successful campaigns for public office.

“That will happen for the trans community as well. We now have four trans state representatives, and council mem-



Gannon Long campaigned on the platform of better state representation for residents of Hartford's city neighborhoods, and particularly for those who are marginalized, living in poverty and underrepresented.



Republican John Scott of Mystic, who served one term in the Connecticut General Assembly, ran on a platform of improving Connecticut's business climate and helping small business owners.

bers in several cities,” she says.

While Victory has just 20 employees, “last year, we climbed a mountain with the number of candidates we screened, endorsed and tracked. The number of organizations supporting women, candidates of color and immigrants surged in 2018. I believe the same conditions will still be there in 2020.”

Yet she admits there is a long road ahead. “It’s great that there are more than 750 ‘out’ candidates who ran at all levels in 2018,” Parker says. “But LGBTQ represents 4 percent of the population of America, so we would need 23,000 more people to be truly representative. It shows you how far we still have to go.”

## FOCUSING ON THE ISSUES

Caitlin Clarkson Pereira of Fairfield is one of several Connecticut candidates endorsed and trained by Victory.

While she didn’t win the seat she fought for in the House of Representatives, she found it “humbling and empowering to be a candidate, particularly in this political climate. There is a responsibility that comes with that, and I am 100 percent committed to seeing that responsibility through, in whatever form that takes, in the future.”

Pereira, 33, is the mother of a 4-year-old-daughter, and a longtime LGBT advocate. In college, she did her grad research on gay and bisexual students. She later became a college counselor, helping students pick majors and choose careers.

“Because I had been in hetero relationships, I had people tell me – and I sort of convinced myself – that how I identified didn’t matter.” But after finishing grad school and launching her career, “it was weighing on me to pretend to be an ally, while it was really so much more than that. I identified initially as bisexual but that only means two gen-

ders. And so I just had to own it. I had to own it.”

Now, she identifies personally as pansexual, and politically as bisexual. For many people, she says, “You don’t just come out once. It’s a process your entire life. So at least for now, and with running for office, I’m identifying using the term bisexual because it’s the most familiar for people.”

She says she “could write a book about the various obstacles” she encountered on the campaign trail. Most related to being a female candidate and the mother of a toddler. “People were asking me really personal questions: ‘Do you want to have more children? Who will look after your daughter? What if you get pregnant?’ There was also the issue of identifying with the LGBTQ community but being in a heterosexual relationship. People would tell me, ‘You’re married. You have a daughter. Your family looks great on Christmas cards, so let that be your story.’”

Pereira didn’t buy into any of that. “I promised myself from the moment I ran that I didn’t want to be identified just as the mom, the wife, or the heterosexual woman from Fairfield. I wanted people to care about what I was advocating for. I wasn’t going to hide [my sexual identity] or remove it from Facebook posts. I was going to be me, and not only for my own wellbeing, but because the number of LGBTQ candidates who are out and run for office is still minute.”

She says anti-LGBTQ rhetoric still rears its ugly head in Connecticut, pointing to Andrew McDonald, an associate justice of the Connecticut Supreme Court who was nominated last spring by then-Gov. Dannel Malloy to be the state’s next chief justice. A social media outcry ensued, and the nomination was rejected by the Senate in a 19-16 vote. If he had been confirmed, McDonald would have been the first openly gay person in the U.S. to serve as chief justice of a state supreme court.

The whole situation incensed Pereira.

“He [McDonald] has been out for a long time. He has a husband, and he’s extremely accomplished as a politician and as a judge, but there were a lot of horrendous things being said about him by people tied to hate groups,” recalls Pereira. “There were a lot of people [politicians] I spoke to who just shrugged their shoulders. When a hate group has something treacherous to say online about a well-established justice and it’s shared, and no one who has the platform to respond is responding to it, that is absolutely personal.”

She has a message for non-LGBTQ politicians. “If you’re going to come to a rally or have a pride flag in your office, and there is something that’s causing distress, what are you going to do about it? Are you really an ally, or just when it’s convenient?”

She says having more LGBTQ candidates run for office can help to improve or even prevent situations like this. “If each of us is able to encourage one or two other people to run, it becomes a chain reaction.”

Gannon Long – a 36-year-old Hartford native and

community organizer who spent time living in Chicago, Washington and Boston – also placed issues first when she campaigned to become the state representative for Hartford’s Behind the Rocks, Frog Hollow and Parkville neighborhoods last year. “I’m a lesbian millennial and that’s my identity. I don’t hide from it but it’s also not at the forefront of most people’s minds. Over 40 percent of people [in my neighborhood] don’t own cars, and only about 25 percent of city residents own homes. The fact that I have a girlfriend is not that important to people dealing with poverty and their own real-life issues.”

While she was campaigning door to door, people told her about their heating issues, having vermin in their homes, and the waste piling up on their curbs. They also expressed their frustration with the public education system, and their inability to change it.

“Even in our local neighborhoods, on City Council, people lack basic representation. How do we support people who are marginalized and left out? Unfortunately, politicians are not making it a space where those voices are heard.”

Long, a Democrat, ran as a petitioning candidate against a member of her own party: state Rep. Minnie Gonzalez, a social conservative who had served 11 terms in the legislature. Gonzalez, 68, who has held the 3rd District seat since 1996, is known as an opponent of gay marriage and was one of five Democrats to oppose Malloy’s choice of McDonald as chief justice.

While Long didn’t win the seat, she says her LGBTQ status was not a negative factor. “I had a lot of conversations with older people who said they were really excited to see a young person come in and try to shake things up. I think more things are possible because former generations lifted barriers.”

She, like her fellow candidates, believes that diversity in political representation is critical. “I can’t believe how acceptable a lack of diversity is to a lot of people. And as they say, ‘If you’re not at the table, you’re on the menu.’ LGBTQ is very important but we also need a lot more diversity types. As a white, queer person, I have a lot of privileges, and I have to use that to advocate for other people. We can’t just keep advocating for the same types of issues in Connecticut – we have to broaden it.” 

Carol Latter is a longtime editor and writer who lives in Simsbury. The mother of a trans son, she is currently the editor of five editions of *Seasons Magazines*.



# Raising the Curtain

## LGBTQ STUDENTS FIND THEATER A WELCOMING HOME

By JANE LATUS  
Photography by STAN GODLEWSKI

Who says theater attracts people who crave attention? For LGBTQ kids, it turns out, theater's lure is that it's a place where they can be themselves – or, briefly, escape.

"I cut my hair off last week because I felt comfortable with being myself – and I thank theater for that," says Elliot, close-shaven and purple-haired, practically laughing with a degree of joy that only a trans male could fully appreciate over what, to many, is a mundane grooming choice.

For Elliot, 15, a part-time student at Southington High School and the Greater Hartford Academy of the Arts, "transition and theater, they kind of work hand in hand."

For Aaron, a 16-year-old trans, bisexual male who attends Canton High School, making props and painting sets started out as a way to both express himself through art and as a respite.

"It was an escape, because although now things are really good at home, then they weren't," he says. Now, he adds of theater, "It's like a home. No one judges you for anything."

Kyla, 18, of Hartford, credits theater for helping her figure out she is gay. She performed in the Classical Magnet School's production of *The Children's Hour*, which explores the aftermath of accusations of lesbianism.

"Being in the play, it made me realize who I was. It was a lot of help," says Kyla.

For other LGBTQ kids, if nothing else, being where no one cares about their identity or orientation is a precious chance to catch their breath.

"In a way, theater is a bit of a safe haven for kids who don't feel safe with their bio family, or who are questioning who they really are themselves," says Jay, 16, of Tolland, who is questioning and fluid. In theater, "you don't have to fit into your little box as you have to in everyday life."

### IT'S COMPLICATED

Safe is definitely not how most queer teens feel most of the time, according to students and teachers.

Most are not fully out. Some are out at

home, but not at school. Some are out at school, but not at home. Many who attend the Arts Academy part-time are out in that setting, but not at their home schools.

It can get stressful.

One 16-year-old trans male is out with his family and school but asks not to disclose his name, town, and school. He does happily proclaim one identity: “I’m a Broadway nerd!”

“I have support at home and I’m really grateful for that. But in my school, the administration is good but the students are very closed-minded. People are okay with LGB, but the transgender part they don’t know about. I’ve had people harass me, but since I started testosterone, and once I started to pass, it stopped,” he says.

“In school, I’m very anxious when I’m around people. I’m very closed off and don’t really smile much. I wouldn’t say I’m grouchy, but I have an angry-looking face. That’s to protect myself from other people so they won’t bully me. My therapist says I’m putting up a wall. When I’m at play practice or at GSA, I can relax and be myself,” he says.

Elliot’s situation is different. He isn’t out in the morning at Southington High but is out in the afternoon at the Arts Academy. He is “not entirely out” at home.

The Academy, he says, “is a very welcoming environment. Not so much at Southington High School. People are not very accepting in Southington, I’ve gotta say.” At home, “My mom refuses to call me Elliot or use male pronouns. It prevents me from having a conversation with her.”

In theater, says Elliot, “It’s such a diverse group of people that everyone’s accepted when they’re there. It’s really easy to be open there, because you’re creating stuff, and no one really cares who made it – they care what’s presented.

“The thing I enjoy most about theater is I’ve made almost a home with it,” he says, adding, “Going through this situation [being transgender] and being in theater, it’s helped me in my general life more than I’ve ever imagined.”

Two simple facts are big deals to him:

“I’m able to wear makeup there and be called by the correct pronouns, and I can’t do that anywhere else.”

And: “The first role I got this year, it was a male. It made me feel very great. And the playbook had my name – Elliot – and that made me feel great.”

“The word seems to get around that we’re open and unilaterally accepting,” says Ken Jones of Canton, who teaches theater craft at public schools, the Farmington Valley Stage Company and Loomis Chaffee School in Windsor. Jones is straight and cisgender, and has a gay son and a transgender son. (He is also married to the author of this article.)

Jones learns of students’ identities through the pronouns they ask to be referenced by, and often by their confiding in him once they reach that level of comfort.

“Some have very supportive parents. In theater, they can be the rest of themselves,” he says. “Some parents live



Jay was in 6th grade when the “be yourself” message of her first show, *Shrek The Musical*, made a deep impression on her. Now 16, she is questioning and fluid, a part-time student at the Greater Hartford Academy of the Arts, and vice president of the GSA at Tolland High School – where she will go “full-on *Mama Bear*” if needed to protect younger LGBTQ students.

vicariously through an ideological, fictional character who they use as a litmus test for their own children.”

One student shared that when she came out as gay, her father said he’d prefer she was a drug addict.

“Relationships are already really hard enough as it is, as a teenager, without added stress or conflict,” says Jones. Theater “gives them short periods where they can thrive and be themselves, and think about something else. The rest of the time, they’re just trying to survive.”

## THAT ISN’T ALWAYS ITS INITIAL ATTRACTION

Based on her 15 years as an instructor, including 10 at the Arts Academy, Missy Burmeister thinks she has figured out why theater attracts kids “who are marginalized in any way, including being LGBTQ.”

“Many of our students, I would say, are closeted from their families, or ostracized from them. Most are not even out with their friends at their home school. My theory is

# One student shared that when she came out as gay, her father said he'd prefer she was a drug addict.

that theater [initially] feels like a place where they can cover up and hide, where they can be someone else.”

She says while they may not necessarily see it as a safe harbor in the beginning, they stay because they learn that “it’s a place where they can be who they want to be.”

At the same time, “the very personal journey in theater, particularly for students who are struggling with identity, is often very hard and scary, and shouldn’t be glamorized as being a beautiful and natural process. A lot of hard work goes into learning how to accept oneself, and theater can serve as an excellent tool in helping with this process.”

Her wife, Tate Burmeister, is technical director at Ivoryton Playhouse and has

worked at community theaters, colleges, and public and private schools.

“It does happen still now that parents don’t like to accept children’s identity or sexual orientation. I’m like, ‘Really, in this day and age?’” Tate Burmeister says. She relishes seeing kids grow into themselves – remembering one who explored an evolving presentation. “It was a cool thing to watch.”

## FINDING A HOME – AND AFFIRMATION

Hazell, 18, of Hartford considers herself a fortunate trans female. “Home is very supportive. They just feel like the real me came out.”

Still, she says, studying theater at the Arts Academy has helped. “I get a lot of female roles. A lot of people, when they see me, automatically think I’m a female. It makes me feel comfortable – I don’t get looked at like, ‘Are you a boy or a girl?’”

“A group of outcasts adopted me – they were gender fluid and gay,” says Aaron of Canton. He joined theater with them “to get

out of my shell,” he says, but now it’s “like another home.” It helps, he adds, because “school is such a tough environment. Everyone here [at school] is so straight, cis and white.”

Jay, of Tolland, says theater changed her life in sixth grade, when she sang “Freak Flag” in *Shrek*. “That made a deep impression on me – that whoever you are, you’re beautiful. It’s a really beautiful and powerful message.” It felt pretty good to a 12-year-old to realize that questioning one’s orientation “was a thing people could do.”

And here’s a plus for any queer students who join Jay in theater: She vows that if anyone hassles them, “I’d go full-on Mama Bear and go straight to the administration. Because I’m protective of the younger LGBT students.” 



Hazell is 18, a Hartford resident, a transgender female. The opportunity to play many female roles has made her transition more comfortable. “It makes me feel comfortable - I don’t get looked at like, ‘Are you a boy or a girl?’” She will study acting in college and her dream is to work on stage, and later in TV and in movies.

Photo by ZACKARY SLADEK

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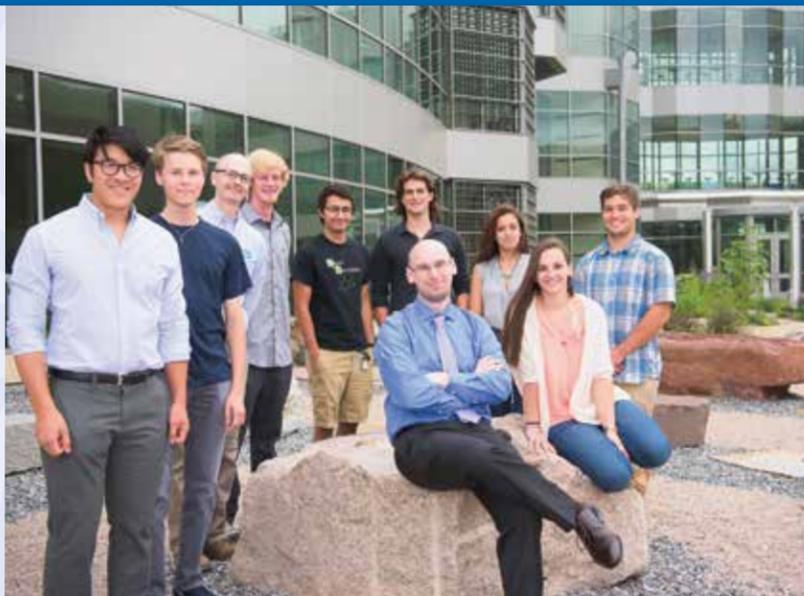
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